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AN EXAMINATION OF PROFANITIES AND THEIR NEUTRAL EQUIVALENTS

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ABSTRACT

Swear words are typically used to express feelings of surprise, annoyance, excitement, pain, and frustration. Euphemism is the term which describes the use of particular words in specific contexts to soften the utterance and avoid or limit shame. This paper investigates the use of swearwords and their euphemistic counterparts amongst males and females. The study is a corpus-based analysis and attempts to provide clear answers as to the usage of obscenities by using material from the British National Corpus (BNC). The discussions gathered in the corpus were held in a variety of settings, including courtrooms, classrooms, interviews, broadcasts, and public debates. This means that it offers us the possibility to research how speakers of language might communicate in a natural situation. These writings can be referred to as naturally occurring texts because they were written down during actual events or situations without anyone telling the participants what to say.

Keywords: Swearwords, Euphemisms, males, females, naturally occurring texts

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Scope of the Study

Swearing is a common feature of human language today. However, the status of swearing has changed through history. What was considered taboo and offensive has changed as well. The increased occurrence and frequency of use is a major reason for this change. In addition to this, swearing takes many forms. In fact, what is regarded as inappropriate in one country might not be considered bad in another country or society (McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006). Swearwords, or obscenities as they are sometimes called, can be used to express a variety of emotional states such as anger and frustration. They also show surprise or emphasize something. In order to avoid causing offence, swearwords may be substituted with euphemisms. Euphemisms help writers soften harsh words like the expression "pushing up daisies" to say that someone is dead and buried.

Here are the two main questions that are posed: "Why do people swear?" and "Why do people use a euphemism instead of a swearword?" Jay and Janschewitz (2008) state people start swearing at an early age. It starts with children whose swearing is harmless and inoffensive and gains complexity during adolescence. At this stage, teenagers are more prone to swearing. As people grow older, their swearing decreases, especially when they start to have children. One point worth mentioning is that male language differs from female

language in terms of swearing. According to some studies, men tend to use more offensive words than women (McEnery, 2006).

### 1.2 Purpose of the Study

The present study is a corpus-based analysis and attempts to answer the research questions by using material from the British National Corpus (BNC). Euphemisms such as 'gee', 'heavens', 'gosh', 'flaming', 'blasted', 'blooming', 'crikey', 'blimey', 'oh my goodness', 'sugar', 'heck', and 'darn' were selected in reference to the swearwords from McEnery's (2006) scale of offence. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to explore the use of euphemisms in male and female speech and to compare the use of euphemism to swear words.

### 1.3 Research Questions

The study will attempt to answer two major research questions:

1. Do women use euphemistic swearing more frequently than men?
2. Are there euphemisms favored by male and female speakers?

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

The importance of the study lies in the fact that there have only been a few studies related to gender difference in language use and swearing. This is mainly due to the absence of corpus resources. Corpora such as the BNC (British National Corpus) have made research easier, for the corpus allows researchers to explore spoken and written language with focus on different demographic variables or genres.

### 1.5 Research Hypothesis

Based on studies that shed light on how factors such as gender affect people's choice of words, the main hypothesis of the research is as follows:

- It is expected to find a higher frequency in women's use of euphemisms, or at least in their use of euphemistic equivalents of offensive swearwords.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Section two defines swearing and euphemisms and present theories about gender-related language. It also mentions previous studies describing swearwords and euphemisms and their functions.

### 2.1 Definition of Swearing and Euphemistic Swearing

Swearing can be defined as the use of taboo words or offensive language to express an emotional state (Jay, 1992). "Taboo words are sanctioned or restricted on both institutional and individual levels under the assumption that harm will occur if a taboo word is spoken" (Jay, 2009, p.153). There are some emotional forces behind swearwords that express people's feelings and attitudes and can be used to shock society. Crystal (2003) distinguishes between the language of taboo, abuse and swearing. He states that calling someone "a shit" is using a taboo word as a term of abuse. He adds that if this term is said with sufficient emotional force, it will be considered an act of swearing (p.173).

Hughes (2006) is convinced that words have the power to change the world. Therefore, he created a list of variations and terms of swearing and what he called 'word magic' (p.16). The figure below shows the various classes of swearwords and the strength of each class.

Figure 2.1 shows that there are different ways of swearing. The recognized types of swearing include "formal swearing", which is considered a ritual of social agreement and duty: People swear on the Bible in court; they swear an oath to tell the truth. A person can be sworn in by being admitted to a particular position. In the case of attestations, people can swear by/on all religious referents, like Jesus or Mary; they can also swear by objects regarded as sacred; for instance, 'I swear on my mother's grave' (Hughes, 2006).

SACRED			
Prayers	Attestations	Charms	Oaths
(Line of Acceptability)			
Curses	Profanity	Spells	Obscenity
Malediction	Perjury	Foul Language	
	Blasphemy	Ethnic Slurs	
	PROFANE	TABOO	

Figure 2.1 Hughes' use of Swearing Words

Hughes states that in terms of mode, people swear by someone or some higher force; they swear to do something; they also swear at something or somebody (Hughes, 2006, p.15). When holy names or objects are used to swear at someone, their modes change to profanity, blasphemy, imprecation and malediction. Nevertheless, words that are normally understood as swearwords are not always offensive depending on the setting. For example, the words "Jesus" and "Christ" are not seen as blasphemous when they are mentioned in religious speech or context.

Hughes' model of swearing and word magic was essentially made to give the reader a clear notion of the differences between what is accepted or not. It is also worth mentioning that many of these terms had a different mode in the past; hence, even if people are familiar with all these terms and modes today, what is called a swearword today may not have been one in the past (Hughes, 2006).

According to Jay (1992), swearwords or taboo words vary from culture to culture and from country to country. Jay (1992) also classifies "bad language" into different kinds. He divides 'bad language' into different types. From among these types, we may mention cursing, profanity/blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity and scatology.

The first type is "cursing". "Cursing" is to call upon divine or mystic power to send injury upon. Swearing frequently refers to holy or religious themes. Tottie (2002) maintains that the first meaning of swearing came from "to swear an oath by something that is holy", like God, or in honor of someone. The denotation of cursing came from "to put a curse on someone" (p.195). Religious cursing is the use of words like "damn you" or "go to hell". There is also non-religious cursing when someone wishes to harm the target by uttering words like: "I hope you break your neck". "Hell" is often substituted with the euphemistic terms "heck" and "heavens" (Jay, 1992, p.2)

The second type is "profanity" and/or "blasphemy". "Profanity" means to treat something sacred with abuse, irreverence, insolence, or disdain. Nevertheless, profanity is often a habitual act. In other words, to be profane is to ignore the rules of a particular custom or a religious belief. Jay (1992) considers that words of profanity show the speakers' ignorance of or indifference to religious matters and are not usually used to degrade religions or religious referents. An example of this is: "For the love of Christ, get off the phone!". Regarding the term "blasphemy," Hughes (2006) argues that it refers to the act of demeaning religion or God. The difference between profanity and blasphemy is that while the latter is more premeditated or deliberate, the former is indifferent to topics such as religion (p.17). In Jay's views (1992), blasphemy as a term or mode has lost its impact as an insult; that is mainly because the church no longer has power over the people. Nonetheless, there are societies where blasphemy is not tolerated. Religious swearing differs from one country to the other. Sex and feces-related swearwords, such as "fuck" and "shit", are considered the foulest swearwords in the United States, whereas swearing involving God and Jesus are milder swearwords. In Norway, on the other hand, the vilest swearwords involve religious profanity or blasphemy. As stated by Ljung (1987), Norwegian swearwords are chiefly directed at religion, and only a few swearwords are related to sex or sexual terms. Ljung adds that this does not mean that swearwords involving religion have become milder forms of taboo words in Norway. Not all people are practicing Christians, but they relate to Christianity in a way or another with varying degrees of respect and disrespect. People know that these words are extremely bad, and will consequently avoid them, at least in public. There are various instances of euphemisms for religious swearwords in the United

Kingdom, such as “crikey”, a euphemism for Christ; “blimey”, coming from “God blind me” or “Blind me, God”; “Oh my goodness” instead of “Oh my God”; “gosh” in place of “God”; and “gee”, a euphemism for Jesus.

The third type is “obscenity”. “Obscenity” refers to words that are disgusting, hideous, abhorrent to morality or virtue and intended to arouse lust or depravity. According to Hughes (2006), the issue with this term is that what is considered obscene depends on variables relating to culture, age and personal penchants. Still, obscene words are still considered the most offensive and are rarely used in public (p.331). The word “fuck” is the only exception for it is the most frequently recorded swearword used in public (Jay, 1992, p.5).

The fourth type is “vulgarity”. “Vulgarity” refers to the language spoken by common people who are considered unsophisticated, undereducated and lacking in cultivation. Beyond the needs for basic human communication, vulgarity serves no special purpose or function (Jay, 1992, p.6). Instances of words that are considered vulgar are “bloody”, “slut”, “piss”, “crap” and “kiss my ass”. The word “Bloody” belongs to the category of stronger swearwords, and it is the most common British swearword.

The fifth type is “scatological swearing”. “Scatology” refers to the study of excrement. It is concerned with the treatment of obscene matters. Scatological terms are among the early words that children learn. Scatological insults are also common among children although the terms they would use differ from those of adults, like “poop” vs. “crap” or “shit”.

In conclusion, Jay (1992) claims that classifying taboo words into categories makes it easier to define the types of reference or meaning that the taboo words use. One can see that there is a logic or purpose behind the use of dirty words and that what is considered taboo or obscene revolves around a few dimensions of human experience (Jay, 1992, p.9).

As previously mentioned, swearing is related to the speaker’s emotional state. A swearword can be considered as a word that captures our attention and makes us examine its unpleasant connotations. Connotation is a word’s baggage, the emotional associations that go along with it, as opposed to its denotation, its dictionary description. Connotation and denotation are the typical phrases used to describe a word’s meaning (Mohr, 2013, p.6). The meaning of a word is usually defined in terms of denotation and connotation. While connotation refers to the emotion evoked by a word or the associations that go with it, denotation refers to the mental representation of the set of objects or characteristics a word relates to (Jay, 2000, p.136). Connotations play a major role in the semantic motivation of swearwords. An instance of connotation is the concept of dirtiness present in the term “pig”. In utterances such as ‘you pig!’, dirtiness is attributed on the basis of the use of pig as an offensive term for people. The attitude expressed by the swearword is not part of the sense of pig. “Curse words are different in that the connotative meaning predominates over the denotative meaning” (Jay, 2000, p.136). The usage of the word “cunt” in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by Lawrence, where characters describe genitalia in a denotative manner, is the example offered in Jay’s study. Another example is found in Chaucer’s (2008) *Miller’s Tale in The Canterbury Tales*: “And prively he caughte hire by the queynte”, which means “He caught her by her cunt” (p.69). Hughes (2006) states that this part of the *Miller’s Tale* was so embarrassing to the middle-class that Chaucer apologized in advance (p.133). All the examples previously given lead to the notion of euphemisms. Chaucer could have used a euphemism rather than an ugly word like ‘cunt’ to express the same idea without upsetting people. Euphemisms have the ability to mask or cover up obscenities or words charged with strong emotions. Through the use of euphemism, taboo subjects such as death, sex and bodily functions can be avoided.

The word “Euphemism” originates from Greek ‘eu’, which means ‘good’, and ‘pheme’, which means ‘speech’ or ‘saying’, as in to speak in a good way; it can be described as the opposite of swearing (Hughes, 2006, p.151). Euphemistic variations are used to suppress offensive words and when speakers want to avoid using unpleasant and inappropriate words and expressions. In Western society for example, euphemisms are related to civility and using them shows that people are aware of their public self-image (Wafaszewska, 2010, p.62) as cited in (Wafaszewska, Kisieleska-Krysiuk & Piskorska, 2010).

Euphemisms are formed in several ways:

- 1- **Substitution:** A euphemism can be formed by the substitution of a word free of negative associations for words connected to death. There is a multitude of different euphemisms for the word 'death'. Someone who has died is often referred to as 'having passed away' or 'having departed'. Likewise, there are numerous religious euphemisms denoting to death like 'he/she has reunited with Father God' or even 'go to meet one's maker' (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p.226).
- 2- **Borrowing:** Euphemisms can also be borrowed from other languages. Euphemisms and medical terms often go hand in hand. In conversations, people often avoid topics related to disease, body parts and bodily functions. However, people have no problem using Latin medical terms to convey the message without causing any embarrassment or discomfort. Words related to genitals are taboo and there are euphemisms for these words. Nevertheless, words inherited from Latin such as 'feces', 'penis' and 'vagina' are usually accepted as 'clean' terms (McGregor, 2009, p.98).
- 3- **Widening:** Widening is a process through which some euphemisms can be formed. What is meant by widening is "when a word is substituted for a term that has become too painful or vivid". An instance of this is the word 'growth' which is another way of renaming 'cancer' (Smith, 2015, p.24).

Euphemisms are used in both spoken language and written language; however, they are more typical of spoken language, for slang and obscene terms are less liable to occur in written language. Hughes (2006) refers to euphemisms as the "use of deliberately indirect, conventionally imprecise, or socially "comfortable" ways of referring to taboo, embarrassing or unpleasant topics" (p.151). As previously mentioned, the word 'taboo' denotes unmentionable words or deeds that refer to something sacred, unspeakable or revolting. However, certain swearwords are nowadays beginning to lose their effect. "Some people say that overuse of taboo words in unnecessary contexts will gradually diminish their power to shock and deprive us of useful language items: taboo terms support us in the occasional need to shock, to register outrage, or to express disappointment or pain" (Beard, 2004, p.74).

According to McEnery (2006), offensive swearwords range from very mild to strong swearwords. Previous studies have shown that women are less prone to swearing than men; therefore, McEnery decided to grade or rank swearwords by creating a 'scale of offence' where he would rank or grade them. This scale makes it easier to examine the relationship between the strength of words and the speaker's sex (McEnery, 2006, p.30). Figure 2.2 below shows the different categorizations of swearwords and the swearwords within each category.

**Very mild:** "bird, bloody, crap, damn, hell, hussy, idiot, pig, pillock, sod, son-of-a-bitch, tart"

**Mild:** "arse, balls, bitch, bugger, Christ, cow, dickhead, git, Jesus, Jew, moron, pissed off, screw, shit, slag, slut, sod, tit, tosser"

**Moderate:** "arsehole, bastard, bollocks, gay, nigger, piss, paki, poofter, prick, shag, spastic, twat, wanker, whore"

**Strong:** "fuck"

**Very strong:** "cunt, motherfucker"

**Figure 2.2 Scale of Offence by McEnery**

Previous research on gender differences in same and mixed-sex conversations has revealed that men are impolite and direct, whereas women are more polite and indirect because they are subordinate to men (Coates, 2004). This is not always the case, though. Speech is not based solely on gender but is affected by factors such as location, state, the relationship between the speaker and listener as well as the status of the speaker and listener. Just as there has been disagreement on the use of swearwords among women, there is no tacit agreement on whether women use more or less swearwords in same or mixed-sex groups. According to some research, women swear just as frequently as men, but other studies indicate that they use milder language (McEnery, 2006).

## 2.2 Gender and Swearing

Previous studies have suggested that gender is an important factor in relation to taboo words and how they are used. In fact, gender plays a powerful role in swearing.

According to Beers Fägersten (2012), swearing is a stereotypical masculine activity and a part of men's nature (p.45). Haslam (2012) believes that gender differences in swearing reflect the social expectations of men and women (p.98). Women are seen as more status conscious than men; therefore, women use a standard speech form. The linguist Lakoff suggests that women's subordinate social status in American society is shown by the language women use and the way language is used about them (Holmes 2008: 296). "Women, seen as aspiring to prestigious 'ladylike' behavior, have long been regarded as upholding such taboos and avoiding nonstandard or "dirty" words in particular" (De Klerk, 1992, p.277). One reason why women use more standard forms than men can be that women's language is related to social class and status, their role in society, and expressing gender identity.

Another study has shown that, being a subordinate group, women must speak carefully and politely in order not to offend men (Holmes, 2008, p.166). There is a connection between women swearing and the feminist movement, according to studies by Oliver and Rubin (1972) and Bailey and Timm (1976). Swearing and swearwords have always been considered a male domain and in the language of swearing there are plenty of terms for females and their body parts, like the word 'cunt' (Beers Fägersten, 2012, p.14). Nevertheless, De Klerk (1992) states that women are familiar with swearwords referring to men and male body parts and never hesitate to use them. Jackson (2006:12) believes that the major reason for gender differences or similarities in the use of swearwords in the United Kingdom might be due to the rise of a new concept called the 'ladette culture'. A ladette is the female equivalent of the archetypal 'lad'. She is a woman portrayed by the media as trouble and in trouble. Also, she is a loud and aggressive girl, inclined to swearwords frequently.

Studies done by Baumeister and Bushman (2011) reported that 67% of men used taboo words in public in 1986, but only 55% in 2006. The studies also showed that men use more offensive swearwords than women do, but women use milder swearwords with a higher frequency than men.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) noticed that while both men and women were more comfortable with using swearwords in same-sex groups, men tended to swear in public more than women (p.274). Words mostly used by men were 'fuck', 'shit' and 'motherfucker', while those used by women were 'Oh my God', 'bitch', 'piss' and 'retard(ed)'. "Oh my god accounted for 24% of the women's 2006 data and women were five times more likely than men to say it" (Jay, 2009, p.156). In addition to this, men prefer to use swearwords related to hell such as 'damn', but women would use swearwords related to heaven such as 'heavens' or 'gosh' (McEnery & Xiao, 2004, p.240).

Studies by Limbrick (1991), Jay (1986) and Berger (2002) found out that women increased their use of swearwords in mixed-sex conversations. This is mainly because women have the impression that males swear more often than them; therefore, women try to accommodate men by using more swearwords. On the other hand, men often decrease their use of swearwords in mixed-sex groups because they think women swear less than them (Beers Fägersten, 2012, p.14).

Mike Thelwall (2008) examines swearing found on youth-oriented social networking sites focusing on gender differences such as MySpace. Although the language of the internet is informal and closer to spoken than written language, social networking sites can give us clear idea on how people of different ages, gender and social classes use swear words. Thelwall argues that it is no longer accurate that men use strong swearwords more often than women do. He claims that young women in the United Kingdom swear more than men and use stronger swearwords too (2008, p.85). In other studies, Thelwall (2008) describes women as sensitive creatures that could not hear foul language or any sensitive topic. Conversational data from the British National Corpus (BNC) between 1991-1993 showed that the term "fucking" was the most distinctive word in male talk. No swearwords were found in the top 25 most associated with women talk (p.89). However, a later study showed that women swear as much as men but use softer forms of swearwords. Gender differences arise when it comes

to who is targeted. Females are more likely to be called 'cows', and men 'bastards'. While the results suggested that females use the word 'cow' in association with other females, they also used female-oriented swear words such as 'whore' and 'slut about' other females more than men do.

According to Lakoff and Jespersen, cited in Coates (2004), women more euphemisms more than swearwords. "There can be no doubt that women apply a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions, and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions" (Coates, 2004, p.15).

In conclusion, the latest studies have confirmed that women do swear and that their swearing depends on numerous factors. However, it has also been confirmed that women use softer swearwords. However, Holmes a distinct feature of female language is the use of euphemisms, like using 'fudge' instead of 'fuck', 'heck' instead of 'hell', 'darn' instead of 'damn' and 'blooming' instead of 'bloody' (Holmes, 2008, p.286).

### 3. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the data utilized in the study and details the sources and methods used to gather it. The area of gender is the focus of this study, and its purpose is to shed light on how euphemisms are related to swearing. The BNC corpus will then be thoroughly detailed after an introduction to corpus linguistics. The material used for this study will also be described in section 3.4.

#### 3.2 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine which gender uses euphemism swear phrases more frequently. Studies have proven that men use stronger expletives than women, as was shown in the preceding chapter. The use of expletives and expectations of men and women are both influenced by gender inequalities. Women have been observed to use milder swearwords than men due to their greater status consciousness, making them more prone to utilize standard speech styles. Therefore, we might anticipate that they'll use euphemisms more frequently than men. Therefore, the following research question arises:

1. Do women swear more frequently than men do, and do male and female speakers prefer different euphemisms?

A number of euphemistic swearwords will be analyzed and compared to McEnery's list of swearwords described in section 2.1 in the previous chapter. The swearwords cited by McEnery are listed below:

- **Very mild:** "bird, bloody, crap, damn, hell, hussy, idiot, pig, pillock, sod, son-of-a-bitch, tart"
- **Mild:** "arse, balls, bitch, bugger, Christ, cow, dickhead, git, Jesus, Jew, moron, pissed off, screw, shit, slag, slut, sod, tit, tosser"
- **Moderate:** "arsehole, bastard, bollocks, gay, nigger, piss, paki, poofter, prick, shag, spastic, twat, wanker, whore"
- **Strong:** "fuck"
- **Very strong:** "cunt, motherfucker"

Because there is no euphemistic counterpart to some of these swearwords, 12 euphemisms only will be compared to the swearwords by McEnery.

- 1- 'gee', euphemism for Jesus.
- 2- 'heavens', euphemism for hell.
- 3- 'gosh', euphemism for God.
- 4- 'flaming', euphemism for fucking.
- 5- 'blasted', euphemism for bloody.
- 6- 'blooming', also euphemism for bloody.
- 7- 'crikey', euphemism for Christ.
- 8- 'blimey', euphemism for blind me or 'Blind me, God'.

- 9- 'oh my goodness', euphemisms for 'Oh my God'.
- 10- 'sugar', euphemism for shit.
- 11- 'heck', euphemism for hell.
- 12- 'darn', euphemism for damn.

These swearwords were not chosen randomly. Rather, they were based on what McEnery calls the 15 swearwords that distinguish male speakers from female speakers. Terms like 'Fuck/fucking' and 'Jesus' are more often used by male speakers, while 'God', 'bloody', 'hell' and 'shit' are more common among female speakers (McEnery, 2006, p.29).

### 3.3 Method

This study used a qualitative approach and a corpus-based approach to investigate how certain swearwords were used in conversations in terms of gender. The former helps examining conversations in the corpus to explore the way swearwords are used and at whom they are aimed. The latter enables the researcher to analyze data through a corpus.

Corpus Linguistics is the study of computer-assisted language data. A corpus is essentially a group of recorded texts or spoken words. A corpus's goal is to convey an accurate and fair representation of a particular linguistic variety, register, or genre (Gries, 2009, p.7). The influence of cultural views on language can also be investigated using corpora (Hunston, 2008, p.13–14).

In this study, the research material which will be used to explore and examine the use of euphemisms based on gender was collected from the BNC (British National Corpus). The BNC was chosen because it is reasonably large and marked for gender category. A corpus makes it easy to search through millions of texts and words by using different tools. One of these tools is the word frequency list which tells how many times a word occurs within the corpus. Baker (2013) states that "rather than making a claim such as 'men swear more than women', a corpus analysis would not only allow us to support or reject this hypothesis, but also show proportionally how often men swear then women, the range of swear words that they use, along with their relative frequencies, as well as affording evidence regarding differences and similarities of a particular contexts or functions of swearing" (p.94). Hoffman et al. (2008) claim that the BNC contains over 100 million words of written and spoken language (p. 27). The spoken corpus, which contains 10 million words, will be the main focus. Face-to-face talks make up less than half of these 10 million words (Atkins & Rundell, 2008, p.77). These are spontaneous texts (or dialogues) written by ordinary people from various regions of Britain. Transcripts of earlier recorded conversations make up the naturally occurring texts in the spoken portion of the BNC. These writings can be referred to as naturally occurring texts because they were written down during actual events or situations without anyone telling the participants what to say. The discussions gathered in the corpus were held in a variety of settings, including courtrooms, classrooms, interviews, broadcasts, and public debates. This means that it offers us the possibility to research how speakers of language might communicate in a natural situation. In order to determine the number of hits per million words and the overall number of hits, each of the several euphemisms that were the subject of this thesis was individually entered into the BNCweb database. The gender of the speakers and honorees is given by the BNC.

### 3.4 Limitations of the Study

The major problem with transcribed data of a corpus is that the intonation of words and phrases cannot be seen or heard. Although we can understand body language in a conversation, we cannot see it. This is occasionally necessary when swearing or using euphemisms to swear (Thelwall, 2008).

## 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Introduction

In this section, the findings from the spoken part of the BNC are reported and discussed. In section 4.1, the results will be presented in broad strokes. Each euphemism will be examined in greater detail in the sections



that follow. The terms that will be analyzed are the following: 'gee', 'heavens', 'gosh', 'flaming', 'blasted', 'blooming', 'crikey', 'blimey', 'oh my goodness', 'sugar', 'heck', and 'darn'.

#### 4.2 Findings

The results found in the spoken section of the BNCweb are shown in the table below. Search results for the interaction type were limited to spoken demographic and dialogue. The total number of euphemisms used by the male and female speakers was computed using the BNC label sex of the speaker.

Table 1: The number of euphemisms produced by women and men in the 809 relevant examples.

Euphemism (Total Number)	Male Speaker	Female Speaker
Gee (47)	28	19
Heavens (45)	26	19
Gosh (184)	63	121
Flaming (33)	11	22
Blasted (17)	4	13
Blooming (183)	56	127
Crikey (41)	15	26
Blimey (116)	45	71
Oh my goodness (35)	6	29
Sugar (5)	3	2
Heck (94)	28	66
Darn (9)	4	5
<b>Total Number: 809</b>	289	520

The results in the table above show that men produce only 289 utterances of euphemisms, while women produce almost the double number of euphemisms, 520 utterances of euphemisms in total (64.2%). The numbers of euphemisms produced by men is due to the fact that there is a larger number of words produced by female speakers in the spoken part of the BNC than words produced by male speakers: 2,264,094 words for female speakers against 1,454,344 words for male speakers. In Table 2, the number of female and male words in the spoken part of the BNC is shown. Calculating the number of euphemisms used by men and women per million words would get the following results:

Table 2: The frequency of the euphemisms per million words

Euphemism	Male occurrences	Male words	Per Million words	Female occurrences	Female words	Per Million words
Gee	28	1,454,344	19.25	19	2,264,094	8.39
Heavens	26	1,454,344	17.87	19	2,264,094	8.39
Gosh	63	1,454,344	41.31	121	2,264,094	53.44
Flaming	11	1,454,344	7.56	22	2,264,094	9.71
Blasted	4	1,454,344	2.75	13	2,264,094	5.74

Blooming	56	1,454,344	38.50	127	2,264,094	56.09
Crikey	15	1,454,344	10.31	26	2,264,094	11.48
Blimey	45	1,454,344	30.94	71	2,264,094	31.35
Oh my goodness	6	1,454,344	4.12	29	2,264,094	12.80
Sugar	3	1,454,344	2.06	2	2,264,094	0.88
Heck	28	1,454,344	19.25	66	2,264,094	29.15
Darn	4	1,454,344	2.75	5	2,264,094	2.20

According to Table 2, female speakers do not use euphemisms more frequently than male speakers do per million words. There are 809 pertinent euphemisms in the study's source material. 520 (about 64%) are produced by women, while 289 (36%) are produced by men.

**4.2.1 'gee':** The euphemism 'gee' appears 47 times in the spoken part of the BNC. The female speakers produce 19 instances of 'gee' while men produce 28 instances. The numbers reveal that men use this euphemism more than women do. The numbers shows that men use the euphemism 'gee' twice as much as women.

**4.2.2 'heavens':** The euphemism "heavens" appears 45 times in the spoken section of the BNC. The female speakers produce 19 instances of 'heavens' while men produce 26 instances of 'heavens'. Table 1 shows that men use the euphemism 'heavens' twice as much as women do.

**4.2.3 'gosh':** The euphemism 'gosh' appears 184 times in the spoken part of the BNC. The female speakers produce 121 instances of 'gosh' while men produce 63 instances. Unlike 'gee' and 'heavens, the results from the BNC show that women use 'gosh' (65.7%) more than men.

**4.2.4 'flaming':** There exist 36 occurrences of the term 'flaming' in the spoken section of the BNC. The female speakers produce 22 instances of 'flaming', while 11 instances were produced by male speakers. Table 1 shows that women (9.71 in frequency per million words) use 'flaming' slightly more than men (7.58 in frequency per million words).

**4.2.5 'blasted':** 17 occurrences of the euphemism 'blasted' are found in the spoken part of the BNC. The female speakers produce 13 instances of 'blasted', while there are only 4 instances produced by male speakers. Even though the frequencies per million words are quite low for both female and male speakers, the numbers reveal that women use the euphemism 'blasted' more than men.

**4.2.6 'blooming':** There are 183 occurrences of 'blooming' in the spoken part of the BNC. 94 are produced by female speakers and 43 are produced by male speakers.

**4.2.7 'crikey':** The euphemism 'crikey' occurs 41 times in the spoken part of the BNC. 26 instances are produced by female speakers, while 15 instances are produced by male speakers. The frequency per million words is 11.48 for female speakers and 10.31 for male speakers. The numbers show that women use this euphemism more than men.

**4.2.8 'blimey':** There are 116 occurrences of 'blimey' in the spoken part of the BNC. 71 instances are produced by female speakers and 45 instances are produced by male speakers. The frequency per million words is quite similar for both genders: 31.35 for female speakers versus 30.94 for male speakers.

**4.2.9 'Oh my goodness':** In the spoken part of the BNC, there are 35 occurrences of the euphemism 'oh my goodness'. 29 occurrences are produced by female speakers and only 6 occurrences produced by male speakers. Even though there are few hits and the frequency per million words is quite low for male speakers (4.12 in

frequency per million words), the results reveal that women use 'oh my goodness' more than men (12.80 per million words).

**4.2.10 'Sugar':** There are 5 occurrences of the word 'sugar' in the spoken part of the BNC. 2 occurrences of 'sugar' are produced by female speakers while 3 occurrences are produced by male speakers. Table 1 tells us that men use the term 'sugar' a little more than women.

**4.2.11 'heck':** There are 94 occurrences of the euphemism 'heck' in the spoken part of the BNC. 66 occurrences, the frequency per million words being 29.15, are produced by female speakers and 28 occurrences, the frequency per million words being 19.25, are produced by male speakers.

**4.2.12 'darn':** There are 9 occurrences of the euphemism 'darn' in the spoken part of the BNC. 5 occurrences are produced by female speakers and 4 occurrences are produced by male speakers.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Euphemistic Swearing and Gender

As mentioned in section 1, the main aim of this study is to investigate which gender is more prone to use euphemistic swearing and to see if there are specific euphemisms that are preferred by either men or women. The study's focus on euphemisms was chosen in relation to McEnery's examination of bad language in contemporary English, in which he looked at interactional patterns and the use of profanity in male and female speech. McEnery discovered that not only does the frequency of the individual swearwords mark the genders apart, but the swearwords themselves also shows how male and females differ (McEnery, 2006, p.29). He also saw signs that women used words forms that would cause less offence. In order to confirm this, he created a scale for swearwords known as 'the scale of offence'. For this study, euphemistic counterparts of the 15 most used swearwords by male and females from McEnery's study were used. Euphemisms in general are softer than these swearwords, and it is unclear whether they can be classified in the same fashion as swearwords. However, it is feasible to contrast the euphemistic equivalents of mild swear words with those of strong swear words. McEnery observed that there were slightly more male than female examples of bad language (3,875 vs. 3,790). According to McEnery (2006, p.30), women are more prone to use very mild to milder swearwords while men have a tendency to use moderate to very strong swearwords. Table 3 is based on McEnery's table showing the use of the 15 swearwords distinguishing male and female speakers. The words are ranked according to his scale of offence to make it easier to see the difference between men and women in this regard. The table shows that very strong to strong swearwords such as 'fuck (-ing)' and 'cunt' have the highest frequency per million words among male speakers. Moreover, while female speakers also swear, they tend to prefer very mild to moderate swearwords such as the mild swearword 'God' or the moderate swearwords 'pissed' and 'pissy'. Women swear as much as men, because even though men prefer stronger swearwords, these are relatively rare.

Table 3: The BNC's favorite expletives by men and women listed in order of strength, (McEnery 2006, p. 29)

Swearword (from very mild to very strong)	Frequency of use by females per 1,000,000 words	Frequency of use by males per 1,000,000 words	Overuse by
God	459.38	172.33	Females
Hell	146.29	114.21	Females
Pig	11.32	1.42	Females
Bloody	526.71	277.80	Females
Jesus	9.79	18.70	Males
Bitch	17.14	8.54	Females
Bugger	39.48	25.00	Females

Arsed	2.45	0.20	Females
Shit	80.19	63.81	Females
Pissed	24.18	13.82	Females
Pissy	1.22	0.00	Females
Fucker	0.61	3.25	Males
Fucking	99.77	284.10	Males
Fuck	32.75	68.28	Males
Cunt	5.51	11.18	Males

## 5.2 Comparison with respect to Strength of Swearword Counterparts

The general claim is that women always use milder words than men; therefore, high frequencies for all euphemisms are expected to be found in women's language. However, the results showed that women are not the most frequent users of all the euphemisms investigated in this study. This section will look into the assertion that women are expected to use more euphemisms for powerful swearwords in order to avoid offending others. In McEnery's (2009) study, the terms 'fuck', 'fucking', 'Jesus', 'cunt' and 'fucker', in descending order, are typical male swearwords, while swearwords predominantly used by females are 'god', 'bloody', 'pig', 'hell', 'bugger', 'bitch', 'pissed', 'arsed' and 'shit'. Again, euphemisms are softer than the softest swearwords, but if women use euphemisms to avoid offence, then it is expected to see overuse of euphemistic counterparts of strong swearwords by women. Even if the results have previously shown that women do not use all euphemisms, we would expect to see higher frequencies for women than men for euphemisms corresponding to the stronger/strongest swearwords.

Table 4: Euphemisms used by men and women from the BNC rated by frequency per million words, based on McEnery's degree of offence (2006, p. 29).

Euphemisms	Frequency of use by females per 1,000,000 words	Frequency of use by males per 1,000,000 words	Overuse by
Gosh (God)	53.44	41.31	Females
Oh my goodness (Oh my God)	12.80	4.12	Females
Blimey (God blind me/Blind me, God)	31.35	30.94	Females
Heavens (hell)	8.39	17.87	Males
Darn (damn)	2.20	2.75	Males
Heck (hell)	29.15	19.25	Females
Blasted (bloody)	5.74	2.75	Females
Blooming (bloody)	56.09	38.50	Females
Gee (Jesus)	8.39	19.25	Males
Crikey (Christ)	11.48	10.31	Females
Sugar (shit)	0.88	2.06	Males
Flaming (fucking)	9.71	7.56	Females

The table above shows that the frequency of euphemisms per million words is not that much higher for female speakers than for male speakers. 'Shit' and 'fucking' are considered as strong swearwords based on the scale of offence. Because women tend to avoid using strong swearwords, it is expected to see high frequencies for the terms 'sugar' and 'flaming' produced by female speakers. However, the results show that women do not have a higher frequency of use compared to men. Women do, nonetheless, use the euphemistic equivalent 'flaming' more than men, which was expected. Women also use euphemisms for the milder swearwords more often than men, as seen in 'heck' and 'blooming'. Even so, there is really no clear scale from mild to strong, for it is clear that some of the euphemisms where women have very high frequencies and large differences from the men correspond to mild or medium swearwords. According to Jay (2000), "Cursing intensifies emotional expressions in a manner that inoffensive words cannot achieve." (p.137). Jay also believes that swearwords express the speaker's level of emotion and only the use of powerful language can show the intensity of our emotions. In that case, the intensity of people's emotions cannot be achieved through the use of euphemisms. A simple search in the BNC showed that euphemisms such as 'darn' and 'flaming' were used to show emotions without offending anyone, like 'darn it! You may pay all them flaming taxes and you get stuff all out of it.'

### 5.3 Summary

The results show that there are differences in the frequency of euphemisms used by male and female speakers, supporting the claim that males have a preference for 'stronger' word forms while females have a preference for 'weaker' word forms (McEnery, 2006, p.30). However, the picture is more complex because women do not always use euphemisms more than men. It depends on the individual words. We have already seen in Figure 5.2 that male and female speakers have a few common favorite euphemisms, while others are preferred by one gender only. The findings also disproved the notion that female speakers overuse euphemisms when they correspond to harsh swearwords.

These subject needs further research and in order to know the power of euphemisms, more euphemisms must be investigated. Also, native speakers must be interviewed and asked to rate examples. Such a study might also reveal more about gender differences as it is generally believed that women have a tendency to use milder swearwords.

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