

Gender and Swearing: A Community Practice*

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Abstract: *Recent studies have shown that the gender-swearing relationship is more complex and context-specific than has been supposed. We adopted a 'communities of practice' framework to contextualize the linguistic practice of swearing and to explore the meanings of this practice for one particular 'community,' a group of undergraduate drinking friends. Through members' accounts, we can observe their negotiation of specific linguistic categories, and their ongoing (re)definition of 'bad language' as a resource for identity construction. These findings provide insights into the ways in which gender itself becomes redefined and contextualized within particular frames of reference. Both female and male participants reported habitually deploying strong language in the context of shared group enterprises, although a number of subtle, yet persistent gender differences reflect the respondents' location within the wider sociocultural context(s).*

Introduction

Recent feminist approaches to language and gender research (LGR) have consistently challenged folklinguistic perceptions of 'women's language' (see e.g. collections by Hall and Bucholtz, 1995; Bergvall, Bing and Freed, 1996; Bucholtz, Liang and Sutton, 1999). In particular, work undertaken from a social constructionist perspective has consistently demonstrated the complexity of the language-gender relationship, and hence, the futility of searching for specifically gendered styles of speaking (Crawford, 1995). Nonetheless, dichotomized notions of gender remain salient, in both expectations and perceptions of everyday communication (Cameron, 1996, 1997a). A particularly robust example of this can be found in attitudes towards women's use of 'obscenity' or 'bad language'. While researchers have identified an increasing knowledge and use of expletives among female respondents (e.g. de Klerk, 1992, 1997; M. Gordon, 1993; Sutton, 1995), the evaluation of such practices continues to be filtered through sociocultural conceptions of femininity/masculinity (see e.g. Risch, 1987; de Klerk, 1992, 1997; Hughes, 1992).

Gender And Swearing: Social And Cultural Factors

Cultural processes and expectations have traditionally mitigated against women's use of obscenity, on (at least) two counts. Firstly, swearing, or the use of expletives, is perceived as an intrinsically forceful or aggressive activity (Coates, 1993; de Klerk, 1991, 1997). Thus, women who engage in such behavior may be seen as transgressing cultural stereotypes and expectations of femininity, wherein they are positioned variously as deferent, polite, nurturing, and oriented towards the needs/feelings of others. To this extent then, the use of

'swear-words' represents an accepted social means of constructing a masculine identity (cf. de Klerk, 1997). Secondly, expletives constitute a linguistic taboo in Western society, thereby functioning to maintain behavioral compliance within particular communities (cf. Guerin, 1992). Given that taboos play an important role in maintaining the status quo of a society, women have traditionally been more fully subject to their effects than have men (Humphrey, 1993). While breaching a taboo inevitably entails certain consequences for the speaker, such consequences will be intensified by the speakers positioning within the prevailing (gender) hierarchy. This process is clearly exemplified in differential attitudes to female/male swearing (e.g. de Klerk, 1992, 1997), whereby women's use of obscenity is likely to be evaluated more negatively than that of their male counterparts.

Moreover, as part of the vernacular (Cheshire, 1982; Romaine 1999), expletives carry strong connotations of lower socioeconomic groupings and/or working-class culture (see Hughes, 1992). Sociolinguistic research has traditionally characterized women as more keenly aware of the prestige value of linguistically dissociating from this culture, although a number of subsequent studies have demonstrated the overly simplistic nature of such claims. More tellingly, a recent study by Elizabeth Gordon has highlighted the gendered nature of social stereotypes, as accrued to 'non-standard' dialect speakers (E. Gordon, 1997). Here, in addition to the expected judgments of lower social status, female non-standard speakers were additionally perceived to be of lower *moral* standing, on the basis of their vernacular usage. Therefore, Gordon suggests that women's linguistic behavior is uniquely circumscribed by the imperative to escape such judgments; "the linguistic behavior associated with women is not so much a matter of self-promotion as a matter of avoidance" (48). Given the specific nature and content of linguistic taboo in Western society, this point is particularly relevant for women's use of expletives. A woman who uses 'bad language' is likely to invite not only negative social ascriptions, but also judgments regarding her moral standing and character. These potential consequences are likely to increase her conformity with prevailing taboo(s).

In a number of ways then, social and cultural factors have worked to produce the general belief that women 'don't use bad language' (Coates, 1993; Crawford, 1995; Romaine, 1999). This belief has been reinforced by a number of influential linguists, from Jespersen (1922), to Trudgill (1974) and Lakoff (1975), who have presented a dichotomized picture of the relationship between gender and swearing, in which women are depicted as consistent 'eschewers' of expletives. For example, when Lakoff (55) wrote that "women don't use off-color or indelicate expressions", there was little attempt to interrogate either the category 'women', or these women's various contexts

of speaking (cf. Bohan, 1993; Unger and Crawford, 1992). For this reason, as pointed out by Coates (1993), much (socio)linguistic writing on 'gender and swearing' has relied on folklinguistic beliefs and conceptions with little reference to empirical data. In particular, such research has overlooked both the inherent heterogeneity of gender categories, and the influence of context on linguistic form and function.

In contrast, more recent studies have begun to explore the complex and situation-specific nature of 'women's swearing'. These studies have, by and large, revealed that women *do* show familiarity with obscene language, and further, that many women routinely use such language. Other studies have shown that speech context, and in particular levels of formality/structure affect gendered swearing patterns. For example, Bayard and Krishnayya's (2001) study of New Zealand University students' use of expletives in unstructured and structured dialogue concludes that the function of swearing varies according to gender *and* context. This study, based on actual conversational data, found an overall tendency for males to swear slightly more frequently than females, but detected little difference in the strength of expletives used by women and men. Interestingly, Bayard and Krishnayya's male participants reduced their levels of swearing in structured contexts *to a greater extent* than did female participants. This finding is in direct contrast to the results of the present study in which males reported swearing more indiscriminately than females (see *Avoiding Obscenity*, below). Once again, this points up the necessity of examining all aspects of the situation (e.g. immediate context, conversational partners, cultural norms and expectations) and fully integrating these within any analysis of 'gender and swearing'. Moreover, the 'popular myth' surrounding linguistic taboo (de Klerk, 1992: 280) means that swearing inevitably acquires different meanings, and therefore functions differently, for female users.

Women's Swearing: Meanings, Functions and Identity Work

A particularly salient finding in research on women's swearing is the degree of 'guilt' experienced by the speakers (Risch, 1987), and the general feeling that such terms are somehow more 'appropriate' for boys/men than they are for girls/women (de Klerk, 1992). Consequently, women's swearing is contextually constrained to a greater extent than is men's; for example, occurring only in the private realm (Risch, 1987), or in the company of certain conversational partners (cf. Hughes, 1992). This contextual circumscription means that swearing frequently signals intimacy or trust between female speakers. In certain situations, it may be read as an act of solidarity, or even affection, between women friends (see Sutton, 1995). In addition, Risch (1987) demonstrates the way in which swearing may be used to denigrate outgroups (in this case, men), thereby strengthening both

the internal bonds and the external boundaries of the ingroup.

In all of these studies, women's swearing is shown to function in a range of subtle and context-specific ways, which, against the backdrop of prevailing sociocultural norms and expectations, can provide a powerful identity resource for female speakers (see also Forsskahl's [2001] study of slang usage in Finland). In addition to contesting social norms of femininity, the use of 'bad language' may also function to construct and enact new modes and versions of 'being a woman'. With reference to her work on undergraduate use of sexual slang, Sutton (1995) suggests that (rather than 'talking like men'), these young women may be seen as "imitating other women whom they want to be like and who are different from the stereotypical image of woman" (289). In this sense, swearing functions not only as a marker of (group) identity, but also as a means of negotiating and actively constituting that identity.

However, as social constructionist-informed analyses have demonstrated, identity itself is a fluid and open-ended category (see Hall and Bucholtz, 1995). Therefore, the identity effects of swearing must ultimately be grounded in analyses of the particular context(s) in which it is deployed. In the present study, I suggest that such analyses may be fruitfully approached via the concept of the 'community of practice' (outlined below). From this perspective, swearing may be seen as a context-specific mode of self-constitution, the meanings of which emerge from mutual negotiation among community members. Thus, we can begin to explore the contingent versions of femininity enacted through swearing, in situated contexts of interaction.

Communities of Practice

In an influential article Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) introduced the 'communities of practice' (CoP) concept into the sociolinguistic domain. Drawn from work by Lave and Wenger (1991) in the field of education/learning, this approach examines the activities and practices through which members assimilate to a group, and which in turn define and constitute group members in different ways. Central to the paradigm is the notion of members' mutual engagement in joint, negotiated enterprises, since it is through such engagement that shared practices emerge and acquire meaning for community members. These practices can then function as resources for self-definition, as "the participants make meaning of their joint enterprise, and of themselves in relation to this enterprise" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999: 186).

The CoP framework, then, maintains an analytic focus on the concrete and contextualized practices through which (gender) identities are forged and developed (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, 1995, 1999). Given that gender categories/meanings emerge from the accumulation of situated practices over time, then such practices provide members with a concrete

means of constructing their 'femininity' or 'masculinity' within their respective communities (Bergvall, 1999; Bucholtz, 1999; Stapleton, 2001). In this way, specific patterns of language use enter into the constitution of (specific types of) gender identity (cf. Cameron, 1997b).

Such practices and meanings, however, are not entirely community-specific, or indeed arbitrarily derived. Rather, they are grounded within more global meaning systems which reflect "the influence of a larger society and its institutions (and) a historical location with its particular pasts and prospective futures" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995: 503-4). Locally negotiated practices, therefore, are systematically linked to broader social structures and cultural ideologies (see Bucholtz, 1999; Ehrlich, 1999; Freed, 1999; Stapleton, 2001).

The Present Study: Scope And Limitations

In this study, I demonstrate the way in which the linguistic practice of swearing is negotiated and understood within one particular 'community of practice'; i.e. a group of Irish undergraduate 'drinking' buddies. The aims and scope of the study are to explore (a) the meanings of swearing/obscenity within this community; (b) gender differences in the perception and use of swearing; (c) the sociocultural influences (both community-specific features and broader ideological structures) which shape perceptions and use; and (d) the ways in which these processes redefine the meaning of *gender itself* within this community, and moreover, create opportunities for members' construction of *their own gender identities*.

This is evidently a qualitative and exploratory study, the aim of which is to gain a deeper understanding of contextualized practices. The participant sample is, of necessity, non-random, in that it seeks to address the use of swearing *within a specific community*. However, while this approach allows us to explore in some detail the members' understandings of themselves as gendered subjects, it clearly limits the extent to which the findings and conclusions may be generalized to the wider population. It may be hypothesized that these processes and meanings could be replicated in other 'communities' and contexts, but much further research would be required to investigate such a hypothesis.

Nonetheless, within the scope of the study, a number of interesting findings emerge. While meaning-making is a dynamic and ongoing activity, there is evidently a degree of consensus among community members as they describe various aspects of their own use of 'obscenity' in a gendered context. This consensus, together with subtle differences between female and male respondents, illustrates the way in which meanings are actively negotiated by the community, but are simultaneously influenced by broader sociocultural ideologies.

The Research 'Community'

Participants in the study were drawn from an open-ended group of friends in a small, but relatively cosmopolitan, Irish town. As is commonly the case (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995, 1999), this CoP subsumes a number of overlapping groups (friendship- and work-based), and is simultaneously located within larger aggregate communities (e.g. the local urban context). The community that forms the focus of the study, however, organizes and constitutes itself primarily around a social drinking culture. During the period of data collection (i.e. September 1997), members had been meeting, at least twice weekly, in their local pub, for a period of two-three months. The study was conducted at the end of a summer vacation, during which time, the participants had all been employed locally, in various forms of holiday work. Because the majority of the respondents were students at the time of the research, they anticipated returning to their respective colleges/universities in the near future. However, the group manages to meet on a number of occasions throughout the academic year, and in addition, shares a history of such activities, dating back to the schooldays of (at least some of) its members. Because the town in question hosts a large number of bars, distinct 'cultures' have developed around each establishment. Thus, the group's selection of a 'local' is in itself an act of identity. While members occasionally frequent other establishments, the group as a whole is based around 'Dempsy's'¹; i.e. a small bar with regular live music, a 'bohemian' atmosphere, and a clientele consisting mainly of students, or recent ex-students. The group's alignment with various aspects of Dempsy's culture undoubtedly influences the emergence, enactment and mutual interpretation of particular identity practices. In the present study, this setting forms the backdrop to members' deployment of 'swearing' as a means of identity production.

Again, it should be noted that the community in question is of a very specific type. The identity categories of the participants (e.g. 'Irish', 'undergraduates', 'drinkers', 'friends') will inevitably influence the findings and conclusions of the study, and thus limit their generalizability to other contexts and groupings. Taking a CoP approach, however, these issues are unavoidable; indeed such contextualized features and categories are integral to the analytic framework. It should merely be borne in mind that this study can by no means claim to be representative of other (gendered) groupings, but should rather be seen as an exploration of processes and meanings which may well have resonances in the broader population(s).

Data Collection

The CoP paradigm is, by definition, concerned with the actual practices in which members engage. Thus, most research to date has entailed directly observing such practices, in situ. In contrast, the present study takes a slightly different approach, in that it focuses on participants' verbalized accounts of what 'swearing' means for them, in the course of their everyday lives. These accounts however, are formulated with reference to the 'drinking' culture in which the study is located, and are firmly grounded in what is 'normal' for the community in question. In this way, they offer a unique insight into habitual modes of 'sense-making' within the community, the linguistic resources and meanings available to community members, and the ideological orientations that shape the deployment of these resources.

Moreover, the situated accounts of group members allow us to observe the explicit mobilisation and negotiation of linguistic categories and labels. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) highlight this point, when they observe that "...labels arise in use in relation to real people in real situations: people label as they chat, make observations and judgments about people, point people out to others, challenge people, and so on. It is through such practices that labels are endowed with meaning". (478) Thus, in their various accounts, the respondents demonstrate the ways in which the category of 'bad language' is negotiated by their own CoP. Simultaneously, their invocation of other linguistic categories offers insights into their own location, as gendered participants, within this particular community.

A total of thirty group members participated in the study. Of these fifteen were female, and fifteen male. At the time of data collection, all of the respondents were either undertaking, or had recently completed, courses in higher level education. The majority of the group would define themselves as 'middle-class', and all aspire toward (various forms of) 'professional' employment. Ages of the group range from 22 - 30 years; all are white, of Irish ethnicity; and all but two define themselves as 'heterosexual'. Data were collected over a two-week period, in the form of semi-structured interviews, conducted by the researcher and audio-recorded.

Interviewees were informed that the research was focused on the general topic of 'swearing'/'obscenity'/'bad language'. Although there may be subtle differences in interpretation, these terms were generally used interchangeably by the participants. It appears that, for this group, there is an overarching and readily accessible category of 'bad language' (exemplified by the expletives presented in Tables 1 and 2). Tellingly, none of the respondents questioned what was meant by the terms in question, nor indeed sought clarification regarding the subject matter of the research. However, on subsequent reflection and analysis of the data, it may be the case that terms judged to be 'really obscene' are perceived as more problematic than (mere) 'swearing' or 'bad language'.

This issue would need to be addressed in any further research in the area – particularly with reference to its implications for gendered usage. For the most part, however, the findings may be interpreted as reflecting members' orientations to a common, and easily identifiable linguistic category.

The majority of the interviews took place in Dempsey's, during afternoon coffee-sessions, were conducted on a one-to-one basis, and on average, lasted for half an hour. The researcher was herself a member of the group, which facilitated data-collection, in that the respondents overwhelmingly oriented to her status as 'one of the gang', rather than that of 'researcher/analyst'. In fact, in one sense, the discussions can be glossed as informal 'interaction among friends', a domain extensively probed by Jennifer Coates, in her studies of all-female interaction (e.g. 1996, 1997). Hence, the data collection sessions proceeded on a relaxed, informal basis (much as any other afternoon meeting in Dempsey's), thereby allowing for the emergence of participants' spontaneous thoughts and formulations.

However, in this situation the researcher was undeniably occupying a somewhat ambivalent role, an experience which has been noted by other researchers working from 'within' a particular group. For example, drawing on personal experience, Gough and Edwards (1998) report that "(t)he two positions simultaneously inhabited . . . researcher and participant . . . did cause some tension around being at once same and different" (413, see also Coates, 1996). Moreover, the research process did have an impact on the overall group culture; this was evident in numerous subsequent references to the concepts and issues evoked during the interview sessions. For a considerable period of time, comments about 'swearing' (and several related themes) formed salient features of the group's discussions. While many of these comments were clearly of a facetious nature, the impact of the (research) process was evident in members' increased awareness of the issues in question. The extent to which this has affected community norms/practices is still unclear; however, it has undeniably entered the culture of the group, thereby mediating the significance of 'bad language' as an identity resource.

Obscenity: Use and 'Acceptability'

In the first part of the interview(s), participants were presented with a list of common expletives (see Table 1; cf. Fine and Johnson, 1984). They were then asked (a) which of these words they considered to be 'obscene', and (b) which of these words they 'regularly' use, in the course of their routine socializing in Dempsey's. Finally, they were asked whether they agreed that 'certain words are more acceptable for men than for women' (cf. Johnson and Fine, 1980). Responses obtained from this part of the interview are given in Tables 1, 2 and 3 respectively. These data present a picture of general and personal orientations to 'obscenity' within the group.

Table 1: Numbers of women and men who judge each expletive to be 'obscene'

Expletive	Derivation	Women	Men
Bitch	Ancestral	2	2
Bastard	Ancestral	5	3
Shit/Shite	Scatological	4	4
Arse	Scatological	4	2
Fuck	Sexual Act	8	7
Screw	Sexual Act	5	4
Shag	Sexual Act	4	3
Bollocks	Sexual Anatomy	5	4
Prick	Sexual Anatomy	0	0
Cock	Sexual Anatomy	8	5
Cunt	Sexual Anatomy	15	8
Fanny	Sexual Anatomy	14	6
Tits	Sexual Anatomy	10	0
Wanker	Masturbatory	1	0

Table 2: Numbers of women and men who regularly use each expletive

Expletive	Derivation	Women	Men
Bitch	Ancestral	14	15
Bastard	Ancestral	15	15
Shit/Shite	Scatological	14	15
Arse	Scatological	11	15
Fuck	Sexual Act	12	13
Screw	Sexual Act	10	14
Shag	Sexual Act	13	15
Bollocks	Sexual Anatomy	12	15
Prick	Sexual Anatomy	15	15
Cock	Sexual Anatomy	9	13
Cunt	Sexual Anatomy	1	13
Fanny	Sexual Anatomy	2	12
Tits	Sexual Anatomy	5	15
Wanker	Masturbatory	14	15

An immediately obvious feature of Tables 1 and 2, is the general consensus among respondents with regard to both judgments of 'obscenity' and reported use of individual expletives. This agreement indicates that, by and large, the group operates with common frames of meaning, within which particular words acquire significance, and are deployed in habitual ways. Notably, many expletives are considered not to be obscene by a majority of respondents (see Table 1). This finding reflects everyday group practice, in that, within the 'pub' culture of Dempsy's, swearing is an accepted part of linguistic interaction between clients. Thus, members also report that they regularly *use* most of the terms in question (see Table 2). For these respondents, expletives such as 'shit', 'bollocks', 'shag', 'prick' and 'wanker' are entirely appropriate for this social setting, and do not carry the negative connotations traditionally associated with swearing/obscene language (see also Hughes, 1992).

In part, these findings reflect broader social processes, whereby a general increase in the use of taboo

has lessened the social significance of individual expletives; a pattern observed almost twenty years ago, by Fine and Johnson, who remarked that such terms "...may be losing their social power as they become more linguistically commonplace" (1984: 71). Additionally however, the particular patterns of response evidenced in this study must be located within the local group/pub culture. Insofar as this culture is organized around such activities as storytelling, humorous anecdotes and interpersonal 'slagging' (i.e. teasing), then swearing forms an integral means of group-participation, and of self-constitution as a legitimate group member. In this context of production, terms which would frequently be considered 'obscene' from an outsider's perspective, perform a range of altogether more benign functions (see *Reasons for Swearing*, below). Indeed, as discussed below, failure to engage appropriately in this linguistic practice may have potentially negative consequences for self-presentation.

To summarize so far: for this group, swearing represents a common linguistic practice, with members reporting regular use of what is commonly seen as ‘bad language’. For this reason, most individual expletives are not considered ‘obscene’ within this CoP. Moreover, 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.

With regard to one form of expletive however, there is a clear gender divide. Terms referring to female body parts are almost universally considered ‘obscene’ by the women in this group; thereby supporting Fine and Johnson’s (1984) contention that this is “one type of obscenity that remains powerful and taboo” (71). In particular, the female respondents judge ‘vaginal’ references (i.e. ‘cunt’ and ‘fanny’) to be obscene, with two thirds of the women also categorizing ‘tits’ in this way. In contrast, only half of the male respondents consider ‘vaginal’ terms to be obscene, and none considers the word ‘tits’ to be obscene. Given that the meanings of obscenity appear to be linked to community practice, these findings suggest that women and men will diverge in their actual linguistic practice, in this area. This conjecture is borne out by members’ self-reports of expletive usage (see Table 2). Here, women are almost unanimous in their contention that they do not (‘regularly’) use the terms ‘cunt’ or ‘fanny’, while two thirds report that they similarly avoid using the word ‘tits’. Male responses to this question show a very different pattern; all of the men report regularly using

‘tits’ in their everyday interaction, and only two and three, respectively, avoid the terms ‘cunt’ and ‘fanny’.

From these responses, gender divergence appears to be greater for actual use of female anatomy terms than for judgments of ‘obscenity’. Thus, in categorizing the expletives (Table 1), approximately half of the male respondents orient to the taboo nature of ‘vaginal’ (if not of ‘mammary’) terms, thereby demonstrating that community members have access to a body of common sociocultural meanings and representations (see e.g. Bergvall, 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999). However, male respondents’ recognition of the social force of such terms does not appear to influence their everyday linguistic practice (at least from the self-presentations offered here). Thus, the men (in contrast to the women) unanimously report regular usage of terms that many of their group consider to be obscene, suggesting that, regardless of commonly available social meanings, male members perceive greater ‘rights’ to obscenity, than do the female members. Such (male) perceptions were underlined when respondents were asked whether they agreed that certain words are ‘more acceptable for men than for women’ (Table 3). In this instance, a gender divide was again clearly evident, with fourteen men, compared to only three women, agreeing with the statement. When probed as to the particular ‘words’ in question, ‘female anatomy’ was by far the most salient category mentioned by the respondents. It appears that the men in this CoP continue to see ‘really’ obscene terms as a male province, but that female members do not share this view.

Table 3: Number of respondents who agree that ‘certain words are more acceptable for men than for women’.

Women	Men
3	14

In contrast to previous research (e.g. that of Johnson and Fine, 1980, who found that both male and female respondents viewed ‘sexual anatomy’ terms as more ‘appropriate’ for men), the *women* in this study largely rejected any such notions of gender differentiation. While a number acknowledged that *society* looks differently upon women and men using ‘strong language’, they were careful to distinguish between socially and personally defined standards of acceptability. Indeed, many stated that they would not tolerate others’ use of such ‘unacceptable’ terms and references. As one respondent stated: ‘if a word is wrong to begin with, then it doesn’t matter who says it - it’s still wrong. I just don’t put up with people saying that sort of stuff any more’ (Jenny; 27). These responses from the female community members show feminist orientations; e.g. resistance to the objectification/trivialisation of women, awareness of sexual aggression, and the need for female solidarity (see *Avoiding Obscenity* below). Hence, while responses to ‘female anatomy’ terms *appear* to reflect traditionally gendered swearing patterns, the use (or avoidance) of

these terms is interpreted differently by female and male members.

Overall then, the patterns of response emerging from this CoP highlight the ongoing negotiation of linguistic categories, on at a number of levels. In particular, they demonstrate the way in which the meaning of any one category is grounded within existing, global frameworks, while simultaneously emerging from the more locally contingent practices of the community. While ‘general’ expletives constitute a routine feature of group interaction (being thereby redefined, and possibly ‘neutralized’), those which refer specifically to the female anatomy remain largely taboo. This negotiation illustrates the general redefinition of ‘bad language’, together with the fact that “sexual slang cannot be treated as a unitary category” (M. Gordon, 1993: 19). In addition, gender differences in the conceptualization/use of certain items, suggest that members may negotiate categories differently, depending on their own location(s) within the community. In their everyday use (or avoidance) of ‘bad language’, these members invoke and sometimes challenge existing ideologies of gender, whether at the

level of the community itself, or with reference to the broader social aggregate. In so doing, they constitute themselves, in various ways, as gendered participants within the community (cf. Bergvall, 1999). Simultaneously, gender categories and meanings are negotiated and redefined through these linguistic practices.

In addition to their role in the construction of identity, expletives also serve a number of social/interactional functions in everyday conversation

(see e.g. Crawford, 1995; Sutton, 1995). In the second part of each interview, respondents were asked to discuss their own reasons for using and/or avoiding particular types of obscenity. Responses were then categorized thematically (see Tables 4 and 5; cf. Fine and Johnson, 1984). Again, gender ideologies and expectations can be seen to influence the practice of swearing in this group. However, such ideologies are also negotiated in light of community-based meanings and practices.

Reasons For Swearing

Table 4: Own reasons for swearing, as reported by women and men.

Reason	No. of Women	No. of Men	Total	Examples
Humor/story-telling	15	13	28	'When you're telling a good story and you want to get a laugh.'
To create emphasis	13	11	24	'It helps to get your message across.'
Anger/Tension-release	10	10	20	'It's like when you're really pissed off – a sort of release.'
Habit	4	14	18	'It's just something I do – I'm not even really aware of it anymore.'
It's normal/expected	2	16	18	'Everybody curses these days – it would be more unusual if you didn't.'
To show intimacy/trust	12	0	12	'I think it shows that you have a fairly close relationship.'
To cover fear/vulnerability	6	5	11	'It's like a defense – to cover up how you really feel.'
Part of personality	6	0	6	'It's just something people know me by'
To shock	2	1	3	'It's really effective if the other person doesn't swear at all – it's the shock factor, I suppose.'

The traditional link between swearing and catharsis/aggression (see Fine and Johnson, 1984) has perpetuated the view that swearing is a 'male' activity (e.g. Lakoff, 1975). Hence, despite recent attempts to demonstrate the variability of linguistic form/function (e.g. Crawford, 1995), swearing remains an accepted marker of 'masculine' speech (de Klerk, 1991). In the present CoP, expletives clearly serve a cathartic function, with twenty respondents reporting that they swear when they're 'really angry', 'tense', or 'stressed'. In this way, strong language may be seen as sign of aggression, or at least of tension/frustration, thereby offering some support to previous theories of swearing. However, in this study, equal numbers of women and men identify 'anger' as a reason for their own use of expletives, suggesting that within this CoP, the link between strong language and aggression does not function as a means of gender constitution. These findings may suggest a more general lack of gender distinction in expressing anger (see Sharkin, 1993). However, it is equally likely that given its ubiquity here, swearing simply does not constitute 'masculinity' in routine usage.

Eleven respondents (six women and five men) also report using strong language when they feel fearful, anxious or 'upset' (cf. Crawford, 1995). Although they usually stated that they used expletives to 'cover up' such feelings, the connotations of 'vulnerability' further demonstrate that for this community, swearing is not linked with (traditional) masculinity, in any straightforward manner. While 'bad language' frequently provides a catharsis for 'inner' emotion in this group, this process is more complex than traditional psychological research would suggest. Notably, swearing can convey emotions which are antithetical to traditional notions of aggression/dominance. Further, when swearing is used in this way, it does not mark out the speech style as 'masculine', but rather provides a group-defined way of expressing 'strong feelings'.

Overall, the most frequently cited reasons for swearing are relational/interactional (see Table 4). This finding underlines the role of 'bad language' in defining the group culture, and in constituting (shared) membership of that culture. Thus, almost all of the respondents highlight the importance of swearing as a means of humor-creation, and as a resource for

constructing a 'good story', while twenty four state that swearing 'emphasizes what [they] want to say'. Such responses show an orientation towards the forceful effects of using strong language. However, these effects are negotiated and adapted to reflect the particular nature of the CoP. Because the group is essentially engaged in 'social interaction', then humor and story-telling, as a type of performance, comprise central resources for both group- and self-constitution. Here, the ability to tell a 'good story' becomes a defining characteristic of community members, and swearing is an accepted means of enacting this ability. From this perspective, the use of expletives performs at least two 'relational' functions: (a) constituting oneself as a member of the group, and thereby aligning oneself with other members, and (b) reaffirming group culture. These functions derive from the activities and nature of the group as a whole, and again produce very little gender differentiation. It appears that the relational dimensions of swearing (as defined within the CoP) are equally salient for women and men.

A further interactional function identified only by female respondents is that of creating/conveying intimacy and trust. As a number of sociolinguistic studies have illustrated, swearing may be used to convey *solidarity* with a given group (e.g. Cheshire, 1982; Trudgill, 1984). While this is likely to be a factor in the present study, it does not fully encompass the women's specific focus on trust/intimacy. Moreover, this function was not identified by any of the male respondents, thereby suggesting that swearing has a particular meaning for female members of the group.

Because female swearing, in the larger community, is more contextually circumscribed than that of males (Coates, 1993), it tends to occur most commonly in informal, intimate environments. Therefore, it can serve to strengthen already existing bonds between group members (e.g. Sutton, 1995). However, while this process has generally been described as a feature of female interaction (de Klerk, 1992; Risch, 1987; Sutton, 1995), the women in the present study indicate its operation in a *mixed-gender* context. Thus, what appears salient here is the nature of the group in question, together with the individual's location within that group. Because swearing (with the exception of certain categories of expletive) forms a routine linguistic practice for all community members, then the actual gender constitution of the group assumes less importance than the mutually negotiated terms of participation. The location of the CoP within the broader social context is also evident in the gender-divergence of these responses. Because the men may be expected to experience more general latitude in their use of strong language, then their terms of participation in the local CoP do not diverge greatly (in this respect) from those experienced in the wider social context. For the women however, this is a context in which their terms of participation (e.g. drinking, swearing, smoking) are frequently counterpoised with social expectations of femininity. Thus swearing, as a means of constituting

group membership, also marks the context in particular ways.

This dual positioning (within local and global communities) is also reflected in the differential numbers of women and men who identified 'habit or 'social' norms as reasons for swearing. Over half of the male respondents subscribe to the notion that swearing is 'normal', and even socially expected ('It's just a natural part of language'; Dave; 30), while fourteen further state that it has become a personal 'habit'. These responses reflect the ideology of the larger social context (in which swearing is accepted as a mundane marker of masculinity; cf. de Klerk, 1997), but also echo Susan Hughes's discussions with 'lower working-class women' (1992). For the women in Hughes' study, swearing formed "an integral part of their language", with one respondent remarking that "it's not swearing to us, it's part of our everyday talking" (297).

For the women in the present study however, while taboo language is habitually deployed within the local CoP, it is frequently unacceptable in other areas of their lives (see *Avoiding Obscenity*, below). All of the respondents are engaged in higher level education, and all expect to work in a professional capacity in later life. Several have already embarked on work placements in their chosen fields, and have been required to present a 'professional' identity in these contexts. In addition, many of the female respondents could expect to be censured for excessive use of expletives, in their domestic, or their social interactions. For these reasons, few consider swearing to be either a social norm, or a personal habit. Rather, as a linguistic practice it is largely reserved for use in certain, 'appropriate' environments (e.g. Dempsey's), where it serves as a resource for a context-specific mode of gender constitution (cf. Sutton, 1995). In this context, six of the women (but none of the men) remarked that swearing was 'part of (my) personality'. This response contrasts with the men's unanimous location of expletives within 'our language'; thereby highlighting the more marked nature of women's swearing in the larger social community, and its consequent implications for the construction of a particular type of feminine identity.

Finally, three respondents reported using strong language to 'shock' others. This effect is often associated with taboo language, and particularly, with women's use of taboo language (Fine and Johnson, 1984; cf. Hughes, 1992). Overall however, 'shock' potential does not appear to be a strong motivation for swearing in this CoP. This finding may be explained with reference to the nature and activities of the group itself, in that (a) members' routine use of expletives has 'neutralized' the terms in question (see earlier), and (b) mutual negotiation has allowed members to develop certain common perspectives and meanings, which detract from their potential and/or motivation to 'shock' one another. Notably, when this potential effect was mentioned by respondents, it was always directed outside of the group; i.e. toward people who 'don't swear themselves' (Tom; 22), and therefore

do not share in practices of the local CoP. Here, swearing further strengthens group identity through the delineation of outsiders (who are 'easily shocked') from insiders (who are more 'open-minded'). Overall however, swearing is not deployed as a 'shock' strategy by either male or female members of this community. This contrasts with standard conceptions of taboo language, illustrating once again the multifunctional nature of any linguistic form, and the need to examine the specific contexts in which such forms are used.

Avoiding Obscenity

In the final part of the interview, respondents were asked whether there were any expletives that they consciously refrained from using. They then discussed their reasons for avoiding these words. As may be expected from their judgments of 'obscenity' (see earlier), respondents most commonly report avoidance of female 'sexual anatomy' terms. In particular, the terms 'cunt' and 'fanny' are avoided on at least some occasions, by almost

all of the respondents. However, there is a degree of gender differentiation here. While most of the women stated that they 'never/very rarely' use these terms, many of the men appeared to deploy them selectively, depending on the conversational context. In addition, some women also report a degree of self-monitoring in their use of other terms (most commonly 'fuck', 'screw' and 'cock'), while the men appear to use these more or less indiscriminately. When asked about their reasons for avoiding (any category of) obscenity, female and male respondents presented somewhat divergent accounts (see Table 5). Moreover, almost all of the identified reasons were reported more frequently by female respondents, suggesting that, within this CoP, women are generally more motivated to refrain from using obscene terms. It should be noted that most 'avoidance' is context-specific, and usually pertains to a small category of expletives. Nonetheless, many members do appear to refrain from using certain terms, and this behavior is reported more frequently by women than it is by men.

Table 5: Women's and men's reasons for avoiding certain expletives

Reason	No. of women	No. of men	Total
Sexist/offensive	15	8	23
Gives negative impression	15	7	22
Inappropriate in certain company	10	10	20
Shows a limited vocabulary	10	2	12
Feel uncomfortable	12	0	12
Don't want to appear sexist	0	7	7

From a thematic analysis of respondents' reasons for avoiding obscenity, two issues emerge as particularly salient. These are (a) sexism/derogatory images of women, and (b) presenting a negative impression of self. Both of these reasons can be seen to reflect wider social processes, drawing alternately on traditional gender ideologies, and on more recent 'feminist' concepts and issues. However, while these meanings are equally available to all members of the community (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987), female and male respondents negotiate them differently. Moreover, regardless of whether a 'feminist' or a 'traditional' ideology is invoked, the behavioral consequences appear to favor a traditionally gendered swearing pattern, within certain circumscribed contexts. This process is explicated more fully below.

Sexism

Feminist influences are evident in respondents' general awareness of, and orientations to, issues of 'sexism'. Such responses referred primarily to 'vaginal' *Women and Language*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Pg. 30

expletives, although a number of women reported similarly avoiding the word 'tits'. In total, twenty three participants stated that they avoid certain words because of the derogatory images of women that these convey. A typical response is provided by Susan (29), who suggests that such words make women seem 'like pieces of meat'. This notion is echoed by Debbie (24) who says that she feels 'belittled as a person' particularly when men use these terms.

While CoP members show a general awareness of sexism, female and male members differ in their personal orientations toward this issue. All of the women (compared to just over half of the men) explicitly identify 'sexism' as a *personal* motivation for avoiding certain expletives. In contrast, equal numbers of male respondents are concerned about how such messages affect the *impressions of others*. Seven report that they refrain from using these words because they don't want to 'appear sexist' (emphasis added), seven feel that they 'give a negative impression' to others, and nine feel that they are 'unsuitable in certain company' (see *Impression-*

management below). As a consequence, words such as 'cunt' and 'fanny' tend to be used only in the context of all-male interaction (a phenomenon described by nine men), thereby marking these as specifically 'masculine' terms. Significantly, almost all of the male respondents identified such words as 'more acceptable for men than for women' (see earlier).

For the men in this CoP then, a general awareness of 'sexism' and 'offensiveness to women' provides a salient motivation for avoiding certain categories of expletive. However, these issues do not always constitute 'intrinsic' motivation, but rather appear to inform the strategic 'management' of swearing, for male respondents. This pattern contrasts sharply with the responses of female participants, for whom 'sexism' is *in itself*, a sufficient reason to eschew certain terms. The women perceive certain terms to be unacceptable, regardless of their context of deployment, and indeed report feeling 'uncomfortable' when such terms are used. For example, Debbie (24) states that she just '[doesn't] feel right' about using the word 'cunt'. Notably, none of the women identifies 'appearing sexist' as a motivation for avoiding obscenity; sexism itself is to be avoided, rather than strategically managed.

Feminist ideologies can be seen to inform these women's accounts in a number of ways. In the first instance, they display a highly developed awareness of 'equality' issues, and therefore resist any action (linguistic or otherwise) that places them in a subordinate position. A number of respondents also comment on the 'threatening' nature of obscenity which is directed specifically at women (cf. Kissling, 1991), and these perceptions are reinforced by the number who feel 'uncomfortable' with certain terms. Moreover, they not only feel antipathetic towards language that they consider to be offensive; they are also unprepared to accept others' use of such terms and references, commonly stating that they will not 'put up' with this behavior. A discourse of 'female solidarity' is also evident here, in that *women* who use offensive expletives are looked upon with more disdain than are men. Thus, Edel (31) remarks that 'it sounds strange to hear another woman using that word' (i.e. 'cunt'), while Kelly (26) suggests that 'it shows they haven't really thought about what they are actually saying'. In this way, women may be seen as 'letting the side down' if they engage in the use of certain ('obscene') terms of reference.

Overall then, variability in the negotiation of 'sexism' illustrates a subtle, but persistent degree of gender differentiation within this CoP. Ironically, while feminist concepts can be seen to inform many responses, this ultimately results in a traditionally gendered pattern of swearing, for certain categories of expletive. Thus, terms referring to 'female sexual anatomy, are largely reserved for use by male community members, evidenced in both judgments of obscenity and self-reported use (see Tables 1 and 2, respectively), while male respondents overwhelmingly agree that such terms are 'more acceptable for men than for women' (Table 3). Moreover,

despite female consensus that such terms are, in themselves, unacceptable (and therefore should not be used by women or men), the women display a tacit acceptance that these are more commonly used by men. Hence, it is more 'unusual' to hear a woman using (e.g.) the word 'cunt', and given the group's common orientation towards issues of 'sexism', this is perhaps more blameworthy than similar behavior from a man. In effect, this serves to delineate one particular category of expletive as constitutive of 'masculinity' within the community - albeit a category which is resisted by female members, and must therefore be deployed strategically, in circumscribed contexts of production.

Impression-management

The second major theme in accounts of 'avoiding obscenity', also illustrates a complex interaction between 'traditional' and more 'feminist'-informed concepts and ideologies. Here, respondents reported that they refrain from swearing for reasons which may be loosely glossed as impression-management. Specifically, the use of obscene language is seen as presenting a negative image of self. However, the precise nature of this image is open to negotiation, depending on one's (gendered) location within the community. While a total of twenty three respondents recognize the potential for swearing to create a 'bad impression', all of the women (compared to just under half of the men) explicitly identify this as a reason for avoiding obscenity. The women also report avoiding a wider range of terms than do the men (see earlier). These patterns appear to support the claim that women refrain from swearing because of a greater orientation towards prestige language varieties (e.g. Trudgill, 1974). However, as with any linguistic ideology/practice, the findings must be grounded within their particular contexts of deployment. In discussing this issue, women more commonly than men, identified the potential impact of 'outsiders' joining the group. Several female respondents remarked that excessive swearing is inappropriate 'when you don't know someone very well' (Sarah; 22). This is congruent with their perceptions of 'intimacy' within the group (see earlier), and also reflects the influence of sociocultural conceptions of femininity. It is also evident that the women are strongly influenced by their own judgments of 'obscenity' in conjecturing the impression that they are conveying to others. Thus, female respondents almost universally perceive the use of 'vaginal' terms as creating a negative impression of self. In addition, ten women (compared to two men) suggest that excessive swearing is an indication of a 'limited vocabulary', which underlines the highly *performative* nature of women's swearing in this CoP. That is, while expletives are freely deployed to achieve particular goals (e.g. effective story-telling), their 'gratuitous' use may attract negative attributions. Because the group constitutes itself in and through activities such as humor/story-telling, then such potentially negative attributions are rarely discernible in everyday interaction. Nonetheless, their

emergence here illustrates the location of community members in the broader sociocultural context, together with the continuing influence of ideologies derived from that domain.

Male community members on the other hand, do not display this level of orientation to generalized negative attributions. For these men, swearing is 'a natural part of language', practised both within the local CoP, and in the wider sociocultural domain (see earlier). Hence, potential attributions of limited vocabulary do not form a salient motivation for avoiding expletives. However, they recognize the specific, community-negotiated meanings of certain expletives, and the potential implications of using these terms in the community context. For this reason, a number of men state that they avoid 'really' obscene words if they feel that these are inappropriate for the 'company' in question. On further discussion, it became evident that, in contrast to their female counterparts (who modify their language more generally, in the presence of group 'outsiders'), male avoidance is limited to specific expletives, and furthermore, is practised equally, if not more rigorously, within the local CoP. This situation reflects the mutually negotiated group norm, whereby men feel free to use 'female anatomy' expletives, only in the presence of other males. As Paul (27) remarks, 'It's like, I don't want to offend other people at the table. I think that gives people a really bad impression of what you're like'.

Overall, the reasons identified by respondents for their own (selective) avoidance of obscene language illustrate a number of subtle differences in the ideology and (reported) practices of female and male members of this CoP. Such differences draw on both traditional and 'feminist' notions of gender, while simultaneously reflecting the variable negotiation of these meanings, within and beyond the community context.

Summary of Research

While recent sociolinguistic research has highlighted the contextualized nature of linguistic action, thereby cautioning against generalized models of 'gendered' speech styles, the persistence of social ideologies and expectations means that certain features of language use remain associated with either 'feminine' or 'masculine' speech. Swearing is a particularly salient example of this, being variously associated with the vernacular, interpersonal aggression, conversational dominance, and, in some contexts, linguistic innovation. In short, many people continue to perceive swearing as symbolic of 'masculine' qualities; indeed, such behavior often provides a resource for the construction of a masculine identity (de Klerk, 1997).

However, as several recent studies have demonstrated, the relationship between gender and swearing is more complex than such folklinguistic theory would suggest (e.g. de Klerk, 1991, 1992, 1997; M. Gordon, 1993; Hughes, 1992; Risch, 1987; Sutton, 1995). In the present study, a 'communities of practice' approach

was adopted in order to contextualize the linguistic practice of swearing, and to explore the meanings of this practice for members of *one particular community*. Through the accounts of members themselves, it is possible to examine their negotiation of specific linguistic categories, and the ongoing (re)definition of 'bad language' as a resource for identity construction. In addition, these accounts of swearing illustrate the way in which the meaning of gender itself becomes redefined and contextualized within particular frames of reference.

Contrary to common sociocultural conceptions, both female and male participants in this community report habitually deploying strong language, in the pursuit of shared group enterprises and goals. In so doing, they constitute themselves as members of the particular 'drinking' culture in which they are engaged, while simultaneously defining and delineating that membership in various ways. However, even within this group culture, a number of subtle, yet persistent gender differences reflect respondents' dual location within the local community, and the wider sociocultural context. Thus, through the gender-nuanced negotiation of specific expletives, as well as their engagement in the more general practices of the community, members constitute themselves as particular types of gendered subject.

Particularly for the women in this group, identity is an ongoing and contested site of definition, with respondents appropriating certain expletives, while rejecting (and explicitly resisting) the use of others. Hence, they may be seen as engaged in an ongoing negotiation of 'femininity', which resonates with Laurel Sutton's (1995) study of 'sexual slang': "Rather than say that young women are 'talking like men', I see these women as imitating other women, whom they want to be like and who are different from the stereotypical image of woman" (289). Similarly, through the strategic use of 'obscenity', the women in the present study are able to forge community-specific versions of femininity, in which they constitute themselves not merely as 'women' or as 'drinkers', but rather, as 'drinking women', or alternatively, as 'women drinkers', within this particular culture.

Conclusion

As outlined earlier, this study is inherently qualitative, in both its methodology and its theoretical orientation. At a conceptual level, it is driven by a *concern with meaning, and/or theory induction* from empirically available data (see Smith, Harré & Van Langenhove, 1995), a concern reflected in its methodology. Thus, the study focuses solely on the activities, practices and meaning constructions of one particular 'community', in order to examine these practices within a *localized* context. The insights gained from this study, then, must be seen as pertaining to one particular community (with its own features, cultural capital and membership categories), rather than as global processes of gender construction. However, it may be

hypothesized that such community-specific processes will find resonances (if not exact parallels) in the broader context of gendered linguistic practice. In fact, this notion underpins much work within the CoP framework. What the present study has shown, first and foremost, is the negotiation of gender identities (and indeed the category of gender itself) through a specific linguistic practice, and within a specific 'community' context. While the specifics of this process will inevitably vary across cultures, contexts, and groupings, (and will hence require further research with other CoP's), the process *per se* is an ongoing and transcendent activity as women and men continue to negotiate their identities within a gendered world.

Note

- * An earlier version of this paper has been published in the Belfast Working Papers in *Language and Linguistics*, 2000 (Vol. 14).
- 1 Both respondents' names and the name of the 'local' have been replaced by pseudonyms.

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