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REPRESENTATION OF BRITISH TEENAGE SLANG
IN THE TV-SERIES *MISFITS*

A communicative approach to teenage slang

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TITLE

Representation of British Teenage Slang in the TV-series Misfits: a communicative approach to teenage slang

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to examine the functions of British teenage slang vocabulary from a communicative perspective and to analyse it in the social situations that occur in the TV-series *Misfits*. The language in *Misfits* can be considered a representation of the slang usage of British teenagers in general. The aim is based on the assumption that slang is used as an instrument of communication in order to accommodate to the addressee and thus create a bond of solidarity. The material of main importance is the DVD collection of the first two seasons of *Misfits* and close-caption transcripts. The method is corpus-based and an empiric and explorative case study with an inductive conclusion that is based on the theories of Sociolinguistics in general, and Communication Accommodation Theory in particular. The main results are that slang is used a tool of accommodation by the teenagers in *Misfits* in order to create and develop their own identity and group solidarity.

KEYWORDS

Slang, teenagers, adolescence, *Misfits*, divergence, convergence, communication, goal, accommodation, sociolinguistics, communication accommodation theory, identity, group togetherness, solidarity, scripted speech, fictional speech, in-group, out-group

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1. INTRODUCTION

Slang is a widespread phenomenon in any language and the functions of it seems to be both dependent on social context and deeply rooted in every human being's need for belonging to a group (Adams, 2009: 59). Slang helps develop and create identity both as a group member and an individual in the eyes of the group (Moore, 2012: 180). Slang is usually labelled as an "exercise in wit" and used "to be different", "to enrich the language" and "to show that one belongs to a certain school" (Crystal, 2003: 182). However, "young people opt for slang as a medium of communication" (Thorne, 2005: 1) and furthermore, according to Palacios Martínez (2011: 106) "teenagers are responsible for the linguistic innovations and changes" and "young people are the group with the most extensive slang" (Adams, 2009: 93). Therefore, although many groups in society use slang it seems important to consider it in the language of teenagers. It furthermore seems interesting to conduct a study that highlights the importance of slang in communication, since the usual focus is on its function to be witty or enrich the language.

The British TV-series *Misfits* will represent the fictional dialogue from where the data will be collected and it will be examined in the specific social situations which occur in the series since "el lenguaje juvenil no sólo es parte del estilo oral sino que ocurre y se crea en situaciones específicas"¹(Zimmerman, 2002: 160). Furthermore, the use of slang vocabulary in the series *Misfits* will be considered a representation of British teenage slang in general² and the main focus will be to study the language in *Misfits* as a group phenomenon. Hence, the factor of individuality will not be considered as central to this essay, since the main focus is the representation of the group of British teenagers. The language will therefore be analysed according to each individual's attempt to affect their group through the use of slang.

1.1 AIM

The aim of this essay is to highlight the communicative function of slang in scripted speech in social context, since slang "is always sensitive to particularities of the

¹ My translation: The language of the youth is not only a part of the oral style but also occurs and is created in specific situations.

² Explained thoroughly in chapter 3. PREVIOUS STUDIES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

situation” (Tracy, 2007: 20). The main intention is thus to stress that social context and the intended goal of the speaker suggest that slang’s efficiency makes possible the use of accommodation in order to achieve specific social goals like e.g. showing social identity. Hopefully this essay will contribute to the field by identifying the functions of slang through accommodating.

1.2 HYPOTHESIS

The main interests of this essay is to, through the slang usage in *Misfits*, investigate whether:

- The functions of slang can be used with a communicative approach to gain certain goals, for example creating identity, by choosing to use slang.
- Slang has a function where it “reflects who people are and is the instrument through which people build who they want to be” (Tracy, 2007: 23).

2. MATERIAL

The material used in this essay is the DVD collection of season one and two in *Misfits* and close-caption transcripts (found at <http://www.tvsubtitles.net>) resulting in a corpus of 99 slang words. Although the number seems small, the decision to include only two seasons was made since season three and four consists of a different group where other characters come in and change the group dynamics. This would also be interesting to examine, but since the amount of space is limited in a BA thesis, I have chosen to focus on one group only. A delimitation has thus been made to effectively investigate a specific group and their development through the social situations represented in the chosen seasons. Season one and two are used as the basis of the corpus since season one demonstrates the teenagers establishment of their identity and attempts at finding their place in the group, using functions of slang typical for identity creation. Season two is used because the teenagers know each other and the structure of the group has been created; they are thus more relaxed in their manner of speech and no longer feel the pressure to ‘fit in’. They have created their own jargon and subgroup and the use of slang and its social functions are therefore used for different purposes than in season one, but are equally important and interesting to examine.

2.1 BACKGROUND OF THE MATERIAL

The first two seasons of *Misfits* are about five young adults that are doing community service for committing minor crimes. The characters are: Nathan who is Irish, Alisha who is of ethnic mix (white and black³) and speaks with a cockney accent, Curtis who is black and speaks with a Jamaican-London-Street accent, Kelly who is from northern England and speaks with a northern accent and Simon who speaks Estuary English. The characters appear to be created to represent an ethnically and geographically mixed group to correspond to a 'mixed' Great Britain. The essence of the series is that the five teenagers and many others in London are affected by a storm and get supernatural powers: Nathan is immortal, Curtis can turn back time, Alicia's power affects people who touch her by making them extremely sexually aroused, Kelly can hear other people's thoughts and Simon can turn invisible.

In the first season the teenagers get to know each other, establish their role in the group and try hard to ascertain their personal identity. Alicia is doing community service because of driving while intoxicated. She becomes the person who all the others follow; if she does not like an idea, the general perception of the idea is not fully embraced. She mainly does this by disobeying authority and therefore gaining a status of being 'cool'. Curtis got caught with drugs, causing him to get community service. He was a very successful runner and does not feel that he should do community service. He constantly repeats this during the first episode, but later gets emotionally attached to the group because of his relationship with Alicia (boyfriend and girlfriend in the season one) which makes him come closer to them. He finally accepts his place in the group in season two. Nathan vandalized a bowling place and refused to pay or repair the damage. He is the person who no one takes seriously and is constantly making jokes and provoking the others. He is also the one who, at the beginning, is the most concerned with quickly creating a bond within the group by frequently asking questions and trying to come close to the others. Simon is his target and he constantly teases him and makes him feel unwelcome in the group. However, Nathan does not have the power to decide who is 'in' and who is 'out', Alicia does. Therefore Simon does become a part of the group but not fully until season two, when Alicia falls in love with him. Alicia's affection for him makes the group accept him as a group member. Simon's speech is not included in the

³ Term used by the Commission for Racial Equality (<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com>)

results since this essay concerns slang and he only uses slang five times during both seasons. He does not accommodate to the other's speech and keeps his personality intact through out the series, being 'the weird kid' who burnt someone's house down. Nevertheless, he is a part of the group and adds interesting aspects to the analysis. Kelly got community service for getting into a fight with another girl. She is the character who expresses her emotions often using the function of slang that is "mirroring the speakers state of mind" (Moore 2012: 173). She summarizes situations and informs and alerts the group when a situation is becoming threatening to them. Kelly is also the person who the others rely on and turn to when they need someone to talk to.

In season two the teenagers have become a group and their identities are determined within the group, they know each other well and every person's place in the group is decided. If the essence of season one was to show ones place in the group and make clear the personality of each character, season two is about maintaining both the bond created through shared experience and the general affection they feel towards each other; this is reinforced by that both Simon and Curtis become a full part of the group. The importance in season two is thus not to constantly be self-assertive, but to demonstrate the significance of their relationships to each other to keep the group-togetherness strong.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous studies based on *Misfits* relevant for this essay has not been found. The field of study that informs this essay is thus Sociolinguistics, used both in general and more specifically through Communication Accommodation Theory (henceforward CAT⁴). They are chosen based on their relevance and to explain the communicative aspects of the fictional slang in *Misfits* and the functions of it in the social contexts which occur in the series.

Previous studies based on scripted speech can be found in Adams' study of slang which includes examples from the TV-series *Buffy the vampire slayer*. Adams explains the importance and relevance of using scripted speech in order to investigate linguistic behaviour (Adams, 2009: 103). He promotes its use and argues that it is

⁴ Previous studies of sociolinguistic studies and CAT are dated to 1974-2007. The reason for including references written such a long time ago, is because of them all referring to established theories. Moreover, the writers are well-respected authors and some of them authorities in their field of study; this essay is thus not challenging the theories but applying them to the use of slang.

“[m]eant to show how speakers negotiate their way through social interactions” (Adams, 2009: 103). Since scripted speech it is neither spontaneous nor natural and the actors perform a script to resemble the way teenagers talk, it might, for some readers be easy to label the language in *Misfits* and other series as stereotypical and not true to real language. However, there is an intention to represent real social situations and if a series is to be successful, it has to be credible (Adams, 2009: 103). According to Adams (2009: 103) the credibility of a series is a “subtle manipulation of elements already present [...] on the edge of the acceptable”. The main idea is therefore to use the fictional language in *Misfits* as a representation of slang usage of British teenagers, and not as a perfectly matching image of reality.

3.1 SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Sociolinguistics is the field of research that studies language in relation to society and “the general study of communication through the study of organization of verbal means and the ends they serve” (Hymes, 1974: 8). Labov (1969: 13) argues that “every speaker will show some variation in phonological and syntactic rules according to the immediate context in which he is speaking”. Accordingly, the speakers adapt their language “to fit the needs of the occasion” (Hudson, 1996: 144). According to Hudson (1996: 209) the social situations in which language is used, is thus “a clue to social information” and the main reason for communicating is to “convey messages effectively”. Therefore speech is used “to establish or reinforce social relations” (Hudson, 1996: 109).

Labov (1969: 13) argues that the use of language depends on the “the relations of the speaker, addressee, and audience, and particularly the relations of power or solidarity among them”. The language of the speaker is used to either enhance the solidarity between the speakers, or to show distance (Hudson, 1996: 128). The balance between closeness or distance is thus what displays “how much experience they have shared, how many social characteristics they share” (Hudson, 1996: 122). Accordingly, through the choice of language people signal social information and distance or closeness, for example, when showing “dominance; and [...] can show respect, but it can also deny X’s individuality” (Hudson, 1996: 129). Since the organization of language depends on the “communicative conduct in a community” (Hymes, 1974: vii) a less successful speakers will not have the same ability to “use

speech as linguistic items in order to locate themselves in relation to [both] the social groups that they can identify in the world around them” (Hudson, 1996: 120) and “to the people they are talking to and also in relation to the people that they are talking about” (Hudson, 1996: 131); their identity can therefore be denied.

Sociolinguistics describes human interaction as being rooted in social needs and behaviour, expressed through language in relation to other people and in order to perform certain acts, e.g.: showing or denying solidarity, implying distance or displaying social status or personal beliefs.

3.2 COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY

CAT is a theory adopting the use of accommodation in communication. According to Giles and Ogay (2007: 326)

Individuals use communication in order to indicate their attitudes towards each other and as such is a barometer of the level of social distance between them. This movement towards and from others, by changing one's communicative behaviour, is called accommodation.

CAT defines language as a reflection of both a speaker and group's need for social interaction with others and as a reflection of “the desire for social approval” (Giles, et al. 1991: 18). The notion of identification through accommodation is something CAT stresses heavily and when people accommodate to become similar to the addressee it is called *convergence* (Giles & Ogay, 2007: 327). *Convergence* “reflects [...] a speaker's or a group's need (often non-conscious) for social integration or identification with another” (Giles & Coupland, 1991: 72). Hence, the need for belonging to a group and converging to a specific linguistic style in order to identify with that group is realized through efficient communication (Giles & Ogay, 2007: 328). Accommodation can thus “bring the other person psychologically closer, and also enhance conversational effectiveness” (Giles & Coupland, 1991: 89).

Yet another aspect of accommodation is *divergence*, which is “a way for the speakers to make themselves appear different to enhance the fact that they belong to a certain group” (Giles & Ogay, 2007: 328). To emphasize distinctiveness as such, is considered to be the main feature of constructing group membership (Giles & Ogay, 2007: 328). Giles, et al. (1991: 27) argue that when two different groups come in

contact “they compare themselves on dimensions that are important to them”. The balance between convergence and divergence is therefore important to the teenagers in *Misfits* as they both need to “take on the communicative patterns believed prototypical for their group” (Giles, et al. 1991: 18) 1991: 28) in order to “maintain a sense of community or fellowship” (Wilson, 2007: 77) and also to emphasize their style of speech and recognize the difference between them and relevant out-groups. Accordingly, different groups create a common language that is valued within the group and characteristic for it (Tracy, 2007: 29).

According to Wilson (2007: 79) “communication is goal directed” and not done randomly. The reason for communicating is thus purposely done and with a clear intention. He defines a goal as “future states than an individual desires to attain or maintain” (Wilson, 2007: 78). The different goals which are presumed during social interaction are thus negotiated through language (Giles, et al. 1991: 50). One of the main goals of communication is using it as an “instrument through which people build who they want to be” (Tracy, 2007: 23). The way a person decides to speak to another both mirrors who they are, who they want to be perceived as and also functions as a social clue to what they think of others (Tracy, 2007: 20).

CAT is a theory mainly focusing on the effects that language has in communicative situations. The different ways of accommodating, either by convergence or divergence, will reveal the intended goal of the speakers have when participating in a conversation. The main intention and function of communication is either to establish identity or to show or maintain group belonging through accommodation.

3.3. SLANG

Slang is, according to Stenström (2000: 89), very difficult to define. Even so, she presents a general definition:

Slang includes the vocabulary of ‘the underworld’ (street gangs, drug-trafficking) as well as the specific vocabulary of ‘a particular group or profession’ and colloquial language ‘below the level of standard educated speech’, consisting of ‘new words or of current words employed in some new special sense’ (Ayoto & Simpson, 1992: V, quoted in Stenström, 2000: 90)

Ayoto & Simpson (1992: V, quoted in Stenström, 2000: 90) call slang “very informal language that includes new and sometimes not polite words and meanings”. Adams (2009: 6) defines slang as being dependent on social needs and used in order to “fit in and stand out”. He furthermore argues that slang plays an important role in the “social dynamics of a group’s or in an individual’s ability to negotiate discourse” (Adams, 2009: 49). Additionally, slang is mostly used in the context of a few semantic fields, described by Jay (1999: 175) as: “name-calling, gender-related insults, sexuality and discrimination”, sexual acts and body parts and Mattiello (2008: 219) adds that slang has ‘scatological connotations’. Furthermore, slang has many functions, one of them being its use “as a medium of exchange” (Adams, 2009: 61), and since “adolescence is a period of social adaptation” (Legaudaite, 2009: 200) the teenagers use this type of language to show belonging to a group or to help construct and develop their own identity “through the semantics of their own speech” (Jay, 1999: 175). Another relevant and interesting function of slang is its notion of efficiency described by Mattiello (2008: 47): “slang words may be much more direct than their standard corresponding description” and are “immediate and unequivocal for those who share the same slang vocabulary since they help efficiency”, it is thus used to “be brief, concise”.

Slang is therefore not only an ‘exercise in wit’ or used to ‘enrich the language’ (Crystal, 2003: 182). It seems to have many different and more deeply rooted purposes for being used, especially when it comes to demonstrating identity or personal beliefs.

4. METHOD

This study has been a case study where the patterns of slang usage have been examined to find underlying functions; it can therefore be considered an explorative case study. The main method used in this essay was through close observation of the series while documenting the use of slang with reference to: <http://www.peevish.co.uk/slang/>, Thorne’s *Dictionary of contemporary slang* and Stenström’s *From Slang to Slanguage: a Description Based on Teenage Talk*. This gave rise to a variation of 99 slang lexemes and provided the social context in which they were used. The slang lexemes that were gathered from the observation were then used in the corpus program AntConc in order to find their frequency and to create the tables that will give the reader a general overview of slang usage in *Misfits*. Accordingly, the data has been

studied empirically and the results have been determined by first looking at specific slang lexemes and then analysing them according to the theoretical framework in order to reach an inductive conclusion.

The documentation and gathering of the extracted data was organized in Figure 1, according to Stenström's division (2000: 101). The method for the division was made by making some changes: by adding some categories, integrating some categories with each other and also omitting what was not considered relevant in order to make the categorization clearer. The division was created to be perceived as logical and based on four main categories which makes slang usage (when it comes to vocabulary) divided in to: *proper slang*, *taboo words*, *proxy words* and *pragmatic markers*. Each category is divided into sub-categories, and some sub-categories have sub-categories of their own. The main line of thought is that *proper slang* and *taboo words* each have the sub-categories: *terms of address*, *intensifiers* and *general words* (the distinction being that offensive and or abusive words belong to *taboo words*).

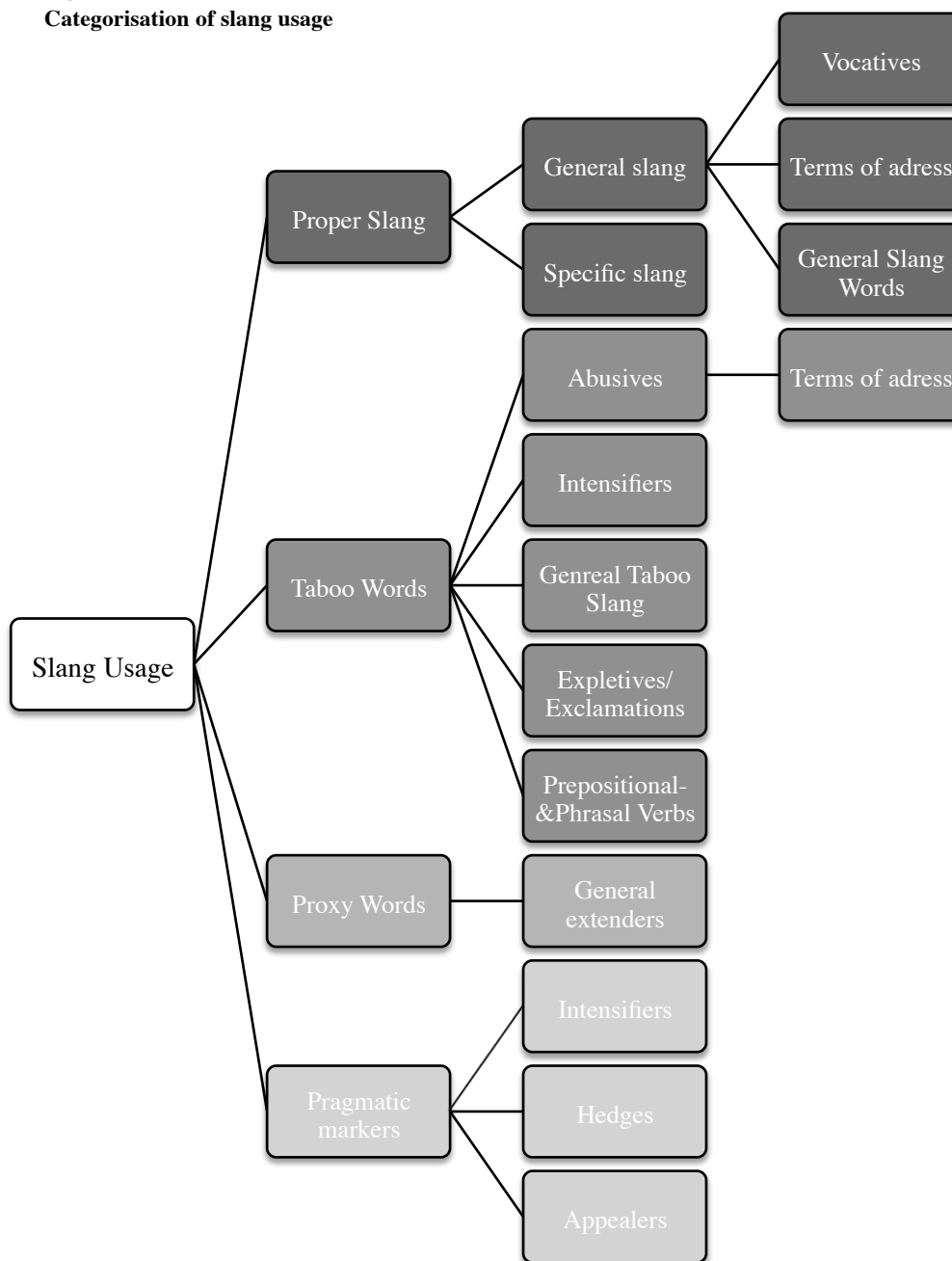
Additions of, for example, *general slang words* and *general taboo slang* were made in order to include words that did not fit into any of the other categories. These are words used to replace formal words and the distinction between the two depends on whether they are offensive or not. Moreover, an explanation of *abusives* was added with the sub-category of *terms of address*, and the use of *vocatives* was added to *general slang*. Also, *phrasal and prepositional verbs* were added to *taboo words*, in order to demonstrate its frequency of use. All additions were made to demonstrate the variety of use.

Some categories were put together when they might have needed to exist in doubles (like the *intensifiers* and *terms of address*) but since the space of this essay is limited and the understanding of a concept such as slang usage is of main importance the division was made to satisfy those aspects in best possible way. The manner in which the categories were divided depended on 1) their frequency and consequently the place they occupy within slang usage, but also on 2) the primary intention of giving an overview of slang usage and thereby facilitating the understanding of the figure. The category of *general extenders* contains 30 uses of *taboo words*: *bullshit* used twice, *bollocks* once and *shit* 27 times. This seems like a vast number since the words which represent this category are used a total of 60 times through out the both seasons. However, the decision has been made not to divide *general extenders* into taboo or not

taboo in order to facilitate the understanding of the category itself. Also *phrasal and prepositional words* which contain *general slang words*, such as *freak out* (used a total of 7 times) or *mess up* (used a total of 8 times) were integrated since the frequency of use is low.

The omission or re-naming of main importance is the category of *swearwords*. Stenström, Adams and Jay all agree that slang and cursing can be used interchangeably (Stenström, 2000: 101, Adams, 2009: 8, Jay, 1999: 179). Since the concepts often overlap swearing is considered a part of slang usage (Stenström, 2000: 101, Jay, 1999: 179). It is difficult to draw the line between slang and swearing; swearing has therefore been considered as a category of slang usage. According to Jay “cursing includes categories such as slang [...] slang is an important part of offensive words” (Jay, 1999: 179). Accordingly, slang lexemes are used to curse and the functions of cursing were thus considered within slang usage. The slang lexemes used to curse are categorized under *taboo words* as *expletives* or *exclamations* in Figure 1. More omission were the use of *vogue words* described as “words that already exist in the standard language but which are suddenly used very frequently for a short period of time before going back to normal usage” (Stenström, 2000: 102). The category seem hard to define and understand and was therefore omitted. Moreover, the words which Stenström (2000: 102) considered as vogue (for example *massive* and *wicked*) are words that can easily be assigned to a different category and thus facilitate the understanding of the figure and the basic categories, as there are many already. Also, the uses of *empathizers* and *monitors* (Stenström, 2000: 97) as a sub-category of *pragmatic markers* were omitted. *Empathizers* are usually stressing focus and are used very similarly to *intensifiers*, which stress degree. The difference between the two is very small and they were therefore both considered as *intensifiers* in Figure 1. *Monitors* are described by Stenström (2000: 102) as the use of *I mean* and were omitted because of the lack of frequency, only being used once in both seasons of *Misfits*.

Figure 1
Categorisation of slang usage



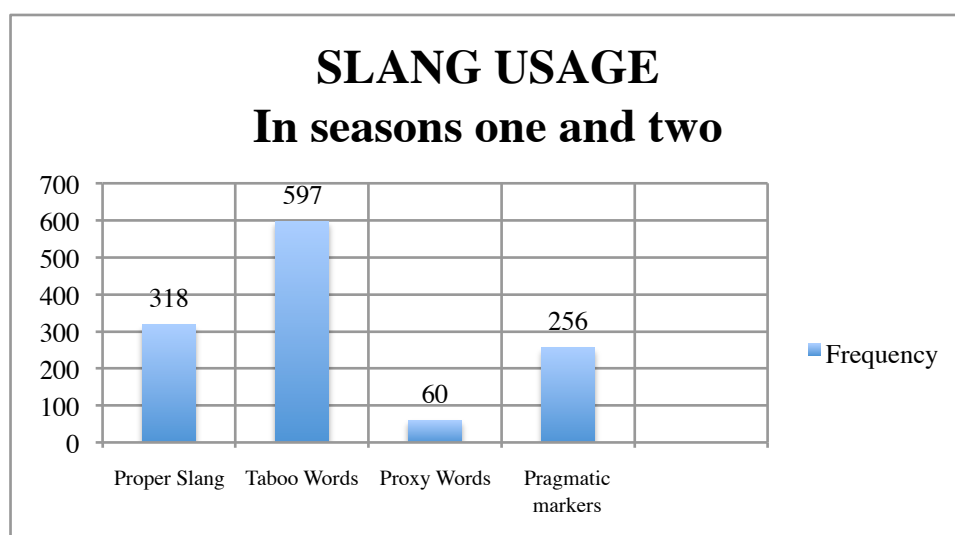
5. RESULTS

This chapter will present a general overview of the different sections of the result-chapter and a general overview of the tables. In 5.1 PROPER SLANG will be introduced with its under-categories of 5.1.1 GENERAL SLANG and 5.1.2. SPECIFIC SLANG. In 5.1.1. the under-categories of *general slang* will be introduced: 5.1.1.1. VOCATIVES, 5.1.1.2. TERMS OF ADDRESS and 5.1.1.3. GENERAL SLANG TABOO. In 5.2. TABOO SLANG will be introduced with its subcategories of 5.2.1. ABUSIVES (TERMS OF ADDRESS), 5.2.2. INTENSIFIERS, 5.2.3. EXPLETIVES/EXCLAMATIONS, 5.2.4. PHRASAL AND

PREPOSITIONAL VERBS and 5.2.5. GENERAL TABOO SLANG. In 5.3. PROXY WORDS will be analysed through its subcategory of *general extenders*. In 5.4 PRAGMATIC MARKERS will be discussed, containing the subcategories of: 5.4.1. INTENSIFIERS, 5.4.2. HEDGES and 5.4.3. APPEALERS.

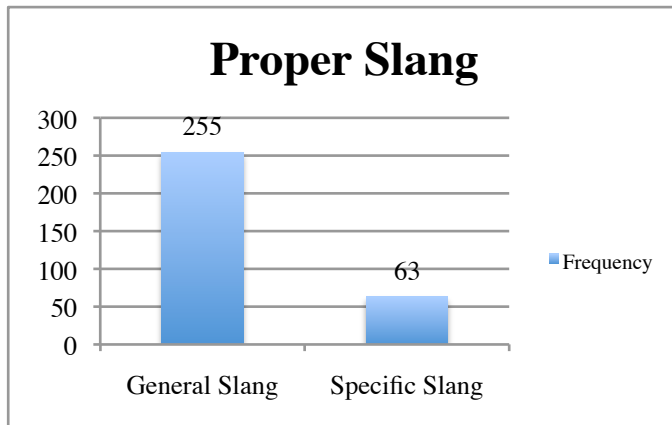
The tables presented below show the 99 different slang lexemes frequency of use, created with Figure 1 as a base. The numbers represent the number of times a specific type of slang words is used. Table 1 is an overview of the four main categories and their variety in frequency of use. Table 2.1 demonstrates the category of *proper slang* and the difference in frequency of use between *general slang* and *specific slang* and table 2.2 includes the sub-categories of *general slang*. Table 3 is an overview of the most frequently used category of *taboo words* and Table 4 is an overview of the use of *pragmatic markers*. *Specific slang* and *proxy words* are not represented in tables of their own been since they only contain one category each and are thus represented accordingly: *Specific slang* in Table 2.1 and *Proxy Words* in Table 1. The tables are included to provide an overview of the frequency of use of the slang lexemes. Accordingly, this will give the reader a general idea of the use of slang in *Misfits* and help the understanding of the pragmatic use of slang. The numbers in the tables will not be used in the analysis, the main idea is therefore not to consider them a part of the results or the aim, but only to provide an overview. Each table presents its category of slang usage below, followed by the most representative examples from the collected data analysed according to social function.

Table 1



5.1 PROPER SLANG

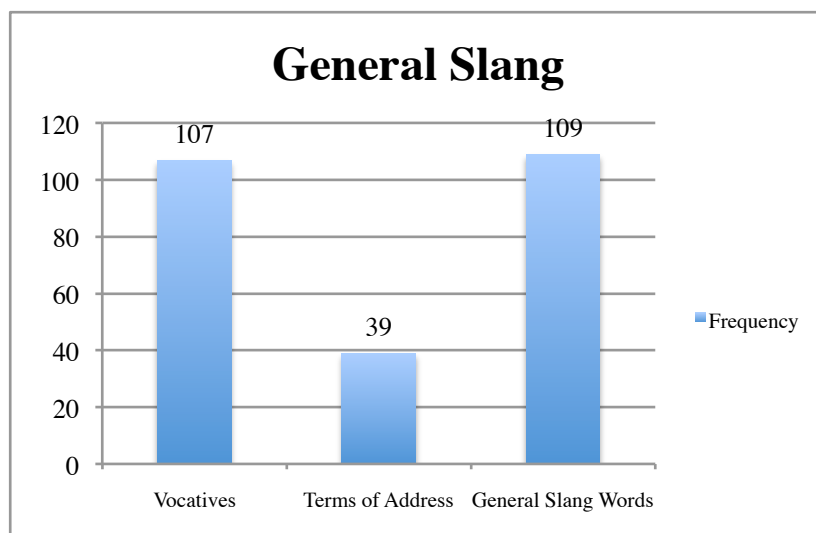
Table 2.1



5.1.1. GENERAL SLANG

General slang involves any slang word or slang expression that can be described as “words not related to a particular group or trend” (Stenström, 2000: 101). Included in general slang are: *vocatives*, *terms of address* and *general slang words*. *Vocatives*, within the general slang category, are nouns identifying the addressee and Palacios Martínez (2011: 115) suggests that *man*, *mate*, *bruv* etc. are a part of this category (except from the abusive terms of direct address). Examples of *terms of address* can be *you freak*, *you sick bastard* etc. The under-category of *general slang words* is pure slang, functioning to replace the standard form of the word or expression.

Table 2.2



5.1.1.1 VOCATIVES

- 1) a. How are we gonna do this, **man**?” (Nathan, S01E01⁵)

Nathan addresses Curtis and is ‘talking about getting laid’ and how they are going to divide the girls between them. He uses the vocative *man* as “an indicator[s] of familiarity and comradeship functioning as a solidarity in-group marker” (Palacios Martínez, 2011: 115). He is trying to make friends with Curtis, addressing the only obvious thing they have got in common: girls. Nathan fails to convince Curtis and it results in Curtis not taking him seriously, since there is almost always a tone of irony in Nathan’s voice.

-
- b. I will kick your balls into your stomach, **mate**! (Kelly, S02E01)

In this scenario Kelly is not trying to be friendly or to create a bond between her and Curtis (who is the addressee): she is threatening him and indicating distance. It is a way of reversing the effect, almost being provocative by calling someone a friend who in the situation is considered an enemy. It can therefore be considered an indirect speech act where the context in which the word arises becomes evident for the understanding of the message and the goal of the speaker, which is to create an aggressive and threatening effect.

5.1.1.2 TERMS OF ADDRESS

- 2) a. You are a weird little **psycho**. (Nathan, S02E03)

Nathan uses *psycho* as a term to address Simon indirectly, he attributes Simon’s behaviour to this description. Hudson (1996: 206) argues that “one person can draw conclusions about another person’s character and abilities simply on the basis of their language”. Nathan’s use of *psycho* therefore functions as an attempt to categorise his own membership in the group by “exaggeration, mocking, stylizing, parodying etc.” (Spreckles, 2009: 37) since “most adolescents avoid defining themselves explicitly and instead prefer to do it via the disaffiliation of others [...] by stereotyping others”(Spreckles, 2009: 37). Nathan’s constant mocking and teasing Simon can thus

⁵ S01 = season 1, E01 = episode one. S01E01 = season 1, episode 1

be interpreted as a way of creating social status and identity through his choice of addressing others.

b. You cheap **bastard!** (Nathan, S01E01)

c. **Freak!** (Alicia, S01E06)

Nathan is addressing the probation worker and Alicia is addressing the *virtue-bitch*⁶. Their choice of language indicates that they have a goal of creating a bond of solidarity through divergence. Mattiello (2008: 214) argues that “slang expressions are in fact deliberately used by speakers to show their affiliation to a group” and are used to keep insiders in and outsiders out. Both Nathan and Alicia are identifying a person they can compare with when trying to negotiate their identities “by constantly comparing ourselves to other individuals or groups” (Spreckles, 2009: 33).

5.1.1.3 GENERAL SLANG WORDS

3) a. What did he **get done for?** (Curtis, S01E01)

At the beginning of the series when the teenagers first meet each other and start to interact this is the most frequently asked question. The reason for using slang is to demonstrate their experience within the slang repertoire, as Mattiello (2008: 215) mentions, “slang is a marker of social identity and group exclusiveness as means of expressing the values and experiences of the peer group members”. They thus use the only shared experience they are sure that they have in common: criminal activity.

b. She is such a **chav.** (Alicia, S01E01)

Chav, as described by peevish.co.uk is: “*Noun*. A person, usually of poorly educated, working class origin [...] chavs are generally viewed as an ignorant under-class with a propensity for criminal or loutish behaviour. Usually derog.”. This is Alicia’s first impression of Kelly, who hears Alicia’s thoughts. Through slang, Alicia organizes her world into social stereotypes as she is trying to understand the world and make sense of it (Hudson, 1980: 237), but also trying to find her identity by comparing herself to others.

⁶ Explained in 5.1.2. *Specific slang*, example d.

5.1.2 SPECIFIC SLANG

Stenström (2000: 101) describes specific slang as being “typical of a group” and in this essay there will only be a handful of words representing the five teenagers, almost all of them made up or primarily used by Nathan. Specific slang is a marker of group togetherness and Adams (2009: 16) argues that “since they have things in common they are bound to speak a common language”.

The reason for including the taboo word *prick* is because of its function as a specific slang word, why is described below. It is a common abusive and is thus included both in *abusives* and in *specific slang*, used a total of 38 times. The other words are specific for this group and are therefore not considered within other categories, even if they can have e.g. an abusive function. Furthermore, they share the function of taking “pleasure in the creation of newly useful terms only known to them” in order to “sparkle in conversation so that [...] others occasionally think well of us” (Adams, 2009: 119).

4) a. Prick

Used frequently by almost every person, but mostly by Curtis about Nathan. Curtis is the first one using this expression and the rest of the group slowly accommodate to his speech by using it similarly, as a term of direct or indirect address of Nathan. The reason for including *prick* in this category is because of its frequency and representation of both the accommodation in the group and their relationships to each other. It becomes one of the more significant indicators of their convergence to each other’s speech, which is a “desire to secure increased intimacy” (Adams, 2009: 45).

b. Monkey slut

The word *monkey slut* is made up by Nathan and used by the group as a password when a shape-shifter⁷ tries to separate them. Only the real persons know the password and Nathans argues for its effectiveness since the chances for it being used in normal conversation are low. The word is completely new and created on basis of their common effort of escaping the shape-shifter; they have thus created a ‘common language’ that is “private and nearly incomprehensible to outsiders” (Mattiello, 2008:

⁷ A person with the power of shifting shapes i.e. changing into any animal or person that he or she likes.

47). Accordingly, they use slang to demonstrate closeness and solidarity through a private and effective term that only they understand and use.

c. Melon fucker

This is one of Nathan's nicknames to address Simon, created when he asks Simon whether he "fucks fruit". The term *melon fucker* is recurrent in the series and used as a funny anecdote that the members look back at and find humorous. Even though it is created to offend Simon, it ends up bringing them together since offensive words often lose their meaning and result in being a sign of intimacy and friendship (Palacios Martínez, 2011: 122). Nathan thus insults Simon in order to come closer to him and to create a relationship.

d. Virtue-virgins

The term *virtue-virgins*, as Nathan calls them, are the teenagers enchanted by a power of a specific girl who Nathan calls *the virtue-bitch*. They are teenagers who have started 'dressing like retards' and are anti-drugs, anti-drinking and anti anything that is not considered 'good' behaviour. Nathan amplifies the negative characteristics of the *virtue-virgins* using divergence making "each negative categorization of the out-group serve[s] the in-group in a positive way" (Spreckles, 2009: 45). Jay (1999: 175) argues that "groups develop slang to communicate about the facets of life that are most important to them" and the language characteristic for this group is therefore based on values of what they find important (Tracy, 2007: 29).

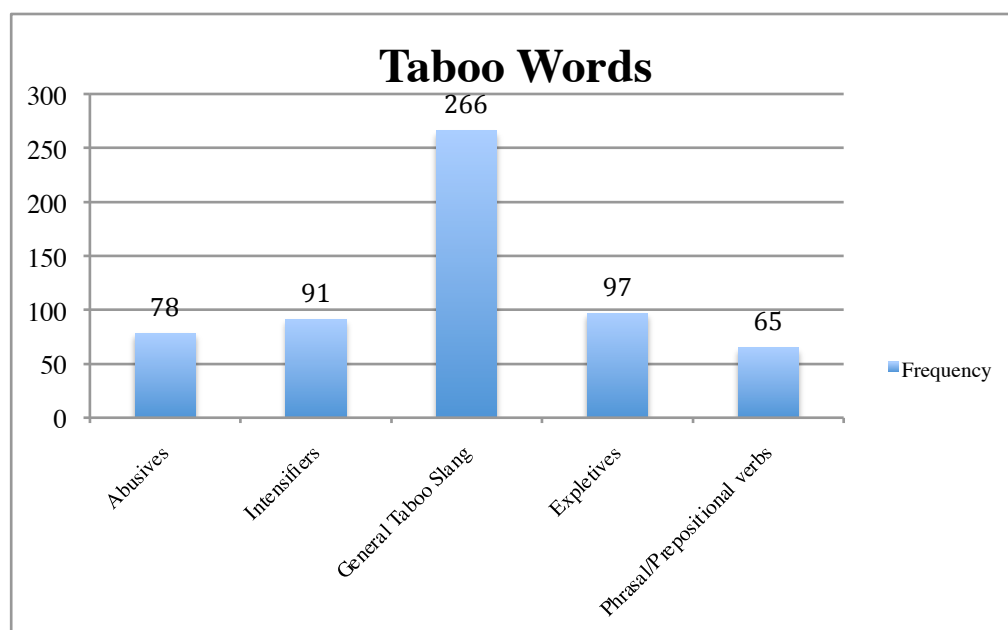
5.2 TABOO WORDS

Taboo words are considered offensive for their relation to offensive subjects: "words referring to offensive concepts become offensive words" (Jay, 1999: 153).

The taboo words are divided into five categories: *abusives*, *intensifiers*, *general taboo slang*, *expletives/exclamations* and *phrasal and prepositional verbs*. The first category is used by the teenagers to insult each other, or people that do not belong to their group. *Abusives* are usually *terms of address*, either of direct address or if indirect address, for example: *pussy*, *dickhead*, *cunt*, *bitch*, *whore*, *twat* etc. and often with a 'you' before the abusive term. *Intensifiers* in the taboo word category are offensive words that add an effect to the statement, for example *fucking* or *bloody*. *General*

taboo slang is pure taboo words or phrases used to replace a formal word or phrase with an offensive or taboo slang lexeme, for example: *cock* or *dick* would replace the formal *penis*. *Expletives or exclamations* can be short utterances that express strong emotions e.g. *fuck!* or *shit!*, clausal exclamations: *That's bullshit!* and phrasal exclamations: *for fuck's sake!* (Hurtford, 1994: 111). *Phrasal and prepositional verbs* consist of a verb + a particle and or a preposition forming a single unit, for example, *fuck off*, *screw up*, *dicking around*, *fucking around* etc.

Table 3



5.2.1 ABUSIVES (TERMS OF ADDRESS)

- 1)
 - a. **Wanker!** (Kelly, S01E01)
 - b. (She was) A total **slut fuck**. (Alicia, S01E01)

The abusive term *wanker* is used by Kelly as a term of direct address of the probation worker. Her statement is playful and through it she opposes authority and wants to be perceived as funny. The term *slut fuck* is a term of indirect address, describing a third person. In this context the abusive terms are used to produce some effect upon the hearer and to impress the audience by “attract(ing) attention with colourful and bizarre expressions by mocking, offending or challenging the hearer” (Mattiello, 2008: 60).

Alicia and Kelly are in an early stage of the series and are trying to establish their identities in the group by choice of language, which is “la función de constituir una identidad específica juvenil y hasta identidades específicas de subculturas juveniles”⁸ (Zimmerman: 2002, 143).

5.2.2 INTENSIFIERS

- 1) a. I shouldn't even **fucking** be here! (Curtis, S01E01)
b. I should have one of these **bullshit** powers. (Nathan, S01E01)

The intention of the intensifiers *fucking* and *bullshit* is to make a strong impact on the hearer, to create an “intense and aggressive effect” (Moore, 2012: 172). Curtis makes it very clear that he does not identify with the group and creates distance through the intensification of his statement. Nathan demonstrates his frustration with not having a power, like the others do. He feels left out and less connected to them, which makes him demonstrate his frustration in order to check if he is still socially approved, even though he does not have a power.

5.2.3 EXPLETIVES/EXCLAMATIONS

- 2) a. That's **bollocks**! (Nathan, S01E02)
b. Oh, **for fuck's sake**! (Kelly, S02E03)
c. Well, this is a big load of **wank**! (Alicia, S02E03)

The short utterance *bollocks*, the phrasal exclamation *for fuck's sake* and the clausal exclamation *this is a big load of wank* is used to intensify an emotion and to convey emotional meaning (Jay, 1999: 9). Nathan disagrees with a statement and displays this emotion. Kelly disapproves of the direction in which the situation is going and she is losing her patience. Alicia displays a feeling of dissatisfaction with them having to clean up the lake, affirming that everyone has noticed her opinion of the situation. The statements are pure expression of emotion, made more powerful and expressing effect,

⁸ My translation: “the function of creating a specific ‘youth’ identity and a specific identity within youth-subcultures”.

which a standard form would fail to do as successfully. Their emotional states are displayed to the rest of the group to signal that the situation needs to be changed in order for them to be satisfied. Slang is thus used in its function of “addressing something seriously and permanently wrong”(Adams, 2009: 150) and as “a response to social inequity” (Jay, 1999: 179).

5.2.4 PHRASAL AND PREPOSITIONAL VERBS

- 3) a. They wouldn't be **dicking around** sticking notes in lockers (if they knew about them killing their probation worker). (Nathan, S01E02)

The phrasal verb *dicking around* is used to decrease the level of seriousness that is accelerating in this scene. They have found a threatening note in Curtis' locker saying “I know what you did”. Nathan does not take it as seriously as the rest of the group and he is therefore trying to calm them by indirectly stating that they are worrying over nothing. Through the use of less formal words he thus effectively signals that the situation should not be taken.

- b. You **screwed up** big time. (Alicia, S01E01)

The prepositional verb *screw up* is used to mean *you failed*. This is the first conversation between Alicia and Curtis and she points out his failure as the first thing she does when meeting him. It can be interpreted as a provocation so that he will notice her, but also as a power struggle meaning that Alicia wants to show Curtis that she is strong. She therefore both constructs her identity in social interaction and provokes Curtis to come close to her by engaging him in conversation.

5.2.5 GENERAL TABOO SLANG

General taboo slang is a vast category of taboo related offensive words which do not belong to any category mentioned above. As this is the largest category, a selection of the most frequent and representative slang lexemes has been made and divided into separate miniature-categories according to the semantic fields described in 3.1.3.

BODY FLUIDS (SCATOLOGICAL CONNOTATIONS):

- 4) a. You know, **tripling**? It's when you **cum, puke** and **shit** yourself all at the same time. (Nathan, S0206)

Nathan's choice of word is used to replace formal words with informal words, in order to be funny. The group are in this scene sharing experiences of embarrassing moments, and as usual Nathan is trying to be the most funny and most extreme by picking words that provoke effect. He is demonstrating who he is in order to invite the others to share their experiences and to come closer.

SEXUAL REFERENCE:

- b. I would definitely **shag** her. (Nathan, S01E01)
c. You're **screwed**. (Nathan, S01E02)

This is the most common semantic field of use when it comes to teenage slang and is often offensive in one way or another. Teenagers often use language in reference to sexual enticement to add a strong and sometimes negative effect to their statements, choosing words that refer to what they consider popular. The teenagers thus create a "contracultura que se dirige contra [...] el estilo culto"⁹ (Zimmerman, 2002: 144). Accordingly, they use language on the basis of what they find interesting, creating a common interest and closeness in their relationship.

BODY PARTS:

- d. I'll kick you so hard in the **cunt** your mum will feel it. (Kelly, S01E01)

Kelly threatens Alicia and uses a slang word with reference to body parts in order to make the threat more personal. It is used to provoke and also demonstrate disapproval

⁹ My translation: 'counterculture' that targets [...] the popular way of speaking.

of the other person's way of behaving. (Mattiello, 2008: 229). Therefore, the reason for using *cunt* instead of for example *vagina* is to create that aggressive effect and scare the addressee.

e. Your step dad has got a massive **cock**. (Alicia, S01E02)

Alicia is teasing Nathan (she saw his step dad naked) and is using a taboo word to enhance the sense of humour in the situation. Nathan is frustrated with the situation and Alicia uses the opportunity to do to Nathan what he usually does to them. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as a sign of friendship (Palacios Martínez, 2011: 115) since she is making an effort to tease Nathan. The function of the taboo word *cock* thus indicates her having a goal to create solidarity.

DRUGS:

f. I had one **wrap** on me. (Curtis, S01E03)

g. I asked you to buy the **gear**. (Curtis, S01E04)

h. I think my brother may have **spiked** you. (Nathan, S02E02)

Many general slang words can be used in order to create “secrecy when performing forbidden acts” (Legaudaite, 2009: 181). All the examples above are uttered in public and need to be cryptic in order to hide an illegal activity. Followingly, Legaudaite (2009: 181) describes how this “indicates a special closeness between group members and heighten[s] internal solidarity through shared experience”. Performing forbidden and illegal acts together thus strengthens group togetherness and amplifies the fact that only teamwork needed to avoid getting caught.

5.3 PROXY WORDS

Proxy words are words which act for other words (Stenström, 2000: 102) and they mainly consist of *general extenders* (Palacios Martínez, 2011: 118). They summarise, create rapport or can be used when hedging. They replace words that usually refer back to an already mentioned set of words (Stenström, 2000: 102) and they can also be taboo words referring to the mentioned semantic fields of teenage slang.

5.3.1 GENERAL EXTENDERS

- 1) a. Apart from all the killing and the dying and **stuff**, this community service wasn't really as bad as I thought it was gonna be. (Nathan, S02E06)
- b. I gotta do some restorative justice **bollocks** with her. (Kelly, S01E03)

The general extenders *stuff* and *bollocks* are used as a replacement for a whole clause. They are therefore used for economical reasons, for example, in order for Nathan not having to name everything they have been through together. Abbreviation is intentional, it is done because it is needed (Adams, 2009: 38) in order to save time and to be brief. However, they are both used to decrease the level of seriousness in the situations in the examples: in the case of Nathan where he performs an open display of his emotions to indicate closeness and in Kelly's case, where she shows disbelief in the system and displaying how unaffected she is by the seriousness in the situation.

- c. If that was me, I'd be all like crying my eyes out and **shit**. (Kelly, S02E04)

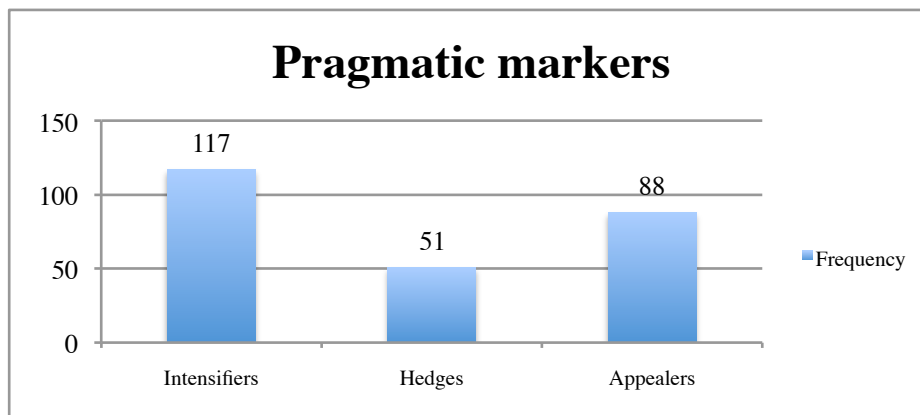
Kelly and Alicia are having a serious talk about relationships and Kelly uses *and shit* in this context as a negative reference to emotions related to a break-up. Since Kelly uses the taboo word *shit*, she is implying that crying is bad and is therefore indirectly showing admiration and demonstrating her personal beliefs. Accordingly, the general extender becomes "a linguistic feature that helps teenagers construct their own personality and identity as individuals in a group" (Palacios Martínez, 2011: 119).

5.4 PRAGMATIC MARKERS

Pragmatic markers contain three categories: 1) *intensifiers* which in this category are multifunctional- (Stenström, 2000: 102), non-slangy and non-offensive words used to intensify a statement and consist of e.g. *well*, *dead*, *very*, *totally*, *right* etc. 2) *hedges*, functioning to imply uncertainty or to make a statement less serious, realised by *like* or *sort of* and 3) *appealers* that "consist of for instance the 'invariant' tag *innit* [...] and

yeah” and that they are “used as discourse interactive markers” (Stenström, 2000: 103). Furthermore, they are used to check if the listener is following and keeping attention and they sometimes require an answer. They can function in the same way as an intensifier does, and also have an emphasizing effect (Palacios Martínez, 2011: 120). The invariant tag *innit* is “the most common of all and particularly characteristic in the language of British adolescents”(Stenström, 2000: 102).

Table 2



5.4.1 INTENSIFIERS

- 1)
 - a. My aunt and uncle are **well** religious. (Curtis, S01E05)
 - b. She looked **proper** sick. (Kelly, S02E07)

The intensifiers *well* and *proper* are used to be dramatic. In Curtis’ case he explains to his girlfriend (Alicia) why she can’t come to his uncle and aunt’s house the same night; it is possible that he uses *well* to enhance the cause, in order to avoid creating tension. Kelly is in the same manner intensifying her statement to dramatize the story she is telling when presuming the goal of amusing her audience in order to reinforce the solidarity in the group.

- c. It’s **dead** wired. (Kelly, S01E01)

Kelly displays her emotions and uses the intensifier *dead*, functioning as a way of proving the seriousness of the situation. She is trying to get her boyfriend’s attention and to make him understand that something wrong, she says when she first starts

hearing peoples thoughts. It is a signal of fear, concern and of her emotional state of mind. According to Littlejohn (2007: 2) human beings have a “strong need to interpret and explain and understand the world” and people always try to make sense, seek clearance find balance (Littlejohn, 2007: 2). She displays this need for understanding by trying to produce an effect upon the hearer through an intensification of her statement.

5.4.2 HEDGES

- 2) a. His brother was **like** crying and shit. (Kelly, S02E02)

The hedge used by Kelly functions as an explanation to the probation worker why Nathan has decided to spend the day with his brother, instead of coming to community service. She is not trying to be serious, as can be judged by watching the episode, but instead intends for the message to be perceived as a bad lie. This is realised by the hedging, by the general extender *and shit* and by her tone. She signals that her statement should not be taken seriously, performing the usual act of hedging; to reduce the level of seriousness and to indicate that the speaker is uncertain of the content. She furthermore opposes authority to strengthen the bond in the group by protecting a group member.

5.4.3 APPEALERS

- 3) a. You just relax, **innit**? (Curtis, S01E01)

The invariant tag *innit* is used by Curtis to create social interaction between him and Alicia, who has decided to tan instead of doing the work assigned for them. He is not requesting an answer from her but is instead making clear that he has noticed her behaviour. Therefore, the answer itself is not the focus, but the fact that he has noticed her realised through the use of *innit*. His goal seems to be to understand her behaviour, which he does by using an applier through social interaction.

- b. Leave him alone, **yeah**? (Kelly, S01E01)

In this example Kelly tells Nathan not to tease Simon. The tag question on the end to her statement makes it slightly threatening, and could, with the right tone and in a different situation be interpreted as such. She requires an answers with her choice of

words, much more directly than in example a. The answer to her question is important to Kelly, whereas the statement itself was more important to Curtis in the previous example. Kelly obligates Nathan to promise her that he will stop teasing Simon, by using the appeler *yeah*.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results showed that there have been a vast number of reasons why the fictional speech in *Misfits* has been represented by slang as a medium of communication. Each situation is sensitive to the goal of the speaker and the outcome of the words chosen since “slang lexemes arise in response to different social functions” (Moore, 2012: 115). Social approval negotiated through accommodation and through slang is based on a fundamental need that “humans are social animals; if you don’t belong to at least one group, you aren’t a fully realized person”(Adams, 2009: 59).

Almost all examples from season one demonstrate a slang usage different to that which appears in season two; the focus being how the teenagers construct their identity through slang (Adams, 2009: xi). According to Stenström and Jørgensen (2009: 5) “identity does not pre-exist” but is created within interaction with others through slang and is especially true about teenagers since they “closely identify with the words they use” (Stenström & Jørgensen, 2009: 5). The goal of communication is often to make an impression on the hearer and the “choices we make about when to use slang, what slang to use, and how to use it effectively, subtly negotiates fitting in and standing out” (Adams, 2009: 94). In this manner Alicia characterizes Kelly as a *chav* and Nathan takes his place as the joker in the group from the very start. Therefore, the use of slang is a subtle balance between standing out to make an impression of being different or strong, and fitting in, in order to accommodate to the group of choice.

However, the use of slang does not only decide who a person is and how that person perceives the world but “people control the impression they make on others by how they present themselves [...] they way we talk and act towards others puts them and us into roles” (Littlejohn, 2007:3). Depending on efficient clues to social information through slang “people develop personal identities that are reflected in the language they speak” (Jay, 1999: 175). This makes persons with less ability to communicate effectively “lose control over your identity: others will determine that identity”

(Adams, 2009: 95). This results in Simon's identity being constructed by Nathan, who is constantly mocking him, since Simon is a passive person who uses a low level of accommodation. Moreover, Curtis' role in the group is also created in a passive way as he at first refuses to be a part of it. The group accommodates to Curtis' use of *prick* as a term of address, which in a certain sense forces him into joining the group. Since he spends almost every day with them he becomes a part of their group and "inevitably, you identify with a group and its speech" (Adams, 2009: 59), or in Curtis' case, the group converged and identified itself with his speech.

In season one, they constantly try to prove who they are to the others in order to find their role in the group, whereas in season two they know each other well and share a specific language. The slang thus functions to keep the group togetherness strong through, for example, divergence by mocking or teasing out-groups as with the pejorative address of the probation workers and the *virtue-virgins*. Giles and Coupland (1991: 18) argue that "since language reflects a speaker's or a group's need for social integration or identification with another, it is a reflection of a desire for social approval". Slang therefore helps them "express closeness and equality" (Mattiello, 2008: 218) within their own group in order to "facilitate social intercourse and inducing friendliness or intimacy" (Mattiello, 2008: 32). Since "people experience satisfaction in the knowledge that they belong to a group that enjoys some superiority over others" (Giles, et al. 1991: 27) the use of slang becomes an important instrument to enhance the feeling of togetherness. Moreover, converging to a group's specific style of speech or "speaking to your group in your group's style of speech engages its loyalty" (Adams, 2009: 103). Accordingly, the balance between *convergence* and *divergence* is something clearly present in *Misfits* which makes the solidarity in the group grow strong.

Conclusively, the accommodation used by the group members in *Misfits* through slang, creates an effect which becomes more striking than if they would have used formal language. Slang thus carries meaning and is an important tool of exchange, accordingly, it is an evident part of accommodation. The more efficiently perceived a statement is, the bigger the chance of realising the intended goal of, for example, that through accommodation the teenagers in *Misfits* establish social status or identity. Since it is important to take a place in a group, slang functions as an unmistakable force in any utterance and is hard to misinterpret because of its directness compared to

standard forms. Slang's "intention to effective communication" (Thorne, 2005: 1) therefore realises its ability to accommodate in order "to negotiate one's identity in a group" (Moore, 2012: 180). Thus, through examining the social context in which the fictional slang usage occurred, it is clear that it's efficiency makes possible the use of accommodation to achieve specific social goals like e.g. demonstrating social identity and maintaining group solidarity.

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DVD

Misfits, 2009, [Series] Created by Howard Overman, UK: Clerkenwell Films