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# Gender differences in the usage of mild versus strong swearwords and their pre- modifying adjectives

An analysis of findings in the BNC2014

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## Abstract

This essay presents a study on gender differences with a focus on mild and strong swearwords and their pre-modifying adjectives when describing a person, based on findings from the BNC2014. Previous research implies that men and women use different types of swearwords, suggesting that men tend to use stronger language than women. The aim of this study is to investigate the usage of strong versus mild swearwords to analyze if there are differences in frequency and use of pre-modifying adjectives across gender. A set of mild swearwords (*cow, git*) and strong swearwords (*dick, cunt*) from Ofcom's scale of offensiveness (Ofcom, 2016) was used to manually compare how men and women tend to differ in the way they use these words. Previous research on swearing in connection to gender, offensiveness, and pre-modifying adjectives is presented as well as a definition of the swearwords. The results show that the usage of mild and strong language is equally used in male and female speakers and that negative and other pre-modifying adjectives are most used together with these words. Hopefully, the findings in this study could shed more light on the topic of gender differences and swearing.

*Keywords:* Swearing, gender differences, pre-modifying adjectives, British National Corpus, sociolinguistics

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## **1. Introduction**

The use of swearwords is a complex social phenomenon and as languages develop, so does swearing (McEnery, 2006, p. 15). A broad definition of swearing is that it is an utterance containing taboo words that are used with non-literal meaning and as an emotive way to express feelings and attitudes (Ljung, 2010). Taboos are created from social restraints and matters that are believed to be harmful or discomforting in some way, and people usually avoid tabooed language unless they want to use it intentionally (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 1). Swearing refers to the use of words that are generally perceived to be rude and thus taboo (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 39). Although the original meaning of the verb swear is 'to take an oath', its meaning developed to become profane swearing, which means using vulgar and irreligious language to insult (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 76). The offensive undertones of swearing lead to it being associated with cursing, which was initially referred to as 'imprecating malevolent fate'. Since the nineteenth century 'cursing' is used as synonymous to 'swear words' (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 77). 'Bad' or 'coarse' language are other terms that are used in connection to taboo words and describe language that is seen as impolite, incorrect, or colloquial in the mainstream of speakers (Battistella, 2005, p. 8)

Linguistic change occurs when users in a speech community implement changes as a new established norm (Coates, 2016, p. 102) and words that were considered strong some years ago might be seen as mild today, just as some words that were used lightly before are now considered inappropriate. Progress in society may lead to people being more sensitive to some categories of swearwords and particularly women have been able to reclaim words about certain body parts as well as being able to use stronger language as it becomes more acceptable as time goes by (Ofcom, 2016). Linguistic taboos are not universal or definite, but change across time and across cultures, and what is considered bad language can be different depending on personal preferences and contexts as well as include a broad spectrum of words of varying character (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 244). Swearing can, for example, involve words that refer to race, body parts, sexual references, or religion (Ofcom, 2016). The offensiveness of a word is revealed to depend on both the context in which a word is used, the speaker-listener relationship, and gender (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Adjectives are often used together with swearwords to increase offensiveness, add a humoristic tone, or make an expression milder, and many adjectives used to modify swearwords are classified as evaluative adjectives and thus express an attitude towards a

person or a situation (Hunston, 2010). As evaluative adjectives are multidimensional and can be used differently in different contexts, the classification into positive versus negative can be seen as subjective, and in a combination with nouns, the interpretation heavily relies on norms and context (Peeters, 1992).

The use of taboo language across gender is a debated topic, as it relies heavily on perception and stereotypes rather than solid research (Hughes, 1998, p. 195). Nevertheless, it is often believed that women swear less than men and that men choose stronger expressions, as women tend to use a more formal and polite language while men tend to apply a more vernacular style of speaking (Coates, 2016, p. 97). It is found that women are more sensitive to linguistic norms and to prestige (Coates, 2016, p. 98), but it is not yet elucidated if this leads women to use milder forms of cursing compared to men. Furthermore, men and women appear to use different kinds of words and direct them to different audiences depending on the character of the word (McEnery, 2006, p. 29).

With these earlier discoveries in mind, the central point of this essay will be swearing, with sociolinguistic variables used to explain variation. The essay will investigate how mild versus strong swear words and their pre-modifying adjectives are used differently across gender when they are used to describe a person. The spoken part of the BNC2014 will be used to examine one set of swearwords that are regarded as mild and one set of words that are regarded as strong in British English. The mild words are considered more acceptable swearwords and include *cow*, *git*. Strong words that are investigated in this study are *dick*, *cunt*, both regarded as some of the strongest and least acceptable words (Ofcom, 2016). Since these words are defined differently on a scale of offensiveness (Ofcom, 2016), it is of academic interest to compare them and their pre-modifying evaluative adjectives to investigate if they are used in different ways by men and women. Previous research implies that women would be less prone to use stronger language compared to men, therefore a study of a set of mild versus strong words in the BNC2014 is relevant to see if that is the case.

## **1.2 Aim and Research Questions**

The aim of this study is to investigate the usage of strong versus mild swearwords to analyze if there are differences in frequency across gender. There will be a manual analysis of the usage of the set of mild versus strong words when used to describe a person across gender in the Spoken BNC2014. In addition, this study will look at the

pre-modifying adjectives used together with the swearwords. The adjectives will be categorized into “positive”, “negative”, or “other” to find out how men and women use milder or stronger language. The research questions that the study is built around are:

1. Is there a difference in frequency between men’s and women’s usage of the mild swearwords *cow*, *git*, and the strong swearwords *dick*, *cunt*, when used to describe a person?
2. Are positive/negative/other pre-modifying adjectives used in different ways when it comes to mild versus strong swearwords and across gender?

## **2. Background**

The aim of this study is to investigate if there are differences in frequency between men's and women's usage of the mild swearwords *cow*, *git*, and the strong swearwords *dick*, *cunt*, when used to describe a person, and if positive/negative/other pre-modifying adjectives are used in different ways when it comes to mild versus strong swearwords and across gender. This section presents previous research and relevant background appropriate for this study. There are three sections, Section 2.1 presents a brief historical background and introduces earlier research on gender and swearing. Section 2.2 focuses on mild versus strong language and discuss the meaning of the swearwords investigated, and lastly, Section 2.3 introduces earlier research on evaluative adjectives.

### **2.1 Historical Background and Gender**

Bad language has been present for a long time and it is believed that Brits are more foul-mouthed than most cultures (Hughes, p. 23). Historically, swearwords have been progressing to aim at different meanings as the focus in society changes. Early swearing in the medieval age of faith was mostly religious, then became sexual with the renaissance and the taboos connected to sexuality. Swearing then shifted to political topics in the nineteenth century and finally became racially targeted (Hughes, 1998, p. 232). Unsurprisingly, taboo language has historically been seen as a token of lower class and inappropriate for women (McEnery, 2006, p. 288). Today, in the twenty-first century, the relation between language, purity, and power is still present but slowly changing (McEnery, 2006, p. 445). Interestingly, more modern research suggests that swearing is a declining trend, as the spoken BNC2014 contains much less of words and phrases considered bad language compared to the spoken BNC1994 (Love, 2021).

The interest in the differences between men's and women's speech has grown over the last decades, and gender differences have been studied from various approaches (Coates, 2016, p. 3). The frequency of bad language across gender is a debated topic and while some studies show that males are more aggressive than females by evolution, which may lead them to use stronger language due to their inability to control their emotions (Güvendir, 2015), others claim that genetics does not have anything to do with swearing but rather that a social distinction has created the differences in swearing across gender (McEnery, 2006, p 80). Nevertheless, the statement that men use swearwords more frequently than women could perhaps be tied to evolutionary reasons that include sexual selection, with males taking part in aggressive intergroup

confrontations to gain sexual access and showing more violent behavior than the female members of a group (Güvendir, 2015). In contrast, females generally adopted a less aggressive response due to their burden of childbearing and the risk of death in aggressive encounters. The linguistic result was aggressive males who tended to use strong swear words more than females, and this may have persisted across time (Güvendir, 2015).

Historically it has been taboo for women to use swearwords, particularly words that are seen as explicit and inappropriate (Coates, 2016, p. 96). Hence, there is an assumption that men use bad language as well as choose stronger swearwords than women more frequently than women (Hughes, 2006, p. 195). Although, this can be seen as a cultural stereotype since not much solid evidence is at hand on this matter (Coates, 2016, p. 97). Older studies in the field by Kramer (1973) and Lakoff (1973) do not confirm that men swear more than women but rather indicate people's perception of gender differences, implying that men use vulgar language more than women (Coates, 2016, p. 10). However, in more recent years the habit of bad language becomes more complex as both men and women participate in the community of language in a more equal way today, but still with some differences reflected by gender (Stapleton, 2003). While it is established that women use swearwords less frequently than men as female speakers are prone to using formal and prestigious forms of language, both genders seem to deploy strong language today to fit into a group (Stapleton, 2003).

Even if it has been claimed that both men and women use vulgar language equally frequently, they tend to choose different types of words (McEnery, 2006, p. 29). Indeed, Jay (1992, p. 169) suggests that men use stronger language compared to women and that men tend to use more offensive words than women. Generally, women are less secure than men, and it is recognized that women are more sensitive to status and feel a greater need to use a specific language to fit in social contexts (Coates, 2016, p. 98). This has traditionally led to women not wanting to be associated with vernacular styles of speaking and masculinity (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Swearing functions as a symbol of vernacular identity and has a connection to masculinity and "coolness" (Coates, 2016, p. 97), and for this reason, women might indeed use milder forms of curse words compared to men. On the other hand, the way women speak has historically been associated with a lack of power, and men have often devalued women's language which has led to women adopting men's language and not the other way around (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). A linguistic development toward more swearing could

possibly serve as a conscious strategy to gain more power for women in recent years as there is an urge for women to reclaim power and adopt a more “masculine” way of speaking, i.e., swearing and using stronger words. (Coates, 2016, p. 99).

## **2.2 Mild versus Strong Language**

Euphemism refers to terms that are polite, the opposite being dysphemism, which is blunt or unpleasant language (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 40). Even if these descriptions are used to classify language, they can be seen as problematic given that the present social attitudes and practices are what really define a specific term. Since social attitudes vary and are ever-changing between individuals even in the same community, what is considered euphemistic and dysphemistic will come down to personal preference in due course (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 239). Researchers agree that the categorization of language into good versus bad is a social construction and relies heavily on the overall culture combined with principles of the current society (Battistella, 2005, p. 110), and there is great complexity in the attitudes toward language and that makes universal labelling of strong or mild words very difficult (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 240). At the same time, bad language has indeed been proven to belong to different categories and is seen as more or less offensive depending on their character. Religious-targeted words such as “god” or “hell” are nowadays often deemed as less slanderous, while racial and sexual assaults are considered strong language today (Battistella, 2005, p. 102).

Acceptance of strong language has been proven to differ across societies, but the degree of tolerance has increased with time (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 104). Even if tolerance is dependent on what type of taboo behaviour is used, the current values and belief systems are what will make specific words be determined as strong or mild, and the areas considered taboo will change over time (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 104). In general, people have more indulgence in stronger swearwords today compared with before (Battistella, 2005, p. 105). Why even the strongest language is tolerated by people is a discussed topic, and it includes the right to express oneself freely, the idea of being able to use realistic speech, as well as flouting convention (Battistella, 2005, p. 115). Arguments against strong language involve the aim for public language to be polite and suited for everybody and to avoid immoral and dangerous ideas, as well as causing offense (Battistella, 2005, p. 115).

As stated above, the starting point of determining the offensiveness or appropriateness of a word depends on contextual variables, some words are considered taboo, and some are not (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Since this is the case, all taboo words are not equivalent as they correspond to different degrees of emotion. Nevertheless, to understand the underlying process of what categorizes language as mild or strong there is a need for knowledge of the underlying emotions, apart from social constructions (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Semantic memory plays a large role in the emotional aspects of words. A person will normally not connect the learning of non-taboo words with something exhilarating, but in the case of taboo words it is the opposite. Taboo words are not seldom connected to punishment, embarrassment, or excitement. A semantic network is built, and the context of a word is stored along with its semantic and syntactic characteristics which include the emotion associated with a specific word. That is why emotion is used as a foundation for lexical access during the swearing procedure (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

Regardless of the complexity of defining specific words into strong versus mild language, Ofcom (2016) has conducted a large study in Britain doing just that. Specific words were studied to distinguish perceptions based on context and cultural norms of today across different demographic groups to determine potentially insulting language and to rank them in terms of offensiveness (Ofcom, 2016). The outcome was that it is challenging to decide on acceptability when words can be used in different ways and when a word's meaning is perceived to have changed. There was a discrepancy regarding terms that have been seen as unacceptable historically, but which might have lost their status due to change over time, often including mental illnesses or religion. The same went for terms that have been 'reclaimed' by those whom they were originally intended to insult, frequently involving feminism and sexuality (Ofcom, 2016). At the same time, many words that were seen as tolerable in the past are now deemed intolerable, but then again, the meaning of words can also shift from being unacceptable to more acceptable because their use and meaning have changed (Ofcom, 2016).

The list of "milder words" includes words that do express strong emotions, but these words are generally of no or little concern. Most are thought to be in common use and frequently in a humorous way. The category of the "strong/strongest words" was seen to communicate very strong emotions and to be disrespectful and aggressive insults (Ofcom, 2016). In British English, the word "cow" is used as an offensive word

for a woman who someone dislike (Oxford Dictionary) and is classified as mild (Ofcom, 2016). The word “*git*” is British English slang for a stupid or unpleasant man (Oxford Dictionary) and is categorized as a mild swearword by Ofcom (2016). When the word “*dick*” is used to describe a person, it refers to a person (especially a man) that you think is stupid or unpleasant (Oxford Dictionary) and is categorized as a very offensive term (Ofcom, 2016). The word “*cunt*” is one of the most offensive terms (Ofcom, 2016) and is a word used to show great anger or dislike as well as to describe women or female attributes (Oxford Dictionary).

### **2.3 Evaluative Adjectives**

Evaluative language is used to express an opinion or attitude about a person or a situation (Hunston, 2010). When using evaluative adjectives, specific attitudes or judgments are revealed, often in the form of figurative phrases. Figurative phrases go beyond the literal meaning of a word and are used to make a point, often in a humorous or emotional way, and are thus often used together with swearing (Hunston, 2010). Calling someone a “miserable cow” is an example of a figurative phrase using an evaluative adjective. Adjectives are often used to suggest something implicative rather than using them in their objective meaning (Karttunen et al., 2014). The context in which an adjective is used is an important aspect of the interpretation, and research shows that evaluative adjectives often are used subjectively along with taking more than one function concurrently, which makes them difficult to categorize (Hunston, 2010). Ordinary adjectives can sometimes mean something positive and sometimes something negative depending on the context, and this means that the general evaluation carried out using the adjective will probably be negative if the context is negative (Stojanovic, 2015). As evaluative adjectives are multidimensional and can be used differently in different contexts, the classification into positive versus negative can be seen as subjective (Stojanovic, 2015). It is often understood that positive adjectives reflect the objective meaning of the adjective, while the meaning of a negative adjective depends on the context (Peeters 1992). This is called the negative-context effect, which infers that when an adjective is used in a positive effect the adjective will have the same meaning as if used in isolation, but the meaning of a negative context evaluative adjective is often used in reverse. That is, a negative adjective by itself might mean something positive, but in the negative context becomes negative. In a combination with nouns, the interpretation heavily relies on norms and context (Peeters 1992).

However, since evaluative adjectives are one-place property-denoting predicates which maintain their individual-level reading, it means that they often have an isolated meaning by themselves, and thus can be divided into semantic classes which means that the meaning of the word itself can be positive or negative (Quirk et al., 1985). McEnery (2006, p 78) also presses on the importance to study words in isolation to get the true meaning when factors connected to sociolinguistics are present. A pre-modifying adjective modifies the target noun and therefore the adjective often bears a target-specific polarity. The polarity strength indicates how strong a positive or negative evaluation of the noun is. As nouns are usually more neutral in their meaning, positive adjectives make for a more positive context while negative adjectives create a harsher language (Fahrni & Klenner 2008). Negative modifiers are used to strengthen the objects of offense, while the opposite goes for positive modifiers (McEnery, 2006, p. 26). When using modifying adjectives together with swearwords, a negative modifier e.g., *lazy*, will intensify the negative meaning of the noun, while a positive modifier, e.g., *smart*, will make the insult less offensive and add a humourous tone.

### 3. Method

This section presents the methodology, focusing on the two research questions of the study, the first being to examine if there are differences in frequency between men's and women's usage of the mild swearwords *cow*, *git*, and the strong swearwords *dick*, *cunt*, when used to describe a person, and the second being if positive/negative/other pre-modifying adjectives are used in different ways when it comes to mild versus strong swearwords and across gender. There are four sections, Section 3.1 presents the material of which the data was collected from, Section 3.2 describes the method of analysis step by step. Section 3.3 gives a description of how swearwords and adjectives are defined in this study, and finally Section 3.4 presents the validity and reliability of the study.

#### 3.1 Material

A corpus study makes it possible to investigate naturally produced language (Baker, 2010, p. 94), and for this study, the data for the analysis was collected through the Spoken British National Corpus from 2014 (BNC2014). The BNC2014 is an upgrade of the previous version published in 1994 and mirrors the developments in the spoken language (Love, et al., 2017, p. 321). The BNC2014 is a large set of samples of modern-day British English language use, collected from a range of real-life contexts (BNC, 2018). The content was gathered for 4 years (2012-2016) from participants of the UK public by recordings from smartphones belonging to the contributors and includes 11.5 million words (BNC, 2018). The data consists of transcripts of informal conversations typically among friends and family, which makes it reflect the actual spoken language.

To comply with the research questions, this study investigated the frequency in two sets of swearwords used specifically to describe a person both as the addressee and an absent third party (mild: *cow*, *git*, strong: *cunt*, *dick*) across male and female speakers using data from the BNC2014. This study restricted the data to only include the instances where the swearwords were used to describe a person to be able to closely investigate how men and women use these words differently in their speech when describing a person. Furthermore, the study collected data regarding the modifying adjectives used together with these sets of swearwords. The BNC2014 is grammatically tagged which allows for searches including grammatical features, and thus the adjectives could be found using specific search strings.

### 3.2 Method of Analysis

This study was divided into two stages, both being manual analyses (every instance was looked at individually) extracted from the BNC2014 to examine the context in which the words were produced. The first stage looked at the frequency of mild versus strong swearwords used to describe a person across gender to see if there were any differences in usage between strong and mild words between the genders. The second stage investigated pre-modifying adjectives used with these swearwords when they were used to describe a person, to find out about differences in strong versus mild adjectives used across gender.

The first stage was conducted by two steps repeated for all four words (*cow*, *git*, *cunt*, *dick*). The first step was to search for each word in order to get the total frequency of the total instances and how many of these instances were used to describe a person by each gender. The four different words were entered into the Spoken BNC2014, one by one as a restricted query with the restriction being the gender of the speaker (male/female), for each word. The total frequency of the word was noted, and from the total frequency for each word and by each gender the estimated number of instances where the word was used to describe a person was calculated. A random sample of 50 hits was taken from the words with over 50 matches to investigate how many of the instances described a person (for the words with under a total of 50 hits all instances were examined). The instances where speakers referred to other things than persons were removed (e.g., cows as animals). This was to get an estimate of how many of the total frequency of the words were used to describe a person. The second step was to calculate a percentage for easier comparison by dividing the number of hits of each word in each gender category that described a person by the total number of hits of the specific word.

The second stage aimed to identify the pre-modifying adjectives that were used with the words *cow*, *git*, *cunt*, and *dick*, in the instances they were used to describe a person, to target the frequency differences in the types of adjectives (positive versus negative) across gender. To search for the modifying adjectives the query mode setting (CQP-syntax) was selected in the restricted query, and the tag that was used for adjectives included positive, comparative, and superlative forms. The search strings were adjectives followed by the specific word investigated, e.g. [pos= "JJ.\*"] [word="cow"]. The words were replaced to include all four words and were examined one time for each gender. For each swearword, all matches with modifying adjectives were examined

manually to include only the instances describing a person. The normalized frequency was then calculated in the same way as for the first stage, by dividing the number of the hits that described a person by the total word count in the BNC2014 for the specific search and then multiplying it by a million.

### **3.3 Definitions**

#### **3.3.1 Swearwords**

The categorization of swearwords was taken from a report conducted by the Office of Communications (Ofcom), a UK government-approved regulatory and competition authority for the broadcasting, telecommunications, and postal industries. The report (*Attitudes to potentially offensive language and gestures on TV and radio*) was made to identify attitudes toward offensive language in today's public, to create a modern barometer of offensive language in terms of acceptability, and to understand the contextual factors which influence the tolerability of possibly offensive words (Ofcom, 2016). The research was conducted by both qualitative and quantitative methods, including face-to-face focus groups and in-depth interviews as well as a quantitative online survey with a total of 248 participants from different parts of the UK. The evaluation included 150 potentially offensive words and the sample of participants involved a general population and minority groups (ethnic minority backgrounds, the LGBT community, Gypsies and Travellers, and disabled people) (Ofcom, 2016). The research was intended to discover why participants had certain opinions about potentially offensive language. Participants evaluated possibly offensive words based on their perceived meaning, and the cultural norms around the words, to define if the words were considered offensive, vulgar, or distasteful. Based on these questions, the less acceptable words were identified as being offensive terms directed to a particular group, to be distasteful, and used as a personal emotional response. The more acceptable words were identified as commonly used words that are not seen as offensive (Ofcom, 2016).

There were different categories of swearwords, with “general swearwords” being the category investigated in this study. The general swearwords mostly refer to body parts and sexual references, but also to religion and defecation. The emotional impact linked with the word investigated was important, and the words were categorized into mild words (generally of little concern, light-hearted insults often used in humorous ways), medium words (possibly unacceptable), and strong words (highly unacceptable,

used to express very strong emotions, or to be rude and/or aggressive insults) (Ofcom, 2016). For this study, two words from the “mild” category and two words from the “strong” category were chosen. The selection of words was made by the following criteria:

1. Words that are used to describe a person
2. Highest frequency in the BNC2014
3. Words that were comparable and usually referred to a man versus a woman in each category

### **3.3.2 Adjectives**

This study investigated modifying adjectives used with the four specific swearwords *cow*, *git*, *dick*, and *cunt*, when used to describe a person, with the aim to analyze if there are differences across gender. This study only used pre-modifying adjectives and did not look at predicative adjectives. Predicative adjectives usually come after a linking verb rather than before a noun and are harder to extract automatically in a reliable way. Thus, they did not fit into the research and limitations for this study, while a premodifier is a modifier that precedes the head of a noun phrase or word that determines the meaning of a phrase. To find out whether positive or negative evaluative adjectives are applied with strong and mild swearwords and used in the same way by men or women, a definition of a positive or negative evaluative adjective had to be made. Evaluative language is language that is used to express a certain attitude or to make an assessment about a person or a situation (Hunston, 2010). To create a solid base for the research, the evaluative adjectives were classified into positive, negative, or other. Even if the investigated swearwords and the adjectives used in association with them were all used to describe a person as an insult, the evaluative adjectives themselves can be categorized and make for stronger or milder language. McEnery (2006, p. 78) claims that there is a benefit in studying words in isolation when considering sociolinguistic factors, as the variables that interact could affect the result. Therefore, the context of the sentence was not considered when classifying the adjectives, but rather their objective meaning by themselves. The criteria of the classification for the adjectives as positive, negative, or other are presented below.

Positive adjectives are words that communicate a positive quality or state of being of a noun (Peeters 1992). The criterion for positive evaluative adjectives in this study is that they describe something good or useful and/or express agreement or support

(Oxford dictionary). A few examples of positive evaluative adjectives investigated in this study are *clever*, *smart*, and *lucky*, which are adjectives that all have an objective positive meaning. A negative adjective is a word that reflects and communicates a negative quality or state of being (Peeters 1992). The criterion for a negative evaluative adjective is that it has a meaning that is bad or harmful and/or only considers the bad side of something or somebody (Oxford dictionary). Some examples of negative evaluative adjectives are *stupid*, *miserable*, and *lazy*, which all meet the criteria of an adjective being used to describe something in an unpleasant way.

Many of the adjectives are not in either class as they are not positive or negative in themselves, so therefore a third category of “other” adjectives was applied. Other adjectives are words that are unbiased, not supporting any side, or not expressing any strong feeling (Oxford dictionary). In this category are words like *complete*,  *fucking*, *big*, and *total*. The other adjectives are different from the positive and negative adjectives in that they intensify the meaning of the noun and are only used to serve this function. Consequently, they are adding information on quantity rather than a positive or negative dimension. However, the adjectives in the other category were scattered and very different from each other. Some words were somewhat evaluative (e.g., *old*) whereas others were not (e.g., *actual*). The word *old* is an example of a tricky adjective to categorize, as it could possibly be seen as negative depending on individual inclination. Nevertheless, the word *old* is not a clear negative term and was therefore fitted into the other category. Consequently, this category includes different types of adjectives, but the common denominator is that they are neither positive evaluative nor negative evaluative, with the important note that some adjectives not being evaluative at all. The other category included the words that are descriptive and intensifying without having a clear positive or negative evaluation.

### **3.4 Validity and Reliability**

In this section, the validity and reliability of the study will be discussed, as they are essential aspects to consider. Reliability aims to see whether the results in a study would be the same if the same data were being analyzed with the exact same method and variables by another person (Rasinger, 2010, p. 55). Validity refers to if the selected method truly measures what it is supposed to measure and can be separated into internal and external validity. Internal validity refers to which degree the method is trustworthy

and not influenced by other factors or variables, while external validity refers to whether the results can be utilized in other situations, groups, or events (Rasinger, 2010, p. 56).

For this study, the most important part of reliability was to follow a consistent and replicable pattern for all words investigated. This was done by calculating the normalized frequency for all instances investigated as well as using the same search strings across all categories. Thus, the data that are collected make for results that are comparable and another person could perform the same analysis by applying the same variables and would get the same results, which increases the reliability. When a manual analysis is used there are some important aspects to consider regarding both validity and reliability. The reason a manual analysis was used was to identify only the instances where the swearwords were used to describe another person, both in the frequency of the usage and together with modifying adjectives since the corpora do not provide for these results without looking at each hit manually. An issue that could affect the reliability when conducting a manual study like this is that there is a risk that the data could be interpreted differently if another person would examine the same data. To increase reliability the study could have used an additional person's opinion on the manual analysis so that a comparison of the results could have been possible.

To increase the validity and reliability of the categorization, both the swearwords and the modifying adjectives have been backed up by definitions as described in the previous section. Because only the instances where the swearwords were used to describe a person were to be examined, each of the matches in the BNC2014 had to be looked at manually. For the words that generated over 50 matches, a manual investigation of all matches was not possible due to limitations in time, but an average percentage was calculated as described in Section 3.2. To increase the external validity, this study did not assume that male and female speakers used the swearwords to describe a person to the same extent but calculated the average percentage linked to the normal frequency. However, this method could affect the reliability as another person could apply the method of randomly investigating 50 matches but get a slightly different average. Another possible matter that could affect validity was that the study had to rely on the grammatical tagger in the BNC2014 when searching for the pre-modifying adjectives. This is a concern in terms of validity as the tagger might not have found all adjectives, as well as whether all adjectives found are actually adjectives. The issue of the first concern remains as there was no realistic way to manually check for adjectives that were not found due to their incorrect tagging in a large database such as the

BNC2014. As for the second concern, all the investigated sentences that were included in the normalized frequency included actual adjectives as this was possible to manually control.

When it comes to the categorization of adjectives, the manual analysis that was done can be seen to be subjective to some extent. To improve the reliability and validity, a definition of the categorization of the adjectives in Section 3.3.2 is clearly presented. However, as some adjectives were difficult to categorize, the aspect of subjectivity remains to be considered. Another important aspect to consider is the speaker's language available in the corpora, as there is always a possibility that the participants adjust their language when recording. If they are not speaking naturally the validity might be affected.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The aim of this study was to examine if there are differences in frequency between men's and women's usage of the mild swearwords *cow*, *git*, and the strong swearwords *dick*, *cunt*, when used to describe a person, and if positive/negative/other pre-modifying adjectives are used in different ways when it comes to mild versus strong swearwords and across gender. Chapter four presents the data that lays the foundation for the analysis and discussion. The results will be presented in two sections, the first section (4.1) focuses on the first research question regarding the frequency of the swearwords. The second section (4.2) presents the analysis regarding adjectives used together with the swearwords associated with the second research question.

### **4.1 Frequency Analysis**

The first part of the study investigated if there is any difference in frequency between men's and women's usage of the mild swearwords *cow*, *git*, and the strong swearwords *dick*, *cunt* when they are used to describe a person. The results were taken from the Spoken BNC2014. Figure 1 presents the total frequency of each word and the estimated frequency of 50 random hits when it was used to describe a person to get an overview of the overall regularity of using these words. The results that are presented in Figure 2 show the total proportion in percentages for when the word is used to describe a person. The percentage is used to show the estimated proportions of frequency when a word is used to describe a person as an insult, and not only using the word in general in a more comprehensive way. Thus, the percentages presented below refer to how often the word is used specifically when describing a person compared to when it is used for other purposes.

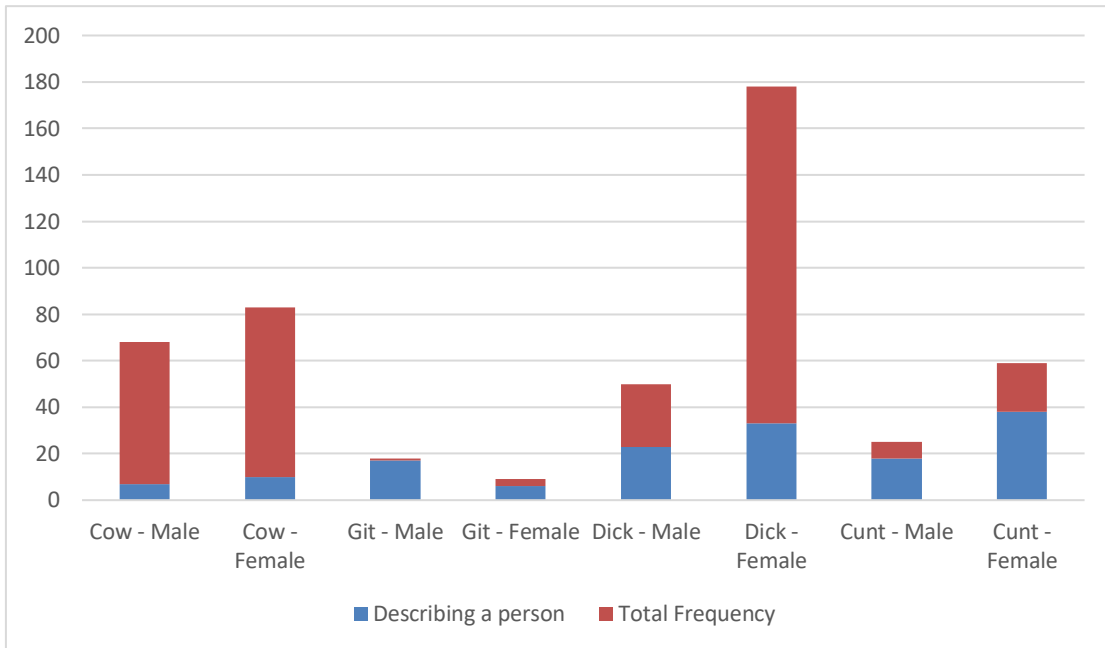


Figure 1. Total frequency of use versus estimated frequency when describing a person of the words *cow/git/dick/cunt* for males/females.

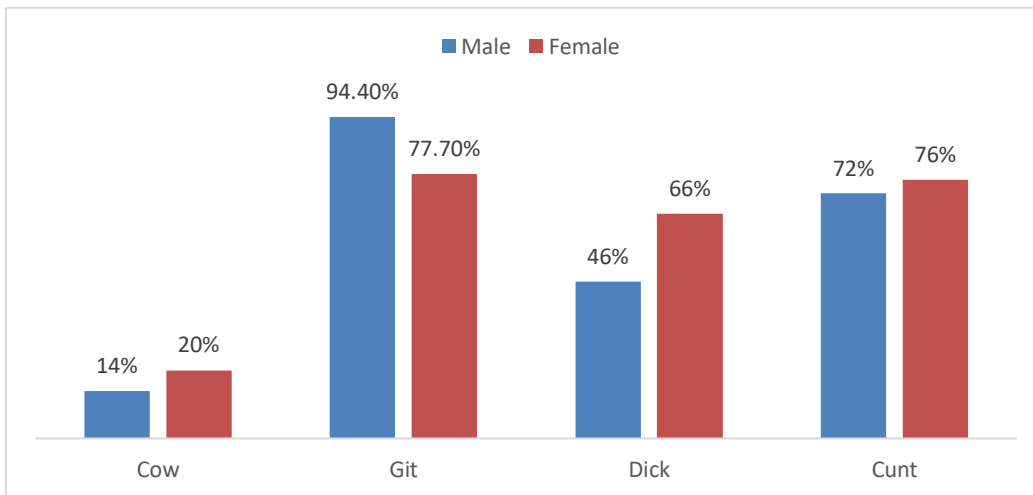


Figure 2. Calculated percentage of the words *cow/git/dick/cunt* across gender when used to describe a person.

The word *cow* generated a total of 68 matches in male speakers in the BNC2014. 50 random hits were examined to see how many of the instances were used to describe a person. 7 of 50 described a person, which equals 14%. When restricted to female speakers there were a total of 83 hits, where again 50 random hits were examined. 10 of 50 of those referred to a person which makes for 20%. The word *git* returned 18 matches by male speakers, of which 17 described a person. That is a percentage of 94.4%. In female speakers, the total number of matches was 9, of which 6 described a person. That equals 66.6%.

The matches for the word *dick* in male speakers generated 50 results, thus all of them were examined manually to get the frequency when used to describe a person. Of 50 hits, there were 23 instances that described a person, a proportion of 46 %. The word *dick* by female speakers generated a total of 178 matches, where a random of 50 matches were examined to find out how many referred to a person. It was 33 of 50, a proportion of 66%. Regarding the word *cunt*, the matches of male speakers were a total of 25 of which 18 described a person. That is a percentage of 72%. For female speakers, the BNC2014 gave a total of 59 matches of which 50 random matches were checked. 38 of 59 referred to a person, which equals 76%.

The variable age was not included in this study as it was not comprised in the background section and was not seen as relevant enough to be a specific variable in this study due to limitations in time and scope. However, the age of the speakers could be a confounding variable, as people perhaps use coarse language differently depending on their age. It could be argued that young people would use swearwords more frequently than older people and if this variable of different age groups were included in the investigation in the BNC2014 the results may have been more nuanced.

## **4.2 Manual Analysis**

In this section, the results from the manual analysis regarding the adjectives used in combination with the swearwords will be presented. The first section (4.2.1) presents the total frequency of the adjectives found together with the swearwords investigated and their classification into positive, negative, and other. The second section (4.2.2) presents the adjectives used with each swearword across gender.

### **4.2.1 Adjectives Total Frequency**

Table 1 presents the pre-modifying adjectives and their total frequency found in the Spoken BNC2014 together with the swearwords *cow*, *git*, *dick*, *cunt*. The adjectives are divided into positive, negative, and other depending on their objective meaning. Most adjectives are classified as other due to their nature as descriptive adjectives as they do not communicate a positive or negative quality or state of being. The positive category contains the least words. The most common pre-modifying adjective was “fucking”, with a total of 12 matches. Other common adjectives are “old”, “little”, and “stupid”. Most adjectives only occur once or twice.

Table 1. Total frequency of pre-modifying adjectives.

Positive	Freq.	Negative	Freq.	Other	Freq.
clever	4	cheeky	1	absolute	1
fluky	1	cocky	1	actual	2
lucky	2	dodgy	1	complete	5
smart	1	lazy	4	f-ing	1
		lying	1	flaccid	1
		miserable	4	fucking	12
		moody	1	furry	1
		picky	1	little	6
		sad	1	massive	4
		silly	1	old	7
		slimy	1	real	3
		stupid	5	right	2
				soft	1
				super	1
				total	4
				utter	1

#### 4.2.2 Adjectives across gender

The below figures present the results of the adjectives used together with each swearword in their normalized frequency across gender. The normalized frequency was calculated by dividing the number of the hits that described a person by the total word count in the BNC2014 for the specific search and then multiplying it by a million.

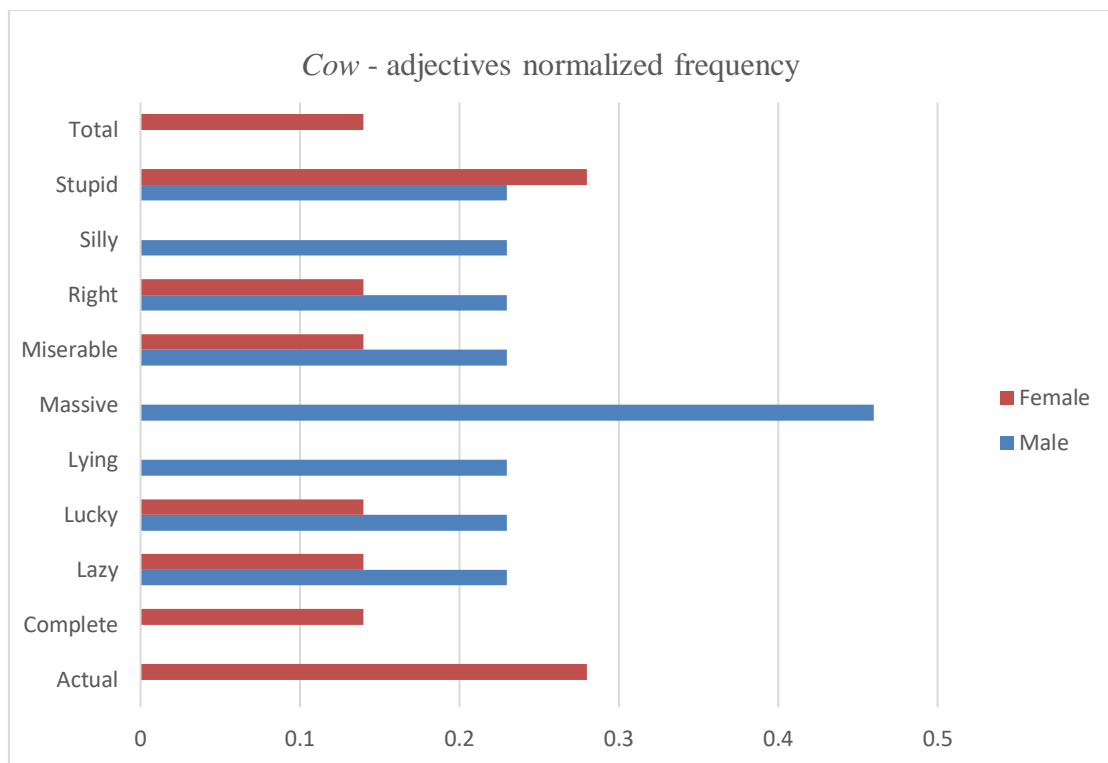


Figure 3. Swearword *cow* with pre-modifying adjectives in normalized frequency.

The word *cow* was used together with a total of 11 adjectives when describing a person distributed as 1 positive, 5 negative, and 5 other adjectives. The allocation between males and females was relatively even. Males used a total of 8 different adjectives and negative adjectives together with the word *cow* in a greater extent than women. For males, the word “massive” was the most common adjective. Women also used a total of 8 adjectives and more other adjectives compared to men. The words “stupid” and “actual” were the most common ones for women.

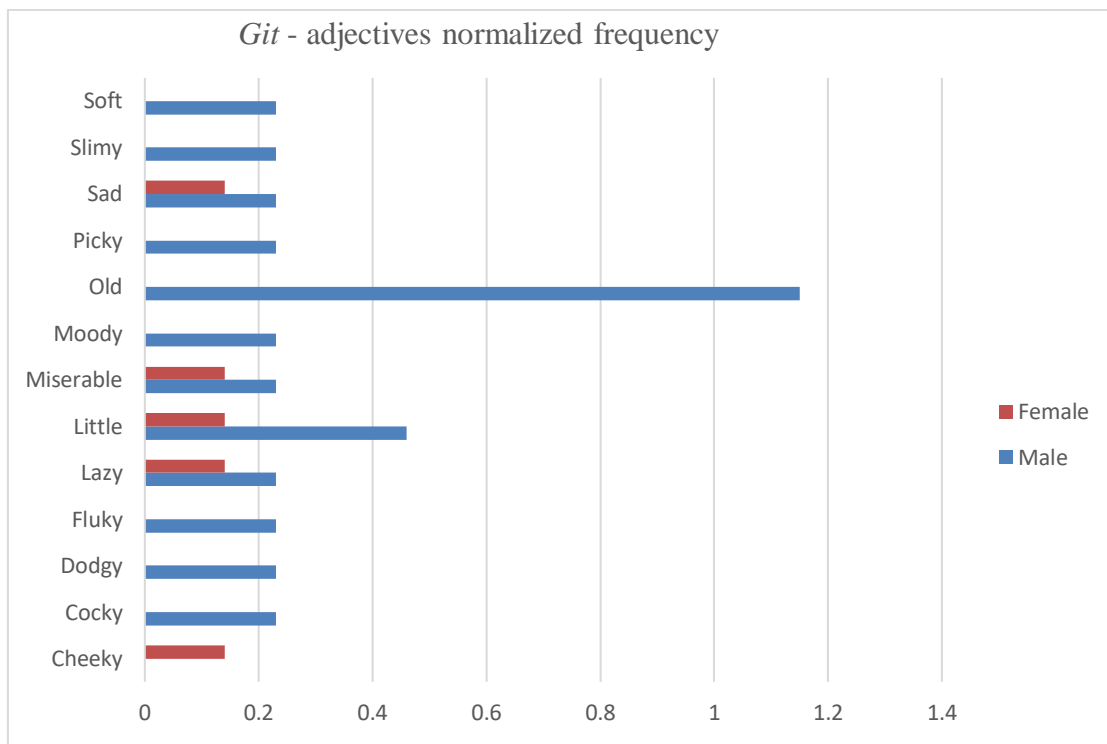


Figure 4. Swearword *git* with pre-modifying adjectives in normalized frequency.

The word *git* was used together with a total of 13 different adjectives when describing a person, which is the highest number of all the swearwords. There were 1 positive, 9 negative, and 3 other adjectives, making the negative adjectives most frequent. Males tended to use the word “git” to a greater extent than women and therefore the adjectives are overrepresented by males. “Old” was used most frequently, while the other words were used more rarely. When women used a pre-modifying adjective together with the word *git*, they used almost only negative words (except for one word “little”).

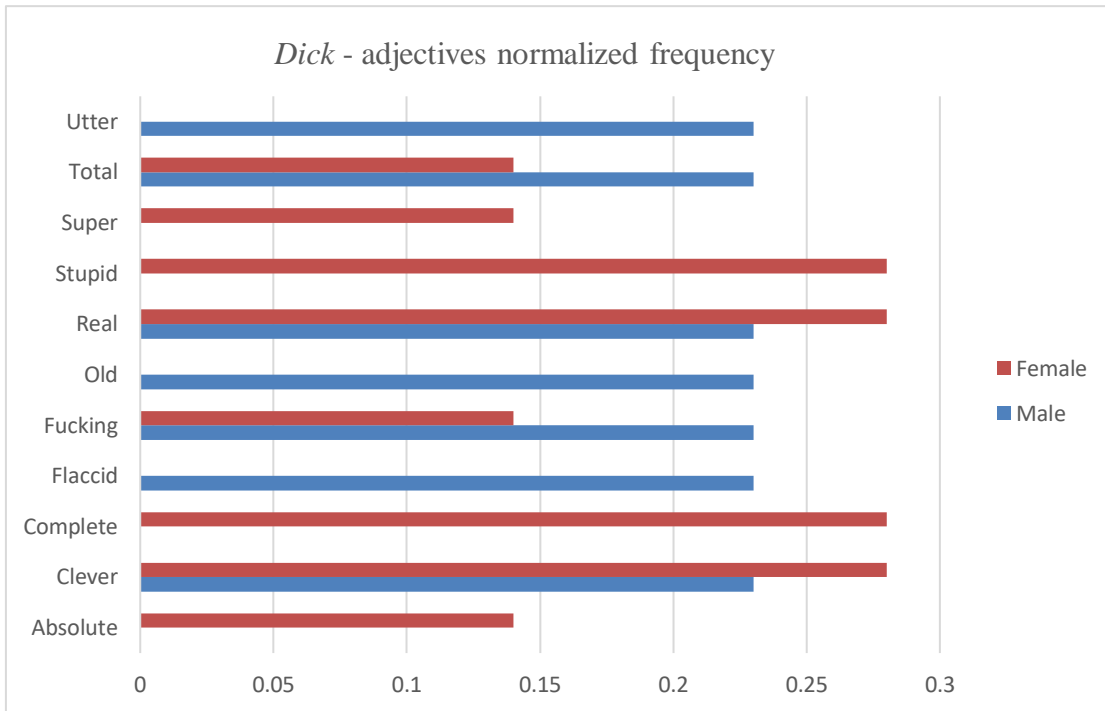


Figure 5. Swearword *dick* with pre-modifying adjectives in normalized frequency.

The word *dick* was used together with a total of 11 different adjectives when describing a person. There were 1 positive, 1 negative, and 9 other adjectives, making the other adjectives most frequent. The distribution between the genders was scattered, males used 7 different adjectives of which 3 were used only by men, and females used 8 different adjectives of which 4 was used only by women. Males had an even use of the 7 adjectives, while women used the words “clever”, “complete”, “stupid”, and “real” most commonly. The only negative word that was used together with *dick* was “stupid” and was used only by women. While there was only one positive adjective (clever) it was one of the most frequent words in total.

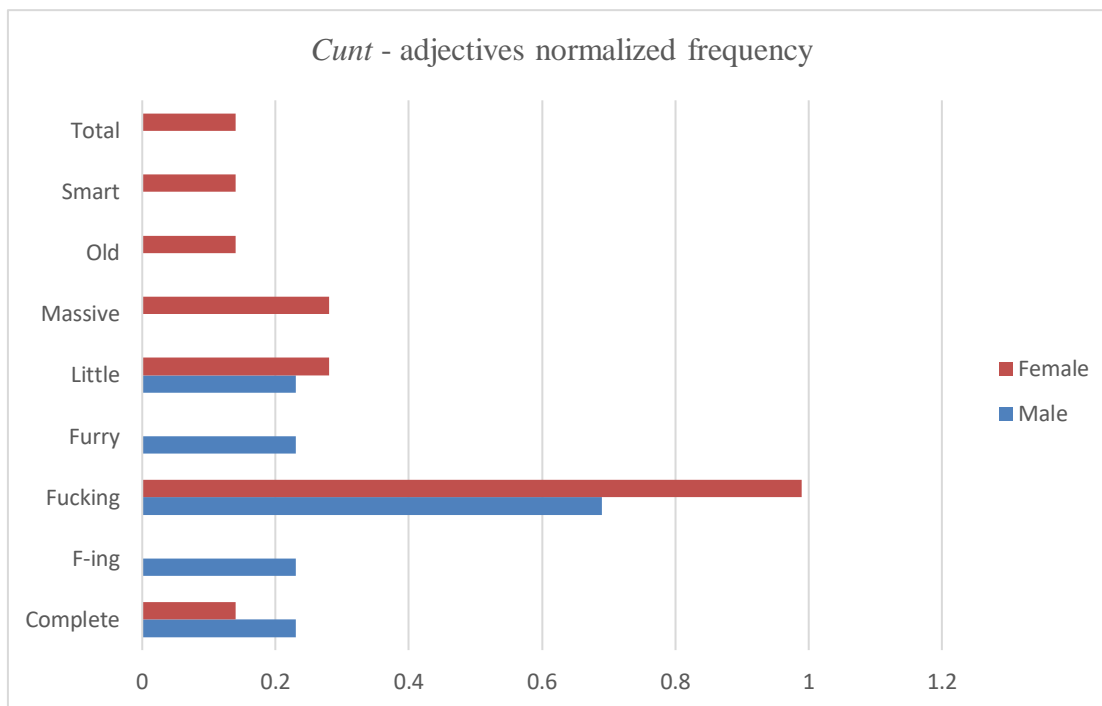


Figure 6. Swearword *cunt* with pre-modifying adjectives in normalized frequency.

The word *cunt* was used together with a total of 9 different adjectives when describing a person, making for the least variants of adjectives in all the swearwords. There were 1 positive, 0 negative, and 8 other adjectives. *cunt* was the only swearword where no negative pre-modifying adjective was used. The distribution between males and females is uneven, males used only 5 different adjectives while women used 7 different ones. Most words were used rarely with the clear exception of “fucking” being the most used by both genders.

### 4.3 Discussion

The first mild swearword investigated was *cow* and it was used somewhat more by women than by men (20% versus 14%) as an offensive term to describe another person. The second mild swearword this study examined was *git*. The results showed a clear majority of male users, the difference was a percentage of 94.4% for men and 77.7% for women. The results show that men use these mild swearwords more than women overall, something that is in line with previous research (Coates, 2016, p. 10). Nevertheless, the interesting part of the results is the usage of the different types of words when aiming them across gender. The word *cow* is most often used to describe a woman when vocalized as an insult to describe another person (Oxford Dictionary) and this study shows that the word *cow* is used more frequently to describe a person by women than by men. At the same time, the word *git* is most often used to describe a

man (Oxford Dictionary) and likewise proved to be spoken more frequently by men compared to women in this study. Previous research confirms that the offensiveness of a word varies with gender and the speaker-listener relationship (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008), which could be a reason why male speakers tend to select *git* as an offensive term, while females more often will use *cow*. The reason for this could perhaps be that people are more comfortable using an offensive term about their own gender, but this needs to be further investigated to be confirmed.

The strong swearword *dick* was used frequently by both men and women when describing a person. Men used the word *dick* to describe a person in 46% of all the instances of the word, while the percentage for women was 66%. Thus, the result of this study shows that women use the word *dick* more frequently to or about a person than men do, and therefore speak against the assumptions from the mild swearwords. Regarding the strong swearwords, this study shows that both men and women tend to use them frequently, and rather than one gender using stronger language it seems it comes down to preferred terminology. Although in contrast to the mild words, men tend to use the term *dick* that refers to male genitalia less frequently than women, while both women and men use *cunt*, which refers to female genitalia almost equally frequently. The results show that men do not tend to swear more frequently than women overall, something that differs from earlier research (Stapleton, 2003). Furthermore, when it comes to mild versus strong swearwords, this study shows that both men and women tend to use these terms relatively similarly. The difference is rather in which terminology each gender tends to choose, and not if the swearword is regarded as strong or mild. This differs from previous research, which suggests that men do use a stronger language than women (Jay, 1992, p. 169), a view that might be outdated and a topic for new studies.

The results of the used pre-modifying adjectives together with mild swearwords were scattered, with a mixture of positive, negative, and other adjectives across the genders. The first mild word investigated, *cow*, showed that men tend to use adjectives that are either negative-evaluative or positive-evaluative to a greater extent than women. Men also used the adjective *massive* together with *cow* when they described a person recurrently, while women did not use that term at all. Why men tend to use this particular word when describing a person (woman) as a cow can be discussed, perhaps it is a sexist way of describing a fat and/or dumb woman, something that would need further investigation to be confirmed. As earlier studies have confirmed, specific

attitudes or judgments are revealed when using evaluative adjectives, and figurative phrases go beyond the literal meaning of a word and are used to make a point (Hunston, 2010).

The results for the word *git* stand out in the regard that a total of 9 negative adjectives were used, a clear majority in negative adjectives compared to all the other swearwords. It was also the word that had the most diverse adjectives. The adjectives *old* and *little* were used frequently with the swearword *git*, implying that people tend to pick an adjective that intensifies the age or size of whom they are speaking. Another interesting finding is that even if women tend to use the word *git* less frequently than men, they almost exclusively use it together with a negative pre-modifying adjective. Why the swearword *git* returned many negative pre-modifying adjectives compared to the other words needs to be further investigated to have a definite answer. However, it seems people are more prone to describe a man (*git*) negatively than a woman (*cow*) by intensifying the meaning of the word with a negative-evaluative adjective. Previous studies suggest that swearing has a deep connection to feelings corresponding to punishment, embarrassment, and excitement, which is why emotion is used as a foundation for lexical access during the swearing procedure (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Perhaps men and women have taken after certain norms in society and use swearwords in a way that seems fitting, i.e. speaking about their own gender.

The results regarding the word *dick* showed that women and men prefer to use quite different terms together with the word. Interestingly, the only negative adjective *stupid* was used only by women, implying that they use the word *dick* to describe a person (man) in a more straightforward way than men. The only positive adjective used with the strong swearword *dick* was *clever*. It was popular among both genders and is probably used to describe a person in an ironic way. Previous research on adjectives supports this view, as adjectives are often used to suggest something implicative rather than reflecting the objective meaning (Karttunen et al., 2014). The word *cunt* was the only word that did not have any negative pre-modifying adjectives used at all, making it stand out compared to the other swearwords investigated. This might be because *cunt* is seen as a very strong word, and when used people perhaps do not feel the need to make it further negative. Sexual assaults are considered strong language and therefore taboo today (Battistella, 2005, p. 102), a possible explanation for why people do not feel the need to intensify this specific word with other negative forms of language.

Hence, the results of this study show that people tend to decrease their application of negative-evaluative adjectives when using strong swearwords. A reasonable assumption as to why this happens could be that there is a reduced incentive to amplify the negativity of the meaning of the noun with a negative adjective as the word itself already reflects a strong negative meaning. However, neither positive-evaluative adjectives are used much together with the strong swearwords but seeing as positive pre-modifying adjectives are not as common as negative and other adjectives together with swearwords altogether, the reason behind it might be that people see them as unfitting with these types of offensive terms as positive adjectives make for a more positive context while negative adjectives create a harsher language (Fahrni & Klenner 2008).

For the strong swearwords, the other pre-modifying adjectives have a clear majority compared with the mild words. Why people choose to intensify the meaning of the noun would be a subject for further research, as there seems to be a discrepancy between the earlier research and the results from this study. On the one hand, speakers do not appear to feel the need to amplify the negativity of an already strong swearword, but they do choose to intensify the meaning. This is specifically evident with the pre-modifier *fucking*, as it was the most frequent adjective across all categories, and it is also the only adjective that would be considered a swear word itself. There is thus a strong tendency for speakers to pre-modify swearwords with another swearword. Many different adjectives are used in combination with nouns, and the interpretation heavily relies on norms and context (Peeters 1992). It might be that other adjectives are seen as more acceptable than negative adjectives, something that needs to be explored in additional research.

## **5. Conclusion**

The aim of the study was to investigate if there are differences in frequency across gender in the usage of mild and strong swearwords and to find out if pre-modifying adjectives are used in different ways across gender. The data that was used as a basis for the study was collected from the BNC2014. The gender differences were analyzed both in terms of frequency in the usage of mild versus strong swearwords and in the use of positive, negative, and other adjectives. Both analyses were manual as only the words that described a person were included.

One of the research questions in this study was concerned with whether there is a difference across gender in the use of mild and strong swearwords. The results showed that men and women use swearwords somewhat equally frequently in general, both genders use both sets of words, and no gender tends to use mild or strong words more frequently. Rather than differences in strong and mild language, there seem to be differences in the specific swearwords men and women use. Men more often pick words that describe men/male body parts and women more often pick words that describe women/female body parts. The second research question focused on the pre-modifying adjectives used together with these words. The results of this study showed that other adjectives were used most frequently with swearwords overall, intensifying the meaning of the word rather than making it positive- or negative-evaluative. Mild swearwords were more often paired with both positive and negative adjectives than strong swearwords which had the most other adjectives.

In conclusion, this study has shown that both genders use both mild and strong swearwords with no significant pattern across gender when it comes to the use of positive, negative, and other pre-modifying adjectives. The gender differences appear to be in which term people tend to choose when intending to speak offensively about another person. Further, more detailed research is necessary to see if men and women do use words that reflect their own gender more frequently rather than focusing on the offensiveness of the word.

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