

# CONSTRUING ACTS OF VOICING IN CHRISTINA DALCHER'S VOX THROUGH VULNERABILITY METAPHORS

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## **ABSTRACT:**

In the digital era, and especially in the context of the fourth industrial revolution, where everyone's digitally mediated voice can, potentially, reach the entire world, Dalcher's dystopian novel, *Vox*, expresses a very real fear of being silenced. In modern America,<sup>1</sup> a purist movement voted into power has silenced all women and girls overnight. The novel investigates the intersection of physicality and the immateriality of spoken words. The narrator's voice, sober but without restriction, contrasts sharply with the limitations imposed around her and uncovers the silent horror of a dystopian America where half the population has lost all rights of self-disposal, both physical and discursive. Employing the conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), this study explores metaphors in *Vox* that shape discourse(s) on voicing vulnerability and on voice as visibility through an interdisciplinary discourse analysis that draws on the fields of literature and linguistics.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the novel's plot clearly takes place in the US, the term 'America' is used throughout the text. Specifically, Canada, Mexico and Cuba are referred to as free countries where American citizens are trying to take refuge, while the Slogans of the Pure Movement include MAKE AMERICA MORAL AGAIN! (135), an obvious reference to Trump's America. In our text we have chosen to use 'America' maintaining the original language choice of the author.

**RESUMEN:**

En la era digital, y especialmente en el contexto de la cuarta revolución industrial, donde la mediada voz digital puede potencialmente alcanzar cualquier parte del mundo, la novela distópica de Dalcher, *Vox*, expresa el miedo muy real a ser silenciado. En la sociedad americana contemporánea, un movimiento purista llega al poder y silencia a todas las mujeres y niñas en el transcurso de una noche. La novela investiga la intersección del carácter físico e inmaterial de las palabras habladas. La voz narrativa, sobria pero sin restricciones, ofrece un contraste pronunciado a las limitaciones que encuentra impuestas a su alrededor y destapa los horrores silenciosos de una América distópica donde la mitad de la población ha perdido todos sus derechos de autogestión tanto físicos como discursivos. Siguiendo la teoría de la metáfora conceptual de Lakoff y Johnson (2003), este estudio explora las metáforas que modelan aquellos discursos que dan voz a la vulnerabilidad e investiga la voz como visibilidad desde un análisis del discurso interdisciplinar que hace uso de las áreas de literatura y de lingüística.

“A word after a word/ after a word is power”  
Margaret Atwood, *Spelling*

The above lines from Margaret Atwood’s poem *Spelling* (1981) echo the power of words and draw attention to the power of superfluity, redundancy, reiteration even, to make a voice heard. Words can carry one’s action beyond the limited space the body can reach. They are the means to tell one’s fear, to assume one’s vulnerability and work towards alleviating it. Imposed silence then emerges as a mechanism of oppression. Processes of silencing have been extensively addressed by social-anthropological and sociolinguistic research focusing especially on minorities such as women (see for example Jaworski, 1992). Moreover, in the information economy of the new media, word limits and practices of algorithmic censorship are becoming increasingly popular (Bamman, O’ Connor & Smith, 2012; Cobbe, 2021). Although a word limit is a common practice permeating all levels of activity, it is seldom thought upon. Electronic forms of various importance allow only so many words as answers, Twitter has a (recently increased) 280 sign-limit for its users, educational institutions have rigid wordcount requirements, and the same holds for academic and other publications.

In addition, contemporary literature in the context of what has been recognized as the “fourth industrial revolution” (see for example Schwab, 2016; Johannessen, 2019) problematizes sociopolitical and human rights issues anew (Manugerren, 2019). The fourth industrial revolution not only refers to connected machines but includes breakthroughs, among others, in gene- and nano-technologies. The diffusion of boundaries between physical, digital and biological domains thus renders the fourth industrial revolution fundamentally different from previous revolutions (Schwab, 2016). From a literary perspective, it inspires transhumanist visions of science fiction dystopias (Cuadrado Payeras, 2022). More specifically, it is in this digitalized context where medical robots, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience data tend to redefine what is human that Dalcher’s dystopia is grounded, integrating a transhumanist vision of women’s control and silencing.

In the digital era, where everyone’s voice can potentially reach the entire world, Christina Dalcher’s dystopian novel expresses a very real fear of being silenced. In modern America, a purist movement voted into power silences all women and girls overnight, using an electronic device on their wrist that allows them a limit of a hundred words per day, administering electroshocks for any additional words pronounced. Reading and writing are banned for all women and language is further used as a brain-washing tool with an obligatory mantra to be spoken daily into the counter devices. With the conception of this device, the novel draws our attention to the nature of spoken words and investigates the intersection of physicality and their immateriality. Indeed, with the counters, words become physical entities detected as pulses as they are being produced and come out of the physical body. Although reduced to its physical expression, speaking is recognized by the authoritarian government as an act—more precisely as a threatening political act. The narrator, a former neurologist working on aphasia (the loss of the ability to speak due to brain damage) constitutes a further link between physicality and speech. The focus on this physiological ability (speaking) that is a prerequisite to language use (i.e., to access the communicative code that is language) is also viewed in the context of pragmatics, namely the relation between language’s literal and non-literal (and, in our case, more specifically metaphorical) meanings. Uttered language thus becomes the subject matter of the novel, which is, in its turn, at least partly constructed on the mechanisms of metaphor. Throughout the novel the constant play between metaphor and literal meaning allows

Dalcher to view metaphorical concepts in their literal manifestations, which uncover the power of metaphor to shape views and policies affecting everyday life.

Employing conceptual metaphor theory in literary analysis, we explore those metaphors in *Vox* that shape discourse(s) on voicing vulnerability through an interdisciplinary discourse analysis drawing from the fields of literature and sociolinguistics. We have analyzed the notion of *vox* in Christina Dalcher's novel identifying different *acts of voicing* that are metaphorically constructed in the novel through vulnerability metaphors. Drawing on bioethics we perceive vulnerability through the metaphor of layers as a context-defined and therefore fluid concept<sup>2</sup> (Luna 2009, 2019) in contrast to essentialist approaches. More specifically, we have taken vulnerability as F. Luna has defined it in "Elucidating the concept of vulnerability. Layers not Labels." The metaphor of layers she proposes and the notion of "cascade vulnerability" help us understand the function of this concept in multiple levels that work cumulatively (2019, 88).<sup>3</sup> She shows how, when it comes to social policies, different layers of vulnerability arise that are often interconnected in all aspects of life: from economic to plain physical, as well as communicational and emotional (2019, 92). For the notion of metaphor, we have drawn mainly<sup>4</sup> on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

According to CMT, there are two types of conceptual domains that come into contact in the formation of a metaphor: a) the SOURCE DOMAIN, from which we draw elements to produce metaphorical expressions, and b) the TARGET DOMAIN, that we try to understand through the use of the produced metaphor. The method consists of identifying a set of correspondences between elements of the source and the target domain.

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<sup>2</sup> "For example, we could say that the fact of being a woman does not in itself imply that one is vulnerable. A woman living in a country that does not recognize or is intolerant of *reproductive rights* acquires a layer of vulnerability (that a woman living in other countries that respect such rights does not necessarily have)." (Luna 2019, 88)

<sup>3</sup> "These layers may overlap: some of them may be related to problems with informed consent, others to violations of human rights, to social circumstances, or to the characteristics of the person involved." (Luna 2019, 88)

<sup>4</sup> Due to the interdisciplinary nature of our literary analysis, we have applied CMT in a more divergent way than it is traditionally used (for recent experimentations in this field, see Fludernik 2011).

In our analysis of vox (voice) as a notion in the novel, we have identified the following vulnerability metaphors: a) aphasia as a biological/biopolitical weapon; b) words as physical entities controlled by smart devices; c) euphemism and catachresis (strained use or semantic misuse of a word) as silencing (covering meanings); and d) metaphorical discourse as feminist dystopian fiction.

### **APHASIA AS A BIOPOLITICAL WEAPON**

Dalcher uses linguistic science (such as Critical Sociolinguistics and Neurolinguistics) as a source domain to construct vox as a metaphor for a collective act of voicing. The existing sociopolitical issue of gendered oppression appears in the novel as the threat of a totalitarian government that plots to pursue even further this silencing practice by creating an aphasic world, where women are no longer silenced metaphorically, but also in the very literal sense both from without (imposed word counters) and from within (induced aphasia). While the word counter prohibits them from uttering words, induced aphasia would ensure that they no longer have the capability of intelligible speech.

The links between totalitarianism and dystopian literature have long been established. Dystopian discourse has been fed by the ideas of totalitarianism and scientific and technological progress that have often been fundamental in the establishment of dictatorships (Vieira, 18). In this context, the political voice is the one that is silenced and the freedom of speech as a political right is violated, often with language playing a key role (see for example Orwell's "Newspeak," in 1984). To represent this in her novel in a new light, Dalcher turns aphasia into a biopolitical weapon. Aphasia is a language disorder caused by brain damage. It

involves one or more of the building blocks of language, phonemes, morphology, lexis, syntax, and semantics. [...] At the most severe end of the spectrum, a person with aphasia may be unable to communicate by either speech or writing and may be able to understand virtually nothing. (Edwards & Salis, 1)

Dr Jean McClellan, the narrator, a former neurolinguist working on aphasia, is forced to participate in a secret mission to create a serum that can induce aphasia. Through this plot, the process

of prohibiting freedom of speech in a totalitarian state in this feminist dystopia threatens to become literal through the phenomenon of aphasia; in other words, science is weaponized to “silence” women (to deprive women of their right to free speech). *Vox* appears then as a collective act of voicing, performing the right of free speech, which takes here an embodied (i.e., physical) form.

The image of the body is also present in the larger metaphor that runs throughout the entire novel. The Pure Movement’s gaining control of the US is described quite early on in physical terms. Dalcher describes its ascent to power as a conquest of the social body, activating the well-known metaphor of the body politic.<sup>5</sup> We are told that it all started with the “Bible Belt” when “that swath of Southern states where religion ruled, started expanding. It morphed from belt to corset, covering all but the country’s limbs.” (17) Soon “the corset turned into a full bodysuit, eventually reaching all the way to Hawaii” until the Bible Belt “had expanded and spread and grown into an iron maiden.” (18) The social body is here seen as a feminine body—the corset certainly alludes to it, and while a bodysuit could refer to both genders, the final image of the restriction of this body as enclosed in an iron maiden brings again the female body shape in mind, along with all the horror associations that this torture device carries. The vulnerability of the people takes, here, the shape of a woman.

On the plot level, the metaphor of the body-politic is taken in its literal meaning as the new government’s policy focuses on the physicality of the individual in its enforcement of the word-counters that regulate women’s expression.<sup>6</sup> Further in the story, we learn that the ultimate plan of the government extends this literalization of the body politic metaphor by plotting to implement a physical and permanent ‘cure’ to the ‘illness’ that is ‘afflicting’ it. The reverse engineering of Dr Jean McClellan’s work on aphasia will allow the Pure Movement to put, once and for all, any individual who resists in their ‘proper’ place, i.e., shut them out of both public and private speech. Aphasia is then presented as both a biopolitical weapon and as the

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough analysis of the body politic metaphor and how it can be converted into action see A.D. Harvey, *Body Politic: Political Metaphor and Political Violence*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on the female body as a site of power relations see Maria Pinakoulia, “Female Struggle and Negotiation of Agency in Christin Dalcher’s *Vox*,” *Ex-centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media*, no 4, 2020. <https://ejournals.lib.auth.gr/ExCentric/article/view/7670/7710>

ultimate metaphor of “silencing” through *linguaging*<sup>7</sup>: if the plan succeeds, there will be no more need for silencing, the loss of meaningful languaging will render rebellious women a marginalized group unable to utter anything comprehensible.

## **WORDS AS PHYSICAL ENTITIES CONTROLLED BY SMART DEVICES**

A second metaphor of *vox* in the novel moves from the abstract level to the concrete and draws from phonetics and morphophonology, focusing on the literal meaning of voice as speaking. Here the author follows the reverse path: *vox* is understood in its literal meaning as production of sounds/words; that is as a speaker's language use. It is an immaterial entity<sup>8</sup> that metaphorically becomes material, receiving the properties of material objects, i.e., physical and thus countable by the smart device. The process of speaking becomes a 24-hour cycle that is renewed for women who are compliant with the new rules. The individual is surveilled through a kind of acoustic Panopticon—or, to be linguistically accurate, a *Panacousticon*—incorporated to their body, and which represents the literalization (in the shape of a material device) of the internalized surveillance described by Foucault (1977 [1974]). The act of speaking is limited to 100 words per day and is furthermore regulated by sanctions following non-/appropriate lexical choices (women's speech is expected to remain within decorum, while words considered unbecoming are penalized).<sup>9</sup> In case of a word limit violation, physical torture is enforced by the word counter with increasing levels of torture leading to brain damage and even death. Technology is weaponized to silence women literally (that is to deprive women of their ability to even speak/right to speech).

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<sup>7</sup> Using this gerund we refer to language as a process, namely doing language, from a sociolinguistic perspective.

<sup>8</sup> Drawing on acoustic phonetics we understand speech as “made up of continuous bursts of sound. Not only are there no breaks between the sounds of which spoken words are composed; the words themselves are not usually separated by pauses.” (Lyons, 2002, 67).

<sup>9</sup> “We like to think of it as a gentle nudge, nothing more. Just keep things clean, and everything will function normally. No four-letter words, no blasphemy. If you slip up, that's okay, but your quota reduces by ten for each infraction. You'll get used to it.” (*Vox*, 81). Concerning the relationship of gender with politeness (polite language use by women indexing inferiority) and offensiveness (used by men indexing power), see for example Lakoff, 1973; Brown 1980.

Non-compliant women who defy the new laws have zero words to use; they are deprived of the possibility to speak and they are isolated and imprisoned in special camps that become heterotopias of silence. Heterotopia—this neologism borrowed originally from the medical field and referring to a misplacement of organs within the human body—brings us back to the metaphor of the body politic (Vieira 19). In *Vox*, the literal silencing within both the social and private sphere is not enough to guarantee that the government will not encounter any resistance, hence the establishment of camps for dissidents. Imprisonment has of course always been the way of eliminating political opponents in totalitarian regimes; what is of interest here is that the camp as a real space confining the bodies of unsubmitive women gains an added layer of meaning as a metaphor for the physical silencing that has already occurred through the word counters; this is emphasized by the zero-word tolerance policy. Those camps thus constitute a heterotopia signaling both a real detention space and a place that is “unreal,” denying the embodied self of those women of its wholeness by depriving it of one of its main attributes: its potential to communicate. It is the space where self-alienation occurs for those women stripped of their words. It is therefore a literal (i.e., real) space, that of a prison camp, that will ensure the removal from the social body of those physical bodies capable of bringing unrest through their physical utterances (speech acts) let alone their actions. A space real for those imprisoned and symbolic for the rest of the society; “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live,” as Foucault defines heterotopia in “Of Other Spaces” (24).

The metaphor of the physicality of words is acknowledged on a very tangible level that is represented by the counter device, as it detects each word while it is being emitted by the body. The physical pulse corresponds to a mechanical pulse which detects—and subtracts from the daily allowance—each separate word. The literary metaphor of the words as physical entities *performs*<sup>10</sup> the conceptual metaphor of the body as a container. Once thought, the words materialize in a sense, they become restless and seek a way out of the body that contains them and into existence. The words that do not come out of the heroine’s mouth hit the narrow boundaries of their vessel: “All my words ricochet in my head as I listen, emerge from my throat in a

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<sup>10</sup> This word choice reflects the tension of integrating the literary and linguistic registers of metaphor; oscillating between the artistic and the cognitive.



heavy, meaningless sigh” (16), thinks Jean. In another instance, the words “*useless mother*,” which do not necessarily seek a way out, restlessly “ping-pong” in her head (27). Indeed, thoughts are also made of words, and they have the same physical substance:

Except, before I talk, I think. I think all of these things, imagining the words bouncing off the tiled walls of our kitchen. In reality, there is no perpetual motion; all energy eventually gets absorbed, morphs into a different shape, changes state. But these words that I'm about to unleash, they'll never be absorbed. Each syllable, each morpheme, each individual sound, will bounce and ricochet forever in this house. We'll carry them with us like that cartoon character who's always surrounded by his own dirt cloud. Patrick will feel them prick like invisible, poisonous darts. (240)

The words' independence and their capacity to move around on their own accord are further exemplified in a representation of word association which leads, inevitably, to the well-known expression of the violent physical silencing of Lewis Carroll's red queen. The heroine muses: “Offering, I think, and words tumble around in my head like Scrabble tiles. Official. Official. Offensive. Off. *Off with her fucking head.*” (65, italics in the original)

Words retain their physical substance also when coming out, and their representation reinforces their individuality. When Jean's daughter has a nightmare and speaks in her sleep, Jean rushes to quiet her daughter before she reaches the limit; every word that brings her baby girl closer to an electroshock is experienced by Jean as a physical assault:

The words continue pouring out, flying through the hall toward me like poisoned darts from a million hostile blowpipes. Each one stings; each one pierces my once-tough skin with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, driving directly to my gut. How many words has she said? Fifty? Sixty? More? (26)

In another instance, when Jean aims to admonish her son, her words as weapons “fl(y) out, little daggers aimed at my oldest son, who had begun acting less like my son and more like Reverend Carl Corbin” (136). Considering the workings of metaphors and particularly the two-way direction of the conceptual information between source and target domain (Biebuyck and Martens, 60), we can observe that the well-known metaphor of language as a weapon is here being activated

and extended to encompass its physical effect on the body. The allusion to Shakespeare's metaphor, "I will speak daggers to her but use none" (*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene II) reinforces the tension between literal and metaphorical meaning that runs through the entire novel. Words are presented also as self-destructive weapons. This common metaphor is literalized through the word counter that induces an electroshock after any excessive word. A particularly poignant and gory scene, where Jean's neighbor, Olivia, tries to commit suicide through a recording of her own voice set on a repeating loop, gives literally flesh and bones to this aspect of words as self-harming weapons when the device reduces Olivia's wrist to a mass of burned flesh, blood and bone (189-190).

As Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated, because "(t)he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (13) the very concept of a notion we conceive through metaphor is metaphorically structured in a way that influences not only its description in words and our understanding, but also our actions concerning it. They give as an example the metaphorical understanding of argument as war:

It is important to see that we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument—attack, defense, counterattack, etc.—reflects this. It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing. (12-13)

With this in mind, we could view Dalcher's argument materializing in a literary dystopian world as a weaponized male minority. The male-ruled government has devised to win this war using neuroscience as a biological weapon. In this society the war metaphor (ARGUMENT IS WAR) is taken literally. More specifically, in this militarized dystopic environment another way to disarm female citizens is to deprive them of the possibility to argue, either in public or in private. The elimination of the 'weapon' that is language in the process of arguing allows the right of speech only to those who do not argue.

The traces of the war metaphor are numerous throughout the novel. We have already discussed the concentration camps for the dissidents. Other elements contributing to a warlike atmosphere are the appearance of government officials always accompanied by guards wearing military uniforms and carrying guns, the youth recruitment organized in schools where students are awarded pins as medals of honor for their loyalty to the values of the Pure Movement, arrests, public court martial processes and executions taking place daily, an organized resistance working undercover to overthrow the government.

### **EUPHEMISM AND CATACHRESIS AS SILENCING**

*Vox* has an ambivalent attitude towards metaphor both on the level of subject matter and on the level of language use. Dalcher bases her novel on the literalization of the metaphorical expression of silencing that is used here to draw attention to a real social issue, that of women's struggle for their voice to be heard. This common metaphor is turned into the main plot, with women being literally either partially or completely silenced. This indirect mistrust of metaphor goes hand in hand with an open mistrust of a certain aspect of metaphoric language, the kind that tends to disregard the accuracy of words. Throughout the novel there is a marked tendency to call things by their names and to refuse euphemisms—"Don't you dare call it a bracelet" Jean snaps at Patrick, her husband, reminding him that things should be called by their names (57). The narrator points here to a different silencing that is actualized through euphemism (in the form of catachresis) put to the service of government propaganda: "They call them bracelets in school, at the doctor's office, in the advertisements they show before movies. (...) Advertisements for electric-shock inducing silencers: pick your own color, add some sparkles or stripes." (87) Jean repeatedly 'wastes' some of her precious few words to correct such use of language that diminishes the horrific aspect of this imposed silencing by a totalitarian government.

The dystopian *topos* of technology in the service of oppression, while not discussed in the novel, is what has enabled the dystopian world described in *Vox* to materialize. It is the "novum" on which the novel is constructed, to borrow Drako Suvin's term with which he refers to the thing or condition imagined to exist by scientific means that marks the difference between our world and the one described in the science fiction genre. In the collective imaginary, this literary

device corresponds to an already existing vulnerability amplified through the means of technology in the fictional world. The novel plays constantly between the literal enforcement of oppression through technology and the metaphoric reading of this silencing.

The word counter, a tangible item and potential torture device, functions as a metaphor for the repression of women's voice. Its presence on the wrist of every woman is a constant reminder of the silencing and of the punishment of both literal and metaphorical transgression. The expression "metaphorical collar" (95), as well as the constant metaphor – or rather catachresis – of "bracelet" (pointing at women's stereotypical adornment), gives an added layer. The counter is thus at the same time a digital tool of surveillance, a potential torture device and a symbol of oppression ("on the days we became shackled by these shiny steel bracelets" 29). The role of the device in the dystopian world is revealed through the use of three different descriptions, which correspond to three different functions: to count, to control, to aestheticize and propagandize. These descriptions grow in intensity as the device is described firstly as a "word counter" referring to its actual/literal technical function, while hiding the implications of word counting (word limit-punishment; algorithmic, controlling, censoring). Secondly, as a "metaphorical collar," the device reveals its function as exercising control (literal function of the collar) but metaphorically applied here (usually worn on the neck; revealing; resisting, awareness-raising). Thirdly, as a "bracelet," the device reveals its embodied use, while hiding its controlling function (misleading, propagandistic, catachrestic).

We note here a specific kind of metaphoric use of language, that of catachresis. In its original meaning, this figure of speech is identified as a "necessary misuse" in the sense of "the application of an already existing word to something not yet lexicalized" caused by a lexical gap (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska 39). A variation of catachresis takes the form of a figure characterized by a "strong clash or incongruity, conflict or discordance between its two constitutive elements, the vehicle and tenor or the source and target domains." (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska 41). In the case of the term "bracelet" for the counting device that gives electroshock, both of those conditions come into play. Michel Foucault has drawn attention to the "pancatachrestic nature of figurative language" (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska 48) by identifying catachresis

as a figure whose defining properties are *incongruity, juxtaposition of incompatible entities, and distortion of categorization*; in a word, catachresis is defined by what Foucault calls *atopia* (or *heterotopia*): a displacement that provokes the most remote things to approach one another, 'a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous, the linking together of things that are inappropriate' (Foucault 1966). (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska 48)

In theories of metaphor, catachresis is considered to have three functions according to classical rhetoric: cognitive, ludic and expressive. In *Vox* it is clearly used in its cognitive function, as a means to draw attention to the dangers (political and social) of misusing language.

In our effort to understand ambiguity and vagueness in language use as a vulnerability metaphor here, taking as a case in point the expression "metaphorical collar," we came up with alternative wordings of interpretation on the basis of interdisciplinarity. Dalcher invents alternative words to denote the word counter corresponding to varying layers of beautifying the function of this device at women's expense (namely silencing). Analyzing these words in order to make sense of them (word counter, metaphorical collar, bracelet), we also used alternative wordings performing an analogous negotiation of clarity addressed by metaphoric against literal wordings, while reflecting on the power of metaphor to shed light on the phenomenon of catachresis.

A literal wording (using an established metaphor "to uncover meaning" reflecting the point of view of a sociolinguist):

"Here metaphor uncovers meaning compared to the previous examples"

A metaphorical wording (using a paradox "a literal metaphor" reflecting the point of view of a literary scholar):

"Here metaphor is more literal than the literal wording"

This argument materialized in our effort to understand ambiguity and vagueness in language use while communicating disciplinary knowledge in a common interdisciplinary space of analysis. More precisely, studying language through an interdisciplinary lens—in this paper through an assemblage of literary and linguistic filters—entails heteroglossic elements that need to be communicated—and made sense

of-through negotiation. This may even involve areas of negotiation where, although both scholars have the same idea in mind, its wording takes the “discursive shape” of the respective discipline, as for example the above-mentioned case that led to metalinguistic reflection and discussion. Arguments, both as sets of claims and as negotiations among a sociolinguist and a literary scholar, seem like “disciplinary wars” (to apply the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR as described by Lakoff and Johnson). Aiming to achieve interdisciplinarity while examining a specific metaphor in *Vox*, the sociolinguist appears to fight for literal wordings (e.g., in the phrase, “Here the metaphor *uncovers meaning* compared to the previous examples,” using the verb “uncover” to denote an unusual function of the metaphor to uncover instead to obscure meaning), whereas the literary scholar supports a metaphorical wording (e.g. “Here the metaphor is *more literal than* the literal wording,” using “is” to attribute a stronger ontological characteristic to the metaphor as more literal than the non-metaphor/literal wording; a linguistic paradox).

More generally, the process of speaking as language use in a communicative context is evaluated through metapragmatic comments on the importance of being accurate and literal. In this dystopia to call things by their name is a political act. This practice does not allow reality to hide behind beautified words, euphemisms, and other manipulations of language. It also draws attention to inaccuracy betraying even good-intentioned speakers such as Jean’s activist friend, as it appears in the following passage:

Jackie always called political situations—elections, nominations, confirmations, speeches, whatever—‘things.’ That court thing. That speech thing. That election thing. It drove me insane. You’d think a sociolinguist would take the time to work on her vocabulary every once in a while, (...) I never spoke to Jackie again. On nights like this, I wish I had. Maybe things—the election thing, the nomination thing, the confirmation thing, the executive order thing—wouldn’t have turned out the way they did. (12)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Some other examples:

“It wasn’t supposed to happen.”

*It.*

I make a silent promise never to use this word again.” [...] What if you told them it was Steven’s fault? That he started it and Julia said no, and he went on anyway. That they were confused. Or that it didn’t actually happen.” There’s that *It* again.” (150-151, italics in the original)

““What is it?”

Literal language use is evaluated as a more authentic process to convey meanings and read the social, while non-literal language use is considered to be obscuring meaning. Reading the word becomes reading the world (Freire & Macedo 1987). The act of voicing here is the communicative competence of the language user. And silencing is understood as political correctness or deliberate miscommunication. The extreme form of this takes, in the novel, the shape of induced aphasia, verbal chaos, an aphasic chaos of unintelligible sounds.

### **METAPHORICAL DISCOURSE AS FEMINIST DYSTOPIAN FICTION**

In their article entitled “Literary Metaphor between Cognition and Narration,” Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens see literary metaphor (and other figures of speech) as endowing the text with “a surplus metaphorical dimension” (65), an “*additional layer of narrativity*” (emphasis in the original) that they have termed *paranarrative* (Biebuyck & Martens, 120). The paranarrative “expands its actional, temporal, spatial and aspectual scopes in ways that are not necessarily congruent or equivalent” (65) to those of the primary narrative (*epinarrative*) and allows the reader access to “alternative segments of the storyworld” (66). They argue that the cognitive approach of metaphor in literature covers only partly the various extended figurative constellations, and propose an approach to literary metaphor from its narrative angle. In this spirit, we have approached the cognitive metaphors that construct *vox/acts of voicing* in the novel as multiple layers of vulnerability, which constitute what we have identified as *vulnerability metaphors*.

When approaching metaphor in *Vox* in this wider comprehensive view that integrates cognitive, rhetorical and narratological approaches (i.e., metaphor in correlation with the primary narrative and in its own narrative potential), we see emerging as a dominant extended metaphor the female physical body as the social (paranarrative level); Jean’s individual silencing and subsequent actions (epinarrative level) reflect also the wider collective both in its vulnerability and in its strength.

Dystopia as a *genre* belongs to a kind of speculative fiction that projects the reader into a future world in which things have gone

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*It again. Everything has become one looming It.*” (155, italics in the original)

wrong and acts as a cautionary tale. The important role of language both as a means and as a theme in dystopias has also been widely acknowledged. David Sisk has even argued that “language is so crucial to dystopia that we are justified in labelling it a generic structural element: without its inclusion, a fiction cannot be considered a dystopia” (174); and Ildney Cavalcanti has suggested dystopias could “be viewed as the verbal hygiene literary genre *par excellence*, due to the pervasiveness of their representations of verbal hygiene practices (and counter-practices)” (156). She asserts that the theme of language is, in the case of dystopia, the theme of metalanguage, in the sense of struggle over language, and concludes that “(j)ust as the dystopias are markedly metafictional, so too they are markedly metalinguistic” (174).

Feminist dystopia deals more specifically with the silencing of women, taking as a theme a historical fact of societies past and present, and bringing to our attention the difficulties women face even today in being heard (*cf.* “Me too” movement). In the case of *Vox*, the right to language is contested and speech is denied to the entire female population and presented as an act of social hygiene, highlighting how one social policy can bring “a cascade of vulnerabilities” (Luna 2019) to a large part of the population (in the novel loss of political rights, financial dependency, illiteracy, and loss of the capacity of speech in infants, etc.). Taking as its plot the literalization of the metaphor of silencing, the novel creates a dystopian world based on a metaphor. However, due to its implicit warning message and its use of metaphor in a wider sense which encompasses the entire meaning of the narrative, dystopia itself as a genre could be interpreted as a vulnerability metaphor in metaphorical discourse, as a kind of heterotopia, a fictional place that materializes all vulnerability metaphors. The dystopian fictional narrative is then viewed as a speech act aiming to communicate a literal meaning through metaphorical discourse.

Literary theory has approached genres through a variety of metaphors. Borrowing on pragmatics and applying speech theory in fiction analysis, Marie Louise Pratt has pointed out that there are enormous advantages in talking about literary genres as speech acts (Pratt *qtd in* Fishelov 120ff)<sup>12</sup> since “genres and subgenres can, to a great extent, be defined as systems of appropriateness conditions”

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<sup>12</sup> Fishelov also mentions the works of Bruss (1976), Lejeune (1975), Petrey (1990) and others (n.5, 121).



(121). While through a pragmatic/linguistic aspect a text in itself can be described as a macro speech act literally, with its illocutionary act and its perlocutionary effect, in the literary tradition, the “speech act” conception is recognized as one metaphor among others. Therefore, the literary text as a speech act is not self-evident. In *Metaphors of Genre*, David Fishelov presents four important metaphors that have served as analogies for the study of genres (genres as biological species, as families, as social institutions and as speech acts).<sup>13</sup> As he points out, different analogies help us shed light to different genres and their different aspects. Following this schema, we would like, in conclusion, to elaborate on the speech act metaphor and approach the genre of dystopia as a metaphorical speech act that is performing an extended metaphor. In making voice in both its literal and its metaphorical meaning the center of her novel, Dalcher is inviting us to see her novel also as a metaphor that has materialized through the plot. She is thus drawing our attention to this genre’s dominant “didactic and moralistic”<sup>14</sup> attribute. As the dystopian world always tries to make visible and interpret emerging tendencies and phenomena with reference to the current real world while reimagining it through (science) fiction, it could also be read as a metaphor seeking to understand the future. In this extended metaphor, today’s real world would correspond to the source domain and its future to the target domain. Paul Ricœur considers metaphor as “the privileged instrument in that upward motion of meaning promoted by *mimésis*” opening “the kingdom of the as if” (qtd by Pettersson 96). His work on metaphor as a displacement of meaning from the level of words to the level of *mythos* supports this reading of dystopia. It shows how, moving from the textual local level into the wider literary/mythical level, metaphor becomes an intellectual tool for thinking contemporary sociopolitical issues through the literary genre of dystopia.

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<sup>13</sup> Fishelov refines the analogy based on speech act by insisting on two different theoretical approaches, one seeing literary genres “as complex, written, but genuine speech acts and the other, emphasising that literary genres artistically imitate or represent, but are not genuine, speech acts” (131).

<sup>14</sup> “although the images of the future put forward in dystopias may lead the reader to despair, the main aim of this sub-genre is didactic and moralistic: images of the future are put forward as real possibilities because the utopist wants to frighten the reader and to make him realise that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens” (Vieira 17).

Indeed, Ricœur sees metaphor as a way to “re-describe” reality (Ricœur “Huitième étude”). Taking into account the speculative nature of the dystopian genre, we could say that mimesis here opens the door, through the metaphorical trope (*as if*) to a speculative future (*what if*), presenting a potential future which, viewed as an extended metaphor, is a criticism of trends of the present. This tentative interpretation does not purport to pinpoint the genre of dystopia to this one specific function, but it could perhaps help explain why language as a theme is particularly prominent in it. As Fishelov notes, “even when we reject a specific analogy we may, during the process of evaluating its potential explanatory force, still gain some fresh insights” (158), and it is in this spirit that dystopia as metaphorical speech act is here put forward.

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