Mid Sweden University
Department of Humanities
English Studies

How Brits Swear
The use of swearwords in modern British English

Joy Williamsson

English C/Special

Project

Tutor: Monika Mondor

13 Maj 2009

Abstract

The aim of the investigation was to see whether there were any visible differences in the use of swearwords in comparison with British speakers' sex, age and social class. The investigation was carried out on the BNC database which contains authentic spoken texts collected from different parts of Britain. Five different swearwords were chosen for this study and the results collected from the BNC have been compared with previously made research regarding swearing in English. It was found that males seem to prefer stronger variants of swearwords while females prefer the milder ones. Young speakers and adolescents had a higher frequency use than other age-groups regarding these words and furthermore, swearing seems to be more common among the lower social classes in Britain.

Table of contents   **Page**

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

We all use swearwords from time to time: some of us use them frequently while others try their best to avoid them. The use of swearwords as a non standard linguistic feature can be studied through several different perspectives and the number of words seems endless. The use of swear words might be more or less acceptable in different situations. What is acceptable at a formal dinner party differs from what is acceptable at an informal gathering of close friends.

Another interesting part in the study of swearwords is that the use of them is related to the speakers' gender, age and social class.

There is a widely held folk belief that men tend to swear more than women (e.g. McEnery 2006:29) and in addition, social class has been shown to be an another influential factor (Trudgill 2000:30) in that swearwords are more frequently used among the lower classes. Furthermore, "young people and teenagers appear to use certain swearwords such as *fuck* more frequently than people from other age groups" (McEnery & Xiao 2004:241) and in general, swearing seems to be abandoned as people get older (Aitchison 2006:23).

1.2 Aim

The aim of this essay is to look into whether there are any differences in the use of swear words in the English language by age- , sex- and social class differences. More specifically, the swearwords *Bloody*, *Bugger*, *Bastard*, *Fuck* and *Cunt* in spoken British English will be studied the way they are used in informal, everyday conversations. The words were chosen in coordination with the *Scale of offence,* i.e. how some swearwords are considered 'mild' while others are 'strong' and could cause offence. It is a five-part scale of offence created by the British Board of Film Classification in order to classify the use of bad language words (McEnery 2006:30), see Appendix 1.

1.3 Method and Material

In order to carry out this investigation, I will use the spoken part of the British National Corpus (BNC). The BNC is a 100 million-word corpus created in the early 1990s to represent authentic spoken and written British English the way it is actually used. Approximately 10 million words (10 percent) of the BNC corpus consist of recorded, authentic, spoken British English in both formal and informal contexts. The investigation will be carried out in the latter, informal part of the spoken texts since such an approach is thought to give a fairly realistic result of how swear words in British English are actually used. The information in the informal spoken division was gathered by 124 volunteers, an equal number of men and women from all over Britain. They recorded all their informal conversation during a few days of time, and if possible they had to include the participants' gender, age and social class (BNC).

Different swearwords are individually typed into the BNC database to see exactly how many hits there are in total and in addition, the number of hits per million words. The corpus is considered representative, i.e. as displaying a fair image of which of the words are used frequently and those that are not so common. The BNC provides information of the speakers' gender, age and social class which is of great importance in this investigation. Each word's results will be analyzed and compared with previous research on similar topics.

Age-group, Sex and Social Class are all presented in this paper according to the BNC standard. Age-groups 0-14, 15-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-59, 60+ and the definitions of the social classes:

AB = Upper Middle Class (higher managerial, administrative or professional)

C1 = Lower Middle Class (junior managerial, administrative or professional)

C2 = Upper Working Class (lower supervisory and technical, skilled manual workers)

DE = Lower Working Class (routine occupations, unskilled manual workers and long term unemployed).

2 Swearing: Previous research

According to McEnery and Xiao, swearing is a part of everyday language use (2004:235) and therefore a rather large field to study. This part will account for theories of the difference in swearword usage divided into three sociolinguistic variables; Age, Sex and Social class.

2.1 Swearing and Age

As Holmes observes (1992:183 in McEnery & Xiao 2004:241)

> The extensive swear word vocabulary which some teenagers use is likely to change over time [...] Though they continue to know these terms, the frequency with which they use them often diminishes, especially as they begin to have children and socialise with others with young families.

The quote suggests that people in the age-range of starting a family are more careful in their use of bad language i.e. swearing, in order to act as role models and be good parents for their children. Also in addition, as Aitchison explains it "swearing as with slang tends to be abandoned as people get older, as they learn to fit their language to the situation". Finally, "some older people have started to swear in order to seem friendly" (2006:23), and this is due to our modern society which is growing increasingly informal. The fact that swearing is more common among younger speakers and teenagers between the ages of 15-34 is also apparent as they use the word *fuck* with its different word forms more frequently than speakers from other age groups (McEnery & Xiao 2004:241). Similarly, according to McEnery (2006:38) the use of bad language words (BLW) increases to the age of 25 and thereafter it steadily declines, which imply that adolescents are more likely to use BLWs (see further Appendix 2) .

Why people in the age range of 35-44 demonstrate a very low use of swearwords is probably due to parenthood or that they have teenagers around them, and teenagers under the age of 15 swear more frequently because they want to behave as adults (McEnery & Xiao 2004:241).

2.2 Swearing and Sex

It is widely reported that women tend to use more prestige speech forms than men (Gordon 1997:26) and they have been "stereotyped as swearing less, using less slang" and being "judged according to their sex" (Hughes 1992:291) in this regard. This is also the case for other findings from sociolinguistic research according to Hughes (1992:292), as women are expected to be more polite and correct in their speech due to their inferior status and because they carry the responsibility for transmitting the norms of speech to children. In addition, these differences in linguistic behavior is according to Gordon (1997:61) due to the double standard regarding sexual behavior, i.e. society overlooks promiscuity in men but condemns it in women, and therefore women tend to change their speech to more prestige forms. "Men and women are socially different in that society lays down different social roles for them and expects different behavior patterns from them" (Trudgill 2000:79). "The idea of distinct female and male swearwords, and differing amounts of usage for the sexes, is still one that is widely held, and it is still considered as aggressive and 'unfeminine' for women to swear" (Hughes 1992:292). However, Hughes points out that although these characteristics attributed to women are not totally false they tend to be overgeneralized; hence women do not always use speech that is more prestigious than men's (1992:293). Stapleton argues that there are different attitudes towards male and female swearing "whereby women's use of obscenity is likely to be evaluated more negatively than that of their male counterparts" (2003:22).

According to McEnery (2006:29) "it is equally likely that bad language will be used by a male as by a female", although some sets of words are overused by men and another set of words are overused by women. According to McEnery, women seem to prefer 'weaker' swearwords that are less offensive while men have a preference for 'stronger' ones (2006:29-30). Apparently female speakers show a preference for heaven-related words such as *heavens* and *gosh* while male speakers prefer hell-related words like *damn* and *devil* (McEnery & Xiao 2004:240). However, in their research they found that male speakers use *fuck* (and different word forms of it) more than twice as frequently as female speakers (McEnery & Xiao 2004:240) even though the distribution pattern of the different word forms was very similar for both males and females (2004:241).

2.3 Swearing and Social Class

Since this investigation will be carried out on the BNC database, this essay will fallow their classification and divide the speakers into four different social classes, namely AB (Upper Middle Class), C1 (Lower Middle Class), C2 (Upper Working Class) and DE (Lower Working Class).

Trudgill argues that men might find it desirable to use non standard linguistic features such as swearwords since working-class speech is associated with masculinity and toughness (2000:73), and in addition, Gordon argues that women use more prestigious speech forms to avoid the damaging lower-class stereotype (1997:50). In England, the upper class speech dialect is referred to as 'the standard' or received pronunciation (RP), while the lowest classes uses a non standard form of English based on their regional dialect (Trudgill 2000:30).

According to McEnery (2006:44), social class relates to bad language word use in the way that "frequency of usage being inverse to height of social class" (see further appendix 3), but he also mentions that in some circumstances the highest class, AB, uses more and stronger BLWs directed at other people (2006:45). For instance, the word *fuck* is used more frequently among AB speakers than C1 speakers in the age group 60+, however, the "difference in the distribution of all other word forms across social class is statistically significant […] people from classes DE and C2 are the most frequent users, followed by AB" (McEnery & Xiao 2004:243).

3 Results

The words are presented in the total number of hits and the words' frequency per million words in the BNC's spoken text division. Note that the number of hits and frequency per million words are different between the overall results for each word and the results presented in the tables. This is due to the BNC's lack of sociolinguistic information about some of the speakers. Thus the total amount of hits differs as the speakers with unknown sex, age and/or social class are not presented in the tables. It also has to be remembered that the contexts in which these words were uttered have not been investigated and therefore a word such as *bloody,* might not have been used as a swearword in all hits found in the BNC.

The tables which follow in this chapter are divided into the three different variables, i.e. Age, Sex and Social Class. What is most important here is frequency per million words, which broadly can be explained as the factor which tells us how often a specific word is used by its speakers. If the frequency per million words is rather high among a certain age-group for instance, it indicates that this word might be more common within this group of speakers than among other age-groups with a lower frequency. In all tables, the highest number among all groups and the total amount is written in bold.

3.1 Bloody

The following overall results were shown for *bloody*:

Number of hits: 3495

Frequency per million words: 337,18

The results in Table 3.1:1 shows that speakers in the age-range of 15-25 are the most frequent users of *bloody* as they carry the highest frequency per million words, whereas the largest number of hits can be found among speakers within the age-range of 45-59.

3.1:1 Speaker: Age

Age-groups	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	164	356,04
15-24	325	**634,94**
25-34	607	545,03
35-44	463	433,99
45-59	**821**	511,21
60+	509	453,6
Total	**2889**	**491,23**

Table 3.1:2 shows that females are the more frequent users of the word *bloody* in both categories, number of hits and frequency per million words.

3.1:2 Speaker: Sex

Sex	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
Female	1716	527,1
Male	1340	272,46
Total	3056	373,89

Table 3.1:3 indicates that speakers belonging to the Lower Working Class (DE) are the most frequent users of *bloody* and also carry the largest number of hits.

3.1:3 Speaker: Social class

Social Class	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	290	416,18
C1	266	621,68
C2	335	689,75
DE	384	1433,81
Total	1275	678,84

In summary, the tables in Section 3.1 indicate that *Bloody* is mostly used among speakers in the age-range of 15-24, as the results show they have the highest frequency per million words. *Bloody* is used almost twice as often by females than by males and it is transcendently most frequent among the DE, Lower Working class.

3.2 Bugger

The overall results for bugger are as follows:

Number of hits: 269

Frequency per million words: 25,95

The frequency per million words is thus much lower than for *bloody*.

The results in Table 3.2:1 show that speakers in the age-range of 14-24 are the most frequent users of *bugger*, however, most hits were among speakers in the age-range of 45-59.

3.2:1 Speaker and Age

Age-group	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	8	17,37
15-24	31	**60,56**
25-34	32	28,73
35-44	37	34,68
45-59	**75**	46,7
60+	52	46,34
Total	**235**	**39,96**

Table 3.2:2 indicates that *bugger* is overly used by females in both frequency per million words and the total number of hits.

3.2:2 Speaker: Sex

Sex	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
Female	**127**	**39,01**
Male	120	24,4
Total	**247**	**30,22**

The results in Table 3.2:3 show that speakers in the Lower Working Class (DE) are the most frequent users of *bugger* and they also have the highest total number of hits.

3.2:3 Speaker: Social Class

Social Class	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	14	20,09
C1	16	37,39
C2	28	57,65
DE	31	115,75
Total	89	47,39

Bugger, considered a mild word, is used most frequently among speakers in the age-range of 15-24, although most hits were found in the age-range of 45-59. Just like *Bloody*, *Bugger* is preferred by females and among DE speakers.

3.3 Bastard

The following overall results were shown for *bastard*:

Number of hits: 193

Frequency per million words: 18,62

Bastard is one of the least common word in this investigation.

The results in Table 3.3:1 shows that the largest number of hits and the highest frequency per million words are among speakers in the age-range of 15-24. The frequency among these speakers is as high as 101,59, which indicates a great diversification in comparison to the overall results.

3.3:1 Speaker: Age

Age-group	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	36	78,15
15-24	52	101,59
25-34	38	34,12

35-44	8	7,5
45-59	18	11,21
60+	11	9,8
Total	**163**	**27,72**

Table 3.3:2 shows that males are the most frequent users of *bastard* and they have the highest number of hits. Thus, this word breaks the trend with mostly female speakers as the swearwords in the previous results displayed.

3.3:2 Speaker: Sex

Sex	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
Female	55	16,89
Male	**111**	**22,57**
Total	**166**	**20,31**

In unison with what the previous tables have demonstrated, Table 3.3:3 shows that *bastard* is most common among the DE class, although most hits are presented within the Upper Middle Class.

3.3:3 Speaker: Social Class

Social Class	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	**33**	47,36
C1	5	11,69
C2	10	20,59
DE	18	**67,21**
Total	**66**	**35,14**

In sum, the moderate swearword *bastard* is both most frequent and have the largest number of hits in the age-range of 15-24. This word also has twice as many hits among males than

among females, but as the previous words, it is also most frequent among DE speakers, although the largest number of hits is found in the AB class.

3.4 Fuck

The overall results for *fuck* are as follows:

Number of hits: 583

Frequency per million words: 56,24

Fuck displays a large number of hits in total and a high frequency, thus *fuck* is the second most commonly used word in this BNC investigation.

The results in Table 3.4:1 shows that *fuck* is used nearly six times as frequent among speakers in the age-range of 0-14 than the overall frequency. In addition, the largest number of hits is found in the same age-group.

3.4:1 Speaker: Age

Age-group	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	158	343,01
15-24	126	246,16
25-34	93	83,5
35-44	8	7,5
45-59	46	28,64
60+	3	2,67
Total	434	73,79

The results in Table 3.4:2 show that males use *fuck* more than twice as frequently as females and displays three times as many hits.

3.4:2 Speaker: Sex

Sex	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
Female	106	32,56
Male	337	68,52
Total	443	54,2

Table 3.4:3 displays the same pattern as Table 3.3:3 and *bastard*, hence the word is most frequently used among the DE class, whereas the largest number of hits are among speakers of the AB class.

3.4:3 Speaker: Social Class

Social Class	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	93	133,46
C1	7	16,36
C2	45	92,65
DE	55	205,36
Total	200	106,49

To conclude, speakers in the youngest age-range of 0-14 years are the most frequent users of *fuck*, and it is also in this age-group that we find the largest number of hits. *Fuck* is also mostly used by males with almost thrice as many hits than among females. In unison with the previous words, *fuck* is most common in the DE class, although most hits are among the AB group.

3.5 Cunt

The following overall results were shown for *cunt*:

Number of hits: 88

Frequency per million words: 8,49

These results indicate that *cunt*, the strongest and most offensive word in this investigation, is the least commonly used word with a very low frequency and only 88 hits in total.

The results in Table 3.5:1 show that *cunt* is most common among speakers in the age-range of 15-25, and this group also presents the largest number of hits in total. According to these results, there are neither hits nor any visible frequency of use among speakers older than 35.

3.5:1 Speaker: Age

Age-group	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	23	49,93
15-24	**33**	**64,47**
25-34	9	8,08
35-44	0	0
45-59	0	0
60+	0	0
Total	**65**	**11,05**

Cunt is twice as frequently used among males than by females as table 3.5:2 displays. However, the total number of hits is only as high as 66, which means that the results are lacking gender information regarding 22 of the claimed speakers.

3.5:2 Speaker: Sex

Sex	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
Female	17	5,22
Male	**49**	**9,96**
Total	**66**	**8,07**

As the results in table 3.5:3 show, *cunt* is the only word in this investigation that is more frequent among speakers of the AB class. No results are visible in the Lower Middle Class (C1), but the other classes show some indications of use.

3.5:3 Speaker: Social Class

Social Class	No. of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	19	27,27
C1	0	0
C2	8	16,47
DE	5	18,67
Total	32	17,04

To sum up, *cunt*, the strongest and most offensive swearword is used mostly by speakers in the age-range of 15-24 and it is not used at all among speakers older than 35. Males are the most frequent users, but this is the only swearword in this investigation that is used most frequent among speakers in the AB class, and this is also were the largest number of hits were found. The C1 class is not represented at all among the users of *cunt*.

4 Discussion

The discussion is divided into three parts based on the different fields of this study, i.e. swearing in relation to age (section 4.1), sex (section 4.2) and social class (section 4.3).

4.1 Speakers' age in relation to different swearwords

In general, it seems to be a common belief among people that swearing has a particular value for teenagers (McEnery 2006:38). Hence teenagers are the main users of swearwords. The reason behind this according to Aitchison is that "teenagers themselves find the fuss about swearing unnecessary, and the f-word a normal response to a frustrating situation" (2006:23) which would mean that teenagers are not so careful in the use of swearwords as perhaps an adult would be. Thus swearing among teenagers would be a part of their everyday language use in order to express their different emotions, which coordinates with Stapleton's claim that "swearing can convey emotions which are antithetical to traditional notions of aggression/dominance" (2003:28). In addition, McEnery suggests that bad language use

increases into the age-range of 25 and after that it steadily declines (2006:38) and that this is the case regarding the use of all bad language words (see Appendix 2) which is also apparent in this investigation as the highest frequency per million words in four cases of five, is between the age-range of 15-24, and the fifth lays between 0-14 years. This indicates that the hypothesis of teenagers and adolescents are the most frequent users of swearwords are true.

The lowest frequency per million words differed a little bit between the words examined. However, there were some indications of a very low rate among speakers in the age-range 35-44 (see tables 3.1:1, 3.3:1, 3.4:1 and 3.5:1). This would be in line with what McEnery and Xiao's ideas that people, such as parents or people with children and/or teenagers around them would swear less than people without children to consider (2004:241). In addition, people in the age-range of 35-44 are very likely to have children living with them and might therefore adapt their language to act as good role models for their children and for them not to inherit any bad language behavior. This is probably what Holmes meant, i.e. that even though these people continue to know all these swearwords they stop using them as they begin to have children (1992:183 in McEnery & Xiao 2004:241). However, why speakers' aged 60+ have a very low frequency can be due to several different factors. When they grew up, swearwords might not have been as common as they are today when people hear so much of it (Aitchison 2006:23). It can also be due to the censorship that lasted in England into the late twentieth century (McEnery 2006:102) on both television and printed bad language. This trend only started in the 1960s, which might be an explanation for the low frequency of swearwords among older speakers. Although Aitchison mentions a new trend in society regarding swearing; "these days, the situation is even more confusing to some. In a society that is increasingly informal, some older people have started to swear in order to seem friendly" (2006:23). According to her, the reason behind swearing among older people is due to the situation in society today where swearing is no longer shocking to people as it is frequently used in both broadcasting and modern literature (Aitchison 2006:23).

Why teenagers and adolescents have a higher frequency per million words can then either be explained by their aspiration to behave and to be seen as adults i.e. to act older than their age (McEnery & Xiao 2004:241) or because they use swearwords in order to express their strong emotions. It can also be the effect of the modern attitudes towards swearing which do not consider swearing as shocking or provoking as it might have been before. Nevertheless, according to this investigation and the swearwords surveyed, teenagers and younger people use swearwords at a higher frequency than people in the other age-groups. An

investigation focusing on reasons behind swearing, if it is used to act out emotions or for other reasons, would be useful to compare with results, such as these, to see what may lie behind why certain age-groups have a high frequency in their use of swearwords.

4.2 Speakers' sex in relation to different swearwords

One of the aims of this investigation was to look into whether there were any differences between males and females in their use of swearwords. As mentioned before, the swearwords chosen in this investigation belonged to different categories in a scale of offence (McEnery 2006:30). According to McEnery, mild and very mild swearwords are overused by females, whereas words that are considered strong and very strong are overused by males (2006:31). Not surprisingly, the results from this investigation conform with McEnery's as *bloody* and *bugger* was used mostly by females, while *bastard*, *fuck* and *cunt* was more frequent among males. Even if this investigation only covered one swearword per category of offence, the pattern is clear as the females here seem to prefer the milder, less offensive words whereas the males chose words that would cause offence. Although it has to be remembered that these words were taken from McEnery's scale of offence, and that this might be the reason for the convenient similarities.

In general, most females consider words that are referring to body parts obscene (words which are also considered to be very strong and offensive) but only half of the males agree (Stapleton 2003:27). This corroborates that *cunt* is used more often by males in this investigation as they would find words such as *cunt* less offensive than females would. This idea may also influence the use of *fuck* since it is can be associated with the same type of words and in addition, two thirds of the speakers are male. However, an investigation that would focus mainly on swearwords connected to body parts would be needed here to see whether any such tendencies that agree with this claim are visible.

The reason for females preferring milder and less offensive words might be due to the different stereotypes regarding female speech. Women are expected and stereotyped as "swearing less, using less slang, and as aiming for a more standard speech style, women were judged according to their sex rather than other aspects of their lives" (Hughes 1992:291) which might have affected their choice of swearwords and why the 'milder' words in this investigation were overly used by females. However, as the words *bloody* and *bugger* were mainly used by females, although they are considered 'mild' the results contradict the claim

of the stereotyped women that swear less than men. Instead, the speakers' gender seems to influence the choice of words rather than swearing in general. Thus it seems like McEnery's ideas, also mentioned above, about it being equally likely for women as for men to use bad language (2006:29) is more realistic in the case of swearing in relation to sex. According to McEnery, *fucking*, *fuck*, *jesus*, *cunt* and *fucker* are more typical of males, whereas *god*, *bloody*, *pig*, *hell*, *bugger*, *bitch*, *pissed*, *arsed*, *shit* and *pissy* are more typical of females (2006:29). The words more typical of males are considerably 'stronger' and more offensive than the word typical of females, which again strengthen the idea that gender differences in the use of swearwords is related to the words' scale of offence. Thus, what distinguishes males and females is that "males have a preference for 'stronger' word forms while females have a preference for 'weaker' word forms" (McEnery 2006:30) which would indicate that women are less likely to choose words that would cause offence. Perhaps the non-swearing, polite and 'correct' woman is still traceable today in the females' choice of 'milder' swearwords and in their unwillingness to cause offence.

When examining the results from this BNC investigation, it is possible to se indications that could be supported by claims in the previous mentioned research. However, as the results shows, three of the five words were used by males to a higher degree than by females, while two words were used by females to a greater extent. Thus, these results do not suggest any particular differences in the frequency of swearword use between males and females as they seem to swear equally often. In addition, the results regarding sex have not been put in comparison with the speakers' age or social class, which might have resulted in a completely different outcome. A certain age-group might display a higher frequency of use by females regarding a certain word, while the results here indicate the opposite. In addition, male and female differences in their use of swearwords might also differ among the social classes. Males in the upper classes would perhaps display a completely different word pattern than the males belonging to the lower classes. All these factors would have to be examined more thoroughly in order to answer the questions surrounding sex in relations to swearing.

Finally, what these results indicate is that the frequency is quite even between the males and females use of swearwords, although males have a tendency to use the 'stronger' variants as *bastard*, *fuck* and *cunt* were used mostly by males. The reason behind this may or may not be the effect of the previous existing stereotype regarding female speech i.e. how they were expected to swear less and use less slang than males. However, there are no indications of any

such labeling on women and their way of speech in this investigation and therefore the conclusions regarding female speech are uncertain.

4.3 Speakers' social class in relation to different swearwords

Social classes might not exist in every society and culture, but according to the BNC, British society is divided into four different social classes based on work-status, income and so forth. According to McEnery the differences between the social classes regarding bad language use is significant as the frequency steadily declines with the higher classes (2006:42). Thus the results in this investigation would indicate a very low frequency among the speakers belonging to the AB class. However, this is not the case as the results present a very high frequency regarding the three of the five words examined (see tables 3.3:3, 3.4:3 and 3.5:3). In the case of the strongest swearword *cunt*, the AB class carried the highest frequency per million words spoken which indicates that ABs select the strongest words. This coordinates with McEnery's research "ABs use slightly stronger words than C1s" (2006:43). In addition, *bloody* and *bugger* had a very low frequency among the ABs which would strengthen the claim of them using the stronger variants of swearwords (see tables 3.1:3 and 3.2:3). Furthermore, according to McEnery and Xiao "AB speakers say fuck more than C1 speakers" (2004:243) which compares with the results shown in Table 3.4:3. This could be the results from C1s attempting to adapt features of AB speech, in other words, what they think is appropriate if they were to belong to the AB class (McEnery 2006:43). At least this would explain the low frequency in the use of swearwords among the C1s.

Trudgill argues that working-class speech i.e. speech with a high frequency of non standard linguistic features, is associated with masculinity and toughness, and therefore males might find it desirable to adapt that kind of speech (2000:73) and also that social class is a factor regarding informal speech such as swearing (2000:30). Thus the use of swearwords as a non standard linguistic feature would be overly used by the DE class, which actually is the case in four out of five words included in this investigation. In addition the frequency among the DE speakers is approximately twice as high as among the other social classes regarding *bloody*, *bugger* and *fuck*. In McEnery's summation of the frequency of bad language words per million words of speech among the different social classes (2006:42) the results indicated that DEs have the highest frequency in general regarding the use of bad language words, such

as swearwords, which coordinates with the BNC results from this investigation. If these results are the consequence of a lack of education, poor economic situations or other reasons, this investigation does not reveal. However, there is a clear difference between the social classes regarding the use of swearwords, but the reasons behind these differences are either unclear or mainly speculations.

5 Conclusion and Summary

To sum up this paper, there are indications that males and females swear equally often, although men prefer the 'stronger' and more offensive variants. Young people and adolescents seem to have a higher frequency in the use of swearwords, whereas people in the age of having children have the lowest frequency among all age-groups. The DE class displays the highest frequency of use regarding all swearwords investigated except for *cunt*, which was more common among the AB group. These differences in the use of swearwords are a very interesting subject to study and it would be an exiting task to see the results of a similar investigation in the future.

I would like to conclude this investigation by recommending further research in every aspect of the study. Not only are there several remaining questions concerning the results, but also when comparing them to previous research the answers differ depending on which report they are compared with. It is a troublesome task to investigate the use of swearwords today using a corpus that was built in the 1990s. Furthermore, we have to remember that the corpus was lacking some details about the participants which resulted in some inaccurate figures in the presented tables. Thus we cannot be completely certain that the results displayed here are in complete consensus with the actual truth.
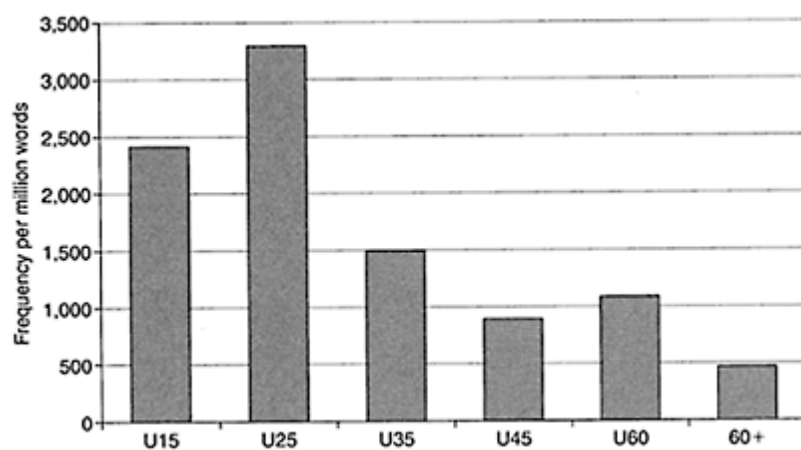
Appendix 1: Scale of offence

This scale is created by the British Board of Film Classification and published here following McEnery (2006:30). The words investigated in this paper are written in bold.

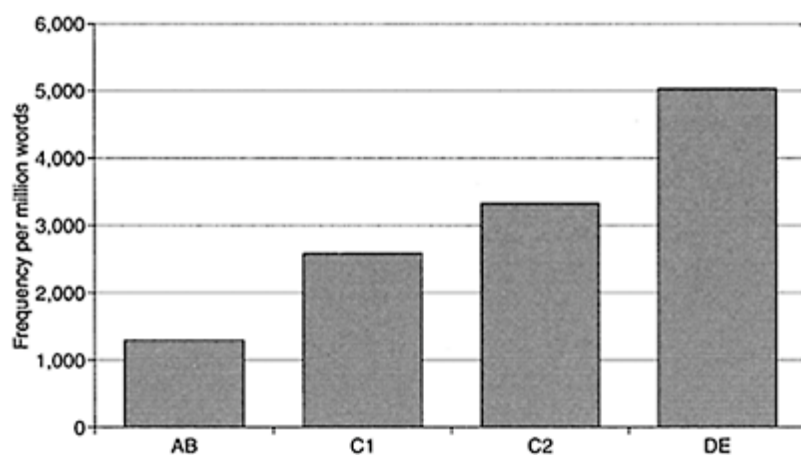| *Categorization*	*Words in the category*
Very mild	bird, **bloody**, crap, damn, god, hell, hussy, idiot, pig, pillock, sod, son-of-a-bitch, tart
Mild	arse, balls, bitch, **bugger**, christ, cow, dickhead, git, jesus, jew, moron, pissed of, screw, shit, slag, slut, sod, tit, tits, tosser
Moderate	arsehole, **bastard**, bollocks, gay, nigger, piss, paki, poofter, prick, shag, spastic, twat, wanker, whore
Strong	**fuck**
Very strong	**cunt**, motherfucker

Appendix 2: Bad language word use and age

This figure is from McEnery (2006:39) and presents the use of bad language words among different age-groups, the same age intervals that are presented in the British National Corpus are used here.

Appendix 3: Bad language word use and social class

This figure presents the frequency of bad language words per million words of speech produced by the social classes (McEnery 2006:42).

References

Primary sources
British National Corpus
http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/ (accessed May 2009)

Secondary sources
Aitchison, J. (2006) 'Whassup? Slang and swearing among schoolchildren'. *Education review*. 19:2 pp: 18-24. Oxford: University of Oxford

Gordon, E. (1997) 'Sex, Speech, and Stereotypes: Why Women Use Prestige Speech Forms More than Men'. *Language in Society*. 26:1 pp. 47-63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Hughes E, S. (1992) 'Expletives of Lower Working-Class Women'. *Language in Society*. 21:2 pp. 291-303. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

McEnery, A and Xiao, Z. (2004) 'Swearing in modern British English: The Case of Fuck in the BNC'. *Language and Literature*. 13:235-268. London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: SAGE publications

McEnery, T. (2006) *Swearing in English*: *Bad language, purity and power from 1586 to the present*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.

Stapleton, K. (2003) 'Gender and Swearing: A Community Practice'. *Women and Language*. 26:2, pp. 22-33. George Mason University.

Trudgill, P. (1974) *Sociolinguistics*: *An introduction to language and society*. 4th ed. England, London: Penguin Books.