

## Of Gaps and Holes and Silence: Some Remarks on Elliptic Speech and Pseudo-Orality in James Joyce's Short Story "The Sisters"

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses aspects of direct speech in James Joyce's story "The Sisters". The story is often analyzed with special attention to the gaps and ellipses in the utterances, which are usually read as omissions, evasions, or uncomfortable silences, and thus as indicative of some transgressive behaviour of the dead priest who is at the centre of the dialogues. In this article we explore the hypothesis that the utterances in question show features that are quite common in natural spoken language and thus may also be read as literary techniques to create authentic oral discourse. This hypothesis is not intended to invalidate previous interpretations, but to introduce an additional aspect of interpretation that has been neglected so far. In the context of a literary work, features of natural spoken language acquire new meaning, and the very attempt to narrow the gap between literary and natural spoken language appears as inauthentic, ominous and as an artistic strategy to express the unspeakable. The story thus evokes suspicion and a feeling of eeriness while also offering narrative and linguistic information that allows for a more empathic assessment of the characters. We use quantitative methods of analysis and linguistic data from corpora of (authentic) spoken language to substantiate our hypothesis. As "The Sisters" is a rather short story and the present study is, in several respects, exploratory, our claims and hypotheses need to be confirmed and validated by more exhaustive research into Joyce's major works.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

In his book *Speech in the English Novel*, Norman Page points out that there "is an inevitable gap – wider or narrower at different times, but never disappearing entirely – between speech, especially in informal situations, and even the most 'realistic' dialogue in a work of literature" (1973: 7). The assumption of such a gap or even a categorical difference, however, has given way to concepts of differences in degree along an oral-written continuum (e.g. Tannen 1982), and has led to the establishment of multidimensional register studies (Biber 1989). Koch and Oesterreicher (1985) distinguish between a "language of immediacy" and a "language of distance", thus replacing the older dichotomy between

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speech and writing. Still, there are elements that appear decidedly more frequently in oral than in written dialogue, indicating the correlation between the oral medium and immediacy, as well as between the written medium and distance. Authentic oral discourse is, for example, marked by interruptions, incomplete sentences, overlap, repetitions, various forms of repair, and quite regularly by shorter or longer pauses (Fludernik 2013: §14). Literary dialogues share specific features of authentic spoken language (e.g. the relative frequency of first and second person pronouns) but are usually more regular, grammatically and syntactically complete and “correct”, and altogether more smooth and coherent, thus exhibiting characteristics typical of more formal registers and the written medium.

In spite of the generally idealized nature of speech in literary language, many authors employ linguistic errors, mistakes, irregularities and also gaps, pauses and omissions in the utterances of their characters, the latter usually marked by three dots. This form of punctuation has existed in English literature at least since 1588 (Toner 2015: 25) and has been used by many authors ever since, often to achieve some notion of accuracy in the representation of speech in literature. It gained new significance with the rise of Modernism and “a new generation of authors who were committed philosophically and aesthetically to forms of the obscure [and] cultivated new connotations for ellipsis points” (Toner 2015: 151), a practice which seems to have challenged the readers and even evoked some hostile responses from critics (Toner 2015: 153). According to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, “[e]llipsis points suggest faltering or fragmented speech accompanied by confusion, insecurity, distress, or uncertainty” (quoted from Adams 2017, n.p.), indicating that a common aspect of everyday oral communication gains specific and negatively marked significance if used in writing.

One of the texts best known for its ‘ominous’ gaps and silences is James Joyce’s first short story, “The Sisters”.<sup>2</sup> It is told from the perspective of a boy who befriended an old priest, Father Flynn, shortly before he died. It opens with a brief introductory paragraph in which the narrator talks about how he passed the priest’s house every evening, expecting some signs of his friend’s demise. He also indicates that the priest suffered from paralysis. This is followed by a short conversation between the boy’s aunt and uncle and a friend, Old Cotter, in which the latter speaks dismissively of the close attachment between the priest and the boy. The third section consists chiefly of the boy’s reminiscences of the

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<sup>2</sup> The story has been published in various versions, few of which pay adequate attention to Joyce’s careful handling of pauses and ellipses. We have used the Viking edition (2012), edited by Hans Walter Gabler with Walter Hettche, as it closely follows the manuscript as published in the *James Joyce Archive* (1978). In the publication of the text, however, some editorial decisions had to be made about the number of dots representing ellipses and pauses at the end of sentences. In the manuscript, there is no distinction between sentence-final periods and dots signalling pauses. In Gabler’s edition one of the dots is usually placed after the last word of the sentence, followed by a space and then the rest of the dots indicating the pauses. We consider this to be a valid procedure and have based our calculations on it. Note that nothing really hinges on this, as the results would not have been significantly different if we had used the numbers of dots as represented in the manuscript for our calculations.

times he spent with the priest, who taught him Latin pronunciation, Church liturgy and doctrine. The final scene describes a visit of the boy and his aunt to the house of mourning and the priest's two sisters, Eliza and Nannie. Eliza confirms that Father Flynn died peacefully after having received the sacraments, but also talks about an unfortunate incident in his past when he accidentally broke a chalice, an event which may have affected the priest's mind.

First published in 1904 and then again, thoroughly revised, as the opening story of *Dubliners*, "The Sisters" is mostly analyzed and discussed with a focus on the various ellipses and pauses in its two dialogues. Margot Norris, one of the most scrupulous readers of *Dubliners*, suggests that:

Among the stories in *Dubliners*, the gaps, ellipses, and silences in "The Sisters" have engrossed critics for decades, and have received such illuminating attention that their dilation of the story's interpretive possibilities has been extensively explored. This is clearly no accident, for I believe (along with other critics) that Joyce made the figure and function of the gap, the silence, and the figure of incompleteness an inescapably foregrounded trope in the story. By doing so he guaranteed that it could not be missed, and would therefore serve as a clew and a clue, a guiding thread and key to the entire volume's hermeneutical enigma. (Norris 2003: 16)

She then goes on to claim that the reader is specifically implicated by the textual strategy of omission and hesitancy:

The holes in the *Dubliners* stories open up the possibility of transgressive reading in two senses or layers. First, the reader (like the characters, on occasion) entertains the suspicion that the gaps and ellipses in the narration hide or occlude evidence of transgression. Second, this suspicion itself becomes a form of readerly transgression by implicating the reader in imagined transgressive knowledge. (Norris 2003: 19)

Other critics have been more direct in asserting what exactly it is that is omitted in the story, one of the most common readings being that the paralysis mentioned in the first paragraph is, in fact, paralysis of the insane, i.e. paresis or syphilis of the central nervous system (Waisbren & Walzl 1974, passim; Gifford 1982: viii).<sup>3</sup> In addition, the physical disease is extended to the priest's spirit, which now also seems to be corrupted, and, in consequence, the reader is confronted with "the fearfully potent image of the excommunicated or silenced priest" (McIntyre, Irish man of letters, in conversation, quoted in Gifford 1982: viii). Annalisa Volpone (2014), on the other hand, focuses on the response of the juvenile narrator and the hopeless task of filling gaps and ellipses:

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, Waisbren and Walzl (1974) suggest that the symptoms mentioned in the story are "consistent with general paralysis of the insane, such as excess fatigue, intermittent lucidity, excess reactions to an insignificant event (the breaking of a chalice), and a peculiar smile (euphoria)." While this is certainly correct, the symptoms are also consistent with various other ailments, most of all with the result of two previous strokes from which the priest suffered before the fatal third one.

The boy mistakenly thinks that he can “extract” or draw out meaning from Old Cotter’s suspended sentences, that in both what is said and what not may be found all he needs to understand the conversation. It is only a question of how to interpret those sentences. In part, perhaps, this is true. The young boy, however, has completely misunderstood the function of ellipsis, which instead demands a significant creative activity on the interlocutor’s part. By contrast, in order to make Old Cotter’s speech meaningful, he does not need to extract meaning from the gaps, as if they were hiding a secret truth; rather he has to insert meaning by filling those gaps. (Volpone 2014: 93)

Both readings see the gaps as ellipses that could either be understood or filled meaningfully by the boy and, of course, also the reader.<sup>4</sup>

As gaps and ellipses are not very common in literary texts, their appearance must necessarily indicate a specific narrative strategy and thus they need to be scrutinized with special attention, an attention which easily turns to transgressions, taboos and other unspeakable issues. In consequence, Marilyn French (1992: 42) writes that in the text the “uncompleted statements seem to direct toward a point. That the point is never made suggests that it cannot be decently made”, and she concludes that sex would be the common assumption, as that is what in Dublin cannot be decently said.

But then, Margot Norris (2003) raises another question: “What if the priest is merely a lonely and kind old man who gratefully repays a boy’s charitable visits and gift of snuff by talking to him, and teaching him things?” And her answer is:

Then the guilty interpretation becomes itself a species of the kind of vicious innuendo with which a dirty-minded Cotter besmirches the reputation of an innocently demented and stroke-palsied priest. (Norris 2003: 22)

Similarly, Marilyn French admits that “the information that is finally given about the old priest is pitiful rather than evil [...]. He broke a chalice and had a breakdown” (1992: 42). It seems as if there are two readings that compete with each other – one in which the gaps and ellipses indicate transgression, guilt and the unspeakable, and one in which they tempt the adolescent narrator and the reader to assume indecency and corruption while the conversations actually contain nothing of the kind.

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<sup>4</sup> One might argue that this view is supported by Joyce’s introduction of the ‘gnomon’ in the first paragraph of the story – a geometrical figure that is marked by a gap. Keith Booker argues that “[t]he frequent use of ellipses in ‘The Sisters’ is the most obvious means by which Joyce conveys his view of language as gnomon, as statement in which something is always missing because located elsewhere, in the social context and conventions within which the statement is made” (Booker 1991: 225). The gap in a gnomon, however, is not an undefined form that can be filled variously; instead, it is fully defined by its surroundings. The decision to mention this geometrical figure at the beginning of “The Sisters” would thus indicate that all the information required is present in the story, or as Joyce wrote far later on the final page of *Finnegans Wake*: “The keys to. Given!” (628:15).

In the present study we address the questions raised above with a focus on characteristics of pseudo-oral discourse and with special attention to pauses and gaps. An analysis of these linguistic phenomena can contribute to the discussion of “The Sisters” and allow for a more complete assessment of Joyce’s literary strategies. If we compare the Joycean text with spoken language as documented in linguistic corpora, the lacunae lose quite a lot of their striking significance, which would indicate that, indeed, the accusations against the priest may well be unfounded and the gaps represent predominantly usual pauses and omissions as can be found in everyday speech.

Following this introduction, we present some quantitative data showing that the distribution of pauses in “The Sisters”, like the distribution of pauses in authentic speech, follows a power law distribution (though the overall frequencies of pauses in “The Sisters” are considerably lower than in authentic spoken language). Subsequently, we discuss specific linguistic effects of omissions and other strategies of conveying implicit meaning, e.g. connotations, before we summarize our conclusions in the final section.

## 2. Gaps and silences: Quantitative data

The dialogical passages in “The Sisters” contain 1040 words and 19 indications of pauses, i.e. one pause per every 55 words.<sup>5</sup> In order to get an impression of the degree of authenticity of the distribution of pauses in “The Sisters”, we compared this number to data from two corpora of spoken language, the Giessen-Long Beach Chaplin Corpus (GLBCC), and the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English (LLC). The GLBCC distinguishes three categories of pauses, ‘... (N)’ (with ‘N’ indicating the time of the pause in seconds), (plain) ‘...’ (~ 0.5–1 seconds), and ‘..’ (less than 0.5 seconds). The LLC differentiates two basic categories of pauses, ‘short pauses’, indicated by a period (‘.’), and “unit pauses”, corresponding to a “foot” in metrical/phonological terms, represented by a hyphen (‘-’). Unit pauses can comprise as many as four units (‘- - - -’).

In “The Sisters” we find varying numbers of dots, supposedly representing the length of a period of silence, ranging from three to seven; occasionally they follow a blank space after the final period of a sentence and thus indicate a pause rather than an ellipsis. The frequencies of the pauses are summarized in Table 1. For the GLBCC, only pauses shorter than five seconds are indicated.

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<sup>5</sup> For the entire story, the ratio looks different. If we disregard the difference between dialogue and non-dialogue, we get one pause per 155 words (3,102 words in total, 20 pauses, 19 pauses appearing in the dialogical parts, and one seven-dot pause in the narrator’s thoughts).

	"The Sisters"		GLBCC		LLC	
words	1,040		281,171		673,881	
pauses	19		23,781		80,747	
pauses per 1000 words	18.27		84.6		119.8	
	...	8	.. (< 0.4 s)	14,207	. (short pause)	45,300
	....	5	... (0.5–0.9 s)	9,574	- (1 unit)	26,043
	.....	3	... (1.0–1.4 s)	1,954	-- (2units)	6,142
	.....	2	... (1.5–1.9 s)	1,432	--- (3 units)	3,262
	.....	1	... (2.0–2.4 s)	852	---- (4 units)	2
			... (2.5 – 2.9s)	335		
			... (3.0–3.4 s)	222		
			... (3.5–3.9 s)	113		
			... (4.0–4.4 s)	75		
			... (4.5–4.9 s)	52		

Table 1: Frequencies of pauses in "The Sisters", the GLBCC and the LLC

As the data show, pauses are, in general, considerably less frequent in "The Sisters" than in either corpus of natural language. This is not surprising, as even (intended) naturalistic speech in fictional texts will only approximate authentic speech to a certain extent. As a comparison of the relative frequencies of pauses in the natural language corpora shows, there are considerable differences here as well, probably owing to different annotation practices.

Pauses, like words, can be expected to follow a power law distribution. This expectation is (approximately) confirmed for the GLBCC, though not for the LLC. Histograms for the two natural language corpora are shown in Figure 1.

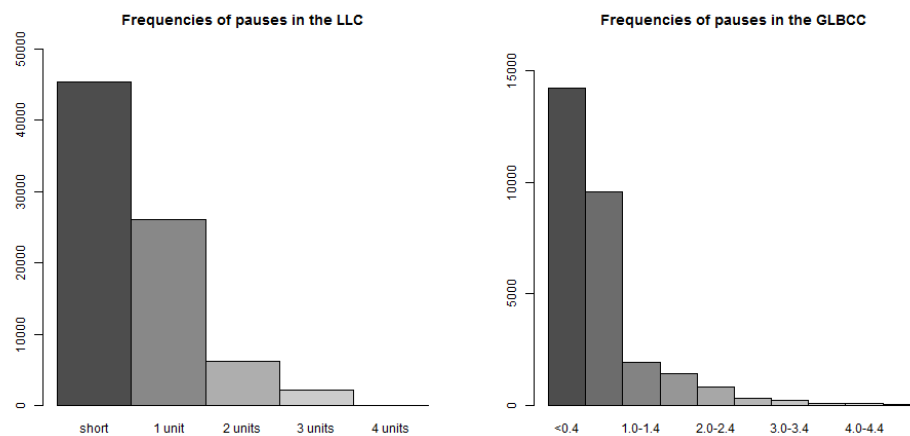


Figure 1: Frequency distributions of pauses in the LLC (left) and the GLBCC (right)

A power law distribution is characterized by a constant rate of change. For instance, the most frequent category could be twice as frequent as the second category, which in turn would be twice as frequent as the third, etc. In order to test whether a given distribution obeys the power law, we have fitted generalized linear models to the data, using the native glm-function of R (R Core Team 2015). The models are best plotted in log-log-diagrams, i.e., in plots in which both axes are displayed on a logarithmic scale, as this yields a linear

regression line for a power law distribution. The plots for the data from the LLC and the GLBCC are shown in Figure 2. The triangles indicate the fitted data, the circles represent the observed data (the 's'-value underneath the diagrams indicates the slope of the regression line, and 'lambda' the mean value, represented as a ratio of the number of pauses divided by the number of pause types).

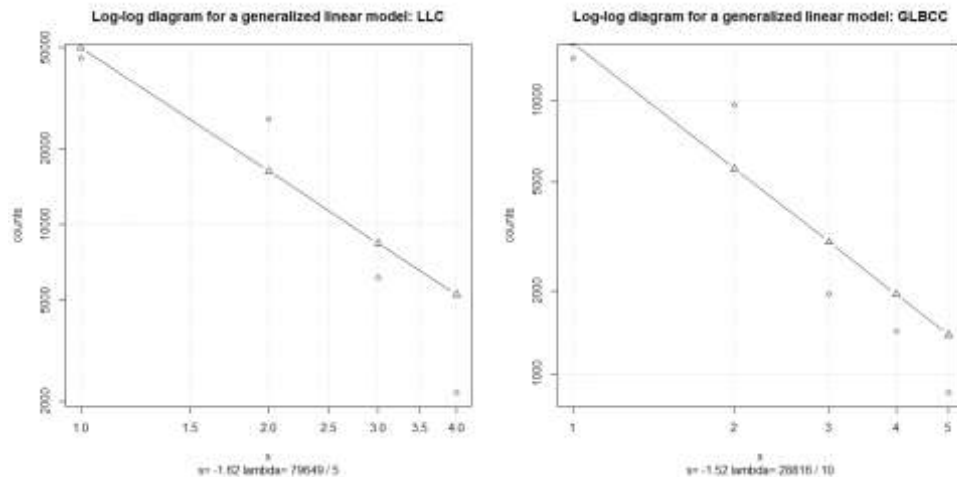


Figure 2: Log-log plots for generalized linear models: LLC (left) and GLBCC (right)

According to the generalized linear models, the rank of a pause type (and, hence, its length, as pause types are ordered in terms of length) is a significant predictor for the GLBCC corpus ( $p = 0.03$ ). For the LLC, rank is not significant at a 5%-level, but it is not too far from significance, either ( $p = 0.08$ ). Given the more precise annotations in the GLBCC, where the pauses are annotated for length, we assume that pauses do, in general, follow a power law distribution in natural spoken language.

The data for “The Sisters” are displayed in Figure 3. As in the case of the GLBCC-data, the rank of a pause type (on a logarithmic scale) is a significant predictor of the length of a pause ( $< 0.01$ ). As the diagram shows, the distribution of pauses in “The Sisters” is even more power-law-like than in authentic data, and the log-log plot on the right-hand side of Figure 3 shows an excellent fit of the generalized linear model to the data from “The Sisters”.

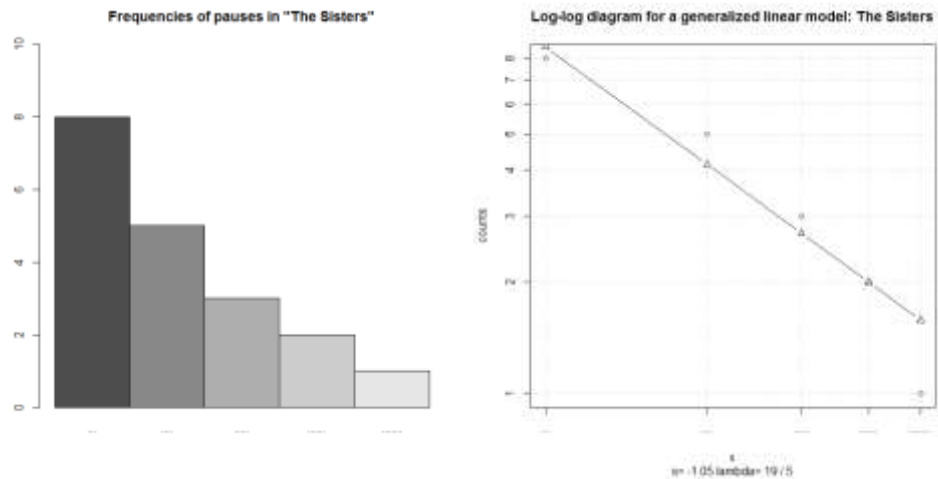


Figure 3: Histogram (left) and Log-log plot (right) for “The Sisters”

Even though the overall frequency of pauses relative to tokens in “The Sisters” (within the spoken parts of the short story) differs significantly from the corresponding data in natural language corpora, the internal distributions of pauses are clearly comparable. In this respect, the pauses represent a realistic element of spoken language in the text. As the next section will show, this assessment can be validated by close readings of the relevant passages.

### 3. Gaps and silences: Denotations and connotations

Words, as well as syntactic constructions, often come with connotations that can be exploited conversationally, as well as, obviously, for literary purposes (cf. Leech 1969: 41). For instance, the post-nominal modifier *waiting to happen* tends to be associated with negative events (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003). This does not mean that it cannot occur with positive events, and corpora actually contain examples of the type *sex waiting to happen*. But the vast majority of nouns combining with this construction carries a negative connotation, and the nouns most frequently occurring in the context of this post-modifier are *accident* and *disaster*. *Waiting to happen* therefore comes with a certain negative ‘prosody’, which is not a matter of denotational, but of connotational meaning. This type of ‘context-induced semantic prosody’ can also be used as a literary technique to convey specific meanings, and it seems to us that Joyce makes use of it in “The Sisters”.

#### 3.1 “I wouldn’t say he was exactly ...”

Let us now take a closer look at the first of Old Cotter’s utterances. These passages are the ones that are specifically concerned with the priest, and thus they are also of particular interest in the assessment of the pauses, gaps, omissions and evasions in the story. Here is the first passage in which we hear Old Cotter talking about Father Flynn:



Old Cotter was sitting at the fire, smoking, when I came downstairs to supper. While my aunt was ladling out my stirabout he said as if returning to some former remark of his:

– No, I wouldn't say he was exactly ..... but there was something queer ..... there was something uncanny about him. I'll tell you my opinion. ...

He began to puff at his pipe, no doubt arranging his opinion in his mind. Tiresome old fool! When we knew him first he used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms; but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories about the distillery.

– I have my own theory about it, he said. I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases. ... But it's hard to say. ...

He began to puff again without giving us his theory. (D, 3-4)

Quite obviously, Old Cotter never really states his point, but it is worth looking at the exact features of the utterances to see if they allow for any assumptions about the ellipses and their potential 'content', or implied meaning.

The opening "No" in Cotter's first utterance could indicate either the rejection of a previous statement by the narrator's uncle, or, more probable as the speaker seems to be "returning to some former remark of his", a qualification of something he himself previously said. "I wouldn't say he was exactly ....." opens up a gap that is not filled, and it is at this point that a negative connotation is created with respect to the priest. The sentence could either be a case of litotes, i.e. negating the opposite of what the speaker wants to say in order to produce a special emphasis or irony, or the dismissal of what has been read into his previous statement. In this context and depending on the stress, the six-dot gap can be either a pause – if "was" is stressed and "exactly" refers back to the previously used term<sup>6</sup> – or an ellipsis. As the sentence after the first pause continues with "but", we again face two possibilities. Either the opening of the sentence was a case of litotes, in which case "but", followed by an unfavourable view, requires that the first part of the sentence had to be a positive assessment. Alternatively, the following statement is meant to be less harsh in comparison to the previous one and, in particular, to the omitted word.

In order to determine connotations that come with the phrase "I wouldn't say he was exactly ...", we can look at comparable corpus data. The two corpora of spoken language used above (GLBCC and LLC) do not, unfortunately, contain any utterances that resemble this particular one. We have therefore used data from the internet, searching for phrases of the type, "I wouldn't say he was exactly". A Google search offered 40 hits of this type. Twelve of the examples are instances of litotes; in six utterances the phrase is used in a literal sense, i.e., *exactly* is used as an expression of 'precision'. Neither of these groups of

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<sup>6</sup> "Do you think he was a crook/thief/simoniac/sodomite?" "No, I wouldn't say he was exactly, but there was something queer ...".

examples is syntactically similar to the utterance in “The Sisters”, however, as no contrastive conjunction (“but” or “although”) follows. A contrastive conjunction like that in Cotter’s utterance is found in 22 of the hits. In twenty of the examples, the opening phrase is explicitly followed by “but” or “although” and two more imply such a conjunction. Those instances of “I wouldn’t say he was exactly” that are followed by a contrastive element express the relativization of a stronger statement, for instance:

- (1) I wouldn’t say he was exactly cheerful. But he wasn’t the opposite either.
- (2) I wouldn’t say he was exactly 235, but he was in the 230’s.
- (3) I wouldn’t say he was exactly horny. Just saying he likes ‘em busty!

The numbers are quite similar for the phrase “I wouldn’t say she was exactly”. Of the 26 occurrences, all of the 17 cases which resemble the sentence structure in “The Sisters” are relativizations; of the others, eight are cases of litotes, and in one case the phrase is used in a literal sense.

Of course, the internet of 2017 differs considerably from the language spoken in Dublin in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the complete correspondence of the phrasing and its specific use indicates that it probably did not have a radically different meaning in its earlier linguistic environment. By introducing an ellipsis in this context, Joyce must then have expected his audience to fill it with some fairly unfriendly adjective which is subsequently regarded as too strong or harsh and now relativized or softened by the terms that follow. This relativization takes the form of a series of adjectives: *queer*, *uncanny*, *peculiar*, which share some connotations but also differ in some respects, as we will see below.

### 3.2 “Queer” and “uncanny”

The second pause in the passage above indicates a self-initiated repair by which “queer” is replaced with “uncanny”, unless “queer” is, in fact, supposed to be an intensifier, which is possible in Scottish and Irish English (OED, s.v.). In the latter case, “uncanny” would be the word preferred to ‘queer + omission’. While this is possible, the correct reading would be restricted to an implied audience of Irish or Scottish readers, and thus it is more probable that “queer” is used as an adjective, the meaning of which would be: “Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric. Also: of questionable character; suspicious, dubious” (O.E.D. s.v.). Note that the word *queer* as a noun may have referred to homosexuality since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (ibid.),<sup>7</sup> but it was probably not used as an adjective until later (the first attestation in the OED, actually in American English, dates from 1914), so that we can dismiss this meaning here.

<sup>7</sup> Actually, the insulting use in a 1894 letter by the Marquess of Queensberry, “The Snob Queers like Roseberry & certainly Christian hypocrite Gladstone,” may well be based on one of its various other meanings, even if the context was the alleged homosexual relationship between his son and Rosebery.

If we take 'queer' to be an adjective, the second and third gaps in this sentence would not be omissions or ellipses but rather pauses that need not be filled by the reader. The third pause is, actually, explained by the following paragraph, which tells us that Old Cotter puffs at his pipe and is thus unable to go on speaking for a moment.

The meaning of *uncanny* is, of course, hard to determine precisely. As Freud's essay "Das Unheimliche" ("The Uncanny") was only published in 1919, its influence on Joyce's story can be ruled out, even if it comes to mind almost automatically for later readers. In the OED, the entries 1. ('mischievous / malicious') and 3. ('unreliable, not to be trusted') are marked as obsolete, but then Joyce frequently includes archaisms in his texts or suggests that obsolete meanings leave their traces in modern usage. In particular definition 3. may well be applicable. The other entries in the OED are (comments in square brackets have been added by us):

2. Careless, incautious [this would actually fit the accident with the chalice]
- 4.a Of persons: Not quite safe to trust to, or have dealings with, as being associated with supernatural arts or powers [not very likely as supernatural aspects do not seem to matter in the story]
- 4.b Partaking of a supernatural character; mysterious, weird, uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar [again, the relevance of a supernatural character is unlikely in the story]
5. Unpleasantly severe or hard [very unlikely]
6. Dangerous, unsafe [possible, but as it is supposed to soften a previous statement, it is not quite probable]

Of course, in a literary context words may mean anything they can possibly mean, but some readings are still more likely than others. In this case, none of the meanings seems to fit too well, and so the word may well be intended to carry an undefined feeling of unease. As Joyce's texts are famous for their retrospective modifications of meanings, "careless, incautious" could be added to this general notion in the course of a second reading when the accident with the chalice has been revealed to the reader.

In this passage, however, there is only one possible omission or ellipsis. All the other gaps are pauses within the utterances of a speaker puffing at his pipe. Linguistically, these pauses are unexceptional, and within authentic speech they would go unnoticed. In this context, they mark hesitancy by the speaker, a search for the right word, which each time ends in another vague and general notion of something unfamiliar and uncommon. Following the logic of the passage, it is not the pauses that act as omissions and ellipses; instead they rather draw attention to the words in their immediate context and emphasize the selection of vague and indeterminate terms.

### 3.3 "A man like that"

The next passage with a series of gaps occurs after the information about the death of the priest has been transmitted to the boy:

- I wouldn't like children of mine, to have too much to say to a man like that.
- How do you mean, Mr Cotter? asked my aunt.
- What I mean is, said old Cotter, it's bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be. ... Am I right, Jack?
- That's my principle, too, said my uncle. Let him learn to box his corner. That's what I'm always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper, every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that's what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large. .... Mr Cotter might take a pick of that leg of mutton. (D, 4-5)

The discussion here focuses on the early phrase “a man like that”. The aunt demands an explanation of the phrase from old Cotter, which is duly given. However, there is also a shift from “he” to “it”: not “he is bad for boys”, but “it is bad for boys”. The priest now becomes part of something larger, a more abstract situation, which does not only affect the narrator of the story, but also other children in similar circumstances. The relationship between the boy and Father Flynn, which seemed to be in some way exceptional, thus becomes less unique and more typical of a specific Irish environment in which the priest plays a contributing role.

The following sentence, then, expresses a dichotomy between boys either playing with boys of their own age or being something that is not further specified. Notably, there is no hesitation by Cotter when he is asked what he meant – the ellipsis only follows later, when the contrast to running about and playing with young lads needs to be expressed more clearly. His statement, however, is immediately confirmed by the uncle, who also repeats old Cotter's utterance structurally, i.e. he expresses quite clearly what a boy should do but is less precise about whatever it is he shouldn't.<sup>8</sup> *It* is, however, quite obviously linked to education and not to any illicit or immoral actions.

The aunt's next question indicates that the metalinguistic exchange has, indeed, worked, as now she wants to know why Mr Cotter considers *it* not to be good for children, and thus the meaning of *it* no longer seems to be in doubt. Thus, the naming of its opposite, boys playing with boys of their own age, must have been as understandable for her as for the uncle. And Cotter does not correct either of them, so he seems to agree with their understanding of his statement. However, his answer now shifts from the earlier *a man like that* and the subsequent *it*-situation including the priest and the boy to *things like that*, i.e. something which can be observed by the boy:

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<sup>8</sup> Booker (1991: 225) points out that “Old Cotter is, apparently, successful in communicating his meaning to Uncle Jack without also communicating that meaning to the boy”.

– It’s bad for children, said old Cotter, because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect. .... (D, 5)

We later learn, of course, what the boy has seen: the unpleasant and partly messy death of an old man who was no longer able to groom himself, who spilled snuff on his clothes and on the floor, whose originally red handkerchief was blackened with the snuffstains of a week, and who discussed with him “whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections” (D, 7). To some extent this information retroactively validates Old Cotter’s opinion that this was probably not the perfect environment for a young boy, that it could have had some detrimental effect on an impressionable young mind and that the narrator should better have spent more time with boys of his own age.

What is more important, the reading we have suggested here has shown that most of the gaps are, in fact, not ellipses at all but rather pauses that need not be filled. All in all, of the 19 gaps in the story, only 7 are ellipses and 12 are pauses – one instance is not quite clear. In Old Cotter’s speech, there are only two ellipses, the rest are pauses. The same is true for the later dialogue between the narrator’s aunt and one of the priest’s sisters – the other sister remains completely silent. Moreover, two of the ellipses that do appear in this passage are easily filled. “Did he ... peacefully?” simply omits “die”, and the following “And everything .... ?” is answered immediately with a confirmation that the last rites were, indeed, performed..

Linguistically, the story does not really pose a problem. The pauses and ellipses are perfectly consistent with normal speech, most of them need no far-reaching interpretation and are, obviously, understood easily by the other characters in the text. The few remaining cases are in part also unproblematic – e.g. the probable relativization in Old Cotter’s first utterance – and thus only very few instances remain that could pose interpretative concern. In addition, the reason for the priest’s altered behaviour given in the final section of the story – breaking a chalice could, of course, also indicate that you have spilled God’s blood – is perfectly sufficient to explain not only the crisis of faith but also the hesitancy of the adults to address Father Flynn’s predicament directly.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As indicated at the beginning of this article, the gaps in James Joyce’s “The Sisters” are usually read as indicative of guilt and moral failure. As some critics like Margot Norris and Marilyn French have pointed out, however, the story does not only lend itself to those interpretations, it also offers information that allows alternative readings, according to which no transgression has taken place. Instead, the priest may be seen as an old man suffering from a crisis of faith, and his ‘bad influence’ on the juvenile narrator consists of no more than keeping him from playing with boys of his own age and filling his head with religious doctrine. Our analysis of the gaps, ellipses and pauses in the text supports these readings and shows that quantitative research is a productive method in

literary studies, as it may be used to shed new light on controversial readings and approaches and thus serve as a suitable supplement to the more traditional tools of the trade.

We want to point out, however, that interpretations that read the gaps as suggestive and ominous are of course not invalidated by our argument, as the text, indeed, lures us into such (mis)readings; they are an integral part of the interpretive process as conclusions that are evoked but may ultimately be discarded. Stanley Fish (1980: 4) points out that “everything a reader does, even if he later undoes it, is part of the ‘meaning experience’”, and he later adds: “Reading is an event, no part of which is to be discarded. [...] all the mistakes [...] will not be cancelled out. They have been experienced; they have existed in the mental life of the reader; they *mean*” (ibid., 48). Joyce presents us with everyday life that suggests hidden meanings and obscurity, but also ominous suspicions that retroactively resolve into normality. In addition, the text demonstrates that the very similarities with normal oral discourse – pauses, ellipses, hesitancy, open-ended sentences – will in a literary text raise suspicions and appear as indications of hidden meanings, ominous hints and undisclosed secrets. Whatever is unsaid will almost inevitably be read as ominous or unspeakable. The simulation of normal speech must thus depart from the very objective it strives for in order to be recognized as such.

“The Sisters” is, of course, only a very short short story, and thus this contribution is only a pilot study for more extensive research into the potential of literary linguistics to tackle Joyce’s multi-levelled works, and to contribute to the discussion of their intricate ambiguities.

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