
What makes a villain? - Decoding villainy and
unmasking gendered Discourse in “Peaky Blinders.”

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1. Introduction

This thesis is a study on how the female and male villains in *Peaky Blinders* talk, comparing gender discourse by analyzing the language used by female and male villains. It aims to explore how common characteristics of villains are conveyed via speech, by looking at language as a tool for the characterization of a villain. To explore these characteristics, it makes use of the first episode of the entire tv-series of *Peaky Blinders* which I have transcribed.

This study is a qualitative study focusing on the language used by the characters in the tv-series *Peaky Blinders*. I transcribed the first episode of *Peaky Blinders*. I wrote down everything that I found of significance, both what the villainous characters said and what the non-villainous characters said. I focused on the content and context of what was said, their facial expressions, tone of voice and situational context.

Peaky Blinders is a Netflix original series about a criminal gang and family called the *Peaky Blinders*. The *Peaky Blinders* consist of Irish travelers settled in Birmingham in 1919. The series follow Thomas Shelby the *Peaky Blinders* gang leader whose interactions in episode one, I will use to explore him as a villainous character.

The characteristics of a fictional character are based on various contexts and displayed in different manners. One of these manners is language. In this study I aim to take a deeper look at what characterization is and how it can be used as a central theme while trying to pinpoint how *Peaky Blinders* Thomas Shelby's villainy is conveyed through speech. By comparing non-villains and villains in *Peaky Blinders*, with Thomas Shelby, I will hopefully be able to unfold how and why he is a villain in order to explore the gender discourse of the female villain. I will use Thomas Shelby's character to answer if it's possible to see that a character is an antagonist and villain by the manner of their language and then intend to investigate how characters, differently, are displayed as villainous considering their gender. Therefore, by unfolding Thomas Shelby's character as a villain, in order to compare him to a female villain, I expect to find distinctive different features in the manner of their language. I think that a female villain is more promptly to talk cheerful and even sensual at times. While I expect that

the male villains will talk angrier or sterner asserting themselves as scary, whereas female villains won't assert themselves as someone to fear.

2. Theory and research literature

2.1. What is a villain?

When the aim of my thesis is to decode villainy by looking at gender discourse by exploring common characteristics of villains, I need to have a clear understanding of what a villain is and what their characteristics are. By understanding their characteristics, I can begin to investigate how important the language a villain speaks is. In order to analyse villainy, I have looked at theories about accommodation, gender, and speech communities.

It may be argued that the villain is very often a large part of what makes the story. In many, perhaps, most, TV series and movies, the villain is the main motivation for the story to proceed and the protagonist or hero to succeed. But how do we as consumers of a tv series or a movie understand who the antagonist and the protagonist is? There are common behaviors and characteristics that we associate with the villainous character that helps us point out who the antagonist of a story is. These characteristics can be, as stated in Maržić Deas (2019) thesis *A discourse of villainy* “unwillingness to help others, and/or willingness to abuse them” and/or they will be “shown as selfish and disposed to using others as means to an end”. In addition, a villain will “be presented as disgusting, in terms of their moral actions, but also frequently in their appearance as well”, (Dea 2019: 2). This makes villains the unconventional factor and the one who gives the story chaos. While these characterizations are commonly used for the villain or antagonist of a story, why are they important? Is it to make the villain believable?

2.2. Characterization

In order to understand why these characterizations are important for a villain it's also important to understand why characterization in general is important. As stated by Culpeper in (2001): “In drama there is usually no narrator who guides our perception of a character: we are exposed in a direct way to their words and actions” (Culpeper, 2001, p. 1) Therefore, because we are without any context other than what we are shown, the purpose of a character

needs to be displayed correctly through characterization. “one cannot see or hear what inclines people to act as they do and even if some fictional work can give you such insights, fiction doesn’t always allow for this and a character’s actions have to be inferred from observable behaviors, including conversational behavior” (Culpeper, 2001, p. 115). We as consumers of TV series and movies are, accordingly, dependent on characterization. If for example, one is to display a rich man from the 19th century, the language should elicit his character. That is, he should talk like he is from the 19th century, or at least in a way that readers will interpret as representing the 19th century. If not, his character is not believable. The language should reflect the linguistic norms of that era. If the character were to use language that is very clearly from this generation, it would break the illusion of historical accuracy and make the character less believable. Considering this, the characteristic of a villain is important because if we are without context the characteristics of a villain will point why they are the antagonist.

2.3. Accommodation theory

Characterization consists of many things. While it may be easy to list and compare the traits of particular villains, it is more challenging to define the common denominators in how they are conveyed for us to perceive the villain as a villain. In addition to non-linguistic aspects of the story telling, with pictures and music and clothing, this also involves the language. How does one talk to appear evil? And how do we, from hearing someone talk, understand that they are heartless, or dangerous? It could also be asked, how important the language a character speaks might be for a general understanding of the story. To address this, I have chosen to focus on the accommodation theory discussed in Meyerhoff (2019).

Accommodation theory, as explained in the book, deals with “the process by which speakers attune or adapt their linguistic behaviour in light of their interlocutor’s behaviour and their attitudes toward their interlocutors (may be a conscious or unconscious process).

Encompasses both *convergence* with or *divergence* from interlocutors norms” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 80). To build on this, a person can and will change their speech according to the context in which they find themselves, whether it is in favour of the other person or themselves. This means that a person can intentionally attune themselves as it seems fit.

Attunement is “a term sometimes preferred over accommodation because of the strong (but incorrect) association of the specific strategy convergence with the more general phenomenon of accommodation. Just as instruments in an orchestra have to be in tune with each other, speakers attune their behaviour to the situation and in relation to the way their interlocutors

are behaving.” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 80). Attunement may be either a conscious choice or subconscious, and it can therefore explain certain characteristics in villains. Someone creating and writing a villain choose how the actors portraying villains talk in certain situations in order to be perceived villainous. Since “accommodation theory is a bundle of principles that are intended to characterise the strategies speakers use to establish, contest or maintain relationships through talk” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 80). it’s useful for the aim of looking at the conscious choice of villainous language as characteristics to make a villain be perceived as a villain.

2.4. Gender and speech communities

While gender usually is perceived the same in tv series and movies, not all female villains are. “Gender...is a social property: something acquired or constructed through your relationships with others and through and individual’s adherence to certain cultural norms and proscriptions” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 227). This insinuates that gender is what one chooses it to be. But because of gender being socially constructed it also follows social norms and cultural norms. Therefore, there are general expectations associated with each gender. When you watch a tv-series or a movie you will assume certain behaviour or speech considering a female or a male character. Meyerhoff notes that “In linguistics, a distinction can be drawn between gender exclusive and gender preferential features in a language” such as “kinship terminology” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 228). Most people would certainly associate the word “sister” with the female gender and “brother” with the male gender. This constitutes a general socially constructed base line of what to expect from each gender, both generally, and in this case, in a movie or a tv-series.

A speech community “is defined on subjective or objective criteria, objective criteria would group speakers together in a speech community if the distribution of a variable was consistent with respect to other factors. Subjective criteria would group speakers as a speech community if they shared a sense of belief in co-membership” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 34). And then, again, a speech community constitutes a general idea about what to expect from each gender. While one probably could group villains together in a speech community, I think its relevant to narrow it down even more and define the female villains as their own speech community and male villains as a speech community. This will allow for a more thorough and comparable analysis on each of the gender roles characterised as belonging to villains.

The theories that I have chosen to focus on, correlate more directly to my investigation on characterization of a villainous character, than the other theories of sociolinguistics in Meyerhoff book. This is because my aim is to investigate how a villain is characterized through language. To do this I need to narrow down my focus on the villains in *Peaky Blinders* and how they act and speak in context with their surroundings, gender and social stance, not with a focus on language use in general, but a focus on how the language becomes a part of the characterization of the villain. With this being my aim, I intend to operationalize these theories to understand villainous characteristics by looking at gendered discourse.

3. Methodology

This thesis is a qualitative study on how female and male villains in *Peaky Blinders* speak. The aim is to look at differences in female and male villains in order to understand how language as a characterisation tool convey common characteristics of villains.

To conduct research on this topic I transcribed the first episode of *Peaky Blinders*. Firstly, I had to narrow down which episodes of the series I wanted to use. *Episode one* allows me to get necessary context and background on the characters of the tv-series which plays an important part in this investigation. This is because the characterisation of a particular character is conveyed in both the context, background, music, clothes and language. While *Episode one* is necessary to understand the characters and get the right context, it also contains female villain interactions that are essential to understand and allows for a look at female villains. I transcribed the whole episodes and not just what the villains say, because I will need to compare villains to non-villains to see if the characterisation is different for villains compared to non-villains.

In order to identify differences in how the female and male villains speak. I intend to operationalize the theories of sociolinguistics such as accommodation, gender and speech community to compare female and male villain language with the intent to look at language as a tool for characterisation. To investigate and understand characterisations of villains I will also draw from the master thesis, *The linguistic anatomy of a villain: A discourse of villainy* by Dea (2019). This will help me get a better understanding of villains and villainy. To get a

better understanding of language as a characterisation tool I will also draw on Culpeper (2001).

While transcribing the whole tv-series would give more thorough data and research overall, there is not enough time on this project to do that. Transcribing one episode provides a good amount of data to compare and analyse in order to answer the research question.

4. Findings

As discussed in the theory part of my thesis, characterisation plays a part for one to be able to point out who the villain or antagonist is. In *Peaky Blinders*, the antagonists, and villains, of the tv-series are also the main characters. The series follow a criminal gang, and family in Birmingham called the Peaky Blinders. Since the Peaky Blinders aren't the typical villain as you see in Disney, and they aren't only bad or evil, one way to understand the depth of their criminal, turned villainous in context, characters is to understand how the members of the Peaky Blinders talk. To do this it's necessary to unfold and investigate the raw data and findings in this study, to then analyse these findings in contrast to the theories presented in the theory section. To understand and contextualise my findings I've chosen to break my findings into three steps. Step one will focus on a villain talking to non-villains. Step two will follow up with the same villain talking to indifferent villains and enemies. Then in step three, the focus is on a female villain talking to non-villains and a male and female villain talking to each other. Each step will show a layer of how the main character, Thomas Shelby, who also serves as a leader in the Peaky Blinders, talk considering his interlocutor.

4.1 Step one

In this step the findings show how Thomas Shelby behave and talk as a villain and antagonist, in contrast to other characters in the tv-series who are not considered villains or antagonists.

4.1.1 Villain talking to non-villain.

In the start of the first episode of the tv-series we are already introduced to a character established as a villain, or at least someone to fear. The opening of the episode shows a dirty and muddy street full of poorly dressed people running away, as well as kids hiding. This is happening at the same time as a well-dressed man ride through the street on a black horse and

stops. As he steps of the horse, the street is completely empty and only the man known as Thomas Shelby and his horse, is to be seen. Then a visually stressed and scared man comes running up to Thomas Shelby while guiding an equally stressed girl. As they stop before him, Thomas asks “*the girl who tells fortunes?*” (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). This question creates a big contrast that highlight Thomas as someone to fear. This is because Thomas asks the question with such a calm nonchalant attitude, showing that this doesn’t cost him anything while talking to the obvious nervous man and girl, while the streets are totally empty because people were running scared trying to hide. A young boy hiding with a group of young boys while watching Thomas Shelby arrive state that “*they are doing a magic spell so the horse can win the race*” (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). This entails that everyone is aware of what business Thomas is conducting in this interaction. Thomas then shouts out in the street, the name of the horse and when the horse race starts. Then he rides away, and the street fills up with people again. This interaction encompasses that Thomas Shelby is a respected man that other people fear. Not only did Thomas Shelby talk in a calm manner, but he also knew that the people who hid, were still around. He knew his presence frightened them and therefore he shouted the time and place of the horse race, making sure that everyone who hid got the information. Another notion that shows Thomas as an established feared character is when he walks into a rowdy bar, and everyone goes quiet and turns to look at him. When he walks into the bar a stressed bartender hands him a drink and says, “*on the house Mr Shelby*” (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). These two different interactions between Thomas Shelby and other characters in the series indicate that said characters are non-villains, and underline Thomas as the villain and established feared character. With this in mind, we move on to, and narrow down the focus to, Thomas’s behavior while talking to characters I’ve defined as indifferent villains.

4.2 Step two

In this step the focus is on Thomas, as a villain, talking and being villainous in the company of other villains. Some considered indifferent and some considered enemies.

4.2.1 Indifferent villains

In the tv-series we follow a gang and family called the Peaky Blinders. Since Thomas who is an antagonist in the series is a member of the Peaky Blinders, he is likely to behave indifferent to the other members of the Peaky Blinders, considering they are his family. In the

tv-series it appears that Thomas sees his family as equal, and he does not act like he is above them unlike in the interaction in the start of the episode. When he talks to the members of Peaky Blinders, he still maintains a calm but stern tone of voice. One of the members of the group named Arthur has an angrier tone of voice than Thomas has. This shows a difference between how these two villains talk. This is perceptible in an interaction between Arthur and Thomas in episode one when Arthur says, “*there was a Chinese*” (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). with an accusing and raspy dark voice. Even though Arthur has more of an accusing and angry tone in his utterance, Thomas maintains a calm but stern and determined tone when he answers and says, “*We agreed Arthur, I’ll take charge*” (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). It seems like that even though the two men see themselves as indifferent, they still talk to each other as if they are on the “job”. They don’t talk like normal family and friends. They talk to each other as if other non-villains are watching and listening, like they are trying to maintain a persona? In this instance, with Thomas talking to a member of the Peaky Blinders it seems like the members often talk like they are on the job. This could entail that they always try to assert themselves, but not as dominant, in a situation even if it’s not necessary, like, in this instance, when they are talking to their own and already have a place in the group. But when it is necessary, and they **must** assert themselves as dominant, they do. This happens, as already discussed in part one, when talking to non-villains and as will be discussed, when talking to enemies.

4.2.2 A villain as an enemy

When Thomas Shelby and Arthur, who is also a member of the Peaky Blinders, converse, Thomas maintains a job-like way of behaving and talking. Even though he and Arthur talk as if they are asserting themselves, they don’t try to undermine the other, and don’t try to come out on top as the more powerful or scary. Nevertheless, when Thomas talks to Freddie, a communist and enemy of the Peaky Blinders he tries to assert dominance and undermine Freddie. However, this is also Freddie’s aim. In one scene from episode one it’s clear that Freddie wants to tease and challenge Thomas’s authority and dominance. Freddie takes one of Thomas’s coins and slides it over to the bartender. Thomas sighs resigned. The bartender looks scared at Thomas, as if he is scared for Freddie, for making noise with Thomas. Freddie says, “*cheers Thomas, good health to you*” (Bathurst, 2013, episode one), cheerfully after he

rudely stole Thomas's coin and tries to annoy him. The conversation goes on, and Freddie suddenly stands closer to Thomas and ironically makes his voice cheerful and interrogatory before he says "*something about a robbery, a robbery of national significance, she found a list of names left on the telegraph machine*" (Bathurst, 2013, episode one), then his voice shifts and he suddenly sounds nasty and distinctly says "*and on that list was your name and my name together, what kind of a list would have name of a communist and a bookmaker side by side*" (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). It seems like, for Freddie, that this conversation is a contest. A contest of who is more powerful. But when Freddie talks, he enunciates the words so clearly that you can see his teeth and his facial expression turns scary. This makes Freddie seem more unhinged and uneasy and he continues the conversation by talking faster and harshly, while Thomas keeps calm and talks slowly and clear. Therefore, Thomas seems to win the "power battle" because he can keep still and get his points across while maintaining a calmness while talking, but Freddie tries to scare Thomas by talking scary instead of calm and clear but ultimately becomes unhinged.

4.3 Step three

4.3.1 A female villain's discourse

When studying how the male villains, more specifically Thomas, converses and behaves considering his interlocutor, also the female villains have a distinctive way of talking and behaving. While researching this, I focused on Aunt Polly another member of the gang and family the Peaky Blinders. Since Aunt Polly is a member of the villains in Peaky Blinders it's equally as relevant to also break this villain's layers into three. One layer focusing on Aunt Polly talking to non-villainous characters, and one to look at the differences in how she and Thomas Shelby talk.

4.3.2 Female villain's vs non-villains

The first meeting with Aunt Polly in the series is when she is shown threatening a young man with a gun. The young man comes out from an alley when Aunt Polly stops him and puts a gun to his head. "*Look at the gun*" (Bathurst, 2013, episode one), says Aunt Polly while she smirks, "*recognise it?*" (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). She hits him and he falls to the ground. There is no hesitation while she talks, her tone is the same the entire time. It's almost

monotone and she is determined. It seems like she is talking like a stern mother and she knows she is in control.

4.3.3 Differences in male and female villains

In one of the conversations with the whole Peaky Blinders gang, the men in the family discuss and behave more like they do when they are out on the job, as mentioned before. They talk and behave like they are trying to maintain some kind of respect, while Aunt Polly still talks slowly, calmly and kind of cheerful, like for example when she asks, with a smile, “so why are they sending him to Birmingham?” (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). Therefore, she seems more pleasant and nice than the others. When Aunt Polly is talking to someone and wants to get a point across, it seems like her voice gets sterner but with an easy flow and she talks a little sensual and teasing like, when she states, “his whole bloody enterprise was woman’s business while you boys were out at war” (Bathurst, 2013, episode one). It’s a clear contrast since Aunt Polly makes her voice sensual to get her point, while the men still maintain a serious and calm voice, or they become louder and angrier.

5. Discussion

In the preceding findings its apparent that the male villains of Peaky Blinders often present themselves as villainous. They deliberately behave villainous to make it apparent that they are dangerous, while the female villain Aunt Polly acquire a more mysterious persona. This emphasizes her role to be portrayed as someone you can trust and who is not villainous or evil, and maybe that’s even more deviant? But why is this?

5.1 Characterization

5.1.2. Layer one

Since I chose to divide my findings into three steps, I was able to look at Thomas Shelby’s characterization as a villain as multiple layers. In step one I unveiled layer number one by looking at Thomas Shelby, a villain and antagonist, conversing with non-villains. This layer sets the tone for Thomas Shelby’s character as a villain, and it sets the tone for the rest of his interactions. In step 1, the findings showed Thomas Shelby as a calm feared and powerful man. He was nicely dressed and calm and “Visual or appearance cues such as stature,

clothing, facial expression, and posture play a key part in person perception and characterization.” (Culpeper 2001: 221) helps build Thomas as a villainous character. In addition to being nicely dressed, Thomas also rides slowly on a horse down the street showing that “nonverbal gestures” (Dea 2019: 13), that are not related to appearance also build up his character. “The example of Scar (*The Lion King*, 1994), who frequently saunters, criss-crosses, preens and moves sleekly across the screen as opposed to Simba and Mufasa, who show no such gesture”, (Dea 2019: 13), and “visual appearance cue’s” (Culpeper 2001: 221) characterize Thomas Shelby as a villain in contrast to the other poorly dressed, dirty, and scared and stressed characters. It’s safe to say that Thomas Shelby is someone other characters respect.

5.2 Speech community (villains talking with villains)

5.2.1. Layer two

When analyzing the findings in step 2 its apparent that when Thomas Shelby is conversing with another member of the Peaky Blinders, they both still maintain an aspect of their character as villainous even though they are talking to likeminded people. In this step I unveiled another layer of Thomas Shelby’s characterization. This layer shows how Thomas Shelby’s character interact with other co villains. In this instance, since the Peaky Blinders is a criminal group and family, they can be considered a speech community because they “shared a sense of belief in co-membership” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 34). This is apparent when analysing the findings that show how the two villains talk like they are still on the job, even though they are talking to likeminded people and not non-villainous characters, where they assert themselves as dominant. Therefor this is a speech community containing a family of gang members considering Labov’s definition of “a speech community as a group of speakers unified by adherence to shared norms and attitudes towards those norms” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 232). since the Peaky Blinders live together, work together and is family as well.

5.3 Accommodation theory (villain vs villain (enemy) and gender

When looking at step three where the findings show Thomas Shelby talking to other villains that are considered enemies, it unveils a new layer of his character. This layer display Thomas, a villainous character who keeps calm and acts cool, in contrast to, Freddie, anpther villainous character is rowdy and unhinged and tries to press and challenge Thomas. This

layer has several underlying factors. Not only does the findings in this step build on Thomas as a villainous character who asserts his dominance regarding other villains, it also shows how different male villains behave, making it possible to see the difference in the male and female villains in *Peaky Blinders*. While the layers of Thomas's character are unveiled and we see him as a man who is respected and feared, discussed in different steps, this layer also show another characteristic of a villain, who is not Thomas Shelby. To further understand this, it's necessary to look at accommodation theory. "Accommodation theory is a bundle of principals that are intended to characterise the strategies speakers use to establish, contest or maintain relationships through talk" (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 80). The interaction I'm referring to is the one where Freddie and Thomas talk at the bar. Considering this interaction, the findings showed Freddie becoming more unhinged while talking, while Thomas kept calm. And since "The two main strategies used in the process of attunement are convergence and divergence." (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 80), this interaction shows what's called, divergence, which is "Accommodation away from the speech of one's interlocutors. Accentuates differences between interlocutors' speech styles, and/or makes the speaker sound less like their interlocuter. It is assumed divergence is triggered by conscious or unconscious desires to emphasis difference and increase social distance" (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 81). It looks like Freddie consciously or unconsciously differentiate the way he interacts with Thomas, his interlocuter, to seem scarier. He moves away from the calmness that Thomas holds and try to seem scarier. This might be his way of asserting dominance over Thomas. Divergence is also what Thomas does as part of his characterisation when he asserts his dominance over other non-villainous characters. This underlines the theory that male villains want you to know that they are villains while the female villains don't.

The male villains of *Peaky Blinders* tend to diverge their speech styles considering their interlocuter because they want to assert themselves as the scary or dominant one in the situation. A female villain in *Peaky Blinders*, Aunt Polly, on the other hand does not do this. She both converges her speech style, "convergence is accommodation towards the speech of one's interlocutors. Accentuates similarities between interlocutors' speech style, and/or makes the speaker sound more like their interlocuter. It is assumed to be triggered by conscious or unconscious desires to emphasise similarity with interlocutors we like, and to increase attraction" (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 81), and diverge it because she always talks and acts as if you are alike and usually, she sounds cheerful. She therefore either matches her interlocutors tone

to not assert herself or she diverges still trying to accommodate her interlocutor, which is ultimately converging.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to investigate how the villains in Peaky Blinders talk in order to sound villainous. To decode the villainy and unmask the gendered discourse, this thesis used episode one of Peaky Blinders, that I have transcribed, and theories of characterization and sociolinguistics.

To decode the villainy, it was necessary to unfold Thomas Shelby's character by breaking the findings into steps. These steps each allowed for a closer analysis of Thomas Shelby's character. In Step one, the findings showed Thomas Shelby a villain talking to non-villains as an established villainous and feared character compared to other scared characters. In Step two the findings show how both Thomas Shelby and Arthur maintain a respectful way of talking but still talk as if they are on the job whereas when Thomas and Freddie talk, it's more of a power battle. In step three, the findings show how the female villain Aunt Polly, has more of a cheerful tone than the other male villains. Breaking the findings into these steps to unfold the villainous character of Thomas Shelby allowed for a more comprehensive study on the characteristics of Thomas Shelby and Aunt Polly by using accommodation theory. Through analysis of Thomas Shelby and Aunt Polly's discourse, it became evident that the male villains in Peaky Blinders only diverge their speech styles considering their interlocuter while Aunt Polly, the female villain, converges her speech style.

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