



The Grammar of Prison Violence: Revisiting the Stanford Prison Experiment (1971)

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► To cite this version:

Jean-Rémi Lapaire. The Grammar of Prison Violence: Revisiting the Stanford Prison Experiment (1971). Pelosi, A., Pirres Ferreira dos Santos, L.A. and Pereira do Amaral, J. Violência, Polidez, Mediação de Conflitos e Acesso à Justiça: Alguns Caminhos, pp.9-44, 2017, 978-85-69235-14-9. halshs-01628827

HAL Id: halshs-01628827

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01628827>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2017

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01 THE GRAMMAR OF PRISON VIOLENCE: REVISITING THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT (1971)

Jean-Rémi Lapaire¹

INTRODUCTION

In 1971, Professor Philip Zimbardo and his team² staged a controversial experiment in the basement of the psychology department at Stanford University. 24 healthy male students were chosen among 70 applicants and arbitrarily divided into guards and prisoners. Surprise arrests³ were made in Palo Alto (by real police officers), a makeshift prison was set up and interactions between the subjects were filmed.

We wanted to see just what were the behavioral and psychological consequences of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. To do this, we decided to set up our own prison, to create or to simulate a prison environment and then to carefully note the effects of this total institution on the behavior of all those within its walls. (Zimbardo 1971)

The Stanford Prison Experiment, as it is now universally known, was meant to last two weeks but had to be terminated after 6 days only “when it became apparent that many of the ‘prisoners’ were in serious distress and many of the ‘guards’ were behaving in ways which brutalized and degraded their fellow subjects.” Mental breakdowns, sadistic behavior and eventually

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² Researchers: Philip Zimbardo, Craig Haney, W. Curtis Banks, David Jaffe. Primary Consultant : Carlo Prescott. Police cooperation in Palo Alto: James C. Zurcher, Joseph Sparaco, Marvin Herrington. Prison construction: Ralph Jilliams, Bob Zeiss, Don Johann (Zimbardo 1971).

³ « On a quiet Sunday morning in August, a Palo Alto, California a police car swept through the town picking up college students as part of a mass arrest for violation of Penal Codes 211, Armed Robbery and Burglary, a 459 PC. The suspect was picked up at his home, charged, warned of his legal rights, spread-eagled against the police car, searched and handcuffed; often as surprised and curious neighbors looked on. The suspect was put in the rear of the police car and carried off to the police station, the sirens wailing.” (Zimbardo 1971)

a hunger strike demonstrated “the power of situational determinants in both shaping behavior and predominating over personality, attitudes and individual values” (Zimbardo 1973).

Despite the sustained attention paid to verbal behavior during and after the experiment (debriefing sessions were held with all the participants), Zimbardo’s perspective remained primarily behavioral and socio-psychological, with a strong focus on “environmental contingencies” and interpersonal dynamics.

Individual behavior is largely under the control of social forces and environmental contingencies rather than personality traits, character, or will power. Thus, we create an illusion of freedom by attributing more internal control to ourselves, to the individual, than actually exists. We thus underestimate the power and pervasiveness of situational controls over behavior. (Zimbardo 1972)

The aim of the present study is to establish the centrality of language-based mechanisms in the processes at work: the enactment of power through the systematic defacement of prisoners, the grammatical orchestration of authority and submission through a small set of modal constructions. The mixed data used will be taken from the original video footage available and three successive film adaptations: *Das Experiment* (Hirschbiegel 2001), *The Experiment* (Scheuring 2010), *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (Alvarez 2015).

A “MOCK PRISON” WITH REAL EFFECTS

Zimbardo and his research assistants designed a simple yet realistic “simulation of prison life”: “environmental, structural, institutional and social variables were manipulated in an effort to create a ‘psychology of imprisonment’ in a group of subjects who role-played being guards (for eight hours a day over three shifts) and a group who acted as prisoners (for twenty-four hours a day)” (Zimbardo, 1973).

Figure 1 – The Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) - Prisoners and guards



“ PLAYING THE PRISON DRAMA” (ZIMBARDO 1971)

The 24 volunteers involved in the experiment were described as “normal, average, healthy American college males.” All had been recruited through newspaper advertisements in the United States and Canada. All had been administered a battery of psychological tests “to eliminate candidates with any kind of psychological problem, medical disability or history of crime or drug abuse” (Zimbardo 1971). In return for participating in “a study of prison life” each participant was promised a daily wage of fifteen dollars. The group was “arbitrarily divided into two subgroups by a flip of the coin. Half were randomly assigned to be guards, the others to be prisoners.” Role-distribution was not based on personal preference or predisposition. No special coaching was provided in the art of role-playing guards or prisoners. Only gowns, uniforms and a few props were made available to the mock wardens and inmates:

Neither group received any formal training in these roles—the cultural mass media had already provided the models they used to define their roles. The mock guards were impressed with the ‘seriousness’ of the experiment and by the demeanor of the research staff; the prospective prisoners began to take their roles seriously when they were subjected to an unexpected arrest by the city police. After being processed and temporarily detained at the police station, they were escorted to the experimental setting. Uniforms and differences in power further served to differentiate the two groups of subjects. (Zimbardo 1973)

The volunteers were left to work out their own strategies, both verbal and non verbal, on how to run the mock-prison: “The guards were given no special instruction (...) on how to be guards. Instead they were free, within limits, to do what ever they thought was necessary to maintain law and order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners” (Zimbardo 1971). Although few students were initially attracted to the guard role, it was not long before they felt empowered. Prisoners were told to strip and clean toilets. They were forced to relieve themselves in buckets in their rooms. Push-ups were routinely imposed as a punishment for showing disrespect to guards or breaking prison rules. When rebellion unexpectedly broke out on the second day, fire-extinguisher spray was used to control and humiliate inmates.

They got a fire extinguisher which shot a stream of skin-chilling carbon dioxide and forced the prisoners away from the doors, they broke into each cell, stripped the prisoners naked, took the beds out, forced some of the prisoners who were then the ringleaders into solitary confinement, and generally began to harass and intimidate the prisoners.

(...) About a third of the guards were extremely hostile, arbitrary, inventive in their forms of degradation and humiliation, and appeared to thoroughly enjoy the power they wielded when they put on the guard uniform and stepped out into the yard, big stick in hand. (Zimbardo 1971)

The spread of sadistic behavior and sudden eruption of brutality, Zimbardo claims, could only be explained by the dynamics of the prison situation:

The guard-subjects displayed a behavioral profile that was marked by its verbal and physical aggressiveness, arbitrariness and dehumanization of the subjects in the prisoner condition. None of these (and other) group or individual behavior patterns was predictable from the medical, social or educational histories of the subjects, nor from a battery of personality test scores. (Zimbardo, 1973)

The rebellion fostered in-group solidarity among the guards while creating a split among the prisoners, some resisting others yielding, some getting preferential treatment for their submissiveness, others undergoing harsher punishments for their rebelliousness, some being trusted (by guards or fellow inmates) others becoming suspect. Those prisoners perceived as “activists” or “ring-leaders” were singled for tougher treatment by guards.

Gradually, prisoners started to show signs of depersonalization and demoralization: stress and depression set in.

Five prisoners had to be released because of extreme emotional depression, crying, rage and acute anxiety. The pattern of symptoms was quite similar in four of the subjects and began as early as the second day of imprisonment. The fifth subject was released after being treated for a psychosomatic rash which covered portions of his body. (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973)

A former prison chaplain, who was allowed to visit the prisoners and talk to them individually, was surprised to find that most inmates introduced themselves by “giving their numbers rather than their name” (Zimbardo 1971). The Roman Catholic priest played his part so realistically that some of the students accepted his offer to contact their parents and seek legal aid. The line between reality and fiction was blurred to the point that everyone, observers included, found themselves caught up in the situation:

The priest's visit highlights the growing confusion between^[...]reality and illusion, between role-playing and self-identity that was gradually taking place in all of us within this prison which we had created, but which now was absorbing us as creatures of its own^[...]reality (...) We were all trapped in our roles. (Zimbardo 1971)

Within six days the “simulated prison” had developed into a dangerously hostile social environment. The situation was clearly spinning out of control, and the ethics of the experiment started to be challenged. Tension developed to levels that could no longer be sustained without harmful consequences on the weaker subjects. Eventually, the experiment had to be called off.

At this point it became clear that we had to end this experiment. We had to do so because it was no longer an experiment. We had indeed created a prison in which people were suffering, in which some boys called prisoners were withdrawing, becoming isolated and behaving in pathological ways. On the other hand, some of the guards were behaving sadistically, delighting in what could be called the "ultimate aphrodisiac of power," and many of the guards who were not behaving that way felt helpless to do anything about it. In fact, they allowed it to go on, never once interfering with an order by one of the cruel guards. (Zimbardo 1971)

SELF-REVELATION

In the year that followed the prison experiment, the 24 subjects were called back for individual and group interviews. Some of the video footage collected by Zimbardo's team was edited and eventually made available to a broader academic audience through *Stanford Instructional Television Network* (1988). A 50' documentary film was produced and released in 1992, *The Quiet Rage*, on which the remarks below are based.

The testimonies clearly show that the dominant feeling among the young male volunteers was one of self-revelation. The mock prisoners realized their own vulnerability and lack of resilience: "At first, I thought I could manage prison for a while. Right now, I don't think I could manage it at all." The mock guards were disturbed by their own unabashed cruelty to others: "I really thought I was incapable of this sort of behavior. I was really surprised... dismayed... to find out that I could act ... and become accustomed to doing things I couldn't even dream I was doing. And while I was doing it, I didn't feel any regret, I didn't feel any guilt. It was only after that this behavior began to dawn on me, that I realized that there was this part of me that I had not noticed before."

Depersonalization was another disquieting experience. The ease with which the healthy young men were deprived of their former identity came as shock to most of them: (Mock prisoner) "I thought I was going to a prison run by psychologists instead of run by the state. I began to feel that identity... the person that I was and that had decided to go to prison was distant from me... was remote... until finally I wasn't that, I was 416, I was really my number, and 416 was going to decide what he had to do." Forcing the students to shed their clothes and wear uniforms undoubtedly played a key role in the process: (Mock guard) "When you wear a uniform and are given a role saying 'Your job is to keep these people in line' you're certainly not the same person as if you were in street clothes and in a different role. You really become that person once you put on that khaki uniform."

One of the prison guards, nicknamed John Wayne for his good looks and self-assurance, confesses that he used the main experiment to "run little experiments of his own." He recalls: "I wanted to see just what kind of verbal abuse people can take before they start objecting." This was a very relevant question indeed, since public defacement was probably the most powerful strategy used by the guards to overcome prisoner resistance and establish their authority, as will be shown in the last section. Wayne insightfully remarks that the prisoners took all the verbal abuse cast at them. They put up with his cruel and demeaning demands without opposing much

resistance: “It surprised me that no one said anything. No one said ‘You can’t say those things to me. Those things are sick!’ No one said that. ‘Don’t tell that man he’s the scum of the earth.’ They’d do push-ups without question. Here they are abusing each other because I requested them to. No one questioned my authority at all. And it really shocked me.”

The discoveries were painful. Yet, no lasting effects were reported in the ten years that followed: “The consensus is that they did suffer during that week but they learned a great deal about themselves, about human nature, which most of them say is quite valuable,” Zimbardo claims in *The Quiet Rage* (1992). The effects, he adds, were “situation-bound”: “What we saw, what they experienced was the power of the situation. They told us about the situation they were in. What they said was not diagnostic of any personal pathology, it was diagnostic of prison-like situations.”

THE PATHOLOGY OF IMPRISONMENT AND “THE LUCIFER EFFECT” (ZIMBARDO 2007)

During the experiment, Zimbardo acted as “prison superintendent.” His standpoint nonetheless remained that of the social psychologist. Although a close “audio analysis” was performed that included structured descriptions of “verbal expressions” (Hany, Banks & Zimbardo 1973), Zimbardo’s priority never ceased to be the study of the mental and behavioral processes associated with the exercise of power, control and domination in a prison-like situation: how the prison environment creates conditions for aggressive behavior or submissive conformity; how “the pathology of power” takes hold of individuals; how “personality and attitude dispositions⁴” evolve in context (Hany, Banks & Zimbardo 1973). Zimbardo’s initial perspective was aptly summarized in “The Pathology of Imprisonment” (1972), where most of the attention was focused on “the dramatic changes (that took place) in virtually every aspect of behavior, thinking and feeling”, with prominence given to:

- Mental confusion:

It was no longer apparent to most of the subjects (or to us) where reality ended and their roles began. The majority had indeed become prisoners or guards, no longer able to clearly differentiate between role-playing and self. (Zimbardo 1972)

⁴ The team used the Comrey Personality Scales (1970) with the following 8 factors: trustworthiness (vs. defensiveness), orderliness (vs. lack of compulsion), conformity (vs. rebelliousness), activity (vs. lack of energy), stability (vs. neuroticism), extraversion (vs. introversion), mental toughness / masculinity (vs. sensitivity), empathy (vs. egocentrism).

- Social and moral regression:

In less than a week the experience of imprisonment undid (temporarily) a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged and the ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced (...) We were horrified because we saw some boys (guards) treat others as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys (prisoners) became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival and of their mounting hatred for the guards. (Zimbardo 1972)

Interestingly, during the prison study, Zimbardo also showed some concern for moral issues, as is apparent in the articles he wrote or co-authored just after the experiment. From the outset, what he defined as the “pathology of imprisonment” rested on a clear division between right and wrong, “good” and “evil”: “good guards” vs. “bad guards”; “good prisoners” vs. “bad prisoners” (Zimbardo 1972); “good men” engaging in “evil deeds”; “people ‘doing evil things’” (Zimbardo 1973). Yet, questions like “What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph?”⁵ were never asked so bluntly in the 1970s.

A much-needed clarification of the moral issue came with the publication of *The Lucifer Effect. How Good People Turn Evil* (Zimbardo 2007). To promote his new book, Zimbardo gave numerous presentations and interviews. In his 2008 TED talk (22') on “The Psychology of Evil”⁶ he can be heard using “bad” 11 times, “Lucifer” and “devil” 9 times, “good” and “evil” 40 times. Yet, it would be a mistake to think that by using strong moral terms with such insistence, by making repeated cultural references to Biblical stories, literary myths pitting “good” against “evil,” Zimbardo cast himself in the role of moralist or mixed religion with science.

Lucifer “the light bearer,” was God’s favorite angel until he challenged God’s authority and was cast into Hell, along with his band of fallen angels. “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven,” boasts Stan “the adversary of God” in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

(...) Lucifer’s sin is what thinkers in the Middle Ages called “cupiditas.” For Dante, the sins that spring from that root are the most “extreme sins of the wolf,” the spiritual condition of having an

⁵ Official Stanford Prison Experiment website, Social Psychology Network, 1999-2017.

⁶ Zimbardo’s viral TED talk on “The Psychology of Evil” has already attracted over 6 million viewers and been subtitled in 30 different languages.

inner black hole so deep within oneself that no amount of power or money can ever fill it. (Zimbardo 2007)

Zimbardo did indeed exploit religious imagery and vocabulary that his North American audience found congenial and meaningful, but his definition of “evil” never ceased to be social, behavioral and motivational. It was never theological in any way. “Evil,” he wrote, “consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize or destroy innocent others—or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf” (Zimbardo 2006: 5). The dominant religion-based model of morality, he claimed, overly personalizes and “essentializes” evil by attributing wrongdoing to a person’s dark side or devious disposition. Although pertinent, “inner determinants” are not alone in guiding humans “up the good paths or down the bad ones.” The alternative model that he proposed stresses the influence of context. “Outer determinants” play an even more decisive part than disposition in shaping behavior and determining human actions. All social creatures, he argued, end up being “creatures of the situation, of the moment, of the mob” (Zimbardo 2007).

The *Lucifer effect* is my attempt to understand the process of transformation when good or ordinary people do bad or evil things. (I) deal with the fundamental question “What makes people go wrong?” But instead of reverting to a traditional religious dualism of good versus evil, of wholesome nature versus corrupting nurture, (I) look at real people engaged in life’s daily tasks, enmeshed in doing their jobs (...) (I) will seek to understand the nature of their character transformations when they are faced with powerful situational forces. (Zimbardo 2007)

Writing on “the Lucifer effect” and deconstructing “the psychology of evil” allowed was Zimbardo’s (successful) attempt at reaching out to a broader, non-academic audience, unfamiliar with research in social psychology. His “situationist” theory of evil (Pignotti 2006) was intended as a dispassionate, enlightened response to a major political scandal that had shaken the United States in 2004 and thrown ordinary citizens into disarray: the startling revelation that human rights violations had taken place inside the Abu Ghraib prison (Iraq), which was run by the American military. 17 US soldiers and officers had abused detainees. None had any previous record of brutal or sadistic behavior. They were not “bad apples,” yet they had become “perpetrators of evil” who had inflicted torture and humiliation upon detainees. Some had even used their cameras or smartphones to take pictures. How could “good soldiers” undergo such a “transformation of character” (Zimbardo 2008)? Could the mixed war and prison situation, not

just moral depravity, be blamed for those sickening incidents? The Stanford Experiment was brought back into the spotlight, and the lessons taught in 1971 spelled out again by Zimbardo, some 35 years later.

I was shocked, but I wasn't surprised, because I had seen those same visual parallels when I was the prison superintendent of the Stanford Prison Study. Immediately the Bush administration military said what all administrations say when there's a scandal: "Don't blame us. It's not the system. It's the few bad apples, the few rogue soldiers." My hypothesis is, American soldiers are good, usually. Maybe it was the barrel that was bad. (Zimbardo 2008)

In his assessment of the Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse of 2004, Zimbardo not only made a more generous use of moral vocabulary than in his earlier writings, but he also relied more heavily on the *stage metaphor* for human action: humans are “actors” playing out “scenes” that define their “character” and behavior.

Social psychologists like me come along and say, "Yeah, people are the actors on the stage, but you'll have to be aware of the situation. Who are the cast of characters? What's the costume? Is there a stage director?" And so we're interested in what are the external factors around the individual. (Zimbardo 2008)

Although Zimbardo never used Goffman's *dramaturgical* model of speech and social interaction (1959, 1967, 1983), he clearly suggested that the utterances produced in face-to-face interaction were similar to *lines* delivered by “actors” on the “stage of life”. The suggestion was a valid one and deserves to be further specified.

Most actors are not solitary figures improvising soliloquies on the empty stage of life. Rather, they are often in an ensemble of different players, on a stage with various props and changing costumes, scripts, and stage directions from producers and directors. Together, they comprise situational features we must come to appreciate as influencing how behavior can be dramatically modified. By recognizing the impact of those off the stage, in the wings, who make the human drama work for any given play, we implicate systemic features into our analysis. (Zimbardo 2007)

In spontaneous interaction, lines are mostly unrehearsed. Yet the type of scene being played out largely determines the form and function of utterances. This is why the peaceful, easy-going male students developed speech forms that clearly departed from their usual conversational style but were nonetheless consistent with their new simulated prison environment. What Zimbardo calls the “power of the situation” is primarily the power of

the speech situation over language use, and the power of social role over identity. The “moment” is the main shaper of communicative behavior: “Not men and their moments. Rather, moments and their men” (Goffman 1967). The “social setting” in which speakers “perform” prevails over personality in shaping and determining conversational style. Here is a good example:

[Guard addressing fellow guards] Good evening gentlemen. How about we make this one a night to remember? [Next shot shows him in his prison uniform, addressing prisoner 416 who is detained in solitary confinement] You mean to tell me that you spent all day long in that stinking hole because you wouldn't eat two lousy, little sausages? Goddamn boy. Well, maybe you want us to take them sausages and cram 'em up your ass, huh? Bet you like that, 416, won't you? (...)

[Breaks out in anger] What did you expect boy? Huh? What the fuck did you expect? Did you expect this to be a fucking nursery school? Huh? Is that what you thought this was gonna be? You thought you were gonna get some playtime in the yard, boy? [Door bangs. Guard yells at prisoner] You listen to me, 416! You ain't going nowhere but this FUCKING hole until you eat those FUCKING sausages! Do you fucking hear me, boy? [Chuckles]

The Stanford Prison Experiment, directed by Kyle Patrick Alvarez (2015)

The sudden change of setting, from the prison guards' room to the “hole,” is accompanied by an abrupt shift in communicative behavior. The same man, endowed with the same personality features, and performing the same role, adopts completely different discourse strategies. In the guard's room, interaction with peers is friendly, cheerful and egalitarian. The guard is careful to consult the wishes of his colleagues and makes a tactful use of “How about...?” He caters to the negative face needs of his interlocutors, and avoids direct interpersonal manipulation. But when confronting prisoner 416 in the prison cell, the guard's voice changes dramatically (in tone, pitch, loudness), and so do his grammar and vocabulary. The interaction is no longer egalitarian but hierarchical. The brutality of his injunctions (“You listen to me”; “You ain't going...”), the coarseness of his admonishments (“What the fuck did you expect?”), the humiliating reference to sodomy (“maybe you want us to take them sausages and cram 'em up your ass... Bet you like that”) are meant to deface de prisoner in front of the other guards and shame him into submission.

Thus speech situations are not just “social gatherings” where communicative interaction takes place. Speech situations are “social settings” (Goffman 1967) that constrain the forms of speech in many more ways than we expect. The “lines” delivered by speakers in the social performance of speech are situation-bound and rule-governed. For speech is not only shaped by contextual forces but also follows established patterns—lexical, syntactic, pragmatic—typical of the communal “verbal repertoire” (Gumperz 1964). Yet, the rules and patterns that constrain speakers also empower them, by providing them with a powerful “arsenal” in which “the weapons of everyday communication” are stored (Gumperz 1964).

In summary, the violence and power plays that unfolded before Zimbardo’s eyes were fought with the ordinary resources of language, not just with nightsticks and fire extinguisher spray, as will be confirmed in the next two sections.

FILM ADAPTATIONS OF ZIMBARDO’S ORIGINAL “PRISON DRAMA”

The Stanford prison experiment (1971) inspired three major film adaptations in 2001, 2010 and 2015, which supply precious verbal and kinetic material for a *discourse pragmatic* approach to the *grammar of prison violence*.

DAS EXPERIMENT (2001)

The first “drama film” to be released was *Das Experiment* (2001) by Oliver Hirschbiegel. The screenplay was based on the eponymous novel by the German novelist Mario Giordano (*Das Experiment. Black Box*, 1990) who was directly involved in writing the new script. The cast included Moritz Bleibtreu as Tarek (prisoner 77), Justus von Dohnányi (Berus, guard), Edgar Selge (Dr. Klaus Thon, scientist) and Andrea Sawatzki (Dr. Jutta Grimm, research assistant).

Figure 2 – Prisoner lineup (*Das Experiment* 2001)



The film was well distributed in Europe and America, and officially described as a “psychological thriller” inspired by real life incidents that had occurred at Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, during a psychological experiment. Although it incorporated recognizable features of Zimbardo’s prison study (1971), *Das Experiment* (2001) did more than just fictionalize what had taken place in the basement of the psychology department. It contained added layers of brutality and perversity, and had more violent twists in its plot than the original “prison drama.” In the second half of the story, Dr. Thon’s colleagues are captured while he is away at a conference. The guards take total control of the prison. Berus (the head warden) even tries to rape Ms. Grimm. The central character, Tarek, escapes from solitary confinement, frees the other prisoners and leads the final rebellion. Shots are fired, two participants killed and three injured. The nightmare is over. Dr. Thon and Berus are sued for their involvement and responsibility in an illegal, unethical experiment.

Das Experiment triggered controversy in European academic circles and was labeled “irresponsible” by the *American Psychology Association* (Murray 2002). Because it recycled authentic material from the Stanford prison experiment and extrapolated Zimbardo’s “psychology of evil,” Hirschbiegel’s outrageous (but clever) screen adaptation of Giordano’s novel elicited angry reactions from the scientific community. The film struck a very sensitive chord in showing researchers losing control (as had been the case in real life, although in a less dramatic way), and crossing the ethical line (Zimbardo was indeed accused of unethical practice and had to defend himself in a 1973 paper entitled “On the ethics of intervention in human

psychological research: With special reference to the Stanford prison experiment”).

In her assessment of the controversy, Murray (2002) quotes an interview with Zimbardo in which he strongly condemned the inclusion of links to the official Stanford Experiment website in the film’s promotional material. The connection set up between fact and fiction blurred the line between reality and fantasy.⁷ Worse, “it made Stanford and (...) psychology look bad.” Zimbardo was nonetheless forced to admit that the first half of the plot was close to the original story, but with no clear indication of when the narrative shifted into fantasy: “The audience doesn’t know at what point this is fiction. Does anyone get raped in the Stanford Prison experiment? No. Did anybody get killed? No. Does anybody even bleed? No.”

What Zimbardo acknowledged as real were the following: recruiting paid male volunteers through newspaper advertisements; interviewing them and spelling out rules for the simulated prison experiment; guards developing sadistic behavior and prisoners showing signs of stress and depression; the need to terminate the experiment early. But he angrily discarded “the beatings, torture, rape and murders,” as well as “the gratuitous sex and violence” which, he claimed, were gross inventions that had misled the public into thinking that his team had acted cruelly and irresponsibly.

Despite the voluminous scientific literature published on the Stanford prison experiment and the continuous media interest it has aroused, few recordings are available to the general public. Video footage is fragmentary and reduced to a small collection of scenes edited for *The Quiet Rage* (Zimbardo 1992). The original shots are blurred and the sound quality is extremely poor. A study of realistic scenes, taken from the three main film adaptations (2001, 2010, 2015) thus constitutes a sensible alternative to carry out an empirical investigation of the *verbal strategies of empowerment and disempowerment* at play. All the more so, as the perspective adopted in the present study is not psychological but discourse pragmatic.

To illustrate this point, let us consider one of the early scenes in *Das Experiment* (2001) in which Dr. Thorn and his assistant Dr. Grimm are

⁷ “What’s wrong is they are masquerading the movie as documentary of a real-life experiment with real people at Stanford University.” Quoted in (Murray 2002).

shown addressing the group of male volunteers who have just been recruited for the experiment.

(Dr. Grimm) I would like to introduce Professor Thon, the director of this experiment.

(Pr. Thon) Gentlemen, I would like to thank you all for participating. You are brave men.

(Laughter) You laugh, but I'm serious. The next two weeks will be a new experience for you. You'll undergo and exert pressure. Some of you will have no civil rights for two weeks. Do not underestimate that. If anyone wants to go, it's your last chance.

Das Experiment, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel (2001)

This scene provides an apt illustration of how situational properties override identity and disposition in shaping a person's conversational style. The hall, the white lab coats and the seating arrangement are an integral part of the social occasion. The “moment” (Goffman 1967) strongly determines the nature and style of the communicative interaction. Formal instructions are issued: the tone is civil, the mood relaxed. Face needs are addressed: polite introductions are made, thanks given, compliments paid, options left, as the underlined segments attest. Warnings and guidance (for the days to come) are expressed with authority, using simple declarative statements.

Figure 3 – Issuing and receiving instructions (*Das Experiment* 2001)



The division of space between instructors (researchers) and students is maintained. Speakers and listeners adopt bodily postures that are both relaxed and respectful. Mutual attention is sustained. It is hard to imagine, at

this point, that the same group of subjects will soon engage in forms of communicative behavior that are far less civil and controlled. Their speech style will be dramatically modified by a dramatic change in the situational features. The confusion and panic, the outburst of anger, the swearing and name-calling, the brutal commands, the constant defacements which would have been thoroughly out of place in the lecture hall, will become *commonplace* in the dark cells and grim corridors of the simulated prison.

Figure 4 – Confrontation between guards and prisoner 7



“You stupid little asshole! You think you’re smart!” (*Das Experiment* 2001)

THE EXPERIMENT (2010)

The second major film adaptation to be released, *The Experiment* (2010), was a “drama thriller” directed by Paul Scheuring, with Adrien Brody (Travis, prisoner) and Forest Whitaker (Barris, head warden). The film is an American remake of the German “psychological thriller” *Das Experiment* (2001), based on the same novel by Mario Giordano.⁸ The plot was however altered, shortened and simplified, the murderous violence toned down. The film struggled to find a U.S. distributor and was finally released in DVD

⁸ The film was dubbed and distributed in Brazil under the title *Detenção*. The distributors defined the movie as little else than “the American version of the German film *Das Experiment*” (“Versão americana do filme alemão *A Experiência*”).

format. Paul Scheuring's screenplay shows greater proximity to the original Stanford prison experiment but major distortions remain: not all the male volunteers are students (one of them turns out to be a former inmate); a young man with a severe diabetic condition is recruited but denied insulin; the "makeshift prison" is nothing less than a highly sophisticated, state-of-the-art prison compound; one of the guards sexually harasses a prisoner and nearly rapes him; prisoners are routinely bullied and some get physically harmed (although none of them dies).

In *The Experiment* (2010), Dr Archaleta (the chief scientist) is shown issuing general guidelines to the volunteers, alone, inside the prison compound.

(Scientist in white lab coat) Good afternoon gentlemen. The next two weeks will be a new a new experience for you. Some of you will have no civil rights. Do not underestimate that. If any of you want to leave, now is your last chance. No? Good! Again, your safety is our number one priority. If there is any violence, any at all, the experiment will be immediately terminated. Clear? When I call your name, please stand. (The guards' names are disclosed). Good. So the rest of you, please stand up and follow the yellow line. Good luck gentlemen.

.*The Experiment*, directed by Paul Scheuring (2010)

The usual repertoire of greetings ("Good afternoon gentlemen"), formulaic wish-phrases ("Good luck gentlemen"), and polite imperatives ("Please stand [up]") are used. Remarkably, the *weapons of everyday grammar* are used more forcefully than in the corresponding German scene to establish complete authority and control over the participants.

- A declarative construction like "your safety is our number one priority" is strategically used to code absolute certainty in an unmarked way. The basic assertive function of the present tense in English is used to manipulate the volunteers into believing that the experts are in control and should be trusted, which is illusory. But who, upon hearing such a plain statement, would dare to challenge its truth-value?
- A manipulative use of *will* constructions is made that combines prediction with volition, leaving no room for contradiction ("The next two weeks will be a new experience for you", "Some of you will have no civil rights").
- A negative imperative occurs that is meant to dispel all illusions and counter possible objections ("Do not underestimate that").

- Elliptical constructions are chosen that enhance speaker authority. The combination of terseness and briskness leaves no room for qualms or contradiction (“No? Good!”). Pragmatically, “Clear?” functions as an injunction meaning “You get me right!” The little lexical or grammatical material that is preserved in ellipsis always acquires greater salience and sharpness (as will later be confirmed in the elliptical command “Push ups, ten!”).
- The quantifying expression *any at all* radically excludes compromise (“If there is any violence, any at all...”).
- Finally, *if*... constructions are successfully used by Dr. Archuleta to blackmail the volunteers and dictate his own law. *If* empowers him with the ability to open “mental spaces” (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) in which a potentially threatening scene is fictively played out (e.g. someone rejecting the rules, violence breaking out). From there, he draws the unavoidable, damaging consequences to everyone. The message is clear and may be reworded as follows: “If you don’t accept the rules set out for this experiment then you can’t stay (and you won’t be paid)”; “If you behave violently then the game will be over.” Conditional constructions in *if* (and equivalent constructions in *or*, e.g. “Either you maintain order *or* you don’t get paid”) are the *absolute syntactic weapon* to control behavior and overcome all forms of resistance.

In the original Stanford experiment, a set of 17 prison rules were prepared by the guards and read out twice to the prisoners. Modal expressions played a key role in expressing deontic necessity⁹:

- 13 rules were built on a obligatory use of the modal *must*: e.g. “Prisoners must not move, tamper with, deface or damage walls, ceiling, windows, doors, or any prison property (rule 5); “Prisoners must address each other by number only” (rule 7); “Prisoners must always address the guards as “Mr. Correctional Officer,” and the warden as “Mr. Chief Correctional Officer”, etc.
- 3 rules relied on the use of the modal *may* to disempower prisoners while empowering wardens: “Prisoners may never operate cell lighting” (rule 6); “Visitors are a privilege (...) The guard may terminate the visit at his discretion” (rule 13). Rule 17 made use of *may* in its possibility (as

⁹ Pragmatic modals are used deontically when they express meanings such as obligation *will* and permissibility. From the Greek word for “duty” (*deon*). Must is said to express “deontic necessity” when it indicates immediate or future obligation / prohibition.

opposed to permission) sense: “Failure to obey any of the above rules may result in punishment” (rule 17). The *may*-construction used in this last rule may be paraphrased by “is likely to” and is more tentative than the alternate *will*-construction: “Failure to obey any of the above rules will (inevitably) result in punishment.” But the tentativeness expressed by *may* is not a sign of weakness, since it works to the guards’ advantage: prison wardens have the power and discretion to decide whether some punishment should be applied to non-compliant prisoners.

- 5 rules contained *will*-constructions (used alone or in combination with other modals). *Will* does more than predict the future with a high degree of certainty. In official documents, *will* has a constraining force that cannot be challenged. Rule-makers know this well and make abundant use of to define lines of action and behavioral pathways: “Mail is a privilege. All mail flowing in and out of the prison will be inspected and censored” (rule 12); “All prisoners in a cell will stand whenever the Warden, the Prison Superintendent or any other visitors arrive on the premises. Prisoners will await an order to be seated and resume activities.” (rule 14).

Modal constructions are not the sole grammatical weapon available to control behavior. Enumeration is an equally powerful tool since it leaves little room for argumentation. Individual rules are laid down, one after the other. No justification is needed, no logical linkage required. The coercive power of enumeration is best summed up by the tautology “Rules are rules” which was repeatedly used by guards in the original Stanford experiment and its subsequent film adaptations.

Interestingly, both *Das Experiment* (2001) and *The Experiment* (2010) adopt the same discourse strategies to lay out the 5 basic rules at the beginning: enumeration, *must*-, *will*- and *if*-constructions. Also worth noticing are passive constructions, which shift the focus to the disempowered subject. Prisoners are construed as patients being acted upon, rather than free agents (“Prisoners are allowed only...” “Prisoners must speak when spoken to”).

(Dr. Archaleta addressing the guards in their room, shortly before the experiments begin)

Rule number one. Prisoners must eat three meals a day. All food must be consumed.

Two. There will be thirty minutes of rec daily.

Three. Prisoners are allowed only in prisoner-designated areas.
Four. Prisoners must speak only when spoken to.
And Five. Prisoners must not touch the guards under any circumstances.
Those that break the rules must be punished commensurately.
This experiment is not about individuals.
If any one person leaves, it's over.
If a prisoner does break the rules, you will have thirty minutes to choose proper disciplinary action. If you fail to do so, that red light will come on, the experiment will be terminated, and you will not get paid.

The Experiment, directed by Paul Scheuring (2010)

Day 1. The role-playing begins. The interaction is playful. Jokes are occasionally cracked. Changing into prisoner or guard uniforms does not seem to create much of a divide between the men, until one of the wardens is accidentally hit during a ball game. This is the first serious confrontation and punishment ensues.

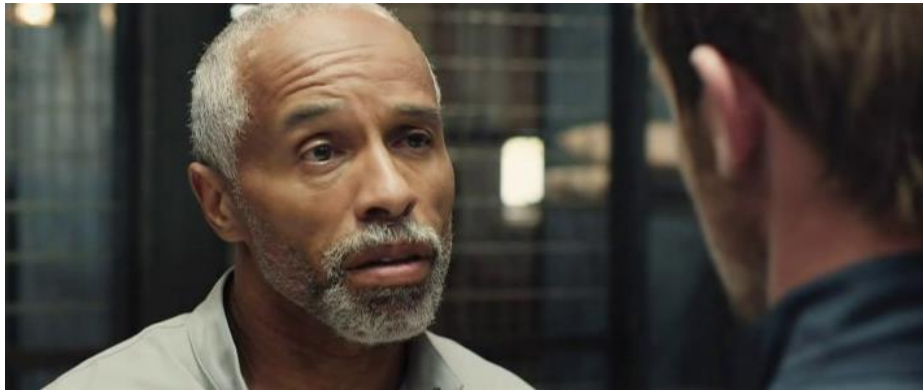
(Guard) Pushups. Ten! Do it now.
(Prisoner) I just need a little civility, that's all. It was an accident!
(Guard) This is not a fucking negotiation. Do the pushups!
(Prisoner) Just a little civility, brother. Just a little!
(Guard) Alright, then. Everyone 10 pushups!

The Experiment, directed by Paul Scheuring (2010)

The grammatical mood is jussive¹⁰: “Do it now”, “Do the pushups!” In ordinary life settings, attempts at direct interpersonal manipulation are commonly experienced as face-threatening, so politeness strategies are spontaneously applied by tactful speakers to avoid interpersonal friction, like adding “please” to an imperative construction, using a friendly intonation pattern or conditional construction to give orders (“Could you...”, “Would you care to...”). In the early moments of the experiment, prisoners still live by the normal code of “civil” interaction. Rough, elliptical commands such as “Pushups. Ten!” or “Everyone 10 pushups!” are experienced as particularly demeaning.

¹⁰ “Jussive,” from Latin *jussus* (ordered), from *jubere* (to command). A grammatical mood typically used to issue orders, give commands and grant permission. In English grammar, the word “imperative,” from Latin *imperare* (to command) is more commonly used.

Figure 4 – Maintaining face



“Just a little civility, brother. Just a little!” (*The Experiment* 2010)

As is clear in the prisoner’s reply (“Just a little civility”) form matters more than content. Punishment is accepted, however unfair, but disrespectful language is not. Interestingly, one of the prisoners (who has a real-life experience of jail) views resistance as pointless and tries to convince fellow inmates to get on with the pushups:

(Other prisoner) Do it, men! Let’s go! Do it! Come on. Do it!

(Guard) Yeah, follow your little brother, men. There we are. Count them out!

The Experiment, directed by Paul Scheuring (2010)

“Come on!” is a fixed form imperative that is typically used to persuade someone to give up and comply, the plural imperative “Let’s...” (in “Let’s go”) creates solidarity between the speaker and those he wishes to control (the suggestion made being “we’re in this together”). The strategy works and his prison mates eventually comply.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT (2015)

The third and last film adaptation to be released was the award-winning¹¹ *Stanford Prison Experiment* (2015), directed by Kyle Patrick Alvarez. To this day, it is considered the most accomplished and accurate of the three. Tim Talbott’s screenplay chronicles the mock arrests and six days spent by 24 college students inside their makeshift prison in Palo Alto. As happened

¹¹ *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (2015) won the “Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award: U.S. Dramatic” and “Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize” at the Sundance Film Festival (2015).

in the original prison study, Zimbardo (played by Billy Crudup) is caught up in his game. His girlfriend opens his eyes and makes him see how perilous the situation has become.

The film has been unanimously praised for its subtle treatment of the psychology of imprisonment: the subjects remain complex, ambivalent and unpredictable throughout. In one of the early scenes, the freshly appointed guards act awkwardly. Something in their voice and demeanor betrays their uneasiness (“OK. Um.”) But grammar provides them with simple, powerful instruments of social control: elliptical imperatives (“Feet apart”, “Wider”), standard imperatives (“Put your head down”, “Take off your shoes”), angry imperatives (“Shut up!”), focused imperatives (“Just keep your hands on the wall”). Interestingly, when used with intransitive verbs, imperative constructions have a stronger manipulative force and sound more face threatening (“Strip!”). Emphatic repetition (“I said”) and the use of *I want you to V* (“I want you to strip”) also empower the guard by highlighting his position as a source of authority (“I”).

Figure 5 – Exercising control and authority with simple grammar



“Now I want you to strip” (*The Stanford Prison Experiment* 2015)
 (Guard 1) Which one of us should start?
 (Guard 2) Well, I’ll do it. (Addressing the blindfolded prisoner) Um.
 Oh. OK. Feet apart. Wider. I said “wider.”
 (Prisoner 8612) You guys, this doesn’t have to be...
 (Guard 2) Just keep your hands on the wall. (Smiles) Ok, just keep your hands on the wall. Um, put your head down. (Prisoner chuckles) Uh, take off your shoes. (Guard 3 picks them up and puts them into a box). Ok. Um... Put your hands at your sides. Now I want you to strip. (Prisoner scoffs)

(Prisoner 8612) Uh, really? Maybe I could have some privacy first...
(Guard 2) Shut up! And strip. (Prisoner chuckles) (Guard smiles and seems to be amused too) And put your clothes on the floor.
(Prisoner complies)
(Prisoner 8612 takes his clothes off) Oh man...
(Guard 2) Put your clothes to the right.

The Stanford Prison Experiment (2015)

As shown in this example, everyday grammar is a powerful tool when authority needs to be established and behavior controlled. Simple jussive constructions empower guards and make prisoners fall in line.

The strategic manipulation of verbal and dress codes is also used for “depersonalization”—or the stripping of individuality. Prisoners lose their first and last names and are systematically addressed by prison number (e.g. 8612)¹²; guards are respectfully addressed as “Sir” or “Mr. Correctional Officer.”

(Guard, admonishing prisoner 8612) “You will at all times refer to us as Mr. Correctional Officer. You got it?”

(Prisoner 8612) Uh, yeah, I got it.

(Guard) What was that?

(Prisoner 8612, half serious, half defiant) I mean, yes sir, Mr. Correctional Officer, sir.

(Guard) Yeah. Good.

The Stanford Prison Experiment (2015)

Uniforms are worn. In the original experiment (as in the 2015 film adaptation), prisoners not only lost their sense of identity but were also made to feel “emasculated” and “humiliated” by wearing a loose-fitting dress, “nylon stockings” on their heads, and no underpants. In his first typed “narration” Zimbardo (1971) explains:

Each prisoner is searched and then systematically stripped naked. He is then deloused, a procedure designed in part to humiliate him and in part to be sure he isn't bringing in any germs to contaminate our jail. The prisoner is then issued his uniform. It consists of five parts. The main part is a dress which each prisoner wears at all times with no underclothes. On the dress, in front and in back, is his prison number. On

¹² One scene shows the prisoners lined up against the wall, being forced to shout out then sing their 4 digit prison numbers “louder”, “faster”, “forwards”, “backwards” in a cruel attempt to crush their will and demean them. (Guard) “I want it fast, I want it loud and I want it clear.”

the prisoner's right ankle is a heavy chain, bolted on and worn at all times. Loosely fitting rubber sandals are on their feet and on their heads, to cover their long hair, stocking caps, a woman's nylon stocking made into a cap which also had to be kept on day and night. It should be clear that what we were trying to do was to create a functional simulation of a prison environment, not a literal one. This is an important distinction for you to appreciate and keep in mind. Real male prisoners don't wear dresses; but real male prisoners, we have learned, do feel humiliated, do feel emasculated, and we thought we could produce the same effects very quickly by putting men in a dress without any underclothes. Indeed, as soon as some of our prisoners were put in these uniforms they began to walk and to sit differently, and to hold themselves differently, more like a woman than like a man. (Zimbardo 1971) [Underline is mine]

Dress codes were not alone in feminizing prisoners (and masculinizing guards¹³). Verbal codes were consciously and purposefully distorted too. Guards delighted in using “Girls”, “Ladies”, “She” to address the prisoners, thus challenging their masculinity:

(Guard dragging the prisoner to his cell) OK boys, let's take her down there and show her just how pretty she looks. (...) Let's take her down to cell n°2.

(...)

(Guard handing pen and paper for inmates to write a letter to invite a visitor)

Let's get to writing those letters, ladies.

(...)

(Guard ordering prisoners to sing their prison number in a girl's voice, doing jumping jacks)

Like a pretty little girl.

The Stanford Prison Experiment (2015)

Conversely, the manliness of the guards was reasserted: “man”, “boys”, “guys” were playfully used to mark in-group proximity and solidarity.

¹³ The uniform worn by the guards were designed to enhance their virility and authority. “For the guards, the uniforms consisted of: plain khaki shirts and trousers, a whistle, a police night stick (wooden baton), and reflecting sunglasses that made eye contact impossible.” (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo 1973).

THE PRISON FRAME

Technically, the word “prison” refers to “public buildings” used to “house convicted criminals and accused persons awaiting trial” (Collins English Dictionary). But “prison” does more than just that: it activates a rich *knowledge structure* stored in *long-term memory* known as a “frame” (Fillmore 1976, 1977, Tannen 1997). Frames relate participants, roles and events typically “associated with a particular culturally embedded scene or situation” (Evans 2007). In both the original Stanford prison experiment and the film adaptations reviewed in 2.1-3, the *prison frame* was set up and maintained through *spatial arrangement* (prison cells, including a “hole”, the guards room, latrines), *role distribution* (superintendent-guards-prisoners), *routines* (lineups, lockups, meals, recreation), and finally *rules* that prescribed what was acceptable or unacceptable prison behavior. The male volunteers identified with guard or prisoner roles through the “prison frame,” which they had culturally internalized before the experiment, and via the new interactional frame that spontaneously developed during the six harassing days of the experiment.

Remarkably, language rules¹⁴ were prominent in organizing prison life: it is through the combination of verbal and physical actions that temporary identities were forged, new social roles performed, strict prison rules enforced or challenged. The forms of address (personal or impersonal, respectful or demeaning), the verbal expressions of deference, impertinence, defacement, interpersonal manipulation and control, all played a decisive part in running the prison. This is why a pragmatic analysis of the real “interaction order” (Goffman 1983) that emerged during the simulation appears as a useful complement to Zimbardo’s socio-psychological approach.

¹⁴ In discussing “language rules” it is important to draw a clear distinction between the *grammaticality* and the *acceptability* of forms (Gumperz 1964). An utterance will be deemed “grammatical” if it conforms with the constraining rules and constructional patterns observed in a given language variety (e.g. Standard British English, Southern vernacular US English, etc.). It will be considered “acceptable” only if it conforms to the “social restraints,” i.e. the “agreed-on conventions which serve to categorize speech forms as informal, technical, vulgar, literary, humorous, etc.” (Gumperz 1964).

GRAMMAR AS ‘WEAPON’ OR ‘BATON’ IN THE PRISON WORLD: A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that studies *language in use* (Levinson 1983, Verschuere 1999, Huang 2007, Mey 2013) with reference to the immediate speech situation and the broader sociocultural context: “What do we say?” (meaning, content), “How do we say it?” (form), and above all “Why do we say it?” (function, relevance). Pragmaticians relate *verbal behavior* to *social behavior*, sentence patterns to social patterns, discourse meanings to social meanings.

It is to be regretted that Zimbardo and his team did not integrate Goffman’s dramaturgical “model of the actor” to their analysis (1959), which was available when their experimental framework was set up. They would have probably paid more attention to the *linguistic performance* of the interactants, and looked for “lines” and “scripts” (Goffman 1967) in the verbal output that they analyzed. But most of all, they would have related the socio-psychological processes of “derogation,” “aggression” and “emasculatation” (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo 1973) to *facework* (Goffman 1967): how individuals claim for themselves a “positive social value” in everyday life; how ordinary human beings tacitly preserve each other’s face; how public defacement can wound, weaken or even kill socially.

In Brown & Levinson’s theory of linguistic politeness (1987), *face* is defined as “something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction.” Face can be positive or negative. *Negative face* is “the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others.” During the Stanford prison experiment, prisoners were completely stripped of their freedom to act “unimpeded” by being locked and ordered about. Guards used the “grammar of interpersonal manipulation” (Shibatani 2002) roughly and efficiently to *bend the will* and *control the behavior* of inmates. Occasionally, prisoners did try to fight back or regain control with similar language tools. The film adaptations are strikingly similar in their treatment of negative face. The main grammatical constructions at work in *The Experiment* (Scheuring 2010) and *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (Alvarez 2015) are the following:

Table 1 – Empowered by grammar:
Strategic use of syntax to control addressee behavior

Standard imperatives (transitive or intransitive, positive or negative)	“ <u>Run along</u> ” – “ <u>Turn around</u> ” – “ <u>Eat this sausage!</u> ” – “ <u>Look at me!</u> ” – “ <u>Say it!</u> ” – “ <u>Put that back on!</u> ” – “ <u>Do the push-ups!</u> ” – “ <u>Don't talk during meal time!</u> ”
Persuasive imperatives	“ <u>You listen to me</u> 416” – “ <u>Come on</u> , then! Move those sheets! Start over!” – “Come on! Get humping!” – “Do them <u>now!</u> ” – “Get to it!” – “ <u>Keep going!</u> ” – <u>Put</u> your <u>fucking</u> cap <u>back</u> on!” – “ <u>Just</u> get back in line, here!” – “ <u>No</u> . <u>Let go</u> of me. <u>No!</u> ”
Nominal imperatives	“ <u>No talking on the line</u> , you two!”
Emphatic or crude imperatives	“Do it again, I said!” – “You need to shut up!” – “You fucking shit out of here!” – “Get the fuck out of bed!” – “Get your ass back in line, boy” – “Don’t fucking touch me man!”
Elliptical imperatives	“ <u>Quiet</u> , 8612!” – “ <u>Hands up</u> against the wall!” – “ <u>30 sit-ups. 30 jumping jacks. 30 push-ups!</u> ” – “ <u>Push-ups. Ten!</u> ” – “ <u>Five push-ups. There you go!</u> ” – “ <u>Ten jumping jacks!</u> ” – “ <u>And down! Twenty!</u> ” – “ <u>Everyone on the line!</u> ” – “ <u>Alright, everyone 10 pushups!</u> ” – “[You clean the] <u>Toilet!</u> ” –
Jussive <i>need</i>-constructions	“ <u>I need you to</u> say it for me. Say I am a prisoner.” – “ <u>I need you to</u> clean my toilet!” – “You <u>need to</u> get up.”
Jussive <i>I want</i>-constructions	“ <u>I want you</u> to address me as Mr. Correctional officer.” – “ <u>I want</u> to hear you say it, goddamn it!” – “ <u>I want you</u> to do pushups.” – “ <u>I don't want</u> any more talking.” – “ <u>I want out</u> and <u>I want out</u> now!”
Nothing (or nowhere) but-constructions	“You ain’t going nowhere but this fucking hole until you eat those fucking sausages!”
Simple declaratives (positive or negative) used to spell out rules or make authoritative statements.	“You <u>are</u> a prisoner, you <u>don't give</u> orders. <u>We give</u> orders!” – “You’re <u>not done</u> yet!” – “ <u>It is up to the guard's discretion</u> whether a prisoner shall do more.” –
<i>Be + -ing</i> constructions	(Prisoner accusing guards) “ <u>You’re messing</u> with my head, man.” – (Guard admonishing prisoners) “Like <u>I was saying</u> , prisoners must remain silent during rest periods.” – “Nobody <u>is</u>

	<u>trying</u> to be difficult.” – “Nobody’s <u>leaving</u> here until their plates are cleaned.”
Conditional <i>if</i> and <i>unless</i>-constructions	“ <u>If</u> you follow the rules, <u>if</u> you repent for your misdeeds, well, we’ll get along just fine.” – “ <u>If</u> you won’t say it, <u>if</u> you won’t say that you’re a bastard, you want to know something, 2093? You’ve just proved my point. You a bastard! You a bastard either way, ugh.” – “You do not address me <u>unless</u> I have spoken to you first.”
Interrogatives (used as threats, injunctions, or desideratives), tag questions	“ <u>Do I</u> need to escalate matters right now?” – “Do you fucking hear me, boy?” – “ <u>Why</u> don’t you give me twenty pushups?” – “ <u>Why</u> don’t you smile?” – “ <u>What</u> ’s going on here?” – “ <u>Why</u> don’t you make up your bunk 8612?” – “ <u>What</u> is so goddam wrong with all of you, ugh?” – “ <u>What</u> did you expect? <u>Did you</u> expect this to be a fucking nursery school? <u>Is that</u> what you thought it was gonna be?” – “ <u>Can you</u> shut up?” – “ <u>Is that</u> clear?” – “Got me?” – “ <u>Is that</u> understood?” – “ <u>Are you</u> fucking kidding me?” – “You (are) a bastard. <u>Isn’t that right?</u> ” – Boys, I’m sure you want to get a good night’s sleep tonight. <u>Am I right?</u> ”
Modal auxiliary constructions	“We <u>can do</u> all kinds of things to you.” – “You <u>will not</u> leave this closet until those sausages are in your belly.” – “There <u>will be</u> no more incidents like there was today” – “There <u>will be</u> zero tolerance for breaking the rules” – “This behavior <u>will not be</u> tolerated” – “I <u>will</u> ruin you” – “ <u>You’ll stay</u> in the hole until further notice” – “Your blankets <u>will be returned</u> to you all” – “All prisoners <u>must participate</u> in rec.” – “Each prisoner <u>must</u> complete the following 30 jump-” – “I <u>need not</u> remind you of rule number 1.”
Other modal constructions (<i>have got to, be allowed to, be supposed to</i>, etc.)	“Prisoners <u>are not allowed to</u> roam.” – “You’ve <u>got to</u> clean your plate.” – “You <u>are not supposed to</u> touch us.”
Adverbial phrases expressing condescending ascent	“Good boy!”
<i>Only</i>-constructions	“Prisoners are allowed <u>only</u> in prisoner-designated areas.”
Repetition	“ <u>Is that understood</u> ? I said, <u>is that understood?</u> ” – “ <u>Get down on your knees, get down on your fucking knees.</u> ” – You <u>will remain</u> here, and you

	<u>will remain</u> silent” – (Group of prisoners is forced to repeat)
Elliptical constructions	“ <u>Warden’s orders</u> ”
Tautological constructions	“ <u>Rules are rules.</u> ”
Enumeration (of rules) and (prison) counts	“Rule number one... two... three... four...” “One, two, three, four, five”

Positive face is “the want of every member to be desirable to at least some others.” Prisoners lost their self-esteem by being viciously belittled and publicly humiliated. The verbal abuse was constant and destructive. They were put down. They were depersonalized. Within two or three days, most had been infantilized. Challenges were repeatedly made to their “heteromascularity” (Anderson 2009, Anderson, Eric and McCormack 2015). The grammar of “linguistic impoliteness” (Culpeper 2011) was ruthlessly applied to “break the spirit of the prisoners and make them feel worthless” (Zimbardo 1972). “Impoliteness formulae” were indeed recruited to silence, subdue and stigmatize, to issue “threats” and hurl “insults”, to launch “identity attacks”, and more generally to publicly shame individuals. It is important to note that linguistic impoliteness served two strategies: one of *defacement*, typically directed against prisoners, but sometimes also against guards (during outbreaks of rebellion); one of *bonding* among the guards.

Table 2 – “Verbal strategies of defacement” (Laera 2016)

“Profanity” and verbal bullying	“ <u>Fuck you!</u> ” – “Tell 416 that you’re gonna kick his ass.” – “You can <u>fuck off, man!</u> ” – “ <u>Go to hell!</u> ” – “I’m <u>tired of this shit!</u> ”
Personal insults and false namings	“ <u>Dogshit</u> ” – “ <u>Dirt Dog</u> ” – “ <u>Shit man</u> ” – “You <u>motherfuckers!</u> ” – “You are a <u>shit ass</u> nut you know that?” – “Why are you <u>such an ass-licker</u> 2093?” – “So <u>you are a bastard too</u> , 2093?”
Depersonalizing forms of address	“And you, look at yourself, “And you, look at yourself, you’re naked” – “You got no name.” – “ You got that, 8612?” – “You like it in there, 416?”
Feminization Verbal emasculation	“Goodnight <u>ladies</u> ” – “Let’s get to writing these letters, <u>ladies</u> ” – “Alright <u>girls</u> ” – “You afraid we gonna see <u>you</u>

	<u>aint got no dick</u> ”- “2093 can play <u>the bride of Frankenstein</u> .”
Male homosexuality	“Move along <u>fuck butt!</u> ” – “Fuck you!” – “7258 walk over and say that you love 2093. <u>Get close</u> . Quit crying <u>you little bitch!</u> ” – “Now, Mr. 2093 here says he ain’t know how to fuck. We gonna show you. Now I want my <u>female camels</u> to line up in the middle. And <u>I want my male camels to get behind the female camels</u> . <u>Bend down, bend down</u> . That’s right. And <u>y’all gonna do like the male camels to the female camels</u> , and <u>y’all gonna hump them</u> . <u>Get inside her</u> . <u>She’s waiting for you</u> . There. <u>Keep humping</u> . Come on. That’s it. Nice and gentle with that camel. <u>She bucking back on your dick</u> . That’s good! <u>Bend down. Don’t cum yet</u> . All right, <u>faggots</u> . Stop!”
Public defacement	(Prisoners lined up against wall, forced to shout and repeat 3 times) “ <u>Prisoner 819 did a bad thing!</u> ” (Victim yells back in despair) “No, I didn’t” – (Guard to subservient prisoner) “ <u>It’s a fucking embarrassment how obedient this guy is!</u> You little brownnose, <u>kiss-ass</u> , homeless boy! ”
Punning or joking	(Prisoner to guard) “You <u>need</u> help” (Guard to Prisoner) “You <u>need</u> to clean the toilet”
Sarcasm (feigned surprise, mock politeness, etc.)	(Guard to prisoner who has been forced to strip) ‘Why in God’s name are you stark naked, boy?’ (Guard to prisoners who have been denied access to the toilet) “ <u>Should you feel the need to defecate or urinate, please feel free</u> to do so in the fine buckets provided by your correctional staff. That’d be us. Thank you.” (Guard to sobbing prisoner) “ <u>Big, tough guy</u> , hugh?”
“fuck-related taboo words” and constructions (Culpeper 2011)	“This is not <u>a fucking negotiation!</u> ” “ <u>What the fuck</u> did you expect?” – “ <u>What the fuck</u> was that guy thinking?”

	<p>“Did you expect this was gonna be a <u>fucking nursery school?</u>” – (Prisoner rebelling against guards) “You <u>motherfuckers</u>. You fascist <u>motherfuckers</u>! You have no right to <u>fuck</u> with my head!”</p>
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Did Zimbardo and his team pay sufficient attention to formal aspects of “verbal behavior”? Probably not, but they nonetheless considered some relevant aspects of *language use* and reported their findings (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo 1973). 12 hours of videotaping were made, with a focus on “daily, recurring events, such as counts and meals.” 25 remarkable “incidents” or “scenes” were singled out for special scrutiny. The following 9 categories were defined to analyze speaker interaction: *question* (i.e. any request for “information” or “assistance”); *command* (i.e. “orders to commence or abstain from a specific behavior”); *information* (related to “any contingency of the simulation”); positive or negative *reference* to others (i.e. “use of a person’s real name, nickname (...) prison number, title, generalized ‘you’” or “allusion to special physical characteristics”); *threats* (e.g. “no meal, pushups, lock-up in hole, no visitors”); *insult*; *resistance* (mainly physical, “usually prisoners to guards, such as holding on to beds, blocking doors, taking off stocking caps, refusing to carry out orders”); *help* (typically “guard helping another to open door, prisoner helping another prisoner in cleanup duties”); *physical instruments* (like “fire extinguishers, batons, whistles (when used) to either intimidate, threaten, or achieve specific end”).

Most of these categories were pragmatic in essence, even if they were never referred to as such. The experimenters did observe and analyze some salient “interpersonal processes” in their video analysis: “the giving of commands” by guards and the frequent “question-asking” by prisoners. They also made a number of insightful comments on wardens using forms of reference that were “deindividuating” like “Hey, you there” to avoid using a person’s actual name. They also noted the bouts of “deprecation-insult” that typically occurred during evening shifts. But, as already pointed out, their general assessment of “verbal behavior” contained few remarks on grammar. What they saw on the tapes or read in the transcriptions of the recordings were “intentions,” “attitudes” or “affects”: language use was treated as the mere linguistic expression of the prisoners’ “rage” or “acute depression”; the guards’ “creative cruelty” and “pathology of power”; the “hostile, confrontational or dehumanizing” aspects of face-to-face encounters, not its rule-governed enactment. The linguistic forms were not

analyzed grammatically as constructions, socially as discourse practice, pragmatically as discourse strategy.

An “audio analysis” was also performed by the team. 30 hours of audio recording were made of “interactions between guards and prisoners on the prison yard” and interviews between subjects and research associates. “Verbal expressions” were assigned to 11 categories, which also have a strong pragmatic component: *questions*; *informative statements*; *demands*; *requests*; *commands*; *outlook* (e.g. “I don’t think I can make it”); *criticism*; *reference*; *desire to continue* (or curtail participation in the experiment); *self-evaluation* (e.g. “I hate myself for being so oppressive”); and finally, *action intentions* (e.g. “I’ll break the door down”). Once again, the experimenters were concerned with “psychological effects”, not language functioning. What struck them most was the “negativity” that prevailed in all expressions of “outlook,” “affect,” and “self-regard.” They were also surprised to discover that “90 % of conversations among prisoners were related to prison topics, while only 10 % to non-prison topics such as their college life, their vocation, girl-friends, what they would do for the remainder of the summer once the experiment was over.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Speech is the best show man
puts on. (Whorf 1956)

It has often pointed out that participants in the Stanford prison experiment (1971) were “taken up” by the guard or prisoner “roles” that were assigned to them. But *role-playing is the very substance of social life and the very medium in which real communicative interaction takes place*. All human beings are taken up by their social roles: the rushed mother role, the angry father role, the worried customer role, the responsible manager role, the committed teacher role, the engaged or disengaged student role, the caring friend or confident roles. The list is open-ended, and the spontaneous, largely unconscious role-playing of speakers keeps adjusting to new settings, every moment of the day. The roles have their typical “lines” and interactional style. Prison guards and schoolteachers all give instructions but use the “grammar of interpersonal manipulation” (Shibatani 2002) differently.

As speakers engage in the *social performance of speech*, they live and speak through the part they are playing. Each part is built around *ritualized forms of speech*. This is an inescapable linguistic fact that transcends personality and character: the *power of the speech situation* is such that the “moment” strongly

determines the “behavioral material” of speakers: their “glances, gestures, positionings and verbal statements” (Goffman 1967). The 24 healthy male volunteers in the Stanford prison experiment were no exception to the rule, and quite logically developed aggressive or submissive communicative styles. They did little more than enact the routines and parts typically associated with the simulated penitentiary system. The brutality and coarseness of the communicative interaction, the constant, systematic defacement of prisoners by guards, were shocking but unsurprising.

The volunteers were *ordinary speakers*, who were assigned *extraordinary roles* in an unfamiliar setting. They instinctively adjusted their interactional style and behaved as normal social actors with regular *face needs* (Goffman 1967, 1983). As in any piece of unrehearsed drama, they engaged in an endless succession of improvisation games, using existing patterns to weave their own text. Consciously or not, they applied a number of *dramaturgical techniques* for interpersonal manipulation that were all consistent with their new “social orientation,” i.e. their “intelligent ability to adapt to (a new) social environment” (Langlotz 2015). They drew the old “weapons of everyday communication” (Gumperz 1964) to fight new verbal battles, applied common verbal strategies to handle uncommon situations. They reassigned power and status through the “physicality” and “performativity” of their speech (Schechner 2003). Eventually, all the participants found themselves empowered or disempowered, strengthened or weakened, protected or wounded by language. The winners of the “language war” (Tolmach Lakoff 2000) were clearly the guards who “experienced a marked gain in social power, status and group identification.” The prisoners, in contrast, “experienced a loss of personal identity (...) which resulted in a syndrome of passivity, dependency, depression and helplessness” (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo 1973).

Since physical violence was banned from the original experiment, the instruments used to maintain the “interaction order” (Goffman 1983) were predominantly lexical and grammatical, and the strategies applied were selected from the common repertoire of pragmatic functions: addressing, informing, requesting, accepting, praising, complaining, rejecting, insulting, etc. Authentic language mechanisms were thus the central, structuring force of the mock prison experiment. Because the guards hurled real verbal weapons, the prisoners got genuinely hurt in the simulation. Until Zimbardo exclaimed: “Enough, we have to end this” (Zimbardo 1971).

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