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► **To cite this version:**

Rose Moreau Raguenes. I, as a Fault-Condernation of Being and Power Dynamics in the Parent-Child Interaction. Languages, 2025, 10 (3), pp.54. <10.3390/languages10030054>. <hal-04997926>

**HAL Id: hal-04997926**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04997926v1>**

Submitted on 20 Mar 2025

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## Article

# I, as a Fault—Condemnation of Being and Power Dynamics in the Parent-Child Interaction <sup>†</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> This article is a revised and expanded translation of Moreau Raguenes, Rose. *L'être comme fautif. Actes de condamnation, altérité et rapport de places dans l'interaction parent-enfant. SHS Web of Conferences*, 191, article 01009. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202419101009>.

**Abstract:** This article explores the power dynamics underlying verbal abuse within the parent-child interaction. Through a reception-based approach, it focuses on condemnation acts of being (e.g., *you are a good for nothing*) directed by abusive parents towards their children and reported by the latter in anonymous testimonies published on the Francophone Instagram account *Parents toxiques*; a sample of ten testimonies is examined. The analyses conducted show that (i) the ontological assertion of power over the other is constructed from the predicative level, with processes that concern their being in its entirety and present condemnation as an objective reality. (ii) The condemnation of being draws its pragmatic force from its legitimisation—by relying on norms presented as self-evident and universal and by highlighting the harm caused by the other. (iii) As a speaker, constructing the other's being as at fault involves, to varying degrees, essentialising and downgrading them as well as conflating their intrinsic worth with one's beliefs and needs. In conclusion, the notion of condemnation acts of being—along with its descriptors—provides an effective framework that can be applied to reports and direct observations to help various professionals identify and assess transgressions and/or dysfunctions in authority relationships.

**Keywords:** verbal abuse; child abuse; testimony; discourse analysis; argumentation; social media; speech acts; politeness; impoliteness; interaction



Academic Editor: Zhengrui Han

Received: 14 July 2024

Revised: 4 March 2025

Accepted: 7 March 2025

Published: 19 March 2025

**Citation:** Moreau Raguenes, R. (2025). I, as a Fault—Condemnation of Being and Power Dynamics in the Parent-Child Interaction. *Languages*, 10(3), 54. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages10030054>

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Approaching Child Abuse

In psychology, experimental studies have been conducted—notably by John and Julie Gottman and their colleagues—to identify predictors of relationship success or failure among couples (see J. Gottman & Gottman, 2017 for a summary). Four “destructive relationship behaviours” were identified: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019). Although our purpose is not to characterise what a successful parent-child relationship might be or to predict its longevity, the present study resonates with these findings. It aims to deepen the understanding of verbal abuse within parent-child interactions by studying, through discourse and interaction, how it may be committed and perceived.

The research objective presents several challenges. I will not insist on the challenges of conducting research involving children, particularly for ethical and deontological reasons, which have been widely documented across various fields (e.g., Kopelman, 2000; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Kousholt & Juhl, 2023). In linguistics, studying child abuse empirically presents specific challenges. The first category of difficulties relates to accessing authentic

parent-child interactions, especially when it comes to collecting informed consent and addressing the “observer’s paradox” (Labov, 1972, p. 209). Researchers have tried to overcome this by giving participants microphones to record authentic discourse within the family sphere (e.g., Laforest, 2002 on complaining in everyday conversation; Clancy, 2011, on hedging in family discourse). However, in studies focusing on abusive interactions, obtaining informed consent could introduce biases, and the anonymity of participants might be compromised if harmful behaviour is observed. Another major difficulty when researching violence is “knowing whether the researcher should consider as violent acts that the participants do not identify as such, and vice-versa”<sup>1</sup>, as Ayimpam (2015, §2) points out. In other words, from which viewpoint should parent-child interactions be categorised as abusive? The instability and situatedness of the category *abuse* affects the entire analytical process—from constructing a corpus to delineating what could and could not be analysed in that corpus.

Given the ethical and methodological challenges of accessing authentic abusive parent-child interactions, this study proposes an alternative approach. Primarily rooted in the French context, it is part of a research project that studies the sociodiscursive representation of child abuse in anonymous testimonies published on a Francophone Instagram account, *Parents toxiques* (‘Toxic Parents’)<sup>2</sup>. Since abuse is an unstable, context-sensitive category, clarifying the current French legislation is necessary: as redefined by the 2019 law on Ordinary Educational Violence, parental authority “shall be exercised without physical or psychological violence” (Article 371-1 of the *Code civil*)<sup>3</sup>. This law was, notably, not associated with new sanctions. It was meant to prevent judges from invoking a jurisprudentially established “right of correction” on the part of parents and, more generally, to officially affirm that violence could no longer be considered an educational tool. Moreover, the fact that psychological violence is considered part of violence and is punishable by law (Articles 222-14-3 and 222-33-2-2 of the *Code Pénal*)<sup>4</sup> raises the issue of its objectivisation for professionals and individuals who may experience it.

In light of this recent legal redefinition of parental authority in France, the present study engages with forensic linguistics on two levels: (i) it uses linguistic descriptors to characterise verbal behaviours that are now delegitimised and/or prohibited by French law; and (ii) it does so by focusing on their publicisation, i.e., how certain parental behaviours are publicly shared and represented on social media—which echoes the origins of *forensic*, ‘pertaining to the forum’. To this end, I shall introduce key notions derived from studies on verbal violence, conducted by francophone analysts in interactional Sociolinguistics and Discourse analysis (namely Laforest & Vincent, 2004; Rosier, 2009; Vincent, 2013; Laforest & Moïse, 2013; Moïse et al., 2019).

### 1.2. Verbal Violence Framework and Objectives of the Study

Fracchiolla et al. (2023, §3) define verbal violence as “a transgression into the other person’s territory, through speech, against their consent [...]” which “constructs unequal relationships and relies on domination, oppositions, and power dynamics”. This is notably carried out through condemnation acts<sup>5</sup> (Laforest & Moïse, 2013), i.e., “forms of verbal violence that undermine the identity of others” (Fracchiolla et al., 2023, §16).

“Speech acts of condemnation, such as provocation, threats, reproaches, or insults, are at the core of perceived effects of verbal violence because they aim to affect the other person, to alter their sense of security, dignity, and/or social esteem, and to demean them by asserting power through pragmatic means. These acts are often accompanied by argumentative devices that legitimise the judgements issued (“I treat you this way because...”).” (Fracchiolla et al., 2023, §13)

The study of condemnation acts is rooted in a conception of language as action (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1982), and a (socio)linguistic perspective provides analytical tools to “objectively address what occurs in violent discourse” (Fracchiolla et al., 2023, §5). To account for the dynamics of verbal violence, Laforest and Moïse (2013) conceptualise a shift from a conflict over an object to a conflict over persons, and from the condemnation of doing to the condemnation of being (Figure 1):

Conflict over an object	Conflict over persons		
	condemnation of doing		condemnation of being
<i>There's too much noise</i>	<i>You're making too much noise</i>	<i>You're being too noisy (right now)</i>	<i>You're noisy (in general)</i>

Figure 1. Types of Conflicts and Condemnation Acts (Laforest & Moïse, 2013, p. 90, translated).

The authors define condemnation acts of doing as “speech acts through which a speaker expresses dissatisfaction with an act or behaviour of an individual that they deem to be inadequate”; when condemnation shifts to focus on the being, one “detaches the contentious behaviour from its particular space and time” and “essentialises the condemnation”, making it a “permanent characteristic of the condemned individual” (Laforest & Moïse, 2013, p. 89). This shift was also identified as part of the “destructive relationship behaviours” mentioned earlier (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019, p. 1212):

“Criticism happens when someone verbally attacks their partner, placing the blame for whatever problem they are experiencing inside the partner’s character. Instead of complaining about the situation and offering a way to make things better, the user of criticism communicates a belief that **the problem is occurring because of a defect in their partner**. Words such as “always” and “never” frequently appear in criticism-based statements”.

Since this shift is a central feature in verbally violent or dysfunctional interactions, this article proposes to delve deeper into its dynamics: focusing on the condemnation of being should allow us to deepen our understanding of its functioning. First, its linguistic and discursive materiality warrants a thorough examination to characterise it at different levels and identify key descriptors and devices. Second, the condemnation of being is represented by Laforest and Moïse (2013) as the extreme end of a continuum; there may be different degrees or variations of intensity within the condemnation of being. Finally, effects are not easily captured in discourse analysis, as studying the reception of a given discourse requires additional data; analysing spontaneous online testimonies can give us access to the long-term reception of verbal violence. With this in mind, we shall analyse the condemnation acts of being addressed by the abusive parent to their child, as reported by the latter in the testimonies, to describe the underlying treatment of otherness.

This study of the condemnation of being cannot be separated from a reflection on the interactional dynamics inherent in parent-child interactions. While every interaction involves shifts in terms of dynamics, the parent-child interaction is characterised by an inherent asymmetry “by virtue of the very status of the participants” (Laforest & Vincent, 2006, p. 8)—with different ages and stages of development, material dependency, etc.<sup>6</sup> The interactional positions are complementary, with the parent assuming the role of the guarantor and the child having a status that ensures protection and guidance. These interactional dynamics correspond to an authority relationship, that is, a “relationship of mutual recognition in an asymmetrical situation” where one participant is in a higher position and the other in a lower position (Moïse et al., 2019, pp. 25–26). Such a relationship

“is not to be confused with a relationship of domination as it is a co-constructed and reassuring relationship” (Moïse et al., 2019, p. 26).

Taking into consideration these interactional dynamics, the starting point of our reflection will be the following: is the authority relationship disrupted in and by the condemnation acts of being, and if so, how? The discursive analysis of the acts of condemnation reported in the testimonies will examine the ways in which the treatment of otherness contributes to a perception of the interaction as inappropriate or abusive. To this end, I present the methodological and analytical framework of the study in Section 2; this section will seek to clarify how to identify and analyse the reported condemnation acts. Section 3 will then highlight the discursive mechanisms of the condemnation of being reported by the authors of the testimonies. Finally, Section 4 will focus on identifying the reasons underlying the construction of one’s being as at fault and their implications in terms of interactional dynamics.

## 2. Studying Reported Speech Acts in Testimonies: Methodology of Collection and Analysis

The *Parents toxiques* account, created in July 2019, is public and features content related to child abuse, discrimination, and resilience more broadly. Testimonies are submitted to the account creator via direct message; they are then published without revealing the author’s identity and techno-contextualised (Longhi, 2013) with the hashtags *#temoignage* *#parentstoxiques*. In total, 350 anonymous testimonies were published from July 2019 to September 2021, that is, from the account creation to a temporary interruption of its activity.

### 2.1. Sampling Methodology

This study focuses on a sample of ten anonymous testimonies published between May 2020 and July 2021, written by nine women and one man. Since the testimonies are anonymous, the authors’ gender was inferred from grammatical and lexical gender markers (e.g., agreements, common nouns such as *daughter*). The first names used to refer to the authors are pseudonyms assigned for this project<sup>7</sup>. Starting from the most recently published testimonies, the criteria presented in Figure 2 were applied to create a sample of ten texts: the shortest testimony comprises 414 words, and the longest 996 words.

At this stage of the research project, these criteria were not intended to ensure a representative sample of testimonies—which could have been achieved by randomly selecting ten testimonies. Rather, the aim was to constitute a sample that would enable us to examine retrospective recountings of abusive behaviours, experienced in relation to the authors’ biological or adoptive parents; the sampling criteria were therefore defined based on the project’s objectives. The sampling process provided insight into both the diversity and specific features of the *Parents toxiques* testimonies—for instance, a large majority of the testimonies are written by women, according to grammatical and lexical markers.

To study the speech acts of abusive parents in these testimonies, two methodological and analytical issues should now be addressed: delimiting reported speech acts, and categorising them as condemnation acts.

FORMAT
<p>1. <i>The testimony must be at least fifty lines long (in the original layout).</i> This minimum length criterion helps isolate testimonies that engage in storytelling and develop the events being recounted; it aligns with criterion 5.</p>
CONTENT
<p>2. <i>The testimony focuses on abuse committed against the author.</i> Selecting testimonies that focus on violence against others would lead to analysing narratives of abuse with different implications. Therefore, testimonies in which the author was not a direct victim of the parent – i.e. those that <i>only</i> described violent behaviours toward a third party – were excluded.</p>
<p>3. <i>The abuse was committed by the biological or adoptive parents.</i> This study explores the retrospective representation of an abusive relationship featuring a parent-child bond.</p>
<p>4. <i>The abuse took place during childhood and/or adolescence (up to eighteen years old).</i> This criterion is based on French law – parental abuse concerns minors. Testimonies that describe abnormal parental behaviors in adulthood were excluded unless they also depicted abusive behaviours during childhood and/or adolescence (based on the temporal information provided by the author).</p>
<p>5. <i>The testimony is a narrative and recounts a specific story from the time of abuse.</i> It was important to observe and characterise how the author represents themselves within their story.</p>
<p>6. <i>The author does not seek legal or other forms of assistance from the community within the testimony.</i> Explicitly requesting information or help would assign a different purpose to the act of testifying.</p>
<p>7. <i>The testimony includes reported speech from the parent.</i> This was essential to study how the parent’s speech was represented, as one of the research focuses is on speech acts perceived as violent.</p>
<p>8. <i>The testimony does not concern sexual violence.</i> Addressing sexual violence would have required a distinct theoretical and analytical framework.</p>
AUTHOR CHARACTERISTICS
<p>9. <i>The author must have left the abusive situation.</i> As this study focuses on the meaning that speakers attribute to their experience of abuse in retrospect, the person cannot still be in the abusive situation at the time of writing; testimonies where the author had just left the abusive situation were also excluded.</p>

Figure 2. Sampling Criteria (Adapted from Moreau Raguenes, 2022).

## 2.2. Delimitating the Parent’s Reported Speech

First, we need to define and delineate the forms that may fall under the reported speech acts. I rely on Rosier’s definition of reported speech as “ways of reporting, representing, interpreting, and circulating someone else’s discourse by configuring a relationship between a discourse that creates a particular enunciative space (the citing discourse) and a discourse that is set apart and—univocally or not—attributed to another source (the cited discourse)” (Rosier, 2008, p. 137). More specifically, our focus is on the reported speech of the abusive parent(s) in which a speech act is clearly addressed to the speaker (i.e., the author of the testimony). The following forms are therefore excluded:

- Acts of insult, denigration, reproach, etc., reported without “the linguistic context containing any semes directly pertaining to the speech act” (Rosier, 1999, p. 129).  
[1] Whether it was **humiliation** in public places, **insults**, **denigration**, psychological pressure or repeated crises, coming to his house became an ordeal.  
*Qu’il s’agisse d’humiliations dans des lieux publiques, insultes, dénigrement, pressions psychologiques et crises à répétition, venir chez lui devenait un calvaire. (Albane)<sup>8</sup>*
- Cases in which identifying the enunciative source and/or interpreting the segment as reported speech present challenges<sup>9</sup>:  
[2] In primary school, my father hit me when I “**made him angry**”  
*En primaire, mon père me frappait lorsque je “le mettais en colère” (Chiara)*  
[3] My brother had serious learning and behavioural disorders. So for me, **it was better not to “make things worse”**. Not to make waves. Not to be an extra burden.

*Mon frère avait de gros troubles de l'apprentissage et du comportement. Alors moi, il valait mieux que j'en "rajoute pas". Que je ne fasse pas de vagues. Que je ne sois pas un fardeau supplémentaire. (Théa).*

The age of the speakers at the time they received these speech acts, whether as children (up to eighteen years in France) or adults, also warrants careful consideration. Applying an age limit to select and exclude speech acts for analysis raises two methodological challenges. Firstly, a lack of available information: the testimonies do not clearly indicate the age of the authors when they received a given act. Furthermore, the speech acts reported by the speakers have often been performed more than once, potentially at different ages. Beyond the lack of access to the situation of utterance, excluding speech acts produced in adulthood would restrict the analysis to the legal distinction between minors and adults. The authors of the testimonies frequently address the ongoing parent-child relationship into adulthood, however. This is one of the specificities of this corpus, and the representation of condemnation acts directed at the adult child can also provide insight into what constitutes an inappropriate power dynamic between parent and child according to the speakers. Therefore, reported speech acts that appeared to have been produced when the speaker had reached adulthood were included.

### 2.3. Categorising Reported Speech Acts as Condemnation Acts

Since we do not have access to the primary interaction in these testimonies, but only to the parents' reported speech, we need to determine how to identify speech acts as condemnation acts—in other words, from which perspective it is possible to categorise them as verbally violent.

Vincent (2013, p. 38) observes that “each device that causes a disruption in expectations has two poles—one acceptable, even recommended or salutary, and the other unacceptable: ritual insult and personal insult, warning and threat, critique and denigration, as well as all intermediate interpretations”. As analysts, we must therefore dissociate “the linguistic means that can potentially cause violence from violence itself” (Vincent et al., 2008, cited by Vincent, 2013, p. 38), and be careful not to judge for ourselves what is violent or acceptable. Apart from the analyst's judgement, another possible approach would be to consider the viewpoint and intention of the speakers—in this case, the parents. However, as Moïse et al. (2019, p. 132) point out, speakers do not necessarily have the intention or even the awareness of acting as a conduit for verbal violence, and we cannot access the speakers' intentions in discourse analysis and sociolinguistics: “The subject who exhibits extreme verbal aggression is primarily driven by impulses that overwhelm them. Consequently, detecting the speakers' possible intentions remains challenging as neither the addressee nor the sociolinguist has direct access to the subjects' intentions”. The present work thus follows Laforest and Moïse (2013, p. 91) in their analytical choice to base the analysis on the viewpoint of reception:

**“[...] the viewpoint of the message's recipient, in our opinion, is the only one that allows us to account for what actually happens in an interaction. Whether we deem a statement to be an insult or not, we can hardly argue that there is verbal violence if its recipient does not feel insulted. Tolerance for confrontation varies greatly among individuals and communities, hence our only analytical choice is to consider that it is the reaction to such acts by an addressee that “constructs” the threatening act, even though the act's intention often aligns with its perception”.**

However, adopting this analytical stance is not straightforward, as we only have access to speech acts through reported speech. To categorise speech acts as condemnation acts, we would need access to the original interaction to observe if there were any reactions such as

denial or avoidance—which would suggest that these acts were perceived as face threats (Laforest & Vincent, 2004). In addition to our limited access to the interaction, analysing reported speech acts can raise questions about the reliability of reported speech because speakers necessarily, consciously or not, alter the speech they report. The representation of the parent’s speech should not be considered a transparent reproduction of what was said; it reflects the speaker’s positioning regarding both the reported speech and its enunciator (Rosier, 1999).

This representation is nonetheless valuable and contributes to the (socio)discursive production achieved in this particular context. The account name, *Parents toxiques*, establishes a thematic unity, i.e., abusive or “toxic” parents; a principle of relevance applies, as well as a communication contract (Charaudeau, 2011). I thus consider that selecting and reporting the parent’s speech acts in testimonies submitted for publication is a sufficient indication that the authors have viewed or view these acts as threatening and/or disqualifying. Since the condemnation acts have existed pragmatically, through the effects produced on their recipients (Laforest & Moïse, 2013; Moïse et al., 2019), the analysis is not hindered by the authors’ enunciative interventions.

In conclusion, the analysis of reported condemnation acts proposed in this article does not claim to provide access to illocutionary acts, i.e., the speech acts performed by the parent. Rather, this corpus allows us to investigate perlocutionary acts, that is, the effects produced on the recipient—in this case, the author. My aim is thus to study the speech acts received as violent, considering that their representation in the *Parents toxiques* testimonies indicates a high degree of performativity and memorability.

### 3. Between Insult, Contempt, and Reproach: Discursive Modalities of the Condemnation of Being

Based on the analytical framework provided in Sections 1 and 2, the condemnation acts attributed to abusive parents were extracted and divided into two categories: condemnation acts of doing and condemnation acts of being—the latter being our focus. The condemnation acts of being were then categorised, both in terms of pragmatic act (e.g., insult) and topic (e.g., lack of intelligence). At this stage, it became evident that these acts do not function in isolation but interact and overlap, producing layered pragmatic effects; this prevents the discrete coding of each act, as they can simultaneously serve multiple functions. To characterise the power dynamics underlying the condemnation of being, this section will therefore employ a multilayered approach, combining enunciative, argumentative, and pragmatic microanalyses. We will scrutinise three condemnation acts of being present in the corpus: insult, contempt, and reproach. The objective is to examine how the condemnation of being operates in situated contexts and to highlight the discursive devices that underlie it.

#### 3.1. Contempt for the Other: Essentialisation and Downgrading

Composed of *més*, ‘bad’ and *priser*, ‘to estimate’, the French verb *mépriser* (‘be contemptuous of, to disdain’) means “to assign no worth or a derisory worth to a being or a thing” (Bernard Barbeau & Moïse, 2020, §1). Among the four destructive behaviours identified by J. M. Gottman et al. (2019, p. 1213), it is considered the most damaging to relationships: “The contemptuous partner speaks from a place of superiority, and the recipient of contempt feels belittled, put down, and abused. Contempt is expressed in many ways, such as name calling, mockery, sarcasm, and negative comparisons (‘You’re just like your mother’)”.

According to Bernard Barbeau and Moïse (2020, 2023), contempt becomes destructive when it is used to gain power over others and to establish a relationship of domination by demeaning them in order to enhance one’s own worth. Koselak (2005, §35) also emphasises the relationship of verticality and superiority between the contemptuous subject and

the object of their contempt: *mépriser* is “to place a (human) object beneath oneself, which implies being *above them*”—that is, to feel superior towards “those who are too weak (low, small) to deserve any consideration”. Contempt thus relies on normative thinking, particularly norms to which the subject adheres: since the contemptuous subject projects their judgement onto their addressee, placing them in a “category of bad objects”, they are engaged as a “cognitive subject, source or controller of the judgements expressed” (Koselak, 2005, §35). The negative estimation of the addressee’s worth by the contemptuous subject justifies their contempt towards them, granting them the “‘right’ to disrespect them” (Baider, 2020, §3).

In the condemnation acts reported by the speakers, we observe numerous pejorative qualifications (Laforest & Vincent, 2004) that focus on lack of intelligence and/or competence:

[4] He often used to say to us, “**You really are good for nothing! You’ll never get anywhere in life. Maybe you can clean the toilet at my job!**” [...] However, to this day, when I do something (I graduated with a Bac+2 [=two years of higher education] in 2014), and I’ve been cosplaying for several years, **it is worthless in his eyes. I’m nothing. I’m still a good for nothing to him because I’m unemployed.**...

*Il nous disait souvent “t’es vraiment bon.ne à rien! T’arriveras jamais à quoi que ce soit dans la vie.. Tu pourras peut-être nettoyer les chiottes à mon boulot!” [...] Cependant, encore aujourd’hui, quand je réalise quelque chose (j’ai validé un bac+2 en 2014), et je fais du cosplay depuis plusieurs années, ça n’a aucune valeur à ses yeux. Je ne suis rien. Je reste une bonne à rien pour lui parce que je suis sans emploi. . . (Mollie)*

[5] He’d make me work on my maths for hours and when I didn’t understand, **he’d call me a “moron”** and shake me by the arm—always that arm. . . . [...] More generally, **it was me who wasn’t good enough.**

*Il me faisait travailler mes maths pendant des heures et lorsque je ne comprenais pas, il m’insultait de “conne” et me secouait par le bras—toujours ce bras. . . . [...] Plus généralement, c’était moi qui n’était pas assez bien. (Chiara)*

[6] He took advantage of a moment when I was burnt out at work **to tell me that I was a good for nothing anyway etc.** . . .

*Il a profité d’un moment où j’ai fait un burn out dans mon boulot pour me dire que de toute façon je ne suis qu’un bon à rien etc. . . (Matthias)*

[7] “We wanted a boy, you were our last attempt”. **Hearing night and day that we were incapable, “I should’ve cut my balls off when I see these sub-sh.”**. destroyed my school education.

*“On voulait un garçon, t’étais notre dernière tentative”. Entendre nuit et jour que nous étions des incapables, “J’aurai dû me couper les couilles quand je vois ces sous-m.. ” a détruit ma scolarité. (Jane)*

[8] Then I lived with my mother, who taught us with “**You’re retarded**”, “**What have I done to produce such morons?!**”, “Your father doesn’t love you, he doesn’t give a fuck about his children”.

*J’ai vécu par la suite avec ma mère qui nous éduquait à coup de “Tu es retardée”, “Qu’est-ce que j’ai fait pour pondre des abrutis pareils ?!”, “Votre père ne vous aime pas, il en a rien à foutre de ses enfants”. (Gabrielle)*

Negative axiological terms (i.e., conveying the speaker’s evaluative judgement, Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997) are used to describe the addressee: *bon/bonne à rien, retardée, incapables, sous-m[erdes], abrutis pareils, conne*. These are ontotypical insults—a type of

insult that targets a person “in their very being” (Rosier, 2009, p. 68). They are based on “supposedly ontological characteristics of the individual” (Ernotte & Rosier, 2004, p. 35), for instance, being slow, ugly, or clumsy. Examples include being stupid in [5] (*conne*) and [8] (*retardée*), with a pathologisation of stupidity added in the latter case. These traits are exacerbated by the vulgarity and excessiveness of the terms used—which makes them lean towards “essentialist” rather than “situational” insults (Ernotte & Rosier, 2004). Indeed, a high degree of condemnation can be observed: the lack of intelligence and/or competence is not confined to a specific situation or domain but suggests a generalised lack of worth.

In [7], the noun *incapables* is not followed by any postmodifications that would restrict its scope by applying it to a particular “doing” and/or a specific space and time (e.g., incapable of doing X). The expression *[B]on/bonne à rien* (‘good for nothing’) in [4] and [6] extends the lack of ability to everything, with no exception. In [5], a general lack of worth is reproached without specifying the domain (*n’était pas assez bien*, ‘was not good enough’), which tends towards an essentialisation of the recipient, as a person of lesser worth. In [7], where *sous-m...* (‘sub-sh...’) evidently suggests the vulgar term *merde* (‘shit’), the condemnation extends to the speaker’s intrinsic worth, as a person. The assault on their being is profound and emphatic, downgrading them to a status lower than the category *merde*.

The copula *être* (‘to be’) takes on a value of general truth in these acts. Indeed, it is not limited to a particular space and time, and it attributes a predicate that expresses a high degree of incompetence and/or unintelligence to the subject referent. In [4], the condemnation based on lack of intelligence and competence explicitly extends into the future with a prediction (*T’arriveras jamais à quoi que ce soit dans la vie... Tu pourras peut-être nettoyer les chiottes à mon boulot!*). The condemnation is at its highest degree here, expressing an absolute and irremediable lack of competence that applies to everything (*quoi que ce soit*, ‘anything at all’) and to the entirety of the addressee’s existence (*jamais*, ‘never’; *dans la vie*, ‘in life’).

In this same excerpt, contempt is particularly expressed in the statement that follows (*Tu pourras peut-être nettoyer les chiottes à mon boulot!*). Contempt is conveyed through the indirect denigration of third parties, the cleaning staff. The enunciator<sup>10</sup> (i.e., the speaker’s father) does not refer to cleaning just any premises, but specifically mentions toilets—a “low” place associated with human waste. The choice of a vulgar term (*chiottes*) rather than the more neutral term *toilettes* reinforces the negative axiology and thus the placement of this professional activity beneath the enunciator. A hierarchy is established by the father here, assigning low status to both his daughter and the cleaning staff while positioning himself in a higher position as someone who has achieved an acceptable or valorised status. This positioning is closely linked to the value system to which the enunciator adheres—the idea that cleaning is an inferior profession is taken for granted.

Moreover, the reported ontotypical insults do not seem to stem from an isolated act due to an accidental loss of control on the part of the parent. Indeed, the authors indicate a repeated or even persistent occurrence of certain speech acts (e.g., *souvent*, ‘often’; *nuit et jour*, ‘day and night’) and the accumulation of contemptuous acts in the parent’s discourse. Repetition is an aggravating factor in verbal violence because, once repeated, an act can no longer be seen as a mere outburst (Vincent, 2013). The pragmatic effects of condemnation are amplified by the parent’s “conscious adherence” to “both the form and content” (Vincent, 2013, p. 41) of the repeated acts.

The ontotypical insults regarding lack of intelligence and competence discussed in this section constitute the majority of the insults identified in the corpus, and they all fall under the contempt category. According to Ernotte and Rosier (2004), ontotypes are not always perceived as insults by the interactants: they are less salient than sexotypes and

ethnotypes (i.e., insults based on the target's gender and ethnicity, respectively) and are more socially acceptable. However, their strong representation in the speech acts reported by the speakers suggests that they can, indeed, cause violent effects. In the following section, we delve deeper into the indirect expression of contempt and its implications in terms of performativity.

### 3.2. Performativity of the Indirect Condemnation Act

Analysts of verbal violence have described contempt as an indirect speech act (Moïse et al., 2019; Bernard Barbeau & Moïse, 2020, 2023) as it relies on “implicit and implied forms aimed at inducing negative emotions in others, such as feelings of shame and guilt” (Bernard Barbeau & Moïse, 2023, §4). Because it is expressed through inferences (Baider, 2020) and does not have canonical forms, objectifying it is not straightforward in interaction<sup>11</sup>. As noted previously, this speech act aims to assert superiority and power over the other (Koselak, 2005; Bernard Barbeau & Moïse, 2020, 2023), “favoring the silence of the addressee (ostracism)” (Baider, 2020, p. 3). The asymmetry of the relationship constitutes an aggravating factor according to Bernard Barbeau and Moïse (2023, §4), as it may hinder the possibility of responding or taking counteraction:

“In an asymmetrical relationship, verbal violence realised through indirect speech acts is more pronounced when the person in the higher position (the parent, teacher, superior, etc) holds symbolic power. It is challenging for the person in the lower position (the child, student, employee, etc) to respond without fearing potential consequences, whether affective or professional”.

Moreover, contempt is particularly violent when it comes from esteemed individuals (Bernard Barbeau & Moïse, 2023, §3). The interaction between parent and child thus presents two aggravating factors: asymmetrical positions within an authority relationship, with the parent in a higher position and the child in a lower position, and affective proximity between the interactants.

To illustrate the indirect nature of contempt, let us examine an act reported by Julie. Unlike the examples in the previous section, which focused on the lack of intelligence and competence, this extract involves the denigration of physical appearance:

[9] Then comments about my appearance: “Cover your legs, they're too skinny”. “You were so ugly as a baby”. And in the middle of my teenage crisis and so of my insecurities, I hear from her mouth, “**You may not be beautiful, but you're intelligent**” (I was a good student).

*Puis des remarques sur mon physique: “cache tes jambes, elles sont trop maigres”. “Tu étais si laide bébé”. Et en pleine crise d'ado et donc de complexes, j'entends de sa bouche “Tu n'es peut-être pas belle mais tu es intelligente” (j'étais bonne élève). (Julie)*

In the highlighted segment, we identify the two stages of concessions described by Doury and Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2011, §22 citing Moeschler & De Spengler, 1981, 1982; Morel, 1996):

- “First, an argument p is put forward for a conclusion r. The speaker may either express agreement with p (acknowledging its relevance or truth value; Moeschler & De Spengler, 1981, p. 101) or, more modestly, suspend their judgement (Léard & Lagacé, 1985, pp. 14–15); in either case, p is not contested.
- p is followed by another argument q for a non-r conclusion; q is typically introduced by an oppositional connector (typically “mais” [in French, i.e., ‘but’]). This second argument is presented as outweighing the first (the concessive movement thus leads to the conclusion of non-r) [...].”

In the first independent clause, the speaker concedes the truth value of the predicative relation <you—not be beautiful> before introducing a second assertion based on the same topic (*tu*, ‘you’) with the oppositional connector *mais* (‘but’). Although they address different aspects—the addressee’s beauty and intelligence—these two assertions can be seen as opposing arguments in response to an enquiry about the addressee’s worth. At first glance, this concession appears to lead to a compliment, as suggested by the use of the positive axiological term *intelligente*, thereby valorising the recipient: the concessive movement tends towards an invalidation of the conclusion implied by the first assertion (*tu n’es peut-être pas belle*, ‘you may not be beautiful’), in favour of an alternative conclusion.

Concessions are fundamentally dialogical, as conceded utterances echo previous utterances (Doury & Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2011). In our case, the concession’s dialogical nature is marked by *peut-être* (‘maybe’), which signals that the enunciator (i.e., the speaker’s mother) is reacting to a prior utterance. Interestingly, the speaker’s mother takes minimal enunciative responsibility for this denigrating utterance. This is indicated by the use of the concessive marker, the absence of *je* (‘I’), and the foregrounding of a valorising assertion (*mais tu es intelligente*, ‘but you’re intelligent’). Yet, the other utterances attributed to her by the speaker—*cache tes jambes, elles sont trop maigres; Tu étais si laide bébé*—suggest that she is the enunciative source of these utterances.

This concession presents an unusual placement of contentious information, namely, the negation of the addressee’s beauty. If we switch *intelligente* and *pas belle*, we obtain a prototypical concession: *Tu es peut-être intelligente, mais tu n’es pas belle* (‘You may be intelligent, but you’re not beautiful’). In the reformulated utterance, the speaker would first demonstrate—or feign—cooperation with her addressee and then introduce an argument that diverges from agreement between the interactants and outweighs the first. The element presented as non-contentious (i.e., her intelligence) would flatter the addressee. In contrast, in [9], the conceded utterance is face-threatening and disqualifying.

As a result, this concession pertains to *polirudeness*<sup>12</sup> (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2010, §32), which covers “utterances that appear to be face-flattering acts (therefore ‘polite’ utterances) but underneath which lies a face-threatening act (the prototypical case being what can be called ‘backhanded compliments’ such as ‘Your hair looks nice today’)”. Because of its ambivalence, *polirudeness* contributes to indirect verbal violence (Moïse & Oprea, 2015). Here, contempt is constructed by presenting the recipient’s lack of worth as unsurprising: by placing denigration in the conceded part, the enunciator presents its content as presupposed and shared information.

In essence, this act of contempt achieves an ontological assertion of power over the addressee, as the enunciator assumes and exercises the right to define the addressee’s very being. The combination of two acts with conflicting illocutionary values makes it challenging to objectivise the disqualifying act, thereby hindering the possibility of a response. The condemnation is constructed as a shared and self-evident fact rather than a judgement issued by the enunciator: the discrepancy between the recipient’s physical appearance and the beauty standards of the contemptuous subject is not treated as a mere difference but as a failure to meet a universal norm—which legitimises placing them “beneath oneself” (Koselak, 2005).

### 3.3. Stratification of the Condemnation of Being

In the previous section, we observed how contempt, through its indirect actualisation, can be difficult to objectify in interactions. In this section, we further explore its placement in the enunciative background, which is particularly evident in excerpt [10] below. The children are denigrated with the pejorative qualification *des abrutis pareils* (‘such morons’); the negative axiology is reinforced by the verb *pondre* (‘to lay [an egg]’, colloquially ‘to

produce'), which takes on a vulgar connotation by dehumanising birth. Both the pejorative qualification and the verb contribute to acts of insult and contempt.

[10] Then I lived with my mother, who taught us with "You're retarded", "**What have I done to produce such morons?!**", "Your father doesn't love you, he doesn't give a fuck about his children".

*J'ai vécu par la suite avec ma mère qui nous éduquait à coup de "Tu es retardée", "**Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait pour pondre des abrutis pareils ?!**", "Votre père ne vous aime pas, il en a rien à foutre de ses enfants". (Gabrielle)*

Interestingly, children's categorisation is presupposed. Indeed, the denigration based on lack of intelligence and/or competence and the ensuing contempt are situated in the enunciative background, within the prepositional phrase *pour pondre des abrutis pareils*. We observe a nominalisation: the enunciator presents the process—and therefore the categorisation of the addressee—as already established through the use of an infinitive clause embedded within a larger syntactic structure. This syntactic process illustrates what occurs at the pragmatic level: acts of insult and contempt are framed as shared knowledge and serve as the foundation for another indirect speech act, guilt induction. Within such stratification, it is the harm experienced by the parent—rather than the ontotypical insult or contempt—that is brought to the enunciative foreground.

In this regard, we can observe a delocution of the addressee, i.e., speaking about someone who is present rather than addressing them directly: there is no second-person pronoun, and the expressive phrase *qu'est-ce que j'ai pu faire pour...* ('what could have I done to...') neither has a direct recipient nor invites a response. The adjective *pareils* ('such') intensifies the condemnation, suggesting that the noun *abrutis* ('morons') alone is insufficient to convey the children's lack of intelligence and competence. Placing condemnation in the presupposed, as non-contentious information and therefore unsurprising to the addressee, tends towards the normalisation of contempt.

This stratification can also be observed in the prototypical feature of abusive parent-child interactions identified by Van Hooland (2005, 2008): renaming the child with derogatory terms of address, which also frames the condemnation as shared knowledge. As noted earlier by Bernard Barbeau and Moïse (2020, 2023), the performativity of condemnation is amplified by the indirectness of speech acts and the underlying authority relationship: by acknowledging that a pejorative qualification refers to them, and even more so by implicitly accepting it (e.g., by responding to it), the interactant may appear to co-construct their subordinate position and, to some extent, the condemnation itself. However, attempting to refute the adequacy between the pejorative qualification and oneself would present risks of retaliation, such as physical violence or affective consequences (Bernard Barbeau & Moïse, 2020, 2023).

I argue that the stratification of condemnation extends to all condemnation acts of being and plays a central role in power dynamics. Indeed, the statement *T'es vraiment bonne à rien!* ('You really are good for nothing!', Mollie) not only achieves acts of insult and contempt, but also serves as a reproach. Figure 3 below illustrates this stratification, with a bidirectional dynamic between the (perceived) ontological properties of the target and the speaker's beliefs and needs. As seen in the microanalysis, framing the condemnation of being as evident, shared information functions as an aggravating device. For instance, in *Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait pour pondre des abrutis pareils?!*, guilt induction is more salient as the prejudice experienced by the parent is foregrounded; the insult is presupposed (as opposed to the more direct *Vous êtes des abrutis*), which normalises contempt and reinforces the subordinate position of the addressee.

<p><b>Target</b> Ontological properties</p> <p>↑</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Beliefs Needs <b>Speaker</b></p>	<b>INSULT</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Ontotypical insult (Ernotte &amp; Rosier 2004), e.g. <i>bonne à rien</i> ('Good for nothing') → supposedly ontological property that is inadequate or insufficient in the target → not necessarily identified as an insult (e.g. <i>incapable</i>)</li> <li>· Transgressing the target's symbolic territory: defining their very being</li> </ul>
	<b>CONTEMPT</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Introducing a norm presented as self-evident and universal → implicitly: <i>You should (not) be...</i></li> <li>· Introducing a superiority between the speaker (and others) and the target → implicitly: <i>I am/We are more ... than you / You are less... than...</i></li> <li>· Drawing a right to belittle the target from their supposed inferiority</li> </ul>
	<b>REPROACH / GUILT INDUCTION OF BEING</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To varying degrees, condemning the target's being serves as a reproach → <i>You really are a good for nothing = I am blaming you for being a good for nothing</i></li> <li>· Projecting unsatisfied needs or prejudice experienced by the speaker</li> </ul>

Figure 3. Stratification of the Condemnation of Being.

#### 4. Constructing the Being at Fault: Negation of Otherness and Disruption of the Authority Relationship

At this stage of our reflection, we can agree that condemning someone's being equates to subordinating them to oneself: the contemptuous subject places the other beneath themselves by assigning them a lower position while simultaneously positioning themselves above them. This subordination involves apprehending the addressee "through oneself", as the subject perceives them through the lens of their own value system. Otherness is threatened, both by rejection—as being inadequate—and by the failure to recognise and treat it as distinct from oneself. In the final section, I therefore explore the reasons invoked for constructing the being as at fault and the resulting disruption of the authority relationship.

##### 4.1. Reproach and Guilt Induction: From Otherness to Oneself

Reproach is a direct speech act by which a speaker expresses their "disapproval of the being and/or doing" (Moïse et al., 2019, p. 85) of a target who is their addressee<sup>13</sup>. It often displays a shift from condemning one's doing (i.e., actions, behaviours) to condemning one's being (Moïse et al., 2019), where the being is condemned in order to reproach a specific behaviour (Laforest & Vincent, 2004). Like contempt, it stems from a comparison with a norm, highlighting the insufficiency or inadequacy of certain behaviours or characteristics in contrast to what is expected. Reproach thus signals what is expected of the interactant—whether these expectations are consciously acknowledged or not—and an ontological assertion of power over them: the behaviour deemed at fault "serves as proof of what is not and should be, of what the person is not and should be" (Moïse et al., 2019, p. 85). Guilt induction of the inadequate behaviour's author often underpins the act of reproach. It is an indirect speech act that "aims to place the other in debt by invoking a lack of recognition; it demands reparation, which prompts the guilt-induced party to conform to the wishes of their guilt inducer" (Neuburger, 2008, cited by Moïse et al., 2019, p. 89).

The distinction between direct and indirect speech acts, although useful in accounting for the insidious nature of guilt induction, does not allow us to easily differentiate between these two acts. Having no direct access to the child's reactions or the parent's intentions, I have no analytical choice but to consider it impossible to determine whether a given reproach is coupled with guilt induction or not. However, as observed in Section 2.2, the

situation of utterance suggests that the speakers have indeed considered or are considering the acts they report as inappropriate and/or harmful. I shall then follow the approach adopted by [Laforest and Vincent \(2004, pp. 64–65\)](#), who identify five types of shortcomings reproached to the target through the use of pejorative qualifications (i.e., lack of strength or courage, lack of experience or maturity, lack of intelligence, lack of consideration or respect for others, and lack of respectability). Building on their approach, I identify the reasons invoked by the parent when the condemnation targets the being and the underlying relationship to otherness.

#### 4.2. Reasons for the Guilt Induction of Being

Three interrelated reasons for the guilt induction of being are invoked: lacking worth, not being satisfying and/or lovable as a child, and existing as one is and/or being born (see Figure 4). These reasons are often combined, especially in the most violent acts.

	Lacking worth
1	<p>[11] He often used to say to us, <b>“You really are good for nothing!</b> <i>Il nous disait souvent “t’es vraiment bon.ne à rien ! [...]” (Mollie)</i></p> <p>[12] She was drooling, <b>shouting that I was just a slut, a real bitch, vile and ungrateful.</b> <i>Elle bavait, criant que j’étais qu’une salope, une vraie connasse, immonde et ingrate.</i> <i>(Gabrielle)</i></p>
	Not being satisfying and/or lovable as a child
2	<p>[13] I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve <b>heard that I’m my father’s daughter...</b> without really understanding why, unfortunately. <i>Je ne compte plus les fois où j’ai entendu que j’étais la digne fille de mon père... sans vraiment comprendre pourquoi malheureusement. (Silvia)</i></p> <p>[14] [...] he used to pick on me, forcing me to leave his house and <b>telling me he hated me and never wanted to see me again.</b> <i>[...] il s’acharnait sur moi, m’obligeant alors à partir de chez lui en me disant qu’il me détestait et qu’il ne voulait plus jamais me voir. (Albane)</i></p>
	Existing as one is and/or being born
3	<p>[15] Then I lived with my mother, who taught us with <b>“You’re retarded”, “What have I done to produce such morons?!”</b> [...] <i>J’ai vécu par la suite avec ma mère qui nous éduquait à coup de “Tu es retardée”, “Qu’est-ce que j’ai fait pour pondre des abrutis pareils ?!” [...]. (Gabrielle)</i></p> <p>[16] <b>“We wanted a boy, you were our last attempt!”</b>. Hearing night and day that we were incapable, <b>“I should’ve cut my balls off when I see these sub-sh..”</b> destroyed my school education. <i>“On voulait un garçon, t’étais notre dernière tentative”. Entendre nuit et jour que nous étions des incapables, “J’aurai dû me couper les couilles quand je vois ces sous-m..” a détruit ma scolarité. (Jane)</i></p> <p>[17] I’m an unwanted child, born at the end of the ‘80s when my mother was barely 21. [...] As far back as I can remember, <b>she always told me that I was the biggest mistake of her life.</b> <i>Je suis un enfant non désiré, né à la fin des années 80 alors que ma mère avait à peine 21 ans. [...]. Aussi loin que je m’en souviens, elle m’a toujours dit que j’étais la plus grosse erreur de sa vie. (Matthias)</i></p>

Figure 4. Reasons for the Guilt Induction of Being.

The first category includes condemnation acts such as those analysed in Section 3.1 (e.g., [11]); they contain contemptuous ontotypical insults that portray the child as inadequate and insufficient by reproaching a lack of worth. This lack of worth reproached to the target can consist of a lack of intelligence or competence, but also a lack of recognition towards the parent, as seen in [12].

In the second category, guilt induction relates to not being satisfactory or lovable as a child; a lack of worth is implied. Indeed, the object of guilt induction is not explicitly stated in [13] (*la digne fille de mon père*) or in [14]. However, the latter extract features an explicit

and emphatic negation of love towards the addressee, conveyed by the verb *détester* and the high-degree adverbial phrase *plus jamais* ('never ever'). It is noteworthy (as observed earlier regarding contempt) that the shortcomings reproached here are not isolated and modifiable behaviours—the object of guilt induction is the target in their being and in their entirety.

At its extreme, guilt induction of being leads to a third category: the target is blamed for existing as they are and/or for being born as they are. It targets the fact of existing as an insufficiently intelligent and competent person in [15], and as a girl rather than a boy in [16]; in [17], guilt induction is based on being born despite not being wanted. In such cases, all three reasons for guilt induction are combined: by presenting the child's birth and existence as detrimental to the parent, these reproaches of existence and/or birth also imply that the recipient is not satisfactory and lovable as a child, and lacks worth. The transgression of the other's symbolic territory is absolute, as their right to exist is attacked, and this seems to occur repeatedly (*entendre nuit et jour* ['day and night'] *que. . .*; *elle m'a toujours* ['always'] *dit que. . .*; *ma mère qui nous éduquait à coup de* ['constantly, repeatedly']. . .). By denying the right to exist as one is and expressing the harm caused by their very being, these guilt-inducing acts tend towards a symbolic destruction of the target. They fulfil the three criteria of direct hate speech identified by Lorenzi Bailly and Moïse (2021, p. 12): the use of condemnation acts, reliance on a pathemic dimension, and the presence of markers that negate otherness.

The harm caused by the target is salient in the guilt induction of being: the three reasons invoked pertain to the child being detrimental to the parent, negatively affecting their life, and/or constituting a burden. The condemnation of being places the addressee in debt, constructing and assigning them a diffuse fault. Guilt induction is accompanied—to varying degrees—by victimisation, particularly manifested through the expression of harm and regret (e.g., *Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait pour. . .*, 'What have I done to. . .'; *J'aurai[s] dû. . .*, 'I should've. . .') and emphatic modifiers (e.g., *des abrutis pareils*, 'such morons'; *ces sous-m[erdes]*, 'sub-sh[its]'; *la plus grosse erreur de ma vie*, 'the biggest mistake in my life'). The parent thus legitimises the condemnation of being, presenting it as a reaction to an initial fault. This is evident in example [12], cited in the previous section and reproduced below with more context. The speaker recounts a scene in which verbal violence occurs after physical violence:

[12'] I'd discovered that my mother was going through all my messages and that she'd done the same with my sister's mailbox and she was really angry about what she'd found there: messages from my sister saying we were unhappy./**So her reaction to that was to punch me in the face. Which stunned me for a moment.** My brother held her back or she'd have jumped on me. She was drooling, **shouting that I was just a slut, a real bitch, vile and ungrateful.**

*J'avais découvert que ma mère fouillait tous mes messages et qu'elle avait fait de même avec la messagerie de ma sœur et elle était vraiment en colère de ce qu'elle y avait trouvé: des messages de ma sœur disant que nous étions malheureux./Alors la réaction qu'elle a eu face à ça et de me coller une droite en pleine face. Me sonnait pendant un instant. Mon frère l'a retenu sinon elle me sautait dessus. Elle bavait, criant que j'étais qu'une salope, une vraie connasse, immonde et ingrate. (Gabrielle)*

This is noteworthy because physical violence, being "the last resort to make oneself heard", typically erupts after verbal violence (Moïse et al., 2019, p. 13)<sup>14</sup>. The acute verbal violence (Moïse et al., 2019) at work here, involving a direct condemnation act of being (i.e., an insult), appears to legitimise the preceding physical violence. Indeed, the lack of worth reproached by the parent, expressed through pejorative qualifications (*une salope, une vraie connasse, immonde et ingrate*, 'a slut, a real bitch, vile and ungrateful') consists in a lack of

recognition towards the parent as well as a lack of respectability. These shortcomings are presented as an affront and legitimise physical violence.

In conclusion, guilt induction of being intertwines the target's intrinsic worth with their affective bond to the parent. The reasons invoked for the condemnation of being frame the child as an object through and within the parent's perspective, as they do not align with the latter's expectations—both in terms of beliefs and needs.

#### 4.3. Towards a Disruption of Interactional Dynamics

We must now address the question asked in the introduction: is the authority relationship that characterises the parent-child interaction disrupted in and by condemnation acts of being, and if so, how?

An essential characteristic of the authority relationship is that the interactants mutually recognise each other in their high and low positions, and that this relationship is co-constructed (Moïse et al., 2019). However, resorting to speech acts that undermine the child's face, with disqualifications that attack self-esteem across different spheres (i.e., social sphere, intimate sphere, and values—Moïse et al., 2019, p. 81) departs from a recognition of the one in the lower position, and thus a co-construction of the relationship. Throughout the analysis of condemnation acts of being, it has become apparent that the position of guarantor of the interaction, expected in an authority relationship, acquires a sense of superiority over the other. It materialises in an ontological assertion of power over the other, by reaching their worth and essence. As discussed in Section 3, the categorisation and attribution of disqualifying traits are sometimes situated within the presupposed, which frames them as shared knowledge. In such cases, the child's low position is not a protective and supportive one but, rather, becomes a site of attacks on their being with latent and reactivable disqualifications. The asymmetry of positions is thus exacerbated in and by condemnation acts of being, leading to a relationship of domination. The parent becomes an all-powerful subject, treating the other as an object through the lens of their values, expectations, and needs; the child is objectified through the implicit or explicit comparisons to what they should be that underly contempt and guilt induction.

While the analysed condemnation acts of being display an assertion of power over the other, they also appear to involve a symmetrisation of positions. Through guilt-inducing acts, the parent places the child in a position of responsibility and/or symbolic debt that may be inappropriate, especially when it concerns reasons beyond the child's control. This disruption is regularly highlighted in the fragments of interaction represented in the testimonies; in the extracts below, for instance, the young Jane and Matthias criticise their assignment to a position where they must, like peers, advise and take charge of their parent.

[18] But being your mother's shrink in the evening, with her nose in her bottle, gives a bitter taste of life as early as 6 years old, just as she experienced it

*Mais être la psy de sa mère le soir, le nez dans sa bouteille, donne dès ses 6 ans un goût amer de la vie, autant qu'elle le vivait. (Jane)*

[19] When I was a kid, I quickly became the man of the house, at least when she was single. Which means I became her confidant, sharing all her troubles. One evening when I was about 6 or 7, we were sitting on the sofa, she took a handful of pills and told me "goodbye". Obviously I panicked, and when I tried to call 911 she told me off, because "it was just a joke to see if I loved her".

*Quand j'étais petit, je suis rapidement devenu l'homme de la maison, en tout cas dans les moments où elle était célibataire. Ce qui signifie que je suis devenu son confident en partageant tous ses malheurs. Un soir, vers 6 7 ans, nous étions assis sur le canapé et elle a prit une poignée de cachets en me disant "Adieu". Forcément j'ai paniqué et lorsque*

*j'ai voulu appeler les pompiers elle m'a disputé, car « ce n'était qu'une blague pour voir si je l'aimais ». (Matthias)*

In sum, the authority relationship is disrupted by a dual movement within the condemnation acts of being: the exacerbation of asymmetry, and the symmetrisation of interactional positions.

### 5. Conclusions

This article aimed to analyse the treatment of otherness underlying the condemnation acts of being reported in anonymous testimonies published on the Instagram account *Parents toxiques*. After outlining the study's methodological and analytical framework, I examined how one's being is constructed as being at fault. The linguistic and discursive devices identified through microanalyses, along with their implications in terms of interactional dynamics, are summarised in Figure 5 below. It breaks down how the condemnation of being is enacted and the treatment of otherness involved by such condemnation.

<b>1. Predicative level: ontological assertion of power over the other</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Present tense with general truth value</li> <li>· State predicates, notably with the copula <i>be</i></li> <li>· No adverbs/adverbial phrases that restrict the process to a particular time and space</li> <li>· Intensifiers: high-degree and restrictive adverbs, e.g. <i>never, nothing, always, only, just</i></li> <li>· Future tense with predictive value (extension of the condemnation)</li> <li>· No enunciative responsibility for the condemnation with <i>I</i></li> <li>· No modalisation of the condemnation (no expressions such as <i>In my view/opinion...</i>)</li> </ul>
<b>2. Argumentative and pragmatic levels: subordination of the other to oneself</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Insertion of negative axiology: pejorative qualifications, emphatic modifiers, vulgar language</li> <li>· Framing the condemnation as shared knowledge (presupposition)</li> <li>· Reliance on norms presented as self-evident and universal</li> <li>· Legitimation of the condemnation: framed as a reaction to an initial fault or act of violence</li> <li>· Pathemic effects that tend towards victimisation</li> <li>· Face undermining: denigration; combination of pragmatic acts with conflicting values (polirudeness / mock politeness); delocution</li> </ul>
<b>3. Interactional and relational levels: disruption of the authority relationship</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Conflation of the other's intrinsic worth with the speaker's beliefs and needs</li> <li>· Exacerbation of the asymmetry → relationship of domination</li> <li>· Symmetrisation of the interactional positions → the participant in the higher position does not assume the role of guarantor of the interaction; responsibility or even symbolic debt is assigned to the participant in the lower position</li> </ul>

**Figure 5.** Modalities of the Condemnation of Being.

Based on microanalyses of the condemnation acts of being reported in our sample of *Parents toxiques* testimonies, we can draw the following conclusions. (i) The ontological assertion of power over the other is constructed from the predicative level, with processes that concern the recipient's being in its entirety and present the condemnation as an objective reality. (ii) The condemnation of being draws its pragmatic force from its legitimisation—by relying on norms presented as self-evident and universal, and by highlighting the harm caused by the other. (iii) As a speaker, constructing the other's being as at fault involves, to varying degrees, essentialising and downgrading them, as well as conflating their intrinsic worth with one's beliefs and needs; these two objectifying processes hinder the recognition

of otherness as distinct from oneself, which is necessary to acknowledge the other as a subject (Moïse, 2020).

These findings should be considered in perspective. Given the ethical and methodological challenges of accessing and analysing authentic abusive interactions highlighted in Section 1—namely, the difficulty of categorising them as such—we used the speech acts reported in the *Parents toxiques* testimonies as an entry point to understand how verbal abuse may be committed and received. As discussed in Section 2, this perspective is inherently limited: we access condemnation acts as received and remembered by the authors, not as they occurred in real-time interactions. I argue that the authors' situated viewpoints and the means employed to represent their experience should not be seen as biases but as a research focus. In other words, the enunciative and argumentative interventions of the authors are an inherent part of what these anonymous online testimonies allow us to observe. This approach to experiential data aims to avoid value judgements on the part of the analyst: we do not question or confirm the testimonies' legitimacy and truthfulness, but treat them as *sociodiscursive traces* that need to be deciphered.

On the one hand, these traces point to how certain parental behaviours were experienced, remembered, and later reflected upon, which gives us privileged access to the long-term effects attributed to behaviours perceived as abusive or "toxic". Notably, our reception-based findings resonate with experimental psychology studies conducted in controlled environments that identified criticism and contempt as damaging to relationships (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019). If we view the condemnation of being as a means of domination, both in terms of attitude to otherness and interactional dynamics, the notion of condemnation of being—along with its descriptors—provides an effective framework that can be applied to reports and direct observations. It can help various professionals identify and assess transgressions and/or dysfunctions in authority relationships—not only in the family sphere but also, for instance, in the workplace.

On the other hand, studying these traces allows us to characterise what the authors *do* through their testimonies, and therefore to question the social meaning acquired by the anonymous publicisation of their experience. The decontextualisation at work in these testimonies—since we do not know who is testifying, when, and where—should not be treated as missing information but as a discursive mechanism that both the *Parents toxiques* account and the authors engage in (Moreau Raguene, 2024b). To build on the present study, further research should examine the enunciative, argumentative, and pragmatic materiality of reported speech itself—that is, what the authors achieve when reporting their parents' condemnation acts (e.g., denouncing, invalidating, providing proof).

Finally, the sample of ten testimonies consists of texts that are longer than average on *Parents toxiques*, and may therefore use more linguistic resources than shorter testimonies; our findings will need to be tested against the full dataset of 314 testimonies, which was compiled at a later stage of the project.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of CY Cergy Paris Université on 8 December 2022 (protocol code: 202212-001).

**Informed Consent Statement:** It was not possible to obtain consent from the authors of the testimonies as these are anonymous testimonies published on a public Instagram account. The account creator invites users to send their testimonies via message; they are then published anonymously, without identifying or naming the author. To further preserve the anonymity of the authors, the publication date and URL of the testimonies analysed in this article were not included. Additionally, potentially identifying information, though rare in the corpus, has been anonymised (e.g., city names,

first names)—such anonymisation was not required in the sample analysed for this article. Analytical precautions have also been taken to protect the authors' integrity: the analysis does not question or confirm the truthfulness of the experience they recount. Based on this, the Research Ethics Committee of CY Cergy Paris Université unanimously approved this research.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this article (i.e., extracts from anonymous testimonies) are available at <https://www.instagram.com/parentstoxiques/> (accessed on 15 November 2024).

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank Julien Longhi, Laurence Rosier, and Claudine Moïse for their invaluable contributions throughout this research project, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback. This article is part of the research conducted by the international research group *Draine, Haine et rupture sociale: discours et performativité*, which studies hate speech, extremist narratives, violent discourse, and the respective genres associated with them (<https://groupedraine.github.io/>). This article is a revised and enriched translation of Moreau Raguenes (2024a) "L'être comme fautif. Actes de condamnation, altérité et rapport de places dans l'interaction parent-enfant" originally published in French by EDP Sciences in *SHS Web of Conferences*, Volume 191, article 01009. The translation was prepared by Rose Moreau Raguenes, assisted by generative AI tools (ChatGPT, DeepL). The author wishes to thank EDP Sciences for granting permission as well as the organisers of the 2024 World Congress of French Linguistics.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All translations will be mine throughout the article unless specified otherwise

<sup>2</sup> The *Parents toxiques* corpus was compiled as part of a doctoral research project supervised by Julien Longhi and Laurence Rosier. The sample was collected for a Master's research project supervised by Claudine Moïse (Moreau Raguenes, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article\\_lc/LEGIARTI000038749626](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000038749626) (accessed on 15 June 2024).

<sup>4</sup> "Chapitre II: Des atteintes à l'intégrité physique ou psychique de la personne (Articles 222-1 à 222-67)" [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/section\\_lc/LEGITEXT000006070719/LEGISCTA000006149827/#LEGISCTA000006149827](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/section_lc/LEGITEXT000006070719/LEGISCTA000006149827/#LEGISCTA000006149827) (accessed on 15 June 2024).

<sup>5</sup> I choose to use the notion of "condemnation act" (Laforest & Moïse, 2013 notably, 'actes de condamnation' in French) rather than face-threatening acts to refer to acts that undermine the addressee's face (Goffman, 1956) and identity. This choice emphasises the disqualification of the target—disqualification not being constitutive of all face-threatening acts (e.g., an injunction not accompanied by disqualifying acts).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, these parameters vary depending on the child's age.

<sup>7</sup> The URL and publication date of the testimonies will not be indicated for ethical reasons.

<sup>8</sup> Emphasis (in bold) is always my addition; in the quotes, italics always come from the cited text. Spelling and punctuation will not be modified in the cited corpus excerpts.

<sup>9</sup> In [2], Chiara could be reporting a reproach her father directed to her (e.g., You make me angry), in which case the segment enclosed in quotation marks would be reported speech. Alternatively, she might be using quotation marks to express critical distance towards the causal link represented. In [3], it could be an injunction (e.g., Don't make things worse) reported in free indirect speech, but the boundary between what the parent said and what was understood and internalised by the speaker ("Not to make waves. Not to be an extra burden".) is porous.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term *enunciator* because the speech acts analysed are in reported speech: the parent is the enunciative source but does not perform the locutionary act. The term *speaker* always refers to the authors of the testimonies.

<sup>11</sup> However, argumentative strategies that allow the narrators to express contempt in interaction can be identified through analysis (see Baider, 2020 for instance).

<sup>12</sup> In the English-speaking literature, a similar notion has been proposed—*mock politeness* (Taylor, 2015, for instance).

<sup>13</sup> I choose to use the term *reproach* rather than *complaint* because, as pointed out by Laforest (2002, p. 1596) "the meaning of the term 'complaint' is broader than that of the French term 'reproche', [...] which refers only to dissatisfaction addressed to the person held to be responsible for deviant behavior".

<sup>14</sup> See the model of the escalation of acute verbal violence ("violence verbale fulgurante" in French) in Moïse et al. (2019, p. 13).

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