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A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Swear Word Offensiveness

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The methodology of the present study, designed for the purpose of collecting quantitative and qualitative data, reflects a sociolinguistic approach to swearing, allowing for an investigation of the relationship between swear word usage and social context. Previous research had established swearing as both a frequently occurring speech behavior within the university speech community and a highly offensive one. The resulting 'swearing paradox' represents the question of how frequency and offensiveness can be directly related. The results of the present study explicate the swearing paradox by providing evidence of a discrepancy between the type of swearing that is most characteristic of social interaction within the university speech community and the type of swearing which is typically presented in offensiveness ratings tasks.

KEYWORDS: swearing, profanity, offensiveness

1 INTRODUCTION

In 1930, *Bell System Technical Journal* published "The words and sounds of telephone conversations," by French et al. The study served as a word frequency data base and was long considered an accurate representation of conversational English. However, the data included in the study represented only 75% of the data (80,000 words) originally collected. Omissions included proper names, titles, letters, numbers, interjections and profanity. At 40% of the omitted data, profanity accounted for a corresponding 10% of the total data base.

The French et al. study, an otherwise reliable source for naturalistic data, is deplored for the omission of profanity which "compromised a true picture of dirty word usage" (Jay 1992:115). Other word frequency studies (Cameron 1969, Dewey 1923, Fairbanks 1944, Thorndike et al. 1944, Uhrbrock 1935) have also been criticized for being curiously void of profanity due to the fact that their "word samples were gathered in such pristine situations and/or in such a biased manner that they couldn't possibly represent typical U.S. speech patterns" (Cameron 1969:101). The motivation for the omission and/or avoidance of profanity lies presumably in the controversial nature of such language use. According to Montagu:

> Swearing, because it is so little understood, is still an equivocal form of conduct without social sanction. Hence, it has long pursued a fugitive existence in all such dark places as are not open to the light of social intercourse. That is to say, among many people, swearing is socially not tolerated in any form. (1967:1)

Johnson et al. note that the "sparse" attention to obscenity paid by researchers is indicative of the taboo nature of obscene language extending "beyond the public and into the research community" (1985:11), an opinion echoed by Fine (1979) and Rieber et al. (1979). A possible explanation for the avoidance is found in Harris' ontological treatise on swearing, in which he claims that "swearwords become unmentionable precisely because institutionalized swearing is the unique and marginal case where locution and illocution are one: the utterance is the deed and the deed is the utterance" (1987:187). Indeed, in Berger's (1970) opening paragraph of *Swearing and society*, he apologizes for his forthcoming use of language.

Some sixty years after the *Bell* article, however, profanity is a legitimate research area within psychology, philology and linguistics (see Jay's 1992 bibliography which contains nearly 400 entries). Nevertheless, despite an increasing amount of attention devoted to profanity (Berger 2002, McEnery 2006), the true picture of dirty word usage is still compromised.

To date, linguistic research on profane language has focused primarily on the following areas: historical occurrences and evolution, grammar and semantics, frequency of usage and offensiveness ratings. Typically word-centered and context independent, these studies document the superficial trends and taboo status regarding dirty word usage, but shed little light on the function and interpretation of profane language use in a social context. According to Davis,

> Once the importance of context is realized, one is led to see that any approach of the orthodox linguistic variety has no means of coming to grips with the underlying question, 'What makes [swearing] bad?' Rather, it assumes the existence of 'bad language' as a sociological given, and endeavors to account for its use. (1989:4)

The disputable status of some words as swear words indicates that there is a blurred line between what does and does not qualify as swearing. The greater the potential of a word to offend, the likelier the word is to be considered a swear word. Offensiveness is traditionally determined by evaluative and semantic differentiation rating techniques. Research has revealed unequivocal evidence that swear words are highly offensive. Some words are consistently judged to be more offensive (abrasive, aggressive, impolite, profane, upsetting, etc.) than others, with sexual terms generally rated most offensive, followed by excretory terms which, in turn, are typically judged more offensive than sacred terms (Baudhuin 1973, Berger 2002). Specifically, *fuck*, *shit*, *cunt* and *motherfucker* (in varying orders) have been rated as the most offensive (Baudhuin 1973, Bostrom et al. 1973, Driscoll 1981, Jay 1978, Mabry 1975). In fact, hearing the word *motherfucker* has been rated as more offensive than witnessing extreme violence, defecation or sodomy (Jay 1978).

Frequency studies having established college environments as rich in obscenity (Cameron 1969, Hipskind et al. 1973, Jay 1977, 1978, 1980, 1986, 1992), ratings tasks have traditionally been performed by various groups of college students. Subjects are asked to rate words in a list, usually by a numerical value according to a Likert-type scale, e.g., from non-offensive to very offensive. The evaluative adjectives vary from study to study and include: 'abrasive' (Mabry 1975), 'aggressive' (Driscoll 1981), 'offensive' (Baudhuin 1973, Bostrom et al. 1973, Jay 1978), 'upsetting' (Manning et al.

1974), and 'taboo' (Jay, 1986). Because the words are presented as singular vocabulary items in a list, that is to say, devoid of any context, the subjects are free to interpret their potential usage. However, the task of rating the words according to the evaluative adjective encourages the subjects to consider the words used in only one way, i.e., offensively, abrasively, etc. While the imposition of the evaluative adjective as the only contextual clue allows the researcher to control for interpretation, it subverts the importance of context.

The bias evident among some researchers that swearing is both categorically offensive and tantamount to an expression of anger and/or aggression (cf. Berger 1970) renders context irrelevant to their focus: Jay (1992) devoted an entire chapter to an anger-analysis of swearing; Wilson (1975) asked subjects to rate obscenities according to a scale of increasing anger at hearing them in casual conversation; and Driscoll (1981) elicited ratings of swear words as used exclusively in epithets (e.g., *You bitch!*). Minimal references to context reveal a maintenance of a clear bias vis-à-vis the nature of swear words: Bailey et al. (1977) designed a questionnaire to elicit swearing utterances as responses to situations such as, "You scrape your shin" or "Someone annoys you". The subjects of the Manning-Melchiori study were asked to rate how upsetting certain swear and non-swear words were, as well as to rate how embarrassing it would be to say the words in the presence of other people, such as parents and clergymen (1974:305). Oliver et al. (1975) investigated their subjects proclivity to use expletives such as *Damn!*, *Bastard!* and *Son-of-a-bitch!* in various social situations.

Swearing research directed at measuring the offensiveness of swear words has obviously *assumed* their offensiveness. Laboratory studies (Baudhuin 1973, Bostrom et al. 1973, Driscoll 1981, Jay 1977, 1978, Mabry 1975, Manning et al. 1974) have typically been designed to encourage participants of ratings tasks to consider swear words from this perspective by eliminating context. The present study suggests the unlikelihood that any participant, when presented with a list of isolated swear words void of context and asked to rate their offensiveness, would consider swearing from an alternative perspective. Consequently, offensiveness ratings are traditionally high, which, when juxtaposed with the similarly high frequency counts of swear words, contributes to a 'swearing paradox', representing the question of how this highly offensive behavior (according to ratings studies) can also enjoy such a high rate of occurrence (according to frequency studies). In this paper, the swearing paradox is shown to be the result of a disregard to context, and swearing research in general is called to task for contributing to misinformation about the social function of swearing. Representing both a complement and a challenge to existing research, this study contributes to a truer picture of profane language use in conversational English.

2   METHODOLOGY

For the present study, a questionnaire was used, designed to expose and explicate the swearing paradox with the inclusion of two separate offensiveness ratings tasks, one in the tradition of previous design, i.e., a word list, and another featuring swearing utterances complemented by contextual information such as setting and interlocutor details. Undergraduate students at the University of Florida were approached at random to complete a six-page questionnaire, including two word rating tasks. They were told

only that the questionnaire dealt with a particular linguistic behavior. After completing the first two pages including demographic questions and the first rating task, the participants were given the opportunity to stop the process if they disapproved of or were uncomfortable with the subject matter. No subjects opted out of completing the questionnaire. A total of 65 questionnaires were completed, 60 of which provide data for this study. Five of the original questionnaires revealed the participant's non-membership of the focus speech community and were discarded.

Because questionnaires tend to be structured in such a way so as to allow for tabulation and quantification of data, depth is sacrificed for breadth. Thus, they are ideal as a preliminary to, for example, an ethnographic interview in that they reveal areas which require deeper investigation. Upon completing the questionnaire, the participants were therefore invited to take part in a voluntary follow-up interview to discuss their answers and the topic of swearing in further detail.

3   PARTICIPANTS

The choice of a college-student sample population for this study was motivated by previous swearing research which 1) showed evidence of frequent swearing behavior within this type of speech community and 2) established baseline information for this environment. Acknowledging Jay's remonstration that "too much of the information accumulated on the use of dirty words is limited to white, middle class, American college students" (1992:243), the data on which this study is based reflect racial diversity amongst the members of the speech community. However, the speech community represented in this study is that of undergraduate students at the University of Florida, which, at more than 31,000 students, is comprised of approximately 68% Whites, 10% International students, 9% Hispanics, 6% African-Americans, 6% Asian-Americans and 1% American-Indians. The distribution of races represented by the present study reflects that of the University of Florida and, as such, is clearly no remedy to the problem of limited sampling.

The questionnaires were completed by members of the University of Florida undergraduate student speech community. The 60 participants were comprised of 33 males and 27 females, accounting for 55% and 45%, respectively, of the total questionnaire participants. Since participation in the questionnaire was both voluntary and non-compensated, it was not possible to control for racial distribution. White females account for 30% of the total questionnaire participants, with white males comprising 27%. African-American males and females and Hispanic males and females each represent 16%, 12%, 12%, and 3%, respectively.

The average age of the participants was 20.1 years old at the time of completion of the questionnaire. Over half of the participants (56%) reported they were born in Florida, with the majority (89%) stating it as both their home state and place of high school.

All but 21% of the participants claimed current affiliation with a religion; Catholics, Baptists and Methodists accounted for 21%, 19% and 15% of the participants, respectively. The remaining participants reported being 7th Day Adventists (5%), Christians (5%), Jews (3%), Lutherans (3%), Protestants (3%), Presbyterians (2%) and members of the Greek Orthodox Church (2%).

Like their religious affiliation, the socioeconomic status of the participants, as measured by the educational background and employment status of their parents, indicates variation as well. While the majority of the participants (71%) reported that both their mother AND father were employed, only 56% of the participants' fathers and 52% of the participants' mothers were said to hold a bachelor's or graduate degree, suggesting a multi-class sample population.

4   WORD LIST RATING-TASKS

For the sake of consistency, the present study will exclusively use the terms 'swearing' and 'swear words', and, in so doing, refer to the use of a set of words limited to: *ass, bastard, bitch, cunt, damn, dick, fuck, hell, shit* and their derivatives, e.g., *bullshit* or *Goddamn*. These words are not intended to represent an exhaustive list of swear words. Instead, they represent examples of the most frequently listed words in swear word elicitation tasks (Foote et al. 1973, Johnson et al. 1985), as well as the most frequently occurring swear words in spontaneous speech in college student populations (Jay 1986).

The first rating task included an alphabetical list of twelve swear words, shown in Table 1, below. Following Jay's (1986) example, participants were asked to rate each swear word on an offensiveness scale of 1 to 10, '1' being 'Not Offensive', and '10' being 'Very Offensive'. The participants were then asked to provide a label for the list of words. The terms 'swearing' and 'swear words', it should be noted, were not yet introduced as of this point. Next, the participants were asked if, according to their label, any of the listed words should be deleted, or if any other words should be added. The participants were then told to circle any words they would not use. Finally, each participant was asked to comment on whether the offensiveness of these words was fixed and unchanging.

It was after completing this section of the questionnaire, which revealed the subject matter, that participants were given the opportunity to discontinue their participation. If they chose to continue, the first rating task was collected, and the remainder of the questionnaire distributed. In so doing, participants were unable to change their initial ratings and labels.

The second rating task presented the participants with six instances of actual swearing utterances, that is, short dialogues that were recorded during a spontaneous speech observation phase, prior to conducting the questionnaire. All six dialogues took place among undergraduate students talking at various public areas on the university campus. The sex and race of each dialogue participant was also provided.

Similar to the first offensiveness rating task, the participants were asked to rate the offensiveness of the individual swear words on a scale of '1' ('Not Offensive') to '10' ('Very Offensive'). The swear words appeared in bold type in the dialogues and included: *fuck, fucking, motherfucking, shit, shitty,* and *ass*. Examples of both *shit* and *fuck* in different referential frames were given, that is as metaphorical and denotative references, in order investigate whether the duality of these words would result in different offensiveness ratings.

5   INTERVIEW

After completing the questionnaire, twenty-three participants (35%) volunteered to be interviewed, eleven (17%) of whom where chosen on the basis of race, sex and questionnaire information, in an effort to achieve a comprehensive representation.

Each interview commenced in the same way, namely, by having the informants describe the style of speech they use in informal, social interaction, as opposed to academic or professional. This question was intended to encourage the informants to consider the different contexts in which they use language and to discover if they were aware of any resulting variability. They were then asked to comment on whether swearing was a feature of any of their various styles. In this way, the informants were encouraged to consider the variability of their swearing behavior. The questionnaire was then discussed, and the participants were able to comment on their answers and thought processes. Each interview was tape-recorded and lasted 30 to 45 minutes.

6   PARTICIPANT RATINGS

This paper suggests that offensiveness ratings of isolated swear words are unreliable, since it is impossible to know how a rating task participant interprets the individual words. In the present study, the offensiveness rating of contextualized swearing is intended to be juxtaposed with the offensiveness rating of isolated swear words to reveal any judgmental discrepancies and to emphasize the importance of studying language and speech variation as socially and contextually bound phenomena.

It was not the intention of the present study to investigate the variable offensiveness of swear words relative to each other, but rather to examine the relationship between offensiveness and context. Nevertheless, both rating tasks confirm that certain swear words are consistently rated more offensive than others, with sexual terms receiving higher offensiveness scores than excretory/body and sacred terms. Among the swear words of the word list, the sexual terms *motherfucker*, and *fuck* rated higher than *ass*, *asshole* and *shit*, which in turn rated higher than *damn* and *hell*. Straddling the two categories of sexual and body terms, *cunt* and *dick* both received relatively high offensiveness ratings. Similarly high ratings were assigned to the words *bitch* and *bastard*, as well. Table 1 presents the average ratings, the standard deviations, and the modes for the words of the word list rating task according to the totals of all participants.

Table 1: All participants – Word list

	Ass	*Asshole*	*Bastard*	*Bitch*	*Cunt*	*Damn*
Average	3.2	4.4	4.3	5.0	6.6	2.3
Std. Deviation	2.5	2.8	2.8	3.0	3.0	2.1
Mode	1	3	1	1	10	1
	Dick	*Fuck*	*Hell*	*Motherfucker*	*Nigger*	*Shit*
Average	4.1	5.0	2.3	5.9	8.5	3.1

Std. Deviation	2.7	3.1	2.3	3.2	2.3	2.5
Mode	1	1	1	5	10	1

During the interview, when asked to comment on their thought processes in completing the word list rating task, seven of the informants said that they considered the words as used by other people and measured the offense they (the informants) would take to the usage; the other four considered their own use of the swear words and the associated offensiveness as perceived by others.

Four of the interview informants said that they interpreted the words according to the evaluative adjective, i.e., as 'offensive', or in name-calling situations, for example:

(1) African-American male*: You know, I look on it by that scale, not necessarily how I use them. 'Cause I use them. […] I use all of these. But I based it on how offensive they were if I used them in an aggressive situation.*

(2) African-American female: *Like somebody might call someone a 'cunt' and that's not a really nice thing to say, like, "You're a cunt." That's not real nice. That's the way I looked at it.*

The remaining informants said that different words required different interpretations, resulting in variable offensiveness:

(3) White male: *Well, 'bitch' is a '4' because that can refer to a woman and I'm somewhat interested in feminist issues or whatever, and I realized how that could just be a…bad choice. But 'motherfucker' is just funny. It makes me laugh. That's a '1' for me.*

(4) White female: *These ('bitch', 'cunt', 'dick' and 'nigger') are higher because I think they're used in a more derogatory way usually, so that's why. […] These ('ass', 'asshole', 'bastard', 'damn', 'fuck', 'hell', 'motherfucker' and 'shit') are more common. I hear them in everyday speech, but the others, probably not.*

The word which received the highest overall offensiveness rating was *nigger*, included in the word list rating task as a challenge to the semantic concept of 'swearing'. Swear words can usually be categorized as having religious, sexual or scatological associations. As more of a racial epithet, however, 'nigger' cannot immediately be labeled a swear word per se. Only 23% of the questionnaire participants, however, chose to delete this word from the list. When the participants completed the word list rating task, the terms 'swear words' and 'swearing' had not yet been used in the questionnaire. It is therefore possible that the majority of the questionnaire participants considered the list of words only in terms of offensiveness and did not conclude that *nigger*, as the most offensive, should be deleted.

Perhaps not typically considered a swear word, *nigger* has in common with swear words an inherent offensiveness which varies according to social context, and a usage characteristic of in-group interaction. Of the 44% of the participants who indicated that *nigger* was a word they never use, 97% were White or Hispanic. No other word in the list was associated with such clear racial and cultural boundaries of usage. Each of the

informants had comments on the inclusion of *nigger* in the word list, the white males and females expressing awareness of its use by African-Americans but a reluctance to use it themselves, while the African-American males and females expressed the social complexities of its use:

(5) White male: *As for 'nigger', I don't…I personally…it's the only one out of the list that I personally don't use in my vocabulary. I only gave it a '9' because I do listen to a lot of rap and stuff like that and I'm not going to tell, I'm not going to try and suppose that I can tell a black person not to use the word. I mean, I just don't think that's my place, so, I only gave it a '9'. Originally I had my pencil on '10'.*

(6) White female: *The one that is the most offensive to me is that one. There's nothing in this world that I can stand less than prejudice and that just, words like that really make me cringe.*

(7) African-American male*: [T]he reason why I gave it a '10' is, I've used it and I'm a victim of that and I call that not being aware of the impact of words. That word doesn't change in context because a black person says it or a white person says it. It's the same word, and I feel that black people are being self-negating when they use that word. […] I know that it's a negative word and even if I use it in a room full of black people it's still a negative word, even if they don't get upset with me.*

(8) African-American male: (regarding African-Americans saying 'nigger' in the presence of whites) *Especially since these were people who could have taken the word and said, "Well," you know, "black people use the word," whatever. And they can now take that […] and they can go and flip it around and tell their friends, "Yeah, you know, they're just like we thought they were." You know, just kind of using it as basically a justification of their thoughts. There's a fine line when you can use that word. A very fine line. The '10' is because of, you know, the previous situation. A black-white situation.*

Following the word list rating task, the questionnaire participants were asked to provide a label for the words included in the list, adding or deleting words according to this label. 46% of the participants labelled the words 'curse' or 'cuss' words, with 'swear' and 'bad' each garnering 13%. The labels provided by the remaining 28% of the participants reveal opposing attitudes. 'Vulgar', 'offensive', 'negative', 'profane' and 'obscenities' were suggested as well as 'friends', 'good', 'descriptive', 'everyday', 'normal', 'regular' and 'second language'. These latter labels reveal the participants' awareness of the variability of swear word interpretation.

Among the most commonly suggested additions to the word list were *pussy*, *Goddamn* and *son of a bitch* (by 10%, 8% and 8% of the participants, respectively), *cocksucker* (7%) and *dickhead* (5%). Also receiving mention were *cracker, fag/faggot, prick, jackass, spic* and *coon*. The latter two suggestions represent racial slurs, reflecting possible influence from the inclusion of *nigger* in the word list.

The two overall least offensive terms were also the most often suggested deletions from the word list. 25% and 16% of the participants chose to delete *hell* and *damn*,

respectively, from the word list, their lack of associated offensiveness rendering them peripheral members of the proposed category of words.

Participants were also asked to indicate which of the listed words, if any, they would not use. Forty-six percent of the participants said that they would not use the word *cunt*, an even larger percentage than those unwilling to use the word *nigger*. In fact, while this latter word was heard occasionally during the prior spontaneous speech observation phase, *cunt* was not observed being used.

The final step of the first rating task was to comment on whether the offensiveness of the listed words was fixed and unchanging. 77% of the participants said it was not 'fixed and unchanging', 20% said it was, and 3% left the question blank. Comments from the 77% who stated that the offensiveness of swear words is neither fixed nor unchanging include the following:

(9) African-American male: *How offensive these words are is based on the receiver's interpretation.*

(10) White male: *They can be used as nouns, verbs, or adjectives. The context then determines the offensiveness. The receiver of the words will also vary on the level that he/she is offended.*

(11) White female: *A lot of words would be offensive to other people, and I think their offensiveness always depends on the context in which they are said, why they are said, who said them and to whom.*

Those who consider the offensiveness of swear words as fixed and unchanging added the following comments:

(12) White female: *I think I'll always be offended by these words.*

(13) Hispanic male: *Someone will always find these words offensive.*

(14) White female: *Someone either is or is not offended by these words, most likely their opinion about these words won't change.*

Thus, by alluding to individual tastes, the comments of those who subscribed to the categorical offensiveness of swear words revealed that the ultimate degree of offensiveness is determined by contextual variables, in particular, variations in speaker and addressee.

The variation among the participants regarding the offensiveness of the listed swear words is also evident in the individual ratings. While the averages represent offensiveness ratings as assigned by the participants as a group, the values for standard deviation and mode indicate the extent of variation among the participants. According to the standard deviations, *bitch*, *fuck* and *motherfucker* represent the words with the most variation in ratings (i.e., the least amount of agreement among the participants), while *damn*, *hell* and *nigger* represent the words with the least amount of variation (i.e., the most amount of agreement among the participants).

According to the values for mode, eight out of the twelve listed words were most often assigned a rating of '1' by the participants, reflecting a lack of perceived offensiveness among certain participants vis-à-vis certain words. Jay (1977, 1992) argued that subjects' categorically low ratings of swear words were an indication of their personalities, not a judgment of the quality of the words per se; because some individuals are not personally OFFENDED by swear words does not mean that the words are not OFFENSIVE. For this reason, his 1978 subjects were instead asked to rate how offensive certain words would be to a "significant part of the population" (Jay 1992:146). Such ratings can only be considered hearsay and, as such, are of little value to the pursuit of a 'truer picture' of swear word usage. Furthermore, it was the occurrence of categorically low ratings which inspired Jay (1978) to redefine his terms for offensiveness ratings, revealing his bias towards swearing as offensive as well as his intolerance of and scepticism towards alternative interpretations. That the offensiveness of swear words can vary so extremely among members of a speech community contributes to the social meaning of swearing. The differences between the average ratings and modes reveals the reality of variation in the perceived offensiveness of swear words, rendering swearing a socially complex behavior which is neither interpreted nor evaluated consistently by the members of this speech community.

6.1 DIFFERENCES ACCORDING TO GENDER

Previous studies have established females as being more sensitive than males to the offensiveness of swear words (Abbott et al. 1978, Jay 1977, 1978, Sewell 1984, Wilson 1975). The ratings values of the male and female participants of the present study's questionnaire are in accordance with this finding. Table 2 and Table 3 present their respective averages, standard deviations and modes for each of the words of the word list rating task.

Table 2: All males – Word list

	Ass	*Asshole*	*Bastard*	*Bitch*	*Cunt*	*Damn*
Average	2.5	3.6	3.4	4.0	5.1	2.1
Std. Deviation	2.1	2.4	2.4	2.9	2.9	1.9
Mode	3	8	5	6	6	1
	Dick	*Fuck*	*Hell*	*Motherfucker*	*Nigger*	*Shit*
Average	3.6	4.4	2.1	5.0	8.0	2.8
Std. Deviation	2.6	3.2	2.4	3.2	2.6	2.5
Mode	6	8	1	9	10	1

The females' average ratings are consistently higher than the males' averages. A one-way ANOVA test for significance resulted in a p-value of 0.0707 which, at a 95% confidence interval, does not support rejecting the null-hypothesis. The variation among the two groups as revealed by the standard deviations, however, is comparable, although specific to different words; only the ratings of the word *motherfucker* revealed

similarly great variation among both males and females. For the males, the greatest variation is revealed by the ratings for *bitch*, *cunt* and *fuck*, while the greatest variation among the females' ratings is represented by the words *asshole* and *bastard*.

Table 3: All females – Word list

	Ass	*Asshole*	*Bastard*	*Bitch*	*Cunt*	*Damn*
Average	4.0	5.4	5.3	6.3	8.3	2.5
Std. Deviation	2.8	3.0	3.1	2.7	2.1	2.5
Mode	1	3	9	8	10	1
	Dick	*Fuck*	*Hell*	*Motherfucker*	*Nigger*	*Shit*
Average	4.7	5.8	2.4	7.1	9.1	3.4
Std. Deviation	2.7	2.8	2.4	3.0	1.8	2.5
Mode	5	5	1	10	10	1

Recall that many of the interview informants reported having interpreted the words of the word list rating task as if they were used in name-calling situations. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the most significant variations for each group are among words that are typically associated with the opposite sex. There was less agreement among the male participants as to the offensiveness of *bitch* and *cunt*, as these words are typically used to refer to females. Similarly, there is little agreement among the female participants as to the offensiveness of *asshole* and *bastard*, as these words are typically used to refer to males. According to one of the male informants:

> (15) White male: *I put '3' because that word ('cunt') has a lot of stigma. I personally don't find it offensive, but why would I?*

There was relatively little disagreement among the males as to the offensiveness of *asshole* and *bastard*, while among the females, the standard deviation for *cunt* was the second lowest of all the ratings.

Finally, the comparison of averages and modes reveals intra-group variation, especially among the females, whose ratings included both extremes of the offensiveness scale: according to the 'mode' date for females, four of the listed words (*ass*, *damn*, *hell* and *shit*) most often received ratings of '1', while the most often assigned rating for another three words (*cunt*, *motherfucker* and *nigger*) was '10'. The 'mode' data for the males reveal considerably less variation.

6.2   WHITE, AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND HISPANIC MALES

Tables 4, 5, and 6 present the respective averages and standard deviations for each of the words of the word list rating task according to the totals for white, African-American and Hispanic males. The grouping of the questionnaire participants according to gender and race significantly reduces the respective totals, thus rendering

values for 'mode' insignificant. For this reason, no 'mode' data are presented in Tables 4 - 8.

Table 4: White males – Word list

	Ass	*Asshole*	*Bastard*	*Bitch*	*Cunt*	*Damn*
Average	2.7	3.4	3.8	3.9	6.2	2.0
Std. Deviation	2.3	2.4	2.7	3.0	2.8	2.3
	Dick	*Fuck*	*Hell*	*Motherfucker*	*Nigger*	*Shit*
Average	3.1	4.4	2.0	5.0	7.8	2.7
Std. Deviation	2.4	3.2	2.3	3.0	2.3	2.4

Table 5: African-American males – Word list

	Ass	*Asshole*	*Bastard*	*Bitch*	*Cunt*	*Damn*
Average	3.0	4.9	4.2	5.7	5.2	2.5
Std. Deviation	2.2	2.6	2.0	2.7	2.6	1.8
	Dick	*Fuck*	*Hell*	*Motherfucker*	*Nigger*	*Shit*
Average	5.0	5.7	2.0	6.0	9.0	4.2
Std. Deviation	3.0	3.7	1.9	3.4	2.8	2.8

Table 6: Hispanic males – Word list

	Ass	*Asshole*	*Bastard*	*Bitch*	*Cunt*	*Damn*
Average	1.4	2.1	1.6	1.6	2.4	1.6
Std. Deviation	0.5	0.9	0.5	0.8	1.6	1.1
	Dick	*Fuck*	*Hell*	*Motherfucker*	*Nigger*	*Shit*
Average	2.6	2.4	2.4	3.4	6.9	2.6
Std. Deviation	1.9	1.5	3.4	3.0	2.7	1.9

The ratings data reveal both inter-group variation regarding overall offensiveness ratings as well as inter- and intra-group variation regarding word-specific ratings. However, while the individual ratings for the white and African-American males exhibit similar degrees of variation, the Hispanic males are shown to be significantly more consistent in their low ratings of offensiveness. One-way ANOVA tests for significance (at a 95% confidence interval) resulted in a significant p-value of 0.01 in a comparison of the means for the white, African-American and Hispanic males, a non-significant p-value of 0.25 in a comparison of the white and African-American males, a significant p-value of 0.05 in a comparison of the white and Hispanic males, and a significant p-value of <0.01 in a comparison of the African-American and Hispanic males. The figures for standard deviation for this latter group reveal a low degree of intra-group variation,

while the individual averages reveal this group's overall low level of perceived offensiveness regarding swear words.

The averages for the African-American males, on the other hand, are higher for nearly every word in the list than the white males' averages. The exception to this general trend are the ratings for the words *hell* and *cunt*. The average rating for *hell* was '2' among both white and African-American males. Although the same word received a higher average rating among the Hispanic males, the standard deviation reveals considerable variation among the individual ratings: six of the seven Hispanic male participants rated *hell* as '1', i.e., 'not offensive', whereas the seventh member of this group rated the word as a '10' on the offensiveness scale.

White males rated *cunt* as significantly more offensive than did the African-American and Hispanic males. The rating suggests that white males are more socially conditioned to the offensiveness of *cunt*, as opposed to African-American males, in whose culture and society the potency of the word *bitch*, as indicated by its average rating, is more relevant. The white and African-American females' ratings averages for the same words support this suggestion (see Tables 7 and 8).

The offensiveness ratings averages are congruent with the behavioral differences that each of the male groups exhibited in their spontaneous speech. Recall that while the African-American males engaged in swearing behavior almost exclusively among other African-American males of close social distance, the white males' swearing behavior reflected less restriction regarding co-participant social distance and the Hispanic males' (and females') swearing behavior reflected less restriction regarding co-participant race. Thus, the racial patterns of swearing behavior are shown to be a function of the perceived offensiveness of swearing.

6.3 WHITE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALES

The ratings data for the white and African-American females reveal inter- and intra-group variation similar to that of their male counterparts. The respective averages and standard deviations for each of the words of the word list rating task according to the totals for white and African-American females are presented in Tables 7 and 8, respectively. With only two participants, the Hispanic females are under-represented and for this reason, their averages are excluded from the immediate comparison.

Table 7: White females – Word list

	Ass	*Asshole*	*Bastard*	*Bitch*	*Cunt*	*Damn*
Average	3.7	4.9	4.8	5.8	8.7	2.3
Std. Deviation	2.6	3.0	3.2	2.6	1.8	2.0

	Dick	*Fuck*	*Hell*	*Motherfucker*	*Nigger*	*Shit*
Average	4.4	5.8	2.4	7.0	9.3	3.2
Std. Deviation	2.6	2.9	2.0	3.2	1.4	2.3

Table 8: African-American females – Word list

	Ass	*Asshole*	*Bastard*	*Bitch*	*Cunt*	*Damn*
Average	3.6	5.7	6.4	7.4	7.1	2.6
Std. Deviation	3.1	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.7	3.3
	Dick	*Fuck*	*Hell*	*Motherfucker*	*Nigger*	*Shit*
Average	5.1	5.7	2.4	7.6	9.0	3.9
Std. Deviation	3.3	3.4	3.4	2.5	1.9	3.3

While the African-American females' ratings averages were generally higher than those of the white females, the overall difference is less significant than that between the males of the same two races. A one-way ANOVA test for significance (at a 95% confidence interval) resulted in a non-significant p-value of 0.70. For only one word (*cunt*) was the African-American males' average rating LOWER than that of the white males, compared to four words (*ass*, *cunt*, *fuck* and *nigger*) receiving lower average ratings from the African-American females than from the white females. Furthermore, the slightly higher average ratings of the African-American females must be considered in terms of group size and individual ratings: one of the seven total African-American female participants categorically rated each listed word a '10' on the offensiveness scale, significantly affecting the averages. Thus, in light of the small samples for gender and race, the data suggest that the white and African-American females of this sample population share similar perceptions of the offensiveness of the listed swear words.

7   DIAGLOGUE RATINGS

The second rating task of the questionnaire required the participants to consider the offensiveness of particular swear words as used in social interaction. Actual dialogues recorded during the observation phase of the study were printed on the questionnaire, along with contextual details such as the setting and race, gender, and social status of the co-participants. The participants were required to rate the swear words, which appeared in bold print, according to the same scale as the word-list ratings task, i.e., from '1' to '10', '1' being 'Not Offensive' and '10' being 'Very Offensive'. Table 9 shows the averages, standard deviations and modes for the swear words of the swearing utterance rating task according to the totals for all participants.

In order to introduce variation in co-participant gender and race as well as to examine a denotative versus connotative use of swear words, only dialogues containing a limited sub-set of swear words were included in the ratings task. For this reason, a systematic comparison between the word-list ratings task and the contextualized ratings task is restricted to the words *ass*, *shit* and *fuck* and their inflections and/or derivatives, as listed in Table 9.

Table 9: All Participants – Dialogue

	Fucking	*Shit*	*Motherfucking*		*Shitty*
Average	2.5	2.7	3.7		2.2
Std. Deviation	2.1	2.1	2.7		1.9
Mode	1	1	1		1
	Fucking	*Ass*	*Shit*	*Fuck*	*Fucking*
Average	2.8	2.4	3.1	3.4	5.0
Std. Deviation	2.1	2.0	2.3	2.6	3.1
Mode	1	1	1	1	1

In all but two instances, the overall average ratings of the contextualized swear words were lower than the overall word-list average ratings. The two exceptions include the average ratings for *shit* as used in the fifth dialogue and *fucking* as used in the sixth dialogue, which were equal to the average word-list ratings for *shit* and *fuck* ('3.1' and '5.0', respectively), as shown in Table 1. Unlike the use of swear words in the first four dialogues, in the fifth and sixth dialogues *shit* and *fucking* were used denotatively, that is, *shit* was used as a synonym for 'excrement' and *fucking* was used as a synonym for 'copulating'. The extracted swearing utterances are as follows; the full dialogues appear in the appendix:

(16) From dialogue #5: *It smelled like shit.*

(17) From dialogue #6: *He's probably out fucking his girlfriend.*

According to the interview informants, these literal uses of the swear words are more offensive than the non-literal uses of the same words or inflections by the co-participants in the other dialogues:

(18) African-American female: *Like, she said, "It smelled like shit!" I mean, when you say that, I like have this disgusting look that comes across my face.*

(19) African-American male: *It was just the way it was used. It was kind of like, yeah, he's fucking his girlfriend. That's kind of like, you know, you could have just left it as, you know, he's out with his girlfriend.*

(20) White female: *Like 'fuck', I'm always saying, "How the fuck are you?" It's not that offensive to me. But this one, if he's 'out fucking his girlfriend', that's just more, I don't know why, it's just more offensive.*

The average ratings for *fuck* and the inflected *fucking*, as used in the first, fourth and fifth dialogues were varied, as were the individual uses. The extracted swearing utterances are provided below; the overall average offensiveness ratings of the swear words appear in parentheses:

(21) From dialogue #1: *Those are some fucking cool shoes.* (2.6)

(22) From dialogue #4: *He's just fucking around.* (2.8)

(23) From dialogue #5: *What the fuck?!* (3.5)

In the observation of spontaneous speech phase, *fucking* was the overall most frequently heard swear word among the speech community sample population. Accounting for 27% of the total swear word usage, *fucking* was used 98% of the time as an adjectival or adverbial intensifier, as it is used in the fourth dialogue. Thus, not only is this inflection of *fuck* widely used, its use is generally considered non-offensive, according to the low overall average rating.

The use of *fucking* in the fifth dialogue, as an inflected form of 'to fuck around', is a less common occurrence accounting for 2% of the total swear words recorded in spontaneous speech. The low frequency of occurrence and the somewhat higher average offensiveness rating suggest an intolerance of this particular usage, as expressed by an interview informant:

(24) White female: *Here, again, it's not being used in an offending context, it's not insulting anyone and it's not being used in its actual meaning. It's just a substitution for another word, like 'fiddling'. And again, I don't know why anyone would want to use that word except to emphasize their point, have people listen, maybe laugh a little bit more because it's out of place…*

Finally, the use of *fuck* in the fifth dialogue received a significantly higher average rating. The occurrence of this expression in the spontaneous speech was infrequent, suggesting that, similar to 'to fuck around', it is an uncommon expression and, as such, does not enjoy a similar degree of social sanction as *fucking* does, when used as an intensifier. According to one interview informant, the use of *what the fuck* in the context of the fifth dialogue represents a harshness to swearing that is not characteristic of casual conversation:

(25) African-American female: *And you say, "What the fuck?" like that, and it just seems, it's more hard core than the rest of these because those, it seems, they can go along, you know, smoothly. It's like a nice thing. Right here, it's like, offensive - the odor and the language.*

Of the swear words included in the word-list ratings task, *motherfucker* consistently rated as the most offensive, among both sexes and across all races. A similar derivative of *fuck*, *motherfucking*, was rated for offensiveness in the contextualized ratings task. Not only was the overall average offensiveness rating for *motherfucking* lower than the overall average rating for *motherfucker*, the individual average ratings according to race and sex (see Tables 10 - 14) were also consistently lower. Moreover, unlike *motherfucker* in the word-list ratings task, *motherfucking* did not consistently receive the highest average offensiveness ratings of the swear words, but rather the averages for *fucking* as used in the sixth dialogue were highest across both sexes and all races.

7.1   DIFFERENCES IN RATINGS ACCORDING TO GENDER AND RACE

The figures for standard deviation for the overall average offensiveness ratings of the contextualized swear words reveal more general agreement (less variation) among the questionnaire participants than do the corresponding figures for the word-list averages (see Table 9). The figures for mode remain consistent, with the lowest rating of '1' as the most frequent rating. Although the task of rating the offensiveness of swear words as used in a social context resulted in a greater degree of consistency among the ratings, variations according to gender and race are evident. Tables 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 show the averages and standard deviations for the swear words of the swearing utterance rating task according to the totals for white males, African-American males, Hispanic males, white females and African-American females, respectively.

Table 10: White Males – Dialogue

	Fucking	*Shit*	*Motherfucking*		*Shitty*
Average	3.3	3.0	4.1		2.6
Std. Deviation	2.6	2.5	2.5		2.6
	Fucking	*Ass*	*Shit*	*Fuck*	*Fucking*
Average	3.1	2.7	3.5	4.3	4.7
Std. Deviation	2.2	2.2	2.9	3.0	3.1

Table 11: African-American Males – Dialogue

	Fucking	*Shit*	*Motherfucking*		*Shitty*
Average	1.5	2.2	2.6		1.7
Std. Deviation	0.7	1.5	0.9		1.3
	Fucking	*Ass*	*Shit*	*Fuck*	*Fucking*
Average	2.0	1.7	2.3	2.3	3.8
Std. Deviation	1.3	1.6	1.6	1.3	1.9

Table 12: Hispanic Males – Dialogue

	Fucking	*Shit*	*Motherfucking*		*Shitty*
Average	1.4	1.7	1.6		1.3
Std. Deviation	0.8	0.8	0.8		0.8
	Fucking	*Ass*	*Shit*	*Fuck*	*Fucking*
Average	2.1	1.7	1.4	1.6	2.4
Std. Deviation	0.9	1.0	0.8	0.8	1.1

Table 13: White Females – Dialogue

	Fucking	*Shit*	*Motherfucking*	*Shitty*
Average	2.8	3.2	4.6	2.7
Std. Deviation	2.0	2.2	3.1	1.8
	Fucking	*Ass*	*Shit*	*Fuck*	*Fucking*
Average	3.3	2.9	3.7	3.9	6.6
Std. Deviation	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.8	3.1

Table 14: African-American Females – Dialogue

	Fucking	*Shit*	*Motherfucking*	*Shitty*
Average	2.0	1.7	3.9	1.3
Std. Deviation	2.2	1.5	3.6	0.8
	Fucking	*Ass*	*Shit*	*Fuck*	*Fucking*
Average	2.0	1.1	2.9	3.3	5.7
Std. Deviation	2.6	0.4	1.8	2.9	3.3

As opposed to the average offensiveness ratings for the word-list swear words which revealed greater differences between the sexes, the average ratings for the contextualized swear words reveal differences between the races, especially among the males. One-way ANOVA tests for significance (at a 95% confidence interval) resulted in a significant p-value of <0.0001 in a comparison of white, African-American and Hispanic males. The standard deviations of the white males' and females' average ratings indicate intra-group variation of a degree comparable to the intra-group variation evident in the word-list rating task. Their respective average ratings for the contextualized swear words are relatively consistent with the corresponding average ratings for *ass*, *shit*, *fuck* and *motherfucker* of the word-list rating task. The majority of the average ratings for the contextualized swear words were lower than or equal to their corresponding word-list averages with the exception of *shit* as used in Dialogues #2 and #5 and *fucking* as used in Dialogue #6; these averages were higher than (or, in one case, equal to) the average ratings for *shit* and *fuck* in the word-list rating task.

Similar trends are evident among the average offensiveness ratings of the Hispanic males. Like the average ratings of the word-list swear words, the ratings of the contextualized swear words reflect a low degree of intra-group variation and a continued consistency with regards to categorically low ratings. However, in several instances, the average ratings of contextualized swear words were higher than the corresponding word-list averages. The average ratings for *ass*, *shitty*, both uses of *shit* and the use of *fucking* in the sixth dialogue were higher than the average word-list ratings for *ass*, *shit* and *fuck*, respectively.

The average offensiveness ratings of the African-American males and females contrast significantly with those of the white males and females. A one-way ANOVA test of significance (at a 95% confidence interval) resulted in a significant p-value of

0.0404 in a comparison of white males and females (as a group) and African-American males and females (as a group). Consistently lower than the averages of the white participants and higher (with the exception of *fucking* as used in the fourth dialogue) than those of the Hispanic males, the African-American participants' average ratings of the contextualized swear words were the only ratings to be categorically lower than the average ratings of the word-list swear words. The figures for standard deviation furthermore reflect considerable agreement among the African-American participants with regards to these low average ratings.

8   CONCLUSION

Although most salient among the African-American males and females, the data for each group of participants according to race and gender suggest that context of utterance significantly affects the perceived offensiveness of swear words. The word-list and dialogue rating tasks also indicate variation in the evaluation of swear words according to gender and race. Overall, females consistently rated the listed swear words as more offensive than males did. White females, on the other hand, rated much of the dialogue swear word usage as less offensive than the white males did. This suggests that females, with whom swearing is traditionally not associated, are more sensitive to the possible offensiveness or inappropriateness of swearing, but more tolerant of swearing within one's social group. The general consistency of the swear word ratings by white males, on the other hand, suggests an awareness of an inherent offensiveness of swear words, but at the same time a lack of attention to context. Representing the social majority and the most socially powerful group within the study population, white males are less likely to be inhibited by rules of linguistic behavior.

In terms of racial differences, African-American males consistently rated the listed swear words as more offensive than any other racial group did, but rated the contextualized swear words as less offensive than any other group, with the exception of Hispanic males. It should be noted that Hispanic students at the University of Florida may have Spanish as their native language, and thus not be inclined to rate swear words in the same way as native speakers. The comparatively higher ratings of listed swear words vs. contextualized swear words among African American males suggests the marginalized social position of this group. Due to their minority status, they do not enjoy the same social power as White males, and as such, they seem less likely to engage in the socially complex behavior of swearing unless the context is appropriate. The lack of context provided in the word-list rating task encouraged an interpretation of offensive, inappropriate behavior, while the dialogue ratings more accurately reflected the kind of swearing common to in-group African-American male behavior, which is considered less offensive.

Evidence of the frequent occurrence of swearing in university speech communities (Cameron 1969, Jay 1986, Nerbonne et al. 1972) juxtaposed with high ratings of swear word offensiveness (Mabry 1975, Driscoll 1981, Jay 1977, 1978, 1986, Manning et al. 1974) establishes a swearing paradox, representing the question of how this reportedly offensive behavior can also be a frequently occurring one. The data analyzed in the present study suggest that the swear words devoid of context tend to be rated in terms of the context suggested by the evaluative adjective provided, e.g.,

offensive, abrasive, abusive, etc. The traditional word-list method can neither account for the variations of swear word usage, such as literal or metaphorical usage, nor for the effects of variations in context, such as setting, topic and co-participants. The word-list and dialogue ratings tasks furthermore revealed that swear words used denotatively or injuriously are considered to be most offensive, while the metaphorical use of swear words in in-group, social interaction tend to be judged as least or not at all offensive. It is the latter type of swearing which was found to be most common within the study population. The findings of the complete research of which this study is a part offer a resolution of the swearing paradox, as the data reveal that the most frequently occurring type of swearing is neither that which is typically represented in offensiveness studies nor that which is considered most offensive.

The variations in ratings of the contextualized swear words suggest that the questionnaire participants based their evaluations more on how the words were used than on who used them. All of the co-participants featured in the six dialogues were presented as students, i.e., members of the participants' speech community. The questionnaire participants were thus required only to evaluate the swearing behavior of their peers.

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APPENDIX

WORD-LIST RATINGS

The following is a list of words which may or may not be considered offensive. Using the scale provided, please indicate by circling a number how offensive you consider these words to be.

	Not Offensive									Very offensive
Ass	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Asshole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Bastard	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Bitch	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Cunt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Damn	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Dick	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Fuck	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Hell	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Motherfucker	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Nigger	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Shit	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

DIALOGUE RATINGS

After reading the following situations and examples of swearing, please indicate how offensive you consider these words to be by circling a number on the scale provided.

Not Offensive									Very offensive
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

1. Three write, female undergraduate students talking in a public area on campus:

    Female 1:   Those are some **fucking** cool shoes.
    Female 2.   Really.
    Female 3:   Thanks. My new clod-hoppers.

fucking   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

2. Two African-American, male undergraduate students talking in a public area on campus:

    Male 1:   I'm like, the shoes you want are upstairs, and I'll go get 'em if you're gonna buy 'em. If you're gonna get the **shit**, get the **shit**.
    Male 2.   Y'all keep the real inventory up there. You got **shit** on the **motherfucking** wall.
    Male 1:   Yeah, man.

shit   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10
motherfucking 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

3. One white, female undergraduate student talking with two white, male undergraduate students in a public area on campus:

    Female: That situation you were in was **shitty** and that's why you gotta avoid getting into another **shitty** one.
    Male 1:   Yeah, I know.

shitty   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

4. Three African-American, female undergraduate students talking in a public area on campus:

    Female 1:   He's up there waiting for you.
    Female 2:   He's sittin' down. He's just **fuckin'** around. He ain't goin' nowhere. I got to walk my **ass** on up there.
    Female 1, 3: (laughter)

fuckin'   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10
ass   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

5. Two white, female undergraduate students talking (about a smelly towel) in a public area on campus:

> Female 1: It smelled like **shit**. I had it around my neck and was like, 'What the **fuck**?!'
> Female 2: Eww, gross.

shit	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
fuck	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

6. Two white, male undergraduate students talking in a public area on campus:

> Male 1: You seen Josh around?
> Male 2: He's probably out **fucking** his girlfriend.
> Male 1: What, are they together?

fucking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

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