

Sexist swearing and slurs

Responses to gender-directed insults

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ABSTRACT

Swearing is a part of everyday life for many, but its functions, and the reasons why certain words are deemed “taboo”, may not be immediately apparent. In particular, the use of slurs serves the functions of policing socially undesirable behaviors, and bringing groups of people together. A subset of swear words can be described as being directed specifically towards one gender, and are mainly used to police behaviors that do not conform to a society’s ideas of masculinity or femininity. Slurs directed towards, and judged most offensive by women comment on sexual, or aggressive behavior, whereas slurs directed towards, and judged most offensive by men imply that they are being too soft or “womanly”. These categories follow patriarchal views on gender roles. The perception of gender-directed swear words can be described by the Affective Language Communication Model (Van Berkum, in prep), which incorporates a speaker’s stance and intention into the listener’s interpretation and response. In order to assess if the degree of offensiveness is internalized by a listener, an EEG study is proposed. It is hypothesized that gender-congruent slurs will elicit larger responses than gender-incongruent slurs, and that one’s level of acceptance of society’s gender expectations could affect perceived offensiveness.

Swearing, frequently used with the intent to insult or injure the recipient, is a common part of cultures across the globe (Jay, 2009; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). Receiving an insult is not only psychologically painful, but its meaning is often internalized, and expressed through physiological changes (Struiksma, De Mulder, Spotorno, Basnakova & van Berkum, 2014). However, not all swear words or insults are judged equally offensive, and elicit the same degree of response (Saucier, Till, Miller, O’Dea & Andres, 2015). Additionally, particular slurs may offend certain groups (e.g. groups defined by race or sexuality) or individuals more than others, and therefore elicit different reactions in different people. This paper focuses on the differences in swear words and slurs with respect to the recipient’s gender, and asks the following questions: Are there slurs that one gender finds more offensive than the other, and what are they? If so, why is this the case? Are there physiological markers that reflect such a difference in offensiveness rating? To answer these questions, the function and perception of swear words and slurs is introduced, followed by a discussion on the influence of culture on taboo categories and swear words. Then, the question of which slurs men and women find most offensive is examined, and incorporated into a model of communication. Lastly, hypotheses are formed and a study to further discover the nature of gender-directed slurs is proposed.

1. FUNCTION AND PERCEPTION OF SWEAR WORDS

Most would agree that the main function of using swear words is to express emotions (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Vingerhoets, Bylsma & de Vlam, 2013). However, it might not be readily apparent that swearing has more than this one intrapersonal function. Other intrapersonal functions of swearing include reducing the perception of pain, increasing confidence, and eliciting humor; swearing can also serve interpersonal functions, such as bringing groups of people together, and policing culturally undesirable behaviors (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). With these multiple functions, it is unsurprising that every language and culture has a set of taboo words (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). The question that then needs to be addressed for the purposes of this research is what function gender-directed insults may serve within a specific culture.

Because a reaction from listeners is a prerequisite to a swear word serving its function, one must also look at the perception of the use of taboo words. Across cultures, swear words differ, not only in phonological form, but also in topic; thus, any reaction to swear words is dependent on experience with a particular language and culture (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). The responses by those familiar with a language to the use of swear words teach language learners what words are taboo in their culture (Jay, 2009). Over time, the taboo nature of particular words becomes internalized for the learner; swear words may even have direct access to the emotional part of the brain. This can be seen through physiological responses (Struiksmas et al., 2014), similar to those exhibited when experiencing a strong emotion. These autonomic responses differ for taboo words as compared to neutral stimuli, and even euphemisms, due to the conditioned response to swear words (Bowers & Pleydell-Pearce, 2011).

The use of swear words not only results in physiological changes, but also in interpersonal consequences (Vingerhoets, Bylsma & de Vlam, 2013). While the reception of swearing depends on many contextual factors, such as the relationship between interlocutors or the location of the conversation (Henry, Butler & Brandt, 2014; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008), in the specific case of insulting another person, the use of taboo words is not well received (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). Previous research has concluded that the use of swear words in a second person context, accompanied by the use of a taboo noun (e.g. *You (are a) bitch!*), elicit the strongest response in the recipient (Vingerhoets, Bylsma & de Vlam, 2013). This effect occurs for two reasons: first, there is a heightened response, not only because it makes use of a swear word, but it directly insults another, and second, the use of a noun makes the insult an inherent trait of the other, as opposed to the use of an adjective, which could be describing a temporary state (e.g. *She's bitchy today.*). From these findings, it is important to ask whether a specific swear word, or set of slurs, compared to other insults, can elicit a stronger response in one gender over the other when used in this most aggressive context, and particularly if different swear words are considered to be more offensive to one gender as compared to the other.

2. IMPORTANCE AND INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

As briefly mentioned above, the use of swear words is found in every culture and language across the globe, but the topics that are considered taboo, and thus are accompanied by

a specific vocabulary, vary between cultures (Vingerhoets, Bylsma & de Vlam, 2013). For example, in Norwegian culture, many insults can be categorized as relating to the devil. This category appears to be unique to this particular culture, as no other culture, out of the eleven studied, displayed such a prolific use of devil-related terms as an insult (van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). The authors of this study put forth the theory that this category of insults around the devil developed through the country's pre-Christian aversion to the "little devils who resided in forests" (p. 183) and the relative isolation and homogeneity after conversion to Protestantism. Despite the differences in culture, however, sexuality, and lack of intelligence are two categories that appear to have corresponding slurs in every language (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). This suggests that while variation occurs across cultures, there will be at least two topics that provide insults, which is further expanded by categories of insults that have been shaped by the culture's history and set of values.

One component of a culture's history that proves to be specifically relevant to research focused on gender-directed insults is the stereotypical gender roles that all men and women are expected to follow (Harris, 1993). Most of the societies in the world, even to this day, can be considered patriarchal, meaning men are believed to be the better, stronger, and more competent sex, whereas women are perceived to be less intelligent, very socially and interpersonally oriented, and weak. These expectations appear to be accepted and adhered to, as previous research has demonstrated that men and women find situations where another is acting in a manner incongruent to gender roles to be anger-provoking (Harris, 1993). This means that men were angered when a woman was displaying physical aggression, because women are not supposed to be physically violent, or when a man was hurting another, because men are supposed to be the protectors; women were angered by condescending behaviors, because they strive for social harmony (Harris, 1993). Taken together, this shows that both men and women alike have accepted the patriarchal expectations of their culture, and find it offensive when another is breaking the gender roles of their society. It can therefore be reasoned that they could also find it hurtful or offensive if someone were to believe or state, through a swear word or other means, that they themselves were breaking societal norms.

3. GENDER-DIRECTED SLURS AND REACTIONS

The existence of gender roles is the basis for the existence, and use of, gender-directed slurs, which may, in turn, perpetuate gender stereotypes. Gender-directed swear words, as a category, provide a powerful tool to sanction actions by either gender that are contrary to the socially accepted behavior (James, 1998). From this description, it is clear that gender-directed swearing falls into the category of "policing undesirable behavior" function of swearing discussed above. This "policing" can be done within or between genders. Because men and women are expected to express different characteristics and behaviors, it can be concluded that different slurs would be used to police the different genders; some have even argued that gender-directed slurs not only reflect, and police socially undesirable behavior, but that they can actually shape the society's perceptions of masculinity and femininity (James, 1998), possibly towards a more gender equal society. James (1998) argues that some women are leading the trend to use certain terms in a gender-neutral fashion, and that this implies, and potentially causes, a blurring of traditional patriarchal views.

While the direction of the cause-and-effect relationship of gender-neutral swear words and a gradual convergence of gender norms is debatable, there is a connection between society's gender expectations and the use of gender-directed swear words.

Another factor to consider when investigating gender-directed swearing is the rate at which men and women use swear words, because this could influence their overall perception of the act of swearing. While swearing is traditionally seen as a masculine habit, evidence suggests that both men and women use swear words at similar rates, but in different contexts (Gauthier et al., 2015; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). However, a difference is seen overall in how men and women perceive swearing. Women generally tend to rate swear words as more offensive than men do (Gauthier et al., 2015; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; van Oudenhoven, et al., 2008), which may be due to the fact that men tend to use more offensive language, and are more comfortable expressing emotions through swearing than women (Gauthier et al., 2015). This use of highly offensive language could perhaps generally desensitize men from the offensiveness that swear words usually elicit.

It is clear then, that when looking at gender-directed insults, it is necessary to assess the different genders' reactions to all swear words in order to determine what can legitimately be categorized as gender-directed. Slurs that receive higher ratings within one gender that are not rated as offensive by the other could then be considered gender-directed. However, it is important to note that the same slur could be used for both genders with different implications. For example, the word *bitch*, when directed towards a woman, would indicate that she was acting too aggressively, but when directed towards a man, the same word would imply that he was being weak or cowardly. Because the word carries different connotations based on the gender of the recipient, and still polices behavior based on stereotypes, it should still be classified as gender-directed. Therefore, it is evident that a crucial factor in determining the offensiveness of any given gender-directed swear word is the gender of the recipient of the insult. While the gender of the sender may have some effect on the perceived offensiveness, the recipient of an insult has been shown to be a more important factor (Harris, 1993). While particular insults can be gender-directed, the rating of offensiveness across all gender-directed slurs may not be equal. Previous studies have shown that if a group is perceived to have a lower social status, then insults specifically directed towards this group will be rated as being more offensive than those directed at the group with higher social status (Henry, Butler & Brandt, 2014). In the case of gender-directed swearing, this has been supported, and insults directed towards women have been evaluated as more offensive than those directed towards men, because women are seen as inferior in a patriarchal society (Benedixen & Gabriel, 2013).

3.1 SLURS DIRECTED TOWARDS WOMEN

As predicted, studies have shown that men and women differ in which slurs and which categories of slurs they find offensive (Benedixen & Gabriel, 2013; Harris, 1993; James, 1998; Preston & Stanley, 1987). In general, the swear words that offend women the most are those that imply that the woman is promiscuous or sexually loose (e.g. *slut*, *whore*; Benedixen & Gabriel, 2013; James, 1998; Preston & Stanley, 1987). Within this category of sexual promiscuity, there is a larger set of offensive vocabulary for women than men (Har-

ris, 1993; Preston & Stanley, 1987), confirming the stereotype that it is more acceptable for men to have multiple sexual partners. On the other hand, women are also offended by slurs that imply they are being sexually withholding (e.g. *prude*, James, 1998). This paradox highlights the fact that women are “evaluated in terms of the extent to which they conform to heterosexual male needs and desires” (James, 1998, p. 404; see Buss, 1998 for a review of Sexual Strategies Theory). This reinforcement of the patriarchal gender roles is further seen in the other categories of swear words which are particularly offensive to women: slurs that suggest a woman is homosexual or masculine (e.g. *dyke*), physically unattractive (e.g. *dog*), a sexual object (e.g. *pussy*, *cunt*), and that she mistreats others (e.g. *bitch*; Benedixen & Gabriel, 2013; James, 1998). Furthermore, there is evidence that women are conscious not only of which slurs are offensive, but also the reasons *why* they are offensive, as discussed above. While some women accept the gender roles put forth by society, and may even use these slurs towards other women to police their behavior, others have begun to use certain slurs, such as *bitch* or *slut*, as terms of endearment in an effort to reclaim these words as a symbol of female power (James, 1998).

3.2 SLURS DIRECTED TOWARDS MEN

Men, on the other hand, are most offended when they are the recipient of a slur which implies that they are homosexual (Benedixen & Gabriel, 2013; Brown & Alderson, 2010; James, 1998; Preston & Stanley, 1987; Saucier et al., 2015). Because homosexual males blur the lines between masculinity and femininity, slurs in this category (e.g. *faggot*) are used as a policing agent against behavior that is determined to be too feminine. The underlying power of this category of slurs comes from the belief that women and homosexual males are devalued members of society. Alternatively, slurs within the same category can function as a way to bring a group of men closer together, and create a strong inner group defined by how “masculine” its members are, in contrast to the outsiders who are the recipient of the slurs (Carnaghi, Maass & Fasoli, 2011; Saucier et al., 2015). Additionally, but to a lesser extent, men are also offended when they are the recipient of slurs that suggest they are not fulfilling the traditional gender roles by being physically unattractive/weak (e.g. *wimp*), stupid (e.g. *jackass*), or cowardly (e.g. *wuss*, *bitch*; Benedixen & Gabriel, 2013; James, 1998; Preston & Stanley, 1987, Saucier et al., 2015). It is interesting to note that studies have shown that men are more offended by slurs insinuating they are womanly, and therefore lesser members of society, than women are by slurs implying they are manly, and potentially better than their feminine peers. This dichotomy further highlights the importance of the patriarchy and gender stereotypes in the interpretation of gender-directed swear words (James, 1998).

4. INCORPORATION INTO A MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

In order to fully understand why gender-directed swearing is so insulting, it is crucial to investigate how stereotypes and gender roles affect a working model of communication and interpretation. As discussed above, the function of gender-directed swearing can either be to police certain behaviors or, to a lesser extent, bring groups of people together. Van Berkum (in prep) has developed a model that allows for the incorporation of these different functions. In the Affective Language Comprehension model (ALC; See figure 1

below), the listener (person Y) must first recognize and parse the verbal and non-verbal signs completed by the speaker (person X), and then Y must interpret the communicative move. At the various steps of parsing and interpretation, Y's affective state can be altered by an emotionally competent stimulus (ECS), which can potentially impact Y's emotions and response. However, Y's emotions will only be affected by a stimulus which they find

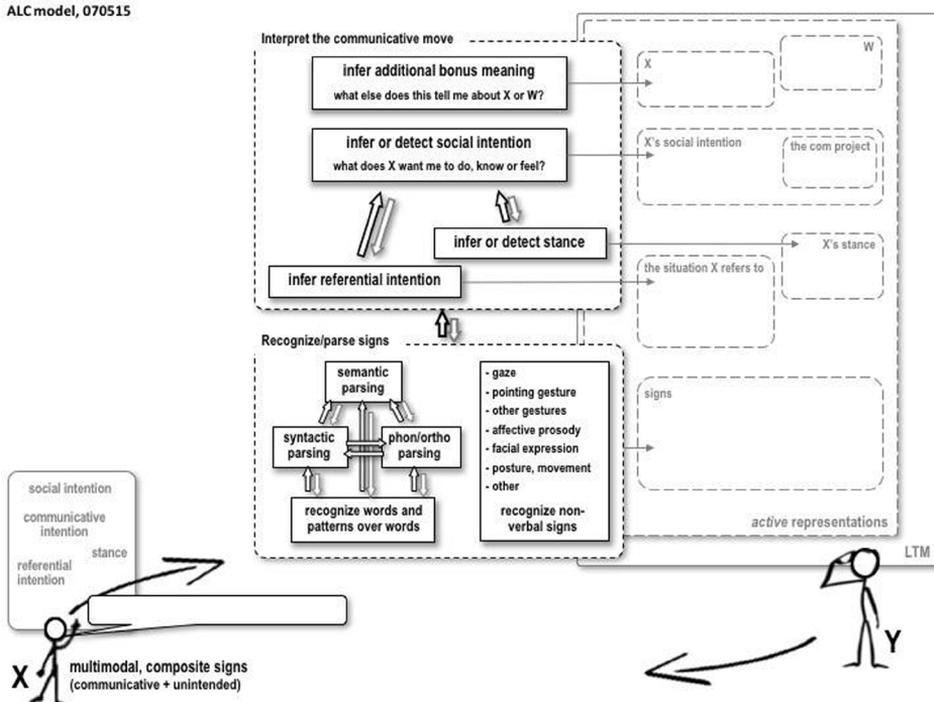


Figure 1. Affective Language Comprehension model from Van Berkum (in prep).

While there are many steps in this model, the two most relevant in the interpretation of gender-directed slurs are “X’s stance,” and “X’s social intention.” If X uses a gender-directed swear word, Y will likely interpret X’s stance to be negative, simply from the use of a slur, but Y’s interpretation will likely go father. Provided that Y has had extensive experience with the culture and language of X, Y will recognize that the slur is gender-directed, and that its use by X signals that X has a negative stance towards the situation, but also that X’s negativity is directly related to their perception that gender roles are being violated. Using this inference, Y will go on to further interpret X’s social intention. Given that there is a social stigma against the violation of gender roles (Brown & Alderson, 2010), two possible intentions, congruent with the functions of swearing, arise. Either X is trying to police the behaviors of Y, and the use of the gender-directed slur serves as a warning sign that Y is not acting appropriately (James, 1998), or X is trying to distance themselves from Y in order to avoid any association with the stigmatized behavior (Brown & Alderson, 2010). Additionally, certain bonus information could potentially be drawn from X’s use of a gender-directed swear word, such as their world knowledge and the degree to which they subscribe to their culture’s gender stereotypes.

5. HYPOTHESES & A STUDY PROPOSAL

From the above discussion of gender-directed swear words and the ALC model, it could be suggested that both men and women who strongly value their culture's prescribed gender roles would have a heightened emotional state to the implication they were not following them, due to stronger effects from the ECS steps. Gender congruent slurs (e.g. calling a woman a *slut*) should elicit stronger responses than gender incongruent slurs (e.g. calling a man a *slut*), and possibly gender-neutral slurs (e.g. *idiot*). Furthermore, it is difficult to predict how those who reject traditional gender roles would react. It is possible that those who strongly object to gender stereotypes could have a strong reaction to another person trying to force them into the culturally accepted gender roles, or it could be that those with more "progressive" views would not be offended by the implication that they are breaking society's expectations, because they do not find these beliefs important.

In order to determine the responses to various gender-directed swear words, I propose a study that utilizes EEG technology to record participants' physiological responses to this particular category of insults. The studies discussed above relied on surveys for their ratings of offensiveness. While these studies have been informative, adding a physiological measure will determine whether or not these different perceptions and reactions are internalized. A previous study has shown that insults, as compared to compliments, elicit a stronger P2 effect, and that insults directed at the participant, as opposed to another individual, elicit a stronger LPP response (Struiksma et al., 2014). Thus, it is possible that when the insult is highly offensive to the participant, a larger P2 and/or a larger LPP effect would be seen. By exposing both male and female participants to gender-directed slurs in a context using a second-person form and a noun, it should become apparent whether the survey-based ratings of offensiveness discussed above correlated to similar physiological differences between the genders. Comparisons will need to be made within one gender, as well as across genders, between gender-directed (congruent and incongruent and gender-neutral slurs). Furthermore, conducting a survey on participants' opinions on gender roles and interpreting this alongside the physiological responses could potentially reveal whether or not one's social views affect how offensive they perceive gender-directed insults to be.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has demonstrated that gender-directed swear words and slurs not only exist, but that they fall into two distinct functions of swearing: policing culturally undesirable behavior and, to a lesser extent, bringing groups of people together. The power of gender-directed swearing is rooted in the society's perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, one's reaction to a gender-directed slur is most likely linked to the value that they place on upholding traditional gender roles. Future studies should utilize behavioral responses to further the results of previous studies, and potentially reveal a physiological difference in response to gender-directed slurs. ■

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