

How taboo are taboo words for girls?

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ABSTRACT

In the past five years, there has been much interest in the question of whether women are really as concerned about politeness and status as they have been made out to be by such writers as Baroni and D'Urso (1984), Crosby and Nyquist (1977), Lakoff (1973), Spender (1980), and Trudgill (1972). Despite the commonly held perception that it is only males who bandy about derogatory and taboo words (Bailey 1985; Flexner 1975), Risch (1987) provided counterevidence based on data obtained in the United States. The results of the present study, based on data obtained in South Africa, strongly support her findings and challenge the assumption that women stick to standard speech, citing evidence that young females are familiar with, and use, a wide range of highly taboo/slang items themselves. In particular, attention is devoted to the question of pejorative words applicable to males and females, respectively, and the view that there are only a few pejorative terms commonly used to describe males (particularly by females) is challenged. (Women's language, politeness, linguistic taboo, stereotypes, slang, expletives, prestige forms).

Linguistic taboos exist in most cultures, tabooed words generally being culture-specific and relating to bodily functions or aspects of a culture that are sacred. Such words are avoided, considered inappropriate, and loaded with affective meaning. Women, seen as aspiring to prestigious "ladylike" behavior, have long been regarded as upholding such taboos and avoiding nonstandard or "dirty" words in particular.

In a study (de Klerk 1990) carried out on English-speaking South African adolescents in order to ascertain their command and use of slang, some interesting results emerged that demand that comfortable theories about "nice," nonswearing females are long overdue for reconsideration. Regardless of the reasons for current shifts in usage (de Klerk 1991), it would seem that change is in the air. Results of the present article conform nicely with results ob-

tained by Risch (1987), based on North American data: Females do use derogatory language and appear to be doing so in increasing numbers. The fact that the same trends have been noticed in speech communities that are worlds apart is of particular interest.

In this study, it is suggested that the stereotype that males are typically slang users and females slang eschewers may not be accurate and that the well-documented lexical bias of derogatory words referring to females (Greer 1971; Lawrence 1974) that exists in the English language is not matched in mental lexicons of individual speakers, who give evidence of a bias in *favor* of females.

Analysis of the data discussed in this article reveals results that strongly contradict the fact that attitudes favor males, not females, as users of slang. Such a discrepancy between reported attitude and actual practice is an instance of a phenomenon that is of general sociolinguistic importance.

DESCRIBING MALES AND FEMALES

Lexical bias?

Greer (1971) noted the growth in pejorative terms applicable to women in English, particularly in the semantic areas of illicit/casual sex, food, pretty toy words, and animal terms. Lawrence (1974) noted the same trend of more contemptuous terms that derogate females rather than males. Legman (1968), in an analysis of dirty jokes, also noted the preponderance of lexical sexism against females (see also Miller & Swift 1978; Schulz 1975; Stanley 1975). It seems that there are many more unfavorable terms in English for females, in conformity with the theory of semantic derogation of words that relate in any way to socially powerless groups (Western females traditionally belong in this category). But does the existence of such a lexical imbalance mean that there is also an imbalance in the *knowledge of* and *use* of such terms? We need to find out, for example, whether speakers know these words and whether males use them *more* than females.

Slang and who uses it

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines slang as “a style of language rather than a level of formality . . . the distinguishing feature . . . is the intention – however often unsuccessful – to produce rhetorical effect, such as incongruity, irreverence or exaggeration” (1969:xlvi). It is commonly agreed that slang serves many diverse functions, often determined by context alone: to show disrespect for authority, to be witty or humorous, to show solidarity by the use of a shared code, or to exclude others who do not use the code: “the chief use of slang is to show that you’re one of the gang” (Crystal 1987:53).

According to Dumas and Lighter (1978:14–15), slang markedly lowers the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing, its use implies the user's special familiarity with either the referent or the usual users of the term, and it is normally tabooed by those with higher status or responsibility.

Being recognized as a group phenomenon, associated with group identity, particularly in the subcultures of youth, slang is generally a low-prestige variety. Ryan (1979), in investigating the persistence of low-prestige varieties, found that the value of a variety for solidarity and identification with a group can often outweigh considerations of prestige, status, or social advancement. In other words, it carries a covert prestige value within subcultures, which makes it highly desirable to the members of that community.

Most writers on slang report males as slang users, females as slang eschewers (Bailey 1985) (which is not to be confused with a statement that there are more slang terms for females than for males). Higher levels of slang usage by males may well be attributable to the fact that use of slang often implies a high level of confidence, which is a typically male attribute in Western society. Also, male peer groups are a great deal larger, more hierarchical, and more competitive than female groups (Romaine 1984), which are smaller, more intimate, and do not value "verbal posturing" as much. This fact also leads one to expect greater overall slang usage by males. Jespersen (1922) and Milward (1937:1) supported this view and so do more recent exponents on the subject, notably Flexner, who said: "most American slang is created and used by males . . . the majority of entries in this dictionary could be labelled 'primarily masculine use'" (Flexner & Wentworth 1975:xii). The title of a recent article in *English Usage in SA* ("Some South African Schoolboyisms" [1989:14–18]) implied the same view: Females do not use slang.

Despite this pattern of commentary on slang-users, Staley (1978) found unexpected similarity in usage of expletives by male and female students, and Risch (1987) also provided interesting counterevidence to this claim, reporting a surprisingly high number of "dirty" or derogatory words used by middle-class female informants to refer to men. The results of the present study also reveal unusually high levels of usage by females.

The experiment

This study reports on one aspect of an experiment carried out on 160 English-speaking informants from schools in and around Grahamstown who were all requested to complete (anonymously) a questionnaire on slang. An equal number of informants came from Stds. 6 and 9, pupils in Std. 6 falling in the 12–14 year age group and those in Std. 9 in the 15–17 year age group. Informants were asked to write down as many synonymous slang terms in the semantic fields of entertainment and eating as they could, corresponding to 23 key words (which focused on drinking, smoking, the opposite sex, and school, all areas known for their abundance of slang). The aim of the

TABLE 1. *Range of responses and response totals for each key word*

Key word	Range	Number	Key word	Range	Number
<i>nice/enjoyable</i>	62	401	<i>pimples</i>	30	195
<i>effeminate male</i>	58	318	<i>party</i>	22	193
<i>drunk</i>	57	295	<i>handsome male</i>	35	176
<i>pretty female</i>	55	258	<i>ugly male</i>	54	174
<i>ugly female</i>	50	259	<i>to fail</i>	18	172
<i>kiss/cuddle</i>	35	255	<i>to be in love</i>	31	168
<i>unpleasant female</i>	45	248	<i>alcohol</i>	31	165
<i>cigarettes</i>	53	244	<i>skip class</i>	16	125
<i>teacher's pet</i>	39	237	<i>work hard</i>	22	89
<i>to eat</i>	26	224	<i>prefects</i>	33	77
<i>unpleasant man</i>	55	220	<i>clothes</i>	16	71
<i>to vomit</i>	22	213			

exercise was primarily to ascertain which groups (e.g., male or female, young or old, government or private school pupils) had the largest slang vocabulary. At no stage was it assumed that knowledge of a slang item implied actual habitual use thereof, but it was interpreted as an indication of exposure to the term, a vague understanding of the term's meaning, and association of some sort with its users.

In addition, an attempt was made to ascertain the views of informants regarding whether they considered the use of slang as appropriate or fitting for various subgroups (girls, women, men, etc.). The consistency of opinion across all groupings of informants was remarkable, and rating results highlighted the profound influence of stereotypes on attitudes. Young adolescent males were seen as the most appropriate slang users by all informants, which is highly suggestive of what the "popular myth" is. Society implicitly condones male use of slang, but females revealed a guilty, self-condemnatory, and narrow-minded perception of the issue.

The present article examines actual responses to selected items of the questionnaire that elicited words referring to the opposite sex. The questions addressed are whether there are reliable sex-based differences in the use of or knowledge of both positive and derogatory terms relating to the opposite sex and whether reported attitude and actual practice conform with each other. Is it accurate to assume that males are freer and have a wider selection than females in their use of slang terms in this semantic field, especially in their use of pejorative terms?

Table 1 gives an overview of average response rates and ranges for all of the key words used in the questionnaire. The focus in this article is on the responses to seven of these items, all of which elicited slang responses (both positive and negative) relating to males and females in particular. The key words in question were: *pretty female*, *ugly female*, *unpleasant female*, *hand-*

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TABLE 2. *Pretty female*

	Girls		Boys		Total		Girls		Boys		Total
	Standard						Standard				
	6	9	6	9			6	9	6	9	
<i>spunk(y)</i>	4	13	15	27	59	<i>piece</i>	0	0	1	4	5
<i>chick</i>	14	13	17	15	59	<i>bokkie</i>	0	0	0	4	4
<i>bird</i>	8	11	5	9	33	<i>broad</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>doll</i>	5	4	1	1	11	<i>babe</i>	0	1	1	1	3
<i>punda</i>	0	0	0	8	8	<i>furburger</i>	0	0	1	2	3
<i>beaut</i>	1	1	1	3	6	<i>anya</i>	0	0	0	3	3
<i>stuk</i>	1	0	2	4	7	<i>meat</i>	1	0	0	2	3
<i>hot</i>	1	3	2	0	6						

Extra responses by males: *beast, beaver, bint, bod, duck, female, flossy, fluffy, fox, goose, honey, hotdog, hotstuff, killer, murderer, pie, punjab, puppy, pussy, salty, slick/sharp, slaughterer, sticky, stab.*

Extra responses by females: *beaver, binnet, cherry, dove, hit, honey, hotdog, hotstuff, killer, murderer, slaughterer.*

some male, ugly male, unpleasant male, and effeminate male. It is important to note that these items were distributed at random and did not occur consecutively in the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Table 1 has been included in order to show the generally high response rate for the items selected for analysis in this article, most notable in the case of negative or derogatory words. The preponderance of derogatory words is a well-known characteristic of slang, which is recognizable for its general lack of respect for people – gentleness is *not* a characteristic of slang, and finer sensibilities and emotions are well hidden.

Tables 2–8 list actual responses to the questionnaire items selected for analysis. These are ranked numerically in descending order, and words that were elicited no more than twice are listed alphabetically beneath each table. The tables reveal the differences between male and female responses and between older and younger informants. Column headings (6 and 9) refer to grades in school. Scholars in Std. 6 were 12–14 years old and those in Std. 9 were 15–17 years old.

Table 9 lists summary overall scores from males and females with respect to all *negative* or *derogatory* terms elicited, showing that the differences in sex-linked response rates are minimal (506 for girls, 509 for boys) and that age seems to have a far greater effect. Each sex responded with more items when referring to the *opposite* sex. When the sex in question was female, fe-

TABLE 3. *Ugly female*

	Girls		Boys		Total	Girls		Boys		Total	
	Standard					Standard					
	6	9	6	9		6	9	6	9		
<i>grommet</i>	6	14	9	21	50	<i>nerd</i>	5	2	0	0	7
<i>blort</i>	7	11	6	17	41	<i>sif(bag)</i>	0	1	1	5	7
<i>gross</i>	9	4	3	7	23	<i>gruck</i>	1	2	1	2	6
<i>sword</i>	0	5	6	7	18	<i>dog</i>	0	1	0	5	6
<i>grot</i>	0	3	4	6	13	<i>slob</i>	2	1	2	0	5
<i>bitch</i>	1	1	5	4	11	<i>whore</i>	1	1	2	0	4
<i>grunt</i>	0	4	5	1	10	<i>cow</i>	0	0	1	2	3
<i>tank</i>	0	0	3	6	9						

Extra responses by males: *broad, burt, croak, dons, dushbag, flab, frankenstein, green, hoer, jak, kaffir, obris, poes, puke, rambonna, russian, shen, sleazebag, slug, slut, spaz, toubok, tonbon, tonk, tramp, vundu, whale.*

Extra responses by females: *bag, blob, bus, doos, dwax, goose, gunge.*

TABLE 4. *Unpleasant female*

	Girls		Boys		Total	Girls		Boys		Total	
	Standard					Standard					
	6	9	6	9		6	9	6	9		
<i>bitch</i>	24	25	20	21	90	<i>shit</i>	1	0	1	2	4
<i>cow</i>	16	15	9	11	51	<i>kaffir</i>	4	0	0	0	4
<i>slut</i>	4	3	2	9	18	<i>fuck up</i>	0	1	2	0	3
<i>cunt</i>	0	4	3	4	11	<i>dushbag</i>	0	2	1	0	3
<i>poes</i>	0	1	4	5	10	<i>doos</i>	0	1	0	2	3
<i>hag/bag</i>	2	1	1	1	5	<i>dog</i>	2	0	0	1	3
<i>witch</i>	1	2	1	0	4	<i>pig</i>	1	0	1	1	3

Extra responses by males: *ass, bat, fartcake, female, goose, gwat, horse, kaffirbudgie, megabitich, moron, mot, pain, nerdess, pukehead, roll, sifbag, sleazebag, slut, sow, sword, tampon, wench, whore.*

Extra responses by females: *blort, gwat, sow, tit.*

males had fewer responses, males more (192 to 233). When the sex in question was male, females had more responses; males, fewer (314 to 276). (The higher number of responses about males overall [590 about males, 425 about females] is the result of there having been three eliciting items about males in the questionnaires, as opposed to two about females.) There does seem to be a slight preponderance of lexical items referring to females, which concurs with the opinions of Greer (1971), Schulz (1975), Stanley (1975), and

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TABLE 5. *Handsome male*

	Girls		Boys		Total	Girls		Boys		Total	
	Standard					Standard					
	6	9	6	9		6	9	6	9		
<i>spunk</i>	26	32	2	12	72	<i>cute</i>	1	3	0	0	5
<i>hunk</i>	10	16	6	9	41	<i>dish</i>	1	2	2	2	5
<i>stud</i>	0	4	0	9	13	<i>oke</i>	1	0	1	1	3
<i>dude</i>	1	2	4	4	11	<i>murderer</i>	0	2	0	1	3
<i>hot</i>	4	3	0	0	7	<i>macho</i>	2	0	1	0	3
<i>guy</i>	1	3	1	1	7						

Extra responses by males: *butch, gigolo, iceman, jock, joller, kong, main oke, monkey, rambo, slab, slick dude, stouch.*

Extra responses by females: *coolness, demon, main oke, nine (out of 10), ovary overflow, perv, slab, specimen, talent.*

TABLE 6. *Ugly male*

	Girls		Boys		Total	Girls		Boys		Total	
	Standard					Standard					
	6	9	6	9		6	9	6	9		
<i>nerd</i>	16	11	3	4	34	<i>moron</i>	3	0	1	1	5
<i>gross</i>	6	8	0	1	15	<i>gruck</i>	0	4	0	0	4
<i>grommet</i>	6	4	1	1	12	<i>grunt</i>	0	4	0	0	4
<i>slob</i>	4	1	2	1	8	<i>dork</i>	1	0	2	1	4
<i>jerk</i>	4	3	0	0	7	<i>asshole</i>	0	0	1	2	3
<i>blort</i>	1	0	3	3	7	<i>pig</i>	1	0	0	2	3
<i>prick</i>	0	3	1	1	5	<i>sif</i>	1	2	0	0	3
<i>sword</i>	0	1	0	4	5	<i>faggot</i>	0	0	3	0	3
<i>doos</i>	4	1	0	0	5	<i>wimp</i>	0	3	0	0	3

Extra responses by males: *bugger up, dick, dof, drip, dwax, dweep, dweet, dwors, fucknut, fuckup, hippo, jug, mof, scumbag, wanker.*

Extra responses by females: *blob, bum, creep, dick, dog, drip, dwax, dweet, goat, grot, ox, pleb, poepal, preppie, rubbish, schmuck, shithead, spaff, scumbag, spanner, spud, tit, towbok, unknown, wart, wimp, wombat.*

Miller and Swift (1978). The chi-square results (47.49) indicate that a very high level of significance can be attached to these results.

Table 10 lists informants' scores for *positive* terms for males and females, respectively, and again sex-linked response rates are remarkably similar (197 for girls, 187 for boys). As was evident in Table 9, there were more responses overall describing females from males (131 vs. 83), and fewer describing

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TABLE 7. *Unpleasant male*

	Girls				Total	Boys				Total	
	Standard					Standard					
	6	9	6	9		6	9	6	9		
<i>bastard</i>	8	14	5	5	32						
<i>asshole</i>	5	15	4	6	30	<i>poes</i>	0	0	0	6	6
<i>dog</i>	5	1	4	7	17	<i>shit</i>	1	1	3	0	5
<i>dick</i>	1	2	3	9	15	<i>fuckup</i>	0	0	1	3	4
<i>pig</i>	2	4	2	4	12	<i>faggot</i>	0	1	1	2	4
<i>doos</i>	1	2	1	5	9	<i>wop</i>	0	0	1	3	4
<i>cunt</i>	1	2	1	4	8	<i>jerk</i>	0	0	0	4	4
<i>wanker</i>	0	1	2	3	6	<i>S.O.B.</i>	2	1	1	0	4
<i>prick</i>	0	2	0	4	6	<i>dwax</i>	0	0	2	1	3
<i>nerd</i>	2	2	2	0	6	<i>tit</i>	0	1	1	1	3

Extra responses by males: *blort, charlie, cock, dickface, dosball, drip, drol, hog, knob, penis, poes, shitass, shthead, slab, twat, wet, worm.*

Extra responses by females: *baboon, boggie, brak, brat, bum, creep, cow, drool, grommet, kaffir, kunk, moron, pig, sleazeball, slob, sod, swine, twerp, wally, zot.*

TABLE 8. *Effeminate male*

	Girls				Total	Boys				Total	
	Standard					Standard					
	6	9	6	9		6	9	6	9		
<i>nerd</i>	21	22	12	15	70	<i>spaff</i>	0	2	1	2	5
<i>drip</i>	10	16	5	8	39	<i>doos</i>	1	0	3	1	5
<i>twerp</i>	6	6	1	3	16	<i>boff</i>	0	1	0	4	5
<i>faggot</i>	1	3	2	9	15	<i>asshole</i>	0	0	1	4	5
<i>wet</i>	0	3	2	8	13	<i>squirt</i>	0	1	2	1	4
<i>jerk</i>	4	5	0	3	12	<i>moron</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>wimp</i>	3	4	3	2	12	<i>gay</i>	1	2	1	0	4
<i>chicken</i>	5	0	2	4	11	<i>wally</i>	1	2	1	0	4
<i>prick</i>	0	3	3	3	9	<i>naff</i>	0	1	2	0	3
<i>weed</i>	3	0	5	0	8	<i>dork</i>	0	2	1	0	3
<i>moffie</i>	0	5	0	2	7	<i>poester</i>	1	1	0	1	3
<i>tit</i>	0	0	2	5	7	<i>sissy</i>	0	1	0	2	3
<i>queer</i>	0	1	1	4	6	<i>dick</i>	1	0	0	2	3
<i>twit</i>	1	3	1	1	6						

Extra responses by males: *attie, cunt, doos, dwax, dwors, egg, fucknut, geek, greeny, homo, jip, paff, pansy, rat, slime, square, stuff up, turd, wanker, wip, worm, yellowbek.*

Extra responses by females: *dropper, fairy, homo, shit, turd, wang, wanker.*

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TABLE 9. *Categorization and frequencies of students' negative responses*

	Girls			Boys			Total girls and boys
	Standard		Total girls	Standard		Total boys	
	6	9		6	9		
<i>ugly female</i>	32	50	82	48	83	131	213
<i>unpleasant female</i>	55	55	110	45	57	102	212
<i>ugly male</i>	47	45	92	17	21	38	130
<i>unpleasant male</i>	28	49	77	34	67	101	178
<i>effeminate male</i>	60	85	145	52	85	137	282
Totals	222	284	506	196	313	509	1,015

$df = 12, \chi^2 = 47.49, p < .0001.$

TABLE 10. *Categorization and frequencies of students' positive responses*

	Girls			Boys			Total girls and boys
	Standard		Total girls	Standard		Total boys	
	6	9		6	9		
<i>pretty female</i>	36	47	83	47	84	131	214
<i>handsome male</i>	47	67	114	17	39	56	170
Totals	83	114	197	64	123	187	384

$df = 3, \chi^2 = 30.86, p < .0001.$

TABLE 11. *Lexical range of responses*

	Male	Female	Totals	
			Positive	Negative
<i>pretty female</i>	39	21	60] 117]
<i>ugly female</i>	41	21	41	
<i>unpleasant female</i>	37	18		
<i>handsome male</i>	21	20] 141]
<i>ugly male</i>	28	43		
<i>unpleasant male</i>	36	34		
<i>effeminate male</i>	49	32		81 81

males from males (56 vs. 114). Overall differences relate more strongly to age rather than to sex, and again the chi-square results suggest that a high level of reliability can be attached to these scores.

Table 11 summarizes the range of responses from males and females and

includes the extra (low-frequency) responses, in order to show trends in actual lexical choices.

DISCUSSION

Sex differences

The stereotype of females not using taboo words is not upheld by the data. Results reveal that female informants were never at a loss for derogatory words to describe people, particularly males; this conforms with Risch's (1987) finding that females do know and use "dirty" words. If one examines the results in Table 9 (derogatory terms) and explicitly excludes the terms elicited for *effeminate male*, one finds the following interesting distribution:

	Standard			Standard		
	6	9		6	9	
<i>Girls</i>	87	105	(regarding females)	75	94	(regarding males)
<i>Boys</i>	93	140	(regarding females)	51	88	(regarding males)

Table 10 (positive terms) reflects a parallel surplus of terms regarding the *opposite* sex in each case. Whether the terms are negative (Table 9) or positive (Table 10), girls report more of them than boys when the reference is to boys. Boys report more of them than girls when the reference is to girls. It could be that each sex, at this age, focuses more on the other than on itself.

There is a bias by each sex in favor of itself, although overt appreciation for one's own sex has negative connotations in most Western linguistic communities, where the average teenager is expected to enthuse over the opposite sex.

Females, it would appear, are not striving for standard prestigious speech (Trudgill 1972) but are striving to use what their peers are using. It would seem that males and females alike gain solidarity from using nonstandard words and that females (certainly young ones) are not necessarily as linguistically conservative as current literature would have us believe.

Age is clearly the factor that had the greatest effect on response rates throughout, relating obviously to growing sexual maturity and to increased daring in use of taboo items with increasing confidence and social power (see de Klerk 1991).

Table 11 reveals some notable differences between male and female responses, depending on the topic. It is worth reviewing here the questions of whether there are more contemptuous terms for males than for females in general and whether there are sex-related differences.

An examination of this table reveals that the range of terms (and therefore of semantic interest?) is strikingly different. Three trends emerge:

All respondents appear to treat *effeminate male* in the same way as they treat the three kinds of females (i.e., many more male responses than female responses in all cases).

The female respondents have almost as large a range as males for *handsome male* and *unpleasant male* and notably more for *ugly male*, where terminological fascination takes a sharp increase.

Contrary to the findings of researchers that there is a lexical bias of derogatory terms referring to women, these informants reveal the *opposite* trend in their responses. If one excludes *effeminate male* from the comparison (as there is no equivalent *butch female* category), then there are 117 derogatory terms to refer to females and 141 to refer to males.

The bias as regards positive terms is in favor of the females as well.

So although huge numbers of derogatory terms for females may well exist in the abstract, actual speakers are familiar with only some of these terms. Also, it would seem that there is a bias against males in the mental lexicon of each speaker, in view of the fact that informants generally knew more negative and fewer positive terms for males than for females.

Slang or swearing?

Dumas and Lighter (1978) reported an experiment in which students showed a remarkable lack of consensus regarding which words from a given list were slang; responses in this study highlight the same problem. It is important to note that pupils were asked about *slang* items, not a breakdown or cross-classification, and that their responses are perceived by them to be legitimate slang words. In fact, a large number of the “slang” terms actually given as responses by informants in this study would be regarded as swearwords by many, an acknowledged problem in the definition of the term *slang*.

A general comment on the high proportion of “bad language” that occurs under several categories might be in order, as the dividing line between slang and expletives is a foggy one, ill defined probably because of the embarrassing nature of the topic (vagueness is the easiest resort).

Harris (1990) wrote of the increasing frequency of taboo terms in Britain and of the consternation this causes among many prescriptivists. But what is “bad language”? According to Swan (1980:589), “children usually avoid swearing in front of adults, so as not to shock or annoy them, and adults avoid swearing in front of children for similar reasons.” Adolescents’ perception of these words is obviously not the same as those of many adults. They seem less inhibited in their use of swearwords, not even perceiving them as taboo. Graves (1927) related trends in the use of expletives to the current state of the nation and to its social well-being, declaring that people in social malaise or times of war swear more, but clearly there is something radically wrong with such a theory in cases where middle-class children are using

increasing numbers of such words. It is obviously not so much socioeconomic changes but shifts in social attitudes and lessening inhibitions that influence expletive usage.

Harris (1990) predicted a gradual breakdown of the distinction between private English (taboo?) and public English, resulting in a lack of means of linguistic identification of class, level of education, and age. "We live in an age where bad language can become worrying not because it is getting worse, but, paradoxically, because it is no longer bad enough" (1990:421). Although this breakdown seems to have occurred here, it is advisable to avoid moralistic judgments. Use of the words elicited in this exercise does not necessarily imply a full command of the word or its meaning in the community at large. Many a teenager is blissfully unaware of the full import of slang terms he or she uses, because the use of slang is often a vague hit-or-miss affair. Slang is picked up by careful observation and is used casually and coolly – asking about the meaning of slang items is tantamount to admitting failure as a teenager. There is often a very real discrepancy between proclaimed standards of language behavior and practice and between the meanings of the words bandied around in the sweet mouths of the young and their perceptions of the meanings of these words (see Hudson 1983).

CONCLUSIONS

Three areas of concern emerge from this study as warranting closer attention. First, results strongly suggest that female linguistic habits do not match commonly held perceptions. Females as far apart as North America (Risch 1987) and South Africa appear to be moving in the same direction: toward increasing "freedom" in the use of impolite terms. It would be interesting to repeat this exercise in another geographical area or perhaps in 10 years' time. The data obtained would enable one to confirm or refute with some confidence the hypothesis that female linguistic habits do not match commonly held stereotypes. The question of the effect of race and social class on the use of derogatory terms also deserves more attention.

Second, in light of the lexical bias in favor of females revealed in this analysis (in contradiction to existing views on the subject), serious attention needs to be focused on the question of the difference between bias within the mental lexicon of individual speakers and bias within the lexicon of the language.

Finally, results of this study reveal a need to look more closely at what speakers understand by the term *slang* and how they distinguish between slang and expletives. Many people, including those questioned in this exercise, might be surprised at the results of this particular study, and further investigation might offer some light on popular perceptions of slang.

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