Homophobia and Logophobia. Construing Homosexuality in European Public Discourse

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1. Introduction

My paper stems from a reflection on philosophy of language moving across the double axis of ignorance and knowledge fuelled by the imbrication of fear and language. In the *New Science*, Giambattista Vico connected fear with language, and underlined the innate quality of fear arguing that "it was fear that created gods in the world; not fear awakened in men [*sic*] by other men but *fear awakened in men by themselves*" (Vico 1996: 382, my emphasis). He then metaphorically asserted that even the language constructed by primordial giants originated from fear, in that they firstly produced the early onomatopoetic sound of "pa" to respond to the fear of thunders (Rudnick Luft 2013: 431; Verene 1991). Primitive human beings started to use language as an instinctive reaction to overcome their "ignorance" and make sense of "scary" and "unknown" natural phenomena. James Joyce, following and quoting the philosopher's etymological method (Sabatini 2015a), renders the concept of biography as "beogrefright" (Joyce 1989: 423), aiming to meld fear in the very concepts of life and language: bio-graphy and Irish life ("beo") are enmeshed with "ogre" (a human-eating giant) and "fright". Thus, Irish culture, human life and the act of reproducing it with words stem from a primordial sense of fear and, notably, of fear of "other" monstrous and obscure creatures able to mysteriously endanger our existence.

From these historical premises that link language and fear on the one hand, with knowledge and ignorance on the other hand, my paper aims to discursively investigate two specific interrelated fears, homophobia and logophobia, namely the fear of homosexuality and the fear of speaking of homosexuality. As I will show, homophobia is not only produced or reinforced by offensive and abusive language but it is a peculiar kind of fear that can be revealed even when language is not offensive but, conversely, seems to be respectful. The qualifier "peculiar" is here particularly suitable because, as argued by numerous sociolinguistists, sociologists and discourse analysts (e.g Butters *et al.* 1990; Leap 1996, 2015; Renold 2000; Winstanley, Ward 2003; Coates 2005; Dalley and Campbell 2006; Caio and Costa 2017) homophobia is not really a "fear" of LGBT people but rather, as I will show, a reaction triggered by a number of ambivalent feelings.

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1.1 Homophobia and gaycism

In 2015, blogger John Sherman wrote a revealing entry entitled "Why Gaycism Should Replace Homophobia" quoting the web series "The Outs"[1] where one of the characters claims that homophobia is not really fear-based: "Homophobia gets a bad rap, but what it means is people being afraid of homos. And I know I'd feel a lot safer walking home alone at night, if more people were afraid of me" (Sherman 2015). The words "gaycist" and "gaycism" have since then gained prominence in current linguistic landscape and in popular and media culture. As Sherman writes, "*Gaycism* is an obvious play on *racism* (...) Both words share the -ism suffix with *sexism, classism,* and *ageism,* forming a foul linguistic family of social ills". Those social "isms" are "a doctrine, a system of belief" and can be "institutionalized, systematized, or proselytized, passed down to subsequent generations", thus exerting a dangerous power "socially and linguistically" (Sherman 2015). Concurrently, though, there are other ideological positions[2] that still consider being anti-gay a stance fuelled by fear proper:

> [Homophobia is] Fear of the unknown, fear of unwanted sexual attention, fear of gender roles being flouted, fear of humanity being wiped out by widespread bumming, fear of a plague of homosexuals dismantling marriage, the family, the church and any other institution held vaguely dear (...) They're all symptoms of an irrational, disproportionate fear: a phobia. (Strudwick 2012)

In light of the abovementioned ideological positions that consider homophobia either as a proper fear or, quite the reverse, as "gaycism" (an "institutionalized doctrine"), the essay will examine materials from media discourse that may foster such ideologies in the audience's worldviews.

1.2 Materials and Methodology

The present study deals with those linguistic patterns that discursively construct LGBT identities. Several instances of verbal homophobia and/or gaycism are examined in specific socio-cultural contexts and in different text-types (i.e. museum texts, screen translation, journalism). As I have argued elsewhere (Sabatini 2016), both offensive expressions on homosexuality and euphemistic ones can challenge existing frames on those gendered discourses (Baker 2005) that show a linguistic ambivalence between homophilia and homophobia. Both highlight issues related to groupthink and to dynamics of in-groupness and out-groupness. From a social constructivist perspective[3] (Duszak 2002) and using

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[1] The series is produced by VIMEO (starting in 2012) and, thus far, 14 episodes have been released.

[2] There are also detractors who claim the word being redundant. This is the case of an article with a clearly biased stance claiming the word gaycist is "a hip little Hollyweird portmanteau" (Lamont 2014).

[3] Constructivism is here used in Vygotskian terms to suggest how, through interaction, specific language patterns and discourse practices are able to shape worldviews and contribute either to stigmatization of homosexuality or to increase of homophobia (the proliferation of counter discourses against homophobia, now actively circulating, are beyond the scope of this analysis). It is worth noting that social constructivism has often been criticized in Queer Theory. Richard Norton, for example, denounces constructivists' lack of reflection on the core of queer identity. At the same time, he seems to agree with a constructivist view according to which "homophobia has a direct link to heterosexual needs, fears, and ideology" (Norton 2008).

the methods of discourse analysis and queer linguistics (e.g. Leap 2015; Mongie 2016), my analysis intends to underscore the mutual influence of language and given socio-cultural scenarios, describing how society and individuals negotiate homosexuality and the language that represents it. Thus homophobia, as I will try to show, mirrors logophobia, namely the fear of openly discussing homosexuality in order not to offend the audience or simply because the speakers perceive homosexuality as offensive or unpleasant, and thus "unspeakable".

2. European Data on Homophobia

In the light of the abovementioned debate, linguistic choices, especially in texts that are "globally popular" (Leap 1996, 2015), are extremely relevant to understand social mores and socio-cognitive mind-sets. As a matter of fact, the language on and about homosexuality is highly significant in terms of strengthening stigmatization and prejudice, or in terms of overcoming discrimination. While improvements seem to be on their way, the "European Union survey of discrimination and victimisation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons'" carried out by FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) in 2012-2013 revealed alarming figures on various instances of homophobia in Europe (FRA 2013: 3):

> A very large number of respondents, 93,079, participated in the research, providing a wealth of comparable data. In many respects, the results raise severe concerns: almost half (47 %) of all respondents said that they had felt personally discriminated against or harassed on the grounds of sexual orientation in the year preceding the survey. A majority of respondents who were attacked in the past year said that the attack or threat of violence happened partly or entirely because they were perceived to be LGBT (59 %). The survey results provide valuable evidence of how LGBT persons in the EU have experienced discrimination, harassment and violence in different areas of life. This report will contribute to much needed discussions in the EU and its Member States about concrete legislative and non-legislative measures to improve the situation for LGBT persons living in the EU.

As to derogatory language, or linguistic discrimination, "more than four fifths of all respondents said that casual jokes about LGBT people in everyday life were widespread, and almost half of all respondents believed that offensive language about LGBT people by politicians was widespread in their country of residence" (FRA 2013: 24). Given such an alarming scenario, I will try to outline firstly some instances of overt linguistic homophobia, and, then, I will underline examples of covert homophobia that seem to move towards the abovementioned concept of logophobia.

3. Overt instances of verbal homophobia

Recent events and social campaigns have revealed that the situation has not improved since the data collected by FRA, especially concerning the political scenario. As Mongie demonstrates in her analysis on framing and counterframing

of homosexuality, "in institutional discourse, powerful groups often defend the status quo by means of intolerant frames that position the less powerful group as inferior" (Mongie 2016: 23), thus leading to a fortification of homophobia in several public heteronormative discourses. This was particularly evident in the UK soon after the Brexit vote. Several newspapers, as well as the LGBT anti-violence charity Galop and police statistics, reported that homophobic attacks rose 147%, (Townsend 2012) after Brexit. Although the very reasons for such an increase are still difficult to decipher, one may argue that Ukip's incessant references to the "danger" of minority groups – and notably immigrants – fostered a more general irrational fear of the "other", as well as an internalized sense of legitimate violence among supporters. First of all, Ukip's leader Nigel Farage claimed a need to keep "HIV-positive migrants out of Britain" as shown in figure 1:
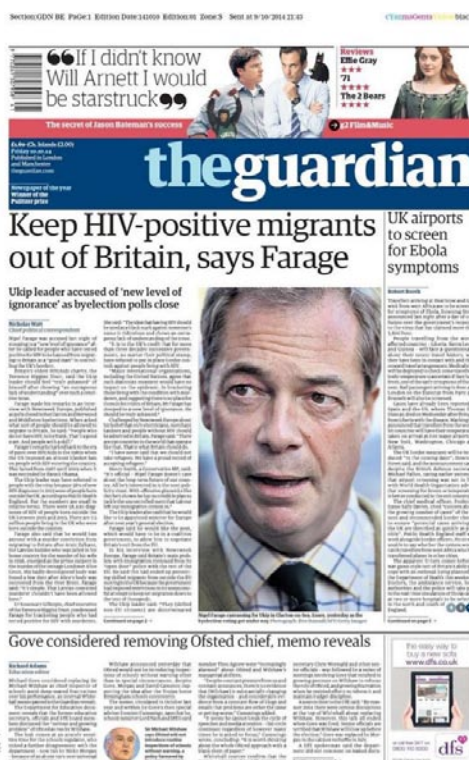

Figure 1: Farage's anti-immigration campaign in the press.

Of course, such statements provoked hatred towards immigrants but, at the same time, made LGBT people a particularly vulnerable target, given that prejudice about HIV being a "gay disease" is still pervasive. Additionally, Farage added further "anti-gay" statements, blaming Margaret Thatcher's "open-mindedness" as a cause for "gay tolerance" in Britain (Scott 2013; Day 2013); he was then accused both of giving support to Roger Helmer's anti-gay remarks (saying that many over-70s feel uncomfortable with homosexuality; Rowena 2015) and using "fag jokes" during a speech at his brother's wedding (O'Connor 2015).

4. Covert instances of verbal homophobia

Naturally, all those expressions and statements (here taken as a key example) pointing towards a supposedly dangerous and/or unpleasant nature of homosexuality have been able to shape the public opinion and to reinforce the taboo on homosexuality, as well as boosting overt and proper homophobia. However, as already shown by Leap in his seminal 1996 work *Words Out*, when studying gender in connection to language use, one has to pay attention also to those covert expressions of gendered meanings which sometimes can be less evident or more innocuous and "politically correct". Those covert expressions, as in the case studies I will outline, reveal the "unspeakable" and taboo nature of homosexuality. As argued by Allan and Burridge (2006: 983), taboos trigger a direct connection with the concept of "social stigma" that may even be deployed through silence. Since homosexuality, as shown in the aforementioned survey, is still a taboo in several countries, LGBT people are often "stigmatized" as "deviant", due to the proliferation of covert or overt discourses that point towards that direction. This may be informed and further scrutinized in light of Foucault's view on logophilia and logophobia (Foucault 2012: 66):

> It seems to me that beneath this apparent veneration of discourse, under this apparent logophilia, a certain fear is hidden. It is just as if prohibitions, barriers, thresholds and limits had been set up in order to master, at least partly, the great proliferation of discourse, in order to remove from its richness the most dangerous part, and in order to organise its disorder according to figures, which dodge what is most uncontrollable about it. It is as if we had tried to efface all trace of its irruption into the activity of thought and language. No doubt there is in our society, and, I imagine, in all others, but following a different outline and different rhythms, a profound logophobia, a sort of mute terror against these events, against this mass of things said, against the surging up of all these statements, against all that could be violent, discontinuous, pugnacious, disorderly as well, and perilous about them – against this great incessant and disordered buzzing of discourse.

Foucault's argument, stressing on the ambivalence between logophilia and logophobia, deftly informs reflection upon the way societies deal with certain topics, up to the point where logophobia is the paradoxical outcome of a "disordered buzzing of discourse". Homosexuality is still controversial due to several factors within the intersection of social discipline, religion, hegemonic control. According to Foucault's well-known argument on the "steady proliferation of discourses on sex" (Foucault 1978: 18), social and linguistic proscription or interdiction are always productive (see also Fleming, Lempert 2011: 5). Ironically, proscriptions and even the appropriate substitutes (e.g. euphemisms, circumlocutions) increase the salience of taboo topics and the language that construes them. The use of euphemism as a form of (self)censoring fosters reflection on what social mores consider offensive or acceptable, speakable or unspeakable. Thus, euphemisms naturally indicate politeness or fear to speak

out while "dysphemisms" indicate insulting and impoliteness. More importantly, those expressions reveal "an us versus them situation" (Allan, Burridge 1991: 50), whereby heteronormative mind-frames dictate what one can or can not speak about, as the following case studies from cinema and museum discourse also suggest.

4.1. Popular films, Screen Translations, Homophobic Marketing

As I have argued (Sabatini 2016), one of the media domains where covert logophobia about homosexuality is evident is cinema and screen translation, in that lexical choices in the target texts heavily depend on the mind-set the target audience is expected to share. In particular, in Italian it often happens that non-sexual gay-related expressions in the source texts get strongly mitigated while dysphemistic homophobic expressions meant as offensive are often kept with similar lexical choices (Sabatini 2016). In the blockbuster film "The Hangover", for instance, there is the common English slang expression "It's gay" that refers to something "uncool", something negative to be avoided:

English	Italian
Do me a favor, don 't text me. *It's gay*.	Per favore non mandate sms. *Roba da gay*.

Table 1: Dialogue and dubbing from the film "The Hangover".

While offensive expressions of this kind are translated with similar pragmatic meanings ("It's gay" is almost literally rendered as "it's gay stuff"), other dysphemistic expressions such as "faggot" used in a "friendly" ironic way, are translated with a different (non-homophobic) expression, in a coarse register related to the scatological semantic field[4]:

English Phil:	Italian Phil:	Back Translation
Paging Dr. Faggot.	Il *Dottor Scorreggione* è in casa?	Is *Dr Farter* at home?
Phil: *Dr. Faggot!*	*Dottor Scorreggione*!	*Dr Farter!*

Table 2: Dialogue and dubbing from the film "The Hangover".

The target expression "farter" for the source "faggot" appears as an attempt to delete the offensive homophobic remark, thus following a general policy in Italian dubbing to mitigate sexual references[5] (Sabatini 2016). Interestingly enough, however, a number of swear words such as "assholes", "fuck off", "whore" are translated with equivalent vulgar words such as "stronzi", "vaffanculo", "troia". Even more surprisingly, some non-homophobic insults become homophobic in the target text. A key example is given by the way a Chinese drug dealer is insulted: the original *crystal-meth tweaker* (methamphetamine addict) becomes

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[4] See Sabatini 2016 for further discussion on the semantics and pragmatics of the expressions.
[5] Interestingly enough, the French, Spanish and German translations have maintained the same gay-related vulgar word with an equivalent expression.

"gialla checca" ("yellow sissy") thus also adding a xenophobic slur to the homophobic expression. In other words, the Italian dubbing seems to mitigate those homophobic remarks that are not proper insults but are used in a friendly way so as to undermine the characters' "masculinity". Conversely, some insults were indeed exacerbated and became fiercely homophobic, so as to suggest an expected cognitive cooperation and alignment in the audience.

Besides verbal euphemisms, "visual euphemisms" are another discursive strategy employed to mitigate fear of homosexuality. This happened, for instance, in the poster of the film "I Love You Phillip Morris":

Figure 2: Posters of the film "I love you Phillip Morris".

The Italian marketing totally silenced the topic of homosexual romance in the title, in the advertising posters and in the theatrical trailer. Besides the obvious change of the title into *Colpo di Fulmine. Il Mago della Truffa* ("Love at First Sight. The Master Swindler"), the two posters are completely different: while the original poster foregrounds the gay couple, the Italian one literally "separates" the two lovers, isolating one of them in the distant background.

In the movie almost every sex-gay-related expression is mitigated. In a sexual scene, for example, the verb phrase "let's fuck" becomes "let's make" (*"facciamo"*), a clear euphemism for sexual intercourse that seems to be used in order to avoid offence or embarrassment in the audience. In a similar fashion, the dysphemism "blow job" for "fellatio" becomes the oddly euphemistic *"lecca lecca"* ("lollipop") or "yo-yo" throughout the movie. This conceptually associates oral sex to the metaphors SEX IS GAME and SEX IS EATING (Crespo-Fernandez 2015), so as to strengthen conceptual association with an innocent dimension that is surely less intimidating. The Italian dubbing has thus employed "hyperbolic euphemisms", namely "uncommon euphemisms that maximize the distance, in the receiver, from the original unacceptable and unspeakable concept" (Sabatini 2016: 227).

More recently, Luca Guadagnino's gay-themed film "Call me by your name" has been fiercely criticized both for its marketing and for the director's filming choices. The film tells the love story between a 17-year-old boy and a 24-year-old man, though they also have heterosexual relations. Although the film can be considered quite graphic (one of the most sensational and controversial scenes depicts the boy masturbating into a ripe peach), homosexual intercourse is evidently concealed. In fact, when the two lovers have sex for the first time "the camera coyly drifts over to an open window, their early coital moans gentle in the background — the kind of tasteful dodge that practically nods to Code-era Hollywood" (Lodge 2017). Critic Lodge admits that the movie is "a triumph on many levels but its conservative attitude towards showing men having sex remains problematic" and speaks about a "compromise", affirming that Guadagnino, in successfully courting a wider audience for the film, "has somewhat diluted its queerness" (Lodge 2017). This leads to discussion about internalized homophobia and/or internalized conviction of the audience's internalized homophobia, condescending to the fact that many people would accept homosexuality as long as it remains silent or barely visible. When asked about the lack of explicitness of gay sex, Guadagnino said (2017, my emphasis):

> I wasn't interested at all (…) *I wanted the audience to completely rely on the emotional travel of these people and feel first love. I didn't want the audience to find any difference or discrimination toward these characters*. It was important to me to create this powerful universality, because the whole idea of the movie *is that the other person makes you beautiful — enlightens you, elevates you. The other is often confronted with rejection, fear or a sense of dread,* but the welcoming of the other is a fantastic thing to do, particularly in this historical moment.

Here, the lexical choices seem relevant. In affirming that the audience is to "rely on the emotional level of those people" and thus excluding sexually explicit scenes may imply that homosexuality could be accepted only as a platonic relationship (thus aligning to a catholic tradition that only accepts non-sexual gay relationships). Moreover, he says he did not want the audience "to find any difference or discrimination towards those characters" implying the strong possibility that they would find such a discrimination in case of explicitness. Although the reasons for this choice could be merely aesthetic or even noble (in terms of conferring a sentimental affect-based value to the homosexual relationship), it is somewhat surprising that the same did not happen for the heterosexual more explicit scene. The risk, then, is to propose a vision of homosexuality as innocuously sexless or at least concealed, on the verge of being crystallized as ethereal in order for the audience to fully accept it. In addition to this, the film's UK distributor, Sony Pictures, promoted the film with a misleading tweet featuring an image of the boy with his female friend, and describing the film as "a romance overwhelming in its intensity", so as to suggest a heterosexual romance:

Figure 3: Twitter image for the Promotion of the film "Call me by your name".

The marketing strategy has caused a turmoil in social media, with responses ranging from outrage to sarcasm and satire, forcing the company to remove it. Several articles have then been written, including Lee's unequivocal and self-evident "Call me by the wrong name: how studios are still trying to straight-wash gay films", where the critic affirms that "Sony's disastrous attempt to push Oscar-buzzed Call Me by Your Name as a straight love story on Twitter is indicative of an industry awkwardly denying queerness" (Lee 2017).

4.2. Museum Discourse and Hyperbolic Euphemisms

The same rhetorical strategies, namely hyperbolic euphemisms verging on silence and censoring proper, are evident in other public discourses too, even in museum texts where one would expect a different "grammar of expectations" from the audience and in the socio-cognitive frames of curators and authors. As I have argued elsewhere (Sabatini 2015b and 2017), museum discourse is able to significantly construct the audience's worldviews, opinions and language towards tolerance and democracy. In best practice instances, museum discourse orients to human rights discourse, notably to the linguistic construction of policies of inclusiveness, conflict avoidance and tolerance. Those discursive practices can actively raise awareness and responsiveness amongst "mainstream" audiences by exploiting the potentiality of words and language patterns through what I have called "info-persuasive language" (Sabatini 2015b). This actualizes the role of the museum as a powerful agent of socio-cultural change, helping our language to be socially responsible and responsive at the same time. This is the case of several UK institutions that have actively worked to fight homophobia, such as the National Museum Liverpool which has established a long collaboration with "Homotopia", a Liverpool-based social justice organisation, organizing "ground-breaking exhibitions" and thought-provoking activities (National Museum website 2018). Similarly, in 2017 Tate Britain in London has organized the successful exhibition "Queer British Art 1861-1967". When asked about the choice of the

word "queer" in the title, curator Clare Barlow said they carried out "audience research", and "took advice from Stonewall and other LGBT charities and held focus groups with LGBT people", finally stating that "no other option captured the full diversity of sexualities and gender identities that are represented in the show" (Tate website 2017).

Despite such cases of evident and constructive efforts to positively address the issue, there have been other instances where homosexuality has been silenced or mitigated. As a key example, the newly open Design Museum in London has launched the exhibition "Fear and Love: Reactions to a Complex World" in 2016:

Figure 4: Poster of the Exhibition "Fear and Love" at the London Design Museum.

Their press release reads "the show is made of eleven new installations by some of the most innovative and thought-provoking designers and architects working today" (Design Museum website 2016). Among these, Spanish architect Andrés Jaque created the film installation "Intimate Strangers" about the gay dating application Grindr which is used by more than 10 million users in the world.

As stated in several reviews and interviews, the work "reveals how the application is used by police in authoritarian regimes, from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, to track down and arrest gay people, as well as how it has been mobilised as vital tool by LGBT refugees seeking safe passage to Europe" (Wainwright 2016). What is revealing, however, is that in the work description, in the museum's website, in the press release and the marketing materials (including the booklet describing the show), the museum staff totally delete references to homosexuality: they never use the word "Grindr" and use the indefinite plural "dating apps", through which, they write, "the author presents a series of tales about how *our pursuit of sex and love* through social media is changing the way

we view the city, *our bodies and our identity*" (Design Museum website 2016, my emphasis). The seemingly inclusive "we" here, more than suggesting that homosexuals and heterosexuals were perceived on the same level as existential human beings ("our pursuit"), seems to align to the tradition of logophobia about homosexuality.

Earlier in 2012, something even more striking happened at the MAMM museum of St Petersburg, where artist David Ter-Oganyan's exhibition "Speed of Light" was subjected to homophobic censorship by the museum. One of the artworks entitled "Propaganda of Homosexuality" was censored and its title changed into "Untitled". As revealed in an interview with the artist, "apparently, museum director Olga Svibloba considers that the infamous law 'on the prohibition of homosexual propaganda' (which was recently passed in St. Petersburg) is not only an acceptable cultural norm, but should be adopted as a manual for appropriate behaviour throughout Russia" ("Interview with David Ter-Oganyan 2012).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Combining various instances of public discourse on homophobia and homosexuality, the present analysis has attempted to show how, along with overt verbal homophobia (still evident in political discourse too), covert homophobia by means of logophobia (e.g. euphemisms, censoring, silence) seems equally dangerous in terms of consolidating, through language, heteronormativity and prejudice. The case studies from the macro discourses of cinema and museum, reveal that the audiences' "grammar of expectations" influence the language used in referring to the seemingly taboo topic. This results in choices that are not supposed to alter people's word-views on homosexuality and that may even increase fear and/or ignorance.

The case instances of homophobia here described seem to comply with the discursive reproduction of homophobia expressed by Gough: the need to "protect and promote heterosexuality and heteronormativity at the expense of homosexuality" (Gough 2002: 219). Those public discourses that presuppose non-cooperative audiences cause the crystallization of language and discursive patterns, thus mirroring and further affecting the stagnation of given prejudicial mind-frames. Such an ambivalence between proliferation and stagnation of discourses brings us back to Foucault's simultaneity of logophilia and logophobia in discourse and the way institutions of power can shape and challenge our epistemic order, whereby "discourse as a non-event becomes reduced to the 'unvoiced and unthought' conditions of speech that we no longer think about" (Foucault 2012: 5)

Logophobia as a form of homophobia, in fact, is often deployed by absence — rendering homosexuality both unspoken and "unthought" — and thus aligns to a long tradition of self-imposed silence which, as stated more than 20 years ago by Harriet Malinowitz "is itself a discourse" (Jacobs 1996; Malinowitz 1995).

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