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Teenage swearing in the U.K.

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Abstract

This article describes the swearing practices of a group of young people aged 14-16 in the UK. The young people are in a specific context – a Pupil Referral Unit catering for pupils who have been excluded from mainstream school. The study's narrow focus builds on existing knowledge by providing a level of precision in terms of speaker and context not usually found in swearing research. 13 key words are examined in terms of meaning, structure, frequency, and use between genders. *Shit* and *fuck*, as the most common terms are explored in more detail, with use of the latter compared to existing accounts from the *British National Corpus*. Examining the swearing practices of this group of people adds detail to our knowledge of a particular style of English, paves the way for future research into the socio-pragmatic functions of teenage swearing, and helps us to better understand the linguistic behaviour of an often-marginalised section of society.

Key words: Swearing; youth language; corpus; gender; *fuck*; *shit*

1. Introduction

This article provides an account of swearing practices among a group of young people in the UK, following a linguistic ethnography carried out in a non-mainstream educational context between 2014 and 2016 (Drummond 2018b). The non-mainstream context in question is a Secondary Pupil Referral Unit – a facility which caters for young people who have been permanently excluded from mainstream education for behavioural/disciplinary issues or because they find it difficult to conform to the requirements of a typical school environment. Studying the language of adolescents is always interesting and potentially valuable due to the general understanding that a) adolescents are at the forefront of linguistic change (Eckert 2014: 388), and b) their language in many ways reflects 'the constant state of flux' (Tagliamonte 2016: 3) in which young people find themselves as they work out their place in the world. However, studying the language of a group such as this is particularly valuable as it helps us to better appreciate the communicative practices of a specific network of young people who, as evidenced by their situation, often have problematic interactions with adults, especially those in authority.

Descriptions of language use in society often deal with quite large demographic groups. However, young people in the UK, even those in 'urban' contexts, are not a homogeneous group, and do not use language in the same way. This article recognises this by focusing on the language of a selection of young people who live on the fringes of the societies that most of us are familiar with, and in doing so, raises the profile slightly of an educational situation that most people know little about. The article is deliberately descriptive in nature for the most part, with the aim of providing a detailed account of a particular linguistic practice among a particular group of people at a particular time. The description is accompanied throughout by critical comments and insights into the variants that are used, along with analysis that uncovers patterns of use within the data set. Data is also compared to previous research on swearing, building on existing knowledge by adding a degree of contextual detail that is necessarily absent in broader studies. The research will therefore inform the debate around language change in relation to swearing, and act as a resource for future comparative work.

The article is structured as follows: first, I look at how swearing has been defined, and the ways in which it has been dealt with in existing research. I then contextualise the current project, providing details of the educational context, the participants, and the methods of data collection and analysis. I then take 13 key words to investigate in detail, looking at the ways in which they are used, and how this compares to previous accounts where relevant. Throughout, I discuss (and usually dismiss) any gender differences in usage. The reason for even including gender in the first place is to allow comparison with existing research, which often has a gender focus.

2. What is swearing?

The term ‘swearing’ is vague, subjective and utterly context-dependent. What is seen as swearing for some people in one context is seen as slang, informal speech, or simply normal speech for other people (or the same people) in another context. And even those words commonly regarded as the ‘strongest’ swearwords – *cunt* for example (e.g. McEnery 2006: 36; Ljung 2010: 9) can, anecdotally at least, be completely innocuous and commonplace elsewhere (e.g. Braier 2016).

Andersson and Trudgill (2007: 195) define swearing as language in which the expression:

- a) refers to something taboo or stigmatised
- b) is not to be interpreted literally
- c) expresses strong emotions or attitudes.

McEnery (2006: 2) takes a very straightforward approach and defines ‘bad language’, which includes swearing, as ‘any word or phrase which, when used in what one might call polite conversation, is likely to cause offence.’ Clearly, the definition is vague and subjective, yet in its simplicity it does perhaps reflect the notion that we all know what swearing is in any given situation, but it is somehow hard to pin down in any consistent way.

Ljung (2010: 4) acknowledges this and other definitions and distils them into the following criteria for what constitutes swearing, which effectively adds one more to Andersson and Trudgill’s list above:

- a) Swearing is the use of utterances containing taboo words.
- b) The taboo words are used with non-literal meaning.
- c) Many utterances that constitute swearing are subject to severe lexical, phrasal and syntactic constraints which suggest that most swearing qualifies as formulaic language.
- d) Swearing is emotive language: its main function is to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker’s feelings and attitudes.

If we look more closely at these criteria; the first is fairly uncontroversial – there must be a taboo aspect to the words in order for them to constitute swearing. However, we are not using taboo in its strictest sense of something that is actually forbidden, but rather in its more widespread sense that it refers to something that is offensive/impolite (Hughes 2015: 464); see also Andersson and Trudgill’s use of ‘stigmatised’ alongside ‘taboo’ above), at least when discussed in a particular context.

Stapleton (2010: 290) identifies three taboo areas which generate the majority of swear words:

- Excretory/scatological- those which relate to bodily functions and associated body parts (e.g. *shit, piss, arse*);
- Sexual – those which relate to sexual acts or to genitalia (*fuck, prick, cunt, wank*);
- Profanity – those which refer to religious issues (*damn, goddam, bloody, Chrissake*).

The second of Ljung’s criteria is more problematic, the idea that, to be considered as swearing, taboo words should be used with non-literal meaning (so that *He’s fucking annoying* would be regarded as swearing, but *They were fucking* would not). Ljung justifies this distinction by pointing out the inconsistent synonymy relations when some of these words are used in ‘swearing’ and in ‘non-swearing’. To illustrate, he argues that while the literal *They were fucking* can be replaced with *They*

were *shagging/screwing/bonking*, the non-literal *Fuck you!* cannot be replaced with *Shag you!* or *Bonk you!* (although it can be replaced with *Screw you!*). He then goes on to demonstrate a different kind of synonymy among words used for swearing, arguing that the interchangeability of words within phrases such as *Fuck you!*, *Damn you!*, and *Sod you!*, despite the different literal meanings of the individual words, shows a situation in which the utterances are fulfilling the same function. Although there is clearly some linguistic merit in untangling the distinction, for the purposes of this study I am going to follow McEnery (2006) and include terms used with their literal meaning as swearing. This, as far as I am concerned, is a common-sense approach in which someone saying '*I fucked him*', at a family meal for example, would most likely be seen as swearing.

Ljung's third criterion represents the entirely sensible observation that many swearing phrases are formulaic in the sense that they consist of 'a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use' (Wray 2002: 9). Whether this amounts to 'most' swearing is open to debate, but there is little doubt that phrases such as *I don't give a fuck*, *What the fuck?*, and *Bloody hell* are formulaic in nature.

Ljung's final criterion, that swearing is emotive language, is undoubtedly true to an extent, but is perhaps not inclusive enough. Yes, the function of most swearing can be seen as in some way reflecting the speaker's feelings or attitudes, but there is more to it than that. Or it is at least more nuanced. Jay and Janschewitz (2008: 268) suggest that 'Most instances of swearing are conversational, i.e. not highly emotional, confrontational, rude or aggressive'. Similarly, Beers Fägersten and Stapleton (2017: 4) observe that 'much of the swearing occurring in spontaneous, face-to-face interaction is social swearing'. Finally, Stapleton (2010: 293-300) outlines four major categories of interpersonal functions of swearing:

- Expressing emotion and/or aggression.
- Humour and verbal emphasis.
- Social bonding and solidarity.
- Constructing and displaying identity.

These suggest a far more complex interpersonal role for swearing than is perhaps generally understood.

3. Swearing research

Research into swearing can be divided into two broad categories – that which focuses mainly on patterns of use of swearing in actual language, and that which focuses mainly on reported use and attitudes towards swearing. Some larger studies (e.g. McEnery 2006; Ljung 2010; Beers Fägersten 2012) combine the two, albeit in different ways. The approaches taken by those studies in the first category are, to a great extent, determined by the speech or population sample available. Pre-existing corpora containing spontaneous speech provide predictably valuable insights into swearing on a large scale, offering the ability to compare frequencies and types of swearing between speakers of various social backgrounds, and in different spoken contexts. For British English (BrE), the *British National Corpus* (BNC) has helped to generate incredibly detailed analyses of swearing (McEnery and Xiao 2004; McEnery 2006), now with comparative work from the spoken part of the updated 2014 version of the corpus (Love 2017). Similarly, Stenström (2017) used *The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage English* (COLT) and *Corpus Oral de Lenguaje Adolescente de Madrid* (COLAm) to compare the swearing habits of English and Spanish teenagers.

Other studies have gathered new data specifically for their research, but not necessarily in the form of a corpus. Beers Fägersten (2012) used a specific speech community, the undergraduate population of the University of Florida, but relied on field-notes to collect data on the relevant interactions rather than recorded speech. She supplemented this data with questionnaires and follow-up interviews with a sample of the speech community around issues of reported use and perceived offensiveness of the

various terms. Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) also investigated at the language of students, this time at the University of Otago in New Zealand. They looked at the spontaneous interactions of two groups of five people recorded over a period of two weeks. Ljung (2010) largely relied on a questionnaire to elicit language-specific acceptability judgements around swearing, but then complements, discusses, and illustrates his detailed results with examples from various corpora. Finally, Thelwall (2008), does not use spoken language, but instead explores the online world of MySpace (an early social networking site), using data gathered from over 9,000 profiles.

Research of this kind often explores the use of swearing in relation to various social factors, depending on the level of detail available. McEnery (2006) and McEnery and Xiao (2004) use the considerable complexity of the BNC to report on patterns of use relating to sex, age, and social class. Stenström (2017) also discusses speaker sex, but focuses primarily on the differences between English and Spanish swearing, whereas Thelwall (2008) looks at sex and any UK/US differences. Studies in the second category, where the focus is more on reported use and attitudes towards swearing, also take into account social factors to better understand the processes involved. Notable studies of this type include Stapleton (2003) (gender), Jay and Janschewitz (2008) (gender and first language), and Rathje (2014) (age), although see Beers Fägersten (2012) for an overview.

As mentioned above, gender is frequently discussed in research on swearing, often with the apparent preoccupation of finding out who swears more – men or women. There is a 'common perception' that women swear less frequently, and use less offensive words, than men (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton 2017: 5), although the evidence, especially from more recent research, is predictably mixed (see Beers Fägersten 2012: 12-15 for a detailed overview). Yet the folk-linguistic belief remains, and the link between swearing and contemporary masculinity continues to be strong, 'with the result that using taboo language has a symbolic association with masculinity, not femininity' (Coates 2004: 98). In discussing the views of Lakoff (1975) and Jespersen (1922), who both assert that men swear more than women based on their various observations, Coates (2004: 15) adds another aspect to the perceived understanding of gender and swearing by asking whether they are actually 'attempting to *prescribe* how women *ought* to talk' rather than simply *describing* what women do, as they claim.

4. This study

The data under investigation in the present study falls into the first category described above, in that it is a corpus of spontaneous speech. Although it is a relatively small corpus - many times smaller than corpora such as the BNC and COLT - its strengths lie in the fact that all the speech was collected during a linguistic ethnography. This means that what it lacks in size, it makes up for in contextual detail. Every single utterance in the corpus can be traced back to a specific speaker, in a specific context, at a specific time, and with a specific communicative purpose in mind. All of which detail is made meaningful by detailed ethnographic knowledge and field-notes made by me and a fellow researcher. The advantage of this detail for a descriptive study is that the categorisation of some of the terms is that much easier and, arguably, accurate, as these extra resources can be called upon in unclear examples. However, while it will be referred to later, the additional value of the rich contextual data beyond helping to classify examples is not going to be fully exploited here, as this is primarily a quantitatively-oriented descriptive account of the swearing habits of a group of young people in a particular context at a particular time. It would take a further investigation to begin to unpack the socio-pragmatic functions of the swearing described here in any meaningful way, as space does not permit both to be carried out properly in a single article.

4.1 The context

The speech belongs to a group of 14-16-year-olds who, at the time of recording, were being educated in one of the learning centres operated by the Manchester Secondary Pupil Referral Unit, having been excluded from mainstream education. The reasons for exclusion varied widely – from fights, to

bullying, to confrontations or aggression towards teachers and school staff, to general and persistent more minor discipline issues. In addition (and perhaps not unrelatedly) to their volatile experiences with the school system, many of the young people had unstable, often traumatic family lives. The two centres we were involved with provided education at ‘Key Stage 4’, a stage of the English school system which covers the two years known as Years 10 and 11 (for pupils aged 14–16) in which GCSE (General Certificate of Education) exams will be taken. GCSEs mark the end of compulsory schooling in England, although young people must remain in some form of education or training until the age of 18¹.

The centres are very different from mainstream school. Catering for only 16 young people at a time (a maximum of eight from each year group), and following a reduced curriculum of core subjects, the centres have much more of a ‘youth club’ feel. Education is central and taken seriously, yet the atmosphere is much more relaxed than mainstream school, with young people able to play pool or table-tennis, watch TV, or go outside and smoke at break times. Despite the small number of young people, there is a relatively high number of adults working in the centres. Each has two co-ordinators, usually from a youth-work background, who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the centres, and who provide in-class support for the specialist subject teachers. The subject teachers work on a peripatetic basis, working between several centres to deliver core subjects such as English, Maths, Science, Art and what is called Preparation for Working Life. There is also a permanent youth-worker in each centre, who offers general support in and out of class.

All these factors combined to create a lively, often very noisy environment in which young people are free to express emotions, disagreements, and their own individual personalities within the enforced boundaries of fairness and awareness of others. Arguments (often extremely intense) are frequent, although physical fights are rare. Battles between staff and students are everyday occurrences, often involving the same individuals. Attendance was characteristically patchy during our time there, although often predictable on an individual basis, with some students rarely missing a day, and others turning up only occasionally.

4.2 The participants

The participants whose speech is discussed here are those who gave consent to take part in the main ethnographic study in 2014-15 (Drummond 2018a; Drummond 2018b) plus a few more individuals who gave consent to take part in a pilot study carried out in the previous year, but who had then left the centres. This results in speech from 26 participants in total – 15 boys and 11 girls, all between the ages of 14 and 16 at the time of recording. Social class was never a focus of the research as the young people are from very similar backgrounds with almost no meaningful social variation. Typically, the PRU population is made up of people at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, with pupils known to be eligible for and claiming free school meals (indicating low-income families) being around four times more likely to receive some kind of school exclusion than those pupils who are not eligible (Department for Education 2016). Participants represent a range of ethnicities, with the majority identifying (or being identified by staff) as white British, a sizable minority as mixed white British/black Caribbean, and a few individuals as either black African, black Caribbean, or mixed white British/Pakistani. However, ethnicity will not play a role in the analysis presented here, largely due to the fact that previous analyses of the data, and evidence from the ethnography, suggest that very little ethnicity work was being done through language in this particular context at this particular time (e.g. Drummond 2018a), at least from our perspective.

5. Methods

¹ For more information on the UK school system and statistics around exclusion, see Drummond (2018b).

Two researchers (the author and a research associate, [name]) spent one academic year visiting both centres, observing, participating in, and recording the daily events in the form of detailed field-notes and audio recordings. Recordings only began after weeks of observation and were made in a variety of ways and contexts. These included: spontaneous interactions in and out of class; interviews/conversations between individuals or small groups of young people and one researcher; peer or self-recording by the young people, often while outside smoking; mock-interviews while preparing for college applications; and discussions of words we heard the young people use. Recordings were made on Zoom H2 and Zoom H1 recorders and transcribed using Elan software. Due to the nature of the recordings (particularly the spontaneous interactions), not all the data could be transcribed. All of this resulted in 70 hours of audio recordings, a 158,075 word corpus, and 413,000 words of fieldnotes. For the current study, the corpus was built and investigated using AntConc software (Anthony 2018).

I have chosen to focus on 13 key words in the analysis of the corpus. Given the vagaries surrounding the definitions of swearing described earlier, it is quite difficult to systematically justify including or excluding particular words. However, I was guided in part by the scale of offence provided in McEnery (2006: 36)², which includes 'bad language words' categorised from 'very mild' to 'very strong'. I dismissed most of the 'very mild words' (such as *hell*, *idiot*, and *damn*), and also those which are more obviously homophobic, racist or sexist, rather than actual swear words (e.g. *fag*). Finally, some words simply do not appear in the data (e.g. *bugger*, *bollocks*, *screw*), so are naturally absent. The final list of 13 key words is as follows: *arse*, *bastard*, *bitch*, *bloody*, *cunt*, *dick*, *fuck*, *knob*, *piss*, *prick*, *shit*, *twat*, *wank*. I decided to remove examples of 'meta-swearing' – situations in which participants are telling us about the words they use in a conversation about swearing. Although I was reluctant to do this in some respects, as there is an argument that any and all language that occurred in the space at the time should be considered data, the situations were infrequent, and overly affected the quantitative analysis of some potentially interesting words. However, where relevant, the contexts have been described.

6. Results

6.1 Overall

Table 1 shows the frequency of the 13 key words in the corpus. In each case, the key word represents derivations and phrases (e.g. *fuck* includes *fucked*, *fucker*, *what the fuck*, etc.). This study was never about 'who swears more – boys or girls?', largely due to the fact that having carried out the ethnographic research, my overriding impression was that there simply was no meaningful gender difference in the quantity or frequency of swearing. With this observation, I did not then want to go any further with gender simply because that is what is 'normally done' in this kind of research. However, separating by gender does enable comparisons of swearing behaviour with existing research, as well as allowing the possibility of uncovering some qualitative differences in the type of swearing behaviour that might not have otherwise emerged. It also provides comparative data for future research which might have gender as its focus. For these reasons, the frequencies in Table 1 (and in subsequent tables) are separated by gender, with log-likelihood scores provided as a comparison of frequency within the corpus as a whole, and as a comparison of frequency just within the swearing language. Note that my observation as to the lack of difference in the overall frequency of swearing between genders is borne out by the bottom row in Table 1, with a statistically non-significant difference in overall swearing frequency between females and males.

Table 1. Frequency of the 13 swear words in the corpus (corpus size 158,075 (F 68,712; M 89,363))

² McEnery identifies two sources for this list: Millwood-Hargrave (2000), and the British Board of Film Classification Guidelines for the certification of films in the UK.

	Raw Freq in corpus (RF)	Normalised Freq per 10,000 words (NF)	Female RF	Female NF	Male RF	Male NF	LL score ³ corpus	LL score swearing
<i>fuck</i>	654	41.4	275	40.0	379	42.4	0.54	0.25
<i>shit</i>	257	16.3	97	14.1	160	17.9	3.47	1.20
<i>arse</i>	68	4.3	28	4.1	40	4.5	0.15	0.00
<i>piss</i>	68	4.3	39	5.7	29	3.2	5.27*	7.27**
<i>dick</i>	48	3.0	10	1.5	38	4.3	10.88**	8.88**
<i>bitch</i>	37	2.3	13	1.9	24	2.7	1.07	0.55
<i>bastard</i>	23	1.5	15	2.2	8	0.9	4.40*	5.43*
<i>knob</i>	16	1.0	6	0.9	10	1.1	0.23	0.09
<i>twat</i>	13	0.8	9	1.3	4	0.4	3.51	4.19*
<i>wank</i>	7	0.4	1	0.1	6	0.7	2.77	2.39
<i>prick</i>	6	0.4	1	0.1	5	0.6	1.96	1.66
<i>cunt</i>	5	0.3	2	0.3	3	0.3	0.02	0.00
<i>bloody</i>	5	0.3	0	0.0	5	0.6	5.70*	5.29*
Total	1207	76.4	496	72.2	711	79.6	2.78	n/a

Figure 1 visually summarizes the gender differences for each of the terms as a proportion of overall swearing. The following section discusses the apparent differences in use in some of the terms.

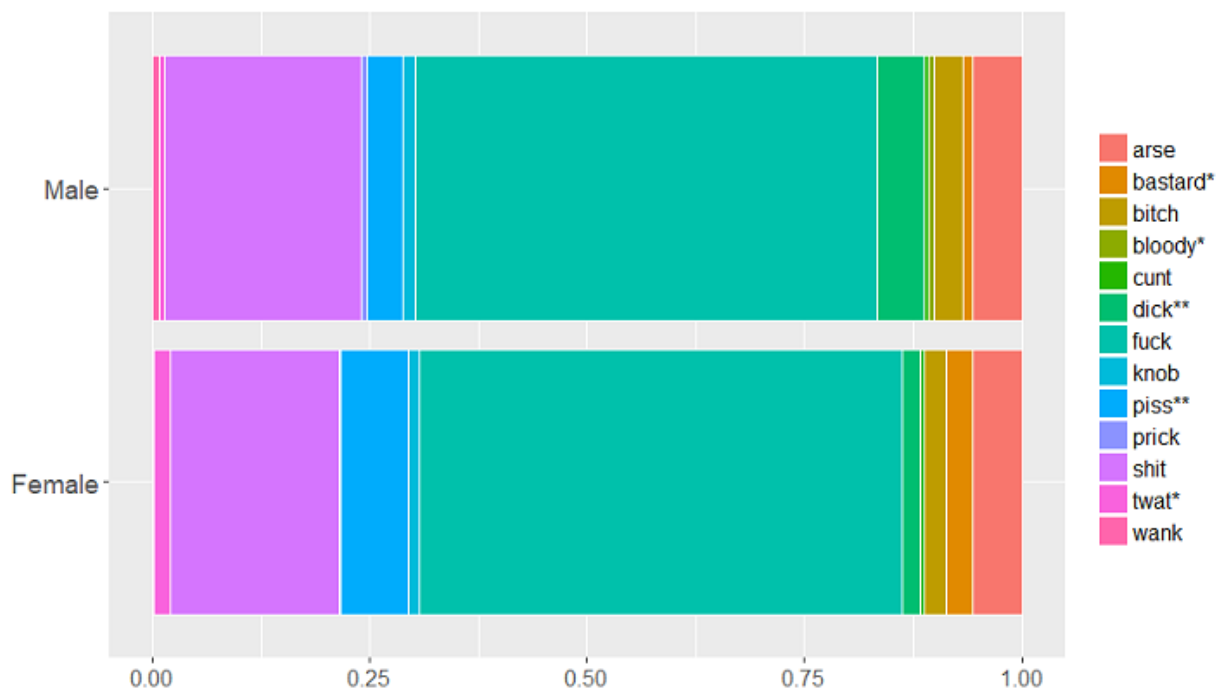


Figure 1. A visualisation of each term as a proportion of overall swearing for each gender.

6.2 The 13 key words

In this section I provide brief details of each key word, giving examples of its use in the corpus, and highlighting either common or noteworthy examples where relevant. However, due to *fuck* being by far the most frequent word, I deal with it slightly differently, comparing its use to existing accounts,

³ The critical value for statistical significance at $p < 0.05$ is 3.84 (marked with *). The critical value for statistical significance at $p < 0.01$ is 6.63 (marked with **).

(McEnery and Xiao 2004 in particular). Pronunciation of each term is given in the local version, and definitions have been generated from my own knowledge with additional reference to various dictionaries when required. Each item's table provides frequency numbers for all the main variants, along with its proportion as a percentage of overall swearing by gender (and its proportion of the overall use of the term in the case of *shit* and *fuck*). The log-likelihood score is given as a measure of the difference between overall usage of the term between genders, although this should obviously be viewed with caution given the small numbers in several instances. In two cases (*shit* and *bloody*) I refer briefly to the spoken part of the 2014 *British National Corpus* (BNC2014) (accessed via Lancaster University's CQPweb server (Hardie 2012)) and/or the original 1994 British national Corpus (BNC1994) (McEnery and Xiao 2004). This process is dealt with in more detail in relation to *fuck* (section 6.2.13).

6.2.1 Shit

There are 257 instances of SHIT' in the data. Table 13 shows the frequency of the different variants separated by gender and by each variant's percentage of the total *shit* tokens versus the percentage total of overall swearing (see Table 1).

Table 2. Frequency of *shit* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	% Total shit	Fem Freq	Fem % total shit	Fem % overall swearing	Male Freq	Male % total shit	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
shit (adj – bad)	58	22.6%	13	13.4%	2.6%	45	28.1%	6.3%	
shit (exclamation)	52	20.2%	19	19.6%	3.8%	33	20.6%	4.6%	
shit (noun – 'stuff')	50	19.5%	20	20.6%	4.0%	30	18.8%	4.2%	
chat shit (phr verb)	22	8.6%	7	7.2%	1.4%	15	9.4%	2.1%	
other phrases	16	6.2%	4	4.1%	0.8%	12	7.5%	1.7%	
all that shit/and shit (noun)	15	5.8%	7	7.2%	1.4%	8	5.0%	1.1%	
shit (noun – excrement)	11	4.3%	9	9.3%	1.8%	2	1.3%	0.3%	
shit/shat oneself	10	3.9%	6	6.2%	1.2%	4	2.5%	0.6%	
<i>copular</i> like shit (noun)	7	2.7%	4	4.1%	0.8%	3	1.9%	0.4%	
shit (verb – excrement)	5	2.0%	1	1.0%	0.2%	4	2.5%	0.6%	
shit (verb – scared)	4	1.6%	3	3.1%	0.6%	1	0.6%	0.1%	
shit (noun – 'stuff' negative)	3	1.2%	1	1.0%	0.2%	2	1.3%	0.3%	
shit (adj – angry)	2	0.8%	2	2.0%	0.4%	0	0.0%	0.0%	
shit (noun – person)	2	0.8%	1	1.0%	0.2%	1	0.6%	0.1%	
Total	257	100%	97	100%	19.4%	160	100%	22.5%	
					19.4%			22.4%	1.20

shit /ʃɪt, ʃɪʔ/ adjective

Bad, rubbish.

- (1) I'm not playing that shit game.
- (2) Honestly it's shit there innit?

shit noun

Things or stuff.

- (3) I've got private shit on this mate.

shit exclamation

- (4) Oh shit! I fucked up, yo.

chat shit verb

To talk rubbish. Lying.

- (5) But when someone's chatting shit to me...
- (6) Don't chat shit!

Other phrases (for example)

kick the shit out of *phrase*

To beat up.

(7) The guy kicked the fucking shit out of him.

give a shit *phrase*

To (not) care.

(8) I don't give two shits.

all that shit/and shit *phrase*

And everything. And all that stuff.

(9) She's fucking perfect and all that shit.

(10) Mine are all like Irish and shit.

shit it *phrasal verb*To be scared. From **shit oneself**

(11) And Abdou shit it!

shit *noun*

Stuff. Anything (negative meaning).

(12) I can't spell for shit.

(go) shit *adjective*

Angry, mad.

(13) I went absolutely shit.

The most notable use of *shit* in the current data is probably in the phrasal verb *to chat shit*, as most other uses are common and generally predictable. *Chat shit* (and *chatting/chats shit*) appears in the spoken part of BNC2014 only 9 times in over 11 million words – a rate of 0.0078 per 10,000 words, whereas the current data has 22 examples, a rate of 1.39 per 10,000.

6.2.2 Arse

There are 68 instances of ARSE in the data, as shown in Table 2.

Table 3. Frequency of *arse* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
arse (noun)	26	9	1.8%	17	2.4%	
arsed (adj)	22	14	2.8%	8	1.1%	
other 'arse' idioms	17	5	1.0%	12	1.7%	
arsehole (noun)	2	0	0.00%	2	0.3%	
-ass (adverb)	1	0	0.00%	1	0.1%	
Total	68	28	5.6%	40	5.6%	0.00

arse /a:s/ *noun*

A person's buttocks or anus.

(14) She's got a big arse.

Put someone on their arse *phrase*

Knock someone down in a fight.

(15) He just put him on his arse and started kicking the sh-

Get your arse in gear *phrase*

Hurry up.

(16) I never got my arse in gear.

Kiss my arse *phrase*

Tell someone you won't do as they say.

(17) They can go kiss my arse.

Up (your/her/his) own arse *phrase*

Self centred, oblivious to others.

(18) You're too stuck up your own arse

Arse-talking (talking out your arse) phrase

Talking nonsense, lying. (19) You're just arse-talking

arsed adjective

Bothered. Having energy to do something.

(20) I can't be arsed with this.

(20) Sometimes I can be arsed to do my hair...

(22) I'm not arsed anyway.

6.2.3 Piss

There are 68 instances of PISS in the data, as shown in Table 3.

Table 4. Frequency of *piss* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
piss off (verb – to annoy)	22	13	2.6%	9	1.3%	
take the piss	14	2	0.4%	12	1.7%	
pissed (adj - drunk)	12	12	2.4%	0	0.0%	
pissed off (adj)	10	8	1.6%	2	0.3%	
piss (noun)	6	1	0.2%	5	0.7%	
piss about (verb)	2	2	0.4%	0	0.0%	
piss poor (adj)	1	0	0.00%	1	0.1%	
pissing (laughing)	1	1	0.2%	0	0.0%	
Total	68	39	7.8%	29	4.1%	

The apparent gender difference here is likely caused by a single participant who told a very long story about being drunk, which actually accounts for 9 of the tokens of drunk *pissed*. Without these 9 tokens, the gender difference would not be statistically significant.

Piss off /pɪs ɒf/ verb

To annoy.

(23) Sorry if I pissed you off or whatever.

Take the piss

To laugh at or ridicule someone. Or to accuse someone of taking advantage.

(24) You're taking the piss bro.

Pissed adjective

To be drunk.

(25) I just got fully pissed.

Pissed off adjective

Annoyed.

(26) So I were really pissed off.

Piss noun.

Urine

(27) Stinks of piss, innit.

Piss about

To behave in a silly way.

(28) He was just pissing about.

Piss-poor adjective.

Poor, having no money.

(29) We're not piss-poor.

Pissing verb

Laughing (from **to piss oneself laughing**). (30) ...listening to that and fucking pissing.

Two of the examples in the first category, **piss off**, do not actually include 'off', but have been included on the basis of meaning (see 31 and 32)

(31) When I hear posh people talk it really pisses me.

(32) Aw this is pissing me.

6.2.4 Dick

There are 48 instances of DICK in the data, as shown in Table 4.

Table 5. Frequency of *dick* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
dickhead (noun)	26	5	1.0%	21	3.0%	
dick (noun – penis)	16	3	0.6%	13	1.8%	
dick (noun – idiot)	5	2	0.4%	3	0.4%	
dickhead (adj)	1	0	0.0%	1	0.1%	
Total	48	10	2.0%	38	5.3%	

dickhead /'diked/ *noun*

Stupid, irritating person. An idiot.

(33) Your mum is a dickhead, blud.

(34) Fair enough you dickhead.

dick *noun*

1. Penis.

(35) You suck dick with a condom on?

2. Stupid, irritating person. An idiot.

(36) Thor's such a dick.

dickhead *adjective*

Silly, stupid.

(37) ...turn up here every morning at dickhead time...

Of all the terms, this is one with perhaps the most obvious gender difference. All three of the main variants were used by females, but not nearly to the same extent as the males. *Dickhead* was used in the same way by both genders – primarily as an insult to the person being spoken to, but at different quantities. *Dick* meaning penis was used almost exclusively in a sexual context, and with 9 of the 16 instances involving the verb 'suck'. *Dickhead* as an adjective is unusual, but was heard several times during the research in addition to the one example here.

6.2.5 Bitch

There are 37 instances of BITCH in the data, as shown in Table 5.

Table 6. Frequency of *bitch* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
bitch (noun)	30	9	1.8%	21	3.0%	
bitchy (adj)	6	3	0.6%	3	0.4%	
bitch (verb)	1	1	0.2%	0	0.0%	
Total	37	13	2.6%	24	3.4%	0.55

bitch /bɪtʃ/ *noun*

A (spiteful or unpleasant) woman. (38) Shut your mouth you daft bitch.

bitch *verb*

To say mean or unpleasant things about someone.

(39) That's the one what doesn't bitch.

bitchy /'bɪtʃɪ, 'bɪtʃē/ *adjective*

Behaving like a bitch (see above). (40) They can be quite bitchy innit.

Although there was no statistically significant gender difference overall, *bitch* as a noun was used more by the males. However, the data is slightly skewed by one male in particular who went through a phase of repeating the line of a rap song: '*that stinking bitch*', thus producing 10 of the examples of the noun *bitch*. He did this in multiple recordings and as part of his everyday conversation, slipping in and out of rapping as he spoke.

6.2.6 Bastard

There are 23 instances of BASTARD in the data, as shown in Table 6.

Table 7. Frequency of *bastard* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
bastard (noun)	23	15	3.0%	8	1.1%	
Total	23	15	3.0%	8	1.1%	5.43*

bastard /'bæstəd/ *noun*

An unpleasant person. (41) I hate the little bastard sometimes.

If *dickhead* is (arguably) more of a male insult, perhaps *bastard* is more of a female insult. Numbers are small, but with more data it might be interesting to look at possible differences in what modifies the noun. In the current data, the most frequent modifiers are: 'fat' (F), 'black' (M), 'dirty' (F), and 'horny' (F).

6.2.7 Knob

There are 16 instances of knob in the data, as shown in Table 7.

Table 8. Frequency of *knob* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
knobhead (noun)	11	2	0.4%	9	1.3%	
knob (noun)	4	4	0.8%	0	0.0%	
knobshite (adj)	1	0	0.0%	1	0.1%	
Total	16	6	1.2%	10	1.4%	0.09

knobhead /'nɒbed/ *noun*

Stupid, irritating person. An idiot. (42) You're acting like a knobhead

knob /nɒb/ *noun*

Stupid, irritating person. An idiot. (43) They're fucking knobs though.

knobshite /'nɒʃaɪt/ *adjective*

Rubbish, of no value, bad.

(44) That was knobshite, that.

Although *knob* is a common alternative to *dick* as a word for 'penis', it wasn't used in this way, at least in the recorded data. Instead, it was used in the same way as *dickhead* or *dick* as an insult. *Knobshite* as an adjective is unusual, as this would be more likely used as a noun. Incidentally, *dickshite* would not work as either an adjective or a noun.

6.2.8 Twat

There are 12 instances of TWAT in the data, as shown in Table 8.

Table 9. Frequency of *twat* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
twat (noun)	7	4	0.8%	3	0.4%	
twat (verb)	6	5	1.0%	1	0.1%	
Total	13	9	1.8%	4	0.5%	

twat /twæʔ/ *noun*

Stupid, irritating person. An idiot.

(45) You look like an absolute twat.

twat *verb*

To hit.

(46) If she puts her hands on me I'll twat her in the face.

There are very small numbers for *twat*. Also, 4 of the 6 instances of *twat* as a verb came from the same speaker telling the same story. However, the verb form is perhaps a less common use of the word, and more frequent in the research than this recorded data suggests, so of some interest.

6.2.9 Wank

There are 7 instances of WANK in the data, as shown in Table 9.

Table 10. Frequency of *wank* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
wanker (noun)	5	1	0.2%	4	0.6%	
wank (noun)	1	0	0.0%	1	0.1%	
wank (adj)	1	0	0.0%	1	0.1%	
Total	7	1	0.2%	6	0.8%	2.39

wanker /'wæŋkə, 'wæŋkʌ/

Stupid, irritating person. An idiot.

(47) What a wanker.

wank *noun*

To masturbate (have a wank).

(48) Am I having a wank in science?

wank *adjective*

Rubbish, bad.

(49) They're being wank.

6.2.10 Prick

There are 6 instances of PRICK in the data, as shown in Table 10.

Table 11. Frequency of *prick* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
prick (noun)	6	1	0.2%	5	0.7%	
Total	6	1	0.2%	5	0.7%	1.66

prick /pɪk/ *noun*

Stupid, irritating person. An idiot. (50) My Mum's Dad; he's a prick.

6.2.11 Cunt

There are 5 instances of CUNT in the data, as shown in Table 11.

Table 12. Frequency of *cunt* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
cunt (noun)	5	2	0.4%	3	0.4%	
Total	5	2	0.4%	3	0.4%	0.00

cunt /kʊnt, kənt/ *noun*.

Irritating, unpleasant person. (51) So I called her a big fat cunt.

Cunt is not at all frequent in the data presented here. Admittedly, it was not a common word overall in the research, but it was certainly used more frequently than Table 11 suggests. There is no doubt that even in this context of relatively prolific swearing, *cunt* retained its status as the strongest swearword (with staff much more likely to object to its use than any other term), so there is a possibility that the young people were reticent to use it when being recorded. One female participant was known for calling people 'you daft cunt', yet for some reason none of these examples made it into the transcribed recordings (either due to them occurring when the recorder was not on, or because they were part of an excessively messy and therefore untranscribable recording). In addition, a few tokens of *cunt* were removed on the basis of them being used in a meta way (see section 5).

6.2.12 Bloody

There are 5 instances of BLOODY in the data, as shown in Table 12.

Table 13. Frequency of *bloody* variants in the data, separated by gender.

Variant	Freq	Female	Female % of overall swearing	Male	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
bloody (adj)	5	0	0.0%	5	0.7%	
Total	5	0	0.0%	5	0.7%	5.29*

bloody /blʊdi/ *adjective*

Used for emphasis.

(52) They're a bloody pest.

bloody hell

Exclamation.

(53) Bloody hell, you what?

I have included *bloody* largely on the basis of it showing how a once common word is seemingly going out of fashion. In the whole of BNC1994 (written and spoken), *bloody* is used 5.27 times per 10,000 words by females, and 2.78 by males; in the spoken part of BNC2014 this is down to 1.09 and 1.57, and in the current data it is 0.12 and 0.19.

6.2.13 Fuck

Fuck has been relatively well-studied in BrE, most notably in McEnery and Xiao (2004), who used data from the original BNC1994 to show its use in written and spoken English in relation to various social factors. More recently, its use is starting to be analysed in the updated BNC2014 (Love 2017, Love and McEnery *fc.*). Such research allows us to make some potentially useful comparisons.

Table 14 shows the frequency of *fuck* words and terms from the spoken parts of both the BNC1994 and the BNC2014 separated by gender, compared to the current data. The BNC divides the age categories into 0-14 and 15-24, thus splitting the age-range of the speakers in the present study, so the table therefore includes BNC data from the older group, aged 15-24 as the closest comparison. Log-likelihood scores are given to determine statistically significant differences between genders in each of the corpora, and the gender divide within each corpus. Additional log-likelihood scores comparing the total frequency for each corpus suggest statistically significant differences between each pair (BNC1994 vs BNC2014 LL=78.52**; BNC1994 vs MCR LL=323.14**; BNC2014 vs MCR LL=725.70**).

There are three immediately striking observations to be made from the table: firstly, the sheer frequency of *fuck* in the current data compared with the BNC; secondly, the decreasing gender gap between 1994 and 2014 in the BNC; and thirdly, the lack of any real difference between genders in my data. Of course, in relation to the first point we should be relatively cautious with respect to the corpora being of very different sizes, and the current corpus being made up of a smaller range of types of interaction and from a much more restricted social group. Although in terms of social groups, if we restrict the search of the BNC2014 to only those 15-24-year-olds in groups C2, D and E (skilled working class and below, thus matching the *approximate* social groups of the current cohort – see section 4), then the normalised frequency only rises from 10.73 to 14.21.

Table 14. The overall gender difference in *fuck* across the BNC and the current data.

Corpus		Words	RF	NF	LL score
BNC1994	Female	296,548	136	4.58	
	Male	215,310	657	30.51	559.55**
	Total	511,858	793	15.49	
BNC2014	Female	1,861,447	1845	9.91	
	Male	916,334	1135	12.39	34.23**
	Total	2,777,761	2980	10.73	
MCR	Female	68,712	275	40.02	
	Male	89,363	379	42.41	0.54
	Total	158,075	654	41.37	

Clearly, *fuck* is used far more frequently (3-4 times) in the current data compared to the most recent BNC data. But what about the functions it is being used for? McEnery and Xiao (2004) identify eight

functions of *fuck* terms in the BNC1994 data, which I use here for comparison purposes. At present, there is no comparable material from the BNC2014 data. Table 15 shows the frequencies and gender-related proportions of each of the *fuck* variants in relation to those categories described in McEnery and Xiao (2004: 257-258). For each function it gives its proportion of the total number of *fuck* tokens and its proportion of the overall observed swearing (see Table 1), separated by gender. The only change is the addition of the 'Discourse marker' category (see below). Table 16 gives an example of each category. The log-likelihood score is repeated here to show the lack of statistically significant gender difference in the use of *fuck* as a proportion of overall swearing.

Table 15. Frequency of *fuck* variants in the data in relation to nine functional categories and separated by gender.

Variant (function)	Freq	% Total fuck	Fem Freq	Fem % total fuck	Fem % overall swearing	Male Freq	Male % total fuck	Male % of overall swearing	LL score
Emphatic intensifier	306	46.8%	145	52.7%	29.2%	161	42.5%	22.6%	
Idiomatic phrase	144	22.0%	58	21.1%	11.7%	86	22.7%	12.1%	
Cursing expletive	57	8.7%	20	7.3%	4.0%	37	9.8%	5.2%	
Destinational usage	48	7.3%	17	6.2%	3.4%	31	8.2%	4.4%	
Discourse marker	47	7.2%	16	5.8%	3.2%	31	8.2%	4.4%	
General expletive	35	5.4%	14	5.1%	2.8%	21	5.5%	3.0%	
Literal usage	7	1.1%	0	0.0%	0.0%	7	1.9%	1.0%	
Personal insult	7	1.1%	2	0.7%	0.4%	5	1.3%	0.7%	
Simulative intensifier ⁴	3	0.5%	3	1.1%	0.6%	0	0.0%	0.0%	
Total	654	100%	275	100%	55.4%	379	100%	53.3%	
			275		55.3%	379		53.4%	0.25

Table 16. An example from the data for each of the nine *fuck* categories.

Emphatic intensifier	(54) Look at your fucking hair!
Idiomatic phrase	(55) Shut the fuck up.
	(56) Oh shit, I fucked up.
Cursing expletive	(57) You know what – fuck yous all!
Destinational usage	(58) Fuck off, prick.
Discourse marker	(59) At the time I was, like, fucking seven, right.
General expletive	(60) Fucking hell!
Literal usage	(61) Man wanna fuck my wife.
Personal insult	(62) Oh shit, that fucker.
Simulative intensifier	(63) He looks scary as fuck mate.

The inclusion of the new category of discourse marker was felt to be necessary due to the prevalence in the data of *fucking* being used in a similar way to discourse marker 'like'. Compare the examples of *like* from D'Arcy (2007: 392) in (64) and (65), with those from the current data in (66) and (67).

(64) Nobody said a word. **Like** my first experience with death was this Italian family.

(65) I love Carrie. **Like** Carrie's **like** a little like out-of-it but **like** she's the funniest. **Like** she's a space-cadet.

⁴ McEnery and Xiao (2004) refer to this function as a 'Pronominal form', giving the examples *like fuck* and *fat as fuck*, but with no explanation as to why. I think 'simulative intensifier' is a more accurate description, so will use it here.

- (66) I bought **fucking** I bought twenty cigs yesterday.
 (67) Only like me and you and **fucking** 'cos obviously his Mum.

The two are not identical, and there are times when discourse marker *fucking* seems to perhaps begin as something else and then remain incomplete, thus fulfilling a discourse function almost accidentally. In (68), during a conversation about swearing, there is a sense that *fucking* could have gone on to be an emphatic intensifier '*he'd absolutely fucking kill me*', but a hesitation and change of direction leaves it with a discourse function. Because of this very flexible intensifier function, it is difficult to definitively categorise some examples as one or the other. However, I have taken the decision to categorise unresolved or ambiguous examples, as in (68), as discourse markers in this case.

- (68) ...and he'd absolutely **fucking**, my Grandad swears, my Mum swears.

Table 17 shows the frequencies and rank of the *fuck* variants in the spoken part of the BNC1994 for 15-24-year-olds, reported in McEnery and Xiao (2004: 262). The table also shows the percentages for *fuck* in the current data for comparison (from table 15). Log-likelihood scores are given to indicate statistically significant differences.

Table 17. Frequencies and rankings of the eight *fuck* categories from the spoken part of BNC1994 (15-24 year olds) compared with the current data.

Variant	RF in BNC	NF in BNC	% of total <i>fuck</i> in BNC/rank	RF in MCR	NF in MCR	% of total <i>fuck</i> in MCR/rank	LL score
Emphatic intensifier	521	10.2	68.46% (1)	306	19.4	46.97% (1)	18.48**
General expletive	67	1.3	8.80% (2)	35	2.2	5.35% (6)	4.28*
Idiomatic phrase	64	1.3	8.41% (3)	144	9.1	22.02% (2)	52.32**
Destinational usage	40	0.8	5.26% (4)	48	3.0	7.34% (4)	3.66
Similiative intensifier	25	0.5	3.29% (5)	3	0.2	0.46% (9)	15.13**
Cursing expletive	21	0.4	2.76% (6)	57	3.6	8.72% (3)	26.40**
Literal usage	14	0.3	1.84% (7)	7	0.4	1.07% (=7)	1.06
Personal insult	9	0.2	1.18% (8)	7	0.4	1.07% (=7)	0.00
Discourse marker				47	3.0	7.19% (5)	
	761	14.9		607	38.4		

Although there is a difference between the proportion in use of *fuck* as an emphatic intensifier between the two sets of data, its position as the most frequently used function in both is not up for question, accounting for almost half the total *fuck* tokens in the current data. However, after that the picture is very mixed. The increased use of 'idiomatic set phrase' is perhaps noteworthy, especially as it reflects similar findings reported in Love (2017), who looked at the use of *fuck* among all ages in the BNC2014, and found this function to be ranked at number one. Love (2017) In the current data, the most frequent idiomatic use (61 of 144) is in the phrase *what/who/where/why/when/how the fuck...?*, used by itself or followed by the rest of a question. The next most frequent is *shut the fuck up* (15). The use of *fuck* as a cursing expletive is relatively high, although 36 of the examples are either *fuck that* or *fuck it*, which perhaps do not carry the same cursing sense as *fuck you*, despite clearly being a part of this category in McEnery's (2006: 32) analysis. Arguably, these are better placed in the

General expletive or even Idiomatic categories. Note that literal usage remains extremely low in both data sets.

7. Why so much swearing?

Something that has become apparent throughout the description above is the relatively high level of swearing in general among this group of young people. This is especially clear in the comparisons to existing research and existing corpora, such as in the example of *fuck* in Table 14, and visualised in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows the spoken BNC2014 figures for all 15-24 year olds, and then only for those speakers in the lower social class categories (C2 skilled working class, D working class, and E non-working) in an attempt to bring the sample closer to the socio-economic status of the current cohort. This is an acknowledgement of the observation that frequency of swearing (or in this case, overall 'Bad Language Words') decreases up the social scale; McEnery (2006: 48) found a uniform decrease from DE > C2 > C1 > AB in BNC1994. The pattern is slightly different when it comes to strength of swearing, but only in the higher-status categories with AB and C1 changing positions in the ranking (McEnery 2006: 49); see also (Love 2017) in relation to *fuck* specifically, in both BNC1994 and the spoken part of BNC2014).

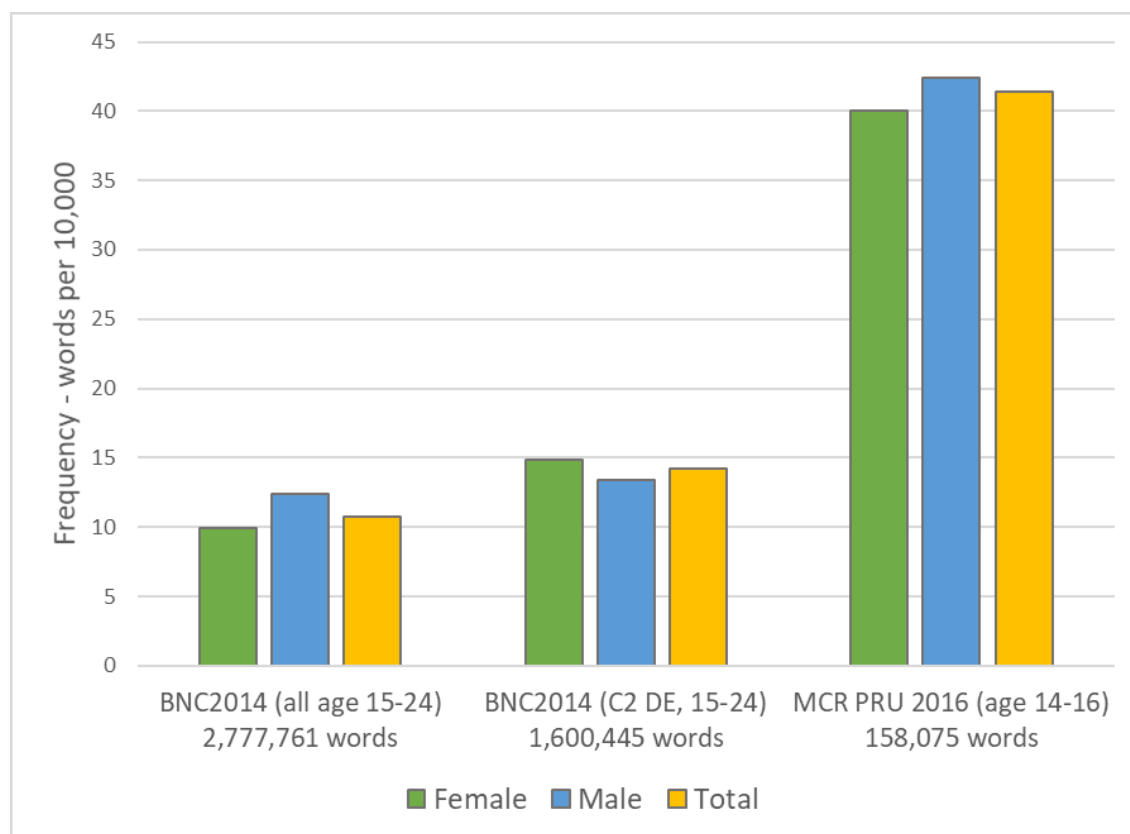


Figure 2. Use of *fuck* across three corpora, separated by gender.

Clearly then, by the measures we have available, these particular young people swear a lot. Impressionistically, this is obvious as soon as you spend time in one of the learning centres, with swearing forming a part of normal conversation in almost every context. As mentioned earlier, it would take another study to explore in detail the socio-pragmatic functions of the swearing observed, but the four categories of interpersonal swearing described by Stapleton (2010: 293-300) are all apparent:

- Expressing emotion and/or aggression.
- Humour and verbal emphasis.
- Social bonding and solidarity.
- Constructing and displaying identity.

However, what is perhaps lost in this, and in other categorisations of swearing, is the sense that swearing can be the default, unmarked position. From a qualitative perspective, swearing is generally looked at in terms of the function it is serving over and above the more regular aspects of spoken communication. In the four descriptions above, there is a sense that swearing is being employed as an *extra* resource in order to *do* something in a particular context at a particular time. Whereas in the learning centres it is simply part of the unmarked, and almost unremarkable, everyday language. This does not make it any less interesting – as with almost any variable aspect of language it is carrying out meaningful social work, including the four functions above, but it does perhaps make it slightly less exotic.

By way of a brief example, Extract 1 describes an interaction that took place around the pool table in one of the centres. Five boys are involved in playing/watching a game, while simultaneously discussing the colour of a dress in a particular photograph⁵. The exchange illustrates the everyday and unremarkable use of *fuck*, primarily as an emphatic intensifier, but also as a discourse marker (line 4) and as 'destinational' exclamation (lines 24 and 26). These interactional uses are undoubtedly serving particular functions; given the context, I would argue that there is a considerable amount of social bonding taking place, as well as the performance of particular identities. However, if we take into account the sheer frequency of these interactions, and the amount of swearing within them, I think there is an argument to be made that the effect is not as strong as it might be in other situations.

Extract 1. The pool table.

- 1 Alex:: I could just fucking get a few good pots now. ((hits ball)) That was [ba:::d]
 2 Daniel: [Get] those pots
 3 in mate
 4 Alex: Check mate naa I'm just gonna wallop it now. ((laughs)) fucking, this ain't gonna be
 5 two shots. You fuck- ((hits ball)).
 6 Nathan: What colour do you see that dress?
 7 Alex: Er white and [blue]
 8 Callum: [Black] and white mate- I mean black and blue
 9 Nathan: Same (.) I've never seen it white and gold
 10 Callum: Yo it's fucking black and black- fucking [black and] black
 11 Alex: [It's not]
 12 Callum: It's black and blue
 13 Alex: It's..
 14 Callum: Honest- youse must be on crack or summat to see white and fuckin gold
 15 Nathan: What do you see the dress?
 16 Daniel: White and gold
 17 Callum: It's black and (.) [blue]
 18 Alex: [It's] fucking white and gold bruv
 19 Callum: It's fuckin [black]
 20 Alex: [If] you look at the top of the picture yeah where there's like barely any
 21 light on it it's genuinely white that was a good shot
 22 Aiden Well I don't give a fuck if it's [black or] white or fucking black and gold or-
 23 Alex: [nah bruv]
 24 Callum: Ahhh fuck off.
 25 Alex: It's not bro it's it's green and purple bro it's green and red
 26 Callum: Fuck off man, end of
 27 Alex: It's green and red. It is.

⁵ 'The dress' was a viral internet sensation in 2015 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress)

- 28 Callum: It's an arsehole
 29 Alex: ((laughs))
 30 Callum: The fucking dress is black and blue (3s). It's black and blue (1s) ((shouts)) black and
 31 blue!
 32 Callum: Youse are on crack and heroin and fucking ecstasy and everything...
 33 Alex: ((laughs))
 34 Callum: ...to see black and white and fucking pink or... (4s) don't (unclear) you little fucking-

Arguably, with such a high default level of swearing, situations of *non-swearing* become more interesting. Just because the young people described here swear a lot, does not mean that they are not perfectly capable of not swearing. As part of the research, some of the young people took part in some quite formal mock college interviews with an unknown adult. They were taken seriously by everyone, and were made to feel as close to an actual college interview as possible. Seven young people were interviewed individually, creating around 3500 words of the final corpus. There are no examples of any of the 13 words in that sample, nor anything approaching any other swear word. My point is that possibly, with the default position being frequent swearing, it would be of use to look properly at the socio-pragmatic functions of non-swearing, rather than assuming that it is swearing that is doing all the work. This is a topic for future work.

8. Conclusion

Although the rich contextual detail offered by an ethnographic study has not been exploited fully here, there is still considerable value in focusing on a particular group of people at a particular time. The speakers as reported here may remain faceless and nameless, but we know for certain that every example presented above was uttered by an individual in a very narrow age-bracket, and in a very precise social context. This is a level of detail that is understandably lost in more generic corpora studies, where individual speakers tend to be abstracted away into larger groups. Both types of research have their value to the wider understanding of linguistic behaviour, and this study's contribution lies in its specificity. It allows (and encourages) future comparisons with language practices in multiple contexts, thus serving to better our understanding of the ways in which young people, including marginalised groups such as this, communicate.

This article has attempted to describe the use of swearing among a group of young people in Manchester, UK, with the purpose of exploring and uncovering the linguistic practices of an often-overlooked group of people. While there are undoubtedly many overlooked groups of people whose language has not been studied, these individuals exist in a particularly relevant sociolinguistic context due to their age and social situation. The description is not intended to be generalisable, but it does provide a description of swearing practices at a specific point in time and among a specific group of people, thus serving as a source of comparison for future work. In itself, it demonstrates the linguistic variation, and in some cases ingenuity, of 26 young people in their use of 13 key words. As part of a wider linguistic endeavour it helps us to better understand the linguistic changes and preferences around swearing, by providing details from a hard to reach group. There is much useful work to be done on the swearing (or non-swearing) practices of young people which will build on what is already there and help us better understand the forms and functions of swearing. This article is intended to be part of that process of understanding.

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Appendix – Transcription conventions

- [] overlapping speech
- (.) pause of less than one second
- (sec) pause times in seconds
- ((laughter)) contextual or paralinguistic information
- (unclear) unintelligible speech
- : lengthening