



SOCIOLINGUISTICS: GENDER AND PROFANITY

by Caroline Smith
Indiana University
cjs3@indiana.edu

In this paper, I examine the relationship between gender and the use of profanity. My primary focus is whether men or women use profanity more, and what circumstances impact their use of profanity. I look at the formality of the environment and the gender of the interlocutor. I take as my hypotheses the stereotypes that men use profanity more than women in every circumstance, that both men and women are more likely to use profanity in casual settings than in formal settings, and that both men and women are more likely to use profanity in the company of male friends than with female friends..

I specifically examine the use of the f-word among 218 subjects ages 18-25, in order to determine the frequency of use among subjects. This is accomplished by giving each subject a confidential questionnaire assessing his/her use of the word in 16 different circumstances. Each subject indicates on a Likert scale, from 1 to 5, how frequently he/she uses the f-word in each setting. The scale is described as: 1 = never, not at all; 3 = sometimes; 5 = frequently. The average response codes are summarized in the table below.

Gender	Female Friend Casual Setting	Female Friend Formal Setting	Male Friend Casual Setting	Male Friend Formal Setting
Female	2.92	1.17	2.92	1.22
Male	2.95	1.42	3.70	1.58

These results generally support my hypotheses. Men are more likely to use the f-word than women in every circumstance, and both men and women are more likely to use the word in casual settings than in formal settings. Both men and women are more likely to use profanity in the company of male friends than with female friends, with one exception, which leads to a surprising result.

The average response code given by female subjects when assessing their own use of the f-word in casual settings is the exact same when they are in the presence of female friends and when they are in the presence of male friends. The average response code for these scenarios is 2.92. This result contrasts with the responses given by male subjects. In casual settings, the average response code given by male subjects is 3.70 when in the presence of male friends; but when in the presence of female friends, it dramatically drops to 2.95. These results indicate that men curtail their use of the f-word when in the presence of females in casual settings, while women do not restrict their use of the word based on gender in casual settings.

This finding raises new questions, and in this paper, I suggest several interpretations of this result. One interpretation is that the f-word is not a bonding variable for women, so their use of it is not gender specific. A second interpretation is that this result is due to audience design – women may have felt uncomfortable saying that they not only speak differently than men, but that they speak differently in the presence of men. A third interpretation of this anomaly is that neither gender nor the use of profanity is as salient as I expected – subjects may have difficulty assessing the frequency of their own usage of the word in different contexts.

In this paper, I discuss this and other findings, and I suggest how I will address these questions in future research. This study contributes to the existing research in sociolinguistics by providing evidence about how the use of profanity is jointly affected by the gender of the speaker, the interlocutor, and the nature of the social setting.