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"What Crime Against Nature Will You Be Serving This Evening?": Banter, Camp and Discourse in ITV's *Vicious*

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Abstract

The British sitcom *Vicious* (2013), starring Ian McKellen and Derek Jacobi, follows the lives of Freddie and Stuart, an elderly gay couple who have been together for almost 50 years. The sharp, witty and often cruel banter that dominates their interactions is a defining feature of the show: the couple engages in endless battles of insults, to which their old friends are accustomed but which cause embarrassment to those who are less familiar with the old couple's conversational habits. The show's humorous effect mostly arises from the ambiguity that is inherent in banter: the lines between teasing and true impoliteness are frequently blurred, leaving the audience (and characters alike) wondering where the joke ends and the truth begins. Moreover, the linguistic realisations of banter, which rely largely on hyperbole, exaggeration and extravagance, contribute to the farcical tone of the show and to the series overall campiness. This study explores the complex role of banter in *Vicious*, analysing its purposes beyond mere humour and illustrating its significance as a linguistic instrument for characterisation, genre, and discourse.

Keywords: Banter, Mock impoliteness, Sitcoms, Telecinematic discourse, Pop cultural linguistics, *Vicious*, Camp aesthetics

1. Introduction

The study of language in popular culture has gained increasing attention within the fields of pop cultural linguistics and pragmatic stylistics, particularly in how language use constructs meaning within media texts. Pop cultural linguistics examines how language functions within mass media, entertainment, and digital communication, shaping audience perception and

engagement (Werner 2018). This approach is particularly relevant in scripted television, where linguistic choices contribute to character construction, genre conventions, and intertextuality. The study of telecinematic language, therefore, goes beyond mere dialogue analysis; it requires an understanding of how speech patterns, humour strategies, and verbal interactions contribute to broader cultural narratives.

One particularly rich area of investigation is the role of (im)politeness in telecinematic discourse, where characters frequently engage in aggressive, sarcastic, or confrontational exchanges. Impoliteness in scripted television functions as a means of characterisation, bonding, conflict, and comedic effect: Bousfield and McIntyre (2018) have explored impoliteness strategies in film, highlighting their contribution to characterisation, emotion, and audience engagement. Dynel (2011; 2012) also examined how impoliteness strategies are often used to entertain the audience, mainly through humour, in both fictional and non-fictional media products. While research on impoliteness has largely focused on reality TV, sitcoms, and film (Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Dynel 2012, Culpeper 1998), there remains a significant gap in the analysis of mock impoliteness —such as playful insults, teasing, and banter— in telecinematic discourse, particularly regarding its pragmatic, stylistic, and cultural functions. Mock-impoliteness is a particularly complex linguistic phenomenon, as it operates within a framework of implicit mutual understanding between speakers and usually serves affiliative rather than confrontational purposes (Leech, 2014; Culpeper, 2011).

Banter seems to be rather understudied within pop cultural linguistics, with the only exception of a recent study on the evaluation and interpretation of banter in the British TV show *Pointless* (Pillière 2018). This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining the function of banter as a central discursive mechanism in the British sitcom *Vicious* (2013–2016): as a matter of fact, the show heavily relies on sharp, rapid-fire exchanges between its two protagonists, which have been largely dismissed by critics as exaggerated, outdated, or merely a tool for comedic effect. However, this study argues that the persistent use of banter in *Vicious* serves multiple, layered functions: not only does it shape character dynamics and comedic timing, but it also plays a crucial role in the construction of the show's genre and its engagement with intertextual and cultural references. To provide a comprehensive analysis, this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical background on banter from a pragmatic standpoint, focusing on its functions in telecinematic discourse; Section 3 introduces *Vicious*, presenting its controversial critical reception and exploring its connection with camp aesthetics and farce. Section 4 demonstrates how banter functions as the primary stylistic and cultural method for creating verbal camp. Finally, Section 5 focuses on the discursive functions of banter, demonstrating how it is used to signal past attitudes to queerness and is used by the main characters as a form of a code language.

2. Banter in Pragmatics and in Telecinematic Discourse

Before introducing *Vicious* and its linguistic and stylistic features, it is important to define what banter is and how it has been approached in pragmatics. This theoretical overview helps to understand the multilayered complexity of such a communicative form and to contextualise its function in telecinematic discourse. A playful exchange of teasing

remarks—even insults—between two or more interactants, banter is a particularly complex form of social interaction: the main difficulty with this communicative strategy is that it employs surface features that are clearly aggressive (insults, teasing, put-down remarks) to convey affection rather than hostility (Hein & O'Donohoe, 2014). Pragmatic approaches to banter have primarily focussed on three aspects: its reciprocal and cooperative nature, which associates banter with a form of verbal game; its correlation with humour; and its affiliative social functions.

Banter is generally distinguished from simple teasing by the fact that it is characterised by reciprocity (Rivers & Ross, 2021; Sorlin, 2018): typically, it is realised as a tit-for-tat verbal exchange in which responses are delivered rapidly, resembling a fast-paced "match of verbal ping pong played by the two (or more) interlocutors within a jocular mode" (Dynel 2008, 244). Unlike teasing or simpler forms of put-down humour, which can be one-sided and do not necessarily require cooperation, banter is inherently interactive and demands the active participation of at least two individuals. Because of its back-and-forth nature, banter is frequently associated with game-playing; many definitions of banter employ terms borrowed from the field of game-playing: in an article for *The Guardian*, MacInnes (2011) compares banter to a boxing match; similarly, Allan (2016) describes banter as a form of verbal play, and Dynel characterises it as an "interactional bonding game, given the alternating contributions of both interactionists who have entered a jocular frame" (2008, 246). Scholars also agree that banter is generally benign, playful and closely linked to humour (Dynel, 2008; Haugh & Bousfield, 2012). Recent studies emphasise that, despite its aggressive or scathing remarks, the underlying intent remains humorous and light-hearted (Dixon *et al*., 2023). Norrick highlights the affiliative nature of banter by defining it as a "rapid exchange of humorous lines oriented toward a common theme, though aimed primarily at mutual entertainment rather than topical talk" (1993, 29).

Pragmatic approaches to banter highlight both its complexity and its social functions. Leech (1983) posits that, in addition to the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle, two other related principles exist: the Irony Principle and the Banter Principle. These are considered second-order principles, since they relate to the first two. The Irony Principle allows a speaker to appear polite while conveying impoliteness, whereas the Banter Principle operates in the opposite manner – enabling a speaker to appear impolite while fostering social solidarity. In this sense, banter functions as a form of mock-impoliteness, an "offensive way of being friendly" (Leech 1983, 144). Leech goes on to propose a definition of the Banter Principle: "In order to show solidarity with *h*, say something which is (i) obviously untrue, and (ii) obviously impolite to *h*" (1983, 144). This is echoed in Bousfield's definition of banter as "an insincere form of impoliteness used for the purpose of solidarity or social bonding" (2007, 213). Recent studies challenge Leech's notion of untruthfulness in banter, suggesting that mock-politeness may refer to an existing "trait, habit, or characteristic of the recipient of the banter" (Plester & Sayers 2007: 159): what appears to be crucial in banter is (non)seriousness, more than untruthfulness. In other words, in an interaction that is characterised by banter, speakers do not necessarily say things that are manifestly false, but they make it clear that they are not to be taken seriously by using hyperbole, exaggeration,

excessive use of metaphor, incongruity, or intonation and gesture. Culpeper also elucidates this point, asserting that mock-impoliteness "remains on the surface, since it is understood that it is not intended to cause offence" (1996, 352). Nevertheless, it is not always easy to distinguish between genuine impoliteness and banter, and it frequently requires contextual knowledge (Yule 1996, 18), such as the power dynamics within the interactants' relationship or the level of intimacy they share. Indeed, the intimacy and closeness between interactants play a crucial role in interactions characterised by banter, which "is not normally used between people who are of unequal power status, or who are strangers" (Leech 2014, 239) but only "among equals or peers" (Plester and Sayers 2007, 174).

Banter appears to be extremely multifunctional: it may be used for entertainment, to show personal knowledge, to display common cultural ground or shared norms, and even to make a point in a friendly way (Plester and Sayers 2007, 174). Due to its multifunctionality, banter is employed in telecinematic discourse for several narrative and stylistic purposes: since it signals intimacy and affiliation, banter can be used to illustrate the nature of the relationship between two characters, or the bond within a group of people. Furthermore, because of the creativity necessary for developing witty repartees, banter frequently results in comedic moments that entertain audiences. The fast-paced, sharp dialogue showcases the characters' intelligence, making their interactions more engaging. This is particularly evident in romantic comedies, where banter plays a crucial role in character rapport representation (Stevens 2020, 41). Through their verbal sparring, the couple paradoxically establish a deep connection, illustrating how banter can be a vehicle for both conflict and affection. Witty banter and verbal friction between prospective lovers have become almost a classic trope, from Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing*, brought to the screen by Kenneth Branagh, to *Harry Potter*'s Hermione and Ron (Murray 2024, 109).

Beyond humour and romance, banter also carries an important function in depicting group solidarity and its complexities. In Michael Winterbottom's *Go Now* (1996), a film about a young man diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, banter is presented as an essential part of the protagonist's camaraderie with his soccer teammates. Their usual dynamic is built on sharp yet affectionate teasing, which reinforces their close bond. However, when his illness progresses, his friends stop engaging in banter, fearing that it may be inappropriate or hurtful. Ironically, this silence isolates him, making him feel excluded from the very group that once made him feel at home. This illustrates the multifaceted nature of banter—not only as a means of connection but also as a marker of social inclusion. The absence of banter, in this case, becomes more alienating than the teasing itself, underscoring its importance in maintaining relationships within groups.

Banter is also crucial in the sitcom *Vicious*. While the exceptionally witty barbs exchanged by the protagonists create moments of great comedic impact, banter also plays a significant role in contributing to the show's camp atmosphere and in conveying discourse. In the following section, I introduce and contextualise the sitcom *Vicious*, examining its controversial critical reception and its intertextual connection with the British tradition of farce.

3. *Vicious* (Old Queens): A Modern (Camp) Farce

Vicious premiered on the British television channel ITV on April 29, 2013. The first sitcom in Britain to feature a gay elderly couple as protagonists, *Vicious* was expected to receive critical acclaim due to the prestige of the cast involved in its production: not only were Sir Ian McKellen and Sir Derek Jacobi cast as the main characters, but multiple Olivier Award winner Frances De La Tour and Iwan Rheon – fresh off the success of *Game of Thrones* – were also recurring characters. Despite these premises, the series was not warmly welcomed in the UK, while it received good reviews in the United States (Kies 2020): after two seasons and one Christmas special, in 2016 the show was cancelled.

Vicious tells the story of the elderly gay couple Freddie (Ian McKellen) and Stuart (Derek Jacobi), who spend most of their time secluded in their Camden Town flat. Freddie is an unsuccessful actor whose career peaked when he "killed a prostitute on *Coronation Street*" and when he later appeared in one episode of *Dr Who*. Stuart, instead, has spent the preceding 49 years of his life taking care of Freddie and their home. Few individuals are permitted to visit them within the restricted universe they inhabit. Violet (Frances De La Tour) is a lifelong friend who usually visits the couple to find solace from the numerous unsuccessful and tumultuous love stories she manages to indulge in; Ash (Iwan Rheon) is a young man who recently moved to London from Wigan; with no friends or family to support him, he is somewhat adopted by the gay couple. Two more friends complete the small group of people who frequent the flat: Penelope, a smart but confused old lady who is starting to show signs of dementia, and Mason, a cynical old man who is later revealed to be Freddie's brother. The plot appears to be rather domestic and conventional: as typical in sitcoms, action occurs nearly always indoors, and classic British sitcom devices are used, "including recurrent scenes […], rigidly defined character types and gender roles" (Drushel 2017, 94). The result is thus familiar, as McKellen himself admitted: "[Vicious] does remind you of the sitcoms we've enjoyed in the past. It's not breaking any new ground in its form" (Scott 2013, 56).

In one thing, however, *Vicious* distinguishes itself from other sitcoms: the two main characters, who have been together for almost fifty years, communicate almost solely through a particularly creative and often cruel form of banter. The title of the series – which initially should have been *Vicious Old Queens* (McKellen 2014), describes rather accurately the nature of the dialogue between the two men, who constantly engage in a battle of insults whose topics range from decrepitude, ugliness, and the insufferable aspects of their partnership: in the series, "every line is a setup or a punchline in an endless war of insults, and every delivery involves a dismount and a pose like it's the Olympics" (Nowalk 2014). Impoliteness (or mock impoliteness, as we will see) characterises most of the interactions that the couple has with anybody; however, while they tend to employ teasing or putdown humour with their friends, they reserve banter for each other. In her analysis of the couple's biting remarks, Laura Tommaso argued that Freddie's jokes normally focus on Stuart's ineptitude and associate him with the stereotype of the "revolting, promiscuous, loquacious woman" (2018, 99), while Stuart usually makes fun of Freddie's pomposity, vanity and declining looks.

Even though the 'bickering married couple' is indeed a classic trope, it appears that this very aspect of the series was particularly disliked by the British critics, who relentlessly and – it is the case to say – rather viciously attacked the sitcom. Curiously, however, some of the critics appear to have been infected by the same inventive and hyperbolic style that characterises Freddie and Stuart's repartees, which makes one wonder whether banter is somehow contagious: for example, in her review of the sitcom critic Felipa Jodelka wrote that the two main characters "pace around their sitting room exchanging insults *like two fractious iguanodons* (Jodelka 2015); for his part, Secher observed that the two protagonists "while away the hours exchanging barbs or scowling at one another from either end of their sofa, like *gargoyles in cardigans*" (Secher 2013). The metaphors of "two fractious iguanodons" and of "gargoyles in cardigans" sound very much like what Freddie or Stuart may say to each other in one of their acrimonious exchanges.

The biting dialogue between Freddie and Stuart was met with particularly negative reactions because it evidently contributes to the camp atmosphere that permeates the sitcom: Jodelka herself makes it very clear when she defines the series "super-trad, high-camp", in an evidently derogatory tone; but it was *Evening Standard*'s Brian Sewell who made it more evident that what was considered highly offensive was the camp representation of gay men, in that – according to Sewell – it does not represent fairly the majority of elderly gay couples: in fact "ordinary homosexuals do not behave like pantomime dames at an audition, are not an endless source of venomous barbs, are not constantly falling into limp-wristed attitudes and are not all too ready to huff and puff in pretended hurt" (Sewell 2013). Freddie and Stuart's mannerisms, their use of hyperbole, frequent vocatives, and the couple's adhering to the heteronormative model where "one is the man and the other is the woman" (Tommaso 2018, 98) appeared to present to the audience a stereotypical image of gay men (and gay couples in particular) which, according to Secher, "may well revive the pernicious prejudices against the faggot and the poof so long familiar to men of my generation" (Secher 2013). Such readings of the series, however, suppress other important interpretations of *Vicious*, which consider intertextuality, genre and discourse. By considering Vicious a "regressive representation of gay men" (Kies 2020, 2), critics attribute to camp – and camp-talk, as I will later explain – an entirely negative evaluation (Note 1), and seem to forget how camp can be invested "with a political charge predicated upon an irreducible and subversive gay difference" (Harvey 1998, 296). As Tommaso notes, the sitcom's campiness is not intended to be offensive: "*Vicious* draws on camp codes and values to celebrate a means of expression that represents a constitutive factor of gay identity" (2018, 96).

What critics appear to deliberately overlook, however, is that *Vicious* clearly operates between parody and farce. Farce, which has a rich and notable tradition in British culture, spanning from Ben Travers to Brian Rix to Joe Orton, is particularly prevalent in the sitcom and is linked to the camp aesthetic. While it is understandable, as Drushel argues, that audiences and critics "could expect characterisations that were at once authentic and multifaceted and scripts that plumbed the dimensions of growing old as gay men in a long-term relationship" (2017, 107), it must be argued that this form of authenticity and realism cannot be found in – nor asked from – farce. In farces, comedy is exaggerated,

boisterous and unrealistic, and "characterisation, as opposed to caricaturization, is relatively unimportant" (Wyllie 2009, 113). One could hardly expect characters (or events) to be entirely realistic, in farces. The mechanical nature of both the characters and of the plot is a crucial part of the identity of farce as a genre, in which verbal artifice, physical excess and theatricality coexist: this is evident both in the first and second seasons of the sitcom, where classic farcical expedients – such as concealment, clothes-swapping, physical comedy, deception – abound.

Intertextual references to British farces, specifically to Joe Orton's *Loot* (1965) are disseminated within the series. In the final episode of Season 1, Stuart's mother faints upon learning that her son is gay, and that Freddie has been his partner for 50 years. Ash discovers her false teeth on the floor while she is upstairs and enquires: "Did anybody lose a set of teeth?", holding them in his hands. Stuart is then given the false teeth, and he assures that he will "shove them back in while she's asleep" (Season 1, Episode 6). This scene is reminiscent of a similar, and very famous, one in Joe Orton's *Loot*: in the play, one of the characters takes his (dead) mother's false teeth and clicks them like castanets. Another intertextual reference occurs at the end of season two, when Stuart's mother passes away during Freddie and Stuart's wedding ceremony. Her body is moved from one character to another to prevent Stuart from realising that she is dead: this episode, which contains more examples of slapstick comedy than the rest of the series, is strikingly like *Loot* in its irreverent treatment of a mother's corpse.

Such references to drama, particularly farce, are unsurprising considering that playwright Mark Ravenhill, whose significant influence on the 1990s theatrical scene established him as a vital figure in contemporary British drama, was one of the co-creators of *Vicious*. Critics have rarely mentioned Ravenhill's role, preferring to focus on the sitcom's other creator, Gary Janetti, probably due to Janetti's earlier work for television in the show *Will and Grace.* Ravenhill's theatrical history and his preference for Orton, to whom he is often compared (Svich 2003, 90), influenced both the style and structure of the sitcom: the theatricality that has been regarded as a flaw in the series appears to be very deliberate, as do the references and allusions to 1960s British farces. The result is an eclectic show that combines camp, the parody of famous sitcoms from the 1980s, such as *Are You Being Served?* and *I Love Lucy*, Noël Coward's farces and a touch of 'Ortonesque' dark humour. Farce is not only characterised by physical comedy but is often filled with linguistic creativity and sophistication (Smith 1989), because dialogue adds to the sense of incongruity (and excess) that defines the genre. In *Vicious*, language has crucial importance: more specifically, it is the linguistic strategy of banter that produces camp aesthetic and farcical tones. In the following section I shall examine in detail how banter actively contributes to the creation of a "camp effect" within the series.

4. "Things-being-what-they-are-not": Banter as Verbal Camp

Defining camp is a particularly challenging enterprise. It has been "tentatively approached as sensibility, taste, or style, later reconceptualised as an aesthetic or cultural economy, and eventually reclaimed as (queer) discourse" (Cleto 1999, 2). Traditionally associated with

flamboyance, exaggeration, and artifice, camp is often reduced to a simplified, superficial definition that overlooks its broader cultural and political dimensions. In her pioneering work *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag argued that the camp aesthetic can be summarised as a "love for the exaggerated, the 'off', of things-being-what-they-are-not" (1964, 518): camp, therefore, emerges through a fundamental discrepancy—between appearance and reality, surface and depth, truth and performance. This principle of incongruity is a "recurrent feature in camp phenomenology" (Cleto 1999, 22), and scholars such as Newton (1972) and Babuscio (1977) have built their theories around the idea that incongruity is central to camp expression.

The only scholarly contribution to the examination of camp in *Vicious* comes from Drushel (2017), who, employing Babuscio's theoretical framework (1977), identified three key features of camp sensibility in the sitcom: theatricality, incongruity, and humour. Theatricality is evident in the show's emphasis on defined roles and the exaggerated manner in which they are performed, as well as in the broad acting style that characterises the main performances (Drushel 2017, 99). Incongruity arises in multiple ways: for example, through the contrast between the protagonists' old-fashioned behaviour and contemporary society or from the show's dated and stereotypical representation of queerness (Drushel 2017, 102). Drushel briefly mentions the use of language in the sitcom but does not expand on the role that language plays in the creation of camp effect. Rather, he associates the "sharp witticism and verbal attacks" (Drushel 2017, 99) that the main characters exchange with humour, thus relegating its significance to general comedic effect. In my view, language in general and banter in particular play a fundamental role in the creation of a camp style: the overall theatrical structure of the sitcom and its relying almost exclusively on dialogue necessarily entail that linguistic resources be crucial within *Vicious*. I thus argue that the creative linguistic resources provided by banter and its implicit sense of incongruity (given by the dichotomy between what is said and what is meant) are used in the sitcom to create a specific form of verbal camp.

To prove my point, I shall now examine instances of banter in the show using the taxonomy elaborated by Harvey (2000) in his study of camp talk. In his examination of verbal camp, Harvey developed a descriptive framework identifying four semiotic strategies that generate camp meanings: Paradox, Inversion, Ludicrism, and Parody (2000, 244). These strategies are "resources that can be drawn upon to produce the surface textual/visual effects" (2000, 243) that characterise camp. As I am about to show, all these semiotic strategies are employed in the witty and cruel barbs exchanged by the main protagonists of *Vicious*.

The first strategy mentioned by Harvey is Paradox, which is often realised through the juxtaposition of different registers: "any mismatch of context to language or any juxtaposition of surface features of different registers within the same stretch of discourse is deemed deliberate" (Harvey 2000, 244). This is a common characteristic of camp speakers, who alternate "different levels of formality in a way that creates linguistic incongruity" (Harvey 1998, 301). The banter between Stuart and Freddie is a perfect vehicle for Paradox, through its continuous alternation between high and low registers, as illustrated in the following exchanges:

Stuart: Your back was cracking so much last night that I thought you were making popcorn in bed.

Freddie: That's because I have to contort myself into ridiculous positions to get as far away from you as possible! (Season 1, Episode 4)

Freddie: If it were possible to bore somebody to death, you would have massacred this entire street by now.

Stuart: At least I don't fart with every step I take. (Season 2, Episode 2)

Freddie: How is it your voice is getting higher pitched? Soon only dogs will be able to hear it.

Stuart: I see you took your fucking bitch pills before going to sleep. (Season 2, Special Episode)

These examples demonstrate how the linguistic style of the two protagonists contributes to the incongruity that Harvey refers to in terms of register. Freddie typically employs a more complex syntax and a more sophisticated lexicon, whereas Stuart responds with swearwords (as in the expression "fucking-bitch pills") or a more colloquial register. Stuart's use of "popcorn" as a metaphor for Freddie's back-cracking is met by Freddie's more elaborate response, which includes Latinate words such as "contort" and "ridiculous". In the second example, Paradox is also generated by the incongruity between Stuart's down-to-earth reference to Freddie's farting and Freddie's hyperbolic expression "to massacre the entire street" with boredom. This example confirms that one of the functions of banter is "deflating someone else's ego to bring them to the same level as others" (Plester and Sayers 2007, 158). Indeed, Stuart's jabs typically focus on Freddie's self-importance, and they serve to counteract the narcissistic tendencies that Freddie exhibits, as evidenced by the following example:

Freddie: I was on tour with erm… Shakespeare, I believe.

Stuart: That's right, *you two were old school chums*. (Season 1, Episode 1)

The second strategy employed in camp talk is Inversion, which is usually realised through the "reversal of an expected order of or relation between signs" (Harvey 2000, 245). More specifically, inversion is created with the reversal of gendered proper names and of grammatical gender markers. Gender reversion is typically associated with camp talk because it is mostly used in those gay subcultures "where a conscious staging of gender and exaggerated forms of masculinity are cultivated" (Johnsen 2009, 143). In Freddie and Stuart's banter this happens quite frequently, with both characters employing gender reversal, as can be seen in the following examples:

Stuart: All right, yes, I was considering having an affair.

Freddie: I knew it, *Jezebel*! (Season 1, Episode 2)

Stuart: Freddie! Hurry up, dear! We don't want to be late!

Freddie: Don't rush me, you cheating *slut*! (Season 1, Episode 2)

Stuart: You behaved abominably today.

Freddie: *She* speaks! (Season 1, Episode 1)

Stuart: I've always wanted to run a marathon! It would be like I was in the Olympics!

Freddie: *Bitch*, please! (Season 2, Episode 2)

Freddie: Why are you always lurking in doorways? Isn't there a counter that needs wiping down?

Stuart: Oh no, I don't need any help at all preparing for the party. Thank you very much for offering, you big *bitch*! (Season 1, Episode 6)

Stuart and Freddie often use female references for each other, including proper nouns – such as in the example of "Jezebel" – and personal pronouns. The camp effect in the first example is also achieved through the juxtaposition of high and low registers: this is evident in the highly cultural reference to Jezebel that is mentioned a line after Freddie has accused Stuart of "having an affair with this whore!" (Season 1, Episode 2). Inversion thus also contributes to the overall sense of incongruity and theatricality.

Ludicrism is characterised by "a playful attitude to language form and meaning" (Harvey 2000, 247), which can be shown in the use of puns, wordplay or double entendre. Linguistic playfulness is an important resource to verbal camp because it stresses its propensity for artifice, confusion and silliness, and is a fundamental source of humour. The most common source of linguistic playfulness in *Vicious* is Freddie, who displays his verbal prowess by using exaggerated parallelisms and hyperbolic language in his intricate jabs at Stuart. In an effort to outshine Stuart with their endless insults, Freddie regularly uses wordplay. Furthermore, Freddie's verbosity in banter is a characteristic that sets him apart from Stuart. His tendency to use wordplay, parallelisms, and complex metaphors to express himself demonstrates his pomposity and desire to overact. One example is when Freddie gripes about Stuart merely using a towel after taking a shower:

Freddie: If you're going to walk around in a towel again, I'm going to need at least 24-hour notice to pick a small bag and check into a hotel.

Stuart: And how do you propose I take a shower?

Freddie: With as much clothing on as possible. No-one should have to see you wet. It was *like a shaved squirrel with hips*. (Season 1, Episode 3)

The fourth and final strategy mentioned by Harvey is Parody (2000, 251), which is a central feature of camp aesthetics. More than just a comedic device, Parody plays a crucial role in manipulating stereotypes and critiquing normativity. As Butler argues, the significance of parody lies in its refusal to treat the object of parody as an 'original'; instead, it exposes the original itself as a mere imitation, so that the result is thus the "copy of a copy" (1990, 31). Through this lens, camp sensibility actively questions and confronts the standards that uphold heteronormativity and, more broadly, accepted social norms. This is achieved by making stereotypes hyper-visible, typically through exaggeration. Harvey (2000, 251) highlights two

key features of Parody in camp: aristocratic mannerisms and femininity. Freddie embodies aristocratic manners: his grand entrances, often descending a staircase as though he were royalty, amplify his aristocratic affectation. His perfect Received Pronunciation, behind which he hides his Wigan accent, and his expectation of constant service from Stuart further cement this parody of aristocracy. One of the couple's earliest interactions vividly illustrates Freddie's aristocratic posturing:

Freddie: For a moment, I thought those high-pitched, piercing shrieks were coming from a gaggle of schoolgirls. But now I see it's just you. I shan't be able to return to sleep now, thanks muchly.

Stuart: Who do you think you are? The Earl of Grantham? You're from Wigan. (Season 1, Episode 1).

If Freddie embodies the parody of aristocratic mannerisms, Stuart embodies the parody of femininity. The parody of femininity produces a set of linguistic features "which diverge from the supposed male verbal norm" (2000, 255), namely hyperbole, exclamation and vocative terms. Indeed, Stuart's verbal style is characterised by a high-pitched tone of voice and by frequent outbursts of emotion, revealed in exclamations (in particular "Oh my God! How dreadful!), sublexical interjections (such as "oh!"), and vocatives (dear, darling, love). Paralinguistic features such tone and pitch are also important in characterisation: "If the pitch of a male speaker nears the normal female pitch range, then that high pitch may suggest weakness, effeminacy, lack of competence, nervousness, or emotional instability" (Culpeper 2014, 218). Stuart's tone of voice, propensity for emotional outbursts and mannerisms are often the topic of Freddie's teasing of Stuart. In the Christmas episode, for example, it is revealed that when Stuart was very young, he slept with Penelope. Freddie's response to this revelation focuses on Stuart's effeminacy:

Stuart: It was ages ago! We were young and attractive, and I was still confused about my sexuality.

Freddie: Confused? Your hips swished so much I thought you were a samba dancer! (Season 1, Christmas Special)

Stuart's effeminacy is also mentioned in the second season, when Violet goes to live with Freddie while Freddie and Stuart are briefly separated. One of the first comments made by Freddie about Violet has to do with her voice (and with mocking Stuart's). This remark is particularly funny because it manages to be offensive to both Violet and Stuart at once:

Violet: Freddie? Tea's ready!

Freddie: After fifty years of Stuart's high-pitched, octave-defying squeaks, it's so refreshing to finally be summoned to tea by a man's voice. (Season 2, Episode 5)

As these examples demonstrate, banter is a powerful vehicle for verbal camp: its competitive nature, based on the game of constantly trying to outdo the interlocutor, involves the crafting of more and more elaborate, hyperbolic barbs, which adds to the general sense of exaggeration; moreover, its formulaic nature, which is based on the structure of banter as a

back-and-forth form of interaction, reinforces the sense of artifice that characterises camp. Banter also contributes to characterisation: the different stylistic, linguistic and thematic choices that the two protagonists make are revealing of their personality traits and of the nature of their relationship. But more in general, banter is a semiotic resource for camp because it belongs to what Harvey calls ambivalent solidarity: "a feature of camp interaction in which speaker and addressee paradoxically bond through the mechanism of the face threat" (2000, 254). Put-down humour and face-threatening remarks are a recurrent feature "of the interactive style of queer speakers" (Harvey 2000, 256). This form of interaction, which on the surface appears cruel and blunt, is ironic and playful in nature; paradoxically, it is employed to reassert a communal belonging.

Banter does not only add to the general sense of incongruity that constitutes the show's campiness, but it also works, along with other linguistic and paralinguistic features, to construct narratively the journey of a gay couple slightly moving from concealment and indirectness to a more open way of life; in the next section I explain how the witty barbs exchanged by the two protagonists are not only sources of humour, incongruity and camp, but are also a reminder of past cultural and social manifestations of homophobia and of the struggles that homosexuals had to face to finally conquer visibility and acceptance.

5. "They Are Survivors, You Know?": Banter and the Habit of Indirectness

In one of the very few enthusiastic reviews of the show, Brandon Nowalk noted that, despite all appearances, the old vicious couple really love each other, and banter is precisely their way of showing it: "Freddie and Stuart believe sniping is the sincerest form of flattery" (Nowalk 2014). I believe that this comment explains precisely how banter functions, within the series, as a narrative and discursive device: the point is that Freddie and Stuart do not love each other *besides* their constant banter, but that banter *is* their personal way to show each other love. Freddie himself admits to Stuart that his verbal game of throwing insults at him is indeed a way to show love and care: "I show [love], but in my own way, you know, by calling you fat." (Season 2, Episode 2). Manifestations of love and affection are thus conveyed in a reversed, paradoxical form: banter is a shared code language, a "shared transgression of socio-relational norms" (Korobov 2017, 280).

Discursively, banter can be interpreted as the linguistic reflection of Freddie and Stuart's shared history, shaped by decades of secrecy, societal discrimination, and the necessity of concealment. As survivors of a time when open expressions of queerness were not just frowned upon but actively persecuted, their interactions are steeped in a complex blend of affection and defence mechanisms. This indirectness, honed over years of living within the confines of societal repression, is not only a personal quirk but a deeply ingrained habit that speaks to the broader cultural realities of their generation. This indirect, paradoxical interactional practice can be looked at as the legacy of their habit of concealment, a habit that they had reinforced in the secluded and closed-off lifestyle that they kept for almost 50 years and which was partially interrupted only by the arrival of young Ash as their new neighbour, who provides "the sitcom's animating culture clash, in this case with his affable, hopeful youth" (Nowalk 2014). Banter is thus the linguistic manifestation of the relationship of two

old men, whose "bond is essentially one of love nurtured by their shared history of secrecy and discrimination" (Tommaso 2018, 103). After all, camp itself was initially born as "a way to communicate among those 'in the know', while (for survival reasons, both legal and psychological) excluding those whose 'normality' couldn't be let into this outlaw, and yet proximate community" (Cleto 1999, 9).

Indeed, Stuart and Freddie seem to have lived frozen in time: modernity and progress have touched them only ever so slightly, and they seem to be in some way impermeable to the multiple changes that characterised society in the last three decades. Freddie, Stuart and their close friends belong not only to a different generation, but to a different world, where the word 'gay' did not exist, and the word 'queer' was used derogatorily (McKellen 2017): the audience of *Vicious* is reminded on many occasions what it was like to be homosexual in the late 1950s and in the 1960s. For example, in Episode 4 of Season 1, Stuart, commenting on the more inclusive atmosphere of contemporary night-clubs, says: "it is lovely that they don't herd us into police vans and throw us into prison anymore" (Season 1, Episode 4), making a direct reference to the times in which homosexuality was still a criminal offence. On another occasion, Stuart specifically mentions what the situation was like before the decriminalisation of homosexuality, achieved in 1967 with the Sexual Offences Act:

Stuart: I haven't been on a date since 1963. And that was in an alleyway.

Ash: Hopefully this will be nicer.

Stuart: Well, it's legal, for one thing, so it's already nicer. (Season 2, Episode 5)

However, even after that significant legal shift, homosexuals still faced great difficulties in their lives: as a matter of fact, "the change in law did not bring about a diminution of police prosecution of homosexuals" (Joyce 2022, IX). This was because homosexuality was legal only between adults who had reached the age of 21 and was accepted only in private. This attitude was not to shift in the years that followed, as "British social attitudes surveys throughout the 1970s and 1980s found that the majority still regarded homosexuality with suspicion if downright disgust" (Smith 2012, 250).

The opening episode of the first season of *Vicious* unequivocally demonstrates that concealment and hiding were a necessary way of life: the group of friends organises a wake at Freddie and Stuart's flat in the aftermath of the passing of one of their acquaintances, Clive. It is disclosed that Clive had been married twice and had six children, but nevertheless he had always been a homosexual and was deeply in love with Stuart. Homosexuals who had been raised in the 1950s had the necessity of maintaining a distinction between public and private life (Smith 2010, 247), which was confirmed by Ian McKellen himself during a conference at the University of Oxford, in which he shared his personal experience: he admitted that he never disclosed his sexual orientation to his father, and that he only decided to live openly as a gay man when he was 49 years old (McKellen 2017). He went on to argue that Stuart and Freddie, in his view, "were survivors, you know? How is it possible to not love them?" (McKellen, 2017).

Banter is not the sole linguistic expression of concealment and indirectness being employed in the show. For instance, it has been observed that both characters "avoid the use of terms such as gay and homosexual" (Kies 2020, 9), frequently employing euphemisms such as "my friend", "my special friend", and "certain friends". Stuart, who has never disclosed his sexual orientation to his mother, calls Freddie his "flatmate". Interestingly, they even avoid employing these terms when conversing with one another. For instance, when the couple initially meets Ash, Freddie enquires of Stuart "Do you suppose he's '*family*'?" and never uses the terms gay or straight. As it can be expected, it is Ash who is more open and at ease with discussing such issues: at the end of the first episode of the first series, he directly declares to the group: "by the way, I am straight", thus putting an end to Freddie's allusive enquiries; more interestingly, Ash is the only one who has ever been to a gay wedding, which Stuart and Freddie never did.

Freddie and Stuart's reclusiveness is also manifested in the environment they inhabit. In the first season, much of the action occurs in a "dark and overly decorated living room" which creates "a claustrophobic, theatrical and old-fashioned feeling" (Kies 2020, 3). The living room is never immersed in natural light, since the couple keeps a big window always closed with curtains. In the first episode of the first season, Ash is left alone in the apartment and instinctively draws the curtains, letting the daylight come in. Returning to the room, both Stuart and Freddie are horrified, and demand Ash close the curtains immediately; this reaction has been associated with the "metaphor of gay-men-as vampires, who walk the world by night […] but for whom the night is deadly" (Drushel 2017, 103). While this is certainly the case, it must be remembered that the curtains here also function as a metaphor for protection from the outside world, a shield from a potentially dangerous environment. Interestingly enough, in the final episode of the first season, after finally coming out to his mother, Stuart moves towards the window and says: "I suddenly feel like opening the curtains". The new openness that Stuart and Freddie share is also reinforced in the second series, where each episode starts with the couple finally strolling down the streets of London.

From this analysis it emerges that banter works, along with other linguistic and paralinguistic features, to construct narratively the journey of a gay couple slightly moving from concealment and indirectness to a more open way of life. It is rather telling that the second and final season closes not only with a (very camp and farcical) wedding, which finally publicly ratifies a life-long relationship, but also with the absence of banter – and the absence of laughter. After the wedding – during which Stuart's mother has passed away – Stuart and Freddie are eating their wedding cake in the kitchen: Stuart automatically gets up to call his mother on the phone, as he had done every night for the past fifty years; it is in that moment that Stuart really realises that his mother is dead and starts to cry. The end credits start in absolute silence, after Freddie gets up, embraces Stuart and tells him: "I am here. I love you" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Season 2 Finale, Freddie consoling Stuart after the passing of his mother

6. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated how banter's functions extend beyond humour, functioning as a vehicle for camp aesthetics, farcical traditions, and as a narrative device. Through its relentless exchange of sharp-witted insults, *Vicious* constructs a performative style of interaction that aligns with both verbal play and queer discourse. While some critics dismissed the sitcom for its seemingly regressive portrayal of gay men, such critiques often overlook its deeply intertextual nature and the cultural significance of its linguistic and performative choices; as Nowalk acutely argued: "*Vicious* is an apotheosis of the form: its theatricality is expert, its rote insult comedy is delicious but not unyielding, and its unhip datedness is mined for exactly that quality" (2014). My analysis of the function of banter in telecinematic discourse has revealed how complex this linguistic and discursive tool is, shedding light on its multilayered hermeneutic significance: my contribution focuses specifically on queer discourse, but further studies may also consider how banter is used to navigate broader social dynamics—such as power, class, and relationships—further exploring its role in shaping societal norms and expectations. Furthermore, examining the evolution of banter in response to changes in social attitudes, such as the growing emphasis on inclusivity and diversity, could reveal how the language of TV shows reflects broader cultural shifts.

In *Vicious*, banter can be seen as a survival mechanism, a means of self-expression forged in an era of concealment and marginalisation. For Freddie and Stuart, language itself becomes a battleground where affection, identity, and resilience are negotiated through exaggerated performances of insult and wit. The sitcom's camp sensibility, reinforced by its farcical structure and the protagonists' barbed exchanges, underscores the enduring power of verbal play in shaping both personal and collective queer narratives. Ultimately, *Vicious* encapsulates

the lived experiences of older queer individuals who once had to navigate a world that demanded their silence. Recognising this deeper function allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the show's linguistic and cultural impact.

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Note

Note 1. McKellen, Jocobi and De La Tour firmly responded to the criticism that the series received, arguing that camp sensibilities should not be stamped upon but accepted as part of the variety of the LGBTQ+ community. See https://www.attitude.co.uk/culture/film-tv/vicious-star-ian-mckellen-dont-like-camp-people-fcking-grow-up-284849/

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