

## Sex Roles and Dirty Word Usage: A Review of the Literature and a Reply to Haas

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Haas reported on sex differences in male and female speech, noting that little evidence exists to distinguish between males' and females' use of dirty words. A careful review of the literature reveals numerous empirical studies of the comparative use of dirty words. Profanity and obscenity, although somewhat difficult to control, have been and can be submitted to laboratory study. Documentation of this phenomenon requires a contextual approach, wherein various sociolinguistic factors (speaker-listener characteristics, social-physical setting, and the intent of the message) should be accounted for in both laboratory and field studies. A comparison of laboratory and field data is certainly in order for convergent validation of the process.

Recently, Haas (1979) examined evidence for differences in male and female spoken language. Her article concentrated on the aspects of form, topic, content, and use to establish these differences. One of the forms Haas noted that distinguishes male and female speech is the use of profanity, obscenity, or dirty words. Although it had been suspected for many years that males and females differ in their use of dirty words, Haas (1979) reported that little evidence exists to support this notion:

A careful review of the literature revealed no empirical studies of the comparative use of expletives. Profanity and obscenity do not readily submit to laboratory study. Documentation of this stereotype would require recording speech of female-only, male-only, and mixed-sex groups in various settings. The speakers should certainly not know they are being observed. (p. 617)

It is with this summary that I take issue. I have two main objections. First, there are a number of studies in the literature reporting differences in dirty word usage. Second, establishing whether such differences exist does not necessarily require recording colloquial speech, nor would the phenomenon have to

be studied entirely outside of the laboratory setting. I substantiate these claims later.

### Previous Evidence

Psychologists have been interested in dirty words since at least the turn of the century when Patrick (1901) published his article entitled "The Psychology of Profanity." The article was formulated in tune with the issues of the day, which were concerned with the emotional and motivational force behind the phenomenon. At only one other point has the topic of dirty words received such attention in psychological literature, and that occurred during the "perceptual defense" debate. Due to the nature of the topic more than anything else, the history of literature on the topic is curious. Generally, the subject has been ignored by psychologists. Most unfortunately, it has been ignored by those interested in psycholinguistic processes. The result is that publications that have appeared are relatively few in number, and they have appeared in a diverse population of journals, including those of other disciplines interested in language and communication. I briefly review some of these efforts, following some introductory remarks.

Sex differences in the use of dirty words have been established on both the receptive-

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decoding-comprehension aspect and the expressive-encoding-production aspect of the communicative act. Rather than limiting the discussion to only the productive aspects of speech, both aspects of communication are considered, since colloquial communication includes both speaker and listener aspects. It can be noted that there are numerous additional articles on the topic of dirty word usage where sex differences have not been reported; that is, there is much more research on dirty words than is reviewed here (see Jay, 1979, for a more complete review). I have limited the discussion to those articles in which sex of subject has been reported. Furthermore, Haas (1979), not being in the position to cite empirical evidence on the use of dirty words, found it necessary to refer instead to "individual investigators writing about their own experiences" (p. 617), for example, the work of Key (1975) and Lakoff (1975). I must agree that reliance on such data is somewhat unsettling because of the anecdotal nature of the evidence. Although there are other reports of this nature, too, I avoid anecdotal reports because as Haas has stated, they are not the kind of empirical evidence that is needed to establish sex differences. I have chosen to look at the literature from a chronological perspective, examining those articles reporting sex differences in the production or comprehension of dirty words.

### *Some Early Studies*

One of the earliest articles establishing sex differences in dirty word usage was Steadman's (1935) study on verbal taboos. Steadman asked his students to compile lists of various types of taboo speech. In the most offensive category, *coarse or obscene speech*, he reported that males provided more of these words than females on their respective lists. Following Steadman's research, Hunter and Gaines (1938) asked college students and faculty members to provide ratings of a word list containing many of the words from Steadman's original lists. The students and faculty were asked to indicate how they used words on a scale with anchors of "freely" and "never." Hunter and Gaines found that

females were more restrained in usage than males and that freshmen showed more restraint than seniors or faculty members. Although the methodology of these studies is open to criticism, they nevertheless indicate underlying differences in the ways that males and females use dirty words.

### *Perceptual Defense*

The next and only major area of concern within psychology about dirty word usage appeared in the perceptual defense literature of the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1949 McGinnies reported on a now famous study wherein he presented neutral and emotional or taboo words to subjects via tachistoscope. He measured both the subjects' word recognition thresholds and galvanic skin response (GSR). The major finding, generating later research, was that the emotional words took longer to perceive and that subjects had higher prerecognition GSR levels in comparison with the levels for the neutral words. Hence, the subjects were assumed to be defending against the perception of the threatening stimuli. McGinnies also reported that males had lower thresholds for both the neutral and emotional words in comparison with females. With only a few exceptions, most of the subsequent research on the topic delved into questions of perceptual bias, response bias, stimulus control or other methodological issues (see Dixon, 1971, or Erdelyi, 1974, for reviews). Some of those exceptions, pertinent to the present issue are presented later.

Postman, Bronson, and Gropper (1953) examined McGinnies' (1949) reported sex differences in visual thresholds. At the same time, they required their subjects to report in writing rather than orally. Postman et al., having equated all words for frequency of occurrence, found lower thresholds for the taboo words. Interestingly, with the written format, they also found that females had higher recognition thresholds than males when taboo words were presented. Only a few studies after Postman et al. used methods presenting taboo stimuli and examining sex differences in performance. Nothman (1962) examined the strategies employed by both McGinnies and Postman et al. by testing both

stimulus differences and response mode. Recognition thresholds were recorded, and oral versus written response modes were compared using male and female subjects. Females under these constraints showed significantly greater mean differences between neutral and taboo word recognition time than males. Oral reports resulted in significantly greater mean differences between taboo and neutral words than did the written method. However, the interaction of sex and mode was not significant. Thus, Nothman confirmed the previous sex differences and the differences in response mode with taboo words.

Additional research using the perceptual defense methodology was conducted by Grosser and his colleagues (Grosser & Laczek, 1963; Grosser & Walsh, 1966). Grosser and Laczek responded to both stimulus and subject dimensions of the perceptual defense debate. They used male and female college students with either parochial or secular secondary educational backgrounds to examine utterance latencies to taboo, aggressive, and neutral words. They found slower responses to the taboo words, as compared with the other types, and this effect was more pronounced for the parochial females than any other subjects. The stimulus effect was least pronounced for the secular female. Later, Grosser and Walsh (1966) examined this "repression" by studying sex differences not in recognition but with recall of taboo and neutral words. Male and female college students were tested for recall of both types of words, and results showed that females consistently scored higher than males on the recall of neutral words, but males recalled more taboo words. In fact, males recalled more taboo than neutral words, and females recalled more neutral than taboo words. Thus, using a recall rather than a recognition memory process, they demonstrated sex differences in the use of dirty words. At about the same time, Miller and Solkoff (1965) studied the effects of response mode and experimenter sex on recognition thresholds of taboo words. They found that males, who responded orally, had significantly higher thresholds for taboo words for both male and female experimenters. In writing their responses, there were no stimulus differences for the males. For the

females, there were no significant stimulus or experimenter sex effects. Thus, their conclusion was that perceptual defense existed only in the males and only when the males responded orally. This finding of male rather than female defensiveness stands in contrast to the previous studies on the use of dirty words.

Following the perceptual defense era, there is no general category of research in which sex differences in dirty word usage could fall. Because the research is diverse and somewhat scattered, what exist are clusters of concern on a variety of topics, and sometimes these contributions remain divorced from any mainstream of research. These articles are discussed below.

### *Jokes and Stories*

Only within the last decade has humor found its way into the laboratory of psychology, and it will probably generate more research than dirty words because it can be made less offensive. Sex of subject as well as age and personality variables have been the source of interesting differences in the humor response. Haas (1979) reported Coser's (1960) evidence that males exhibit the authority over joke telling, whereas females play a receptive rather than an expressive role. It should also be mentioned that several additional studies on humor, in which differences have been reported, appear in the work of Chapman and Foot (1976, 1977) and McGhee (1979). Chapman and Foot, especially in the later volume, and McGhee reported studies explicitly examining sexual joke material and sex differences that are of interest to the investigator concerned with sex differences and language usage.

Differences in humor responses using dirty word jokes have also been demonstrated by Abbott and Jay (in press). Abbott and Jay were interested in the effect of different word types used in joke punch lines on the humor response. In one study male and female college students rated jokes containing taboo (e.g., fuck) versus technical (e.g., coitus) wording on a funniness scale. The general hypothesis was that the more taboo the word,

the more arousal it creates to be relieved by the humor response. Hence, the dirtier the joke, the funnier it should be. Males found the jokes with taboo wording funnier than those with the technical wording. For females, there were no differences in funniness as a function of wording. In another experiment students were asked to fill in the blank of a punch line with the word that would make the joke as funny as possible. Males responded with twice as many taboo responses as technical responses, but females selected an equal number of taboo and technical responses. In these studies males confirmed the affect-arousal-resolution hypothesis, but females did not. Thus, the humor response to jokes using dirty words provides additional evidence of sex differences in dirty word usage.

Recently, Sutton-Smith and Abrams (1978) examined spontaneously reported narrative fictions from 5- to 11-year-old children. In this examination of childhood sexuality, they were interested in the presence of overt psychosexual elements in the stories. They found that boys selected psychosexual or obscene stories in great proportion, whereas girls told only "romance" stories. These results are particularly interesting because of the spontaneous nature of the method used and the age of the subjects, supporting the contention that sex differences in the production of dirty words are found at an early age.

Sex differences in the use of the verbal game of "sounding" or "playing the dozens" have also been reported by Abrahams (1962). In 2 years of research in South Philadelphia, Abrahams indicated that these games of hurling insults at a member of another's family occurred only in groups of boys. Females did not play these games. Similarly, Lerman (1967) reported male dominance in the use of argot, slang, and swearing when he examined the records of juvenile delinquents.

Taken together, these data provide evidence of sex differences in joking, insulting, and story telling, where the use of dirty words is the major variable of interest. These data support the stereotype that males dominate in these activities and that males and females use expletives in these phenomena in different manners.

### *Rating and Reporting Dirty Words*

In this section those studies employing methodology in which subjects are asked to rate dirty words on various dimensions, free associate to certain word stimuli, or directly report exemplars of dirty words are discussed. These studies vary widely in methodology but nonetheless point out some common sex differences in dirty word usage.

Schill, Emanuel, Pederson, Schneider, and Wachowiak (1970) examined the personality variables of repression, sensitization, and defensiveness in relation to male subjects' free association to sexual double entendres (e.g., screw). Subjects, tested by either a male or female experimenter, showed greatest sexual responsiveness to the male experimenter and greatest inhibition to the female. No significant personality differences were found with the female experimenter. For subjects tested by the male, however, those low in defensiveness showed the highest level of sexual responsiveness, compared with those rated high in defensiveness. Since no comparative data were obtained with female subjects, it is not known whether these findings were indicative of any underlying sex differences or only the personality dimensions in question. Later, Milner and Moses (1972) noticed the methodological weakness in the Schill et al. study and crossed sex of subject with sex of experimenter in the free-association task. They found no significant differences in terms of response frequency or flagrancy when subjects were tested by the same-sex experimenter. However, when tested by the opposite sex, males' sexual responsiveness was significantly inhibited by the female experimenter. Further, the female subjects, when tested by the male, had significantly lower sexual responsiveness than any other subject-experimenter group in the experiment. These results are suggestive of the type of Sex of Subject  $\times$  Experimenter interaction that has been obtained in this type of dirty word research and must be attended to in future research.

Sex differences have also been found when subjects are asked to either report examples of dirty words or respond to stimulus words. Some of the results are similar to those men-

tioned earlier where sex of subject interactions are obtained and females are generally more inhibited (or males are less inhibited) in responding. Using an open-ended responding technique, Foote and Woodward (1973) asked college students to report examples of obscene words either in writing or orally on tape. Males in this experiment produced more examples of dirty words than females, and this tendency was more pronounced with the oral report than the written one. Kutner and Brogan (1974) obtained similar results when they asked college students to list slang expressions for a group of sex-related stimulus words. They found the following results: (a) Males listed more word responses than females, (b) females' religious involvement and traditional sex role orientation was inversely related to extensiveness of a sex-slang vocabulary, and (c) there was more "sex-exploitation" imagery (males dominating or exploiting females in sexual interactions) in males' slang vocabularies than females'. Using a similar method, Walsh and Leonard (1974) asked subjects to list synonyms for the term *sexual intercourse*. Similar to the findings of Kutner and Brogan, they found that (a) males listed more terms than females; (b) females listed a higher percentage of technical (e.g., coitus) words than males; (c) females were more likely to use euphemisms like "make love," consistent with the idea that love rather than sex is the reason to have intercourse; and (d) both males and females indicated on a survey that they used dirty words to a greater degree with the same-sex company than with mixed company.

Mabry (1975) factor analyzed subjects' ratings of how likely they were to use sexual vernacular. Five factors were derived: sexual obscenity, technical expressions, personally defaming words, body words, and euphemisms. A multivariate analysis of variance further revealed a main effect for sex of subject and Sex  $\times$  Religious Belief interaction. Females with a strong religious belief indicated that they would use abrasive sexual obscenity significantly less than males. Males evincing strong religious beliefs had lower use ratings for euphemistic terms than other males or females. Not only has this type of study provided further sex differences, but

the additional analysis by word type demonstrates the need to examine individual words with regard to sex differences as well.

More recently, Halaby and Long (1979) surveyed college students' attitudes toward the use of dirty words in a variety of contexts. Data showed that males tended to use the more profane (or four-letter) words in the context of other males, and females used more in the context of other females. However, freshman males were more inhibited in some contexts of usage than either freshman or sophomore females. Although these studies vary widely in methodology, they converge on the fact that females and males differ in dirty word usage under laboratory-controlled conditions.

#### *A Note on the Universality of the Phenomenon*

One area of general interest in sociology and anthropology is that of ethnolinguistics, applied in the present case to the examination of the differential or universal use of dirty words. There are numerous articles on the topic of dirty words in other cultures. Only a few of them have focused on sex differences within these cultures. Devereaux (1951) studied the Mohave Indians and provided evidence of sex differences in the use of profanity, cursing, and obscene gesturing. Bernard (1975), studying the Otomi of Mexico, found that sexual and scatological obscene humor were male-dominated pursuits. Finally, Flynn (1976) reported on the universality of sexual insults and showed that these sex differences in insulting behavior vary from culture to culture. Thus, sex differences are not only found within our own culture, but evidence has been found that these differences also exist in others too.

#### *Some Real Evidence*

Haas's (1979) comment that recording of colloquial speech was required cannot be denied by those interested in dirty word usage in the real world. The need for in situ recording of communication is also important for many types of linguistic analyses on a variety of topics with various speakers and

listeners. Because the methodology of recording in the field is laborious, time-consuming, and at times frustrating, very few of these studies have emerged on any psycholinguistic topics, let alone dirty word usage. Although studies have reported the use of dirty words in conversations (Cameron, 1969; Howes, 1966; Jay, 1980), only one study has explicitly examined sex differences obtained under such circumstances. Gallahorn (1971) recorded the number and type of taboo words used in psychiatric ward personnel staff meetings. He reported that certain types of words were used exclusively by males (e.g., balls, hot pants, laid, and piece of ass) and other words were used exclusively by females (e.g., broad, come, fuck, pimp, shack up, slut, and wet dream) in the meetings. Considerable variation for individuals both in the type of taboo word that they used and the frequency of usage was also reported. Interestingly, in contrast to Coser's (1960) work on laughter, no hierarchical pattern in swearing was found among the staff. Gallahorn also questioned the staff members about dirty word usage, and some additional sex differences were noted. There were no overall sex differences for "discomfort" ratings for *hearing* cursing or genital words. Males reported no significant differences for *saying* either of these types of words either. However, females were significantly more uncomfortable saying genital words than curses or anal words.

The Gallahorn (1971) study is certainly one of the recording or field-type studies that Haas would recommend to establish evidence on male and female differences in spoken language. Perhaps the previously mentioned studies by both Sutton-Smith and Abrams (1978) and Abrahams (1962) are also of this real or natural type and should be considered under the present heading also.

#### Future Evidence

It is certainly true that those interested in developmental, personality, psycholinguistic, social, and therapeutic research would benefit from more knowledge about how people use dirty words in conversation. Whether or not sex differences are of primary importance, dirty word research, as other language re-

search, should be conducted both in situ and in the laboratory. Although dirty word processes do provide some difficulties for laboratory study, the research discussed earlier and other investigations on dirty words indicated that these processes have been and can be studied in the laboratory using a number of different methods. These laboratory data should be compared with natural recordings when available for validation purposes. Some suggested uniformity for both laboratory and field study follows.

#### *A Contextual Approach*

Previously, pitfalls of doing research with dirty words have been described, and some remedies have been offered (Jay, 1977). Many of these researchers remain in agreement with others, including Haas, who are doing research on psycholinguistic processes. Those interested in language processes, especially dirty word usage, need to be aware of and account for the impact of contextual variables on those processes under investigation. I doubt that the present phenomenon can be completely understood without reference to information about speakers, listeners, social and physical surroundings, the topic of discussion, and the intent of the message. Attending to these data provides the context that is needed to understand how and why people use dirty words.

In my most recent research project (Jay & Burke, Note 1) subjects' laboratory ratings and semantic interpretations of dirty words are compared with a corpus of spontaneously produced utterances. The utterances were recorded by student assistants in and around the college campus whenever dirty words were used. In addition to the utterances, contextual variables (the age, sex, and number of speakers and/or listeners, as well as location and manner of speaking) are noted. When compared with laboratory data, these field data provide the type of validity check on laboratory data that the study of dirty word processing requires.

Haas (1979) was correct in alerting us to the potential for problems in laboratory investigations of dirty word usage. This does not mean, however, that the phenomenon can-

not be studied empirically in the laboratory. What investigators must do is elucidate the variables that affect dirty word usage in the laboratory and design their research accordingly, with attention to how sensitive peoples' dirty word usage is to these contextual variables. The final strategy with regard to dirty words is to compare these and other laboratory findings with field recordings of natural conversations where the appropriate contextual influences have been noted.

### *A Linguistic Component*

Besides the contextual or sociolinguistic aspects of dirty word usage, a linguistic analysis will be beneficial not only to examine the possible sex differences involved but to establish the major phonological, semantic, and syntactic constraints on dirty word language. At some point the comparison of dirty word usage will need to be made. One problem at this point is that very little linguistic research on dirty words has appeared in either linguistic or psycholinguistic literature. Zwicky, Salus, Binnick, and Vanek (1971), in a light-hearted vein, provide some interesting insights into linguistic constraints on dirty word usage. Taylor (1975), in a more serious attempt, has given a linguistic analysis of swearing in Australian English. More recently, Jay and Danks (1977) examined the effect of the semantic meaning of dirty words on prenominal adjective ordering. To date, however, there has been no overall attempt to analyze dirty word usage from a linguistic point of view. Perhaps these studies will provide some basis for future work. Otherwise, a complete understanding of dirty word usage and sex differences will be incomplete even if buttressed with adequate contextual information.

### Conclusion

Although Haas (1979) did not find evidence of sex differences in males' and females' use of dirty words, a review of the literature revealed numerous reports of sex differences. Differences were obtained in experiments focusing on frequency of usage, type of words used, recognition time, memory, jokes, story-

telling, insulting, and various types of word-rating studies. Ethnolinguistic reports indicate the universality of the phenomenon.

To provide a basis for future investigation, a model of dirty word usage based on contextual variables (speaker-listener relation, social-physical setting, and topic of discussion) was suggested, since dirty word usage is particularly sensitive to these forces. There is also a need to continue examining dirty word usage in the laboratory while collecting data from natural settings, as Haas suggested. A comparison of these two sets of data provides for a more accurate interpretation of results. A knowledge of how we use dirty words will prove intriguing to any of us working in clinical, developmental, personality, psycholinguistic, or social-psychological areas.

### Reference Note

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