

Differences between men and women: the case of swearing

Swearing plays an interesting role in language use – it can fulfil a lot of functions. Swearing is a common feature of everyday language, typically used in situations of anger, frustration, but also as a sign of solidarity and group membership. Swearwords appear quite frequently in language, especially in spoken informal communication, as documented by data from the British National Corpus 2014. A common stereotype about language use is that men swear more than women do. This impression is further enforced by societal norms and beliefs in “proper etiquette” for women, something we also explore in the research bite below. But is this really the case? This worksheet focuses on swearwords and whether gender plays a particular role in their use, in terms of both gender of the speaker, and gender of the addressee of the swearword.



Key terms

(non-)standard

swearing

semantic fields

lifetime change

Task 1

Make a list of some frequently used swearwords.

Now think about the following questions and make a note next to each swearword:

- Which of these words are used predominately for women and which for men?
- Do you think that some of these words are more often used by men and some by women?

Compare your notes with a partner. Looking at the swearwords, think about the following questions:

- What associations (*semantic fields*) are linked with typical swearwords aimed at women, and what associations are linked with swearwords aimed at men?
- What do you think affects this pattern in the use of swearwords?

Task 2

From your list above, pick two or three swearwords. Go to BNClab and using the Gender button check whether there is an actual gender divide in how these swearwords are used in BNC1994 and BNC2014. Are the results what you expected? Why or why not?

Task 3

We are now going to focus on possible gender effects on one of the most frequent swearwords in British English – ‘fucking’. Type this word in BNClab and look at the results under the Gender button. What trends can you notice with respect to:

- The use of the swearword in the 1990s and 2014?
- The use of swearwords by men and women in these two time periods?
- What overall trend have you observed? How did the effect of gender change from the 1990s to 2014?

Task 4

Languages don't just change over time (the way people spoke 50 years ago is different from how we speak now), but also over the lifetime of each individual speaker. Think back to your own experience - do you speak differently from the way you spoke ten years ago?

In this task, we are going to explore the effect of age on people's use of swearwords – at what age do speakers swear the most? Using the results for 'fucking', explore the role of age of speakers further.

1. Looking at the results in the Age button, at what age do speakers use the word 'fucking' most often? Is the trend in BNC1994 and BNC2014 similar or different?

2. Now go to the Usage button, select Speakers and then order the results by age of the speaker. Scroll down the concordance lines and look at the frequency with which the speakers used the word.

- At what age does the word tend to appear in people's vocabulary?
 - At what age does it tend to disappear?
-
-

Why do you think people start using more swearwords in a specific period of their life? Do you think you have changed your use of swearwords? Did this coincide with particular periods of your life?

Task 5

Look again at tasks 2-4 and think about the various types of factors that are involved in the language use by men and women at different periods of time (the 1990s and 2010s) and at a different age. Can you summarise what factors play a role in the language change of an individual and how they affect the language use?

Research bite

In the beginning of the 1970s, many sociolinguists started researching the use of language by men and women and tried to address the question of whether there was indeed a linguistic difference between the different genders, and if so, why. Robin Lakoff, who published one of the first volumes on gender and language in 1975 ("Language and Woman's Place"), argued that women use "soft" or "weak" language because society expects them to adhere to norms of femininity and ladylike behaviour. Other studies highlighted the role of child-rearing in language use which was traditionally seen to be the woman's task: mothers were responsible for teaching their children the "proper" way to speak and this could also influence the way women spoke. Over the years, these explanations have been increasingly criticized as not fully accounting for the complexities of gender and identity in different contexts. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point this out in their 1992 publication on gender and community; they highlight that 'being female' is not at all a straightforward category as women and girls can be, for example, "*tomboys and goody-goodies, home-makers and career women, body builders and fashion models, secretaries and executives, basketball coaches and French professors....*" (1992: 470), arguing that gender alone does not define an individual.



With the findings of the tasks above in mind, what do you think plays a role in how men and women use swearwords?

Eckert, P.; McConnell-Ginet, S. (1992). Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as community-based practice. *Annual review of anthropology*, 21(1), 461-488.

Lakoff, R. T. (1975). *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row.

Macalay, R. (2009). *Quantitative Methods in Sociolinguistics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.