Gender and the Language of Religion

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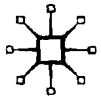

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Contents

4

American Women: Their Cursing Habits and Religiosity

Timothy Jay

Cursing is the use of offensive emotional language to express one's emotions and communicate them to others. Cursing is ubiquitous in American social life. Many questions remain to be answered since scholars have given the phenomenon scant attention over the years. Here I focus on two questions: Why do American men curse more than American women do?; What role does religion play in the process? These questions allow us to review research on three psychosocial factors, gender identity, religiosity and cursing. My aim is to demonstrate that people who curse use offensive language primarily to express anger or frustration, and that gender and religiosity moderate this habit (as do mental status, hostility and alcohol use). Religious women seem to be doubly restricted from cursing, first for their gender (men can express aggression more openly than women can) and second for their religious beliefs (Christians should not use profanity). I review religious restrictions on language, the relationship between religiosity and cursing, the relationship between sex anxiety and cursing, women's use of taboo language, and working-class women as a counter-example. I begin the discussion with an examination of recent increases in women's public cursing and an outline of cross-cultural cursing comparisons.

American women's cursing: past and present

Curse words persist over hundreds of years because they are useful to a culture (see Hughes, 1991). Until recently it was difficult to get an accurate measure of how frequently curse words were used in public. All written records and documents have been censored and estimates of cursing based on written materials are entirely unreliable. Frequency *estimation*

techniques and recording methods are more accurate than written materials. Besides, cursing is primarily an oral, not a written phenomenon.

To provide data on the frequency and stability of cursing, Jay compared a field study of cursing from a sample from 1986 (see Jay, 1992) with a set of 1996 data recorded on the east and west coasts of the United States (Jay, 2000). The 1996 study permits geographic comparisons and time-frame comparisons. Data were collected by male and female researchers who recorded episodes of cursing in and around college communities in Los Angeles, California, Boston, Massachusetts and in western Massachusetts. Half of the data were recorded by females and half by the author. Half of the data were recorded in California and half were recorded in Massachusetts.

Most of the data from California (90 per cent), are accounted for by the usage of ten words. Two words *fuck* and *shit* account for 50 per cent of the cursing episodes. Most of these curse words are obscenities (*fuck, shit*) or profanities (*god, hell, damn*). Females were much more likely to say the mild oath 'Oh my god' than males. Males were recorded swearing more than females, 56 per cent and 44 per cent respectively. Both males and females generally use the same set of words with a few exceptions. Males had a production vocabulary of 28 words and females, 20. The correlation between male and female vocabularies is high, $r = 0.75$ to 0.80.

In Massachusetts most of the data, 90 per cent, are accounted for by the usage of ten words. *Fuck* and *shit* accounted for 54 per cent of the data. Most of the curse words are obscenities and profanities. Again, females were much more likely to say 'Oh my god' than males. In this sample males and females were recorded cursing at about the same rate. Males had a production vocabulary of 22 words and females, 24. The correlation between males and female cursing is quite high, $r = 0.93$.

The correlation between the most frequent words used on the east coast with their west coast counterparts is quite high, $r = 0.97$. This means that there is very little difference in cursing in these two different locations. One important difference is that females were recorded swearing more in public in the east, relative to the west coast. This might be due to the fact that only one female recorded data in the west, while three females recorded data in Massachusetts.

The past decade – 1996 and 1986

Most cursing involves the use of a small set of curse words that are repeated often. Not much has changed for public cursing during the last ten years. Speakers in a college community rely heavily on obscenity

(*fuck, shit*) and profanity (*hell, Jesus, goddamn, damn, god*). Males tend to use more obscenities than females, who use more profanities than males. Interestingly, one finds the opposite emphasis (more profanity and few obscenities) in a nursing-home setting, where speakers in their eighties and nineties are less likely to utter strong obscenities (Jay, 1996). There are also more women in nursing homes than men. Overall, one might notice that extremely offensive language occurs at a low rate in public, words such as *cocksucker, cunt, nigger* or *spic* were heard infrequently around campus communities. One noticeable difference is that American women are swearing more in public than they did 20 years ago. We conclude that American cursing is fairly stable, involving a small set of words repeated frequently, mainly obscenities and profanities. The stability of these cursing patterns over ten years suggests that cursing in public has not undergone dramatic changes. Before moving on we need to address another question at this point. First, how does American cursing compare to other cultures?

Cross-cultural comparisons

One method for making cross-cultural comparisons is to look at patients with similar cursing problems across cultures (see Jay, 2000). For example, Tourette Syndrome (TS), a tic disorder associated with compulsive cursing (coprolalia), occurs in all cultures and there is uniformity in its clinical picture. What is missing in the picture is that a Touretter from a non-English-speaking country utters forbidden words in his or her culture, not what is forbidden in English. Because the coprolalic lexicons differ depending on culture, cross-cultural comparisons of TS lexicons reveal the semantics of forbidden words in a culture. Coprophenomena in TS indicate a neurological failure to inhibit thoughts and speech learned in childhood that are forbidden within the child's culture. Cross-cultural coprolalia reveals the universal use of religious, sexual, scatological and animal references. However, the relative frequencies of these references (religious versus sexual, for example) depend on culture. Whether a Touretter utters profanity or not depends on his or her culture.

Meaningful background information about TS appears in the work of Shapiro, A., Shapiro, E., Young and Feinberg (1988). As for cross-cultural comparisons of Touretters' lexicons, one of the first was made by Lees (1985). Lees made comparisons of Touretters' frequent coprolalia based on US, UK, Hong Kong and Japanese studies (Table 4.1). Several reports have surfaced since Lees's work, which are examined later.

Table 4.1 Comparisons of Touretters' coprolalia

United States	United Kingdom	Hong Kong	Japan
fuck	fuck	tiu (fuck)	Kusobaba (shit grandma)
shit	shit	shui (useless person)	chikusho (son of a bitch)
cunt	cunt	tiu ma (motherfucker)	(female genitalia and breasts)
mother-fucker	bastard	tiu so (aunt fucker)	

Note: Table adapted from Lees (1985); US data from Shapiro et al. (1978); UK data from Lees et al. (1984); Hong Kong data from Lieh Mak et al. (1982); Japan data from Nomura and Segawa (1982).

American, British and Canadian English

As Lees's work and that of others (Shapiro, A., Shapiro, E., Young and Feinberg, 1988) indicated, English coprolalia most frequently employs obscenities (*fuck, cocksucker, shit, cunt, motherfucker*) and socially offensive words such as *bitch, bastard* and *nigger.* Obscenities and socially offensive words predominate over milder profanities (*hell, damn, Jesus*). One theory is that obscenities relieve the stress associated with coprolalia more effectively than mild profanities.

Beyond the English-speaking world, one has to ask if non-English-speaking cultures produce coprolalia similar to English-speaking counterparts with TS? The answer is not straightforward. Some of the semantics underlying coprolalia, for example references to genitalia, religion, animals or faeces, are remarkably similar.

Middle East

One of the studies that makes it obvious how sensitive coprophenomena are to culture is Robertson and Trimble's (1991) analysis of five patients from the Middle East with TS. The most interesting case is a young woman born in Kuwait of an Arabic background. Her coprolalia began at the age of 15. The literal translations of the Arabic words were *ass, bitch* and *pimp*. But more telling was her sexual disinhibition in public, which included uncovering her thighs in public, unacceptable in Moslem culture, and exposing her breasts at school.

Japan

Several authors working on TS have stated that the disorder occurs only rarely in Asian cultures, referring mainly to Japanese and Chinese research. Nomura and Segawa (1982) reported a study of 100 Japanese

TS cases. According to the report, coprolalia is also infrequently seen in Japanese aphasics, but not uncommon in English-speaking aphasics. One caution, reported differences in prevalence may be due to comparing samples with different age ranges and not due to cultural/genetic differences.

Common Japanese words reported in Table 4.1 include *kusobaba* (*shit grandma*), an insult usually directed at an older woman, *chikusho* (*son of a bitch*), an animal reference to domesticated animals, comparable to expletives of frustration in English (*damn it*). Other words were references to female genitalia and breasts.

Brazil

Cardoso, Veado and de Oliveira (1996) studied the clinical features of 32 Brazilian patients (24 men and eight women) with TS. Coprolalia and copropraxia were present in nine patients. The lexicon of 'obscenities' shouted by the patients is as follows:

merda	*faeces*
bosta	*faeces*
filho da puta	*son of a whore*
bunda	*buttocks*
buceta	*vagina*
cacete	*penis*
caralho	*penis*
porra	*sperm*
va tomar no cu	*fuck off*

(Cardoso, Veado and de Oliveira, 1996, p. 210)

The authors suggest that coprolalia represents an expression of disinhibition and patients with TS become incapable of suppressing the production and vocalization of obscenities 'which vary depending on culture'.

Spain

Lees and Tolosa (1988) in a report on tics, listed the following curse words from Spanish patients with TS. The words are listed in order of frequency:

puta	*whore*
mierda	*faeces*

cono	*vulva*
joder	*fornicate*
maricon	*homosexual*
cojones	*testicles*
hijo de puta	*son of a whore*
hostia	*holy bread, literally*

Denmark

Regeur, Pakkenberg, Fog and Pakkenberg (1986) studied 65 patients with TS in Denmark, who were being treated with Pimozide for their symptoms. Seventeen patients exhibited coprolalia. Examples of their 'obscenities' (with the authors' translations, p. 792) included:

kaeft	vulgar expression for shut up
svin	swine – rather powerful in Danish
fisse, kusse	very vulgar expressions for the vulva
pik	vulgar expression for the penis
rov	ass
pis	piss
sgu	by God
gylle	rustic word for farm animal excretions
lort	shit

These examples seem somewhat similar to English coprolalia, in that they refer to body parts, genitalia and body products. The animal terms and profanity are less typical of English-speaking Touretters but still typical of English cursing.

Hong Kong

Lieh Mak, Chung, Lee and Chen's (1982) study of coprolalia is based on 15 Chinese patients, born in Hong Kong and treated there. The original report indicated that seven patients used single swear words (not reported) and two used phrases like 'fuck your mother' and 'rape your aunt'. Their families considered coprolalia to be the most undesirable symptom, but the patients did not seem to be distressed by the symptom. According to Table 4.1, Lees reported the patients making references to female genitalia, breasts and useless persons, but these words are not in the original report. And one has to wonder about the difference between 'aunt fucker' and 'rape your aunt' as translations. They seem to be meant as

equivalent interpretations of a Chinese term, but are they? A caution on translation is necessary.

It is tempting to conclude that English speakers are more obscene and Brazilian, Danish and Spanish speakers are more religious because they present different patterns of coprolalia. Japanese speakers also produce less obscene and religious references, employing more ancestral allusions and insulting references. We can infer that profanities are salient in cultures where TS patients utter them. What is needed is more cross-cultural data before universal similarities and differences in cursing can be made with a degree of certainty.

Of course there are other bases for cross-cultural comparisons. Restricting the discussion to pathology, we can address one additional comparison based on 'culture-bound' syndromes which are not particular to the United States (Jay, 2000). I refer to conditions similar to people 'running amok', where victims of the nervous condition have licence to express intense emotions and even violent behaviour. Ataque de nervios, present in Latin America, and latah (in east Asia), are two such syndromes where women are given licence to express verbal and physical aggression, which would be stifled in public at other times.

A nervous condition or culture-specific syndrome provides an acceptable outlet for cursing not otherwise enjoyed in their culture and it would be interesting to record what kinds of speech occur during these episodes. At this point we see profanity is common across cultures on the basis of the outbursts of people who cannot control their cursing. It is also the case that religion plays a greater role in setting standards for public behaviour in some countries than others and it is to the issue of religious restrictions that we turn next.

Religion, learning and language restrictions

Social learning explains why we do or do not curse. For example, the child who is told that 'sex is bad and sinful' develops a negative emotional response to sexual stimuli. Also on the negative side, people have learned a negative emotional response to the word 'abortion' when told such things as 'abortion is murder'. The religiously raised child who has heard and read many positive emotional statements about God will be positively conditioned to this word. Religious parents forbid the use of profanity in the home (Jay, King and Duncan, 2004). But a child reared in a home filled with profanities will learn less positive reactions to religious words and concepts. Centuries of prohibitions on and declarations about the use of profanities restricted their use.

Religious people become conditioned to think of profanities as 'bad' words. Other words are 'good' words. 'Good' words are non-profane, non-obscene, those that do not offend or attack religion. 'Bad' words, like *goddamn, shit* or *fuck*, offend religious people, who will not utter them and do not want others to utter them. Religious training and practice creates social tensions within a culture about the behaviours and thoughts that must be inhibited. Tensions surrounding religion and religious figures at times require catharsis through humour and joking. Religious figures thus become the subjects of religious jokes. Legman (1975) recorded scores of jokes that include priests, nuns and other religious figures. He dedicated several pages to the subject of 'mocking God' in his second volume of jokes.

Restrictions on words originate in part from religious ceremonies and sacred texts (Bible, Koran). Words are defined as 'bad' through religious doctrine, Old Testament law, Islamic or other religious laws, or when religious authorities declare words and thoughts as forbidden. Religious ceremonies employ special language that is regarded more highly than everyday speech. Generally speaking, religious restrictions are based on the notion that words are 'good' or 'bad' and that 'bad' people use 'bad' words. One's attitude about religion and blasphemy depends on one's personal-psychological development and indoctrination in a religious community.

Censorship

Another means of teaching people that profanity is taboo is through the process of censorship. Words have to be sacred, powerful or dangerous to be censored by religions. An example of religious censorship over speech comes from the motion picture industry. From the first days of 'talking' pictures, the Catholic Church played a significant role in censoring American films (Jay, 1992, ch. 6). In 1927 a set of guidelines for film language, known as the 'Don'ts and Be Carefuls', banned '*god, lord, Jesus, Christ, hell, damn, gawd*, and every other profane and vulgar expression however it may be spelled' (Jay, 1992, p. 217). Here the public is explicitly informed that profanity is powerful through censorship standards.

The Church banned profanity because it had the power to do so. Recently, however, these prohibitions on profanity have declined significantly. Profanity is now common in all forms of popular media (radio, television, newspapers, comic strips). As older prohibitions on profanity have largely disappeared, current media censorship focuses on obscene and indecent speech (Flexner, 1976; Jay, 2000). Punishment and sanctions must be understood in light of definitions of profanity and blasphemy.

Profanity and blasphemy

To be *profane* means to be secular or indifferent toward religion. A profane word is not an attack on the Church; it amounts to indifference toward or a misuse of religious terminology. *Holy shit!* is a profanity. *Blasphemy* is more troublesome; it is an attack on religion and religious figures. It represents an intentional and offensive threat to religion subject to greater punishment than profanity (Jay, 1992, 1996). *The Pope is a fool* is a blasphemous statement. The distinction is necessary here even though the person on the street uses 'profanity' to refer to all categories of offensive speech. However, profanity and blasphemy are specific categories of religious speech sanctioned by religious authorities.

Censorship is enforced by members of a religious group or by one's (religious) parents. But if religious sanctions disappear in a community, profanities are frequently heard. In cultures where religion is powerful and its followers devout, penalties are proscribed which reduce the frequency of profanity and blasphemy. Since the 1900s in the United States, blasphemy prosecutions have all but disappeared. In comparison, Islamic punishments for blasphemy ('words of infidelity') still result in the loss of legal rights, marriage validation or claims to property (Elaide, 1987). However, there are ways for emotional expressions to sidestep the profane.

Euphemisms

One way around the religious restrictions on profanity is to express emotions through the use of euphemisms or substitute words. Euphemisms are milder replacement words (e.g., *cripes*) for more offensive counterparts (*Christ*!). The list includes expressions such as *darn, gosh darn, jeepers, heck, sugar, fudge* and *friggen*. K. C. Ushijima (2004) has documented how extensively Mormon students enrolled at BYU-Hawaii and on BYU campuses in Utah and Idaho use euphemisms and substitute words. As a testament to religious conservatism, Ushijima found that the most commonly used word by students on these three campuses was *crap*, which clearly contrasts with college students elsewhere who liberally utter words such as *fuck* and *shit* (Jay, 2000).

Religion is the source of some Americans' most frequent curse words because profanity (*damn)* is less offensive than sexually explicit (*cunt*) or aggressive speech (*fuck you*). Profanities (*damn, hell, Christ*) are acceptable in public speaking and in popular media in many cultures. Because profanity is so common and frequent in the United States, it is quickly learned by children, who along with others realize that they will not be punished as much for uttering profane epithets as they will for obscenities.

But people who define themselves as religious should eschew profanity regardless of how mild others deem it.

The religious personality and cursing

Personality refers to an individual's consistent patterns of behaviour and thought; examples are extraversion or neuroticism. We tend to think of personality as fairly stable across contexts, but we must realize that environment and learning also influence personality. The notion of personality allows us to differentiate individuals on the basis of personality traits and ask questions such as 'What kind of woman curses in public?'.

The answer to the question must reference personality factors because an act of cursing springs from a speaker's personality and speech habits. How seriously anyone treats profanity depends chiefly on her view of God. Cursing, as a habit, is part of a woman's psychological make up. When we hear a woman cursing we see traits related to her religiosity, aggressiveness, anxiety, racism or hostility. By training, a religious woman is more likely to be offended by profanity than a woman who is not religious.

Offendedness and offensiveness

Before we continue we need to distinguish between properties of words and properties of people. The notion of *offendedness* refers to a speaker's sensitivity to offensive language. Offendedness is an aspect of personality; it is a psychological reaction to words. In contrast, *offensiveness* is a property of words. Words can be very offensive or inoffensive. Offendedness is not innate, people learn to be offended by 'offensive' words. One's offendedness is a product of personality development and social awareness, which ultimately affect one's reaction to profanity and one's tendency to curse. A religious woman who is offended by profanity will not utter profanity. Similarly, a mother with high sex anxiety is unlikely to use sexual slang around her children.

To correlate cursing habits with personality, psychologists administer personality tests to subjects and then they measure their reactions to taboo words. Personality scores, for example, high sex anxiety (or religiosity) are then correlated with the word data. Very little work has been done to develop a test of offendedness and as a result we know little about what kind of women curse in public. While we have established facts about offensiveness (Jay, 1992), we know less about offendedness. Below is what one can find in the social science literature.

Long and Herrmann (1997) developed a 45-item questionnaire to gauge a person's sensitivity to taboo words and behaviours. Questions

were designed to ask how acceptable, on a one-to-seven scale, respondents find behaviours related to questions tapping Sexuality, Religion, Obscenity, Seaminess, Liberality (live-and-let-live), Publicity (public displays of questionable behaviour) and Laxity (society has declined morally). Three of these factors (Publicity, Liberality and Laxity) provided consistent scores. The Publicity, Liberality and Laxity sub-scales measure feelings related to the sacred, which are used to make word choices in social situations. Gender differences were not delineated in the paper. This is just a beginning and more research is needed to fully develop the questionnaire with a non-college sample.

A review of personality and language research indicates that reliable correlations exist between cursing and religiosity and between cursing and sexual attitude (Jay, 2000). People with high religiosity and those with high sexual anxiety tend to be offended by profanity and sexual slang. These variables have also been examined with two additional lines of research, studies of viewers' reactions to speech on television and laboratory studies examining subjects' reactions to offensive speech.

Broadcast language

A good predictor of one's offendedness (by crude language) is the depth of religious belief. Complaints about television broadcast content are linked to religiosity and sexual conservatism. Here we learn little about gender. Hargrave (1991) and Wober (1980, 1990) recorded complaints about broadcast language and the complainers' demographics. Hargrave identified five groups of people with unique approaches to broadcast content:

1. 'Anti-sexual', who are mainly young men who were offended by sexual terms.
2. The 'offended', who are frequent churchgoers with strong and negative opinions about all types of offensive words on television.
3. 'Non-anatomical', who are most offended by scatological references and those words that referred to the genitals.
4. 'Permissive respondents', who are least likely to complain about sexual words.
5. 'Religious protectors', who are conservative churchgoers who reacted most strongly to words from religious origin.

These results are interesting in light of Long and Herrmann's (1997) work. Consistent predictors of reactions to speech in both studies were

attitudes about the sacred, moral decline and public displays of offensive behaviour.

Laboratory studies

Religiosity has been an accurate indicator of one's hesitation to say taboo words in experimental settings. Here is better evidence about speaker gender. The explanation behind one's hesitation is as follows, when a speaker takes longer to say a taboo word relative to a neutral word, this hesitation represents the process of repression. Repression delays both decision processes and utterance latencies (reaction time, RT).

Grosser and Laczek (1963; see also Grosser and Walsh, 1966) compared students from parochial school backgrounds with students from secular schools to see if reluctance to say taboo words (utterance latencies) was related to religious training. Subjects viewed single words projected on a screen. They had to pronounce the word on the screen for the experimenter. The time between the end of the visual presentation and the onset of the oral report was recorded (RT). Subjects saw 15 neutral words, 15 aggressive words, 15 taboo sex words, then 15 more neutral words. The taboo sex words were (*prostitute, sperm, homosexual, pervert, adultery, douche, intercourse, erection, lesbian, seduce, vagina, penis, masturbation, rape* and *incest*). The RTs to the taboo words were significantly slower than any other sets of words, indicating that word meanings caused different reactions across participants.

The religiosity effect was most pronounced in the parochial females. The non-parochial females had the fastest RTs to the taboo words and the parochial females had the slowest RTs. The males fell between these extremes; the male secular subjects had the same RTs as the male parochial subjects for the taboo words. The authors attribute the parochial females' strong response repression effect to their moral training in school. Religious background and religious belief (some 40 years ago) have significantly affected measures of offendedness. One other potent variable in personality research is sexual repression.

Women's sexual anxiety, guilt, repression and cursing

Historically, religions have placed severe punishments on sexual expression (see Grey, 1993) and as a consequence people who are highly religious are often highly anxious about, and offended by, sexual language. Religiosity comingles with one's sexual anxiety. Hargrave (1991) found this in his broadcast speech survey, and numerous laboratory studies have confirmed the relationship between sex anxiety and repression.

Free-association research

A traditional approach to studying word meaning is the free association method. Subjects are presented with a target word and asked to respond with the first word that comes to mind. Galbraith, Hahn and Leiberman (1968) used the word-association test to examine the relationship between sex guilt and responses to *double entendre* words, which possessed substantial sexual connotation (*mount, pussy, screw*).

Subjects first completed the Mosher Forced-Choice Guilt Scale to measure their level of sexual guilt. Next their responses were recorded to a set of 50 words, 30 *double entendres* and 20 words devoid of sexual meaning. Associative responses to the words were scored 0, 1 or 2 depending on the amount of symbolic sexual components in the response. The higher the numerical score the higher the verbal, sexual response. Results indicated that sexual guilt was negatively correlated ($r = -0.41$) with sexual responsivity. Scores reflecting the frequency and flagrancy of verbal sexual responses in the free-association task to *double entendre* sex-slang terms were negatively correlated with guilt over sexuality.

The free-association format has been used to test sexual responsitivity in relation to males' repression and defensiveness. Schill, Emanuel, Pederson, Schneider and Wachowiak (1970) used free association to examine sexual responsivity to *double entendres* with a group of male college students. They found that personality traits of Defensiveness and Sensitization were related to the sexual responses provided during a free-association task with *double entendre* words with sexual connotations (*pussy, screw*). Subjects rated low in Defensiveness had the highest level of sexual responsitivity. Non-defensive Repressors and Sensitizers had greater sexual responsitivity than did Defensive Repressors. These results were obtained when male subjects were tested by a male experimenter.

When male subjects are tested by a female experimenter, sexual responsitivity is reduced. Under these circumstances male subjects become inhibited, because they want to make a good impression on the female experimenter and therefore they inhibit their sexual responses. The subjects' need to repress sexual responses is more salient with the female experimenter. With the male experimenter, male subjects are less defensive and more responsive without worrying about the impressions that their sexual responses makes on him.

Milner and Moses (1972) used both female and male subjects to extend the findings of Schill, Emanuel, Pederson et al. (1970). Using sexual responsivity measures to *double entendres* with both male and female experimenters, Milner and Moses found no overall differences comparing

males' and females' responsivity. However, sexual responsiveness of males was significantly inhibited when the test was administered by a female experimenter. The sexual responsivity of the females tested by a male experimenter was significantly lower than all of the other experimental groups. Therefore, sexual associations to *double entendre* words were repressed when a member of the opposite sex administered the test and this was especially true for females. Experiments like these reveal the sexual dynamics underlying repression, which fit with those that underlie religiosity. However, the link between religiosity and gender is inferred and not empirically established by the researchers.

Women, power and taboo language

Gender identity is a set of beliefs, behaviours and norms that permeate human activity. Each culture seeks to transform infants into masculine and feminine adults. Gender identity is a set of cultural prescriptions and expectations that specify how men and women, gays and lesbians, should behave. In the past, cursing and aggression have been most closely identified with masculinity. Our cultures constrain *how* speakers communicate about sexuality. Sexuality is a taboo topic in the United States and words denoting sexual activity are avoided. Sexual speech is taboo because sexuality is taboo, not vice versa. Historically, American women have been expected to repress sexual thoughts, while men have been freer to use sexual speech.

Speaking sexually in public is intimately bound to cultural definitions of human sexuality and gender identity. A speaker's gender identity affects the tendency to curse in cultural contexts. Gender identity (with age, wealth, occupation and class) is a co-variant of power. The freedom to curse without punishment is for those who have power. But cursing and dominance are masculine traits, and ultimately cursing in public depends on both gender identity and power. Males tend to have more power to curse in the United States than females, though this is not universally true as we see later.

Throughout history men and women have experienced different standards for public behaviour. Not long ago, men cursed freely in pubic, especially in male-centered contexts, such as factories, taverns and sporting events. As women entered contexts historically occupied by males, women's cursing standards became more relaxed. Even though we have not experienced parity, American women can curse more openly in public now and men can no longer use obscenity as freely as in the past.

Research on gender and cursing reveals three recurrent findings, men curse more than women; men use a larger vocabulary of curse words than women; and men use more offensive curse words than women (Jay, 1992, 2000). Gender differences in cursing emerge when children enter school and they persist into middle age. It is worth noting, however, that women outnumber and outswear men in nursing-home settings (Jay, 1996). While men generally curse more in public than women, research indicates that the frequency gap between men's and women's swearing is decreasing (Jay, 2000). Gender differences in cursing are also related to differences in the use of sexual terms, joke telling, harassing speech, insulting and fighting words.

Sexual terminology

Gender differences regarding the use of sexual terminology have been documented many times. Heterosexual men, women, gay men and lesbians speak with distinctive sexual lexicons and prefer different terms for genitalia and sexual acts (Walsh and Leonard, 1974; Sanders, 1978; Sanders and Robinson, 1979; Terry, 1983, 1994; Wells, 1989, 1990). Men and women also write different kinds of sexual graffiti (Bruner and Kelso, 1980; Arluke, Kutakoff and Levin, 1987); that is, men's graffiti is more sexually suggestive and less socially acceptable relative to women's. Men's graffiti also tends to be more racist, more homophobic and less romantic than women's graffiti.

Joke telling

Speaker gender plays a significant role in dirty joke telling (Mitchell, 1985). Reliable differences appear in the selection of joke themes, characters in jokes, and forms of jokes. Men, relative to women, tell a higher percentage of obscene jokes, religious jokes, ethnic-racial jokes, and jokes about death and drinking. Women, relative to men, tell a higher percentage of absurd jokes, morbid jokes, Pollack jokes, jokes about authority figures and jokes with plays on words. Men tell more openly aggressive and hostile jokes than women. Finally, women prefer to tell their jokes to other women, while men are more willing to tell jokes to mixed audiences and opposite-sex audiences.

Harassment and fighting words

An interesting pattern of gender differences emerge when research on sexual harassment and fighting words is examined. Women are more sensitive and men less sensitive to speech that constitutes verbal sexual harassment (Jay and Richard, 1995). In contrast to sexual harassment

dynamics, men are more sensitive to what constitutes fighting words (Jay, 1990). Fighting words are personally provocative words that lead to violence. Men are more likely than women to say they would be provoked into fighting by insulting or threatening speech. Women are more sensitive to harassment and men seem more sensitive to the dynamics of fighting language.

Gender-related insults

As for the question of words and insults, gender identity provides a basis for insulting words. Insults are based on cultural differences in men's and women's personalities. To get a clear picture of how men and women insult each other, one must first appreciate the kinds of traits associated with American men and women. Masculinity is associated with traits such as aggressiveness or dominance. Femininity is associated with traits such as nurturance and sensitivity. Gender-related insults tend to be based on references about deviations from expected or idealized gender-related behaviour.

Risch (1987) asked women to list insults for men and found that the most frequent words were based on references to the genitalia (*dick*), buttocks (*ass, asshole*) and ancestry (*bastard, son of a bitch*). Preston and Stanley (1987) asked subjects to list the 'worst thing' men and women could say to each other. They found the worst insults were:

woman to man: *bastard, prick*
man to woman: *cunt, slut*
man to man: *faggot, gay*
woman to woman: *bitch, slut*

The semantics of insult in these studies seem clear. Insults directed to heterosexual men refer to them as insincere or effeminate. Insults directed to heterosexual women refer to sexual looseness. These gender-related insults for women and men have legal implications as the dimensions of sexual looseness (*whore)* and homosexuality (*faggot*) are likely to be perceived as fighting words (Jay, 1990).

Insults are not merely offensive words; they are references to behaviours and traits that disturb Americans. The semantic structure of insults provides a model of those behaviours and traits. Through the use of detailed interviews with college students, Holland and Skinner (1987) constructed a cultural model of insulting. The semantic dimensions used in the model of insults were based on sexuality, attractiveness and sensitivity.

Several categories of terms were specific to males and females. Female directed insults were references to:

women who promised intimacy but did not fulfill the promise – *dickteaser*
social deviants who want too much from men – *bitch*
ugly, unattractive women – *scag, dog*
sexually loose women – *cunt, slut*

Insults for men also had definable target behaviours/traits:

effeminate or weak – *homo, fag, wimp*
insincere or mean – *bastard, prick, asshole*
inept, unattractive – *nerd, jerk*
attractive but sexually exploitative – *wolf, macho, stud*

Holland and Skinner (1987) showed that gender-related insults go beyond sexuality as a basis for insulting, as insults also reference attractiveness, ability, sexual potential and ineptitude. These dimensions of gender-based insults can be found in popular US media.

Media stereotypes

The construction of gender and gender-related insults is influenced by, and reflected in, media. American stereotypes are reinforced in the electronic and print media, as has been demonstrated in motion pictures (Jay, 1992), newspaper comic strips (Brabant, 1976; Brabant and Mooney, 1986; Mooney and Brabant, 1987, 1990; Jay, 1992) and televised films (Jay, 1993). The overwhelming majority of the portrayals of men and women cursing show that men curse more than women, men use more offensive words than women, women use more euphemisms than men. Men are rarely sanctioned for cursing. Women who curse tend to represent 'bad' characters (whores, drunks, drug users). The role of these exaggerated stereotypes of men and women are important to the degree to which they affect consumers.

A caution

One note of caution must be addressed on the issue of gender differences and speech. Henley (1995), reviewing literature on communication and dominance, concluded that women of colour are generally ignored in these studies, limiting applications to predominantly white middle-class

society. Gender in most studies refers to white men and white women. Also, heterosexual identity is assumed in many gender studies. Analyses based on gay men's and lesbians' speech are less common in the literature. Obviously a broader sample of ethnic, homosexual and lower-economic groups is needed to draw valid conclusions about gender differences and cursing.

One of the most influential pragmatic forces controlling cursing is the power relationship between the speaker and the listener. Power is the ability to influence others through control over desired resources. Power co-varies with age, education, wealth, occupation, gender and race. Among equals, speakers adopt a level of verbal and non-verbal communication that is responsive to the listeners' power. Speaker–listener communication includes eye contact, personal space, speech volume, vocabulary, syntax and profanity. These components will shift according to the level of formality adopted. Power makes communication among non-equals asymmetrical. People with power have licence to tell jokes, make fun of subordinates and use curse words. The level of speech formality adopted in a context depends on who has the power to shift levels up or down.

Cursing generally occurs at an informal, non-standard level. Cursing should be appropriate for the speaker–listener relationship. Speakers can 'talk up' or 'talk down' to the listener, urging a shift to higher or lower standards of formality. A speaker can initiate the use of cursing as a way to move to a non-standard, more relaxed level of speaking. A working-class woman, however, might inhibit cursing when she thinks she might be judged negatively by her boss.

Working-class women and cursing

Paul Fussell (1983) described many of the obvious and not so obvious differences in American lifestyles as a function of status. One lifestyle difference is our speech patterns. He noted that the 'bohemian class' is fairly free to use obscene speech, using it with rhetorical effectiveness. Working-class speakers are fonder than most people of calling someone an *asshole* according to his analysis. Fussell stated, 'your social class is still most visible when you say things' (p. 151), noting that the sizeable middle class feared offending others. To avoid offence they employ euphemisms, genteelism and mock profanity ('holy cow'). Examining both gender and class differences, Hughes (1992) noted the reluctance of lower-working-class women to use profanities at work. In contrast to their lack of profanity, the lower-working-class women frequently use expletives, in part to maintain social cohesion.

According to Hughes (1992), the use of 'prestigious' standard English has little value for lower-working-class women because standard English cannot provide any social advantage to them or increase their chances for success. Speaking standard English would work to isolate them from their own peers. In contrast to the stereotype that women curse less than men, lower-working-class women frequently use strong expletives (*cunt, fuck, shit*) that many middle-class men avoid. Daly, Holmes, Newton and Stubbe (2004) drew a similar conclusion about the use of expletives on the factory floor. Many exchanges using the word *fuck* served to promote cohesion and solidarity between women (and men) factory workers. Interestingly, working-class women in Hughes's sample exhibit a strong moral code against the use of profanity (*Jesus, Christ, God*). The middle class might find these values surprising, that is, where obscenities are acceptable and even encouraged, but profanities are avoided. One cannot ignore the impact of religion on this choice.

In addition there are some data relating joke telling to occupational status. Coser (1960), studying joking among staff members of a mental hospital, found that the most frequent targets of the senior staff joking were junior staff members. Patients and relatives were targeted by the junior staff members. Humour was directed downward at those with no power over the speaker.

Jokes and harassment at work

In many occupational settings, speaker power is a defining feature of sexual harassment. Most verbal sexual harassment suits involve junior female workers claiming to have been harassed by male managers. Unwanted jokes, obscenity, sexual innuendo, comments about physical attractiveness or appearance flow from the top of the hierarchy down. Top-down harassment has been documented with nurses and doctors (Cox, 1987, 1991a, 1991b; Braun, Christle, Walker and Tiwanak, 1991), medical students and physicians (Nora Daugherty, Hersh et al., 1993), workers and management (Martell and Sullivan, 1994).

Henley (1995) studied non-verbal communication patterns as a function of power, gender and dominance. Her comprehensive view of communication presents cursing within a broad interpersonal context which incorporates class, race and gender variables. Power gives a speaker the licence to do things that the powerless cannot. Dominance legitimizes invasions of personal space, touching others, engaging in eye contact, and addressing subordinates by their personal names rather than by title. Dominance and power also legitimize the use of offensive language

over subordinates. Therefore, the doctor tells a dirty joke and the nurses laugh, but not vice versa.

Conclusion

What have we learned by examining the nexus of gender, cursing and religion? We see that each factor has a significant impact on language choices. Women curse less than men, generally speaking, but times are changing and for working-class women this generalization does not apply. Social class, status, power and occupation are important mitigating variables. The Church has lost power to broadly censor speech in US media; however, the faithful maintain values that allow them to repress profanity in public. Religiosity and sexual anxiety are primary traits underlying language repression. Cross-cultural studies reveal the pervasiveness of cursing and the semantics of the forbidden in different cultures; some more focused on profanity than others. Finally, the role of cursing for American women is changing and we will probably continue to see a relaxation of the restriction on their cursing in the future.

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