

Taboo language essay sample

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



All languages have words that are considered taboo – words that are not supposed to be said or used. Taboo words or swearwords, can be used in many different ways and they can have different meanings depending on what context they appear in. Another aspect of taboo words is the euphemisms that are used in order to avoid obscene speech. This paper will focus on the f-word which replaces the word fuck, and as the study will show it also have other meanings and usages. First, it is a fact that from now on the use of curse words have become part of male and female's everyday language. No longer is it uncommon to hear a person use an offensive word to express their emotions. Not only is it unusual to hear in general, but it has become normal to hear cursed words that can be either obscene or profane. These two words do not mean exactly the same thing but are both considered as taboo. Not to be extremely precise but just to give a general insight, obscene depicts or describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive way, while broadly, the word profane refers to irreverence towards God or holy things, particularly to the blasphemous use of the name of God.

So it seems that what first refers to foul language actually gathered together blasphemy and an unholy manner to talk about sex, that is to say that both words clearly appear to be linked to religion. No matter whether they are profane words (ex. Damn or hell) or obscene words (ex. Motherfucker, cunt, pussy or wanker) they are all considered as part of taboo language. Yet, this kind of language, these forbidden words undergo some change through time because their use depend on the people and their culture. Furthermore, as the time goes, new data enter into account as the difference in use between genders for instance: is girls using less bad words than boys?

It has come to my attention through the media and listening or participating in everyday conversations that cursing has become something that was once a taboo to socially acceptable for both male and female. So, first, to begin with, we shall search and understand the meaning of the word “taboo”. A taboo (təˈbuː, tæˈbuː) is a vehement prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behaviour is either too sacred or too accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake, under threat of supernatural punishment. Such prohibitions are present in virtually all societies and all cultures. The word has been somewhat expanded in the social sciences to include strong prohibitions relating to any area of human activity or custom that is sacred or forbidden based on moral judgment and religious beliefs. Thus, what counts as taboo language is something define by culture, and not by anything inherent in the language. Etymology:

The term “taboo” comes from the Tongan tapu or Fijian tabu (“prohibited”, “disallowed”, “forbidden”), related among others to the Maori tapu. Its English use dates to 1777 when the British explorer James Cook visited Tonga and made a linguistic discovery: the term taboo. Describing the Tongans’ cultural practices, he wrote: Not one of them would sit down, or eat a bit of anything.... On expressing my surprise at this, they were all taboo, as they said; which word has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden and When anything is forbidden to be eaten, or made use of, they say, that it is taboo. So the term firstly meant “to forbid”, or something “forbidden” and was then translated to Cook as “consecrated, inviolable, forbidden, unclean or cursed”, eventually it was described by Europeans in use as “the common expression when anything is

not to be touched”. Moreover, the Tongans used tabu as an adjective. Cook, besides borrowing the word into English, also made it into a noun referring to the prohibition itself and a verb meaning “ to make someone or something taboo.” From its origins in Polynesia the word taboo has traveled as widely as Cook himself and is now used throughout the English-speaking world meaning anything improper, forbidden and unacceptable by society. Thus, taboo words -or what can be called foul language- are words prescribed by culture as being “ off limits.” And the use of this taboo or stigmatized language is usually associated with strong emotions.

Then, considered as a very emotional person, it is true that I am a frequent and long time user of the f-word, so I will attempt to explain this unique and fascinating word in a different light by showing the etymology, written history, the amazingly flexible use this word has in grammar and the way it is used or not used in media. First of all, it seems that the actual root of the word is very unclear. It is impossible to say precisely when it appeared because so little documentary evidence exists, probably due to the fact that the word was so taboo throughout its early history that people were afraid to write it down. The first recorded use of the word is before 1500 in the English/Latin satirical poem *Flen Flyys* “ Non Sunt in celi quia fuccant uuiuys of hely” meaning they are not in heaven because they fuck the wives of Ely. Others claim the first known use of fuck is in a Scottish poem by William Dunbar, *Ane Brash of Wowing*, in 1503. However, it took nearly another century for fuck to make its lexicographic debut in John Florio’s 1598 Italian-English dictionary.

Finally, it seems that fuck remotely derived from the Latin future and Old German ficken/fucken meaning to “strike or penetrate”, which had the slang meaning “to copulate”. Indeed, there is evident connection to German in the word “ficken” meaning “to copulate” in dialects and “to strike” historically speaking. Moreover, there are also cognates in other Germanic languages such as Dutch “fokken” meaning “to copulate or thrust”, Norwegian “fukka” meaning “to copulate” and the Swedish “fock” meaning “penis”. As far as the acronyms of the Puritans “For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge” and the edict of King George “Fornication Under Consent of King”, all are myths as the words never appeared before 1960s according to the authoritative work, *The F-Word* by Jesse Sheidlower. The history of the F-word is very deep actually; it can be traced to 1250 to the proper name, John le Fucker according to John Ayto’s *Dictionnary of Word Origins*. Though what John did to earn this name is unknown.

Furthermore, I found a document on the internet, saying that the origin of the f-word dates back to the Greek age. It is said that it comes from the Greek verb φύω and more particularly from the root phu, an agricultural term which literally means “to plant seeds”. This word was then adopted by the Romans who changed the Latin root phu to fu, and the noun fututio soon became part of the Roman vernacular. This noun “fututio” is an example of what linguists refer to as a “frequentative” because this word describes repeated action –dropping seeds into a furrow one after another, after another. And soon, the Roman elegiac poets got hold of the word at a time when erotic love poetry was all the rage in Rome. “Fututio” thus became a metaphor for planting a particular kind of seed in a specific kind of furrow.

Ovid used that word, that kind of language, in his poem the *Ars Amatoria* or the Art of Love which main theme was how to pick chicks in ancient Rome. This literary debauchery was considered too vulgar and ultimately offensive to the emperor Augustus who had poor Ovid exiled around the Black Sea.

Nonetheless, even if we can semantically understand the Greco-Latin etymology of the word, it is very doubtfully phonetically because how a /t/ in Latin “fution” could become a /k/ in Germanic “ficken” –it seems very unlikely. “Fuck”, only four letters long, not only has sexual connotations but it can also describe pleasure, pain, love and hate, that is to say many situations: Greetings “How the fuck are you?”, Fraud “I was fucked by the Macdonalds Drive Through”, Aggression “Fuck you!”, Confusion “What the fuck?”, Difficulty “I don’t understand this fucking thing” and Incompetence “He fucks up everything”... And so many more. Fuck is a highly varied word. In fact, in language, “fuck” falls into many grammatical categories: Grammatically, it can be anything. It can be a transitive verb, for instance: “John fucked Shirley”, or an intransitive verb; “Shirley fucks”. It’s meaning is not always sexual; it can be used as a noun: “I don’t give a fuck”, it can be used as an adjective: “John is doing all the fucking work”; as part of an adverb: “Shirley speaks too fucking much”; as an adverb enhancing an adjective: “Shirley is fucking beautiful”; and eventually it can be used as part of a word: “abso-fucking-lutely”; and as almost every word in the sentence: “Fuck the fucking fuckers”.

This, of course, tells us nothing about the etymology of the word; yet it is a commentary on the impressive range of usages the word has acquired over

time. The numerous grammatical variations and the creative uses of the word can boggle the mind. The problem of this word is thus not the definition but the acceptable time and place to draw upon it. First of all, on the one hand, the f-word was for a long time regarded as quite vulgar and offensive because it describes love making in a very unholy manner. However, on the other hand, the word sex was not and still is not an offensive word, and was and still is used in normal conversations and writing. Indeed, according to psycholinguists, its taboo was likely due to people's deep subconscious feeling about sex. The taboo was even so strong that it compelled many to engage in self-censorship. Through time though, it seems that fuck has first overcome banning in literature and created confusion in the correct usage in the positive and negative connotation. In literature, James Joyce published the word fuck in his book *Ulysses* in 1922, and D. H. Lawrence first published it in 1928 in his novel *Lady Chatterley's lover*. Besides, slang meanings and expressions began to be widely used during and after World War 2.

It became part of the slang vocabulary of many veterans, and spread from them to students and friends. By the 1960s people became aware of that word, though it might have remained one of the worst words in the world for the lower-middle class, while it was in everyday use for the educated middle class. So it seems that it is not until the 1970s that the word spreads so much that it even started to be used on television. For instance, in 1965 Kenneth Tynan was the first person to say fuck on British television, an act which was still controversial at the time. Soon, there were not only famous writers who used the f-word, cabinet ministers, academics, surgeons and so on joyously embraced the word. And it went on in 1976 with the Sex Pistols

who famously used the word on Thames Today and in the 1994 film Four Weddings and a Funeral and more particularly Hugh Grant's opening and his fusillade of fucks. Eventually, fuck was not only limited to comedians and singers who used the word greatly in their lyrics but little by little also appeared in radio, newspapers, magazines... According to the British National Corpus (BNC), the word fuck is more commonly spoken than written but it did spread and began to appear in fiction –as we saw above-, magazines and newspapers.

In fact, as I found in the corpus, the Guardian is more likely to quote it than other newspapers which are more cautious about it. The Independent itself also uses the f-word even if it is not as commonly used as in the Guardian. Indeed, the print media continues to agonize over the appropriate use of the word today. Similarly, most English-speaking countries still censor it on radio and television. Reference to or use of the word fuck in press may often be replaced by any many alternative words or phrases including “ the F-word” or “ the F-bomb” or simply eff –as in “ what the eff!” For instance, the f-word, and many more curse words, is massively used in the American TV shows, but they are all censored by some “ bip” while people speak. It is actually said that the word's use is considered obscene in social contexts, but may be common in informal and domestic situations. That is why it is more usual to read the f-word in British magazines –Esquire magazines or The Face- than in British newspapers. It is unclear whether the word has always been considered vulgar, and if not, when it first came to be used to describe (often in an extremely angry, hostile or belligerent manner) unpleasant circumstances or people in an intentionally offensive way, such as in the

term motherfucker, one of its more common usages in some parts of the English-speaking world.

In the modern English-speaking world, the word fuck is often considered highly offensive that is why most English-speaking countries censor it on television and radio. A study of the attitudes of the British public found that fuck was considered the third most severe profanity and its derivative motherfucker second. Cunt was considered the most severe. Some have argued that the prolific usage of the word fuck has de-vulgarized it, an example of the “ dysphemism treadmill.” Despite its offensive nature, the word is common in popular usage. In fact, there is research from Yehuda Baruch, professor of management at University of East Anglia that says that swearing at work helps build teamwork. And Timothy Jay, professor of psychology at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, finds that using taboo words is a good stress reliever. In his paper, Ubiquity and Utility of Taboo Words, surveys show that when we are upset, instead of restraining our language to vent, we actually do feel better when we swear. Swearing and cursing are modes of speech existing in all human languages. They perform certain social and psychological functions, and utilize particular linguistic.

I’m thus just wondering, is it really being used with greater frequency because it has lost some of its shock value and people have become more accepting of it as has been the case with some other words? Or I’m also wondering if it is the passing of the older generations that may lead to more acceptance of the word. For some people, the increasing use of swearwords in modern language will always be a source of despair. DuFrene and Lehman

call for an end to profanity, claiming that it can damage a person's image or create an unfriendly and abusive workplace.

On the other hand, McEnery and Xiao accept that swearing is simply a “ part of everyday language use”. They now recognise that swearing can have positive and negative functions within interactions that is why most people seem to have accepted this word in their everyday life. While some people seek to control the use of profanities within certain environments, swearing is viewed by others as a tool that “ promotes bonding and rapport” As we have already said, while the use of swearwords occurs in written and spoken language, it generally occurs more frequently in speech, because it is a more informal mode of communication or people are more likely to verbalise emotions through the use of expletives. The purpose of this research report is to measure the frequency of the use of the word fuck and its morphological variants in spoken British and American English and to determine whether the Americans use the term more aggressively than the British First, each corpus was searched for the following words: fuck; fucking; fuck up; fucker and fucked.

Search BNC COCA

Word (spoken) (spoken)

Fuck 579 5

Fucking 2162 4

Fuck up 13 1

Fucker 22 0

Fucked 63 0

TOTAL 2839 10

Table 1: Frequency of Occurrence of Search Words in Corpora

These results show a significant difference in the frequency of usage of the word fuck between British and American English. British people seem more likely to use the f-word than Americans. Then, I chose to categorise the occurrences of fuck according to Wajnryb to find out the different way it is used in context by British and American people: Abusive swearing, directed towards others;

Insult, abuse directed at others with the intent to insult;

Dysphemism, using an offensive term in place of an inoffensive one;

Expletive, a passionate exclamation.

Classifications COCA BNC Category of Swearing

Abusive 3 2 Dysphemism 4 6 Expletive 2 1 Insult 1 1 Table 2: Results of Classifications

The results indicate a significant difference between the way British and American speakers use fuck to manage rapport. Although, both cultures tend to use the word as a dysphemism rather than an abuse, insult or an expletive. The results of this research do confirm that there is a difference in the usage of swearwords between British and American English. The obscenity fuck seems to be much more prevalent in British English than in American English. These findings also indicate that a difference in taboos exists between the two cultures, although further research would need to be carried out to determine what those differences might be. But, it clearly

seems that the frequency usage of the f-word increased depending on the context in the British and American oral speech.

To conclude, even if some people still find the f-word so taboo that they self-censored themselves, it seems to be more commonly used nowadays because others have become more accepting of it. Fuck no longer has the same shocking value as before. Nevertheless, it is more often used in oral speech and in informal situations than in written and social contexts where it still appears as obscene. Indeed, culture and context remain significant factors regarding the use of the word.