“…this is teenage bitchiness”
A corpus-based study of teenagers’ use of the term *bitch* and its forms

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Abstract

So far little research has been done on the term *bitch* exclusively. The aim of this essay is to find a pattern of teenagers’ uses of the word *bitch* in various contexts and in different grammatical forms. A further question is whether *bitch* can be considered a swearword or not.

The investigation was carried out by using two different corpora which is COLT (*The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*) and Webcorp as the primary sources out of which concordance lines were extracted. These were in turn categorized into different word classes and analyzed in detail. The results show that there were several word classes in which *bitch* appeared such as noun, verb and adjective and the most common word class is nouns. The results also show that teenagers mainly use the term as a swearword with which they address their peers. In conclusion even though the term *bitch* did not originally belong to taboo language, however, due to the fact that the word has developed a more negative meaning it can be seen a swearword.

Keywords: Taboo, swearing, swearword, bitch, bitches, bitching, bitchy, bitchiness, conversion, amelioration, pejoration
1. Introduction

Swearing is a fascinating topic in the sense that it is condemned by most people and it is seen as inappropriate but still most of us do actually swear in one way or the other. Swearwords are also often connected with people who are poorly educated and therefore swearing is rare in many formal situations and among upper social class groups. It is also fascinating in the sense that the language of swearing is different from the language we use in normal conversation in terms of word-formation and grammar. Crystal points out that many combinations of swearwords are “abnormally” constructed; they do not have to make sense and could be totally incomprehensible (Crystal 2004:173) e.g. bitch balls, bitch-a-saurus, Bitchaholic, etc. (Urbandictionary 2007). Considering the swearwords that are used nowadays it seems as if most of them have much to do with sexuality.

People were aware of the taboo terms already in Victorian England and the official attitude towards using taboos and swearing among people was very negative. Using taboos or swearing was more forbidden then than it is today. Noah Webster was an American lexicographer (Bett 2006) and he was also one of those people who wanted to get rid of as many taboo terms as possible and replace them with either euphemistic expressions or simply by circumlocutions (Hughes 1992:198). Swearing was even more of “a forbidden language” for women in those days – they were harshly judged and criticized if they swore. Taboo language was so forbidden that it sometimes could lead to serious consequences. For instance, it was not uncommon that people were punished severely by the law for swearing and this could be traced back to the 17th century. The last prosecution and burning of a person pleading guilty of swearing took place in 1612 in the UK (Hughes 1992:247).

Swearing was considered to be taboo not only by the law but also by many people. Some people found swearing to be so provocative that they took a step further and actually did something about the matter in order to prevent the use of swearing. In the 1960s, Mrs. Mary Whitehouse was offended by a TV-show, Till Death Do Us Part, and decided to write a book about it in an attempt to get rid of the bad language and indecent scenes on television. She first published a book, Clean Up TV, and this was the beginning of her movement that became a kind of “TV-police” which prevented foul language and “nasty” scenes to enter the television. This, of course, put tremendous pressure on the producers who were at risk of ending up with a lawsuit (Hughes 1992:244).
Swearing can be found in any language and it appears in many different ways; some languages are more similar to one another and some differ greatly. For example, English and Swedish are quite similar whereas Vietnamese is very different. Crystal has pointed out that in English there is a tendency to use “the sexual activity and its consequences or to show no reverence towards God and holy things and holy people” when swearing (Crystal 2004:172). Swearwords which originate from sexual words are very common in English and Swedish. Vietnamese does have sexual words as swearwords, but there is another area of the language that is more common to use as swearwords i.e. to use terms of address or names of family members in various swearing expressions. Due to the fact that the Vietnamese respect older people very much these expressions are seen as some of the most severe swearwords. For instance, to use terms of address such as mother and father or to use somebody’s parents’ or grandparents’ names in swearing is regarded as very disrespectful and rude. One of the worst swearing expressions of this type is to say Ong noi may!, which means Your grandfather! As one can see there is nothing rude in saying this in English or in Swedish, but this is considered to be very rude in Vietnamese.

Obviously, it seems that swearwords have very much to do with the culture and the different kinds of norms existing in different societies. It is therefore interesting to find out the reasons why we swear, which is not easy to pinpoint. As mentioned earlier, this topic is very sensitive and it often makes people uneasy to talk about it. Already at this point, the assumption is that people swear at others using terms which are very personal or are very important both for themselves and also for the people who are sweared at. This is a way to make the swearing more effective and to get the most out of it in terms of relieving tension and hurting the person in question. Otherwise, the swearing would have no impact on people.

However, swearing itself is not the main focus in this present study but what is interesting is to investigate a specific swearword which is the term bitch and the aim and the research questions are presented more thoroughly in Section 1.1.

1.1. Aim and Research Questions

The main focus of this essay is to investigate the term bitch – how it is used today among teenagers. This is an interesting word because one can encounter it anywhere nowadays e.g. in lyrics, TV-shows, radio etc. People use bitch frequently nowadays and due to the fact that it is used in different contexts the term obviously has several different meanings. Hence, it is
interesting to find out more of various uses of the term. The following are the three research questions that are of importance in this survey:

1. Can the word *bitch* be considered a swearword?
2. In what word classes does *bitch* appear and which is the most common one?
3. Are there any differences in the meanings of various forms?
4. To whom do the teenagers address the term “*bitch*”?

Several previous studies about swearing and about the term *bitch* and its definitions will be discussed in the next section and these will be taken into account when dealing with the analysis. This is a way of understanding what has been studied and also a way of comparing previous studies with the current one.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Taboos and swearing

Many people who have studied swearwords (i.e. Lindhe 1994, Crystal 2003, Ljung 2006) have claimed that swearwords are, in a way, related to *taboo* terms. Moreover, several sources (i.e. Hughes 1992, Karjalainen 2002, Ljung 2006) also agree on the fact that *swearing* is an ancient act and can be traced far back in time. Swearwords existed already among ancient Egyptians, ancient Greeks and the Romans and are not something new that has been invented in our modern days (Ljung 2006:11). Nonetheless, it is important to know what is perceived as *taboo* and what is perceived as *swearing* in order to understand the relation between taboo terms and swearwords.

The term *taboo* originates from the Polynesian word *tabu* and stands for ‘things that are forbidden’ and the Tongans used it as an adjective. Later on, this term was adopted by the English explorer James Cook who did not merely borrow the term but also changed its use. Taboo could be used as an adjective, a noun and a verb. The noun refers to the ‘prohibition’ itself and the verb means “to make someone or something taboo” (*The Free Dictionary* 2006, Ljung 2006:38).

According to Crystal (2003: 173), swearing is “an outburst, an explosion, which gives relief to surges of emotional energy.” He suggests that this could be an effective way of
reducing stress. The function of swearing is to let out steam and it is either aimed towards a person or an object. This could in turn be caused by mild annoyance and develop to more “serious” levels of frustration and anger. Another important function of swearing is to mark social distance, but it can also mark social solidarity e.g. when a group develops identical swearing habits. As a matter of fact, swearing is universal and everybody swears – more or less and in different kinds of ways. Some people would prefer to say shoot instead of shit, but it is still a way of swearing if one says the word in exactly the same manner and for the same reason (Crystal 2003:173).

Another factor which makes us swear has to do with social interactions between people. This means that we swear deliberately in front of people: an audience. There are many causes which underlie such behaviour, e.g. we want to trigger reactions. We swear very likely whenever we want to assert our own identity in a group, to shock, to amuse, to insult, to indicate friendship, to create social distance or social solidarity (Crystal 1995:173). Swearing in this sense would not have anything to do with venting frustration or anger, which has been argued previously and this is also the most common pattern for swearing (ibid). It is important to know that not all swearing has negative intentions. One may show friendship, fondness and endearment by using swearwords (Ljung 2006:96).

A study by Ross (1960), shows that swearing is contagious. It also indicates that swearing becomes more frequent when people are in a relaxed social group. However, once there was a “non-swearer” present the swearing would decrease. She observed that people swear out of annoyance that is caused by stress but on the other hand if the stress becomes unbearable there will be no swearing whatsoever. Finally, the conclusion was that swearing is a way of coping with stressful situations that are still bearable (Ross 1960 in Crystal 2003: 173).

2.2 Swearwords

There is a great number of “lexical items” that belong to the category of taboo words, which people avoid using in polite language. This may be due to the fact that they tend to be very “offensive, harmful and embarrassing”. Offensive terms would be those with associations of different forms of physical, mental and social “abnormality” (Crystal 2003:173). What is regarded as being “harmful” are those words that have to do with death, belief in supernatural phenomena and superstition etc, while the taboos that could cause embarrassment would be the ones with connotations of sexual acts and sexual deviance (Crystal 2003:172). Further,
Crystal (2003:173) argues that there are three different stages in the use of taboo words. The first stage is when a speaker uses taboo terms, the second one is when he/she abuses them to aim at somebody and the last stage is when there is enough emotional force put into the term or expression that it becomes an act of swearing. Ljung, on the other hand, has another view on this matter and suggests that a term can be seen as a swearword when it is used in a “non-technical” sense. For example, in the sentence “It is generally considered best for the bitch to be bred for the first time upon maturity but not before her second or third heat cycle, depending on her age at the first.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2007) bitch would be interpreted as a term for the female dog and it is used in its literal meaning, thus, was not a swearword. However, in the sentence “You fucking bitch!” bitch is used with reference to somebody in a non-literal sense and hence it is a swearword (Ljung 1984: 22).

Despite the fact that many swearwords derive from taboos it is important to keep in mind that all taboo terms do not have to behave as swearwords and vice versa. For instance, piss is a taboo word that is neither perceived as an insult nor as a swearword. Another example is wimp which is a term of abuse that belongs neither to the category of taboo words nor to the group of swearwords. Heck is a swearword and nothing else (Crystal 2003: l73).

In addition, Jay points out in an interview on Voice of America, that swearwords are stable but what is changing is slang. “We make up new sexual slang.” (Jay 2003). He also argues that the focus of cursing and swearing has changed through the years. The shift is from profanity and blasphemy, that is religious swearwords, to words which have to do with sexuality. Jay states that this shift is due to the fact that the power of the church has declined in modern societies. On the question whether TV standards are becoming more permissive, Jay’s answer is that TV standards have not become more permissive but they have changed and rather become more explicit (Jay 2003).

2.3. Different types of swearing

This section covers different types of swearing based on a study by Barbro Lindhe (1994). Her study, in turn, is part of a project started in 1989 by Seltén with the intention to investigate how taboo terms are used and in what kinds of situations.

Lindhe (1994:12), divides swearing into two categories: the primary form of swearing and the secondary form of swearing which in turn are divided into sub-categories. The Oxford English Dictionary (henceforth OED) defines The primary form of swearing as consisting of:
cursing – the utterance of words which consign to spiritual and temporal evil, the vengeance of the deity, the malign influence of fate, etc.

Asseverating – To affirm solemnly, assert emphatically, declare positively. This is usually used to guarantee the truth by adding holy entity e.g. “My God, this tastes good!”), or applied to emphasize what is being said.

Invocating – the action or an act of invoking or calling upon God, a deity, etc. in prayer or attestation; supplication, or an act or form of supplication, for aid or protection.

imploring – to beg and to pray for aid, favor, pardon etc”

apostrophizing – is a figure of speech, by which a speaker or a writer suddenly stops in his discourse, and turns to address pointedly some person or thing, either present or absent; an exclamatory address (Lindhe 1994:12).

The secondary form of swearing is an indirect form of swearing where the object in question is replaced by derogatory synonyms e.g. “That silly bitch stole my money!”. These definitions will be taken into consideration when analyzing the word bitch in the following sections. Moreover, the following sub-sections cover facts about the term bitch itself which serves as a kind of background information that will be used further on in the analysis.

2.4. The history of the term bitch

According to Hughes (1992: 215), the derogatory use of bitch can be traced back as far as the 15th century: at the beginning this term was used merely for women; however, this changed and a century later the term applied to men as well. These two uses existed simultaneously and have survived until today (Hughes 1992: 215). Moreover, Hughes (ibid) made distinctions between different swearwords by putting them into different categories. Bitch was categorized as a swearword belonging to the category of swearwords derived from “animal terms”.

Meanwhile, he put swearwords such as whore, harlot, filth, slut, hussy and broad into another category, that of swearwords derived from “sexual terms”. Reading his categorizations bitch did not have, at that time, a sexual connotation (at least not as much as it has today). For instance, bitch can be compared with the way people use dog as an abusive term. Whenever it is used to refer to a person (especially a male) it would mean that this
person is inferior or of low social rank according to the speaker. *Bitch* had an equivalent meaning but was applied to women and later on to men as well (Hughes 1992:215).

The following quotation shows how the term *bitch* was used in earlier days: “He is a shrewed *byche*, In feyth, I trow he be a wych” (from c 1500 quoted in Hughes 1992:226).

In 1971, an article, *The Bitch Manifesto* was published, which was a way of reclaiming the term *bitch* and turning it into a more positive word. This was also a way of celebrating the good qualities of strong, independent, self-confident and capable women. This is an example of what was attempted by the second-wave feminists who tried to reclaim the word *bitch* (Freeman 1971 in *Chicago Women’s Liberation Union* 2006).

### 2.5 The OED’s definitions of the term *bitch*

This section presents the various grammatical forms of *bitch* according to the *OED* (a summary of *bitch*, *bitching*, *bitchy*, *bitchily*):

The use of *bitch* as ‘a female dog’ can be traced back in c1000 when it was spelled as *bicē*. Not until in 1400 did the offensive meaning of ‘a treacherous, malicious woman’ come into use. The spelling also changed slightly to *biche*. The informal use soon developed and it could gradually refer to a male as well starting from the 16th century. *Bitch* was ultimately converted into a verb and this alteration took place in American speech in 1930 when it acquired the meaning of ‘to grumble’ and ‘to complain’. The meaning ‘to be spiteful, malicious, unfair and to deceive’ is from 1934. *Bitchy* as in ‘malicious and catty’ came into use already in 1928 and the second meaning of *bitchy* which was “belonging to or resembling a *bitch*” showed up in 1948. The use of *bitchily* showed up already in 1938 and it had fairly the same meaning as the adjective. At last the form *bitching*, which functions as an intensifier, in a negative sense namely when one expresses anger, frustration or contempt was present already in 1929. In 1957 *bitching* could also be used in a more positive sense which is when one expresses admiration, approval or enthusiasm (*OED* 2007).

### 2.6 General usage of the term *bitch*

Ljung wrote two books about swearing in several languages; the first book was published in 1984 and the second one in 2006. One expects that there must have been some changes in the way we swear. Nonetheless, there is no change at all in the way Ljung described the usage of *bitch* in both books. *Bitch* is one of the most severe swearwords applied to women and it still
refers to ‘women who are malicious, lewd, sexually promiscuous etc.’ He also argues that this term is more prevalent in American English. Ljung also brings up the expression *son of a bitch* which originates from American slang and came into use as early as the 18th century and is also used more frequently in the USA (Ljung 1992: 64-69, 2006: 122-123).

*Bitch* is commonly used informally and derogatorily as a swearword. This term has always been considered as being too offensive to use publicly. As a matter of fact this term is thought to be too inappropriate by broadcasting regulations and *Standards & Practices Manuals* in the USA despite the fact that it appeared for the first time in television already in the 1980s in the soap opera *Dynasty* (Wikipedia).

*Bitch* is not used merely in negative contexts and it is not entirely derogatory but it could also be used in positive contexts to show endearment; “Love ya bitch!” (Wikipedia). However, it is essential that the speaker and the hearer/addressee have a mutual understanding of the meaning when using the term.

In an article in the *BBC* online (*BBC* 2002), it is claimed that the use of *bitch* is very similar to the use of *bastard* even though they have totally different meanings. One may also find *bitch* used amongst people in prison as well and it is often a matter of showing power. When *bitch* is used in such circumstances it refers to somebody who is considered as a subordinate.

3. Method and Material

As mentioned Section 1.1 this essay has its main focus on teenagers’ language which was an essential factor when choosing the material and method. The primary method to carry out the investigation of the term *bitch* is to use two specific corpora which is *The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language* (henceforth COLT) and *Webcorp* and then compare the results from those with one another.

During the process of searching for data and material some obstacles have been encountered which affect the outcome of the investigation. The first main problem is the fact that there are limited corpora of teenage language available that can be used for this particular research. There are only two corpora which are relevant for this survey and accessible: COLT and Webcorp. COLT was founded in 1993 and it is the first English corpus that has its focus on teenagers’ speech only. It consists of half a million words of spoken British English produced by 13 to 17-year-olds from different areas of London (COLT 2003). Moreover,
Webcorp was created by a group of corpus linguists, software engineers and statisticians who are a part of the Research and Development Unit for English Studies (RDUES) based in the School of English at the University of Central England, Birmingham. Webcorp was introduced in 2000 and whoever had access to the Internet could utilize it; however, this was just a demo version and the RDUES continued to develop and improve the performance of the Webcorp which they still do today.

Not only are there limitations when it comes to access to the material but also the contents of the material itself are in some ways problematic. COLT has specifically identified the age group that can be considered as “teenagers”, which is 13 to 17-year-olds, whereas in Webcorp there is no such information. The Webcorp does not state any specific age range when referring to “teenagers” and, in addition, the language of children is included. Therefore, the comparison between these two corpora will not be entirely fair because a generalization of the uses of the term bitch among teenagers will be made at the end of this essay and we cannot exclude the language of children from Webcorp, which is included in the same domain as teenagers. Yet another downside is the fact that Webcorp allows “unlimited” access while there is an exact number of words in COLT. Therefore one cannot compare the frequencies of the word bitch between these two corpora; however, it is doable to make comparisons in terms of meanings.

Nonetheless, there are some benefits in these corpora as well. Webcorp is an up-to-date corpus which allows us access to the World Wide Web. Thus we have access to anything that is on the web. Yet, another advantage is the fact that COLT takes us near the language of teenagers as close as one can get. Thus, bitch was searched for in the two corpora in different word classes:

- bitch (noun and verb)
- bitches (noun and verb)
- bitching (verb and intensifier)
- bitchily (adverb)
- bitchy (adjective)

Further on, the results are presented in Section 4 where the frequencies of bitch are presented in two different tables; one for COLT and one for Webcorp. Moreover, concordance lines from the two corpora that are of importance will be dealt with individually and the
surrounding texts (if any) will also be mentioned in order to obtain a fuller picture of what *bitch* actually refers to in different contexts. The concordance lines from the two corpora will also be compared with each other in order to see whether there are any differences in terms of meanings. In addition, the results are discussed more in depth in Section 5 and the data mentioned in Section 2 have also been taken into consideration when dealing with the concordance lines. Eventually, the analysis is discussed in a broader term in section 6 and the research questions are also dealt with in this section.

4. Results

In this section the results from the corpora are presented. The frequency figures from different corpora are shown in separate tables and the concordance lines that are of importance will also be taken up in this section. In addition, these data will be discussed and dealt with in the Discussion section.

4.1 Results from *COLT*

The data found in *COLT* are presented in Table 1 where it is possible to see the frequency of *bitch*. Due to the fact that the term *bitch* can be used in various word classes, it is appropriate to present it in such a way that we can see the frequency of *bitch* in individual word classes.

*Table 1 The frequency of the term bitch in COLT*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word class</th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bitch (noun)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitch (verb)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitchy (adjective)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitchily (adverb)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitching (intensifier)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>75</td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures in Table 1 show that the term *bitch* functions most often as a noun (84%) and the uses of *bitch* as a verb and an adjective are very rare. Furthermore, *bitch* neither performs as
an adverb nor as an intensifier. When looking more closely at the concordance lines individually it appears that people tend to use *bitch* when referring to a female. However, there were a few cases where *bitch* referred to a male (see (1)) and there was only one instance where it referred to an animal (see (8)), which was a cat in this particular context (which is quite unusual).

Most of the recorded conversations took place in classrooms or somewhere in the school areas, in homes or in parks. The teenagers were either addressing their friends as *bitches* (see (1)) or their “enemies” as *bitches* (see (3)). The meaning of *bitch* also differs from context to context; sometimes they use the word just to be funny (see (9)). However, very often they use it to express annoyance, anger or even hatred towards other people (see( 2)). Furthermore, there were differences in the meaning of *bitch* depending on what sort of word class it functioned as. The expression *son of bitch* could also be found but it was very rare with merely two hits (see (10)).

Various examples are presented below in order to see more clearly how the term *bitch* is used. In order to get a better understanding of the different uses of *bitch* concordance lines that are of importance for this survey are discussed below:

**A. Noun** (*bitch, bitches, bitchiness*):

As mentioned earlier teenagers may address their friends as *bitches* without any wicked intentions; in (1) *bitch* is used as such.

(1) **Alright ya bitch.**

(1) was uttered by a boy and “ya bitch” was directed towards his two friends with whom he was playing video games. They were all friends and were just chatting with one another about their teacher. Nonetheless, *bitch* is often used in order to express anger, frustration or even some kind of hatred. This kind of use of the term *bitch* is presented below in (2) and (3).

(2) **She goes on about it. She’s such a stupid bitch that we got no money!**

(3) **You two-faced bitch!**
In (2) *bitch* refers to a female. In this context there is a girl whose mother won on the lottery and they now have a great deal of money and the girl who made that utterance is annoyed because the “rich” girl makes her feel poor. This is obviously her way of expressing irritation and envy towards the other girl. In (3) “*bitch*” refers to a girl who was in a fight with another girl.

(4) Just leave me with a *bitch*.

*Bitch* in (4) refers to a sexy and promiscuous woman. A boy who was talking to his friend about possessions uttered this sentence. He made a joke about him just wanting a woman and that nothing else matters. Even though this was a joke one can still sense the derogatory meaning of the word when one looks at the context.

In the next two examples *bitch* is used by males in both cases and it is directed at females, but one (5) is used in a more negative sense and than the other (6):

(5) That Jade thinks she a right horny *bitch*, don’t she?

Example (5) was uttered by a boy and the term *bitch* referred to a girl whom he disliked.

(6) (…) they were just really nice. They’re not like *bitches*.

(6) serves as another example where *bitch* is a noun which refers to a female; it was a male who uttered this sentence referring to some females he met, which was a compliment.

(7) Shut up *bitch*!

The person who uttered (7) was a male who was arguing in a classroom with another male. They became annoyed with each other and used *bitch* to express that. This shows that the term can be used to address a male too.

(8) The cat won’t come in, she never comes in the stupid *bitch*.

(8) displays the rare use of *bitch* to refer to a cat and there were only two instances of this. Even though *bitch* in this sentence is, in fact, refers to a cat it is still a way of expressing
annoyance. Hence, it is unlikely that the literal meaning of the term has been altered in some way. It was a little surprising not to be able to find any uses of *bitch* referring to a ‘female dog’ which is the literal meaning.

(9) Anyway, this is teenage *bitchiness*.

A teenage girl uttered (9) when talking with her friend about their teachers, whom they had negative opinions of: she excused herself by saying that she and her friend are in fact teenagers and hence they have the right to have such opinions about their teachers. Reading from the surrounding text it also appears as if she was trying to be funny. This example of the noun *bitchiness* is the only one in this corpus.

(10) I’m gonna kill your dog you *son of a bitch*!

*Son of a bitch* is a rarely used expression among teenagers in London. There were only two hits found in *COLT*. So far, the uses of *bitch* as a noun have been discussed. In what follows the verb form of *bitch* will be dealt with.

**B. Verb (*bitch*, *bitches*, *bitching*):**

(11) Women do not snore, or burp, or fart therefore they must *bitch*, or they will blow up.

A 14-year-old girl uttered (11) and what she probably meant by *bitch* in this context is that women nag, complain, gossip etc. According to the speaker, there are certain things that are typical and acceptable for boys to do and therefore there has to be something which is typical and acceptable for girls to do as well. She also emphasized the fact that if women always try to hide or suppress their feelings someday things will get worse.

(12) *Bitches on* at everybody and about everybody.

Example (12) was uttered by a 13-year-old boy who was talking to his friend about a girl they found acting strangely. She said “stupid” things and always went “over the limit”. Furthermore, one can compare the expression *bitches on* with *go on* which is also considered
as an informal expression e.g. “My, you do go on.” (The Free Dictionary 2007). It appears
that both these expressions refer to the chatty way of talking. However, bitches on obviously
has a more negative meaning than go on.

(13) Bitching me about this, bitching me about that, bitching me about every little
fucking thing I do!

In (13), another 13-year-old boy was rapping in a classroom. Obviously, he wanted to show
his teacher that he thinks people always nag and complain about him and he is fed up with it.
Next, the adjective form of the word bitch is dealt with.

C. Adjective (bitchy)

In (14) and (15) bitch is used as adjectives.

(14) (…) shut up and stop being so bitchy.
(15) That’s my bitchy science teacher.

Bitchy in both (14) and (15) refers to the fact that the persons in question are considered to be
mean and unpredictable. In (14) the girl is of the opinion that her friend can sometimes be
very kind but also very mean, one never knows in what kind of mood she is. In (15) the girl
dislikes her teacher and thinks simply that her teacher is a mean woman.

Observations on concordance lines from COLT have now been made and the analysis
will continue with dealing with the concordance lines from Webcorp in Section 4.2.

4.2 Results from Webcorp

Webcorp is another online corpus which gives access to the World Wide Web where facts
about language use can be extracted. This corpus differs from other corpora in that it does not
have sub-corpora but it has different domains instead: site domains and textual domains which
one can choose to get more specific results. Furthermore, it is possible to include or exclude
words (Webcorp).
The textual domain chosen in this survey was *Kids & Teens* which is based on a wish to acquire a better understanding of how people from that age group use this term. The results of the *Webcorp* search are presented in Table 2.

*Table 2 The frequency of the term bitch in Webcorp*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word class</th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bitch (noun)</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitch (verb)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitchy (adjective)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitchily (adverb)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitching (intensifier)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>162</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that the noun is the most prevalent word class which is similar to the results from *COLT*. Nevertheless, if one compares the frequency of the uses of *bitch* that function as an adjectives in this corpus with the results in *COLT*, it appears that young people use it less often on the Internet.

Further on, several concordance lines are categorized into different word classes and they will also be discussed below:

**A. Noun (bitch, bitches, bitchiness)**

In the following two examples (16) and (17) *bitch* functions as a noun, however, with different meanings.

(16) In 1990 I acquired my first *bitch* “Winnie” from (…) Kennel.

In (16) *bitch* refers to a female dog, hence, it is not an offensive way of using it. This meaning is the literal meaning of the term *bitch* and can only be found in this corpus and not in *COLT*.

(17) Come here *bitch*, I’m going to fuck you.
Bitch in (17) is used for a person in a derogatory way and reading from the data this sentence was used by a guard in a jail, directed at somebody, probably a prisoner since he showed little respect to that person when speaking. The guard had a very condescending attitude towards the person he was talking to. As mentioned in Section 2.6 it is not uncommon that bitch is used in prison and reading from (17) this seems to be true. The following lines are examples of bitch used as a verb.

**B. Verb (bitch, bitches, bitching)**

As the observations in Section 4.1 show, the verb form of bitch refers to the act of complaining and nagging which can be seen in (18) and (19).

(18) TalkPunk Punk rock forum to bitch & gab Join 77 for regular (…)
(19) I think the normal meaning of to bitch would be to complain or belly-ache, as in to bitch AT something.

Both examples (18) and (19) illustrate how the verb form of bitch is used. Example (18) is extracted from a forum where people who are interested in Punk can chat. Sentence (19) is an interpretation of the meaning of the term bitch made by a male. Next, concordance lines where bitch performs as adjectives are presented.

**C. Adjective (bitchy)**

There were no cases with the word bitchy whatsoever, however, the following line shows that bitch could also be used as an adjective. This is the only line of this type:

(20) My bitch weather!

Bitch in (20) seems to be a noun but it functions an adjective (pre-modifier). This is a very short sentence and the surrounding words do not say much about the term itself; therefore, further examples were sought for on Google in order to get a better picture of this kind of use. (21) is one of the examples found on Google:

(21) I want snow now…so sick of the moody bitch weather we are having here! Not
hot, not cold...just rain. (Google)

There were about 114 lines similar to (21) on Google and it seems as if bitch weather is used when we want to describe weather that is “nasty”, unbearable, unpredictable, etc. Moreover, there are cases where functions of bitch differ from the ones we have encountered which are illustrated in D.

D. Other Cases

There are approximately 18 tokens of bitch in Webcorp that refer literally to female dogs as seen in (22) and (23).

(22) (...) a 10 week old Tri bitch puppy...
(23) (...) stud dog or a brood bitch.

In this corpus there are also another “special” use of bitch illustrated in (24)

(24) Too much bitch and backstabbing.

At first sight the term bitch in (24) seems to function as a noun and it is actually a noun, however, its meaning is different from the meaning of a noun which we have encountered earlier. Even though bitch is a noun it does not have the original meaning of a noun but has the meaning of a verb which is ‘to nag’ or ‘to complain’. The term bitch has obviously gone through a type of word formation process i.e. conversion. Conversion involves an altering of a term from one word class to another word class (Yule 1996: 67) and this case even the meaning is changed. The meaning of the word bitch in (24) would be “too much nagging or too much complaining.” Figure 1. displays the process.

Figure 1.
Bitch (noun) = a person → bitch (verb) = to nag, to complain → bitch (noun) = nagging, complaining

At this point, both corpora, COLT and Webcorp have been consulted, and to investigate the various uses of bitch more profoundly the examples that have been presented in the Results
section will be analyzed in the Section 5 and comparisons between the two corpora will also be made in terms of meaning differences.

5. Discussion

In this section, the previous discussion about the concordance lines will be dealt with more closely. There will also be comparisons between the results from both corpora in order to get a broader picture of the different uses of the term bitch.

After observing the sentences where the term bitch appeared, one is able to conclude that there are three dominating word classes in which bitch appears:

- Noun (about a female, a male, an animal, an object, a situation, the act of nagging)
- Verb (to nag, to complain)
- Adjective (catty, malicious, scheming, cold, etc.)

The results show clearly that bitch functions mostly as a noun (see Table 1, Table 2). It can appear as other word classes such as verb, adjective, adverb and intensifier as well but they were very rare and some of them such as adverb and intensifier could not even be found. This holds for both the corpora in this survey. The few examples of bitch functioning as a verb showed that its meaning differs from the meaning of the noun. ‘To bitch about something’, e.g. in (12) and (18), is similar to that the verbs ‘nag’ or ‘complain’. According to OED, bitchy refers to somebody who resembles a bitch or it can have the meaning of a person who is malicious and catty. The latter sense correlates with the findings which have been taken up in examples (14) and (15). There were no cases with bitchy found in Webcorp; however, there was one case where the form bitch functioned as an adjective (see (20)). Furthermore, compared to COLT with no instances at all where the word bitch referred to a female dog, Webcorp shows that this kind of use does exist but it is not very common. Regarding this meaning of bitch, it is peculiar that it can be found in the Webcorp UK but not in COLT which is also a British corpus. The fact that the site domain in Webcorp includes “kids” (mentioned in Method and Material) might contribute to this difference. Other than that, there is another factor which is that Webcorp gives a wider range of data from the Internet and hence the access is unlimited whereas COLT has its limitations as to the number of words. These factors
are the most apparent factors that one can detect which might contribute to the difference in the use of *bitch* that has the literal meaning of ‘a female dog’.

As mentioned in Section 2.6, *bitch* can be used in positive contexts as well where the speaker intends to show endearment; however, this type of use could not be found in any of the corpora that have been investigated. Thus, one can conclude that this type of use is not very common after all, at least not in these corpora. Moreover, according to sources in Section 2.2 (i.e. Ljung 1984:38, *The Free Dictionary* 2007), most of the swearwords derive from taboo terms. *Bitch’s* original meaning is ‘a female dog’ and Hughes (1992:215) put *bitch* in the category of “swearwords deriving from animal terms”. Furthermore, as Jay stated this meaning seems to have changed and it developed a more sexual and taboo meaning. This means that *bitch* originally was not a taboo term but has become one over the years. In other words, the term has gone through a process of *pejoration* meaning that “a lexeme develops a negative sense of disapproval.” (Crystal 2003:138). Hughes (1992:215) also argued that the use of *bitch* could be compared with the use of *dog*, which is used towards somebody whom the speaker finds is of low quality. The findings also show that *bitch* is used most often as an abusive term which teenagers use to address each other when they are frustrated or angry – it is a way of giving vent for emotions, as stated earlier in Section 2.1.

According to Lindhe (1994:12), the secondary form of swearing refers to the act of replacing the name or the title of the person in question with a derogatory term with the intention to harm or offend this person verbally. The use of the noun *bitch* which is aimed at a person can be put into this category. Evidently, this use of *bitch* was also the most common one in both COLT and Webcorp.

To sum up this section, the results show that *bitch* functions mostly as a noun and it often refers to a person in a derogatory manner. Whenever *bitch* functions as another word class besides a noun, its meaning changes into less derogatory and less offensive which is a process of *amelioration* (Crystal 2003:138). Moreover, the literal meaning of *bitch* ‘a female dog’ is in fact rare and could be found merely in Webcorp whereas the non-literal meanings of *bitch* is prevalent in both COLT and Webcorp. There have also been suggestions of the existence of the positive use of the word *bitch*; however, this could not be detected in neither of the two corpora. The data show that teenagers who use this term often use it in order to let out steam. The data have now been dealt with and conclusions will be drawn in Section 6.
6. Conclusion

As stated in Section 1.1, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the use of the term *bitch* among today’s teenagers nowadays. Two corpora, *COLT* and *Webcorp*, have been utilized in order to collect data. Despite the fact that the material is small interesting information could be found. *COLT* is an excellent corpus in the sense that it provides information about the speakers in question such as their age, gender, whereabouts, etc. This kind of data is not available in *Webcorp* (at least not in the domains that were used). However, as in *COLT*, it is possible to see full texts where the word appears in and by knowing the contexts it is easier to analyse.

In addition, throughout the Results section and the Discussion section connections were made between the data from the corpora and the previous studies. Thus, in this section we will sum up and discuss the results along with the research questions that have been posed in Section 1.1. Finally, conclusions will be drawn in hope of obtaining a better understanding of the uses of the word *bitch*.

There are four research questions in this survey:

1. Can the word *bitch* be considered a swearword?
2. In what word classes does *bitch* appear in and which is the most common one?
3. Are there any differences in the meanings of various forms?
4. To whom do the teenagers address the term “*bitch*”?

To be able to answer these questions we need to take a look at what has been discussed previously. According to Table 1 and Table 2, the term *bitch* can function as a noun, a verb and an adjective and the most common word class is the noun. As *OED* stated, there are a few differences when it comes to the meaning of *bitch* when it appears as a different word class. When *bitch* functions as a noun it is often used in swearing but there are a few instances in *Webcorp* where it is used in its literal meaning that is ‘a female dog’. The word has the meaning ‘to nag’ and ‘to complain’ whenever it performs as a verb. When it appears as an adjective it has the meaning of a person (usually a female) who is ‘catty’ and ‘malicious’.

The people whom teenagers address as *bitch* are mostly their peers. The teenagers are often in a discussion and address each other as *bitches* out of annoyance, frustration and anger. They did call their teachers and a few other adults *bitch* as well but behind their backs.
Despite the fact that the original meaning of the term *bitch* is neutral its other meanings are negative and many times offensive which is also used more often than the neutral meaning, therefore, the term *bitch* can be considered a swearword.

As far as teenagers are concerned, there always seems to be one person who swears the most and then there are a few followers, but not everybody is influenced by that. This correlates with what Ross (1960 in Crystal 2003:173) stated that swearing is in many ways contagious. Teenagers who spend time with each other are highly influenced by one another and it is not surprising that they “pick up” terms from each other. Therefore, it is important to point out that the language that is used in the media such as in reality shows, movies, lyrics, etc., has a great influence on the way teenagers speak. Nonetheless, further investigation on this matter needs to be done before any conclusion can be drawn on this aspect. Another interesting topic that can be investigated is to do a quantitative survey of teenagers’ attitudes towards the term *bitch*.

The present research allows us to understand the use of the term *bitch* better, however, more investigations need to be carried out on the topic and also more corpora should be used.
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