# GENDERED TALK: TABOO LANGUAGE IN INTERNET RELAY CHAT

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**Abstract**

One of the well-established sociolinguistic stereotypes is the concept of woman as a gentle and delicate creature whose language tallies with this notion. Women are brought up to mind their manners and be in command of their choice of vocabulary markedly more than men. Recent studies indicate that the correlation between gender and taboo language is context-dependent. Research shows that both men and women use more crude expressions in the same-sex conversation and that the usage of swear words decreases in mixed-sex conversations. In narratives, however, women tend to increase the use of taboo language in order to accommodate to the male norm, in contrast with men who tend to use fewer profanities. The paper wishes to present partial results of an ongoing survey into computer-mediated communication (CMC). As the most anonymous and fleeting CMC environment, chat accentuates the virtues and vices of the cyberspace communication – it lessens the pressure of social expectations and gives the impression of impunity. The present study adopts the community of practice framework and examines how this specific context influences the use of taboo language in IRC (Internet Relay Chat) in terms of gender differences.

**Key words**

swear words, taboo language, women's language, men's language, Intenet Relay Chat (IRC), gender, community of practice, context

## 1 Introduction

Early studies in the field of language and gender put the ways in which men and women behave and express themselves in sharp contrast, portraying women as consistently gentle and polite, cooperative and hedging, whilst marking the men's language and conduct as assertive, aggressive and dominant (e.g. Lakoff 2004, Trudgill 1974, Tannen 1994). Recent research has refuted this stereotypically dichotomized approach and proved that gender differences are variable and context-dependent and defy an unequivocal categorisation (e.g. Coates 2004, Crawford 1995, Stapleton 2003). Yet, the stereotypical perception and expectations are still deeply rooted in the society and our behaviour is judged with respect to gender (e.g. Cameron 1997, Litoselliti & Sunderland 2002, Sunderland 2006, Romaine 1999). Women are still "brought up to talk and act like ladies" (Romaine 1999: 221) and rough behaviour and language are more tolerated when coming from a man than a woman.

The present study wishes to examine the use of taboo language in an environment that is said to allow disengagement from social pressures and expectations. It applies the community of practice (CoP) framework (Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999) to research the use of swear words in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) with respect to gender.

The paper presents an overview of the use of swear words both in CMC and face-to-face (FTF) communication, including taboo language variables. The practical part brings an analysis of the swear words and acronyms containing swear words in the corpus gathered on an IRC chat site JustChat.

## 2 Taboo language

Making use of taboo language is a normal part of human behaviour. Cursing knows no age or social boundaries, virtually all people swear at one point of their lives or another. Learning crude words is part of natural childhood development and we continue to swear till we die, irrespective of our social background or level of education. Research shows that in spoken discourse swear words occur at 0.3 per cent to 0.7 per cent rate (McEnery 2006). Given that an average speaker uses 15,000–16,000 words per day (Mehl 2007), this accounts for 50–90 taboo words spoken per day. To illustrate the point that swear words are a common part of everyday human interaction, let us compare their frequency of occurrence with that of first person plural pronouns (*we, us, our*), which is 1.0 per cent rate in spoken discourse (McEnery 2006).

With respect to their semantic referents, swear words can be divided into several categories. Taboo expressions range from the mildly offensive to very offensive and they can be of sexual (*fuck*) or blasphemous (*goddamn*) nature, they can refer to scatological or disgusting objects (*shit*) or animals (*pig*), they can constitute ethnic-racial-gender insults (*wog*, *fag*), denote psychological, physical or social deviations (*twat, fatso*), ancestral allusions (*bastard*), substandard vulgar terms (*fart locker*) and offensive slang (*fudgepacker*) (Jay 2009). Although the choice of taboo words is wide, roughly 80 per cent of all the swear words used in everyday speech comprise only ten words. The most repeated terms are *fuck, shit, hell, damn, goddamn, Jesus Christ, ass, oh my god, bitch*, and *sucks* (Jay 2000).

The primary purpose of swear words is to help release emotions, especially those of frustration, anger, joy or surprise (e.g. Allan 2006, Jay 2000, McEnery 2006). In such cases swear words are used in a spontaneous manner with little control over the situation. However, we also use expletives intentionally in order to achieve a number of social goals (Jay 2009, Montagu 1967). Swear words can

be meant and perceived as positive, negative or inconsequential, they can be used in order to establish and maintain social status, and allow the speaker to show affiliation or identify with a social group (e.g. Coates 2003, Jay 2009, Stapleton 2003).

## 3 Taboo language variables

The frequency of taboo word use together with the choice of crude vocabulary are influenced by several factors. The first variable is age. In his study of swearing in English, McEnery (2006: 38-42) examined the spoken part of the *British National Corpus* (BNC) to determine the number of swear words used by speakers of different age groups. The analysis showed that the usage of taboo expressions peaks around the age of 25 with a frequency of well over 3,000 swear words per million words; it then gradually starts to decrease to less than 500 expletives per million words in the 60+ group. What also changes with age is the choice of swear words – as we get older, we start using milder, less offensive swear words (McEnery 2006: 41).

The next factor to consider is social hierarchy and social groups. Swearing has been traditionally associated with lower socioeconomic groups and working-class culture (Stapleton 2003). Research shows that social status and the frequency of swearing are inversely proportional, i.e. the higher one's position on the social ladder, the fewer swear words they tend to use (Jay 2009, McEnery 2006). In close connection with social hierarchy is also affiliation to social groups. Speakers on the same step of the social ladder can be members of different 'cliques' and can therefore greatly differ in their choice of swear words as well as the frequency with which they use them. A member of a highly religious group is likely to use few swear words in everyday communication, whilst an average secondary school student can be expected to utter a sizeable number of crude expressions per day. Similarly, a group of pensioners meeting over a game of cards can use surprisingly strong swear words, strictly limiting the usage of such vocabulary to the particular group and occasion. Adjusting one's language to the lexicon of a community serves as an immediate and salient signal of group solidarity and bonding.

The third variable to consider with regard to frequency and choice of taboo language is gender. The usage of swear words has been closely associated with male behaviour and masculinity and seen as more acceptable, even appropriate when coming from a men. Women, on the other hand, have always been exposed to more pressure when it comes to following the rules and living up to the expectations of society (e.g. Cameron 1997, Chambers & Trudgill 1998,

Crawford 1995, Romaine 1999). "A woman who uses 'bad language' is likely to invite not only negative social ascriptions, but also judgments regarding her moral standing and character" (Stapleton 2003: 22). Similarly, Romaine points out that women need to "tread a fine line in their behavior or they risk being called slags and whores" (Romaine 1999: 189). Early studies in the field were in concord with this notion and reinforced the dichotomized view of women's and men's language (Jespersen 1922, Lakoff 2004). Latest research, however, shows that "the use of expletives as symbols of both power and solidarity is no longer the exclusive privilege of males alone" (Bayard & Krishnayya 2001: 1) and that "the frequency gap between men's and women's swearing is decreasing" (Jay 2000: 166). Research into the spoken part of the BNC revealed a gender difference in the choice of swear words. Males used the words *fucking, fuck, jesus, cunt* and *fucker* more frequently than women, whilst the words *god, bloody, pig, hell, bugger, bitch, pissed, arsed* and *shit* were more typical of females (McEnery 2006: 29). Research also showed a difference in the choice of swear words, depending on the addressee. *Cow*, for example, is an intragender word used by and directed at women only (McEnery 2006: 34).

The last factor to add to the equation is context. We change the way we speak and behave depending on our audience. Different vocabulary is employed when speaking to a peer in an amicable discussion and when talking to a superior in a formal situation. We would not use swear words during a job interview but when describing it in the relaxed atmosphere of a pub to a group of friends, we are likely to utter a few crude expressions, simply to spike the narrative and make it more appealing to our audience. Jay points out the influence of immediate communication context on the use of vulgarisms: "If cursing will lead to a cost (e.g. punishment, loss of job, social banishment), it will be avoided. If cursing will lead to a benefit (e.g. attention, praise, humour, social cohesion), it is more likely to be used" (Jay 2000: 148).

What further complicates the situation and makes any clear cut assumptions about the use of taboo language virtually impossible is the interplay of the above mentioned variables. Let us consider the relation between gender and context. Research shows that both men and women use more swear words in same-sex conversation and that the usage of swear words decreases in mixed-sex conversations. In mixed sex narratives, however, women tend to increase the use of taboo language in order to accommodate to the male norm, in contrast with men, who tend to use fewer swear words (Coates 2004). McEnery points out that the choice and frequency of taboo lexicon of both men and women "may vary markedly depending on context and the gender of the hearer/hearers" (McEnery 2006: 29). Stapleton analysed the mechanics of swearing in a group of

undergraduate drinking friends to find out that "swearing represents a common linguistic practice" in this particular CoP and that "there is little difference between female and male respondents in this respect, suggesting that in terms of 'everyday' swearing, women and men participate on equal terms within the community" (Stapleton 2003: 31).

## 4 Taboo language in CMC

With the expansion and wide availability of the Internet many believed that CMC would represent a new frontier in communication, an equal environment where social status, race, age or gender would disappear. The facelessness of the Internet inspired ample research in the ways in which identity is constructed and performed in both synchronous and asynchronous communication. But even early studies in the field of CMC arrived at the conclusion that when we enter cyberspace, our offline lives are not left behind (e.g. Danet 1998, Herring 1993, Rodino 1997, Savicki 1996).

Research in CMC shows that men are more aggressive and use flaming (the practice of sending deliberately hostile, rude messages) markedly more than women (Herring 1994). Thelwall (2008) looked at gender differences in swearing in the youth-oriented social network site MySpace in the US and UK to find out that males used more moderate and strong swear words than females both in the US and UK sample. The only exception was strong swearing in the UK profiles, where no difference was found. The figures show that strong swearing is the most frequent in the profiles of teenagers (16-19), declining in direct proportion with the rising age of MySpace users. Teenage female users follow close on male users' heels. With other age groups the gender difference starts to increase. Thelwall concludes that "the U.K. female assimilation of traditionally male swearing in the informal context of MySpace is suggestive of deeper changes in gender roles in society" and that "gender equality in swearing or a reversal in gender patterns for strong swearing will slowly become more widespread, at least in social network sites" (ibid.: 100).

## 5 Method and material

The data for the present analysis were recorded on a British chat site JustChat (www.justchat.co.uk). JustChat is a small site with many regular users who chat on the main screen rather than disappearing in private rooms. The site offers three forums, each with a number of rooms, and a video chatroom. The most visited forum is Forum 1, room Lobby, where the corpus was gathered.

JustChat presents itself as "the online community for adults" and requires its users to be over 18. The site rules do not allow "sexual or offensive language or content" as well as "inflammatory or defamatory comments" to be posted in any of the forums (http://justchat.co.uk/chat/forum1.htm). To reinforce the rules, the site has a team of Chat Guides who oversee the conversations and can eject and ban users who do not conform to the site rules. Chat guides recruit from regular chatters and work on a voluntary basis. There are not enough of them to be present in all the chatrooms at all times, but they function as "visible deterrent for chat abusers and prove that we will not tolerate abuse at Just Chat" (ibid.). Moreover, the room also has a 'self-cleaning' mechanism – disruptive and abusive users can be put by others on *Ignore list*, thus preventing their messages from appearing on the screen. In spite of this, the postings in forums abound with taboo language and topics. The guides and common users tolerate crude expressions as long as they are misspelled, thus symbolising graphic euphemisms, and as long as they are not used in an abusive way.

The analysed corpus comprises 20,000 postings (94,293 words) sent by 40 users (500 postings per user). Twenty users identified themselves and were recognised by others as males, twenty as females. The postings were analysed for swear words including their spelling variants and acronyms containing swear words.

## 6 Results

The analysis shows that in IRC, both men and women swear in abundance. Swear words or acronyms containing swear words occurred at 2.7 per cent rate in the corpus. Compared with McEnery's (2006) 0.3 to 0.7 per cent rate of swearwords in the spoken part of the BNC, chat users more than tripled the occurrence of profanities in their contributions.

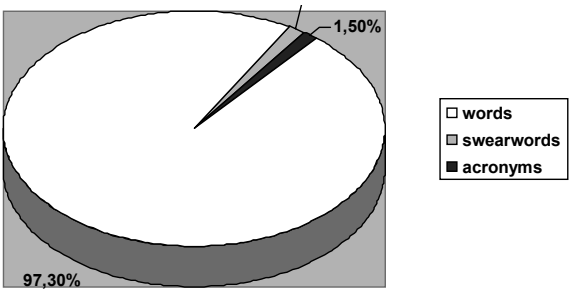


**Figure 1: Swear words and acronyms with swear words**

The male participants wrote 1,112 swear words and acronyms containing swear words in their contributions, females posted 1,411, making them the more foul-mouthed part of the community. So the women not only drew level with men, they outmatched them in the use of crude language in chat. A more detailed analysis shows differences in the usage of swear words and acronyms containing swear words. The male group used more swear words than the female group; 626 taboo words were posted by men compared to 484 that were sent by women. Women, on the other hand, used almost twice as many acronyms with swear words as men; 927 compared to 486.

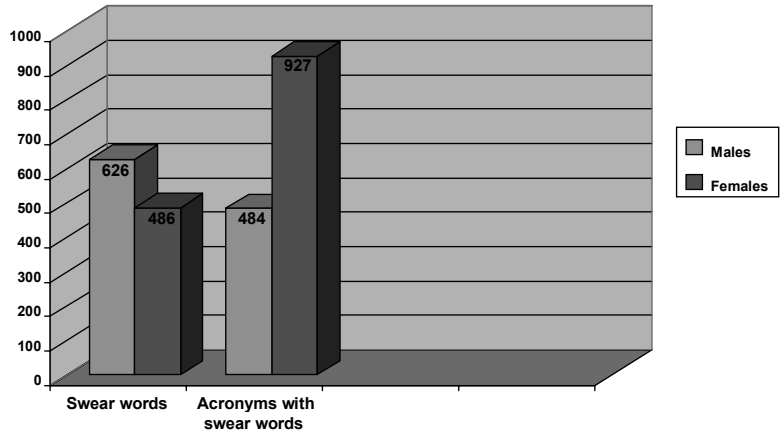


**Figure 2: Swear words and acronyms with swear words**

The Internet is a creative and playful environment. There is a wide variety of crude acronyms to choose from (e.g. http://www.netlingo.com/acronyms.php), yet only a minority are commonly used. Moreover, each community tends to develop its language through which the users show affiliation to the particular group. JustChat participants limit themselves to only ten acronyms with swear words, five of which contain the word *fuck – bj = blow job, ffs = for fuck's sake, lmao = laughing my ass off, lmfao = laughing my fucking ass off, omg = oh my god, omfg = oh my fucking god, pm(s)l = pissing myself laughing, stfu = shut the fuck up, wtf = what the fuck.* As Figure 3 shows, the most frequent acronym used by the female participants was *lmao* with 399 occurrences, followed by *pm(s)l* with 156 occurrences, and *ffs* with 144 occurrences. Men favoured *pm(s)l* the most with 192 instances, followed by 120 occurrences of *lmao*, and 66 of the acronym *ffs*. With the exception of the change in positions of the first and second

most repeated crude acronym, there was no difference between the genders in the preference of the three most commonly used acronyms with swear words.

Acronyms containing swear words are typically of little information value. Their aim is to express the user's sentiments, often simply to display the user's presence in the room. The first two most frequent acronyms in corpus (*lmao*, *pm(s)l*), both for males and females, are used to express amusement; the third most often posted acronym (*ffs*) suggests exasperation and annoyance.

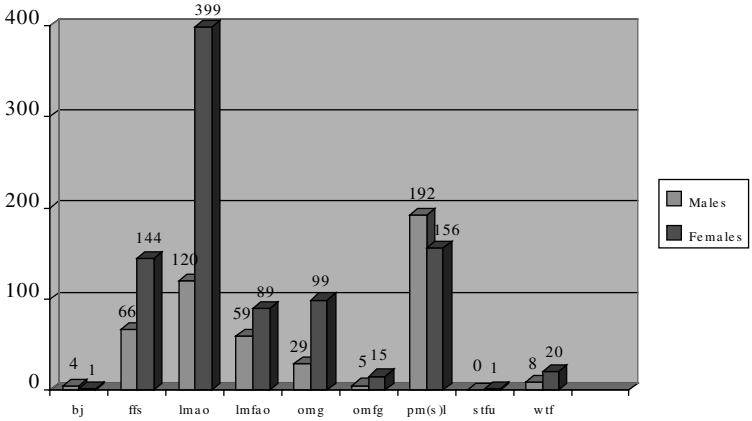


**Figure 3: Acronym with swear words**

The first two most repeatedly used swear words in both parts of the corpus were the words *fuck* (and its variants *fcuk*, *fu ck*, *fuc k*, *fúck*, *feck*, *fook*, *fek*, and *fk*) and a versatile euphemism %%% that can stand for any taboo word, though it typically represents the word *fuck*. The third, fourth and fifth most frequent swear words used by women were *bloody*, *shit*, and *arse*, for males these were *shit*, *god*, and *arse* (and their variants); all belonging to the most common profanities used in face-to-face communication. Interestingly, research shows that the profanity *god* tends to be favoured by women (Jay 2009). In the present study, however, *god* ranked fourth in the male corpus but did not appear among the first ten most frequent swear words in the female corpus. On the other hand, women in the spoken part of the BNC preferred the word *bloody* markedly more than men (McEnery 2006), which is in concord with the present findings. Men in the corpus used the word *bloody* only twelve times and the word did not rank among the ten most frequently used swear words. In concordance with Thelwall's study of swearing in MySpace (2008), female chat participants used fewer taboo

expressions, but matched males in the strength of the swear words they used. The groups had seven of the ten most frequent swear words in common – *fuck*, %%%, *shit*, *arse*, *piss*, *tart* and *perv* and differed in three – women preferred the words *bloody*, *crap* and *hell*, men used *god*, *shag* and *cunt*. Terms referring to female body parts are generally used markedly more by men (McEnery 2006, Stapleton 2003), which is confirmed in the IRC context in the word *cunt*, which in the female corpus occurred only once, compared to 16 occurrences in the male part of the corpus.

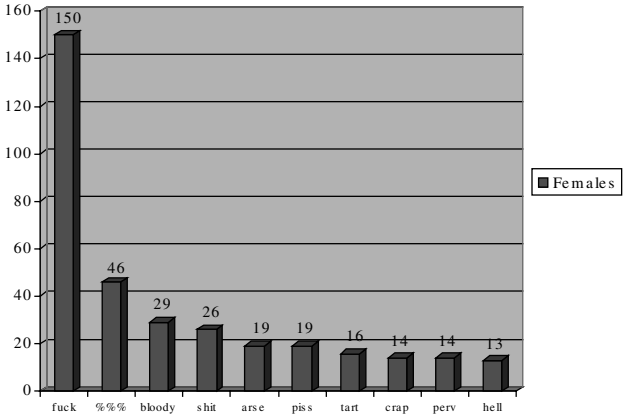


**Figure 4: Most frequent swear words – females**

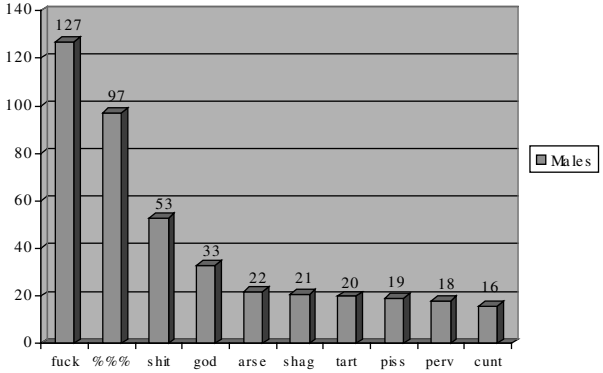


**Figure 5: Most frequent swear words – males**

## 7 Discussion and conclusions

Swear words carry a heavy emotional load. We are brought up to shy away from crude expressions and frown upon those who use them, especially when they come from women. Crude language is strongly associated with bad manners and low social classes. Yet, there is something enticing about breaking the expected social norms and exploring the dark corners of human behaviour and language. For several reasons, the context of IRC seems to be an ideal environment for such practice.

Every chat site tends to have its own rules of conduct and uses its own language. Conforming to these maxims is a way to signal identification with the community. Excessive use of swear words is one of the trademarks of IRC. Swearing in chat is particularly easy because virtually everybody seems to do it and as long as they are not of abusive character, taboo words are accepted by the community. Both males and females in the corpus used the same acronyms containing swear words with little difference in their preferences of usage, and with seven of the ten most frequent swear words in common. What this means is that in the chat community, men and women are on equal footing when it comes to the choice of taboo expressions.

The relative anonymousness of IRC allows the users to curse without fear of punishment or contempt of the society. Freed from the constraints of conventions, people like to discuss taboo topics, exploit taboo language, and generally behave in ways they themselves consider unacceptable in real life. In the darkness of cyberspace, the users hide behind their nicknames and enjoy the feeling of impunity. The social construction of gender gives men more linguistic freedom than women. Since they are not subjected to the same pressure as women, men do not need to make up for it in the anonymity of the virtual world. The primacy of women in the overall usage of taboo language in IRC can therefore be explained by their urge to break free from social constraints. However, the increased female swearing in chat can also signal their effort to accommodate to the male norms of behaviour, especially in an environment that was originally male-dominated.

We are emotionally bound with what we say. Many people would not utter certain profanities even though they are familiar with them, but are willing to type them since unlike the contributions in asynchronous communication, chat postings disappear as soon as they scroll off the screen and cannot be looked up and viewed later. Combined with the anonymousness of cyberspace, the emotional burden diminishes when a taboo word is not pronounced but typed. Moreover, the emotional load of taboo language is further lessened by the fact that strong swear words are misspelled in chat. For instance, the word *fuck* in its

original spelling was used only three times in the male corpus, and not used at a in the female corpus. The practice of misspelling swear words dates back to the beginnings of IRC communication. Many chatrooms were so swamped with foul expressions that the providers developed software which detected swear words and ejected those who used them from the room. It would have been easy to incorporate the modifications in the programmes, but these graphic euphemisms became accepted variants and are not censored. The emotional load is even lower in the case of acronyms containing swear words. Here the crude expression is symbolised by a single letter. The markedly large gap in the male and female use of acronyms may therefore suggest that, although anonymous, when they disclose their gender, women still carry the burden of gender stereotypes. To keep up with the language of the community, women use swear words but they do it in the least offensive way – hidden in acronyms.

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