

MANAGING THE MENSTRUAL COMMUNICATION TABOO IN LITHUANIA: PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract: The paper is based on anonymous questionnaire surveys and interviews of women. One sample involved 423 young women (mean age: 21.04) surveyed by means of an anonymous questionnaire in 2016–2018. The survey produced a collection of 896 words and phrases used to denote menstruation. These lexical finds may be regarded as euphemisms/dysphemisms for taboo words representing an integral part of a secret language shared by women. Another sample involved 208 significantly older women (mean age: 73.66) interviewed individually in 2005–2012. The interviewing produced 117 lexical substituted for menstruation. This research is a part of a wider inquiry into the ways in which everyday practice, experience and

knowledge affect the social and cultural constructions of menstruation. Seeking to record the widest possible range of popular knowledge and discourse about menstruation, including menstrual beliefs and practices, we shall try to interpret these data, focusing on how everyday experience, everyday knowledge, and encrypted language can shape behaviour, experience, and attitudes of contemporary people.

Keywords: Lithuania, menstrual communication taboos, menstrual euphemisms, menstrual taboos, menstruation

Introduction

Menstruation as a cultural phenomenon covers a wide range of beliefs and practices, such as menstrual superstitions and taboos, menarche rituals, menstrual blood magic, menstruation-related religious restrictions, and menstrual health communication (Montgomery 1974; Buckley & Gottlieb 1988; Gottlieb 2020).

A substantial part of menstruation taboos are connected with the imparting/exchanging information on menstruation. Like a wealth of lexical substitutes for the word *menstruation*, silence also has a share in this communication (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler 2020: 186). A robust research on euphemisms used by women to denote their periods has been going on for several decades (Gottlieb 2020: 145). Exploration of this subject is carried out in many countries (Joffe 1948; Hays 1987; Agapkina 1996: 104–110; Newton 2016; Gathigia & Orwenjo & Ndung'u 2018).

Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler argue that a communication taboo is supported by the existence of dozens of euphemisms/dysphemisms for menstruation. When talking privately to their daughters about facts of life mothers convey not only the facts to them but also the guidelines for communication (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler 2020: 185–187; McHugh 2020: 411–412). Elizabeth Arveda Kissling states that adolescent girls develop creative linguistic strategies, such as the use of slang terms, circumlocutions, pronouns, and euphemistic deixis. These communication strategies allow them to avoid descriptive language, such as *menstruate*, *blood*, *menarche* or even *period*. These and similar manoeuvres help the girls maintain the norms of menstrual concealment and manage simultaneously menstrual communication taboos (Kissling 1996: 292, 299–302).

In Lithuania, like in many other countries, menstruation is a taboo topic. This is witnessed by lifelong experiences and attitudes shared by elderly women. At the first occurrence of menstruation (menarche) their knowledge of this major event in a woman's life was very poor or, sometimes, totally absent (Šaknys 1996: 40–41; Račiūnaitė 2002: 87; Šatkauskienė 2005: 110–111; Navickas & Piliponytė 2009: 993–994; Balikienė & Navickas 2013a: 245–246; 2013b: 1518).

Menstruation-related secrecy, shame, and anxiety were reflected in a special language. One of its purposes was to hide these monthly female troubles – especially from males. However, media-assisted modernisation of the traditional style of living lifted the veil on these secrets over the past decades. Inevitably, definite aspects of menstrual communication, including menstrual language, had to change.

From the point of view of sexual attitudes and personal hygiene, much has changed in Lithuania over the past century and recent decades. Ongoing changes have made the menstrual experience of the oldest now living Lithuanian women dissimilar to the menstrual know-how of modern-day girls. However, in order to evaluate the difference, specific empirical data are needed. The early twenty-first century offers the last chance to gather unique data able to compensate, to a certain extent, for the missing studies in this field.

Lithuanian ethnologists Žilvytis Šaknys and Rasa Račiūnaitė inquired into the experience of the first menstrual period in the context of rites of passage (Šaknys 1996: 49–54; Račiūnaitė 2002: 85–89). Lithuanian philologist Marius Smetona examined Lithuanian lexical substitutes for *menstruation* against the background of euphemisms used to denote illnesses and diseases in Lithuania (Smetona 2015: 131–136). Still, many other important aspects of menstruation are open to investigation.

Cultural and social constructions of menstruation are certainly influenced by daily practice, experience, and knowledge of people. Although the immediate purpose of this research was to record popular discourse about menstruation, menstrual beliefs, behaviours, and vocabularies, its ultimate goal is wider: to explain the meaning of research findings, highlighting the process in which everyday menstrual experience, menstrual know-how, and menstrual communication mould behaviour, experience, and attitudes of present-day people. In this article our plan is to show a rich contents of secret menstrual vocabulary used by women in contemporary Lithuania, paying special attention to a variety of euphemisms/dysphemisms included in it. We will try to compare the

traditional menstrual vocabulary with the modern one in order to demonstrate how secret vocabularies change.

Participant recruitment and data collection

The paper is based on anonymous questionnaire surveys and interviews of women.

Sample 1 involved 423 young women (mean age: 21.04) surveyed by means of an anonymous questionnaire in 2016–2018. The anonymous questionnaire on the experience of the first menstruation (menarche) started with a question about the respondent's age at menarche and ended with a question about words and phrases used by people to denote menstruation. Respondents were asked to list them. The questionnaire included other questions about who was the first to hear respondent's personal account of her menarche experience; when this confidential conversation occurred; whether respondent knew before getting her first period that she was going to menstruate; when and from what sources respondent learned about menstruation; and whether she ever talked about menstruation with her mother.

Data collection procedure. At the initial stage of the survey, participants were recruited from second, third, and fourth year psychology and medicine students (females exclusively) enrolled at Vilnius University. These recruits were surveyed in class when taking courses in Developmental Psychology. Survey participants got acquainted with the generalized findings of the survey during Pubertal Development classes. After that, these students were invited to take part in the research on female pubertal development. Those who volunteered (the number of volunteers was impressive) received special instructions. After a corresponding briefing and training, they distributed questionnaire forms among their girlfriends themselves. Questionnaire distributors as well as surveyors had to keep to the following two basic rules: not to transcend the limits of the chronological age of their respondents (from 18 to 25), and not to allow respondents to take questionnaire forms home. Without exception, respondents were required to complete the forms in front of the surveyor. This measure was included to secure respondents against the temptation to consult the Internet and other sources when filling out the questionnaire forms.

In this way, 423 questionnaire forms were gradually filled in. One third of the survey material was collected by Vytautas Navickas; the rest – by students who participated in the surveying. As can be seen, Sample 1 was mostly composed of students studying at higher educational institutions in Vilnius and other Lithuanian towns.

Sample 2 involved 208 significantly older women (mean age: 73.66) interviewed individually in 2005–2012. At the moment of interviewing, 54 of them were between 50 and 70; 154 were 70 and over. These 208 interviewees provided in total 174 words and phrases denoting menstruation. Of these 174 expressions 57 denoted menopause and menopausal women.

Data collection procedure. Ethnographic material for this article was gathered in various places in Lithuania (Pilviškiai (2006); Obeliai and Kriaunos (2007); Panemunis (2008); Onuškis (2010); Užpaliai (2010); Vieکشniai (2010); Žemaičių Kalvarija (2010); and Kaltanėnai (2011 and 2012)) by Monika Balikienė and Vytautas Navickas during ethnographic expeditions sponsored by the Versmė Publishing House. The authors were also assisted by Vilnius University psychology and sociology students. For the purpose of this article, ethnographic material collected by Vytautas Magnus University ethnology students Regina Mikštaitė-Čičiurkienė and Diana Mikužienė (15 interviewees) was utilized. The questionnaire “Menstruation in the Lithuanian culture” (Balikienė & Baranauskaitė & Navickas 2006) was used for conducting the survey. The questionnaire was designed to cover the whole menstrual experience of women, starting with the first period (menarche) expectations and finishing with the permanent stoppage of menstruation (menopause). The 68 questions constituting the questionnaire reflect the following basic themes: menarche encounter, menstrual restrictions and superstitions, menstrual hygiene, menopause experience, and mother-daughter communication on the subject of menstruation.

Results: popular discourse about menstruation, menstrual beliefs, behaviours, and vocabularies

Sample 1 (young women) comprised four hundred twenty-three (423) young women (mean age: 21.04). All of them were requested to list words/phrases denoting menstruation. Overall, by means of the survey 1036 lexical units denoting menstruation were elicited from young participants.

Forty-three (43) respondents did not give a single requested word/phrase; eighty-seven (87) produced only one word/phrase per respondent; ninety-eight (98) – 2 words/phrases per respondent; eighty-nine (89) – 3 words/phrases per respondent; sixty-eight (68) – 4 words/phrases per respondent; twenty-three (23) – 5 words/phrases per respondent; eight (8) – 6 words/phrases per respondent; five (5) – 7 words/phrases per respondent; and two (2) – as many as 8 words/phrases per respondent.

Having deducted *menstruation*, *menarche*, *menstrual cycle* and *PMS* (this premenstrual syndrome abbreviation is well known in Lithuania) from the overall number of expressions provided by young women, we received 896 lexical units. Having examined these finds from the point of view of dominant characteristics, we combined the 896 units into groups. The resulting nine (9) groups were given the following names: *Time*; *Colour*; *Teen slang*; *Relatives, guests, and other visitors*; *Illness and indisposition*; *Gender specific*; *Blood*; *Technical failure*; *Natural phenomena and calamities*. A small number of expressions did not fit into any of the above nine groups. For these ambiguous lexical finds, we formed a separate group. We called this group *Not ranked among any of the above groups*.

As a result of such grouping, some words and phrases inevitably ranked among more than one group. E.g., *raudonos dienos* ('red days') got both into the group *Time* and the group *Colour*. The commonly-used euphemism *pusseserė iš Raudondvario* ('female cousin from Raudondvaris') also occupied a place in two groups simultaneously. Firstly, this *pusseserė* ('female cousin') naturally entered the group *Relatives, guests, and other visitors*. Secondly, having in mind that this cousin arrived from a particular place called Raudondvaris ('Red Manor'), we included this euphemism also among words/phrases representing the group *Colour*. The euphemism *dienos* (*tos dienos*, *mano dienos*) ('days, those days, or my days') was given a place only in the group *Time*. However, *moteriškos dienos* (women's/feminine days) we listed among two groups, namely, *Time* and *Gender specific*. In our opinion, such display of our lexical material demonstrates more clearly what portion of expressions young women consider to be the property of women's sphere exclusively. What is more, it shows that strict borders among these groups do not exist.

Having distributed our lexical material among the groups, we calculated how many lexical units each of them contains. The summing up of scores produced the overall number of units (1054) which will be used for calculating

the percentage of lexical finds contained in every group. The groups will be described in order of size from largest to smallest.

Time. This group represents the richest gathering of words and phrases denoting menstruation. It comprises 297 expressions out of the total amount of lexical substitutes for menstruation (1054); percentage: 28.18%.

The component *dienos* ('days') (267) is found in the biggest number of expressions. Among them *tos dienos* ('these days') (147) are very conspicuous. Circulated vigorously by mass media and widely used for the promotion of women's hygiene products, this euphemism is very popular in Lithuania. Some young women identified menstruation days as *moterų, moteriškos, mergaičių, mergaitiškos dienos* ('the days of women and girls', 'women's or girls' days', 'feminine or girly days') (29), indicating the colour of such days (48). Small was the number of words and phrases showing extremely negative attitude to menstruation directly and indisputably, e.g., *blogos dienos, juodos dienos, pragaro dienos, skausmingos dienos* ('bad days', 'black days', 'hellish days', 'painful days') (7). The group *Time* also contained some comparatively rare but powerful expressions, e.g. *braškių sezonas, žuvų sezonas* ('strawberry season', 'fishing season'). Possessing a great connotative power, they can evoke not only feelings and ideas but also vivid images and even smells.

Colour. This group includes 228 words and phrases out of the total number of lexical finds (1054); percentage: 21.64%.

The group is numerous but not multicoloured. Out of all words and phrases ranked among this group only two (2) describe menstruation using colours other than red, e.g., *juodos dienos ir žalios dienos* ('black days and green days').

In this group, names of cities, towns and villages containing a red colour component can be found, e.g., *Raudondvaris* ('Red Manor') (76), *Krasnodaras* ('Red (=beautiful) Present', a city in southern Russia) (7), *Krasnojarskas* (derived from 'Red coast', a city in Eastern Siberia) (4). These and similar red colour names of Russian and Siberian cities are widely used to denote menstruation in Russia. But they may evoke bad memories in Lithuanian respondents, reminding even young individuals of mass deportation to the places of evil, cold and death. However, the most frequently mentioned red colour locality is *Raudondvaris* ('Red Manor'), a village well known in Lithuania.

Numerous are words and phrases which dye menstrual flow days red, e.g., *raudonos dienos* ('red days') (46). This is a relatively simple way to bypass the taboo word *menstruation*. More artful courses of action are also taken, e.g.,

Raudonoji armija ('Red Army'). This euphemism features prominently in the stock of our lexical finds (17). However, we have recorded some expressions which refer to the Red Army without spelling its name directly. People more or less acquainted with the history of Vilnius will easily identify them with the group of euphemisms stressing the element of colour. Let's take a closer look at the euphemism *Krasnucha* (5). This Russian word is still used by Vilnius residents to denote a non-prestigious residential district located along Savanorių Avenue. Since times immemorial this area has been notorious for its high crime rate. In the years of Soviet occupation, the avenue and surrounding residential district was officially called Red Army Avenue. However, unofficially Vilnius residents called it *Krasnucha*. The reason is obvious: *краснуха* in Russian means *rubella*, a contagious viral infection best known by its distinctive red rash. Although the avenue was renamed as Savanorių Avenue 30 years ago, *Krasnucha* survived. As can be seen from our research, today it is even used as a substitute for *menstruation*.

The euphemisms *barščiai* ('thick beetroot soup') was mentioned 11 times. Nine (9) times respondents were laconic, writing just *barščiai*. Other variants of this euphemism were more descriptive, e.g., *barščiai užvirė* ('beetroot soup has reached the boiling point') or *virti barščius* ('to cook beetroot soup'). *Barščiai*, a nourishing soup of intensively red colour, is a traditional menu item in Lithuania.

Teen slang. A quite numerous group of lexical substitutes can be regarded as teen slang words/phrases. It contains 157 lexical units out of the total number of substitutes used by young women instead of the word *menstruation* (1054); percentage: 14.90%.

The most common of such teen slang words is *menkės* (110) plus variants: *mėnkės* (17), *menkes* (4), *mynkės* (1), *menzės* (3), *memes* (1), *mėmės* (2). In the Lithuanian language, *menkė* means 'cod fish'. However, we think that there is no relation between this popular type of fish and menstruation. As shall be seen later, such word was never used to denote menstruation by our oldest Lithuanian interviewees. So it is possible to state that this particular word emerged in the past decades. Together with its derisive variants aping each other, it expresses contempt and ridicule of menstruation. It is very likely that the principal slang word *menkės* together with a string of its scornful variants has evolved simply from the Lithuanian word *mėnesinės* ('menstruation').

The group also contains euphemisms provided in the form of abbreviations, e.g., *mnsn* (1), *M* (3), *MS* (1). To this subgroup the euphemism *S* (6) with its variants, such as *S raidytė* (small letter *S*) (1) and *S dienos* (days *S*) (1) must be added. Deciphering of such lexical finds seems impossible without assistance from respondents' side. Consultations, however, are out of the question, since the survey was anonymous. Luckily, one of respondents left an explanatory note next to *S* in her questionnaire form. The note read: "Teacher used to mark it in this way". So, the origin of *S* is clear: *S* stands for *serga* ('is ill'). Physical education instructors and teachers traditionally write *S* in their notebooks if a menstruating student asks for a release from training.

Relatives, guests, and other visitors. This group comprises 140 expressions out of the total amount of words and phrases denoting menstruation (1054); percentage: 13.28%.

Female cousins, aunts, sisters, and other visitors often appear having some red attribute, e.g., wearing a red dress or skirt, or arriving from localities the names of which contain the word/component *red*.

The euphemism *svečiai* ('guests') (19) turned out to be not as common as expected. It must be noted that our expectations seemed to be well grounded. They rested on our observation: elderly female interviewees used this euphemism in their narratives quite often. It should be mentioned that the gender of these *guests* or *visitors* is not pronounced. However, it is very likely that all *guests* are females. Actually, the Lithuanian language has a special word to denote a female guest (*viešnia*). But not a single *viešnia* is present in our stock of euphemisms.

Other visitors and relatives identified in our collection of euphemisms were females without any doubt. Among them, *pusseserės* ('female cousins') used to arrive most frequently (72). Aunts (20), sisters (13), and girl-friends (8) paid less frequent visits. The least frequent visitor was *močiutė* ('grandmother') (1).

Although Lithuanian girls host such aunts, female cousins, and sisters on a regular basis, these female guests or visitors are anonymous. In our collection not a single visiting relative, friend, or guest has a name. This is strange, compared to the findings of Victoria Louise Newton. In her collection aunts, for example, may have various names: Aunt Flo, Aunt Norah, Aunt Hilda, Aunt Muriel, Aunt Sally, Aunt Irma (Newton 2016: 198–199).

Interestingly, some *draugai* ('friends') (2) also arrive. These *friends* are somewhat mysterious entities. Obviously, they cannot be girl-friends. In order

to denote a girl-friend, the word *draugė* is used in the Lithuanian language. Had respondents meant any girl-friends, they would have written in the questionnaire form the word *draugės*. Instead, respondents mockingly wrote the word *draugai* in inverted commas. It is very likely that they had in mind so-called *towarishchi*, a gang of over politicised intruders carrying with them red-coloured Communist Party membership cards. Surely, this is only our supposition. Overall, male relatives, male guests, and other male visitors are missing among our lexical finds.

Illness and indisposition. This group consists of 81 words and phrases out of the total number of lexical substitutes for menstruation (1054); percentage: 7.68%.

Illness-related euphemisms total up to 19. The word *liga* ('illness') was used to denote menstruation only once. Quite often a descriptor was added to *liga* to stress that the illness was *moteriška*, *moterų liga* ('female illness', 'illness of women') (14). In one instance, euphemism containing the component of *illness* also contained the component of colour: *raudona liga* ('red illness') (1). Sometimes (4) the illness was specified: *inkstų vėžys*, *raudonoji karštinė*, *raudonasis maras*, *spazmai* ('kidney cancer', 'red fever', 'red pestilence', 'cramps').

The largest number of expressions was connected with *sirgimas* ('being ill') (42). These euphemisms were mostly simple, from the point of view of form and contents, e.g., *susirgti*, *susirgau*, *sako*, *kad serga*, *aš sergu* ('to fall ill', 'I've fallen ill', 'says that is ill', 'I'm ill'). More spectacular substitutes, such as *skendimas*, *dramos*, *hormonai siaučia* ('drowning', 'dramas', 'hormones are raging') can be also found.

Bėdos ('mild illness', 'general indisposition') and variants, such as *moteriškos bėdos*, *bėdelės*, *problemytės* ('female indisposition', 'mild problems') were not very popular among respondents (7). We think that *kraujavimas*, *kraujuoja* ('bleeding', 'is bleeding') could be added to this subgroup of indisposition (7).

Among euphemisms belonging to this group one interesting borrowing is present: *nusikaltimas kelnėse*. This funny definition of menstruation is a Lithuanian translation from the English language ('a crime scene in my pants')

Gender specific. This group includes 61 expressions out of the total amount of words and phrases denoting menstruation (1054); percentage: 5.80%.

The group represents words and phrases indicating clearly that menstruation belongs exclusively to the women's sphere. The biggest number of such expressions state plainly that periods are *moteriškos dienos* ('women's days')

(29) or *moterų liga* ('women's illness') (13), or *moteriškos bėdos (problemos)* ('women's troubles (problems)') (9), demonstrating distinctly that menstruation is *ne vyrų reikalai* ('not men's concern') (1). As is noted by Victoria Louise Newton, such euphemisms stress gender difference (Newton 2016: 199–200).

Blood. This group comprises 47 expressions out of the total number of lexical substitutes for menstruation (1054); percentage: 4.46%.

Without any doubt, *Kruvinoji Merė* ('Bloody Mary') (22) occupies the first place among euphemisms directly connected with blood. This globally popular substitution for menstruation is well known to Lithuania's womanhood. Popular in Lithuania among young girls, *Kruvinoji Merė* is a borrowing from Western culture. Respondents in their answers give it in Lithuanian, English and Russian.

Respondents wrote this euphemism in English using its standard spelling (*Bloody Mary*). Some respondents deviated a little from standard, e.g., *Blood Mary*, *Bloody Merry*. Lithuanian translations of this euphemism were also present. Some of them differed only in minor details, e.g., *Kruvinoji Merė* or *Kruvinoji Meri*. Other translations were more creative, e.g., *Kraujuojančios Merės* ('Bleeding Maries'). In this case, the plural form is probably used to bring this euphemism closer to the Lithuanian word *mėnesinės* or *menstruacijos* ('menstruation'), both, as a rule, used in the plural.

In addition to Bloody Mary, other bloody entities were mentioned, e.g. *kruvinoji sesė* ('bloody sister') (1), *kruvinoji pusseserė iš Kauno* ('bloody (female) cousin from Kaunas') (1). Interestingly, this cousin comes from Kaunas although this Lithuanian town, unlike Raudondvaris, has nothing to do with red colour.

The euphemism *kraujo prakeikimas* ('curse of blood') (1) could easily fit into the group *Biblical terms* which was formed by Victoria Louise Newton from her lexical finds (Newton 2016: 199). Since our respondents did not provide more euphemisms of this kind, we did not have a chance to form such group.

The euphemism *karas* ('war') was offered by one respondent who, fortunately, added to it the following explanatory note: "Because lots of blood is shed".

As expected, expressions containing both blood and time components were also present, e.g. *kruvinos dienos* ('bloody days') (3) and *kruvinoji savaitė* ('bloody week') (4).

Technical failure. This group is composed of 22 words and phrases out of the total amount of lexical substitutes for menstruation (1054); percentage: 2.08%.

Although not too numerous, the group is eloquent: *kranas* (*čiaupas*) ('water tap/faucet') plus variants, such as *čiaupas atsisuko*, *atsisuko čiaupas*, *atsuktas kranas*, *kranas atsisuko*, *paleido kraną*, *kranai atsisuko*, all of them meaning roughly the same: the water tap/faucet is turned on (8); *vamzdis* ('sewer/water pipe') in an emergency situation, such as *prakiuro vamzdis*, *vamzdis prakiuro*, *trūko vamzdžiai*, *vamzdžiai trūko*, meaning 'sewer/water pipe leakage', or 'sewer line stoppage' (*kanalizacija užsikimšo*) (5); *katastrofa* ('catastrophe') plus variant *katastro* given in non-standard Lithuanian (2); *avarija* ('breakdown') (1); *nešvarumai* ('dirt') (1); *tepliojimas* ('smearing') (1); *fontanas* ('fountain') (1); *lašėjimas* ('drip') (1); *tepalai išbėgo* ('grease leakage') (1); *prakiurau* ('I've started leaking') (1).

Expressions connected with technical non-performance are represented chiefly by *kranas/čiaupas* ('water tap/faucet') (8) or *vamzdis* ('sewer/water pipe') (5). Predominant euphemisms, such as *kanalizacija užsikimšo* ('sewer drain clog', 'sewer line stoppage'), *vamzdis prakiuro* ('sewer/water pipe leakage'), *tepalai išbėgo* ('grease leakage'), *čiaupas atsisuko* ('water tap leakage problem'), *nešvarumai* ('dirt'), suggest that menstruation is regarded mainly as a top plumbing emergency.

Since it is widely known that menstruation is associated with dirt, we entered *nešvarumai* ('dirt') and *tepliojimai* ('smearing') into the group *Technical failure*.

We expected to collect many dirt-related expressions, but actually we obtained only two (2). What is more, words and phrases from our collection tell absolutely nothing about the smearing or ruining of women's underwear or clothes. This indicates that today young women, compared to their mothers and grandmothers, no longer encounter such problems. Lithuanian women of older (especially oldest) generation complained during their interviews mostly about the absence of menstrual hygiene products immediately after WWII and also in the years of the Soviet rule. In that era product deficiencies troubled womanhood immensely (Balikienė & Navickas 2013a: 245–248). As will be seen later, these menstrual worries found their direct reflection in the narratives and lists of menstruation euphemisms/dysphemisms produced by older/oldest women.

Natural phenomena and calamities. This group consists of 14 expressions out of the total amount of words and phrases denoting menstruation (1054); percentage: 1.32%.

Although modest in size, the group is spectacular: *Motina gamta* ('Mother Nature') (6); *kriokliai* ('waterfalls') plus 2 variants: *Niagaros kriokliai* ('Niagara Falls') and *raudonieji kriokliai* ('red waterfalls') (3); *tsunamis* (the Lithuanian spelling of this word is non-standard) plus variant *raudonasis cunamis* ('red tsunami') (2); *Nilo patvinimas* ('high tide on the River Nile') (1); *Gamtos išdaiga* ('Nature trick') (1); *Motinos gamtos dovana* ('Mother Nature's gift') (1).

Very positive-sounding expressions, such as *Motina gamta* ('Mother Nature') or *Motinos gamtos dovana* ('Mother Nature's gift'), or even a mildly amusing *Gamtos išdaiga* ('Nature trick') are borrowings from Western literature and humorous advertisements for Tampax menstrual hygiene products (Newton 2016: 176). As is witnessed by our research findings, these Western euphemisms not only reached Lithuania but were readily absorbed by young women.

Not ranked among any of the above groups. This group includes seven (7) words out of the total number of lexical substitutes for menstruation (1054); percentage: 0.66%.

Here are the seven words which did not fit neatly into any of the above groups: *uogos* ('berries') (1); *žvaigždutė* ('starlet/asterisk') (1); *liniuotė* ('ruler, an instrument to draw straight lines or measure distances') (1); *pliusas* ('plus', a symbol +) (1); *silkės* ('herrings') (1); *riešutas* ('nut') (1); *mokesčiai* ('taxes') (1).

Since young women were surveyed anonymously, there was no chance to ask them what they actually had in mind when putting these items on their lists of euphemisms/dysphemisms. Possibly, respondents left out some elements which are vital for grasping the sense of these obscure lexical finds. What may be missing, we can only guess, e.g., *uogos* ('berries'). Maybe the respondent meant *red berries* or *strawberries* but wrote only *berries*. When writing *žvaigždutė* ('starlet/asterisk') the respondent possibly meant a star-shaped symbol used for marking the menstrual flow days in a calendar. Perhaps, a similar idea rests behind the euphemism *pliusas* ('plus')? If we are right, then both *starlet/asterisk* and *plus* should be added to the group *Time*. It is very likely that into this group the euphemism *mokesčiai* ('taxes') can also fit easily. Respondent who wrote *silkės* ('herrings') most probably omitted a couple of words. If these lost words are *pomidorų padaže* ('in tomato sauce'), then we can safely place these *herrings* (and also the above-mentioned *berries*) among expressions constituting the group *Colour*. Cf. *silkės pomidorų padaže* ('herring in tomato sauce') was actually listed by our respondents.

Sample 2 (elderly women) involved two hundred and eight (208) significantly older women (mean age: 73.66). The women mentioned in total 174 phrases and words denoting menstruation. Among them 57 were used to denote menopausal women and menopause. Having deducted them from the overall number of expressions provided by elderly interviewees, we received 117 lexical substitutes for menstruation.

We combined these 117 expressions into groups. Like in Sample 1 (young women), the grouping was done on the basis of dominant characteristics displayed by our lexical finds. Here are the names of the nine (9) groups obtained in this manner: *Time; Colour; Relatives, guests, and other visitors; Illness and indisposition; Gender specific; Blood; Flowering; Material culture of menstruation; and On oneself.*

In consequence of grouping, some words and phrases got into more than one group as expected. However, this time only 18 (15.38%) expressions migrated among groups, compared to 158 (17.63%) in Sample 1 (young women). These migrants represent a fraction of lexical finds. Containing several semantic nuclei of equal or similar power, they do not possess a dominant characteristic. For this reason, words and phrases of such kind may fit quite easily into more than one group.

Having distributed our lexical material among the above-named groups, we summed up the scores shown by each of them. The resulting amount (135) will be used for calculating the percentage of expressions per group.

Here are the groups – from largest to smallest – combined from lexical material provided by elderly interviewees.

Illness and indisposition. This group consists of 54 words and phrases out of the total number of lexical substitutes for menstruation (135); percentage: 40.00%.

Words and phrases contained in this group are very similar, compared to a parallel group in Sample 1 (young women). However, Sample 2 (elderly women) provides a large number of expressions, such as *savo/savos ligos* (4), *savo/sava liga* (8), *sergu savo ligomis* (1), *savom ligom* (2) (meaning ‘one’s own illness(es)’, ‘I’m ill with my own illnesses’). Not a single such expression is found in Sample 1 (young women). The euphemism *bėdos* (‘mild illness’, ‘indisposition’) is present in both samples. But *bėdos*, and especially *savo bėdos* (‘one’s own troubles’, ‘indisposition’) feature more prominently in Sample 2 (elderly

women), representing 20% of the lexical units contained in this group. Young women use these euphemisms less frequently (8.64%).

Gender specific. This group includes 19 expressions out of the total amount of words and phrases denoting menstruation (135); percentage: 14.07%. Words and phrases contained in this group do not differ in principle from expressions constituting a parallel group in Sample 1 (young women).

Material culture of menstruation. This group comprises 18 words and phrases out of the total number of lexical substitutes for menstruation (135); percentage: 13.34%.

Elderly women produced a rich array of expressions relating to the material aspect of menstruation hygiene. Euphemisms stressing clothing and articles of dress were numerous, e.g. *drapanė* (1) or *antdrapanės* (1), or *rūbiniai*, *rūbinė*, *rūbinės* (6) (all meaning something unmentionable on dress/clothing/underwear), *ant drabužių* (2) or *ant rūbų* (2) ('on dress/clothes'), *ant baltinių turi* (1) ('has on her (white) undergarment') or simply *ant baltinių* (1) ('on (white) undergarment'), *ant rubačkos* (1) ('on undergarment'), *ant belyznos* (1) ('on (white) underwear'). Young respondents did not provide any words connecting menstruation with clothes or dress smeared with menstrual blood. This can be explained in the following way: young girls no longer have big hygienic problems, compared to the troubles experienced by the older generation of women.

Having analysed numerous collections of menstruation-related beliefs and rites practiced by Slavs, Tat'iana Agapkina concludes that lexical substitutes for menstruation, such as *рубаша*, *на рубаше* ('undergarment', 'on undergarment') were widely popular in traditional Slavic cultures (Agapkina 1996: 104).

Victoria Louise Newton states that as many as 20.1% of expressions provided by her respondents (males and females) were connected with the material culture of menstruation. These words and phrases were often archaic (e.g., *on the rag*, *on the cloth*, *on the towel*). As indicated by the findings of Victoria Louise Newton's survey, these archaisms were doing quite well in the contemporary world (Newton 2016: 192–193). Even so, young women participating in our survey did not produce a single word or phrase able to enter a group of expressions referring to the material culture of menstruation.

Flowering. This group includes 14 words and phrases out of the total number of lexical substitutes for menstruation (135); percentage: 10.37%.

Elderly interviewees produced euphemisms related with flowering and flowers, e.g. *žydėjimas* ('flowering') (3), (*mergaitė*) *jau pražydo* ('(the girl) has

already burst into flower') (2), *žydi gėlės* ('flowers are blooming') (1), *moterų žiedai* ('women's flowers') (1), (*panos*) *Marijos žiedai* ('(Virgin) Mary's flowers') (2). Among flowers, roses and lilies are distinguished, e.g. *žydi raudona rožė* ('a red rose is blooming') (1), *rožės / lelijos žydi* ('roses/lilies are blooming') (2). Flowers occupied an important part also in a group of euphemisms denoting menopause (5). Only in this case, flowers were wilted, e.g., *jau nuvyto* ('already wilted') (1), *rožės nežydi* ('roses have stopped blooming') (1), *peržydėjo* ('past flowering age/flowering is over') (1), *nukrito žiedai* ('blossoms have drooped') (1).

Young respondents did not provide a single word or phrase connected with flowering. So, it is possible to state that these beautiful old euphemisms are becoming extinct in Lithuania.

Keith Allan and Kate Burridge describe the history of euphemism *flower* (including its variants, such as *flowering* or *rose*, etc.) in great detail. The authors argue that this euphemism is the most positive in the menstrual period vocabulary (Allan & Burridge 2006: 167–169).

Colour. This group consists of 9 words and phrases out of the total number of expressions (135); percentage: 6.67%.

The group is monochrome. Only red colour is represented, e.g., *raudonos vėliavos jau pakeltos* ('red flags are already raised') (1), *burokėliai verda* ('beet-root soup is boiling') (1), *Raudonosios armijos žygis* ('Red Army on the march') (1).

Relatives, guests, and other visitors. This group comprises 6 lexical substitutes out of the total amount of words and phrases denoting menstruation (135); percentage: 4.45%.

In this group, the euphemism *svečiai* ('guests') prevails, e.g., *svečiai atvažiavo* ('guests have arrived') or *turiu svečių* ('I have some guests'). Among these visitors only one female cousin can be found (*pusseserė atvažiavo*).

Blood. This group includes 5 words and expressions out of the total number of lexical substitutes for menstruation (135); percentage: 3.70%.

Among plain euphemisms, such as *kraujavimas* ('bleeding') (1) or *kraujuoju* ('I'm bleeding') (1), more sophisticated phrases, such as *vėdarus kraujinius dirba* ('is making blood sausages') (1) can be found.

On oneself. This group comprises 5 euphemisms out of the total number of words and phrases denoting menstruation (135); percentage: 3.70%.

Young women and girls did not mention such euphemisms at all. Judging from literature, the euphemism *ant savęs* ('on oneself') (3) and its pronunciation variants, such as *ant savy* (1), *unt sau* (1) used to be widely popular in the past (Šatkauskienė 2005: 111; Smetona 2015: 133). Lexical substitutes of this type are characteristic of Slavs (Agapkina 1996: 105–106).

Time. This group consists of 5 euphemisms out of the total number of substitutes for menstruation (135); percentage: 3.70%.

Unlike in a parallel group of Sample 1 (young women), words and phrases containing the component *day* were not represented excessively. This component is present in 3 lexical finds out of the 5 constituting this small group of euphemisms, e.g., *mano dienos* ('my days') (1), *tavo dienos* ('your days') (1), and *blogos dienos* ('bad days') (1).

Menopause

To the question: "What words do people in your environment use when referring to women who stopped menstruating for good?" interviewees would usually answer: "Now they are called *klimaksinės* ('stricken with menopause'), but in former times other words and names were used, too."

However, the women were not eager to share their knowledge with interviewers. Some of them stated directly: "Those words were bad, I do not remember them, I do not want to repeat them."

Not too willingly the interviewees produced in total 57 lexical substitutes for menopause and menopausal women. A large portion of them included words, such as *klimaksas*, *klimaksinės*, *klimakterinės* ('climacteric (menopause)', 'menopausal'). The number of expressions stressing old age, e.g., *senos moterys* or simply *senės* ('old women'), *senos* ('old') is not large. More numerous are words and phrases stressing time, e.g., *atėjo toks laikas* ('time has come'), *laikas pasibaigė* ('time has run out'), *atėjo jos laikas* ('her time has come'). By the way, these are the most positive expressions denoting menopause.

As already mentioned, words and phrases connected with flowering can be found also among substitutes for menopause. However, these positively-sounding lexical finds are not numerous. The largest number of expressions describe menopausal women negatively or very negatively, stressing the loss of reproductive power. Here are several examples of such dysphemisms:

nevaisingos ('infertile'); *bevaisės, bergždžios* ('barren'); *nebetinkamos* ('no longer useful'); *niekam tikusios* ('good for nothing'); *niekam nereikalinga* ('no longer needed by anybody'); *netikros moteriškos* ('fake females'); *nebemoteriška* ('no longer female'); *sausos* ('dry'); *išdžiūvusios* ('dried-up'); *tuščia kaip špokinyčia* ('as empty as a nesting-box for starlings'); *sudegė pinigai* ('money has burnt'); *atimti dokumentai* ('documents seized').

Menstrual know-how

Menstrual knowledge of pre-menarche adolescent girls, as witnessed by Lithuanian women of older generation, was less than minimal if not totally absent. They knew almost or absolutely nothing about menstruation. Only those girls who started menstruating relatively late had a vague understanding of what was in store for them. Basing on her research findings, Rasa Račiūnaitė argues that in the late nineteenth – the second half of the twentieth century, mothers in Lithuania did not tell their adolescent daughters anything about menstruation. With the exception of several cases, mothers avoided talking on this subject with their daughters (Račiūnaitė 2002: 84–85). Our findings show clearly that such behaviour of Lithuanian mothers started to change only in late twentieth century.

Answers given by our respondents and interviewees to the following questions indicate very convincingly how menstrual communication taboos and attitudes to menstruation have changed over the past fifty years.

All participants of this survey were asked the following question: "Did you know anything about menstruation before you started menstruating yourself?" All young respondents (423; mean age: 21.04) answered: "Yes". Mean age at which they got such information was 10.1. Elderly women (208; mean age: 73.66) had a different answer to this question: 108 (52%) interviewees did not know anything about menstruation before experiencing menarche themselves.

Answers to the question: "Did your mother tell you anything about menstruation before you started menstruating?" were equally eloquent. As many as 271 (64%) young respondents talked with their mothers about menstruation. Among elderly interviewees, only 39 (18.75%) talked with their mothers. Elderly women stated that they obtained vital information about this major event in a woman's life from their older sisters or female cousins, or more

speedily maturing girl-friends. Very rarely they learned about menstruation from their mothers.

Comparison of results shown by sample 1 (young women) and sample 2 (elderly women)

It is fairly difficult to compare not only the samples but also the lexical material produced by members of these samples. Firstly, sizes of the samples differ. Secondly, data collection procedures differ. Thirdly, education of young and elderly participants differs. Fourthly, data collection time differs. However, having assessed our lexical finds as a body, we can state that several things in this collection have caught our eye.

In order to see whether the menstrual period vocabulary has changed over the past fifty years, and – if it has – to identify the changes, we compared data produced by young women (Sample 1) with corresponding data obtained through interviewing elderly women (Sample 2).

Similarities. Viewed as a whole, words and phrases provided by elderly women fall into almost all groups created for organizing lexical material produced by young women. We could easily distribute them among the following groups: *Time, Colour, Relatives, guests, and other visitors, Illness and indisposition, Gender specific, Blood.*

Basic differences. Expressions filling three groups in Sample 1 (young women) (*Teen slang, Technical failure, Natural phenomena and calamities*) are absent in Sample 2 (elderly women). Teen slang words and phrases obviously do not appeal to elderly women. The same is true for frivolous euphemisms from the group *Technical failure*. The contents of group *Natural phenomena and calamities* in Sample 1 is less frivolous. However, it consists of borrowings from Western culture. Loanwords/phrases of such origin can hardly enter the vocabulary of elderly women.

In the sample of young women, words and phrases containing a temporal component occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of expressions. Lexical substitutes of this kind are very popular in Lithuania owing to mass media. Promoters of women's hygiene products can hardly do without euphemisms marking menstruation as a specific temporal event. However, in the sample of elderly women, such euphemisms fall to the lowest position. Elderly women are

certainly susceptible to ads promoting hygiene products, only they are affected by the ads adversely. Often during our interviews, elderly women grasped a chance to express their personal opinion about too annoying, open and embarrassing promotion of menstrual hygiene products on TV.

Compared to Sample 2, three groups of lexical substitutes (*Flowering, Material culture of menstruation, On oneself*) are missing in Sample 1 (young women). It must be noted that lexical material filling these groups in Sample 2 (elderly women) was supplied by the oldest participants of our survey. The age of each of them was above 70.

Borrowings. In Sample 1 (young women), the number of lexical borrowings from Western culture is large. Practically all euphemisms contained in the group *Natural phenomena and calamities* (14) are loanwords. Among loanwords/phrases *Bloody Mary* and all its variants (22), and *bloody days* (1), *pragaro dienos* ('hell days') (1) together with *day x* (1), *big day* (1) and *shark week* (1) must be counted. A list of borrowings also includes *Red Lady* (1), *red herring* (1), and *red wedding* (1). Seas, rivers, waterfalls feature prominently in this list, e.g., *Raudona / Raudonoji jūra* ('Red Sea') (2), *pasiplaukiojimas Raudonojoje jūroje* ('having a swim in/sailing the Red Sea'), *Nilo patvinimas* ('high tide on the River Nile'), *kriokliai* ('waterfalls') (1), *Niagaros kriokliai* ('Niagara Falls') (1). Among foreign countries only Japan is distinguished, e.g., *Japonija* ('Japan') (1) and *išvykau į Japoniją* ('I've left for Japan') (1). Euphemisms containing a Japanese component, such as *flying the Japanese flag, Japanese flag day* are discussed more exhaustively by Victoria Louise Newton. In her opinion, a red sun disk on a white background is seen in these phrases as symbolic of menstrual blood on a white sanitary towel. In her classification, phrases of this type fall into the category of *Events* since they mark menstruation as a specific event (Newton 2016: 200–201). Our list of borrowings contains also more traditional or even archaic euphemisms, such as *kraujo prakeikimas* ('blood curse') (1) and *nuotakos mirta* ('bride's myrtle') (1).

Conclusions

Lithuanian menstrual communication underwent a change in the late twentieth – the early twenty-first centuries. At the beginning of that period, the problem of menstrual hygiene – a major difficulty encountered by Lithuanian

womanhood for decades – was finally solved. This welcome relief affected two essential aspects of menstrual communication, namely the menstrual silence and the menstrual secrecy.

As indicated by the findings of this research, silence and secrecy are closely connected with menstrual hygiene: if menstrual hygiene products are unavailable, a special effort must be made in order to keep menstruation in secret.

Research data also show that mothers have started to communicate more willingly with their adolescent daughters on the subject of menstruation. This indicates that a vital element of communication taboo forbidding mothers to discuss menstruation with their daughters has crumbled in Lithuania.

As evidenced by research findings, menstrual knowledge has also increased in Lithuania. Today it is hardly possible to come across a premenarcheal girl absolutely ignorant about menstruation.

Comparison of data provided by Sample 1 (young women) and Sample 2 (elderly women) demonstrates that menstrual communication through encrypted language has also changed in Lithuania. Lexical material produced by Sample 1 (young women) and Sample 2 (elderly women) differs. The number of strategies used to convey menstruation messages has actually grown over the past fifty years. Menstrual vocabulary has become more diverse, e.g., numerous teen slang words/phrases substituting menstruation have emerged, and the number of borrowings from Western culture has increased.

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