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Articles

A Child's Garden of Curses: A Gender, Historical, and Age-Related Evaluation of the Taboo Lexicon

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Child swearing is a largely unexplored topic among language researchers, although assumptions about what children know about taboo language form the basis for language standards in many settings. The purpose of the studies presented here is to provide descriptive data about the emergence of adultlike swearing in children; specifically, we aim to document what words children of different ages know and use. Study 1 presents observational data from adults and children (ages 1–12). Study 2 compares perceptions of the inappropriateness of taboo words between adults and older (ages 9–12) and younger (ages 6–8) children. Collectively these data indicate that by the time children enter school they have the rudiments of adult swearing, although children and adults differ in their assessments of the inappropriateness of mild taboo words. Comparisons of these data with estimates obtained in the 1980s allow us to comment on whether swearing habits are changing over the years. Child swearing data can be applied to contemporary social problems and academic issues.

What are parents, educators, and other adults to do about the problem of child swearing? It is clear that at some point children learn taboo language; however, the nature of this acquisition is unspecified by language researchers. In the absence of a good body of data about child swearing, obscenity law assumes that children are naive to taboo words and become corrupted or depraved when exposed to them; therefore, children should be protected from taboo words

(Heins, 2007; Jay, 2009b). Before we can tackle the question of how taboo language is learned during childhood, we need descriptive data to get a sense of what words are acquired and when they are acquired. The purpose of the studies presented in this article is to provide data obtained via observation and interview to begin to describe the child swearing lexicon at different ages and comment on when that lexicon becomes adultlike.

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The last 30 years have produced a body of research on aspects of swearing in adults (for a review, see Jay, 2009b). Observational studies of adult language use (Jay 1992, 2000; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003; Mehl, Vazire, Ramirez-Esparza, Statcher, & Pennebaker, 2007) demonstrate that taboo words (i.e., swearing, cursing, expletives, name calling) come from a variety of semantic domains (e.g., sex; profanity [religious terms]; scatology; body parts, processes, and products; disgust; ethnic and racial slurs; Jay, 2000) but are often used connotatively (i.e., for their emotional value, as intensifiers) as well as denotatively (i.e., referencing their semantic meaning; Jay, 2000). It is evident that fluent adult speakers of a language develop an implicit or folk knowledge of taboo words. That is, regardless of their personal frequency of use of offensive language, speakers of a given language learn that some words are taboo or “bad” words and others are nontaboo, “good” or neutral words.

Few published studies bear on the emergence of the taboo lexicon throughout childhood, although there is evidence that even young children use taboo words from several semantic domains. An observational study about children’s use of taboo words from the early 1980s (see Jay, 1992) found 1- to 2-year-olds using taboo words. At this age, children may repeat offensive words without understanding what these words mean. Besides repetition, another common motivation for child swearing is name calling or insulting. In a study of derogatory epithets used by children, Winslow (1969) found that children often use taboo terms as insults, name calling, and ethnic slurs. These were categorized as focusing on physical appearances and peculiarities, mental traits, and social relationships. Children also use taboo language when they talk about taboo topics. Research on children’s storytelling indicates that sexual themes are present in the stories of 5- to 10-year-old children. Sutton-Smith and Abrams (1978) reported that young children told stories that focused on scatology and self-exposure, whereas the narratives of older children involved more sexual themes and therefore sexual taboo words.

As Sutton-Smith and Abrams’s (1978) data suggest, the content of children’s swearing lexica should change over time because adultlike knowledge of taboo topics depends on a more adult understanding of how the world works. That is, the use and comprehension of taboo language should parallel

the development of communication about emotion in general: Awareness and use of emotion language, evaluative judgments, and linguistic politeness have been found to increase with age (Arunachalam, Gould, Andersen, Byrd, & Narayanan, 2001; Peterson & Biggs, 2001; Ridgeway, Waters, & Kuczaj, 1985). Thus, it is reasonable to predict that children should use less offensive taboo words at younger ages. This relies on the assumptions that parents are less likely to use extremely offensive words around young children and that young children do not have a nuanced social awareness available to make distinctions and use terms from common taboo word semantic domains such as politics, race, or social class. In support of this prediction, Jay (1992) noted that infantile insults recorded from children between ages 3 and 8 years were not recorded from older children. Instead, adolescents and adults produced insults evidencing greater awareness of social, political, and economic issues (see Eble, 1996, or Holland & Skinner, 1987). Although we expect the taboo lexicon changes to become more adultlike with time, systematic study of child swearing is needed to document the ages of emergence of taboo language use and changing values.

A common finding in the literature about taboo language use in adults is that men outswear women (Jay, 1992, 2000, 2009b; McEnery, 2006; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003); however, very little research exists to inform our impressions of gender influences in child swearing. In two different field studies of 1- to 10-year-olds, Jay (1992) recorded more boys saying taboo words than girls, and with the exception of 3- to 4-year-olds, boys produced a larger lexicon of taboo words than girls. In a cross-cultural study of gender differences of 3- to 11-year-olds in six different cultures, Whiting and Edwards (1973) found that in all six cultures younger and older boys produced more insults than girls, with the exception of a group of New England 7- to 11-year-old girls, who produced more insults than their male peers.

It is reasonable to expect gender differences in the content and frequency of swearing to emerge as children acquire gender-based communication practices through social interaction. Thorne (1993) provided an examination of gender differences that unfold when boys and girls play, and a sense of “us versus them” arises where boys and girls insult same-

gender peers for nonconformity and insult cross-gender peers for being different. School children routinely engage in teasing, threats, gender-related insults, racist slurs, and name calling. In this case, the us-versus-them mentality gives rise to gender conformity within a group and insults levied against those who do not follow the norm. Thus, it is reasonable to predict that gender differences in frequency and content should become evident around the time that children enter settings, such as school settings, that make gender roles salient.

A final justification for providing descriptive, normative data about child swearing is to begin to inform our estimates of the manner in which this behavior changes over time. Periodically, editorials in popular media assert that language is getting “coarser” with time (see Kahn, 2010, and O’Connor, 2000, for examples). However, no longitudinal investigation of taboo language use by either adults or children exists to support the assertion that taboo word use is becoming more or less frequent.

Therefore, the studies presented in this article are intended to describe how children use and evaluate taboo language throughout childhood, to document the age at which adultlike gender differences in swearing behavior appear, and to address the issue of whether changes in swearing behavior are appearing over time. Study 1 presents child and adult swearing data obtained from an observational study to provide current baseline estimates of the frequency of use of specific taboo words and gender differences in taboo language use. One problem with existing children’s frequency counts is that most studies do not categorize children’s utterances precisely by age. For example, in a comprehensive study of swearing McEnery (2006) combines child swearing data in a category of 1- to 14-year-olds, leaving us unable to address the issue of how the lexica of very young children shift with development. In Study 1, child swearing behavior is decomposed by age in 2-year groups. Child and adult data are compared with each other, and data from both children and adults are compared with estimates obtained from the 1980s (in Jay, 1992) in order to assess the stability of the adult and child swearing lexica over time.

To address the question of whether children have the same perception of taboo language as do adults, Study 2 presents subjective ratings of the

“badness” of taboo words obtained from parents or caregivers and their children. Ratings from younger children are compared with those of older children and adults to document developmental changes in the perception of the offensiveness of specific words. Collectively, these data describe aspects of the taboo lexicon through childhood and into adulthood, and they begin to address the nature of the emergence of normal swearing behavior.

STUDY 1

We surmise from our review that children are not naive about taboo words and that sampling the speech of children at different ages will show that the taboo lexicon emerges early and shifts over time. Existing research (Jay, 1992; Sutton-Smith & Abrams, 1978; Thorne, 1993; Whiting & Edwards, 1973; Winslow, 1969) suggests that swearing should be evident in young children and should comprise, at the very least, repeated offensive words, insults, and sexual terms. Adultlike gender differences in swearing should emerge by late childhood; however, the age of this emergence is unknown. Here, data describing the frequency and content of child and adult swearing were collected by observation. The bodies of adult and child data were collected as separate studies (i.e., adult sample and child sample); thus, their methods are presented separately here. Descriptive statistics were computed to determine word frequency and differences in frequency of use based on gender and decomposed by age. These data were compared with observational data recorded from children in the 1980s (in Jay, 1992) in order to evaluate the perception that speech is “coarsening” over time (Kahn, 2010; O’Connor, 2000).

METHOD

Observational Method for Adult Sample

Five researchers (one man and four women with training in research methods and statistics) were recruited to record taboo word utterances over the course of one calendar year. They were instructed to record all taboo utterances at any time of day that they overheard occurring spontaneously in any public setting where they normally worked (e.g., shopping mall), traveled (e.g., to and from campus, to home, or on school breaks), or relaxed or socialized (e.g., bars, restaurants, sporting

events, social gatherings, shopping malls). They were instructed to spend more time recording off campus than on campus. Taboo utterances to be recorded were described as offensive words or phrases (e.g., *fuck*), insults or name calling (e.g., *douchebag*), or the use of clinical terms (e.g., *penis*) as in Jay (1992, 2009b). Researchers were told to record any time they heard taboo words being used and when they could identify who was talking and who was listening, but they were not to include conversations in which they were involved. Researchers were encouraged to set aside time for recording purposes only at settings where swearing was likely (e.g., bars, sporting events, recreation areas), but these times were not monitored or registered. Researchers were instructed to record only adults' speech and not conversations by school children or teenagers. They were told to record unobtrusively the gender of the speakers and the listeners and the specific words and phrases they heard as soon as possible after they heard them.

To learn what was to be recorded, researchers used a written list of words collected in Jay (1992) as examples of what to listen for. They were told to record these kinds of words and any other offensive words that were not on the example list but that were being used as insults or were offensive words or slang. They were told the primary investigator (T.J.) would check their data and decide whether any new words or expressions were to be included. Words or phrases that did not meet the criteria for inclusion (e.g., *you're not nice*) were excluded from analysis. Assistants met with the second author every 2–3 weeks to discuss their data and ask questions about recording. Socioeconomic status of the adults was not documented. Speakers were estimated to be predominantly Caucasian and middle class, aged 20–35 years. Data were primarily from New England (66%) and southern California and were aggregated without regard to region because previous research (Jay, 2000) revealed no substantive differences by geographic area. Half of the data were recorded by the women and half by the man. The observational recording method was very similar to that used in the 1980s (to which these adult data are here compared; Jay, 1992) with the exception that researchers for the current study were instructed to record data using pocket-sized notebooks instead of preprinted field cards.

Observational Method for Child Sample

Episodes of swearing were collected over the period of one calendar year using a modified version of the observational technique used for the adult data col-

lection and 1980s children's data collection (in Jay, 1992). Researchers (one man and six women with training in research methods and statistics) who had frequent contact with children or worked with children, whose ages they knew, were instructed to record all taboo utterances occurring spontaneously in context (e.g., day care, public school, recreation center, sporting event, playground). Taboo utterances to be recorded were described as offensive words and phrases (e.g., *fuck*), insults or name calling (e.g., *douchebag*), and clinical terms (e.g., *penis*), as well as abusive expressions (e.g., *I hate you*). Abusive expressions were recorded as a type of taboo language here because children may derive and respond to these phrases with more emotional force than would adults (Ney, 1987). Researchers were instructed to record only children's spoken taboo word use and not words spoken by teenagers or adults. Researchers were told to record on notepads unobtrusively the gender and ages (1–12 years) of the speaker and listener and the specific words and phrases they heard as soon as possible after they heard them. Researchers obtained permission to record data from supervisors (who were also given a copy of the protocol approved by the institutional review board) in schools and recreation centers.

To learn what was to be recorded, researchers used the protocol approved by the institutional review board and written lists of words reported in Jay (1992) as examples of what to listen for. They were told to record these kinds of words and any other offensive words or abusive expressions there were not in the example list but that were used by children as insults, abusive comments, or slang. They were told that the primary investigator (T.J.) would check their data and decide whether any new words or expression were to be included. Words or phrases that did not meet the stated criteria for inclusion (e.g., *you don't know anything about soccer*) were excluded from further analysis. Assistants met with the second author every 2–3 weeks to discuss their data and ask questions about recording. Socioeconomic status of the children was not documented. The sample included predominantly middle-class, Caucasian children from the New England region. Half the data were recorded by the women and half by the man. The observational method was very similar to that used in the 1980s (see Jay, 1992), with the exception that researchers for the current study were instructed to record data using pocket-sized notebooks instead of preprinted field cards, and they recorded abusive expressions that were not tallied in the 1980s research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content of Swearing Episodes and Decomposition by Gender

ADULTS .

A total of 3,190 taboo utterances were recorded from adults. Significantly more utterances were recorded from men, 1,751 or 55%, $\chi^2(1) = 30.52, p < .001$. In this case, the taboo lexicon comprised 71 different taboo words or phrases. There was no gender difference in the size of the lexicon: Of the 71 different taboo words or phrases recorded, men drew from 60 words or phrases and women drew from 55, $\chi^2(1) = 0.22, p = .64$. The amount of the overall lexicon shared by men and women was 62%.

From the distribution of frequencies, it is immediately apparent that the taboo word set includes a heterogeneous group of words, few of which are recorded very frequently and many of which are recorded rarely. For this reason, frequency data in this article are presented in terms of "top 10s." Table 1 presents the 10 most frequently recorded words by gender. The 10 overall most frequently recorded words accounted for 82% of the data, and the top 3, *fuck*, *shit*, and *(oh my) god*, accounted for 51% of the data. Of the 71 types of taboo utterances, 52 had a frequency of 20 or less, collectively accounting for

7% of the data. These figures were similar for men and women: For men, the top 10 and 3 words accounted for 80% and 50% and for 82% and 56% of the data, respectively. The trend for a few words to be spoken frequently but many others infrequently is a common finding in lexical frequency studies of nontaboo words (see Zipf, 1949).

With respect to the most frequently used taboo words and phrases, there was much overlap between those used by men and women (bold words in Table 1): Men and women had 8 of 10 words in common in their respective 10 most frequently used sets. Furthermore, the words tended to fluctuate only one or two places in rank between the genders, with the exception of *Jesus Christ* (4th for men and 8th for women) and *(oh my) god* (1st for women and 6th for men). The phrase *(oh my) god* accounted for 24% of women's data.

CHILDREN.

The set of child-spoken frequency data comprised 1,187 utterances. More taboo words and phrases were collected from boys than from girls, $\chi^2(1) = 75.32, p < .001$; 743 (63%) for boys. Table 2 presents frequency data decomposed by gender and age group. One-way chi squares were used to compare frequencies within age group. The results of these tests showed that more taboo utterances were produced by boys in three of the six age ranges: 5–6 years, $\chi^2(1) = 9.63$,

TABLE 1. Top 10 taboo words used by adults

All adults		Men		Women		1986	
Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
fuck*	613	fuck	391	(oh my) god	342	fuck	472
shit*	587	shit	345	shit	242	shit	382
(oh my) god	421	hell	141	fuck	222	hell	140
hell*	242	(Jesus) (Christ)	139	hell	101	asshole	137
(Jesus) (Christ)*	178	ass	82	damn	71	ass	129
damn*	146	(oh my) god	79	ass	50	(Jesus) (Christ)	120
ass*	132	damn	75	suck(s)	46	goddamn	120
suck(s)*	99	goddamn	66	(Jesus) (Christ)	39	bitch	74
goddamn*	79	suck(s)	53	bitch	38	damn	65
bitch*	65	asshole	38	crap	36	suck(s)	65

Note. First 3 columns reflect current data. In the "All Adults" columns, bold indicates that a word appears in both men's and women's top 10 current overall frequencies; asterisks indicate that the word appears in both current and 1986 top 10 overall frequencies. For all adults, crap also had a frequency of 65. The 1986 data were compiled from Jay (1992). Bold words in the 1986 data appear in both men's and women's top 10 overall frequencies in 1986.

TABLE 2. Size of taboo lexica and frequency of taboo word use by age and gender

Age range (yr)	Taboo lexicon size			Taboo spoken frequency		
	Boys	Girls	Total*	Boys	Girls	Total
1-2	6	8	13	22	16	38
3-4	34	40	51	99	140	239
5-6	34	21	42	77	43	120
7-8	45	25	54	138	57	195
9-10	34	26	46	73	75	148
11-12	55	38	68	335	112	447
All ages	95	80	117	743	444	1,187

Note. Bold values within an age group indicate a gender difference: one-way χ^2 significant at $p < .05$. *This number represents the total number of types by boys and girls; there is some overlap across genders.

$p = .002$; 7-8 years, $\chi^2(1) = 33.65$, $p < .001$; and 11-12 years, $\chi^2(1) = 111.25$, $p < .001$. Interestingly, in the 3- to 4-year-old age bracket, girls produced significantly more utterances than boys, $\chi^2(1) = 7.03$, $p = .008$. There is some precedent for girls outswearing boys at some ages (Stenstrom, 2006; Whiting & Edwards, 1973). It should be noted that there was not an equal number of children of each gender within each group; therefore, the extent to which observed gender differences can generalize is limited.

A total of 117 different taboo words and phrases were recorded, 95 from boys and 80 from girls. There was no overall gender difference in lexicon size, $\chi^2(1) = 1.29$, $p = .257$. Table 2 presents lexicon size data from children by age group. Analyses by gender within each age group showed a significant gender difference for lexicon size only at ages 7-8, $\chi^2(1) = 5.71$, $p = .017$, with boys drawing from a larger lexicon than girls. A trend for this effect also occurred at ages 5-6, $\chi^2(1) = 3.07$, $p = .080$, and 11-12, $\chi^2(1) = 3.11$, $p = .080$. The amount of the overall child lexicon shared by boys and girls was 58%. Decomposed by age, overlap was 8% (age 1-2 years), 45% (3-4 years), 31% (5-6 years), 30% (7-8 years), 30% (9-10 years), and 38% (11-12 years). Collectively, these statistics show much variability in the content of boys' and girls' taboo word sets.

Table 3 presents the 10 most frequently heard words or phrases for all children and for all boys and girls. For all children, the top 10 accounted for 53% of the data. The top 3, *fuck*, *shit*, and (*oh my*)

god, accounted for 27% of the data. There were 101 utterances with a frequency of 20 or less, collectively accounting for 35% of the data. These figures were similar for boys and girls: The top 10 and 3 words accounted for 60% and 30% and for 55% and 26% of the data, respectively. The lexica for boys and girls overlapped somewhat, but both boys' and girls' most frequent words differed depending on age range, as can be seen in Tables 3 and 4 (bold words appear in the top 10 for both genders within a given age range).

Child Swearing Becoming Adulthoodlike

The breakdown of child swearing data by age range also indicated that, with age, the child swearing lexicon shifted to become more adulthoodlike. Whereas some words were common across age ranges (e.g., *shit*, *stupid*), others appeared only in the lexica of younger children (e.g., *chicken*, *poop[y]*) or older children (e.g., *motherfucker*, *slut*). Accordingly, although child frequency data were generally positively correlated with adult frequency data from Study 1 ($r(47) = .84$, $p < .001$), the strength of the correlation depended on child age group: 11- to 12-year olds' data were more strongly correlated, $r(38) = .93$, $p < .001$, with adults' data than were 9- to 10-year-olds' data, $r(29) = .63$, $p < .001$, or 7- to 8-year-olds' data, $r(25) = .46$, $p = .016$. The younger age groups tended to share few words with adults and did not show significant correlations with adults based on word frequency. It should be noted that although the 11- to 12-year-

TABLE 3. Top 10 taboo words used by children ages 1–12

All children		Boys		Girls		1980s	
Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
shit*	116	shit	91	(oh my) god	53	fuck	108
fuck*	103	fuck	83	stupid	38	shit	91
(oh my) god	102	(oh my) god	49	shit	25	jerk	62
stupid	82	stupid	44	jerk	22	asshole	46
damn	51	damn	42	fuck	20	bitch	42
jerk*	42	suck(s)	23	bitch	18	fag(got)	36
suck(s)*	34	hell	22	shut up	16	suck(s)	33
crap	32	crap	20	hate you	14	(Jesus) (Christ)	30
hell	32	jerk	20	butt	12	dink	27
bitch*	31	butt	17	crap	12	piss(ed)	27

Note. First 3 columns reflect current data. In the "All Children" column, bold indicates that a word appears in both boys' and girls' top 10 current overall frequencies; asterisks indicate that the word appears in both current and 1980s top 10 overall frequencies. For boys two other words had a frequency of 17: fr(i)(ee)k(en) and poop(y); for girls idiot also had a frequency of 12. The 1980s data were compiled from Jay (1992). Bold words in the 1980s data appear in both boys' and girls' top 10 overall frequencies in the 1980s.

TABLE 4. Top 10 taboo words used by children ages 1–12 by age

Age bracket (years)											
1–2		3–4		5–6		7–8		9–10		11–12	
Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
poop(y)	11	jerk	18	stupid	11	stupid	22	(oh my) god	26	fuck	72
stupid	5	stupid	18	cuckoo(head)	9	(oh my) god	20	shit	13	shit	67
butt	4	hate you	14	shit	9	shit	13	crap	9	damn	39
fuck	4	(oh my) god	12	butt	8	suck(s)	10	stupid	8	(oh my) god	38
shit	4	crap	11	fuck	7	bitch	8	bitch	7	stupid	18
(oh my) god	2	shut up	11	jerk	7	boob(s)(y)	8	fuck	7	fr(i)(ee)k(en)	14
fart	2	damn	10	suck(s)	7	butt	8	jerk	7	hell	14
bad	1	shit	10	poop(y)	6	shut up	8	gay	6	asshole	11
bitch	1	hell	9	scaredycat	6	fuck	7	suck(s)	6	bitch	10
brat	1	poophead	9	(oh my) god	4	hate you	5	retard(ed)	5	suck(s)	9

Note. Based on the current data. Bold words show overlap; they appear in both boys' and girls' top 10 overall frequency. Three other words had a frequency of 1 in ages 1–2: damn, fr(i)(ee)k(en), and gay. In age 5–6, one other word had a frequency of 4: hate you.

old children had more words in common with adults than did younger children, 11- to 12-year-old children and adults only showed 40% overlap in their lexica, suggesting that there are still substantial differences between the way that older children and adults use taboo words, at least in these samples.

Taboo Lexicon Over Time

ADULTS.

In order to provide descriptive information bearing on the issue of whether the taboo lexicon is shifting over time, we compared the observational data presented here with a set of words from a 1986 study in which spoken frequency data were also collected

by observation. That set included 2,129 utterances; consistent with the current sample, significantly more words (1,491), $\chi^2(1) = 0.22$, $p = .64$, were from men. The number of different taboo words and phrases recorded was 59. In contrast to the current set, in which no gender difference was observed in lexicon size, significantly more types of taboo words and phrases were recorded from men than from women in the 1986 set, 57 for men and 32 for women; $\chi^2(1) = 7.02$, $p = .008$. The amount of the overall lexicon shared by men and women was 51%.

As in the current sample, the 1986 taboo set included a few words and phrases that were recorded frequently and many that were recorded rarely. Table 1 shows the top 10 most frequently recorded words from the 1986 set; these accounted for 80% of the data. The top 3 (*fuck*, *shit*, and *hell*) accounted for 47% of the data. Furthermore, 43 of the 59 types of taboo utterances had a frequency of 20 or less, collectively accounting for 10% of the data. As in the current sample, these figures were similar for men and women: For men, the top 10 and 3 words accounted for 77% and 47% and for 87% and 47% of the data, respectively.

Comparisons of the current and 1986 sets also showed that the content of our collective taboo lexicon appears to be quite stable over time. As shown in Table 1 9 of the 10 most common words (marked by asterisks) were the same in both sets, and words tended to fluctuate one to three places in rank across sets, with the notable exception of (*oh my*) *god*, third in current frequency (13% of the set) but 18th in 1986 frequency (with a raw frequency of 11, or 0.5% of the 1986 set). It should be noted that *asshole* appeared as fourth in the in the 10 most frequent words from 1986 but not in current overall frequency (where it was 12th).

This general point about the stability of the lexicon over time was further supported when the current and 1986 sets were considered as wholes. A correlation was computed for frequency between words that appeared in both the current dataset and matching words in Jay (1992). The relationship was very strong, $r(33) = .86$, $p < .001$, showing that high-frequency words from the 1986 list tended to be current high-frequency words, and low-frequency words from the 1986 list tended to be current low-frequency words.

An analysis of the content of the lexicon for the 1986 sample by gender showed even more overlap between men and women than the current sample: The 10 most frequently used taboo words and phrases were the same for men and women. As in the current sample, the words tended to fluctuate only one or two places in rank between the genders, and a few words appeared at the same rank for men and women.

CHILDREN.

We can address the stability of the child's taboo lexicon in a historical sense by comparing the present data with child spoken frequency data recorded in the late 1980s (in Jay, 1992, child field studies 1 and 2 in chapter 2 and child data from field study in chapter 4). Collectively, the 1980s child data comprised 963 taboo words or phrases from children ages 1–12; however, because of differences in data collection methods across studies, they cannot be broken down further by age.

As in the current count, more taboo utterances (79%) were recorded from boys, $\chi^2(1) = 312.98$, $p < .001$. The taboo lexicon comprised 89 different utterances, and in contrast to the current data, a significant gender difference in lexicon size was observed, with boys drawing from a larger variety of taboo words and phrases than girls (80 for boys, 52 for girls), $\chi^2(1) = 5.94$, $p = .015$. The amount of the overall child lexicon shared by boys and girls was 48%.

The 10 most frequent words from the 1980s dataset are listed in Table 3; they accounted for 52% of the 1980s corpus. The top 3 words, *fuck*, *shit*, and *jerk*, accounted for 27% of the data. There were 75 words with a frequency of 20 or less, collectively accounting for 38% of the data. These figures were similar for boys and girls: For boys, the top 10 and 3 words accounted for 55% and 29% and for 57% and 24% of the data, respectively.

Although this pattern is similar to that in the current dataset, the individual words in the top 10s show some variability with time. As is apparent in Table 3, 5 of the top 10 most frequent words from the 1980s appeared in the current top 10 (accounting for 52% of the current top 10; see asterisks in Table 3). The words (*oh my*) *god*, *stupid*, *damn*, *crap*, and *hell* rose in rank to appear in the current top 10 but did not appear in the old top 10, and the words *asshole*, *fag(got)*, (*Jesus*) (*Christ*), *dink*, and *piss(ed)* fell in rank since

the 1980s estimate. Likewise, 5 of the top 10 most frequent words from boys' 1980s data appeared in boys' current top 10 (accounting for 54% of boys' current top 10), and 5 of the top 10 most frequent words from girls' 1980s data appeared in girls' current top 10 (accounting for 57% of girls' current top 10). In order to answer the question about whether children's language is getting "worse" over time, supplementary data about the tabooess or offensiveness of each constituent word (e.g., estimations of how adults or children would rate these words) would be needed, and they are not currently available.

Although there was some movement with time in the content of children's taboo lexica, for words that were recorded during both time periods, the frequency relationship described by correlation is significant and positive, $r(57) = .67, p < .001$, showing that high-frequency taboo utterances in the 1980s tend to be high-frequency taboo utterances in the current sample.

STUDY 2

Study 1 demonstrated a change in the content of the child swearing lexicon from young childhood to early adolescence. Study 2 continues to explore the development of language values—which underlie adult taboo semantics—by comparing parents' and children's judgments of "good" and "bad" words. We predicted that parents and children would have similar responses to offensive taboo words (e.g., *god-damn*) but less similar judgments of mild taboo words (e.g., *pig*), based on the finding that young children produce mild words as insults (Jay, 1992) and based on the patterns of use of specific taboo words described in Study 1. Specifically, older children should produce judgments that are more adultlike than those of younger children.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were solicited via newspaper ads, e-mail announcements, and postings in libraries and schools in western Massachusetts. Parent- or caregiver-child pairs or groups with children 6–12 years old were solicited. This sample comprised 27 parent- or caregiver-child pairs or groups; that is, 27 adults (17 women) and 41 children (24 girls). The

analyses that follow compare adults, older children, and younger children. Older children were defined as 9–12 years old ($n = 23$; 15 girls), and younger children were defined as 6–8 years old ($n = 18$; 9 girls). This assignment was based on an approximate median split of our age data and yielded groups that were the most similar in size. The following analyses also examine adult-child agreement within parent- or caregiver-child pairs. In this sample, there were 14 parent- or caregiver-child pairs (adults who came in with a single child) and 13 parent- or caregiver-child groups (in which an adult brought 2 or 3 children). In the latter case, the adult data were used with each child within a group to create as many data points for pairs as there were children in the sample. In all cases, only one adult came in with a child or children. Each adult-child pair or group was paid \$10.

Materials and Procedure

A list of 38 words, half "good" and half "bad," was created. Bad words came from a list of curse words spoken in public by 7- to 9-year-olds (Jay, 1992). Good words were also selected from a list of commonly spoken words by 7- to 9-year-olds (Hall, Nagy, & Linn, 1984). In an interview setting, each participant was read the list of words and asked to judge (verbally) whether each was a good word that could be used in his or her home or a bad word that should not be used in his or her home. Parents or caregivers and children were interviewed separately. Parents or caregivers were interviewed first and were given the opportunity to delete any words that they did not want presented to their children. Of the 27 parents or caregivers, four chose to delete words from the list. Two of these deleted the word *asshole* only. One of these deleted the words *goddamn*, *shit*, and *asshole*. One of these deleted the words *piss*, *suck*, *damn*, *bitch*, *goddamn*, *shit*, and *asshole*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Words Omitted From Analysis

In addition to the words omitted from the analysis based on parents' or caregivers' judgment, words that children reported not knowing could not be analyzed. These are reported here in order to provide a sense of the scope of the knowledge of taboo words by children. Of the 42 children, 6 reported not knowing one or more of four words from the entire list: *fag* (4 "don't know"), *queer* (4 "don't know"), *piss* (3 "don't know"), and *bitch* (1 "don't know").

Within-Pair Disagreements

An independent-samples *t* test was used to evaluate the total number of parent- or caregiver-child disagreements on a word's status as good or bad based on child age (younger or older). Younger children showed more disagreements with their parents, $M = 6.67$, $SD = 3.09$, than did older children, $M = 4.96$, $SD = 2.14$, $t(39) = 2.09$, $p = .043$. It should be noted that comparing a child with his or her parent or caregiver could be expected to yield less disagreement than a random adult-child comparison; considering this, it is interesting that this age-related difference is still significant.

Individual Word Data

A summary of all words in terms of their percentage "bad" ratings is presented in Table 5, decomposed

into percentages by adults, children (younger and older), and all participants. This should give the reader a sense of the gradation of perceived inappropriateness within the entire word set (indeed, not just within the set we designated as "bad" to begin with).

In order to get a better sense of the nature of adult-child disagreement about word valence, individual word comparisons were conducted using *t* tests that evaluated the percentage of "good" or "bad" responses to words we designated as good and bad, respectively. A first set of *t* tests compared the percentages of adults with those of all children, and a second set of tests compared the percentages of older children with those of younger children. A summary of significant results of these tests is presented in Table 6.

TABLE 5. Percentage "bad" evaluations by all participants

Word	Valence designation	Participant group				
		Younger children	Older children	All children	Adults	All participants
asshole	Bad	100%	100%	100%	96%	98%
bitch	Bad	100%	95%	97%	100%	98%
goddamn	Bad	100%	100%	100%	96%	98%
shit	Bad	100%	100%	100%	96%	98%
ass	Bad	100%	96%	98%	93%	96%
fag	Bad	94%	90%	92%	100%	95%
piss	Bad	88%	95%	92%	96%	94%
damn	Bad	100%	100%	100%	81%	93%
hell	Bad	94%	87%	90%	67%	81%
stupid	Bad	94%	83%	88%	63%	78%
suck	Bad	94%	82%	88%	63%	78%
crap	Bad	83%	83%	83%	59%	74%
wimp	Bad	83%	78%	80%	48%	68%
dork	Bad	94%	65%	78%	44%	65%
fart	Bad	89%	74%	80%	41%	65%
Jesus Christ	Bad	83%	57%	68%	44%	59%
queer	Bad	47%	55%	51%	67%	58%
balls	Bad	33%	65%	51%	48%	50%
pig	Bad	39%	48%	44%	22%	35%
baby	Good	17%	17%	17%	4%	12%

Note. Words judged by less than 10% of all participants as bad are not included in this table. Words judged by no participants as bad were book, car, dog, game, hello, juice, play, and time. Words judged by less than 5% of participants as bad were house, look, mommy, people, watch, little, right, water, and down. Take was judged by less than 10% of participants as bad.

TABLE 6. Significant adult–child and younger–older child valence evaluations

Word	Valence designation	Nature of difference	t Value (df)	p Value
crap	Bad	Adults (59%) < children (83%)	2.17 (66)	.034
damn	Bad	Adults (81%) < children (100%)	2.83 (65)	.0062
dork	Bad	Adults (44%) < children (78%)	2.84 (66)	.006
fart	Bad	Adults (41%) < children (80%)	3.36 (66)	.0013
hell	Bad	Adults (67%) < children (90%)	2.42 (66)	.0184
stupid	Bad	Adults (63%) < children (88%)	2.42 (66)	.0184
suck	Bad	Adults (63%) < children (88%)	2.36 (65)	.0211
wimp	Bad	Adults (48%) < children (80%)	2.79 (66)	.0069
down	Good	Younger children (83%) < older children (100%)	2.03 (39)	.0488
balls	Bad	Younger children (33%) < older children (65%)	2.03 (39)	.0495
dork	Bad	Younger children (94%) > older children (65%)	2.24 (39)	.0306

Note. *T* tests here compare percentages of “good” and “bad” responses to words designated by us as good and bad, respectively. That is, for a bad word, a “child > adult” finding indicates that more children than adults evaluated this word as bad (i.e., inappropriate to use at home).

Several words were evaluated as bad by a significantly greater percentage of children than adults: *crap*, *damn*, *dork*, *fart*, *hell*, *stupid*, *suck*, and *wimp* (all $p < .05$). Responses to the words *Jesus Christ* and *pig* also trended in this direction (both $p < .08$). Younger children and older children differed slightly in their evaluations. A greater percentage of older children evaluated *down* as a good word than did younger children ($p < .05$), a greater percentage of older children evaluated *balls* as a bad word than did younger children ($p < .05$), and a greater percentage of younger children evaluated *dork* as a bad word than did older children ($p < .05$).

Collectively these data show that adults and children have different conceptions of what constitutes taboo speech, even if they come from the same home. We can generally say that adults are more liberal with their evaluation of mild taboos than children. To put it another way, however, the definition of a mild taboo is something that we interpret according to adult standards; children do not show the same pattern of evaluation as adults. In support of this point, if the percentage bad statistics for words here are correlated with the offensiveness and tabooess ratings for the words' counterparts in Janschewitz (2008; 15 of the 20 words in Table 5 appear there), significant positive relationships are present only for the adult data (offensiveness $r(13) = .63, p = .012$; tabooess $r(13) = .80, p < .001$).

The finding that fewer disagreements between adults and children exist with older children demonstrates that taboo language values become more adult-like with age. Likewise, within the group of children in the present study, we see that older children are more conservative than younger children toward the sexually loaded taboo word *balls*. Younger children are probably not aware of the offensiveness of this word because they do not evidence adultlike emotional communication practices, as demonstrated in research on the use of emotion terms, evaluative judgments, and linguistic politeness (Arunachalam et al., 2001; Peterson & Biggs, 2001; Ridgeway et al., 1985). Additional investigation of the basis of these age-related differences in linguistic evaluation should be done; we speculate that these arise from differences in social learning, abstract thinking ability, and the salience of words as insults.

A larger theme in these data is that, by the age they have reached at the point of their participation in this study, most children have learned something about the social norms attributed to the taboo words presented here. That is, there are very few cases of children reporting to not know the meanings of these words, at least enough to evaluate their emotional significance. We suggest that the incorporation of a younger sample of children and a more complete range of taboo words (including highly taboo words)

into future studies would meaningfully contribute to our understanding of the emergence, rather than the progression, of language values. Additionally, the social home environment, including a family's religiosity and media use habits, should be evaluated.

It should be noted that some caregiver-child pairs in this sample came from the same family, and it is possible that ratings from pairs with the same caregivers may be more similar to each other than ratings from independent pairs. Although this is a limitation of the analysis, the implication is that the estimates of the differences between older and younger children and between children and adults may be more conservative (smaller) than we might find with completely independent pairs. Finally, gender differences were not examined here, because of the small size of the sample. Future studies should examine the relationship between parent or caregiver gender (or gender of the primary caregiver, not directly assessed here) and child gender on language values, as well as the progression of the development of language values among girls and boys of a complete range of ages, considering the gender differences in production that were evident in Study 1. Regarding the latter point, the present data do not suggest strong differences in values or knowledge of semantics (e.g., the "don't know" responses came from an equal number of boys and girls), but the present study cannot be considered a definitive comment on that issue by any means.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Frequency-of-use and subjective rating studies such as those reported here are necessary to document the phenomenon of taboo language use in terms of age of emergence and gender differences. Given what we have observed so far, we are in a better position to comment on three major issues in child swearing.

How Children Use and Evaluate Taboo Language Throughout Childhood

The child frequency-of-use data yielded several meaningful observations: Very young children used taboo words, the taboo lexicon expanded rapidly between 1-2 and 3-4 years (lexicon size increased from 13 to 51 types of taboo words or phrases), and by the time children were of school age (5-6 years), they had a fairly elaborate (42-word) taboo vocabulary. Col-

lectively these data showed that even young children had experience with and knowledge of taboo words. Consistent with this, most children in the sample that made badness ratings, as young as 6 years old, knew all the words in the set enough to provide estimations of their appropriateness.

Adult and child spoken frequency data were similar in one respect: A limited number of words, repeated often, accounted for the majority of episodes of swearing. For adults, however, the set of central words was smaller, and the overall number of utterances recorded as taboo (the adult taboo lexicon) was smaller. The finding that a greater variety of taboo words and phrases were recorded from children probably arose from the manner in which adults and children used words and the manner in which our observers were instructed to record taboo words. That is, children were recorded using some words that adults did not use (e.g., *poophead*). In addition, we instructed our observers to record words or phrases that were used offensively, abusively, or insultingly, and using this method it was apparent that although children and adults may use the same words, children may have attributed an emotional force to some words that adults did not (e.g., children but not adults may have used the word *baby* as an insult). Therefore, a word present in the speech of children and adults may have appeared as a part of only the child taboo lexicon. The problem of attributing a word to a taboo lexicon makes it clear that intention and context are determining factors in a taboo word's meaning.

More age-related variance in the taboo lexicon was apparent through comparisons of frequency (rather than lexicon size). These data made it clear that adults and children used taboo words differently: Adult frequency data were better correlated with frequency data from older than younger children. Adults and children, especially young children, viewed taboo words differently in terms of their appropriateness: Younger children disagreed more with adults than did older children about what was "bad" or inappropriate. The finding that younger and older children disagreed about the inappropriateness of specific words probably reflects what they knew about the words' meanings, which is interesting considering that taboo words have primarily connotative meanings that are dependent on knowledge of "adult" issues such as human sexuality and social class (see Eble, 1996; Jay & Danks, 1977;

Wells; 1989). Studies of the development of swearing vocabulary in relation to the development of complex cognitive processes and knowledge structures can be conducted to study this issue.

It was also demonstrated that adults and children in general (ages 6–12) showed differences in evaluation of mild taboo words; specifically, children found mild taboo words more inappropriate than did adults. The latter finding gives us reason to suspect that the swearing habits and values of adolescents older than 12 years should be documented because they will continue to evidence a transition into adult forms.

Appearance of Adulthood Gender Differences in Swearing

Consistent with other data (Jay, 1992, 2000, 2009b; McEnery, 2006; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003), we saw a gender difference in adult swearing frequency, with men outswearing women, although their swearing lexica showed much overlap. Children showed the same overall gender difference in frequency, but the lexica of boys and girls were more different than those of adult men and women, as evidenced by the many points of divergence in boys' and girls' vocabularies.

The gender difference in frequency was most obvious at older ages (generally over 5 years), suggesting that the time of transition to school is when adulthood gendered habits of emotional expression become salient. More observational data clarifying the time of the emergence of adulthood gender patterns in swearing would be useful to evaluate this supposition; in addition, the means of the emergence of adulthood gender differences in taboo word use has not been addressed here. More focused research on the nature of the home versus school environment could be done to begin to study this issue. Future studies may also control the numbers of boys and girls observed; the present data do not link frequency to a consistent identity and in so doing lose information about potentially meaningful speaker variables (e.g., religion, ethnicity, employment, education). Likewise, social or physical context is not linked to swearing episodes here.

Changes in Swearing Over Time

To evaluate claims that our language habits are “getting worse” over time, we compared the present frequency estimates with those collected in the 1980s.

This was a first attempt at longitudinal study of taboo language; more work here is clearly necessary. From the comparison of adult frequency data we saw that, generally, there was much stability over time. The same gender-based frequency difference obtained across time periods, as did the structure of the taboo set (few words of high frequency, many words of low frequency) and, for the most part, the content of the lexicon. It is also noteworthy that in both the 1986 and current samples there was much similarity in the most frequently recorded words across gender.

For adults, there were two time-related differences in the taboo lexicon. First, the 1986 sample showed a significant gender difference in lexicon size, with men drawing from a larger pool of taboo words and phrases than women, whereas the current sample showed no gender difference. Second, though still significant in the current sample, the gender difference in swearing frequency was numerically less in the current than the 1986 sample. It is possible that the gender difference in taboo spoken frequency is diminishing; more data are necessary to evaluate this possibility. We speculate that, in our datasets, this effect results from a greater presence of women in our public observational contexts, for example, on college campuses and in the workforce (Toossi, 2012).

The comparison of past and current child frequency data also showed much similarity over time: An overall gender difference in frequency was observed, the structure of the frequency distribution of the taboo set was similar across time periods, and words that appeared in both time periods showed positive correlations for frequency, indicating that high-frequency words tended to remain high-frequency words and vice versa. However, as with adult data, some differences were apparent across time. The 1980s sample showed a significant difference in lexicon size, with boys drawing from a larger pool of words than girls, but no gender difference obtained in the current child data. In terms of the content of the lexicon, there was more variability across time for the child data than adult data.

It should be noted that the definition of swearing used in the 1980s counts for both children and adults was narrower; it did not include abusive expressions such as *hate you* or *don't like you*. Since the 1980s, research has shown that children are particularly vulnerable to abusive comments (see Jay, 2009a) and may

have different perceptions of them relative to adults (as we found in Study 2). Future studies of adult and child taboo speech should include abusive expressions even though they occur infrequently in public relative to other taboo words, as demonstrated here. The lack of consistency in the definition of *taboo* over the years and across samples is a limitation of these studies and should be addressed in future research; however, this limitation applies to more peripheral elements of the taboo lexicon and arguably does not undermine the larger point about the stability of the lexicon. It should also be noted that the observational techniques reported here do not control for the number of children of each age or gender observed; still, gender differences demonstrated via observational techniques have been shown to correlate positively with subjective self-reports of swearing frequency (Janschewitz, 2008; Jay, 1992). We suggest that swearing frequency is best described via convergent measures and repeated sampling, considering both the limitations of unobtrusive observational data collection and the numerous cognitive biases, demand characteristics, and other intervening factors that affect self-reported frequency estimates (Piasecki, Hufford, Solhan, & Trull, 2007).

A Note on Taboo Words as Language

Considering the universality with which they occur, children's acquisition of a taboo lexicon and taboo etiquette are normal language phenomena that occur in the context of normal cognitive and sociocultural development (see Jay, 2000). We are pointing this out explicitly in order to counter claims that swearing is unnatural, a bad habit, or not genuine language (see Jay, 2009b). One of the most striking examples from our data of swearing acquisition as a normative language phenomenon is the rapid growth in lexicon size between 1 and 4 years of age (see also Jay, 1992). During this time period boys' lexica grow from a vocabulary of 6 to 34 words, and girls' grow from 8 to 40 words. This growth in taboo words is co-emergent with a general word spurt, occurring at about age 2 years (Nelson, 1973). That is, children learn more taboo words because they are learning more words, generally speaking. At an individual word level, 1- and 2-year-olds use offensive words that are common in adult speech and words that are more characteristic

of infants' concerns about body parts and products. The extent of the taboo lexicon of the 3- to 4-year-old is impressive; children of these ages are learning name-calling and psychosocial insults, abusive language, common profanities, scatological language, and gender-related insults.

The growth in the taboo lexicon levels off at about the time children enter elementary school in the United States. This trend may reflect parenting practices combined with school conduct codes that prohibit offensive language; that is, when children enter school and are under the view of other adults, parents may worry that their children's speech reflects home practices more than when children remain at home.

Our data suggest that, because it reflects a routine part of linguistic competence, children's knowledge of taboo words is normal (see also Harrison & Hinshaw, 1968). It is also clear that child swearing can be problematic, at least in terms of social consequences (Berges, Neiderbach, Rubin, Sharpe, & Tesler, 1983; Jay, 1992; Jay, King, & Duncan, 2006). Rarely advanced is the notion that many uses of taboo words are innocuous (see Jay & Janschewitz, 2007). In the adult literature, a few recent studies have shown that the consequences of swearing are mixed: Swearing has been shown to increase pain tolerance, particularly for people with lower daily swearing frequency (Stephens, Atkins, & Kingston, 2009; Stephens & Umland, 2011), suggesting a cathartic effect, but it has also been associated with decreased emotional support and increased depression in groups of women with rheumatoid arthritis and breast cancer (Robbins et al., 2011). In general, too few normative data have been collected for us to make definitive statements about the consequences of swearing for children. Much more data from multiple contexts are necessary to substantiate the consequences of swearing in both children and adults.

Limitations and Additional Study

The issue of consistency in parent and child values deserves further study inasmuch as it can provide insight into how children learn what words are inappropriate. A larger pool of adults and children is necessary for analysis of parent-child or caregiver-child gender interactions. Children might agree more with their mothers' values than their fathers' because

mothers do the lion's share of child-rearing (Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008; Maccoby, 1998), and mothers have been found to play a more significant role than fathers in sanctioning the use of children's offensive language in the home (Jay et al., 2006). Most parents have rules prohibiting young children's swearing at home (Jay et al., 2006), although parents have different child-rearing standards depending on the gender of their children (Adams, Keubli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Gleason, 1987; Jay et al., 2006; Maccoby, 1998). Child-rearing practices that affect swearing need further explication. Relatedly, developmental differences between boys and girls may also contribute to gender differences in the progression of swearing throughout childhood. School-aged children develop different strategies to communicate with peers; for example, research indicates that girls are more sensitive than boys to the social impact of swearing on their peers, whereas boys tend to be more egocentric (Bird & Harris, 1990). More work relating swearing behavior to phases of child development is clearly necessary.

Although the studies here show that children use and can evaluate taboo words, we know little about the extent of children's semantic or pragmatic knowledge. That is, fluent adult speakers know the etiquette of swearing; they are sensitive to contextual or pragmatic variables (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, social status or occupation of listener, social occasion, physical location) that constrain taboo word use (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Locher & Watts, 2005; Thomas, 1983; Wells, 1989). One way to address this question would be to measure the physiological response to taboo words that is evidenced by adults (e.g., Jay, Caldwell-Harris, & King, 2005) in children. We also do not know the learning mechanism: Does the acquisition of the emotional meaning of a taboo word arise through a process of classical conditioning (see Jay, 2009b)? Furthermore, if we can answer these questions in the context of one's native language, we can extend this analysis to the acquisition of second-language swearing (see Dewaele, 2010). Questions may include the following: How is swearing competence in a second language related to competence in a native language? What is universal versus unique about native and nonnative swearing?

A methodological limitation across studies of taboo language and evidenced here is the lack of consistency in the definition of *taboo* over time; this is obvious when we try to match words recorded in the frequency studies here with those used in other studies of taboo language. The necessity of developing a master list of taboo words and the problem of doing so comprehensively highlights the difficulty we have defining the very heterogeneous, context- and mode-dependent category of taboo words. It is clear that we must attempt to do so systematically; longitudinal studies of language use habits and values can be better conducted as a result.

Finally, a significant limitation here and in taboo language research in general is that the sampling is limited to primarily white, middle-class speakers. Repeated sampling allowing a more realistic representation of population differences in ethnicity, religiosity, geographic region, and education (not to mention consistent longitudinal sampling) is needed to verify the conclusions we have advanced here. It is certainly needed to make broader generalizations about swearing in America. If we collect these data, we will become more able to make informed judgments about what to expect from children and adults in terms of emotional comprehension and expression, and we will be better able to judge the appropriateness of institutional language standards.

NOTE

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