

# Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Period Poverty: Case Study of Protest Signs at London Women's March 2019

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Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Period Poverty:  
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## Table of Contents

1 Introduction.....	1
2 Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis.....	1
3 The Socio-Cultural Aspect of Period Poverty.....	3
3.1 <i>Period Poverty</i> .....	3
3.2 <i>The Menstruation Taboo and Swearing</i> .....	5
3.3 <i>Speech Acts and Swearing</i> .....	8
3.4. <i>Language of Men and Women</i> .....	9
3.5 <i>Women’s March and Challenging Period Poverty</i> .....	11
4 Research.....	13
4.1 <i>Methodology</i> .....	13
4.2 <i>Individual Analysis</i> .....	14
4.3 <i>Discussion</i> .....	21
5 Conclusion.....	23
Abstract.....	25
References.....	26

## **1 Introduction**

Social movements are a popular form of public speech due to their form, function and the effect they ultimately have on changes in society. The social movement that will be the topic of this analysis is a women's march, a movement advocating social change and empowering women as oppressed members of society. Social movements gain a lot of attention on social networks which provides them with great visibility and power, and allows them to influence the necessary social changes.

This study will be divided into 3 main chapters. Chapter two will provide the theoretical framework for the analysis and introduce the means and methods of Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CMDA). It will also explain why CMDA is a good choice for the analysis of a discourse created at a social event such as a women's march.

The third chapter will explore the issue of period poverty from a socio-cultural perspective and focus on the way of presenting periods in public discourse in general. Hand-in-hand with periods and period poverty comes the notion of taboos, which will be introduced along with swear words. Both are used as means of shocking the intended audience and gaining their attention. The chapter will also examine the hypothetical distinction between male and female language, and explain the power relation between social status and language used. This will prove relevant in the analysis, as the stereotypically male type of language is deliberately used by female protestors to make a point.

The final portion of the study will introduce a corpus of protest signs on the subject of period poverty selected from a wider corpus of signs created by participants of the London Women's March 2019. In total, seven protest signs will be analysed to identify different modes of conveying the intended message. The chapter will end with a discussion of the analysis and a conclusion.

## **2 Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis**

The theoretical framework that will be discussed in this chapter will focus on Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis, and will be based on the works of Fairclough (1995), Wodak and Meyer (2001), Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006), Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009), Machin and Mayr (2012), Kress (2012), and Machin (2013).

The common term in the two aforementioned approaches is *discourse* so it ought to be discussed first. Fairclough defines discourse as "use of language seen as a form of social practice" (1995: 7), and Machin and Mayr define it as "language in real contexts of use" (2012: 20). These definitions raise a few general characteristics of discourse – it is language used for

communication; it is tightly tied to the context of use; it functions within sociocultural practice. Deriving from the two definitions of discourse, *discourse analysis* is “analysis of how texts work within sociocultural practice” (Fairclough 1995: 7). Machin further explains that “discourses are communicated through different kinds of semiotic resources, different modes, and realised through different genres.” (2013: 347), and inevitably introduces the notion of multimodality which will be reviewed at the end of this section.

Critical Linguistics originated in the 1970s in the work of Roger Fowler, Robert Hodge, Gunter Kress and Tony Trew with the intention to show the potential that language and grammar have in being used as ideological instruments (Machin & Mayr 2012: 2). Fairclough argues that “what makes a theory critical is that it takes a ‘pejorative’ view of ideology as a means through which social relations of power are reproduced.” (1995: 17). The analysis in chapter 4 will demonstrate the way language is used to defy the dominant ideology, and challenge the traditional power relation both between men and women, as well as between lawmakers and people affected by that law within the society. Stemming from Critical Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is based on the works of Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun van Dijk, and has since spread into a range of critical approaches (Machin & Mayr 2012: 4). What all of the approaches have in common is that they all view language as a means of social construction and are more interested in linguistic characteristics of social and cultural processes and structures (ibid.). According to Machin and Mayr, the term *critical* means “‘denaturalising’ the language to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts” in order to “reveal the kinds of power interests buried in these texts” (ibid.: 5). Wodak further explains that CDA specifically considers institutional, political, gender and media discourses because they testify to more or less overt relations of struggle and conflict (2001: 2) and identifies three essential concepts of CDA: the concept of power, the concept of history, and the concept of ideology (ibid.: 3). CDA “seeks to show how language is used to convey power and status in contemporary social interaction, and how the apparently neutral, purely informative (linguistic) texts which emerge in newspaper reporting, government publications, social science reports, and so on, realize, articulate and disseminate ‘discourses’ as ideological positions just as much as do texts which more explicitly editorialize or propagandize” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006: 14). In this study, the ‘contemporary social interaction’ will be the London Women’s March 2019 and the interaction between protestors and the Government, and the language in question will be the language of protest signs. Protest signs are used to raise important questions of injustice and inequality, their messages are aimed at the Government, and they prompt for action and change. Because of the fact that protest signs

are used to challenge the position of power in the Western society, as well as the fact that they provide a solid ground for the use and exploration of CDA, they have been chosen as the research material for this study.

The final component of CMDA that needs to be discussed is *multimodality*. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, multimodality is the “use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event” (2001: 20), and according to Kress “multimodality asserts that ‘language’ is just one among the many resources for making meaning” (2012: 38), meaning that language is one of the modes that create meaning in a communicative event. The modes in multimodality are “semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action” (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 21), and they can be language, image, music, sound, gesture, layout, colour, writing, font and similar (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2012). Forceville and Urios–Aparisi agree with this proposed list of modes and emphasize that “since what can be conveyed in terms of facts, emotions and aesthetic pleasure differs from one mode to another, the choices for (one) particular mode(s) over (an)other(s) that the producer of a multimodal metaphor has to make is/are bound to affect its overall meaning” (2009: 4). The use of different modes, therefore, is an intentional choice by the author in order to achieve the desired effect upon the reader. In the following analysis different modes will be examined and some of them will prove more salient than the others in the production of meaning. Multimodal analysis, therefore, aims to acknowledge the multitude of different materials and ‘meaning resources’ that people use to create and distribute meaningful signs (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Forceville & Urios–Aparisi 2009; Kress 2012; Jancsary et al. 2016), or simply aims to distinguish different modes and to show how they contribute to the production of a single meaning.

### **3 The Socio-Cultural Aspect of Period Poverty**

#### *3.1 Period Poverty*

*Period poverty* “refers to the state in which people who menstruate find themselves without the financial resources to access suitable menstrual products” (Vora 2020: 32) and it is as much of a problem in high as well as low- and middle-income countries (Tull 2019: 4). This study will, in particular, focus on the issue of period poverty in the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup> due to the

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<sup>1</sup> Period poverty can appear to be a much lesser problem in high-income countries, such as the UK, than it is in middle- or low-income countries, however it is an issue that greatly affects people. Tull (2019) presents an interesting case study of Period poverty in low-income countries such as Kenya, Ghana or Tanzania, where the

fact that the corpus for the case study had been collected from the coverage of the London Women's March 2019. In 2018, a research into the topic of period poverty in the UK concluded that the average woman will spend about £4,800 on period products in their lifetime<sup>2</sup>, which is a heavy burden for low-income households (Zipp et al. 2018). The 'tampon tax' was imposed in the UK in 1973, and was only abolished on 1 January 2021 when the UK left the European Union (HM Treasury 2021). The tax was imposed on sanitary products because they were deemed luxury items or non-essential items<sup>3</sup>.

Period poverty does not only imply financial poverty, but also educational poverty. Stubbs and Sterling identify a key issue about menstrual education: many materials can be problematic and misleading for young people<sup>4</sup> and should be reviewed and re-written to provide quality education to people (2020: 241). The battle against period poverty puts an emphasis on the fact that sanitary products undoubtedly are essential, and not only should they be tax-free, they ought to be readily available and free of charge for people who need them. This is where Scotland took the issue a step further than the rest of the UK and made period products free even before the rest of the UK abolished the tampon tax – in November 2020 (Diamond 2020). The battle should also put an emphasis on properly educating young people on menstruation and recognizing that it is not a taboo subject, but a naturally occurring event which is experienced by about a half of the population of the Earth, and is completely normal. As a stereotypically women's issue, it is unsurprising that period poverty will be one of the issues raised at the Women's March.

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extent of Period poverty is much greater, much more serious, and has greater consequences to people's health and wellbeing than in countries such as the UK. This, however, does not make the issue of Period Poverty in the UK any less significant and controversial than in any other country.

<sup>2</sup> Vora (2020) conducted an interesting case study in Bristol, UK, about the effect homelessness had on menstruation and the availability of, among other things, sanitary products. They depend greatly on the help of shelters, but generally recognise that there is a high level of embarrassment present due to the institutional power relations between the homeless and those working at the shelters (Vora 2020: 38).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, there is no such tax imposed on condoms. Even more interesting is the fact that one can get free condoms in most branches of the National Health Service (NHS), but not (yet) free period products.

<sup>4</sup> Stubbs and Sterling (2020) examine problematic menstrual education materials and conclude that they often do not represent the accurate picture of menstruation: some do not present different body types and how a body type may influence menstrual cycle, some do not offer accurate diagrams of internal and external genitalia, and they often include stereotypically negative messages about menstruation.



### *3.2 The Menstruation Taboo and Swearing*

Allan and Burrige (2009) study the topic of taboos in language and culture from its origins to contemporary use. They define taboo as a “proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life” which “arise(s) out of social constraints on the individual’s behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury” (Allan & Burrige 2009: 1). Taboo terms originate from a number of sources (Hoeksema & Napoli 2008: 349; Allan & Burrige 2009: 1), and thus Allan and Burrige identify five general origins of taboo: (1) bodies and their effluvia, (2) the organs and acts of sex, micturition and defecation, (3) diseases, death and killing, (4) naming, addressing, touching and viewing persons and sacred beings, objects and places, (5) food gathering, preparation and consumption (2009: 1). The type of taboo analysed in this study is the menstruation taboo, which falls into the category of bodies and their effluvia, more specifically, taboos in which the motivating factor is the notion of uncleanliness (Hoeksema & Napoli 2008: 349; Allan & Burrige 2009: 5; Jay 2000: 202). Menstruation is viewed differently in different cultures, but many communities taboo menstruating women and contact with them, as well as menstrual blood itself, believing it is unclean and pollutes (in particular) men (Allan & Burrige 2009: 5).

What is considered a taboo is culturally defined, based on cultural beliefs and attitudes about life itself (Jay 2000: 153). In the UK, as well as other Western/ised nations, the concept of menstruation as a taboo likely originates in the third book of Bible, Leviticus, where menstruation is mentioned as a curse, and where one can find a list of forbidden activities for menstruating women (Gottlieb 2020: 146). With such a culturally strong origin, the Judeo-Christian society views menstruation as something that is undesirable and ought to stay hidden, and it is presented to young people as such in everyday life through advertisements for menstrual products that emphasize secrecy, embarrassment, and freshness by using blue liquid rather than red, and promoting feelings of “confidence” and “cleanliness” which can be seen in magazines, on the TV, on the internet (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler 2020: 185). Such advertisements contribute to the idea of menstruation as a taboo and are deeply rooted in the

society and culture<sup>5</sup>. Despite activist efforts<sup>6</sup> to offset the current cultural views of menstruation, the stigma is still widespread throughout the world, and people who menstruate become increasingly aware of cultural messages about the discriminatory treatment (Stubbs & Sterling 2020: 238). It is important to note that in this study the binary opposition of male/female will be challenged, and menstruation will be considered a biological process that's experienced by *people* because “not all people who menstruate are women, and not all women menstruate”<sup>7</sup>.

When speaking about topics that are considered taboos the speaker may use one of the three types of expressions: dysphemisms, orthophemisms and euphemisms, which entirely depends on the effect the speaker wants to achieve. *Dysphemisms* are words or phrases with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance (Allan & Burridge 2009: 31). In the following analysis, an example of dysphemism would be the use of the word “menstruation”, a word considered taboo. *Orthophemisms* and *euphemisms* are words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression (ibid.: 32). Orthophemisms (for example, “period”) are typically more formal and

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<sup>5</sup> An interesting fact to note is that the first mention of the word “period” on American national TV occurred in 1985. The actress Courtney Cox, 19 years old at the time, being the star of the Tampax commercial, delivered the line “It [Tampax] can actually change the way you feel about your period.” As discussed, the focus of the ad is on maintaining cleanliness, however it was a big step in the right direction. The full ad can be found on this YouTube link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOHCtQfFn7E&ab\\_channel=The80sQuadrant](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOHCtQfFn7E&ab_channel=The80sQuadrant).

<sup>6</sup> Activist and poet Rupi Kaur, notably, posted images of herself with blood on her bed and trousers, aiming at challenging the taboos surrounding menstruation. Her photos had been removed by Instagram for violating the community standards. They were later restored, and an apology was issued by Instagram. Photos are still available on Kaur's Instagram profile (<https://www.instagram.com/p/0ovWwJHA6f/>).

<sup>7</sup> The massive debate was sparked in June 2020 when author JK Rowling wrote a tweet: “‘People who menstruate.’ I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” (@jk\_rowling, June 6, 2020). The debate on whether women are the only people who menstruate spread fast from Twitter to other social networks, sparking the hashtag #BleedingWhileTrans, with many LGBTQIA+ activists speaking out about their own experiences with menstruation. The quote is a form of conclusion of the whole debate, and it is widely attributed to menstrual health activist Cass Clemmer and their instagram post (original post is no longer available, but can be found in many online articles, such as: <https://www.self.com/story/women-arent-the-only-ones-who-menstruate>, <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/transgender-artist-speaks-out-about-periods-with-powerful-facebook-post-a3594941.html>, <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/pride/agenda/article/2017/07/24/transgender-activist-tackles-issue-menstruation-powerful-viral-photo>).

more direct than the corresponding euphemisms, while euphemisms (for example, “the curse”, “that time of the month”, “the misery”, “red plague”)<sup>8</sup> are more colloquial and figurative than the corresponding orthophemisms (ibid.). The speaker’s motivation behind using a dysphemism would be the fact that the tabooed, the offensive, and the impolite is more emotionally marked and therefore seems more powerful and effective (ibid.: 2, 27). Inherently related to menstruation are the personal hygiene products used to manage menstruation. Allan and Burrige list some of the orthophemisms used to manage menstruation: personal hygiene products, sanitary pads, tampons; as well as some of the euphemisms: feminine hygiene products, sanitary protection, panty liners, tampax (ibid.: 169–170). The use of dysphemisms, orthophemisms and euphemisms will be illustrated in the analysis.

Closely related to the topic of taboo, Allan and Burrige discuss cursing, cussing or swearing, and the motivation behind using the curse words: “Used when a higher style is expected, it is likely to cause offence and may be specifically used to offend” (2009: 77). Cursing is the utterance of emotionally powerful, offensive words or emotionally harmful expressions that are understood as insults (Jay 2000: 9), and it is usually an emotive reaction to anger, frustration, or something unexpected and usually, but not necessarily, undesirable (Allan & Burrige 2009: 78). Curse words affect listeners emotionally, and allow the speaker to express a string of emotions, most commonly that of anger and aggression (Jay 2000: 9–10, 55). Jay points out that historically, cursing and aggression have been most closely identified with masculinity (2000: 166), and stereotypically, men are portrayed as less emotional but more independent and aggressive than women (ibid.: 113). Traditionally, Jay finds, three trends can be distinguished: men curse more often than women; men use a larger vocabulary of curse words than do women; and men use more offensive curse words than do women (ibid.: 166). As motivation behind the use of curse words, he determines that cursing intensifies emotional expressions in a manner that inoffensive words cannot achieve (ibid.: 137).

A question that naturally arises from the analysis of taboos and curses is how come this particular sequence of letters has a “bad meaning”? It does not. This “bad word” reflects people’s attitudes toward the denotations and connotations of the word (Allan & Burrige 2009: 41). *Denotation* is the mental representation of the set of objects, characteristics, or events that a word is used to refer to (Jay 2000: 136; emphasis in the original). *Connotation* is the affective or emotional representation commonly associated with a word’s denotative meaning (ibid.;

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<sup>8</sup> Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler list a whole paragraph of euphemisms found in American Folklore Archives at UC Berkeley (2020: 186–187).

emphasis in the original). Denotative meaning is generally expressed explicitly, it is stated clearly and in detail, while connotative meaning is often suggested implicitly and not directly expressed. This is evident in curse words more than taboos, and can easily be found in dictionaries. For example, the noun *cunt*, which will be examined as a curse word in the case study below, has a denotative meaning of “a woman’s vagina and outer sexual organs” (OLD<sup>9</sup>: cunt). On the other hand, the second, connotative meaning is “a very offensive word used to show great anger or dislike” (ibid.). Apart from being listed as a secondary meaning, it is recorded in the definition itself that the word is offensive<sup>10</sup>. When it comes to taboo words, it is their denotative meaning that is problematic and offensive. The words themselves are not recorded as problematic in any way in the dictionary, however the primary, explicit meaning contains connotations that make the word undesirable.

### 3.3 Speech Acts and Swearing

The theory of speech acts originated in the lectures of J. L. Austin at Harvard University in 1955, which were subsequently published as a book in 1962. He introduces the notion of the *performative*, or the performative sentence (or utterance), which is derived from the verb to perform and which indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action (Austin 1962: 6). According to Searle, “speaking a language is performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on” (Searle 1969: 16). A common device of performatives is the use of imperative mood (Austin 1962: 73), as will be evident by one of the examples in the analysis where the phrase “end period poverty”, with the verb *end* in its imperative form, is used on the sign addressing the Government. He further explains the performance of an act as the performance of an *illocutionary* act which is “performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to

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<sup>9</sup> Oxford Learner’s Dictionary (OLD) available at:  
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/cunt?q=cunt>

<sup>10</sup> The same formulation can be found in many words considered curse words: bloody “a swear word that many people find offensive that is used to emphasize a comment or an angry statement” (OLD: bloody); fuck “a swear word that many people find offensive that is used to express anger, horror or surprise” (OLD: fuck); fucking “a swear words that many people find offensive that is used to emphasize a comment or an angry statement” (OLD: fucking); etc. OLD entries available at:  
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/bloody1?q=bloody>;  
[https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/fuck\\_1?q=fuck](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/fuck_1?q=fuck);  
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/fucking?q=fucking>.

performance of an act *of saying something*” (ibid.: 99; emphasis in the original). Austin defines different classes of illocutionary acts: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, expositives<sup>11</sup> (ibid.: 150–163). According to this division, cursing is placed among behabitives which “include the notion of reaction to other people’s behaviour and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else’s past conduct or imminent conduct” (ibid.: 159). He highlights the inherent feature of behabitives, that is expressing and describing the feelings of the speaker, which is closely related to the use of swearing for the purpose of venting one’s feelings (ibid.), which is also evident in the example “how fucking dare you”, where the curse word *fucking* is used to intensify the statement and show the protestor’s feelings of anger and outrage.

Jay analyses the relation between power and cursing and gathers that “people with power have license to tell jokes, make fun of subordinates, and use curse words” (Jay 2000: 157). On the other hand, he remarks that speakers of the middle class may experience anxiety about cursing in order not to offend the listeners (ibid.: 158). Talking about social movements like the one analysed in this case study, the hypothesis may be that the protestors, or speakers of the lower class when compared to their targeted listeners, use more powerful language on purpose to symbolically increase their status and importance. “Cursing will stand out in conversations where it is not expected” (ibid.: 162), and (“female”) fight for equal rights might be regarded as such a situation. This is why the use of curse words and imperatives on protest signs performs an action of provoking a reaction from the listeners (in this case, asking the Government “how dare you?”) and, ultimately, achieving the desired goal.

### 3.4. *Language of Men and Women*

There is no complete and comprehensive research into the hypothetical distinction between the language used by men and women. In “Man Made Language”, Dale Spender examines the idea of English language as being “man-made”, and the monopoly men seemingly have over language, while consequently making women’s language the ‘other’ or derived from the language of men and, therefore, less important (1980: 12). She reviews research by Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Cheri Kramer into the topic of “women’s language” and the characteristics that are associated with it, more on which will be discussed below. Apart from the stereotypical characteristics of language, Spender explores the relationship between

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<sup>11</sup> This study will not be dealing with all classes of illocutionary acts, however detailed analysis of them all can be found in Austin 1962: 150–163.

language and social power, and concludes that language is a “powerful human tool and we must begin to ask what role it plays in maintaining and perpetuating existing social structures, what contribution it makes to our hierarchically ordered classist, racist and sexist world view” (1980: 51). Language, then, is used as a means of communicating the (dominant or opposing) ideology, and sustaining the existing structure of power<sup>12</sup>. Fairclough identifies the language used in news media as a means of covertly transmitting the voices of social power-holders (1995: 63). He also positions ideology not only in language, but also in the discursive event in which the language is used (ibid.: 71). The analysis in chapter 4 will be based on the examples taken from the Women’s March 2019, a social movement which linguistically functions as a discursive event in which the protestors share the same intentions of challenging the prevalent ideology. Power, therefore, is what gives ideology the impact it may have on the society. Building on the discussion of power, Lakoff states further that “allowing men stronger means of expression than are open to women further reinforces men’s position of strength in the real world: for surely we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions” (Lakoff 1975: 45).

While Jay (2000) introduces the difference between the use of swear words in male and female language, Kramer (1975) sums up some general findings about the perception of male and female speech. Kramer conducted research among 644 participants who were asked in a questionnaire to determine which speech characteristics are associated with which gender (1975: 8–9). She notes at the beginning of her study that it deals with stereotypes, rather than observed behaviour (ibid.: 1), and in this case study on protest signs, those stereotypical characteristics will be illustrated in writings found on signs. Male language, Kramer records, is perceived to be concerned with important aspects of the society, it is logical, literal, brief, concise, harsh and in control, assertive, shrewd and competitive (ibid.: 7, 13); female language, on the other hand, is perceived as being concerned with “trivial” subjects, inappropriate, emotional, unorganized, out of control, full of jibberish, gentle, polite, and enthusiastic (ibid.: 7, 16). Originally published in 1929, Virginia Woolf also discusses this contrast in her timeless

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<sup>12</sup> Spender comments that women are more polite than men because “there is a social expectation that ‘subordinates’ should be more polite than their ‘superiors’” (1980: 36). Jess Hill agrees with that in her research on domestic abuse. She explains that patriarchy is still a mainframe that regulates how we live, and as such it defines the acceptable behaviour for both genders. The system presents men as strong, independent, unemotional, logical and confident, and women as expressive, nurturant, weak and dependent (Hill 2019: 139). This construct, she concludes, allows for a number of injustices, such as the violence of men, the domestic servitude of women, the dominance of men in power.

essay, stating that male writing, unlike female, is direct, straightforward, confident and free (1997: 107), but also presents the idea of the androgynous mind, originally introduced by Coleridge, which is an ideal mind that has characteristics of both, and that is naturally creative and undivided (ibid.: 106). She criticizes this idea and highlights that education should “bring out and fortify the differences rather than similarities” (ibid.: 95), but should still recognize the differences between the writings of males and females as equally important. Robin Tolmach Lakoff (1975) explains that the overall effect of the discrepancies between men’s and women’s language is that “women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behavior along with other aspects of their behavior” (Lakoff 1975: 42). In the context of the Women’s March, it will be evident that the protestors reach for the stereotypically male language, which is perceived as more powerful, in order to increase the visibility and the level of power their language conveys.

The fact that different language type is used by the protestors on purpose, shows their awareness of the fact that this type of language holds more power and will likely have more chance in reaching their goal. This intentional use of different language varieties is a feature of code switching<sup>13</sup>. Nilep presents an overview of the theory of code switching through the years and concludes that “speakers may switch the form of their contributions in order to signal a change in situation, shifting relevance of social roles, or alternate ways of understanding a conversational contribution (2006: 17). The language used can therefore be recognized as both that of men (literal, brief, concise, harsh language, with the use of curse words), and that of women (inappropriate and emotional), and both of the varieties are used in order to produce a desired effect of (mostly) women using (stereotypically) male language characteristics against men.

### *3.5 Women’s March and Challenging Period Poverty*

The idea of women leading an uprising is by no means a novelty, with the most notable recent protests being those against violence in Argentina in October 2016 and protests against the abortion ban in Poland in October 2016; and dating all the way back to the most famous Women’s suffrage parade in Washington DC in March 1913, and well before that. The event that will provide the corpus of texts for this study is London Women’s March 2019. It is one of the Women’s Marches originating from the Women’s March on Washington in 2017, which

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<sup>13</sup> There has been a lot of work done on the topic of code switching in sociocultural linguistics, for example Nilep (2006), Ervin-Tripp (2001), Myers-Scotton (1995), Heller (2010), among many others.

sparked protests all over the world. A Women's March is a form of social movement, which is defined by Jasper in the Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology as "sustained and intentional efforts to foster or retard social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels encouraged by authorities" (2007: 4451). This definition points to the aim of Women's March, which is to urge social changes and encourage gender equality. Peggy Antrobus argues that women's movements are different from all other social movements in that they are crosscutting, ask different questions, and often seek goals that challenge conventional definitions of where we want to go (2005: 10). When talking about London Women's March 2019, there were many topics raised, most of them relating to the stereotypically female gender. The discussion on male and female language introduced Fairclough's (1995: 63) positioning of ideology in the discursive event in which language is used, with the general idea being the fight against austerity, the protest signs of the London Women's March 2019 bore writings on economic oppression, violence against women, the gender pay gap, racism, fascism, institutional sexual harassment, hostile environment and Brexit. Among them, a prominent topic was that of period poverty, which was featured on many protest signs.

The aim of a social movement is to be seen and heard, to make an impact and to get noticed by people in power, as well as to prompt a reaction from them. In this age of the Internet, the most efficient way to be seen and heard is to "go viral". If a piece of information, video, image, etc. is viral, it means that it is sent rapidly over the internet and seen by large numbers of people within a short time (OLD<sup>14</sup>: viral). London Women's March 2019 was covered by many news portals<sup>15</sup>, but it made the greatest impact on social networks, most notably Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, where it went viral with the use of relevant hashtags. Grubišić (2017) covers the origins and use of hashtags on social networks. Hashtags are strings of characters

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<sup>14</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/viral?q=viral>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/hundreds-join-global-women-s-march-in-london-a4043591.html>; <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6610193/Womens-March-2019-Thousands-women-attend-protest-London-against-austerity.html>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2019/jan/19/womens-march-2019-in-pictures>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/18/womens-march-30-countries-set-to-take-part-in-third-global-protest>; <https://metro.co.uk/2019/01/19/women-march-london-demand-gender-equality-end-austerity-8364423/>; <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/8575713/international-womens-day-2019-uk-events-is-there-a-march-in-london-this-year/>; <https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/womens-march-london-2019-january-live-updates-photos-pictures/246300>; <https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/g25972829/best-signs-2019-womens-march/>; <https://www.marieclaire.co.uk/entertainment/people/womens-march-2019-637495>.



consisting of the symbol # (hash character) followed by a word, phrase, acronym (ibid.: 481). The use of hashtags makes a post searchable and helps it gain more visibility with a wider audience (ibid.). Grubišić further explains the property of hashtags known as hypertextuality, which means that “a single hashtag can organize and mediate a particular conversation about a topic” (ibid.: 482). In the case of London Women’s March, there are some more general hashtags that connect this march to other related movements (#womensmarch, #womensmarch2019), then there are those that distinguish it from other related movements (#BreadandRoses, #womensmarchonlondon), and those that target specific topics covered by protest signs (#endperiodpoverty, #timesup, #metoo, #brexshit). The event was well documented by the protestors who were documenting their experience, as well as the media covering the event in its entirety. All of the hashtags allowed for the event to gain visibility across social networks, namely Twitter, and raise important questions and topics that are still discussed over social media using the same hashtags. Even though they are prototypically used in online discourse, the hashtags are also written down on physical protest signs.

## **4 Research**

### *4.1 Methodology*

The Women’s March in question is the one that took place in London on 19 January 2019. The starting point of the March was Portland Place, from which protestors continued towards Trafalgar Square. The topic of the 2019 March was “bread and roses” in honour of Rose Schneiderman<sup>16</sup>. The March was well documented by online portals and Twitter with a large number of photos recording the protestors and their protest signs.

The corpus for the case study has been gathered from four different news portals and one Twitter profile, and only protest signs on the topic of period poverty have been chosen for

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<sup>16</sup> Rose Schneiderman was a Polish-born American suffragette and worker's rights campaigner most known for her quote “What the woman who labors wants is the right to live, not simply exist — the right to life as the rich woman has the right to life, and the sun and music and art. You have nothing that the humblest worker has not a right to have also. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too. Help, you women of privilege, give her the ballot to fight with.” after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, indicating a worker’s right to something higher than subsistence living. This will prove still relevant in the case study on period poverty due to the fact that period products were, until recently, considered a luxury and were taxed as such, making them hard to afford for people of lower financial status. Schneiderman also helped to pass the New York state referendum of 1917 that gave women the right to vote. More on Schneiderman can be found in Sarah Eisenstein’s “Give us bread but give us roses: Working women’s consciousness in the United States, 1890 to the First World War.”

the analysis. All of the sources will be listed in the photo descriptions along with their corresponding hyperlinks. In total, five photos featuring seven protest signs have been selected for the analysis. From the multimodal point of view, all of the protest signs will be analysed in terms of different modes of conveying the message that can be distinguished on the signs. They will further be analysed in the overall context of the Women's March and of the socio-cultural impact of period poverty in the UK. The analysis will focus on the context of the United Kingdom because of the location of the March, as well as because of the abolishment of the Tampon Tax by the UK Government on 1 January 2021.

A similar CDA of protest signs had been conducted by Branimira Brezovec (2019) on the topic of the "original" march, the Women's March on Washington in 2017 that saw the biggest response by protestors from all around the world. She analysed multiple topics covered by the protestors in the overall context of the socio-political situation in the US at the time (Brezovec 2019). Brezovec (2019) noted that the protest signs were highly multimodal and depended on the visual impact they had on the spectators. The CMD analysis by Maria Bortoluzzi (2010) on the topic of printed adverts has also been used as a guide for this case study because it focuses on the use of text and imagery in adverts to convey a message, which can easily be translated into the medium of protest signs.

The use of speech acts and taboos will be emphasised in the analysis of each of the protest signs, as well as the intention behind such use. The analysis will end with a general discussion, and the effect that the March had on the change in the UK tax system, and more.

#### *4.2 Individual Analysis*

The first protest sign that will be analysed comes from the Evening Standard news portal and is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Evening Standard, 19 January 2019, Figure 6

(<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/hundreds-join-global-women-s-march-in-london-a4043591.html>) ©

Reuters

This example features the phrase characteristic of the March in general: “End period poverty”. It is a campaign that is focused on helping people who are unable to afford period products, but it is also a powerful phrase used and endorsed even by well-known brands such as Always<sup>17</sup>, Bodyform<sup>18</sup> and Lunette<sup>19</sup>. It is also used on social networks as a hashtag to identify and promote the content regarding this specific topic.

Because the March tends to increase its visibility online via internet news portals and social networks, it therefore adapts some of the features from the internet discourse. The all-capitalized text<sup>20</sup> is combined with bold letters, yet again increasing visibility. The word *PERIOD* is further accentuated by the use of the colour red, symbolizing blood. This will be a frequent technique on other protest signs in this analysis.

The last prominent mode we can distinguish here is the use of images. The text is framed by images of a used period pad on the top right and a used tampon on the bottom right. If periods are considered to be a taboo of uncleanness, the images of used period products work in the same way a taboo word would: they aim to shock, offend and to incite a reaction. Another

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.always.co.uk/en-gb/about-us/campaigns-and-initiatives/end-period-poverty/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bodyform.co.uk/our-world/period-poverty/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://uk.lunette.com/blogs/news/period-poverty-what-is-it-and-what-can-we-do>

<sup>20</sup> The etiquette of the Internet states that using capital letters makes the words look “louder” (Robb 2014). The purpose of making the words look louder would be to attract attention, make oneself seen and heard, and get the message across.

aspect of this sign that urges for reaction is the use of imperative of the verb “end” which makes this utterance a command, thus using a speech act to prompt a response.



Figure 2 Alamy, 19 January 2019 (<https://bit.ly/39xeNNO>) © Dinendra Haria

The second sign features a striking red background image depicting blood spreading in water. When it comes to period products advertisements, blood is always the subject of censorship, usually occurring as a clear blue liquid. On the other hand, blood is displayed realistically in advertisements concerning sensitive gums and periodontitis. This confirms the thesis that only period blood, and not blood in general, is seen as unclean and something to hide (Allan & Burridge 2009: 164). Also depicted at the bottom of the sign is an outline of a period pad.

The text on this poster is not handmade but printed and it states “Everyone deserves a bloody good period”. It also contains a piece of writing right on the image of the pad which states “BLOODY GOOD PERIOD”, in letters that are smaller in size when compared to the main text, but capitalized in order to intensify the statement. The text features the adjective “bloody” twice, meaning “a swear word that many people find offensive that is used to emphasize a comment or an angry statement” (OLD<sup>21</sup>: bloody). The adjective “bloody” can be examined in two ways: if regarded as a swear word, it presents the author’s level of emotion towards the topic; if, however, regarded as a taboo word representing menstrual blood, it

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<sup>21</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/bloody1?q=bloody>

presents the author's intent to shock by using language concerning the topic which is usually censored. The variations of the word "blood" will be a common feature among other examples.



Figure 3 Daily Mail, 19 January 2019, figure 12 (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6610193/Womens-March-2019-Thousands-women-attend-protest-London-against-austerity.html>) © Dinendra Haria REX

The next poster is visually fairly simple, so the text itself should be examined first. As mentioned before, the March has strong connections to online discourse and social networks. This line is a variation of a popular internet meme "Ain't nobody got time for that"<sup>22</sup> which links it to popular online discourse. The text is written in all capital letters, which reflects the verbal act of yelling as seen in the interview. The final two lines, "TAMPON TAX" are larger in font size than the rest of the text, accentuating the issue. The content of the message points towards the government and the VAT that applies to women's essential sanitary products.

This protester also expresses a message on their t-shirt which features the line "Empowher" on a red background, red being a colour which occurs in every example so far. The word is a blend of a verb "empower", meaning "to give somebody the power or authority

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<sup>22</sup> The meme originated when a woman, Kimberly Wilkins, was interviewed after an apartment complex fire. In the video interview, she yelled "Ain't nobody got time for that!", a line that has since been used countless times regarding many different subjects that authors deem not worthy spending time on. For a general idea of the origin and content of the meme, information can be found on following sites: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t\\_Nobody\\_Got\\_Time\\_for\\_That](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t_Nobody_Got_Time_for_That); <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sweet-brown-aint-nobody-got-time-for-that>.

to do something” (OLD<sup>23</sup>: empower), and the italicized pronoun “her”, a pronoun used to denote women in general.



Figure 4 Elle UK, 21 January 2019, Figure 17 (<https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/g25972829/best-signs-2019-womens-march/>) © REX

The next sign uses the classic children’s rhyming poem to convey its message. The lettering is capitalized once again, indicating yelling in rage. The text is arranged in four lines, allowing for a rhyme typical of the poem. Because of the fact that it uses a children’s poem, the reader would not expect the subject of the sign to be that of anger and outrage. In the text, the author uses the word “tampons” with reference to periods that can be considered a taboo word, as well as a curse word “fucking” which functions as an intensifier. The author’s stylistic choices are tuned to create the impression they want to create, and in this case the author chose a style of language that is dysphemistic (Allan & Burrige 2009: 75–76). Using dysphemistic language means that the speaker uses derogatory or unpleasant terms on purpose, as can be seen in the line “how fucking dare you” where the author uses a curse word “fucking” to emphasize the anger and disgust towards the government and the imposed tampon tax. The phrase with the verb “dare” is regarded as a behabitive according to Austin, and its function is that of a stern judgement which calls for an imminent change. There is also an idiom used in the second line to achieve the rhyme: “to talk till (one’s) face is blue” means “to speak (about something)

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<sup>23</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/empower?q=empower>.



repeatedly and at length, used especially when one is not being heeded or listened to” (The Free Dictionary<sup>24</sup>: talk till (one’s) face is blue). The London Women’s March 2019 is most certainly not the first and only occasion where the tampon tax was criticized, so this phrase shows disappointment with the government and their disregard of the issue of period poverty. Period poverty has been a topic of protests throughout the years with campaigns such as Pink Protest<sup>25</sup> and The Red Box Project<sup>26</sup> being the most well-known alongside the Women’s Marches.

The bottom of the sign features the characteristic hashtag #ENDPERIODPOVERTY, which is capitalized, but also written in characteristic red letters and framed in a square in order to stand out. This functions as an identifying phrase on social networks, but also as a performative like the phrase in Figure 1. The top of the sign features images of two tampons covered in red colour. The image on the left contains a small “£5” price tag on the tampon itself, representing the high price of period products.



Figure 5 Twitter account of Peter Tatchell (@PeterTatchell), 19 January 2019  
(<https://twitter.com/petertatchell/status/1086618770171400192>)

<sup>24</sup> The Free Dictionary available at: <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/talk+till+our+faces+were+blue>.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.pinkprotest.org/freeperiods>

<sup>26</sup> <http://redboxproject.org/>

In figure 5, there are three protest signs, all covering the same topic. Considering the fact that the topic of the March was “bread and roses”, these activists used faint images of red roses as the backdrop for all three posters, as well as actual roses tied to all three handles. When seen from a distance, the pattern of roses and leaves resembles the military camouflage pattern which is stereotypically seen as a predominantly male domain.

Apart from the backdrop, these three protest signs have other things in common: they are written in bold black fonts, and they use curse words to shock and capture attention: “bleedin’ cunt”, “fucking luxury twinge”, “very bloody sorry”.

The sign on the left uses the distinction between explicit and implicit meaning to achieve its message: the explicit meaning of the verb “to bleed” is “to lose blood, especially from a wound or an injury” (OLD<sup>27</sup>: bleed), while the noun cunt means “a woman’s vagina and outer sexual organs” (OLD<sup>28</sup>: cunt). Explicit meaning of the phrase “bleedin’ cunt” would then be that of a woman’s period, again using a taboo of uncleanness to shock and attract attention. On the other hand, the form “bleeding” also has a meaning of “a swear word that many people find offensive that is used to emphasize a comment or an angry statement” (OLD<sup>29</sup>: bleeding), while a cunt is “a very offensive word used to show great anger or dislike” (OLD<sup>30</sup>: cunt). Using the latter meanings, the phrase “bleedin’ cunt” could be substituted by a similar phrase with almost synonymous meaning: “fuckin’ idiot”. This is the intended meaning of the phrase when put into the context of the rest of the sign, and into the context of the March for that matter, but it also draws attention to the imagery of menstruation and menstrual blood. The phrase “bleedin’ cunt” is not considered a taboo in this case, but it is intentional swearing nevertheless.

The middle sign uses the notion of “luxury tax” which is a tax on goods or services considered to be luxuries rather than necessities (Britannica<sup>31</sup>: luxury tax), and which may be

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<sup>27</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/bleed?q=bleed>.

<sup>28</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/cunt?q=cunt>.

<sup>29</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/bleeding\\_1?q=bleeding](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/bleeding_1?q=bleeding).

<sup>30</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/cunt?q=cunt>.

<sup>31</sup> Britannica available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/luxury-tax>.



synonymous with tampon tax, to creatively rename menstrual cramp into a “luxury twinge”. If period products are considered luxurious, then the period itself must be considered a luxury, and all the symptoms a person might feel should, consequently, be considered luxurious as well. The adjective “fucking” functions as an intensifier and its function is, again, to shock and get attention. This sign is written in bold capital letters with “menstrual cramp” and “luxury twinge” being much larger in font size than the rest of the text in order to stand out.

On the poster on the right, there is yet another word play on the word “blood”: “bloody” functions as an intensifier in the phrase “very bloody sorry”. Another interesting word play is the blend “ovaryacting”: “to overreact” to something is “to react too strongly, especially to something unpleasant” (OLD<sup>32</sup>: overreact). It is a verb made out of preposition “over” and verb “react”. Based on the phonetic similarity, the noun “ovary” is inserted into the beginning of the verb. Since periods are perceived to cause irrational behaviour and overreacting, noun “ovary” is used to denote the reproductive system in general (OLD<sup>33</sup>: ovary). The added text in the brackets is slightly smaller in font size than the rest, and again points to the high price of period products.

4.3 Discussion

The issue of period poverty proves to be quite a visual one. The most salient mode identified in nearly all (six out of seven) examples is that of colour, as identified by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) and Forceville and Urios–Aparisi (2009). More specifically, the colour in question is red, and it is dominant in the discourse on period poverty because it denotes blood, and through metaphorical extension represents menstruation itself.

Five signs apply the mode of formatting: the use of capitalized letters, either on the whole sign or just a part of the text. Such capitalization indicates the intended tone of voice, shouting, and fighting for one’s rights. When combined with the inherent characteristic of a social movement – that of a mass of people moving together and, more often than not, making noise – the purpose of capital letters is that they increase visibility and ensure the text will be legible from a distance, as well as on photographs posted online.

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32 Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/overreact?q=overreact>.

33 Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/ovary?q=ovary>.

According to Allan and Burrige (2009), the use of dysphemisms would indicate a more emotional, and therefore more powerful and effective, statement. Four signs use taboo words from the domain of menstruation: adverb “bloody” (which appears twice), noun “tampon”, adjective “bleedin’”, and noun “period”. When the use of those words is combined with the mode of colour red and images of period products (as seen on three of the protest signs), it is obvious that they are making stern judgement against period poverty and have a much more powerful effect on the reader.

Two signs use curse words in the function of intensifiers: adjective “fucking” (appears twice), and noun “cunt”. Such intensifiers represent the emotive reaction of anger and frustration (Jay 2000: 55; Allan & Burrige 2009: 78). This brings the discussion back to the distinction between (hypothetically) male and female language, where swear words are primarily identified as a feature of male language (Jay 2000: 113), yet at a women’s march they are being used by women in order to intensify emotional expressions (ibid: 137) and achieve the desired effect of equally shocking the reader and invoking a reaction. The use of the phrase “how fucking dare you”, as mentioned, is a swear word with a function of a speech act (Austin 1962: 159), which may have potentially been the cause of the abolishment of the tampon tax. It is a speech act calling for, and ultimately achieving, reaction.

The cultural setting in which the social movement arises is of great importance and will dictate the way the movement will be performed. The March in this analysis occurred in London, UK, which is evident from the language used, for example in the use of a typically British phrase “bloody good”. Adjective *bloody* is recognized by the Oxford Dictionary<sup>34</sup> as informal British slang. The use of humour, puns and word play all confirm that the participants of the March, as well as the intended recipients, all share the same common knowledge. Without this common knowledge, the protest signs would not be acknowledged, and the protest itself would not be successful. Language depends on culture and cultural context in which it is used, but it also contributes to the development of culture which can, and ultimately should, lead to normalization of circumstances such as period poverty, or just a natural phenomenon of menstruation. In the UK, discourse on menstruation is becoming generally more open, which is the reason the London Women’s March protestors were able to use explicit language and pictures to convey their message.

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<sup>34</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD) available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/overreact?q=overreact>.

Finally, and returning back to the visibility, two signs use the hashtag #endperiodpoverty. Hashtags have proven important because they increase the visibility of certain issues across social networks and make it easier for an idea to spread and become noticed. The more the hashtag spreads, the bigger the chances of it reaching its target audience, in this case the Government which is imposing the period tax.

## **5 Conclusion**

Social movements, such as the London Women's March 2019, are becoming more and more popular method of public speech and opposing the dominant ideology. The March has proved to be a fruitful source for CMD analysis due to a number of different modes that are used by the protestors to express the messages throughout the event. In order to increase the movement's visibility, protest signs depend on certain attention-grabbing devices which have been identified in the analysis, most notably the use of vibrant red colour, large bold letters, taboo and swear words, word play, and use of speech acts which call for a reaction. Another key feature of such social movements is their online visibility which is predominantly associated with the use of hashtags, such as the characteristic #endperiodpoverty, and the goal of making the issue go viral.

The language used on the protest signs reflects the intention of the participants of the March to change the current socio-cultural norms, achieve equality and, in the case of period poverty, normalize menstruation in everyday discourse and eliminate the view of menstruation as a "luxurious experience". The anger and frustration expressed on the protest signs are regarded to be a type of language that is considered more powerful and therefore more likely to be heard and responded to. Language, as seen here, is not just a tool of everyday communication, it is clearly a powerful tool that is being used as a means of challenging and changing reality. It is a popular tool to use in social movements and protests in general because of its visibility and versatility, and because of the vital function it has in use on the Internet, the biggest platform for free speech. It can be moulded and manipulated by the speaker to fit the purpose and it can be used to achieve what the speaker intended. The intentional use of a certain type of language unifies the speakers and serves the function of forming and expressing ideological systems, and ultimately, leads to changes in society.

The cultural impact of period poverty is considerable, with the abolishment of tampon tax being just one of many steps that the Government would need to undertake in order to diminish, or even eliminate the issue in its entirety. Clearly, the abolishment of tampon tax was

not a result of the Government reacting to a single speech act on a protest sign, but a more complex and timewise far longer process; however, it is a big step in the right direction.

**Abstract**

This study presents a Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis of protest signs from London Women's March 2019. In lieu of the recent abolishment of the tampon tax in the UK, this paper will focus on protest signs with the topics of period poverty and tampon tax. The goal of the paper is to explore the ways in which language and image work together to produce a single communicative act, and how this communicative act then realizes its meaning in the situational and social context. The analysis shows that the visual aspect is based on the use of the colour red, and the textual aspect shows a wide range of linguistic creativity.

**Keywords:** Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis, protest signs, taboo, period poverty

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