

# Swearwords and attitude change: A sociolinguistic study

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## **Abstrakt:**

Denne masteroppgåva tek for seg haldningsendringar til engelske banneord der undersøkingar om haldningsmønsteret til banning blant engelskmenn har endra seg, er gjort. I tillegg til dette består oppgåva av ein teoridel der tema som underliggjande mekanikkar bak banning, historia til banning og definisjonen på haldningar blir diskutert. Ei av hypotesane i masteroppgåva gjekk ut på at haldningsmønsteret til banning blant yngre engelskmenn er mykje meir liberalisert enn hjå dei over 60 år. Unntaket er rasistiske banneord, der dei yngre har eit meir restriktivt bruk enn dei eldre over 60. Sjølv undersøkinga var gjort ved å intervju engelskmenn i to ulike aldersgrupper i York, og samstundes samanlikne desse resultat med tidlegare studiar på feltet. Noko av resultat frå studia viser at banneord som *nigger*, *paki* og *spastic* har vorte mykje meir belasta berre på eit tiår, medan ord som *fuck* har mista mykje av krafta si. Generelt viser det seg at dei unge respondentane har eit mykje meir liberalt forhold til banning enn kva gruppa med eldre respondentar har. I tillegg vart det hevda frå somme respondentar at dei yngre kvinnene har eit bannemønster meir likt mennene.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

One major difference between humans and animals is the ability of advanced communication. With thousands of languages being developed throughout the history of mankind, humans are equipped with a large arsenal of words, to which we assign meaning. Some words express affection, some express greetings and goodbyes, some represent colours, items and objects, and others are more suited in certain situations where professionalism and formality is required. Although seemingly highly used, one group is often not talked about; the swearwords. These durable words, whether they act as adjectives, verbs, nouns, adverbs, interjections, because they are so flexible, have an exceptional ability to express a multitude of feelings, usually on the negative side of the spectrum. Spawned from what society sees as taboo, whether it is from regulations or behaviours, these words thrive on the unacceptable. Although high moral powers have fought against these words prolifically for centuries, most of them are still alive and in a healthy condition. Some have even prospered and evolved into great semantic organisms. The word *fuck*<sup>1</sup>, for instance, has grown into 170 reported varieties, everything from *I guaranfuckingtee you* to *I don't give a flying fuck* (Sheidlower 1999). However, other words have become so taboo today that you may be forced to resign from your position or face criminal charges (or other types of sanctions) if you use them publically.

My motivation for writing on English swearing was that I see it as a captivating element in the English language, despite its rather controversial status. In my opinion, swearing is irreplaceable in certain contexts, whether used in classical English banter, or when we are emotional. Being both an extremely colourful addition to our language and serving a unique flexibility, swearing is a fascinating phenomenon. A good example of this is a famous scene in the thrilling and realistic TV-series *The Wire*, in which two investigators entered a kitchen where a woman was killed. Lasting several minutes, the dialogue consisted of only the word *fuck* in many various shapes and forms as the crime scene investigators discovered new clues that would give them a good understanding of what took place when the killing happened (David 2002: *The Wire*). This is only one of many examples where certain swearwords can showcase its versatility. According to Leigh & Lepine (2005: 233-36) the word *fuck* can be used in 20 different settings. Some of them are as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> All swearwords discussed are written in *italics*.

- I. Dismay: ‘Fuck it’!
- II. Inquiry: ‘Who the fuck does she think she is?’
- III. Disbelief: ‘Unfuckingbelievable!’
- IV. Retaliation: ‘Shove it up your fucking ass’
- V. Surprise: ‘Fuck me!’
- VI. Dissatisfaction: ‘I don’t like what the fuck is going on here’
- VII. Greetings: ‘How the fuck are you?’
- VIII. Hostility: ‘I’m going to smash your fucking face in

This illustrates the semantic strength of certain swearwords. The list put forth here may be one of the many indications that there has been an actual increase in the use of swearing of late. Alternatively, it showcases wordplay and semantic creativity. My research question, which is probing change in attitudes to swearing, is exactly what I find the most intriguing.

One would think that there has been a liberalisation in the last century in the usage of swearwords, but the picture is not so clear, as we shall see. This triggers the research questions of the present master thesis:

1. Has there been a change in attitude to swearwords in the last 50 years?
2. Does this change relate only to some types of swearwords?

This thesis consists of two major parts. The first is theoretical, and the other empirical. The theoretical part will begin by discussing the mechanics behind swearing. The importance of doing that is to get a grasp of why we actually swear, and whether the reasons for swearing can be traced only to an individual’s attitudes. The following section will be about taboo. Here, definitions of taboo and the history of taboo will be given. In this section I will investigate why certain words are regarded as taboo by some people, but not by others. The last part on swearing will be the history of English swearing in the last century. Historical events that have changed the public’s attitude to swearing will be emphasised. As this is concluded, a general examination of attitudes, and specifically how they play in terms of language use, will be initiated. This will then be followed by the empirical part, in which hypotheses, method and field study will be described in detail. Findings will then be presented, discussed and subsequently compared with previous studies in the field of attitudes to swearing, in an attempt to answer the aforementioned research questions.

The term *swearword* or *swear/ing* is a rudimentary part of this master thesis, as it is frequently used in my interviews and questionnaires. Therefore, a working definition is of vital importance to fully comprehend the research question and the subsequent discussion. In

colloquial English, several terms are used to refer to words that carry strong meaning, for example *profanity*, *cursing*, *swearing*, *expletives*, *swearwords* and *cursewords*. The uses of swearing/swearword/to swear, however, are most frequent in comparison to the aforementioned alternatives, according to simple searches on google.com. According to the Collins English Dictionary (2003) and The American Heritage Dictionary (2009) the definitions are as follows:

*Swear at* – To use abusive, violent, or blasphemous language against; curse (...).

*Swearing* - Profane or obscene expression usually of surprise or anger. (...) (*The*

*American Heritage Dictionary*: 2013) *Swearword* – (Linguistics) a socially taboo word or phrase of a profane, obscene, or insulting character (*Collins English Dictionary*: 2013).

For practical reasons I have chosen to use *swear-ing/swearword* as chief umbrella terms throughout the thesis. My definition of a swearword is an expansion of the definition provided by Collins English Dictionary (2003) above, and it is the following: ‘socially taboo word or phrase of a profane, obscene, or insulting character’. I expand Collins’ definition by including in it the words *nigger*, *paki* and *Jew* used offensively. It should be noted that, *swearing* is the preferred term used in the questionnaire in the large joint-study done by Millwood-Hargrave (2000), BBC and British television commissions, to which my results are directly compared.

## **1.1 Why do we swear?**

Swearing is generally regarded as offensive. Thus, we have incorporated and learnt how to use care when uttering tabooed words. However, as hinted at in the introduction, not only are there attitudinal mechanics derived from a sociocultural context involved when we curse, such as knowing that saying i.e. *shit* in a political speech is wrong due to the contextual formality, but also ‘neurological control [and] psychological restraints’ (Jay 1999: 19). The individual works of psycholinguists Jay (1999) and Pinker (2007) have taken a keen interest in investigating what neurological, psychological sociocultural systems are at work when we swear. The importance of this, Jay believes, is that ‘while curse words can be differentiated from non-curse words through a social-historical analysis, an act of cursing cannot be understood without considering simultaneously all three of the dimensions underlying human behaviour’ (Jay 1999: 19). In an attempt to get a better grasp of the choices we make when we



opt to swear or not to swear, the aforementioned interdependent systems will be presented. Specifically, works by Jay and Pinker will be chiefly referred to below, as these are at the very forefront in the field of the mechanics behind swearing.

### **1.1.1 The Neurological system**

Our language can be divided into two extremes either propositional speech or non-propositional speech, with conventional speech somewhere in the middle. Propositional speech is when our speech is ‘novel and creative’ (Jay 1999: 33), while non-propositional speech is ‘automatic, reflexive, and non-creative’ (ibid: 33). In other words, the more we think about what we say, the more propositional it is, while the less controlled our speech is, the more non-propositional it is. An example of non-propositional speech could be when we spontaneously shout out something after getting physically hurt. Or in swearing terms, if we go around thinking about how to insult a person with a swearword, or are constructing a joke that includes a swearword, it is propositional, while it is non-propositional if we say an expletive with little time to think about it. It is widely believed among neuroscientists that the left hemisphere holds the key to ‘many language functions like calculation, analytic thinking, and verbal reasoning’ (ibid: 35) while ‘emotional speech, visualization, musical abilities, spatial reasoning, and holistic processing predominate in the right hemisphere’ (ibid: 35). After numerous scientific studies of brain damages, the current belief among scientists is that non-propositional speech is heavily reliant on the right hemisphere (ibid: 37-43). This is further backed up by Pinker who states that taboo words are emotionally coloured as they are ‘spread across connections between the neocortex and the limbic system, especially in the right hemisphere’ (Pinker 2007: 2).

This leads to the emotional aspect of language. Jay argues that swearwords ‘are unique in their ability to express our strongest emotions’ and that ‘opposed to noncurse words, curses gain their power through the need to inhibit them; therefore breaking the inhibition or taboo in order to say cursewords is understood as occurring when the speaker is in an emotional state’ (Jay 1999: 51-52). Thus, one could say that uttering a string of swearwords, when in a strong emotional state, would be regarded as more acceptable than saying a swearword out of the blue. Such emotional states could be everything from being angry, upset, shocked or happy. If I was walking down the street and observed a car ramming into a pedestrian, it would not be unthinkable if I shouted out an expletive such as ‘oh shit!’ automatically, or propositionally, as mentioned above. Thus swearing could be described as a relief button when in certain

emotional states; according to Jay 'Touretters (...) report more relief from uttering obscenities than from uttering euphemisms' (ibid: 52). In the report, 'swearing as a response to pain', scientists have studied the link between pain relief and swearing by investigating 'whether swearing affects cold-pressor pain tolerance (the ability to withstand immersing the hand in icy water), pain perception and heart rate'. Their findings were interesting as they concluded that swearing 'increased pain tolerance, increased heart rate and decreased perceived pain compared with not swearing' (Stephens *et al* 2009: 1056).

The most important components in the discussion of swearing and emotional states is perhaps anger. Jay has researched the mental condition that users are in when they swear. The results showed that swearing when angry or frustrated occurred in the majority of cases: In a summer camp for children, 64% of the swearing was used to express anger or frustration, while in nursing homes and mental health facilities swearing as a way to express anger occurred two thirds of the times (Jay 1999:56). If a person is held at an institution against his or her will however, such as a patient in a nursing home, it would be natural to assume that this could spur some anger. Nevertheless, these numbers from Jay's research still give a strong indication of where swearing takes place. On the basis of the aforementioned studies, one could speculate that the relief button that swearing might represent is biologically programmed, and in a given context supersedes any factors that we may have for deciding whether to swear or not. In addition, swearing might 'induce a negative emotion that, if not fear, may nevertheless be characterized as an immediate alarm reaction to present threat' which subsequently leads to 'a fight or flight response including heart rate acceleration' (Stephens *et al* 2009: 1059-1060). Jay divides swearing when angry into two categories: 'the use of expletives, which is automatic and reflexive; and strategic verbal aggression, which is controlled and calculated' (Jay 1999: 56). The division of these categories refers back to the distinction between propositional vs. non-propositional speech. However, we are all different, and I am sure that there are as many ways to express anger as there are people on this earth. Luckily most people are able to control their anger, especially in a professional setting. Additional factors play in : 'One positive aspect of cursing is that it replaces more primitive physical aggression' (ibid: 59) It is quite clear that swearing at someone instead of physically attacking the victim, potentially injuring him or her, would be a better option. However, on the other hand, the person that is verbally abused could 'commit counter-violence' (ibid: 60) potentially doing more damage than the other person initially did or planned to do. Perhaps being verbally offensive, instead of attacking each other, or swearing when angry, instead of

being silent, are important in safely releasing our anger, or managing an emotional situation. In any way, what the aforementioned suggests is that most of the time when we swear we are in an angry state of mind.

### **1.1.2 The psychological system**

In a continuing effort to identify the various systems that are fundamental in understanding why we curse, it is advisable to consider the psychological system. In this system there are several factors underlying swearing that will be emphasised in the following paragraphs. These are children's language acquisition, personality factors (such as religion, sex etc.), swearing habits and the sexual lexicon.

Children become acquainted with swearwords surprisingly early. Some researchers report that this occurs as early as at the age of one. Evidence suggests that children attach swearwords to their vocabulary at the point of hearing them (Jay 1999: 82), which could explain why 'Sir Thomas Elyot advised in *The Boke of the Governour* (1531) that the children of a gentleman should be brought up exclusively by clean-spoken women and that men should not be allowed in the nursery (I xxvi)' (Hughes 2006: 74). As children grow up they learn the effects of swearing either in an undesirable or desirable way: 'The tendency to curse [can be strengthened] if cursing leads to rewarding consequences; the tendency to curse will be weakened if speakers are punished for cursing' (Jay 1999: 84). When observing the cause and effects of swearing, they practically learn the 'functional utility or the power of cursing' (Jay 1999: 84). To illustrate this point, if I was brought up in a deeply religious home with strict guidelines in terms of appropriate language, there could have been a significant chance that I would inherit a more restricted use of swearing compared to a child that was brought up in a home where swearwords were as common as any other word.

As they grow up, children effectively 'associate curse words with emotion states' (Jay 1999: 97). Before children have learnt to speak, they effectively express their emotions in whatever way they can. Examples of such behaviour are crying out, biting or hitting (ibid). As mentioned above, people tend to use words, often swearwords, as a relief button when in an emotional state. If a father swore after he burnt his fingers on the oven, in front of his child, the child would most likely pick up the swearword and use similar tactics when he or she faced similar situations. It is these children that might end up entering the bracket of people who tend to swear more than others.

Although important, the home environment is not the only deciding factor to the development of a child's vocabulary. As the children grow up, school and other socially based factors play an increasingly important role as well. When children attend school, the social norm is that boys curse more than girls, which might link up to the general idea that one should not swear in front of women (Jay 1999: 82) (Swearing and gender difference will be discussed below). These children will eventually reach adolescence in which their vocabulary develops to match their mental age:

One field study showed that this [the emergence of an obscene lexicon] starts surprisingly early and is more prevalent among young boys. However there was a consistent pattern of increase to a peak at ages 7-8 and then trailing off around ages 11-12 (1992: 44-60). The incidence of *fuck*, for example, rises from a figure of 13 at ages 5-6 to a peak of 26 at ages 7-8, falling first to 16 at ages 9-10 and further to 2 at ages 11-12. The implication of this pattern is that the early acquisition is imitative, while the later reduction reflects awareness of the seriousness and taboo quality of the words (Hughes 2006: 75).

A person's swearing habit is reduced to his or hers knowledge and experience of each episode in which swearing has occurred. If we assume that an innocent child swore in a religious building, such as a church or a mosque, the immediate reaction from the people around would be that of unacceptability followed by a quick reprimand telling the child that swearing is clearly not allowed within the sacred walls. This episode and its subsequent sanctions would then be stored in the child's memory, coming forth every time he or she entered a holy environment, effectively reminding the child it should be conscious in its choice of vocabulary. Jay explains that:

Memory and consciousness are highly susceptible to stress, and stress may create so much anxiety that a speaker cannot remember what was uttered. Alternatively, an obscene remark may cause so much stress to the victim of the insult that the memory for the incident is difficult, even impossible, to forget (Jay 1999: 83)

In this case, perhaps the aforementioned imaginative episode caused so much stress that the child will never forget it, thus securing him/her from making the same mistake again. Growing up, it is in the nature of children to make mistakes, and in the process learn from them. However, an individual's mental lexicon of swearing is a knowledgebase of its own, in which the process of distinguishing which words fit what context can be demanding. In addition, there are various variables that decide this knowledgebase that children themselves use. These depend on the personality of the child and the social factors surrounding the person (Jay 1999: 83). However, as claimed by Jay (1999: 83), use of such memory relies on

cognitive processes, where we plan what we are going to say, which is an element far removed from our reflexive and automatic vocabulary. In the case of swearing reflexively, we often do not have the sufficient amount of time to initiate cognitive processes, thus often failing to abide by the linguistic rule set that we have built throughout the years (ibid: 51)

Interestingly, swearing has a high durability in that it is also used by elders. This is especially the case when an elderly person is burdened by illnesses such as Alzheimer or dementia (Jay 1999: 97). When seniors have a memory that goes retrograde, they tend to forget recent events. Instead, they increasingly draw on elements they learnt in their childhood. In terms of vocabulary, for example, a similarity with children's vocabulary rises. In terms of swearing 'both elders and teens produce a limited lexicon, drawing on a small number of words that are repeated often (...). Both age groups predominantly use offensive language to express anger and frustration' (ibid: 97). In other words, swearing is not necessarily a component that restricts itself to one age-group, but is an element that persists throughout our entire life.

Another significant module attached to our sense of swearing is clearly our very own personality. Whether a person is mentally ill, is masculine or feminine, impulsive, is placed in the personality A or B camp, introverts or extravert, are all factors that could enhance the swearing ratio of the person (Jay 1999: 110-113). However, religiosity is one main attribute that needs to be emphasised. Growing up in a religious home a child normally learns the great range of positive connotations attached to God, and that it is forbidden to speak about God in vain, i.e. uttering phrases like *God damn* etc. (profanity), which is the opposite of 'a child reared in a home filled with profanities [who] learn less positive reactions to religious words and concepts' (Jule 2005: 69). The Bible includes heavy doctrines or laws on how to behave, the Ten Commandments being one example. By disobeying these you will be sanctioned by God. Some of these laws give strict information on which words or actions are deemed bad. To distance themselves from these evil entities,

Religious ceremonies employ special language that is regarded more highly than everyday speech. Generally speaking, religious restrictions are based on the notion that words are 'good' or 'bad' and that 'bad' people use 'bad' words. One's attitude about religion and blasphemy depends on one's personal-psychological development and indoctrination in a religious community (Jule 2005: 70).

In other words, if possessing a strong held belief that swearing will insult God and lower the chances of entering heaven, then such a belief could place heavy and careful restrictions on which words are uttered.

### 1.1.3 The cultural context

Every society has a cultural context that forms our day-to-day actions, such as the differences between men and women, humour, power and relationship between speakers, what is regarded as taboo and the subsequent words that are preferred in a said situation, etc. These nuts and bolts help form our attitudes to swearing.

Power relations, for instance, are important in this cultural context as ‘generally, speakers who have power have license to curse as they please because they suffer no social consequences for doing it. At the other extreme, those without power have license to curse because they have nothing to lose by doing so’ (Jay 1999: 158). Evidence suggests that there are some discrepancies between classes; Jay (ibid: 158-9) points out that the middle class generally have the largest anxiety about swearing. The reason for this is that middle class people might fear that their superior, in this case someone with high status, will react negatively and be offended if people of the middle class lash out swearwords in their presence. A person with high class status though will have little to lose, and is able to use language more freely, such as initiating a top-down insult (ibid). However, if the person is a public figure and is in a position where there is little room for errors, the media could probe the situation and bring down a judgment that would jeopardise his or her position. One example of this is an infamous episode when Wayne Rooney, an English football player, shouted expletives at the camera during his goal celebration. This caused heavy stir in the English media, which thought it unsuitable, for a man who is considered a role model, to swear publically. As a result, Rooney was asked by the Football Administration to publically apologise his actions (*The Sun*: 2012).

It is common knowledge that there is a stark dissimilarity between how men and women approach swearing. One shared belief is that men tend to swear more than women and that men should refrain from swearing when in the company of women, as doing so would rupture good manners (Hughes 2006:195). Citing different studies, Hughes argues however, that the picture is not so clear cut in every area. Among college students ‘women were ahead in certain categories, but did lag significantly behind men in using terms for the genitalia, such as *pussy*, *cunt*, *tits*, and *cock*’ (ibid:195). Illustrating the distribution of a selection of swearwords among men and women, only *bitch*, *cow* and *sow* were terms exclusively used by women. Whereas swearwords commonly used by men were words referring to male and female genitalia, excretion, and general terms such as *bastard*. What the distribution did not elucidate was in which context these words were used, as some words have little profound

severity if used in certain situations (Hughes 2006: 195-96). The words of Lakoff, ‘If a little girl ‘talks rough’ like a boy, she will be ostracized, scolded or made fun of’ (Lakoff 1973: 47), backs up the general idea that women are supposed to not talk ‘rough’. Although some would argue that there is little evidence which supports the notion that there is a clear difference between male and female swearing, other studies argue that men have a higher swear ratio than women, but that both men and female swear more when they are in the company of their own gender (ibid: 511).

Another area where swearing often has a free zone is humour. Applying swearwords to a joke might enhance it if the speaker wants to give the joke a cutting edge: ‘Curse words make a joking insult ‘hurt’ the victim a bit more than noncurse words, creating an emotional impact for jokes that affect listeners in a manner that noncurse words cannot do’ (Jay 1999: 181). In stand-up comedy, for example, comedians often employ a wide range of swearwords. In a BBC article, the British comedian Arthur Smith stated that ‘humour is meant to challenge a bit. I agree that some comedians swear too much but a well-placed swearword is a marvellous bit of grammar. Used just into the punch line, maybe as the penultimate word, a big swearword will probably enhance the laughter’ (Geoghehan 2013). On the other hand, Jerry Seinfeld, known from playing the main character in the sitcom *Seinfeld*, stated that ‘most of the time, when you hear the dirty words sprinkled in, it’s someone who’s lost and scared and uses swearing to save their tail’ (NME 2013). Various types of humour or jokes play on what is taboo in a society. Ethnic jokes, sexual jokes, scatological jokes, hostile jokes, sick jokes and different categories of wit, such as satire, are all touching on controversial topics. Subsequently, these jokes give room to swearwords (Jay 1999).

As discussed in 1.1., there are many motives for why most of us end up saying or even shouting a swearword. Together, all these sockets power our attitudes to swearing, either negatively or positively. Sometimes, as we have learnt, the way we are built neurologically and psychologically, swearwords might transpire reflexively in emotional and acute situations, even though our rational cognitive processes, which derive mostly from a cultural context, would want us to abstain from it.

## **1.2 Taboo**

Exceedingly important to the cultural context of swearing is taboo. Although it easily fits into the segment above, i.e. the cultural context of why we swear, the topic of taboo will be

discussed in its own section from a more wide-ranging perspective. Allan and Burrige (2006) see ‘taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual’s behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury’ (Allan & Burrige 2006:1). According to Hughes, taboo ‘generally describes that which is unmentionable because, on a hierarchical scale, it is either ineffably sacred, like the name of God, or unspeakably vile, like cannibalism or incest’ (Hughes 2006: 462). Today, he argues, ‘taboo increasingly refers to prohibitions against socially unacceptable words, expressions, and topics, especially of a sexual and racist nature. They are also governed by context and medium, being most strictly observed in the press, the printed word, and broadcasting’ (ibid: 463). To illustrate, dealing with bodily effluvia might cause illness, or being impolite in social situations can risk a loss of social standing.

Apparently, the English word *taboo* hails from the Tongan word *tabu* imported by captain and discoverer James Cook in the latter years of the eighteenth century. James Cook wrote in his diary that everything that was regarded as forbidden was deemed *tabu*, ‘a word of very comprehensive meaning but in general signifies forbidden’ (James Cook’s diary cited in Allan & Burrige 2006: 3). Cook used the word taboo when he spoke about acts the Polynesians did ‘that were not to be done, entered, seen or touched’ (ibid: 4).

Taboos can be divided into several categories. Allan and Burrige (ibid: 1) list elements of taboo within religion, sexuality, bodily effluvia, disease, death and killing, and food. I will attempt to explain in the following section why these categories are seen as taboo.

### **1.2.1 Blasphemy**

‘That is blasphemy!’, a phrase that was usually said to a person accused of using religious symbols or names in a scornful manner. The word *blasphemy* emerged around 1200 having the meaning ‘to utter impious or profane words’, later being defined in the eighteenth century as ‘strictly and properly, an offering of some indignity, or injury, unto God himself, either by words or writing’ (Hughes 2006: 31).

Although often mixed, there is a distinction between the word *blasphemy* and *profanity*; with blasphemy being ‘intentional’ and profanity ‘habitual’ (Hughes 2006: 31). Such perceived disdainful acts, as being contemptuous towards religious symbols or names, were in the western world previously quite austere punished. Evidently, this was due to the Ten Commandments written in the Old Testament, with laws such as: ‘You shall have no other gods before me’, ‘you shall not make for yourself a carved image’ and ‘You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain’ (*GodsTenLaws*). The universal respect for the Christian



God is evident when scrutinising oaths. Today we have legal contracts, government laws and mortgage security to name but a few security nets that safeguard written agreements. Before such systems were in place, people commonly swore to God that they would meet a given agreement. The common belief was that God would punish those that did ill doings. Today, blasphemy is not a token of taboo as it was previously. Pinker argues that there are several reasons for this. Modern secularisation of western countries and the ever increasing governmental bodies are two major factors. Additionally, the fact that people over time discovered that they were not immediately struck down by God after doing something deemed blasphemous has most likely made them less sure about his existence (Pinker 2007: 340-1). Interestingly, there are still some remnants of this 'blasphemous past' today, in which witnesses in American court rooms are required to swear on the Holy Bible that they will speak the truth (ibid: 341).

### **1.2.2 Sexuality**

One of the strongest providers of taboo words is the topic of sexuality. Interestingly, sexuality is the provider of arguably the most popular swearword today, namely *fuck* (and its numerous offspring). One would think, however, that something completely natural such as an intercourse would not elicit anything remotely taboo. Instead one would think that this activity, which humanity hinges on, would prompt positive and happy connotations. Unmistakably, this is not the case. Pinker (2007) argues that there are several reasons why sex is tabooed, even today:

Has everyone had fun? Not necessarily. One partner might see the act as the beginning of a lifelong relationship, the other as a one-night stand. One may be infecting the other with a disease. A baby may have been conceived, whose welfare was not planned for in the heat of passion. If the couple is related the baby may (...) be susceptible to a genetic defect (Pinker 2007: 347)

In addition, jealousy might be a dangerous opponent should other interested parties get to know what happened. Problems easily arise if a married woman gets pregnant by another man than her husband, in which case the husband might end up raising the child of another man. The worst misdeed is clearly rape, in which one of the parties involved violently forces the other into having sex (ibid). Pinker also claims that there are vast differences between attitudes to sex between men and women: 'in every act of reproduction, females are committed to long stretches of pregnancy and lactation, while males can get away with a few

minutes of copulation' (ibid: 348). On the whole, men pursue casual sex much more frequently than females. Pinker points to this as one reason why males swear more than females and that sexual talk might be seen as offensive for women (ibid: 348).

Masturbation has for centuries been regarded as an out of bounds activity. It is written in the Bible (Genesis 38: 6-10) that Onan was slain by God for spilling his semen on the ground, instead of making his dead brother's wife pregnant. The Christian church's interpretation of this tale was that Onan was masturbating. Thus, the Christian church has since deemed this activity as something one should refrain from. This has been backed up by medical journals up until the early twentieth century, stating that masturbation can lead to a long list of mind boggling health problems such as blindness or mental deficiency. With the effort of both medical science and religion, and the fact that it has been commonly regarded as addictive, the public domain has met this activity with disdain, which has created a strong taboo (Allan & Burrige 2006: 145-146). Naturally, there are numerous slang words and also swearwords concerning masturbation (ibid: 147-148). Perhaps the most popular word in this category, especially in Britain, is *wanker*, which is a term of abuse often directed at another person (Hughes 2006: 310). If someone told a man he was a *wanker*, the target would then, according to the American Heritage dictionary (*American Heritage dictionary*, 'wanker' 2013) be regarded as a 'worthless person' or a 'detestable person', which epitomises some of the taboo surrounding masturbation.

Homosexuality has also been a subject of taboo. In the Old Testament it is written that: 'If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them' (*Bible.cc*). According to the Bible, homosexuality is equal to having sex with an animal or even his or her own family member (incest); all punishable by death. This has surely coloured the public opinion towards homosexuality, which is evident when considering the many laws against it up until today (Alan & Burrige 2006: 152-155). Although there has been a clear movement towards acceptability, homosexuality is still regarded as an ill doing by government decree in many Islamic nations and even Russia (Elder: 2012).

### **1.2.3 Bodily effluvia**

Terms such as *shit*, *bloody* and *piss* refer to bodily effluvia and acts of excretion that are generally regarded as expletives. Although completely natural and ever present in our lives, it is a mystery why these bodily emissions are an unwanted topic to discuss. Pinker refers to

Curtis and Biran in his quest to find out why: ‘It can’t be a coincidence, they note, that the most disgusting substances are also the most dangerous vectors for disease. Feces are a route of transmission for the viruses, bacteria, and protozoans that cause at least twenty intestinal diseases (...)’ (2007: 345). In addition, blood, vomit, mucus, pus, and sexual fluids are carriers of diseases from one body to another. Pinker also points to the fact that there is a strong opposition to drink or eat bodily effluvia among us; even just thinking about it generates a factor of disgust, which might explain why the terms are seen as taboo (ibid: 345). However, that begs the question why *vomit* has no vile connotation as *shit* and *piss*. This remains a mystery.

#### **1.2.4 Political correctness**

Blasphemy, sexuality and bodily effluvia reveal the major topics of taboo today, and why we find the terms and activities relating to these as discourteous and in many domains, such as the media, unmentionable. Some of the vulgar terms coming from the aforesaid topics of taboo have spurred a need in modern times to create neutral terms, free of any vile connotations. This need to use neutral terms is known as political correctness. The main objective of political correctness is to ‘eliminate prejudicial language and alter attitudes in addressing a whole range of social and political issues, including culture, education, curricula, gender, disability, and ethnicity. (...) The axiomatic assumption is that to change language is to change social attitudes’ (Hughes 2007: 348).

Interestingly, the origins of political correctness date to China during the 1930s in the Mao led communist party. With a strict party line, abiding by the rules was crucial. The party members had to be ‘politically correct’, and so the term was born. However, it was not until the 1960s and the 1970s that it was picked up in the west, where it transformed and evolved in a different socio-political environment (Hughes 2010: 4-5). In the 1960s, it was first used by the party members of the American New Left. The phrase was then picked up and used by ‘the assorted ideologies of the late 1960s and early 1970s: black consciousness, and black power, feminism, homosexual rights, and to a lesser extent, pacifism, environmentalism, and so on’ (Dinesh D’Souza; in Hughes 2010: 61). As observed, *political correctness* was a term mostly groups fighting for their rights during the 1970s in the US used. Later it was picked up by academics and students at campuses as the traditional canon and curriculum were

questioned and probed. This happened at the same time when the term multiculturalism paved way into society, as the world saw a heavy increase in globalisation (Hughes 2010: 66). Parallel to this, a great deal of major publications issued books, and even dictionaries, shedding light on political correctness (ibid: 67-68).

This developed into a so-called language crusade where alternative words were used with reference to those groups that were considered as outsiders, such as homosexuals, native Americans and the African Americans (Hughes 2010: 116). This language crusade still lives on, as the search for a proper, neutral word for a *homosexual* is still on-going. This is richly illustrated through the latest suggestion in the new British anti-discrimination law:

'*homosexual* is no longer the way forward in defining sexual orientation' (British Department of Trade and Industry; in Hughes 2007: 239). Instead the department proposed homosexuals to be called 'OTPOTSS, an abbreviation for "orientation toward people of the same sex"' (ibid). Another discussion has been about which word is best suited for those with a different skin colour than white. As a result, there have been numerous terms for black or coloured people, ever since the colonial times. Hughes argues that *Nigger* is one of the most tabooed words in the English language. Furthermore he reasons that there has been an active move to find a good and suitable word free of any negativity (Hughes 2010: 152-3). Thus, words such as African American, black and coloured have been present in the English language.

According to a Gallup poll from 2007, the majority of black Americans say it does not matter which of the terms 'Black' or 'African American' is used to describe them. 13% of black Americans prefer to be called 'black' while 24% prefer to be called 'African American'. Moreover, when Black Americans were given two explicit options in 2005, whether they preferred the term 'black' or 'African American' to describe their racial identity, 48% chose 'black' and 49% preferred African American (Newport 2007).

Political correctness has also reached other minorities. To avoid terms such as *cripple* and *spastic*, the preferred terms are *physically disabled*, *disability*, *differently abled* and *physically challenged* (Hughes 2010: 195). Other examples where new words have been invented include those with mental disorders, eating disorders and those with addictions (ibid: 194-207). These terms are prime examples of political correctness, an attempt at removing possible discrimination through words that are as neutral as possible. However, some of the words could be felt to be too long and the public might get confused by the number of alternatives. Subsequently, this could result in a limited use. The confusion has also led to a series of race related lawsuits. This especially has been the case in the US, where people

accuse others of discrimination or being racist (ibid: 163-4; 75). The big wave of politically correct words caused confusion, as people became increasingly unsure from which words to choose from. As a result, political correctness became a dirty word in Britain during the 1990s: 'To call someone PC is less a description than an insult, carrying with it accusations of everything from Stalinism /McCarthyism to (even worse?) having no sense of humour' (Dunant; in Hughes 2010: 69). Possibly, the confusion and the massive awareness that have come with the upsurge of political correctness in recent years have altered our attitudes to swearing, especially in cases where hate speech is concerned.

### **1.3 The history of swearing**

In an effort to understand English swearing, investigating the history of swearing might prove valuable. Clearly, the history of swearing as a whole is potentially very sizable. Thus, emphasis will primarily be on the latter part of the twentieth century for three reasons: 1. Extensive investigation into the semantic and cultural history of swearing will be too exhaustive. 2. It will be counter efficient to not primarily focus on the latter part of the twentieth century as my thesis chiefly concerns attitudes to swearing over a span of a few generations. 3. I believe the most rapid and radical changes have occurred in the last 50-70 years, for reasons I will outline below. Although Hughes (1998) will be the main point of reference, I intend to use a selection of history books to contextualise the changes he targets. The major points of interest will be the following: Secularisation, The Second World War, films and literature, media and relaxation of censoring, libertarian movements during the 60s and the 70s including the Freedom of Speech Movement and the Filthy Speech Movement, black consciousness and rap, and political correctness.

#### **1.3.1 Literature and the Second World War**

Through extreme ideologies, the Second World War was unmatched in worldwide brutality, from concentration camps, mass executions on both sides, to weapons of mass destruction (Noble *et al* 2006: 891-93). Compared to previous wars in terms of media coverage, there was a greater attempt to document this war as it was unfolding. This was achieved by having men at the frontlines with tools such as modern hand held cameras. As a result, the war was brought to a home audience like never before (*Bookrags.com*). After the war was over, literature was streaming out telling the tales of the war. Perhaps to give a realistic picture of

the war, the language was as real as possible, which naturally included slang and expletives (Hughes 1998: 199). As Pinker (2007b) argues, swearing is a natural part of life, and it is the writers' responsibility to give a just, sparkling and real image of humanity:

When Norman Mailer wrote his true-to-life novel about World War II, *The Naked and the Dead*, in 1948, his compromise with the sensibilities of the day was to have soldiers use the pseudo-epithet *fug*. (When Dorothy Parker met him, she said "So you're the man who doesn't know how to spell *fuck*") (Pinker 2007b: 8).

Additionally, Pinker reasons that prohibitions against foul language in broadcast media, whether it is in written form, radio or TV, brands historians, writers and others wanting to express themselves publically as liars. Consequently, this creates an artificial world, distancing itself from the real one (ibid: 8). In other words, there was a wave of writers wanting to give a realistic presentation of the war. Arguably, this was in an effort to justify what actually went on during the war. As a result, Second World War authors helped to break some of the strict language barriers in literature (Hughes 2010).

As for poetry, Hughes looks to Philip Larkin's poems during late 1960s and early 1970s. As with other types of literature up until that time, poems with profane language were not published in fear of offending people. However, Larkin's poems illustrate a shift, where he releases poems which include swearwords. For example, a two line poem by Larkin called 'This Be The Verse', dated 1971, used the word *fuck*, while another called 'High Windows' from 1967, which has a clear sexual context, had the word  *fucking*  in it (ibid: 188). It is precisely this sexual context during the 60s and the 70s that is interesting, as shown in the following section.

### **1.3.2 Sexual revolution**

According to Noble *et al* (2006), the sexual revolution began with the arrival of the birth control pill. This pill was commercialised and available for everyone by the late 1960s. With the pill, women were able to take control of their own lives, as they could literally plan and adjust how many children they wanted, and with whom. Most importantly, they were not living under the fear of becoming pregnant. In contrast with the baby boom which happened after World War II, the birth-rate declined heavily after the introduction of the pill (Noble 2006: 983-4). As Faragher (2009) points out, 'during the 1960s more teenagers experienced premarital sex---by the decade's end three-quarters of all college seniors had engaged in sexual intercourse---and far more talked about it openly than in previous eras' (Faragher 2009: 827). Living together as partners was also gradually more common among the young

men and women, to the frustration of many parents. The taboo concerning sex was diminishing in the public as well, as the idea of intercourse happening within the four walls of the household between a married man and a woman became a thing of the past (Noble 2006: 983).

The sexual revolution happened at the same time as the counterculture emerged in 1967. In the Summer of Love, a social phenomenon happening in Haight-Ashbury, nearly 100,000 like-minded people gathered. Here, emphasis was on love, sexual freedom, drugs, music, shared living, creative expressions and politics, especially an anti-Vietnam war sentiment. Similar events were not only happening in various places in Northern America that summer, but also abroad, in the outskirts of London for instance (Faragher 2009: 827). As a result, the hippies, or the flower children, were born. With them, they carried their well-known and fitting slogan 'Make Love, Not War', which 'linked generational rebellion and opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam' (ibid: 828) The epitome of this counterculture is the famous Woodstock (music) festival held in 1969, which lasted three days. There, 400,000 people attended, celebrating life, which included sexual intercourse and drugs out in the open while listening to the rock music being played by the world's biggest bands (ibid: 827).

What has this to do with swearing? First, sexuality is a major source of swearwords, and as the sexual liberation took place, people, especially the young, spoke more freely about sex, which naturally included words such as *fuck* and names of female and male genitals. As Pinker (2007: 347) stated, sexuality is tabooed partly due to the risk of pregnancy, and with the pill being introduced in the late 60s, this fear of pregnancy was effectively being removed. Additionally, the movement wanted to distance itself from conservative values. Arguably, this also included an effort to unshackle the restraint on profane language.

In addition to the counterculture during the 1960s, a wave of protest movements occurred as well. In essence, these were libertarian movements which protested against the lack of civil rights and foreign policy. With the US being heavily engaged in the Vietnam War, social divisions increased domestically in the USA. As Hughes points out:

The war in Vietnam acted as a major catalyst in social division, provoking violent protests in which the liberation of the sexual vocabulary proved to be a corollary, and many confrontations between the upholders of order and the shakers of the foundations were marked by verbal slogans such as 'Fuck the Pigs!' (Hughes 1998: 200)

Flower children and hippies, who advocated peace and love, were frontrunners in these protests and represented a clear break from traditional and conservative values among the American establishment. As such, they did not shun using the language that many considered vulgar (Hughes 1998: 200).

One rally, the Freedom of Speech Movement, transpired in 1964 at Berkeley. There, college students were not allowed by the administration to initiate political fundraising and organise protests. The students' chief area of complaint was lack of student rights, and Berkeley's strict policy of not granting them room to raise their voice gave rise to massive protests. Up to 3,000 students demonstrated against these aforementioned enforcements on campus, declaring their rights to freedom of speech. This culminated in California's biggest mass arrest, in which 1,000 students were arrested by police (Faragher 2009: 827). This eventually led to the Filthy Speech Movement at the same campus where a student was arrested for wearing a sign with the word *fuck*. Contrary to the Freedom of Speech Movement, the Filthy Speech Movement was less embraced by the student community. Nevertheless, a substantial number of students voiced their right to express themselves freely. As a result, they emphasised the use of swearwords they felt were common in private conversations (*everything2.com*).

Another movement that challenged the language free of swearing was that of the Black Conscious Movement. This movement housed members that were impatient of the progress made by Martin Luther King and his followers, who had for years through peaceful actions attempted to gain equal rights. Inspired by Black Power, which emphasised self-help, self-determination and organisation to gain political influence, the Black Panther Party embraced a paramilitary and direct style. This included using expletive language on posters and slogans (Faragher 2009: 837). One poem by Sonia Sanchez illustrates the language that the Black power movement incorporated:

Wite/motha/fucka  
Wite/motha/fucka  
Wite/motha/fucka  
Whitey  
(Sanchez; in Hughes 2010: 201)

Through persecution by FBI and the police, the leaders of the Black Panther Party were arrested and the movement quickly faded (Faragher 2009: 837). Despite this, publically



showcasing swearwords such as the poem above surely helped swearwords gain foothold in society.

The traditions from the Black Conscious Movement also became evident as the musical genre called *rap* was invented (Hughes 2010: 202-3). Originally *rap* means ‘to utter sharply’ (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, “*rap*” 2009), which might indicate that utterances that are branded as rap consist of curse words. Looking at the lyrics from notable rap artists up through time, it is evident that the use of swearwords runs freely (Hughes 2010: 203). One of the many examples is lyrics by the artist Ice Cube. From the very first lines in *The nigga ya love to hate* (1990), it is clear that swearing is not held back:

The nigga Ya Love To Hate  
I heard payback’s a motherfucking nigga  
That’s why I’m sick of getting treated like a goddamn stepchild  
Fuck a punk cause I ain’t him  
You gotta deal with the nine-double-m  
(*The Nigga Ya Love To Hate*, Ice Cube: 1990)

According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the album became a huge commercial success selling one million copies after only a few months (*RIAA.com*: 2013). One critic from *Entertainment Weekly*, Greg Sandow (1990), concluded that: ‘Ice Cube emerges as a rapper most original for his uncompromising tone. He throws ghetto life in our faces and dares us to draw our own conclusions. That makes *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted* an important social document, but not necessarily cohesive art’ (Sandow: 1990). Expectedly, not everyone was happy with the swearing rapped by Ice Cube. The acclaimed music magazine *RollingStone* had this to say: ‘The relentless profanity grows wearisome, the Bomb Squad beats lose steam, and Cube’s attitudes toward women are simply despicable’ (Light: 1990). Looking at the reviews, one could argue that such use of expletives in popular music was something new. Additionally, the fact that parts of society embraced it to such a degree might be evidence that people were ready and open to swearing.

### **1.3.3 Media**

Although traditionally, there were heavy restrictions of expletive language use among British newspapers in the post-war years, outbursts of profanities started to occur in the 70s. Hughes cites the Daily Mirror when they in 1974 published a front-page headline including the word *Bloody* in capital letters. Another similar headline in the same newspaper reads: ‘IS

EVERYBODY GOING BLOODY MAD?’ (Hughes 2010: 189). Other words occurring in British tabloids in the same decade included ‘get stuffed’ and ‘murdering bastards’ (ibid: 189). Even though these words themselves are not exactly shocking by contemporary standards, it is remarkable when a national newspaper decides to print these on the very front page. Being ground breaking, this literally meant that other newspapers, such as the rather infamous British red-top tabloids, could print strong language as well, and most importantly get away with it.

One could claim that the expansion of broadcast media has changed the linguistic landscape the most. In addition to radios, 90 per cent of all households in America had at least one television set by 1960 (Faragher 2009: 774). Moreover, distributing movies was a big business. Movies coming out of Hollywood were under strict regulations before the Second World War. One code of regulation from 1934 reads as follows: “Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embracing, suggestive postures and gestures are not to be shown (...) Pointed profanity (this includes the word God, Lord, Jesus, Christ – unless used reverently – Hell, S.O.B., damn, Gawd), or other profane or vulgar expressions, however used, is forbidden’ (Katz 1979: 934; in Hughes 2010: 198). However, this regulation was already breached in 1939 when the famous one liner ‘Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn’ from the movie *Gone With the Wind* was sanctioned.

As the explosive expansion of television sets and television channels in the nineteen fifties happened, a similar and rigid code of conduct was in place. The television was defined as a family medium, and as such, the content presented in the various TV-shows needed to be as family friendly as possible. In addition, advertisers had significant power, being able to pressure TV networks and threaten to withdraw their ads should their expectations of the contents of the program not be met. Meanwhile, cinemas saw a steady decline as the television was expanding. To counter this, film makers had to think differently. The watershed, in this verbal liberation, happened when the *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* came out in 1966. With its daring dialogues, including swearwords, the Supreme Court eventually relaxed the Production Code, when it was revised. Not affected by advertisers and being branded as a family medium, they saw a way in introducing age restrictions, which meant they could control what content they gave to which age group. This literally meant that they could show movies restricted to adults with more realistic language than ever before (Hughes 2010: 199).

With only a rating system to worry about, filmmakers had much more freedom in their creative products. Evidently, this was the case when movies heavily influenced by the Vietnam War were brought to world-wide audiences. As seen in the post Second World War literature, there was an emphasis on telling it as it was. Along with the many Vietnam War movies, *Apocalypse Now!*, one of the most critically acclaimed war movies to ever come out, would never meet the criteria of the conservative Production Code, as a great deal of expletive language were used (Hughes 2010: 203). Hughes' close study of these movies captures this embodiment of strong language as the Vietnam War movies were 'marked by a verbal bombardment quite as devastating as the fire-power of weaponry' (ibid: 203)

The way words are either accepted into dictionaries or the manner in which the words are described can be fairly revealing: The description, or the register, 'namely the diction appropriate to a particular literary context or social situation', can say something about the values that are currently abiding in society or the values of the lexicographers (Hughes 2006: 123). Traditionally, there are three different approaches, or policies, that dictionaries have employed: '*prescriptive* (emphasizing correct usage), *proscriptive* (condemning the incorrect), or *descriptive* (reflecting actual usage)' (ibid: 123). If a dictionary is prescriptive it will not include words that the publisher deems as incorrect. A proscriptive dictionary might include swearwords, but will most likely mark these as vulgar and brand them unsuitable. The descriptive dictionary however, is possibly the most friendly minded to swearword. Indubitably, certain swearwords are frequently uttered, and any inclusion of swearwords would reflect general usage. The question whether a word is slang or not, a technical term or plain scientific are also factors the lexicographer must address (ibid: 123).

Interestingly, the inclusion of swearwords in dictionaries is something fairly recent, as dictionaries have become increasingly more descriptive and inclusive. On the other hand, there have been hurdles as the wave of political correctness has washed over the semantic debates, thus affecting the dictionaries in the process (Hughes 2006: 124). In modern times, the inclusiveness started to happen in the mid-sixties. Before that, we must travel all the way back to 1795 to find the last dictionary to include *fuck*. In other words, it took 170 years before it was in print again (Sheidlower 1999: xxivff). Despite being included in various slang dictionaries in the timespan between 1795 and the 1960s, it was not before 1965 that the *British Penguin English Dictionary*, a major dictionary, dared to include *fuck*. Interestingly, it took four additional years before a major American dictionary followed its British counterpart. The famed and respected *Oxford English Dictionary* chose to include it in 1972,

with the director reasoning that: ‘Standards of tolerance have changed and their omission has for many years, and more frequently of late, excited critical comment’ (ibid: xxvi). Possibly, this statement referred to reviews of the dictionaries such as one by *the Times*, which had this to say about excluding swearwords: ‘Unfortunately, a stupid prudery has prevented the inclusion of probably the most widely-used word in the English language. The excuse here, no doubt, is ‘good taste’; but in a dictionary of this scope and ambition the omission seems dumb and irresponsible’ (ibid: xxv).

It seems that the key changes in public swearing started to happen in the 1960s, with the liberal movements that the counterculture brought and the language changes in the media being the spearheads. It is vital to stress that these events were all public. Therefore, it is difficult to say for certain whether definite changes occurred in private conversations as well. However, a move towards more liberal use of swearwords in public could also encourage more use in the private. If popular music, such as *rap* in this case, and successful movies include a great deal of swearing, this might justify a higher use of swearwords among listeners and viewers. Also, growing up, children might take notice when their public role models use swearwords. In many of the cases where swearing in public is documented, strong emotions have been involved. Some examples where swearwords have been used are as follows: Emotions from wars wanting to be put to life through literature or movies, angry slogans from the protesting movements, injustice being sung in rap songs or strong headlines in newspapers.

## **2 ATTITUDES: AN INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this section of the thesis is to investigate whether there has been an attitude change to swearing. Although there have been attempts earlier in the study to investigate actual changes in public perception to swearing in the last decades, tried to comprehend what lies behind topics of taboo, and also worked towards finding an understanding of the mechanics behind why we swear, attitudes as a subject has yet to be touched upon. I.e. trying to elaborate the basic aspects that form our attitudes in general, and finally examine what constitutes attitude change. Possessing a basic knowledge on how attitudes work would be imperative moving towards my own research. Acquiring this knowledge would be beneficial as it would elicit and analyse the information the respondents give. When this attitude segment is discussed, I will move on to what constitutes language attitudes, before eventually discussing factors that build our attitudes to swearing. Although I have indirectly touched the latter part previously, i.e. attitudes to swearing, it is vital to summarise those points, and bring in other elements that might be relevant to the topic at hand.

### **2.1 Defining an attitude**

Research into what actually constitutes an attitude has shown substantial discrepancies, ever since the early twentieth century. A reason for this might be that the meaning of attitude has ‘glossed over difficult theoretical conflicts’ (Potter 1987: 43). Thus, definitions of an attitude have been tweaked, altered and expanded over the years. Thurstone (1931) defined attitude as ‘affect for or against a psychological object’ (Thurstone 1931; in Garrett 2010: 19)<sup>2</sup>. In his views, attitude is embroiled in affection in that one can either have a positive view, being for something, or negative, being against. However, Allport (1954) stated that an attitude is ‘a learned disposition to think, feel and behave toward a person (or object) in a particular way’ (Allport 1954; in Garrett 2010: 19). In other words, attitude does not only relate to affection, but to what we think (‘feel’ as stated in the definition) about a person or object and our behaviour towards an object or person. Although Allport’s definition is frequently cited (Allport 1954; in Garrett 2010: 19; 23), McGuire approaches the definition of an attitude

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<sup>2</sup> Garrett (2010) is frequently referred to in this section, as I was unable to find the sources he used.

differently. He argues that when ‘speaking or acting, people are taking some idea or object of interest and giving it a position in an evaluative hierarchy’ (McGuire 1985: 239). To illustrate what McGuire means with respect to swearing, one could think the following: Every time when hearing or saying, for example, the word *shit* in whatever contexts, the word *shit* could potentially uphold a status quo, climb in favour or fall down in disfavour in a ladder of assessment. Oppenheim’s definition though is more expansive. He claims that an attitude is

a construct, an abstraction which cannot be directly apprehended. It is an inner component of mental life which expresses itself, directly or indirectly, through much more obvious processes as stereotypes, beliefs, verbal statements or reactions, ideas and opinions, selective recall, anger or satisfaction or some other emotion and in various other aspects of behaviour (Oppenheim 1982: 32; in Garrett 2010: 19)

Here, Oppenheim includes stereotypes, beliefs, opinions, anger and emotions into the definition of an attitude. In summary, the general consensus is that attitudes can be linked to cognition (thinking), affection (feelings) and behaviour (Garrett 2010: 23). The interrelation of these components have since 1940s been called the tripartite model (Breckler 1984). These three mechanisms constituting this model will be my starting point in my attempt to elaborate the basic aspects that constitute an attitude. As will be revealed further below, the part about behaviour will be most elaborative as it yields a significant amount of controversy (Garrett 2010: 25).

Garrett argues that attitudes are cognitive, ‘as they contain or comprise beliefs about the world, and the relationship between objects of social significance’ (Garrett 2010: 23). An example of an attitude being cognitive could be that one makes the judgement that strong language is often associated with enthusiastic fans at football matches. Another example would be processing the judgment that if you want to secure a high level job, it often is a prerequisite to speak Standard English instead of an urban accent, as Standard English is often associated with high levels of prestige while an urban accent has generally low prestige (ibid: 173)

As cited above, Allport claimed that attitudes were also affective, in that they contain definite feelings about the object in question. To illustrate the aforementioned, one can envision a barometer of attitudinal approval. Importantly, ‘this positive-to-negative directionality of attitudes is usually augmented by an assessment of intensity’ (Garrett 2010: 23) as something dislikeable would be placed low on the barometer and something regarded as slightly likeable would be placed above the middle of the barometer.

The last component is *behaviour*. This component of attitude grants the wielder a predisposition to ‘act in certain ways’, often synchronised with our affection and cognition when making judgements (Garrett 2010: 23). To illustrate, it could be wise to save up a substantial amount of money before the Christmas holiday, as purchasing gifts to friends, family and buying food have proven to be quite taxing on the wallet. Learning from previous pre-Christmas shopping experiences would then create a predisposition to act in a certain way when the next Christmas holiday closes in.

However, there have been studies that suggest that it is difficult to give sufficient evidence that the three aforementioned components are interrelated. In addition, questions have been raised arguing that affection, behaviour and cognition are aspects that should not be included under the umbrella of attitude. In replacement for this theory, it is advocated that they should rather be seen as ‘causes and triggers of attitudes’ (Garrett 2010: 23). For instance, affection might release an attitude towards an object.

In an attempt to investigate to which degree cognition, affect and behaviour work independently, Breckler (1984) studied attitudes to snakes among students. His study was split in two working conditions for those filling out a questionnaire. The first set of respondents had a living snake present in the room, and the other group had to imagine that a living snake was present in the room. The results differed as the second study showed a strong support for a correlation between cognition, behaviour and affect, while the first, where an actual snake was present, only revealed moderate support for the tripartite model. In conclusion, Breckler argues that the results indicate that ‘correlations among these three components were moderate, suggesting the practical importance of discriminating among them’ (Breckler 1984: 1203). Despite Breckler’s investigation, more recent studies show that generally there is a connection between cognition and affect. However, the validity of the tripartite model as a whole is still heavily probed (Garret 2010: 25).

In attitude research, it is the relationship between attitudes and behaviour that is most challenging to investigate. Specifically, light has been shed on the link between the attitudes that people say they have and their actual behaviour (Garrett 2010: 25). The common sense belief is that if people ‘are able to change someone’s attitude towards something, then the person’s behaviour will also change accordingly’ (ibid: 24). However, one often-cited study by LaPiere (1934) suggests that there is a weak relationship between behaviour, in this case actions, and attitudes. In his study, LaPiere took a Chinese couple with him on a journey through the United States visiting 66 hotels and 184 restaurants to find out whether they

would be rejected or not, by attempting to buy goods and services. The context was that people with Asian origin did not have the same privileges and rights as the native Caucasians. Apart from being rejected at one place, they were accepted at all places and treated with respect (LaPiere 1934: 232). Six months later LaPiere sent a questionnaire to all the restaurants and hotels they visited asking ‘will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?’ (ibid: 233). Although he sent two different questionnaires, one was asking only about Orientals, and the other questionnaire including every ethnicity. The results were staggering: 91% and 92% respectively answered no (ibid: 234). It is important to note however, that LaPiere himself concluded that questionnaires were not the best at indicating attitudes among the subjects:

Only a verbal action to an entirely symbolic situation can be secured by a questionnaire. It may indicate what the responder would actually do when confronted with the situation symbolized in the question, but there is no assurance that it will (ibid: 236).

Nonetheless, what the study illustrates is that there are potential dangers when eliciting information that subjects give to a researcher or show to a researcher in terms of actions, as the correlation between what they say and what they do is weak.

As a conclusion, research into what constitutes or defines an attitude has definitely changed over the years. Researchers have gradually expanded the definition of attitude. Allport defined an attitude as to ‘think, feel and behave towards a person (or object) in a particular way’ (Allport 1954; in Garrett 2010: 19; 23) while Oppenheim expanded the definition to include stereotypes, beliefs, anger and emotions (Oppenheim 1982: 32; in Garrett 2010:19). Furthermore, attitudes are generally linked to three components in *cognition* (thinking), *affection* (feelings) and *behaviour*. Most researchers argue that these components are interrelated in that one affects another. It is important to stress however, that *behaviour* is a component riddled with a degree of controversy as scientific results differ with respect to whether the link between behaviour and the other components is actually present.

## **2.2 Attitude change**

As the topic of attitudes is so encompassing, it is important to have a broad understanding of terms related to this, as some of the terms are largely similar in definition. Previously, I outlined the history of swearing, where evidence illustrated a more liberal stance now than



compared to 50 years ago towards swearing in the public sphere. Thus, one could argue that there has been a change in attitudes over the last 70 years. There are various approaches as to how attitudes change. According to Hewstone *et al* (1997), the three main approaches are as follows: '(1) the message-learning approach; (2) the cognitive response approach; and (3) the so-called "dual process" models' (Hewstone *et al* 1997: 35).

The message-learning approach proposes that it is possible to learn a new attitude as it is possible to learn how to drive a car or learn to play football. This learning process depends on four variables 'source, message, receiver, and channel' (Hewstone: 35) In terms of the source, people tend to agree more when the source (of information) has a high standing, whether it is in expertise, dependability or of similar background to the listener. How the message is worded is also imperative. Variables such as the number of arguments in a message, whether one-sided or two-sided, are believed to be decisive in an attitude change (ibid: 35-36). Additionally, fear factor plays a role. Recent studies claim that 'high-fear messages can be more effective than low-fear messages' (ibid: 249). Furthermore, it is argued that education also plays a role. People with an education tend to be more easily persuaded than those without education, but only up to a point, as those with high intelligence are more stubborn and less persuadable. Channel factors, i.e. whether a message is delivered through radio, face-to-face or TV, also play a major role. In bringing an attitude change to a substantial number of receivers, the TV is evidently effective. Face-to-face is the preeminent option if one is to persuade a single individual (ibid: 36-7).

There are several variables within the *Cognitive Response Approach*: Distraction, degree of involvement and whether a topic brings positive or negative connotations within a receiver, to name a few, are all elements that may increase or decrease the likelihood of an attitude change. The last approach, the Dual-Process Approach, is built upon the Cognitive Response Approach. The approach claims that people generally want to have correct attitudes, that is, what public see as 'correct'. Moreover, attractiveness of the source might influence an attitude change in a positive way to the listener (Hewstone: 38).

As we can see, there are numerous variables that contribute to an attitude change. One of the most effective variables in attitude change is the channel used to convey a persuasive message to the listener, represented by TV, radio, internet and newspapers. Additionally, messages channelled through face-to-face could prove to be very persuasive, but often lack the effectiveness in distributing messages compared to media outlets. Degree of education and status among the listener and the interlocutor is also important.

### 2.3 Attitudes to language

Languages have features that could prompt the listeners' attitudes in specific ways. Here, a person's speech rate, his or her lexical provenance and diversity, the mood of the listener, the expertise, a speaker's physical appearance, gender, age, school, ability, social class and the context of a given speech, are all variables that influence attitudes to language (Garrett: 2010). I will investigate some of these.

Although there have not been studies concerned with whether a person's lexical diversity might change a receiver's attitudes, other studies have found that 'using low lexical diversity may be seen as less suitable for employment requiring technical expertise, and more suited to low-status employment' (Garrett 2010: 89). In addition, there is a correlation between intelligence and competence on one hand and high lexical diversity on the other. However, a person's accent elicits more attitudes, in terms of status and solidarity, than a person's lexical ability (ibid: 90). Evidence suggests that one's prowess in a given language is interconnected with the attitude to that language: 'The higher the achievement, proficiency, ability in a language, the more favourable the attitude' (Baker 1992: 44). However, questions are still yet to be answered whether there is a 'cause-effect relationship' (ibid), as an initial positive attitude towards a language could enhance the proficiency within a learner, under motivational circumstances; and likewise a high proficiency in a language could cause positive attitudes.

Interestingly, speech rate plays a significant factor in terms of competence, status, and solidarity. In the US, a person speaking in a high pace is deemed more competent than a person speaking in a slower pace. In terms of speaking more slowly, the level of competence, status and solidarity will be downgraded. However, in the UK, speaking slowly will increase one's solidarity ratings, which implies that there may be cultural differences between the UK and the USA (Baker 1992: 90ff). The age of a speaker is also fairly substantial in language attitudes. Stewart and Ryan (1982) investigated the correlation between speech rate and age in the UK by interviewing young speakers aged 20-22 and mature speakers aged 60-65. In terms of age alone, younger speakers were regarded as more competent than mature speakers. Speakers who were young and talking fast were rated considerably more positively in terms

of solidarity than young slow speakers. In general, the results elicited in Stewart and Ryan's (1982) study showed that speakers possessing a talking rate of either medium or fast speed were regarded more competent than slow speakers. To further analyse these findings, Giles *et al* (1990) investigated multiple variables such as age, speech rate and accent. Interestingly, their results indicated that a person's speech rate evoked stronger reactions than a person's age or accent. It is argued that the very 'socialisation process (...) has an effect' when adolescents shape their language attitudes (Baker 1992: 42). Furthermore, Baker claims that 'age is an 'indicator' or 'holding' variable that sums up movement over time, and does not reveal the underlying reasons for that movement' (ibid).

The cultural discrepancy between the UK and the US, apparent in the speech rate studies, is evident in two different studies, one by Ryan and Sebastian (1980) and one by Giles and Sassoon (1983). Ryan and Sebastian investigated whether the status of Mexican-Americans was upgraded if listeners knew beforehand which social class they belonged to. Respondents were given tapes to listen to with recordings of Mexican-American and standard American accents. In addition, some listeners were given information on the class background, i.e. lower or middle class, of the people behind the voices being played, while other listeners were not given such information. In total, the Mexican-American speakers were rated lower on status than the standard American speakers. Furthermore, the results revealed that the greatest difference occurred when information about social background was given, much more so to the Mexican-American voices than the standard American counterpart. This study then suggests that while accents do matter, class backgrounds play a significant role in people's attitudes towards a person's language. This is especially the case when the accent is marked, or non-standard, such as the Mexican-American accent. Giles and Sassoon (1983), on the other hand, did not find a correlation between their study in the UK and that by Ryan and Sebastian in the USA. Giles and Sassoon found that when comparing cockney English, a non-standard variety from London, with Received Pronunciation (RP), class-background did not give the same strength as in the study conducted in the US. The results indicated that the accent a person had mattered more than the social class background. Arguably, this could be due to the much higher standing of RP, in terms of status and competence, compared to cockney. Contrary to these findings, 'high ratings for solidarity are likely when people believed to be of high social status speak non-standard varieties (...) and when speakers believed to be of low social status speak a standard variety' (Garrett 2010: 94). Considering all these aforementioned studies in total, one could speculate whether it is more or less

accepted for someone with, for example, a non-standard accent and a low social status to swear than someone with standard accent and a high social standing. Indubitably, speech rate could also elicit a more positive or more negative reaction to a speaker's swearing.

As noted above, class background could, depending on the geographical location, prove a significant attitudinal variable. In addition, evidence suggests that other socio-cultural variables affect attitudes as well. The educational context could play a key role as 'through the formal or hidden curriculum and through extra curricula activities, a school may produce more or less favourable attitudes and may change attitudes' (Baker 1992: 43). Moreover, Baker argues that parental interest, community pressure and ethos are factors that may sway attitudes among pupils. Noticeably, the social network of a person may play a part in moulding language attitudes, specifically the use of language among friends and family. Attitude formation can also be influenced by mass media, role models, youth and pop culture (ibid: 44). As an example of influence that could cause attitude formation is the type of area an individual is brought up in.

However, a social dilemma occurs when one person crosses from one social arena, in which he/she is comfortable in, to another. According to *communication accommodation theory*, people are prone to alter their language in an attempt to fit in with a social group that they are usually not a part of. This theory 'rests on one pivotal process: *attunement*. The idea is that we all tailor, or attune, our behaviours according to the interaction, and this process of attunement involves a range of communicative behaviours, like speech styles' (Meyerhoff 2008: 72-3). According to Garrett, these communicative behaviours include 'language that is used, phonological variants, accentedness, speech rates, levels of lexical diversity, gestures, postures, smiling, the use of humour, pause frequencies and lengths' (Garrett 2010: 106). There are two strategies involved in this process of accommodation. One is *convergence*. When converging, we are attuning our speech towards the speech of the interlocutor. This is prompted, consciously or unconsciously, by a need to be more similar to the speaker. Potential motivations are many. A need to be more easily understood is evidently one of them. Most often, a person with a respectable command of English might want to accommodate or attune if the interlocutor has a limited grasp of English, in an effort to be more easily understood (Meyerhoff 2008: 73).

The other strategy is *divergence*. This is the exact opposite of *convergence*. The essence of this strategy is to increase or maintain the difference from the speech of the interlocutor. It is argued that in this process of comparison we strive to distinguish our group in a positive

light through divergence, as we generally have a tendency to compare the group we belong to with others. *Divergence* then could happen if a person belonging to a specific profession, social class or ethnicity, for example, strives to maintain the identity attached to that given group. For example, it is usually in the interest of a court judge to diverge from a suspect in the court of law as a demonstration of authority.

The many features of languages prompt different attitudes among listeners. How fast or slow a person speaks is one significant variable. Generally, if a person speaks slowly he or she will be regarded as less competent compared to a person speaking quickly. We have also learnt that class background, the accent spoken and the level of vocabulary play a significant part in language attitudes. As there are attitudinal pertaining to the variables mentioned above, people often strive to accommodate linguistically, in an effort to gain acceptance. This is achieved through *divergence*, where he or she tries to maintain or keep away from the speech of the interlocutor or *convergence*, where a person tries to emulate the speech of the person he or she is speaking to.

#### **2.4 Attitudes to swearing**

As we have seen earlier, swearing has historically been a culprit of controversy, and as with attitudes to language, attitudes to swearing are very much varied. It is undisputed that swearing is a part of language. Therefore, attitudes to swearing could be subject to the same language features that prompt attitudes among the people. As mentioned in section 2.3 (attitudes to language), these features include speech rate, class background, geographic location, accent, lexical provenance, mood of the speaker, physical appearance, gender, a person's expertise and the context of where language is spoken. To my knowledge, there is little research on the connection between the features above and attitudes to swearing. As I will present findings on attitudes to swearing by researchers below, I will speculate as to whether variables that affect attitudes to language affect attitudes to swearing as well. Perhaps one could proclaim that a speaker with substantial swearing prowess, i.e. knowing when it is suitable to swear, can invoke more positive attitudes to swearing among listeners, than those with less swearing prowess.

In terms of geographical differences and subsequent attitude formation, an area in which rough language is common may form neutral or positive attitudes to swearing among the inhabitants. On the contrary, an upper-class area with strict social guidelines could potentially

lead to the opposite. This could be due to social norms of conducts in which attitudes have been formed through sanctions, et cetera.

One could also speculate whether the rate of swearing of an outsider increases when said person socialises with a group that swears substantially. This may depend on variables such as the given social role of the outsider. Personally, I would attune and drastically decrease my swearing habits if I was with a group of deeply religious Christians. Contrariwise, and in all probability, I would converge and in the process increase my use of swearwords if I was among a group of English football supporters who were keener on embracing swearwords during the excitement of a football game. Despite the links made between the features, which we know are substantial, and language in attitude formation, I believe swearing in many cases goes beyond the features listed in attitudes to language. Here feelings towards topics such as religion, racism and feminism are prominent and may factor in. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to summarise the main findings in research concerning attitudes to swearing.

In a joint research undertaken by various British broadcasting institutions and spearheaded by Millwood-Hargrave (2000), respondents were asked about their attitudes to swearing and the use of swearing on broadcast media. It is important to stress that this report was conducted 13 years ago, and changes since then may have occurred. I will come back to this question when my own findings are presented.

Millwood-Hargrave (2000) investigated attitudes to swearing among three age-categories, 18-34 years, 35-54 years and 55+ years. Respondents were questioned about their attitudes to individual words and attitudes to swearing in general, and in broadcasting and advertisements. In general and not surprisingly, the young respondents had a more liberal view on swearing than their seniors.

In the qualitative part, respondents in the Millwood-Hargrave (2000) study were asked about their general attitudes to swearing. For most respondents, high use of swearing was often most associated with a minimal size of vocabulary, aggression and vulgarity. Both young and old grudgingly admitted that swearing was a part of language that has become common. For the youngest, this was the case as to them swearing has become 'second nature'. One parent with older children expressed the following: *'I think it is everyday life now, isn't it, swearing. I think it is accepted now. I think it is just part of the culture or whatever, you know'* (ibid: 5). A young British family also claimed that hearing someone saying a swearword when he or she accidentally drops eggs on the floor is something that cannot be helped, and is not offensive, contrarily to a swearword directed at another person: *'I think if*

someone's shouting it out at someone else then I think it's offensive. If someone drops their shopping bags and their eggs crash all over the floor and they say a swear word then I don't find that offensive. It's not offensive, but it's just a shame really' (ibid: 36). The report also indicated that families would rather let their sons listen to swearing on TV rather than their daughters, making gender a definite determinant in parents' control of what their children hear. One male parent noted that hearing a female swear was worse than hearing a male swear and in addition, he would rather let his son listen to people swear on TV rather than his older daughter: 'Well I don't like women swearing to be honest ... women and girls swearing. That is a lot worse than if you hear blokes swearing (...) Some things I watch more with the 10-year-old than I do with the (older) daughter.' (ibid: 6-7)

More females than males found *nigger* and *paki* 'very severe'. One female empty nester from Aberdeen, felt racially abusive swearwords were 'far more offensive than sexual innuendo' (Millwood-Hargrave 2000: 15). Additionally, young respondents were inclined to rate racially abusive swearwords as more severe than the other age groups (Millwood-Hargrave 2000). *Nigger*, for example, was rated as 'very severe' among 45% of the 18-34 year olds bracket while 37% of the 55+ years rated *nigger* as 'very severe'. *Paki* was overall rated as less severe than *nigger* among all groups, but again a higher number among the young rated it 'very severe' compared to the group of 55+ years (ibid: 15). A young man based in Manchester stated that if a commentator was caught saying *paki* on live TV he should be sanctioned: 'I think for a commentator ... to say something like that, maybe he should be reprimanded by the company he works for. I mean you couldn't really have that sort of thing flying around the television all the time' (ibid: 16).

In terms of religious swearwords, the general consensus was that they are not regarded severe. Nearly one in three among all three age-groups felt that *Jesus Christ* was a 'mild' swearword. However, one in five of the 55+ years considered the aforesaid word as 'very severe', while a slight majority of the young viewed *Jesus Christ* as 'not swearing' (Millwood-Hargrave 2000: 17). The same pattern could be found in the ratings of *God*. Overall *God* was rated as less severe than *Jesus Christ*, and the majority among every group of respondents rated the word as 'not swearing' (ibid: 18). The pattern among all age-groups was overall strikingly similar in the rating of *Jew* used offensively, as 20% among all age-groups thought it 'very severe'. Comparatively, around one in two labelled it as 'not swearing' (ibid: 17).

There were slight differences in the rating of offensive words used against people with disability. 33% among the young respondents felt *spastic* was a 'very severe' swearword, while 27% of the 55+ years felt the same. Likewise, 34% of the 55+ years considered the word 'not swearing', while 24% of the young agreed with the aforementioned statement. 36% of the middle-aged group, 35-54 years, rated *spastic* as 'very severe' (Millwood-Hargrave 2000: 16). In the interviews, it was claimed by a young Irish family that it is not the fault of the disabled that they are in their condition, and young Irish family felt that it is wrong to use these marked terms against people with disability: '(Re. *spastic/retard/epileptic*) 'Yes, when you say, "oh you bastard" and they're not, they don't really take it offensively, but if someone is a *spastic* or a *retard* or *epileptic* then it's not their fault'' (ibid: 16)

In terms of words deriving from bodily functions, *shit* was generally seen as a mild word; with 53% of the young respondents claiming that it was 'mild' and 42% among the 55+ years regarded the word as 'mild'. Interestingly, approximately one in ten among the young and the middle-aged thought it was 'very severe'. A fair amount of 26% among the seniors, however, assessed *shit* as 'very severe' (Millwood-Hargrave 2000: 13).

*Wanker*, in the report defined by Millwood-Hargrave as a directive personal abusive word, is rated by native Englishmen as the fourth most severe word. Although the young evaluated the word slightly less severely than 55+ years, there was a general agreement among all age-groups in the rating of the word, with 37% among the young group and 40% of the 55+ years rating it 'very severe' (Millwood-Hargrave 2000: 11).

The top three words in the report were *cunt* securing the number one spot, *motherfucker* at 2<sup>nd</sup> spot and *fuck* at 3<sup>rd</sup> spot. In all cases, slightly more females than men valued the words as more severe than men. In both the cases of *cunt* and *fuck*, young respondents evaluated the words as less severe than the other two age groups. The biggest discrepancy between the young and the 55+ years was in rating *fuck*. Here, 65% of the young rated *fuck* 'very severe', while 82% of the 55+ years rated it 'very severe'. 78% of the young respondents regarded *cunt* as 'very severe' with 85% of the old respondents rating *cunt* 'very severe' (Millwood-Hargrave 2000: 10).

Generally, respondents felt that there has been an increase in swearing 'in daily life' (Millwood-Hargrave 2000: 3). Despite the increase, the respondents reasoned that there was little that they could do about the development. Additionally, swearing was not an element of language that they particularly approved of. There was also a wide-ranging consensus that swearing should be excluded from Television before watershed at 9.00 pm (ibid).



McEnery (2006) investigated the use of ‘bad language words’ (in his study labelled BLW) among Britons with the help of corpora tools. In his research, McEnery compiled lists of the most frequently used BLWs and a list of the ‘strongest’ words. Additionally, differences in use of BLWs among social class, age and sex were examined.

The most frequently used BLW among males was *fucking* with a frequency of 284.10 per 1,000,000 words. This word was followed by *bloody* at 277.80 and *God* at 172.33. Females, on the other hand, most frequently used *bloody* with a rating at 526.71. This was followed by *God* at 459.38 and *hell* at 146.29 (McEnery 2006: 35). Interestingly, McEnery claimed that, despite previous research suggesting that females swear less than men, females swear equally much as men. However, it is equally important to stress that McEnery’s findings advocate that females possess a different vocabulary of swearing than men. Typically, the most frequently used swearwords by males have a higher perceived severity than females’ most frequently used swearwords (ibid: 36).

McEnery’s scale of offense (2006: 36) has *cunt* and *motherfucker* rated on the top as ‘very strong’, with ‘fuck’ alone at ‘strong’. In the category of ‘moderate’ BLW, notable words such as *nigger*, *paki*, *spastic*, *wanker* and *whore* are found. *Jew*, *shit*, *Jesus*, *balls* and *dickhead* are situated in the ‘mild’ category. *God*, *damn*, *hell*, and *bloody* are reduced to ‘very mild’.

McEnery cited Cheshire (1982) where Cheshire argued that teenagers use swearing as a vernacular tool of identification. McEnery used British language corpora in an attempt to investigate whether there is a connection between age and use of swearing. As expected, McEnery found a ‘positive correlation between age and the production of BLWs’ (ibid: 43). McEnery’s data made him to believe that young people swear more often than the elderly. Importantly, there was a peak in the frequency of swearing somewhere between the age of 15 and 25. From a frequency peak of nearly 3500 BLW per million, somewhere in the years of adolescence, there is a sharp decline down to under 500 BLW per million among those aged 60 and over (ibid: 44). Remarkably, the researcher also carefully proposed that evidence in his data indicated that there was deterioration in depth of ‘bad language’ lexicon parallel to the increase of age. Those aged in their mid-twenties typically had, at the point of his study, around 75 ‘bad language words’ in their lexicon, while those aged 60-plus had 29 words in their vocabulary (ibid: 54).

Moreover, McEnery investigated discrepancies between social classes in BLW use. As he expected, he observed a ‘frequency of usage being inverse to height of social class’ (2006: 51). In essence this means that the people in the lower working class are the ones swearing the

most. From the middle class to the upper class the rate of swearing decreases gradually. Interestingly, his numbers suggest that ‘AB’, here a code for the highest social class, is on the increase in the usage of the strongest BLW, especially when used discriminately against either sex (McEnery 2006: 51).

Although there are rarely explicit arguments for and against swearing in public, the use of swearing by a source, prominent or not, might give the receiver justification to increase or decrease its own use of swearing in a given context. On the topic of swearing in public, Pinker (2007: 370) gives a clear example where he lists arguments for and against swearing. One of the pro arguments stated that ‘the prohibition against swearing in broadcast media makes artists and historians into liars, and subverts the responsibility of grown-ups to learn how life is lived in worlds distant from their own’. On the other hand he reasons that the audience might not want to be ‘reminded of excrement, urine, and exploitative sex’ (ibid: 369) through the utterances of strong words. By reading said arguments the reader’s attitudes might be altered.

Scherer and Sagarin (2006) investigated the use of swearwords in speech. In their tests, they had three near identical speeches. One of the speeches had the swearword *damn* initially, the other had it at the end and the third speech did not include a single swearword at all. The researchers tested persuasiveness of speakers, perceived speaker intensity and speaker credibility. Results showed that the speakers who included a swearword initially or at the end of their speech were positively regarded as substantially more intensive and significantly more persuasive than the speaker who delivered a speech without a swearword. The topic of the speech was also regarded in more positive light if a swearword was included. However, there was no evidence that suggested an increase or decrease in speaker credibility when a speech included swearwords. In light of these findings, the authors suggested that:

Obscenities could impact credibility positively because the use of obscenities could make a credible speaker appear more human [...]. However, obscenities could also impact credibility negatively because the use of obscenity could be seen as inappropriate for a credible speaker (Scherer & Sagarin 2006: 144).

There could be a correlation between the data presented by Scherer & Sagarin (2006) and the pro swearing argument proposed by Pinker above in that using swearing could increase persuasiveness in arenas such as broadcast media. The reasoning is that not using strong language might decrease the reflection of the real world we live in.

One could propose that attitudes to swearing are riddled with as much, and if not more, complexity than attitudes to language. As with attitudes to language, most of the same features that apply in discerning its attitudes are involved in the formation of attitudes to swearing. In addition, phenomenon such as religion, feminism and ethnicity factor in. Studies by Millwood-Hargrave (2000) and McEnery (2006) show that people in their late adolescence and early twenties are both the highest users of swearing and the ones being most liberally minded to it. Comparatively, the mature, those aged 55 years and above, are the complete opposite. Although age is a big factor, so is social class. McEnery suggested that swearing increases parallel to the decrease of social class, with the working class being the most frequent and the upper class the least frequent users of swearwords. Evidence found in Sherer and Sagarin (2006) also suggested that swearing could work as a speech enhancer as listeners would perceive speeches which including swearwords to be more persuasive and intensive.

### 3 HYPOTHESES AND METHOD

#### 3.1 Hypotheses

My research questions were as follows:

- I. Has there been a change in attitude to swearwords in the last 50 years?
- II. Does this change relate only to some types of swearwords?

Hypothesis 1 (H-1) springing from research question I is as follows:

Among users of British English, the generation between twenty and thirty express more positive attitudes towards swearwords compared to people aged over sixty.

H-1 is motivated by the fact that attitudes towards swearwords have changed towards being more liberal. Ever since the 1950s the people have steadily become more liberal. Some evidence for this is that swearing has had an increasing presence in the British public, in films, music, theatre, literature, dictionaries or media channels such as newspapers, TV and radio. Also, the counter-culture during the 1960s played a substantial role in this liberalisation. The use of swearing is no longer branded taboo, but instead seen as a common and verbal outburst, or a language enhancement that comes natural to people. Although this change is most evident in the public sphere, my feeling is that if the media and its public persons, whether stand-up comedians or a Hollywood actor in a big movie, use swearing in their vocabulary, then viewers and listeners will slowly follow.

Research question II generates two hypotheses: A) and B):

A) Some swearwords have seen an increase in severity. Words such as *nigger*, *paki*, *cunt* and *motherfucker* have increased in severity, while *shit* and *fuck* have seen a decline.

B) Some types/categories have increased in severity, while others have decreased in severity.

Hypothesis 2B has generated 4 sub-hypotheses:

# H-2Bi The two age groups differ in that the young view racially abusive words more severe than the old.

# H-2Bii The two age groups differ in that the young view swearwords relating to sex and bodily effluvia as less severe than the old.

# H-2Biii The two age groups differ in that the old view swearwords relating to blasphemy/religion as more severe than the young.

# H-2Biv There is not any difference in viewed severity of swearwords relating to disability between the two age groups.

The hypotheses springing from research question two are motivated by several ideas. As for racially abusive swearwords, I believe that some of the terms, now branded racist, were neutral and more common when people of the old generation were growing up. On the whole, this relaxed context meant that words such as *nigger* would be regarded as less severe than today. In the years between the old and the young generations there have been strong human rights movements, anti-racism campaigns, political correctness and an influx of immigrants settling in Britain. This has triggered moves towards equal rights. As a result, I believe the young think twice before using racially abusive swearwords, and, as a result, rate those very words as more severe than their peers.

Today, there is much more openness about sexuality and bodily effluvia, especially in the media. This openness has decreased the taboo surrounding these topics, and, as a result, the young regard words relating to sexuality and bodily effluvia as less severe than the old. However, the word *cunt* is an exception. I believe both the young and the old rate this word as 'very severe'. *Cunt* has seen an increase in severity parallel to the development of women's rights and their awareness of what is sexist. However, the use of *cunt* among some sections of football fans in the UK is still frequent. Personally, I believe this is banter not serious shouting.

The sub-hypothesis, 2Bii, on swearwords relating to blasphemy is motivated by the fact that the young are less religious than their old counterpart, and, as a result, view blasphemous words as less severe. Potentially, this excludes British Muslims as recent investigations suggest that the young generation of British Muslims are getting more religious than the old generation (Malik 2009). However, that is another topic entirely. Interestingly, the word *Jew*, especially with a preceding intensifier, working as an expletive like *fuck*, is getting more

severe as an offensive word among the young people, as anti-Semitism is yet again increasing in Europe. I believe the old generation, who have lived much closer to the Second World War in time, pay more respect to Jews and refrain from using *Jew* as a swearword.

In perceived severity of words relating to disability my hypothesis is motivated by the fact that there are no significant differences between the old and the young generation. Both groups regard words such as *spastic* as offensive as there is increasing emphasis on equal rights for the disabled today.

### **3.2 Method**

There are at least three types of methods one can use to test the above mentioned hypotheses (see section 3.1): quantitative, qualitative, or alternatively a mixture of both. Quantitative research ‘involves collecting primarily numerical data and analysing it using statistical methods’ (Heigman and Croker 2009: 4f). Quantitative research often comprises questionnaires in which subjects are asked to numerically rate a given item. The sole purpose is to elicit countable answers that are easily transformed into, for example, percentages. The statistics gathered from the sample of answers can then be generalised to apply for a population of substantial size (ibid: 137).

A qualitative study on the other hand places emphasis on ‘collecting primarily textual data and examining it using interpretive analysis’ (Heigman and Croker 2009: 5). Here, the emphasis is not on numerical data, but on what subjects actually say about a phenomenon. Qualitative research relies on data-collecting techniques such as open-ended questions, observation and verbal reports (ibid: 5). The goal of qualitative study is ‘not to try to prove or disprove something; rather, the aim is to explore and then describe in rich detail the phenomenon that is being investigated’ (ibid: 5).

A mixture of both research methods serves the purpose of using the strengths of each individual method in accordance with the aim of the study (Heigman and Croker 2009: 5). It is defined as a measure to ‘understand a research problem more completely’ (ibid: 137). This is achieved through a mixture of both a qualitative and a quantitative study in that data from both studies are collated and collectively analysed. This means that a researcher elicits numerical data from quantitative studies together with interpretive data, such as answers given by subjects in open-ended questions.

Three aspects are involved in a mixed method: *Timing*, *weighting* and *mixing*. *Timing* refers to the order from which data collection method comes first. The subjects might answer questions differently if they are given a questionnaire with close-ended questions before being asked open-ended questions in a face-to-face interview than in the opposite order. *Weighting* refers to the weight given to a data collecting method, in other words, the priority or the importance of one of the methods. The higher priority or weighting, the larger proportion of the mixed study is devoted to one of the methods. The remaining characteristic is *mixing*. *Mixing* denotes integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods in one study. There are three potential *mixing* approaches. First, if a researcher obtains results from the quantitative study first, he or she can design the following qualitative study based on the results from the quantitative study. This technique helps the researcher to understand the data from the quantitative study better. The opposite strategy involves ‘analysing the qualitative data for codes and themes and transforming them into questionnaire items and scales’ (Heigman and Croker 2009: 139). The last approach is used when the purpose is to compare the quantitative and the qualitative results. In order to do this, the methods need to be employed separately. The *mixing* occurs when the data from the two studies are interpreted and subsequently compared. By triangulating the results the researcher can come with a joint interpretation of the whole study (ibid: 138ff).

Heigman and Croker (2009) argue that a qualitative study places emphasis on the subjects, and how they interact with specific phenomenon in given contexts. It is an exploratory method. On the other hand, a quantitative study may give better answers to more numerical questions, rather than what actually happened before, after or during events.

With limited resources at my disposal, it was unmanageable to question hundreds of people through advanced questionnaires. Instead, I carried out a simple questionnaire and interviewed a selection of natives. In the interview, respondents, both young and old, were asked to answer open-ended questions about their attitudes to swearing. These questions were pre-generated, carefully and neutrally worded to avoid any leading questions. There were ten questions, with three supplement questions in case I needed them. Despite being open-ended questions, respondents could still answer them very shortly. As a result, there was pressure on me as a researcher to try to probe and raise follow-up questions if needed. The questions were as follows:

*Q1. Do you have any comments you would like to make on this task I have given you?*

*Q2. Do you feel that swearing should be used more or should it be used less in the English language?*

*Q3. Do you feel that the use of swearing has increased over the last decades?*

*Q4. In what kinds of situations do you feel swearing is more acceptable?*

*Q5. Do you feel racially abusive words have become more or have they become less severe over the years?*

*Q6. Do you feel swearwords relating to sexuality have become more or have they become less severe over the years?*

*Q7. Do you feel words relating to bodily functions have become more or have they become less severe over the years?*

*Q8. Do you feel swearwords relating to blasphemy/religion have become more or have they become less severe over the years?*

*Q9. Do you feel offensive words concerning disability have become more or have they become less severe over the years?*

*Q10. Is there anything you would like to say about swearing in general?*

In addition to the open-ended questions, I aimed to elicit which words were considered by the respondents to be most severe. The list of these words was taken directly from a list by Millwood-Hargrave (2000), who did a similar study. The list consisted of 28 swearwords (see appendix A). Although I could have easily created my own list, I wanted to directly compare my findings with the findings in Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) study. With reference to the task of comparing my results with Millwood-Hargrave (2000), I concluded that the best way was to distribute a short questionnaire in which respondents rated each word in terms of severity by rating words on a scale. The rating scales were also adopted from Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) study. The options in the scale were: 'Very severe', 'fairly severe', 'mild', 'not swearing' and 'do not know'. The values elicited in the questionnaire were then quantified and subsequently compared with the results in previous studies. Although my aim was to chiefly do a qualitative study, the research became a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques. I assumed that the questionnaire could be passed around to a much greater number of people than the ones suited for an interview. Concerning *timing*, the study was initiated with respondents filling out the questionnaire first. The idea was that this would ease the respondents into the task, and presumably it would prompt cognitive processes on swearing when the respondents rated the selection of words. Arguably, this made them more ready for the open-ended questions that followed. Additionally, by accepting to rate the



words, the chances of the respondents being willing to answer the qualitative part afterwards would be higher. Also, the first open-ended question was directly related to the questionnaire. Initially, the aim was to at least hand out a total of 60 questionnaires to English natives, and, in addition interview at least 12 persons for the qualitative part. In the end, I managed to distribute and collect 77 questionnaires and interview a total of 15 people. The number of interviewee objects includes two groups of people, where one group consisted of two male and two female students, and the other group consisted of two mature females.

The study was carried in York, UK, between January 14<sup>th</sup> and January 23<sup>rd</sup>. An office attached to the University of York, The Norwegian Study Centre (NSC) helped me set up appointments with several natives that they knew fit the bracket of respondents. Setting up appointments made it possible for me to give more lengthy interviews, as I knew that they were not in a dire hurry to get the interview over with. In addition, I was allowed in to a lecturer's workshop, in which I was able to hand out questionnaires to native students. To avoid interviewing only a homogenous group (in this case those connected to the University), I went to public places in search of natives with different occupations. This included pubs, cafes and libraries. Libraries and cafes were, during daytime, places that were typically occupied by the elderly, who mostly sat with a newspaper and a drink. These people were more often than not interested in helping to fill out questionnaires and answering questions. Pubs and libraries alike gave me access to a good mixture of people, and not exclusively the upper-level social class members of society that the lecturers at York University represented. Since I had a good number of students in the bracket of young people, I brought with me questionnaires when I watched football matches at the pubs. In the end 44 English natives between the age of 20-30 years and 33 in the 60 plus category filled out my questionnaires. The male-to-female ratio was around 50% among the group of young people, while the 60 plus had a small majority of men. Henceforth, the group of people aged between 20 and 30 years will often be referred to as the 'young respondents', while the group of people aged 60 and over will often be referred to as the 'mature' respondents.

Generally, the reactions about participating in a survey, among the young, whether students or normal pub-goers, was that a questionnaire about swearing was fun, and they took it with in a light hearted manner. In fact, all but one rejected my invitation to participate. On the other hand, the reactions from the 60 plus category of respondents were more mixed. Some people did not want to participate as soon as they heard the questionnaire concerned the topic of swearing. Some respondents were very open and approached it in a light hearted

manner; and some did help out after some persuasion. The rejections could be partly due to the mature people's having a less than positive attitude to questionnaires in general. As a few people pointed out, this could be due to them always being asked at inappropriate times to participate in surveys.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section the results of my study will be presented. This will be followed by a discussion of the findings.

### 4.1 Interviews: People between 20 and 30 years

When I conducted depth-interviews with the young, their general comment to the questionnaire was that the severity of swearing is heavily dependent upon context, as some particular words might directly affect a group in society, and therefore be offensive. Non-affected groups on the other hand might regard those words as less severe. In addition, one respondent argued that adding *fuck* behind a following swearword enhances it, making the swearword in question more severe.

*I reckon most of it is context dependent. If you put fuck behind every word it automatically becomes that much more severe. (Male, aged 25)*

*Some words, I did not consider swearing. But I mean, in certain contexts they probably are. Being called a bastard for example is offensive to those that were born outside a marriage... But for others, it's definitely not offensive (Female, 24)*

The respondents were asked whether they felt swearing should be used less or used more in the English language. The respondents were divided. A few participants argued that the current level of use is fine as it is

*[the use of swearing is] alright as it is. I have to say that it depends on who it is, though. It's upsetting that younger parents nowadays swear in front of their kids, you know. But I think the use of swearing among friends is ok as it is. (Female, 24)*

However, one participant argued that the ever increasing habit among people to swear impedes the implementation of 'correct' vocabulary, as the versatility of certain swearwords makes choosing a swearword instead of a 'correct' word, an easy way out.

*Personally, I think that swearing should be used less because, obviously, swearing replaces more correct vocabulary (Male, 24).*

This argument, however, was not shared by a respondent in a group interview consisting of two males and two females, all university students. He stated that swearwords are a linguistic reality and that swearwords are undisputedly best at emphasising points:

*Swearing exists. Therefore you should definitely embrace it, you know. I think it is an extremely good way to emphasise points. So no, I don't think swearing should be used less. (Group interview, Male, 21)*

A female participant in the same group did not fully agree. She thought swearing generally is used too much.

*I don't like swearing being overused. It's actually possible to not say f-that and f-this all the time. And shit. Shit is like replacing all the words now. (Group interview, female 20)*

Interestingly, the idea that the likelihood of a person belonging to the working class increases parallel to the rate of swearing was a notion that the group of four students agreed on. I previously stated that traditionally and historically swearing has been seen as the 'language of the gutter'. This notion might still persist among Englishmen today. Except one who 'didn't know', all participants were unanimous when they were queried whether they felt swearing has increased over the last decades:

*Yes! TV and comedy have involved swearing lots more. This is because there are fewer restrictions in media. Language changes all the time due to movement in culture, and media and TV-games screw the picture the most (Male, 25)*

Interestingly, one participant agreed that swearing has increased in the last decades, but that this development only included use among girls. The use among boys on the other hand has been stable, he reasoned.

*Yeah, definitely. We are exposed to it more these days, with the help of media. I find that girls have increased their use quite a lot, but the use among boys has been the same as ever. (Male, 25)*

Another pointed to the fact that a word's severity decreases when its use is increased, citing the slippery slope argument:

*The increase of swearing could be due to media. Things are becoming more accepted, I think. It is like the slippery slope argument. The more a word is used the less severe it is (Male, 24)*

*Yeah, I think swearing has increased. I think that possibly certain words have decreased in strength with it. (Female, 24)*

To the respondents, there were several situations identified where they felt swearing was more acceptable. Most emphasised situations where emotions were expressed, particularly episodes when something bad occurred. This was illustrated with examples of respondents in unfortunate situations where they accidentally dropped items on the floor or when they managed to get hurt. Essentially, they found it more acceptable to swear in situations where

they communicated with people they knew would not take offense. Swearing as a comic value was also a point forwarded.

*I find it acceptable to swear when I hurt myself. And like, when I'm angry or having an argument with someone I know. I would never swear in front of a shopkeeper, you know. And yeah, when I'm joking in front of friends it's acceptable to swear. (Female, 24)*

*I forget my surroundings when something bad happens, like, when I drop something on the floor. I think it is more acceptable to swear in small groups with friends and not in the public. It is basically natural to swear when emotions happen, such as a heated argument. (Male, 24)*

One respondent though had a more liberal attitude to swearing than the aforementioned. He found himself swearing rather frequently and used swearing as a better means of adding emphasis than *very*. Fascinatingly, he reported using *fucking* instead of *very* as a face-saving act.

*I swear all the time, I say fucking a lot as a way of bulking up the sentence. I even say fucking as a face-saving way, instead of saying very. I think it's a cooler way than saying very. It adds emphasis. Other than that though, I swear when I'm angry, upset and all...(Male, 20)*

To the question of the severity of racially abusive swearwords (see 'question six' in 3.2), most participants believed they have become more severe over the years and that today *nigger* and *paki* are very much tabooed words, much due to awareness. All agreed that it was socially not acceptable to use them. Some also reasoned that the decrease in use reflected an increase in severity.

*[Racially abusive swearwords are] more severe these days. It's much due to the PC-movement (political correctness) and the awareness that followed. It's just not socially acceptable to use them, you know. (Male, 20)*

One female respondent pointed out that the severity of *nigger* is contextually dependent. She argued that between coloured people, *nigger* is just another word, but if a white man used *nigger* to a black person, then it would be very severe. *Paki* was also a word that the young group of respondents (20-30 years) all found very severe. One respondent, however, claimed that the severity of *paki* only has developed in recent years.

*When I was a kid, Paki wasn't taboo at all. So we used it quite frequently. But today, it's has become taboo and it's getting more taboo. (Male, 25)*

Generally, participants felt that words relating to sexuality have become less severe due to the media being much more open about sex and sexual attitudes and the fact that the sexual

words are losing their potency when used more often. Although not a word included on my list of 28 swearwords, nor an item in my hypotheses, some respondents contended that the word *gay* was not offensive due to both awareness about homosexuality and increased acceptability of homosexuality.

*Sexual words are less severe because of openness. There is also an acceptance about homosexuality, so homophobic slang is more accepted in most contexts due to pro-gay movements. (Male, 20)*

All agreed that *cunt* was vulgar, unpleasant and a very severe word. Although one respondent felt that it was okay to use it jokingly among friends. The females were all unanimous that *cunt* was very severe.

*Personally, I don't like the sexual words, especially the c-word. I think it's a really derogatory word, and it bothers me a lot. I know that it's more used in TV and comedy, but I don't like it when I hear it. (Female, 20)*

Interestingly, all participants found words relating to bodily functions to be suitable for comedy and jokes. The group of students I interviewed all nodded in agreement when one of the females in the group claimed that

*The words [relating to bodily functions] are complete comedy these days. They're used a lot when joking. (Female, 20)*

To the question whether blasphemous words have become more or have become less severe, the respondents answered that they have become less severe (see 'question 8' in 3.2). Some even said that blasphemous words never have been regarded as swearing. Some participants quickly stressed that it depends on the religion in question. Christian blasphemy was not regarded severe, while Islamic blasphemy could potentially be severe. Interestingly, some also observed that *Jew* is growing in severity. One respondent pointed out that there were no personal insults from the pool of blaspheme words. Another did mention that he would be careful to say these if he talked to a religious person.

*Religious words are less offensive, especially Christian words. It is probably because I'm not a religious person. Jesus Christ doesn't carry much offense to it. There aren't any personal insults to take from the Christian words. But, it's much more severe if you're using an actual religion. Jew is getting much more severe. (Male, 24)*

*To me these aren't even swearwords, as I don't see them as offensive at all. I just wouldn't think twice about saying these in front of people I know. (Female, 24)*

*They are less severe. Today, fewer are strict religious people, probably much due to religion versus science. And I also think it's because there aren't many around to protect these terms. There are very few people protecting religious slurs. (Male, 20)*

The general consensus among the participants, when discussing offensive words concerning disability (see ‘question 9’ in 3.2) was that these words have grown in severity. They reasoned that this is due to disability being treated as a normal state of human life. This acknowledging effort of awareness, equal opportunities and normalisation of disability, through the help of popular events such as the Paralympics, has greatly tabooed words such as *spastic*. Most said that they used *spastic* and *retard* as children, but stopped using these as they matured and understood the words’ meaning. They felt that generally, the use of offensive terms relating to disability is much more attached to children’s vocabulary than that of grownups.

*[Offensive words relating to disability] are more offensive today and used less. There’s a big difference in use of these words at school and not at school. Spastic, and retard are used by children, but these words are mostly thrown away as you get older when you learn to know what they mean. Personally, as a child I used the words, but I just didn’t know what they meant. Obviously, the connotations are very offensive. (Male, 24)*

*I would never insult anyone that is disabled. Not their fault, you know. I think that disability invokes sympathy and that the success of Paralympics has shown that some are more capable than abled bodied. (Female, 20)*

As a concluding question I asked the respondents whether they had any comments to make about swearing in general (see ‘question 10’ in section 3.1). Although various views were put forward, there was a sentiment that young people swear far more than the elderly. They claimed that it could be a combined act of rebellion against their peers and influence from media, films and music.

*Young people swear far more than the elderly. It’s probably a rebellious thing, because they are not supposed to swear, and obviously TV, rap songs, media... you know... they influence us. (Female, 24)*

One respondent insisted that people should be more relaxed about swearing, and he argued that people tend to get offended by words that originally were not meant to be swearwords. Interestingly, he also condemned censorship to create word taboos that did not previously exist.

*People very often get offended about things that aren’t meant to be offensive. People should become less offended, just relax and take it easy. I also think that censorship is a bad thing. If you censor something it does become taboo and people who want to use offensive words pick them up and use them. And that’s how unnecessary taboos happen. Basically, you choose to censor it people come aware that it is taboo. (Male, 25)*

Another respondent claimed that the purpose of swearing should not be an act of malevolent and a directive personal abuse. Instead, swearing should be used as a relief.

*Swearing should never be malicious. It should not target anyone. It should only be used as a cathartic relief. You feel better after swearing, it's like a release of unwanted emotions in a way (Male, 20)*

From the interviews with the category of young people aged between 20 and 30 years, it is evident that generally they have liberal attitudes to swearing. It is indicated that most of them use swearwords regularly and in their daily vocabulary. At the same time, however, they express an acute dislike of racially abusive swearwords and also words of abuse concerning disability. They cite growing awareness in public around these topics as a major reason.

#### **4.2 Interviews: People aged above 60**

As for the mature people, aged 60 and above, the most common comments from the respondents about the questionnaire, given prior to the depth interview, were that severity of swearwords is hugely contextual. Some mature respondents claimed that they would not define *paki* and *nigger* as swearwords, but instead as racist words. Also swearing becomes much worse they said, if it is directed at a person instead of a simple expletive after hurting themselves. One respondent observed that women are swearing more, and that he personally took more offense if a woman swore at him than if a male did.

*Eh... It depends on the context, whether someone is angry or joking. (Male, 61)*

*My view it basically boils down to who is saying what to whom. If a lady swore to me as a man I would be more offended. Swearing was a class thing when I was young. Mostly working class people swore, not those from refined homes. But today you will find that even female executives swear. And also, I don't think jew is a swearword. The definition of a jew is a man with money, a man who is good with money. (Male, 62)*

*Terms that I find really offensive are the ethnic terms. (Woman, 63)*

When questioned whether swearing should be used less or more in the English language, the respondents were unanimous and succinct in their answers. They felt that swearing should be used less.

*Swearing should be used less. My preference is that people should be able to say things without using the easy way out that is swearing. It is too easy to say those words. Our vocabulary gets dumbed down. (Male, 61)*



To the question whether the use of swearing has increased over the last decades, the respondents answered nearly unanimously. Most of them felt that it had increased, much due to the liberalisation of media and culture. Others noted that this development mostly affected the public, and not necessarily at a personal level. One claimed that some words have grown in use and others, especially racially abusive swearwords, have seen a sharp decline.

*When kids passed us on the street before they wouldn't swear aloud, but now they do (Two females, 70 & 71)*

*Ehm... More use in public, especially TV. The media is more liberal minded I think. I don't know about how much people swear in private, but I don't think that has changed very much. (Female, 60)*

*I used to swear more when I was young, so I don't know how to answer that. Some words are more acceptable these days, especially fuck/shit. The N-word and Paki however are much less used. (Male, 62)*

Interestingly, one respondent claimed that the increase of swearing frequency was due to the breakup of the British class system and that it has also become an act of rebellion.

*It's partly a breakdown of the class thing. Before, smoking was pretty much a sign for rebellion. Swearing is perhaps the same. I think it is a sort of rebellion against your parents. Swearing is a feeling of expression. It is pretty common playground talk I think. Also, I think that children growing up don't know what the words they are using really mean...Take 'bastard' for instance. (Male, 62)*

All respondents identified situations where they felt swearing was regarded as more acceptable. These ranged from situations where they felt pain, when angry, at football matches, in jokes, at unperturbed social events and relaxed public places such as pubs. However, most felt that swearwords directed at people was unacceptable.

*Swearing is more OK when you hurt yourselves, and is angry. I oftentimes say shit to myself when I get angry or hurt myself. (Females, 70 & 71)*

*When I'm frustrated or angry I swear to myself. Not to other people, or about people. There's a massive difference there... (Male, 62)*

*At football matches and if you are in a group of people doing something energetic together, like climbing, it's okay to swear. More acceptable to swear amongst friends than people you don't know. (Male, 62)*

To the question whether they felt racially abusive swearwords have become less or more offensive (see 'question 5' in 3.2) over the years, the answers were predominantly not that they had become more severe, but rather that they have publically become less acceptable. Regarding severity, the responses were more mixed. The change in acceptance was explained to be mostly due to public awareness. Additionally the surge of multiculturalism was also

mentioned. Most respondents stated that saying *nigger*, *paki*, *coon* and *chinky* were terms that were frequently used when they were growing up, and that no harm was meant by saying them. Interestingly, one person argued that the word *Paki* is just a practical and simple abbreviation of Pakistani, just as *Brit* is an abbreviation of British.

*Racially abusive words are less common and less acceptable today. The words are simply much more problematic now due to political correctness and multiculturalism. My father, during the 30/40s often said 'jew that and jew him'. It was very much common back then. Nowadays racial slurs are mostly about blacks and Pakistanis. (Male, 62)*

*We had here in York one coloured man during the 40s. We used to call them niggers. It was quite normal back then. (Female, 87)*

*Those terms are possibly less acceptable. I'm not from a multiracial community. Some words are illegal. To use nigger back in the day would not been taken serious. It was acceptable. You could basically use it in a conversation where we knew we were not getting heard. There is less use of nigger, but people find other terms to use. (Male, 62)*

*They were more acceptable years ago. Today they're less, and quite rightly as well. (Male, 61)*

*They're not more severe, they have always been severe. (Females, 70 & 71)*

*Paki is just an abbreviation and it's not swearing. It's just the same as a shortening for a British. It was never anything vile behind paki, never is either. It's just that someone decided it was bad, you know (Male, 72)*

*Well they're all pakis aren't they? I don't see it as swearing. (Female, 87)*

The respondents were slightly divided with respect to the question whether swearwords relating to sexuality have become more severe (see 'question 6' in 3.2). Most felt that sexual terms have increased in severity. Although some felt the words have seen an increase in usage, they did not think they have become more severe. One even stated that people have wrongly blamed feminism as a culprit behind a supposed increase in severity of swearwords relating to sexuality. At the same time, the participant felt that swearwords relating to sexuality have always had a place in the English language.

*Sexual swearwords have become more severe. I think they've taken the role of blaspheme words. (Male, 60)*

*Look at Shakespeare, lots of sexual terms there. But in the Victorian period it was prohibited to use them. After the sexual revolution in the 60s the words have increased in use. So, they have always had a place in the English language. And no, feminism has not made it more severe. (Female, 60)*

*The words are used more, as it is more acceptable among youngsters. (Male, 61)*

The answers varied concerning words relating to bodily functions (see ‘question 7’ in 3.2). Some respondents mentioned the use of these words in competitive environments, especially in the private sector, where they felt the use of the terms in a derogative manner is a part of the process of going up in the hierarchy. Another participant did not like the terms and found them offensive due to the image that comes up when thinking of them.

*If I used any of those in a working place I would be disciplined. It’s simply not a class thing anymore. It’s normal to use them in banking and in other competitive environments, where there could be some aggression. Using the words to your benefit, you know, it’s a process of going up the hierarchy. (Male, 62)*

*Arse licker and the order of the brown nose. Those terms are kept alive by the private sector. I find arse to be more comical than offensive. (Male, 60)*

*They’re used more and less severe these days. (Females, 70 & 71)*

Again, respondents were divided with regards to the question concerning the severity of blasphemous words (see ‘question 8’ in 3.2). Most said the degree of severity depended on the context, as there were differences between the religions in England. It was understood that Muslims took greater offense to swearwords than Christians. Some said that the words relating to religion have become less severe parallel to the degree of religiousness in society and others’ opinion was that of increase in severity.

*They are less severe because we are living in a less religious society. Nobody seems to worry about this, except the Muslims. (Male, 62)*

*Oh my god – is a major blasphemy, but religious people would be more upset by children saying sexual swearwords than religious. If you want to offend somebody, better do it via sexual words. (Male, 60)*

*They are less severe. (Female, 70 & 71)*

*No, they haven’t become more severe. The words are simpler now. When people are referring to Jews, they say jewish people. Before they said ‘somebody’s jewing you’. Not used anymore. (Female, 60)*

*Back in the 60s a TV reporter got sacked for saying Jesus wept on TV. It was the end of the world back then! Different now (Male, 62)*

The mature respondents indicated that offensive terms concerning disability have become less acceptable. Specifically, it was observed that previously acceptable terms related to disability have since become increasingly less acceptable and more severe. The general feeling was that the change in acceptability concerning offensive terms relating to disability

was a movement orchestrated by the public media, political correctness and the governmental bodies. Some respondents spoke of words that are branded as swearwords today, as words that were not regarded as swearwords when they were young. Although most respondents claimed that there has been a steady decline in the use of offensive terms regarding disability, in addition to a public revulsion concerning these words, some felt that people still used them frequently.

*We use different words now. But, you would get very different answers if you asked a person from a council estate. We think twice about mimicking people with disability today. Teachers would have a go at everyone not being normal. They picked on those not normal. They instigated such activities up until the 1970s. From then on, there has been more awareness, and everything is branded normal now. (Male, 62)*

*It was acceptable to say cripple and spastic when I was in my 20s, but that's not acceptable to say today. I must say, I get annoyed by parking spots for disabled people, they are always empty. Sometimes they have overdone it! (Male, 62)*

*More awareness these days, so they are more severe. But people are still saying nasty things though! They wouldn't have their children have disability! (Females, 70&71)*

My final question queried respondents about their comments about swearing in general (see 'question 10' in 3.2). Although these comments varied, some participants claimed that people, especially the young, should restrict their use of swearing, as this would enhance and strengthen their swearing when it really mattered. Others were adamant that there is a clear discrepancy between uses among the mature and the young. The mature respondents claimed that the young incorporate swearwords into their everyday talk, while the mature are more conservative in their use swearwords.

*Although older people swear, young people have it as their everyday talk. Mature are more aware of what they are saying. The young are saying 'f-this' and 'f-that'. They don't think anything of it (Females, 70&71)*

*I find it offensive when women swear. I don't like other people swearing, even though I swear. People swear when they cannot think of anything else to say. I think that people with good vocabulary swear less. But then again, people with intelligence swear, it just goes back to anger. (Male, 62)*

Two respondents were more positively minded towards swearing than the rest. One person claimed that the best way to maximise the effect of swearing is simply not to swear often, while the other saw swearing as a means of challenging authoritative language.

*I like swearing because it can be quite creative. It can challenge authoritative language, which is good and healthy. (Female, 60)*

*To maximise the effect of swearing, don't do it often. Sometimes it could be very creative, just look at Shakespeare. It's an important part of language, but at the same time people should be more careful when using swearing. Also, I think that people with status have nothing to lose, and therefore they probably use it more than others with lower status. (Male, 62)*

The group of mature respondents, aged 60 and above, were mostly adamant that there have been changes in the use of swearing from when they were young up until today. Especially, this change applies to racially abusive swearwords and terms of disability. The respondents cite public awareness as the main reason for change in this respect. They also felt that there should be less use of swearing in society. Interestingly, the use of words relating to bodily functions is perceived by some mature respondents to be kept alive by the private business sector. It was claimed that *arse*, *arselicker* and *brown nose* were commonly used to depict employees who tried to advance on the hierarchy at the workplace.

#### 4.3 Results: Questionnaire

This section deals with questionnaire respondents' attitudes to individual words. The respondents were asked to rate the severity of words. The complete list includes 28 words (see appendix A). The results will be presented in the tables below.

**Table 1: Reactions to the term *nigger*.**

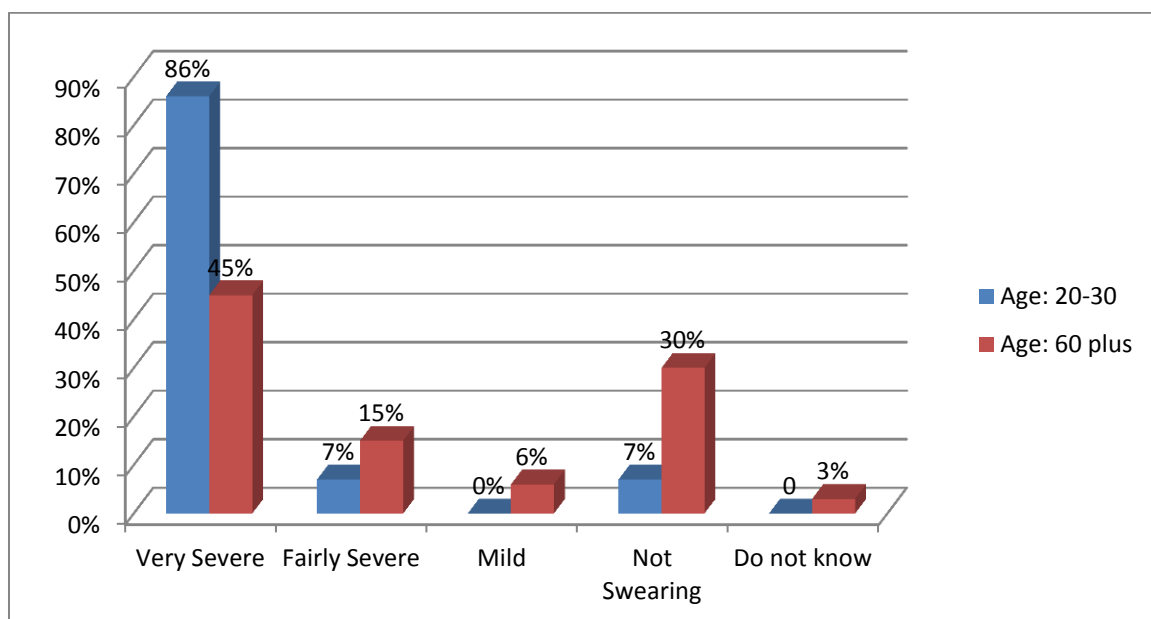
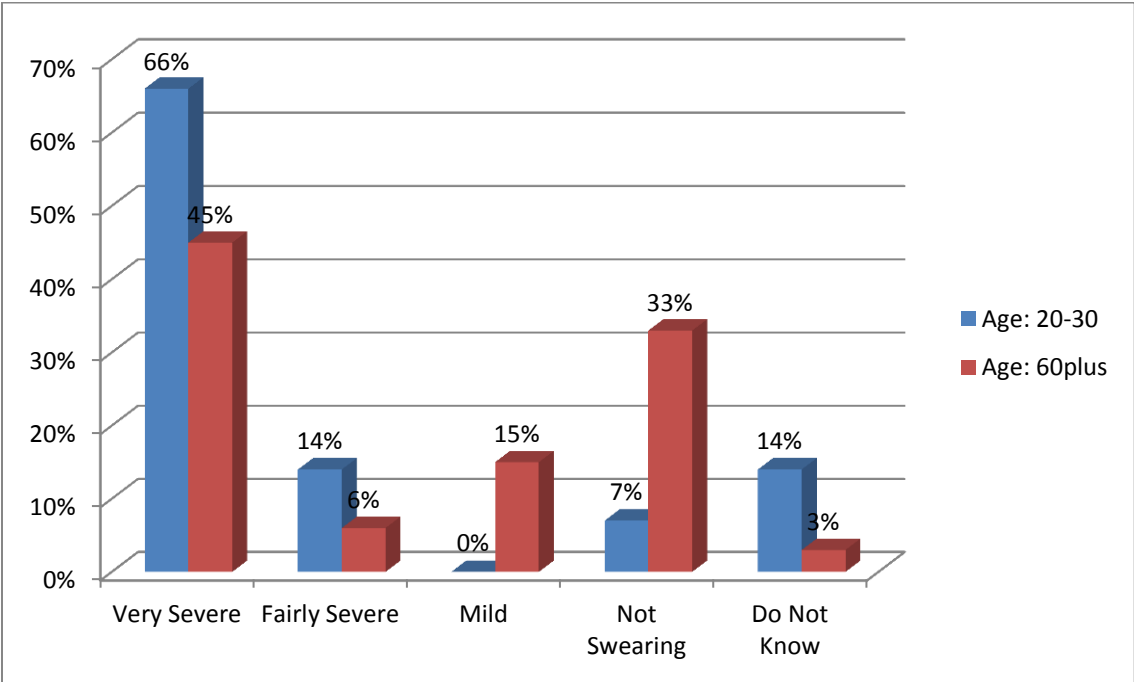


Table 1 shows the difference between the two age categories. Here, the vast majority of young respondents, 86%, thought the term to be 'very severe'. Moreover, none of the younger

respondents felt the word was ‘mild’. Comparatively, nearly half of the group of mature people regarded *nigger* as ‘very severe’. Interestingly, 30% of the mature people regarded *nigger* as ‘not swearing’. Some of these respondents stated that, after they had finished filling out the questionnaire, they defined *nigger* as racist and not swearing.

Table 2: Reactions to the term *paki*



Although the discrepancy between the generations is not as big, as reflected in table 2 compared to *nigger* in table 1, it is clear that the attitudinal patterns are somewhat similar. Again, the young were more likely than the mature to rate a racially abusive swearword as ‘very severe’. A substantial number, 33%, of mature people rated *paki* as ‘not swearing’, while the young in this category only numbered 7%. Also, while no young person rated *paki* as mild, 15% of the mature people did. Unlike *nigger*, a 14% portion of the young were unsure of how to rate *paki* in terms of severity.

Table 3: Reactions to the term *Jew*

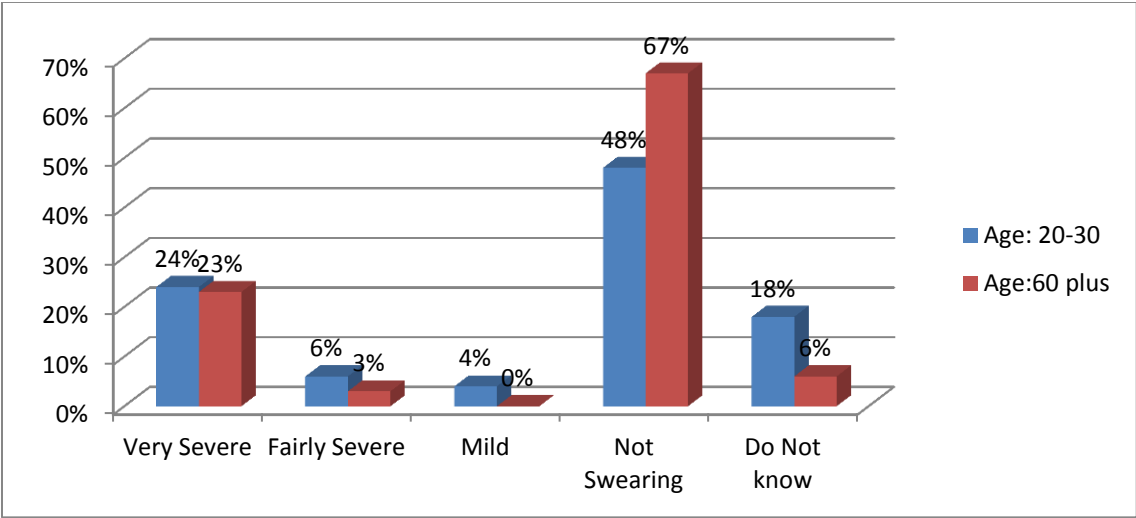
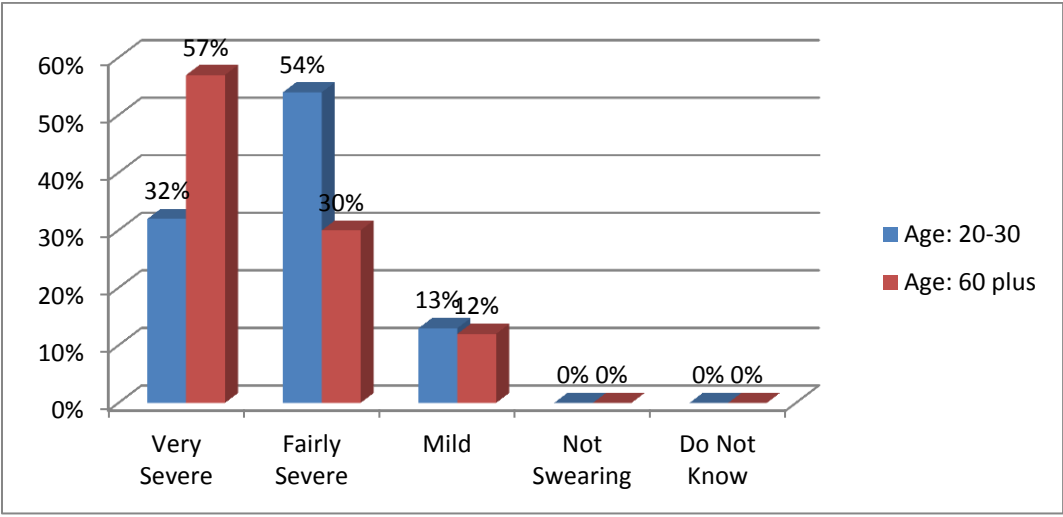


Table 3 shows that in the rating of *Jew* used abusively, there was largely an agreement between the two generations, as roughly one in five rated the word as ‘very severe’. Instead, large sections of both groups rated *Jew* as ‘not swearing’, with the group among the mature people having as many as 67% selecting the aforementioned option, with nearly half of the young doing the same. Interestingly, a substantial 18% among the young did not know how to rate *Jew*. Only 6% of the mature followed the choices of this group in choosing ‘do not know’.

Table 4: Reactions to the term *fuck*



As table 4 indicates, nearly 60% of the mature people rated *fuck* as ‘very severe’. This is roughly twice the amount compared to the young, where approximately one third rated the

word ‘very severe’. Instead, the 54% majority of the young generation of respondents regarded *fuck* as a ‘fairly severe’ term. Comparatively, 30% of the mature did the same.

**Table 5: Reactions to the term *motherfucker***

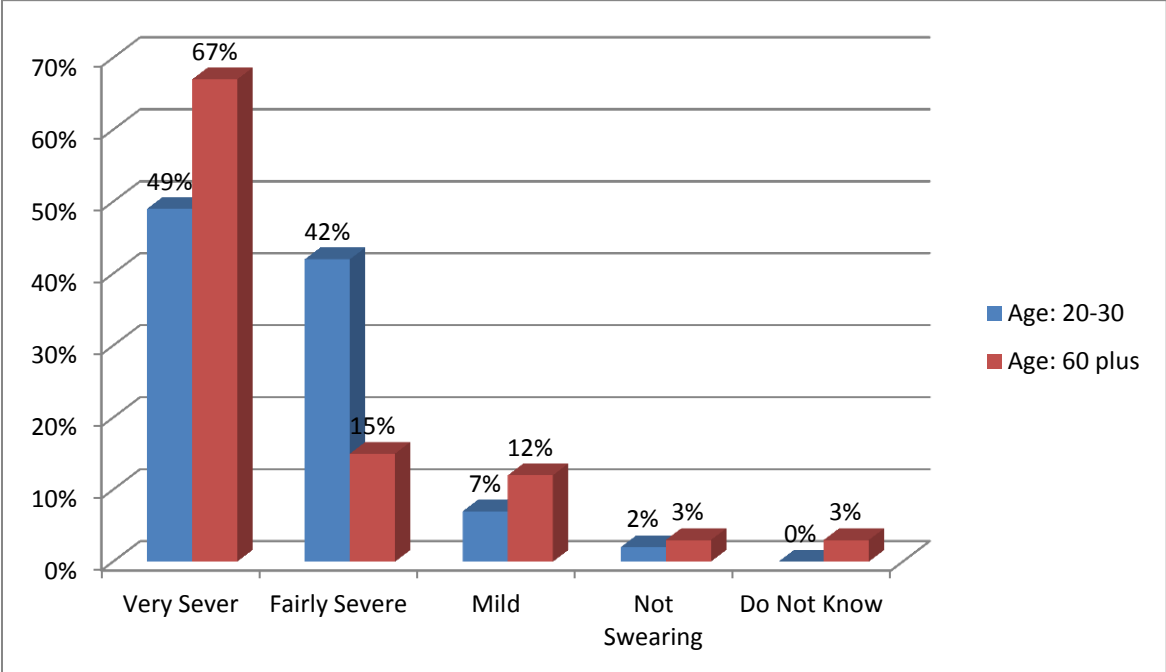
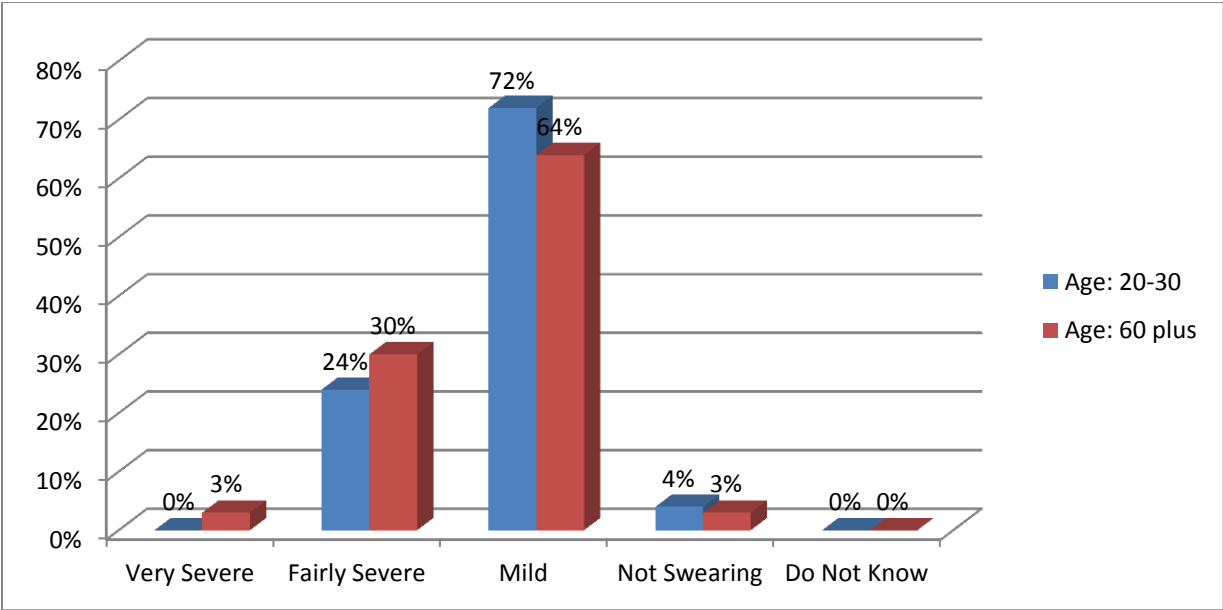


Table 5 shows that *motherfucker* was generally regarded offensive as 67% of the mature respondents rated the word ‘very severe’. The pattern was not identical among the young respondents, where about half of the participants rated the word as ‘very severe’. Interestingly, a big chunk of the other half of the young respondents thought it was ‘fairly severe’, whereas this was only the case among 15% of the mature respondents.



Table 6: Reactions to the term *shit*



Contrary to the aforementioned terms, table 6 shows that *shit* is regarded among the majority of both groups as a ‘mild’ term of abuse. There are no noteworthy discrepancies, other than that the young are slightly more inclined to rate the word as less severe the mature. Only 3 % of the mature regarded *shit* as ‘very severe’. It is important to stress however, that a large portion of both age groups thought the word to be ‘fairly severe’.

Table 7: Reactions to the term *cunt*

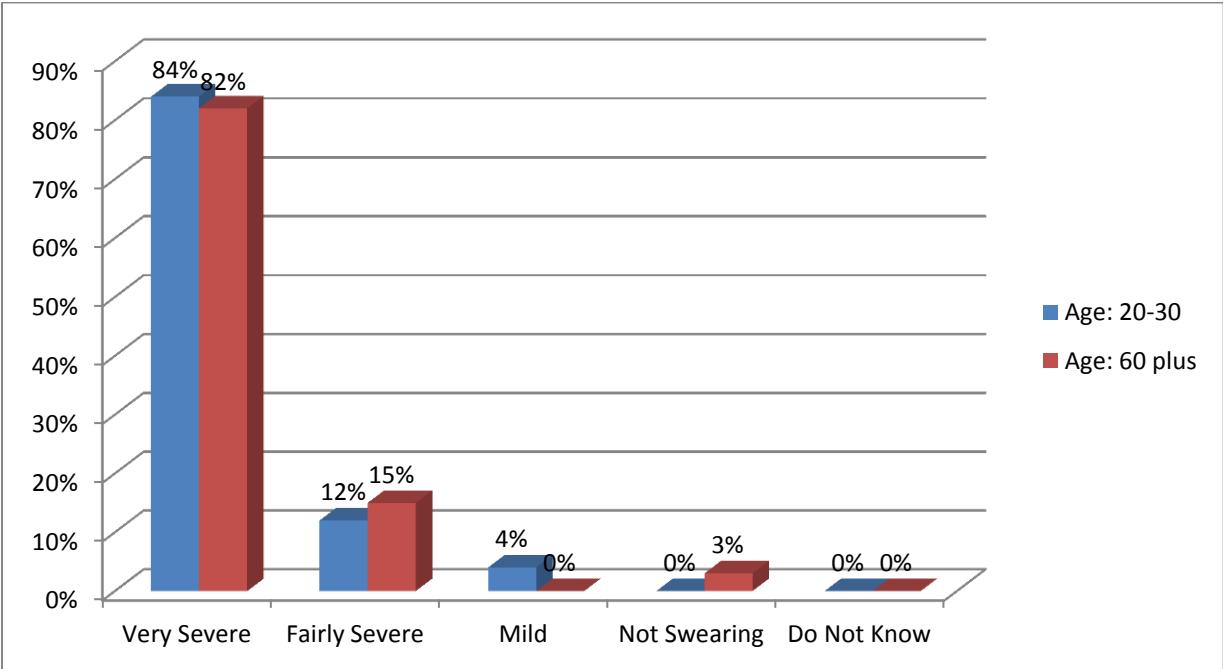


Table 7 demonstrates that it is clear both age-groups have identified *cunt* as ‘very severe’, with a noteworthy percentage above 80 among the young and the mature. The near identical pattern between the groups continues under ‘fairly severe’ as well.

Table 8: Reactions to the term *whore*

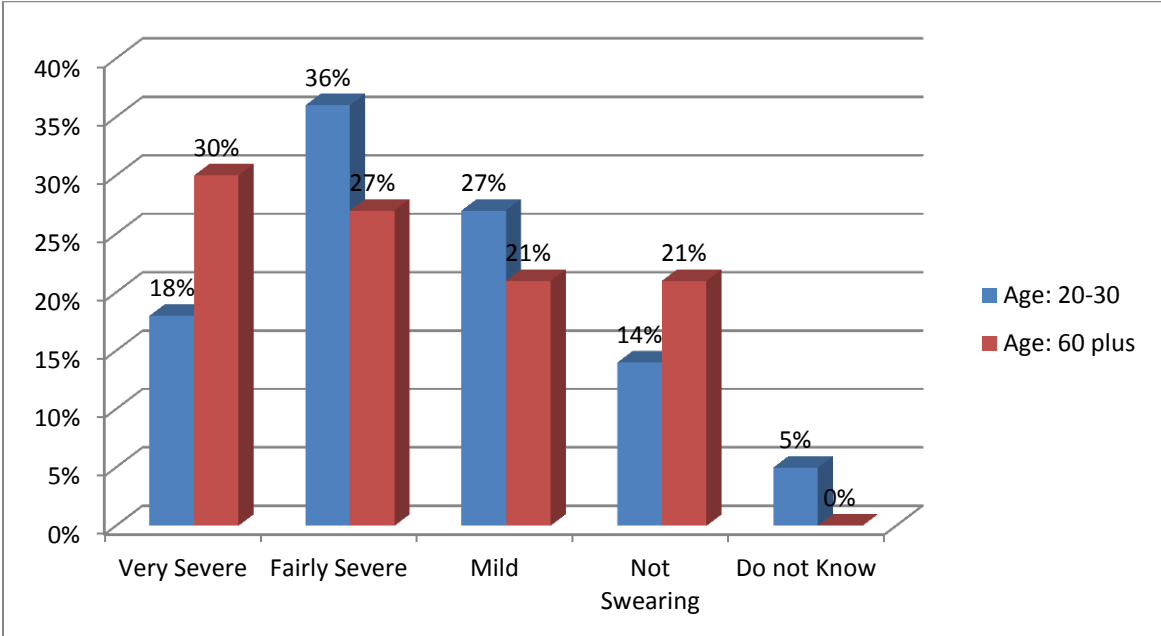


Table 8 illustrates no great discrepancies between young and mature respondents in the rating of *whore*. The only noticeable difference is that 30% of the mature rate *whore* as a ‘very severe’ swearword, while 18% of the young respondents rate *whore* as a ‘very severe’ swearword. A large portion of respondents, both young and mature, regard *whore* as either a ‘fairly severe’ or a ‘mild’ word.

**Table 9: Reactions to the term *wanker***

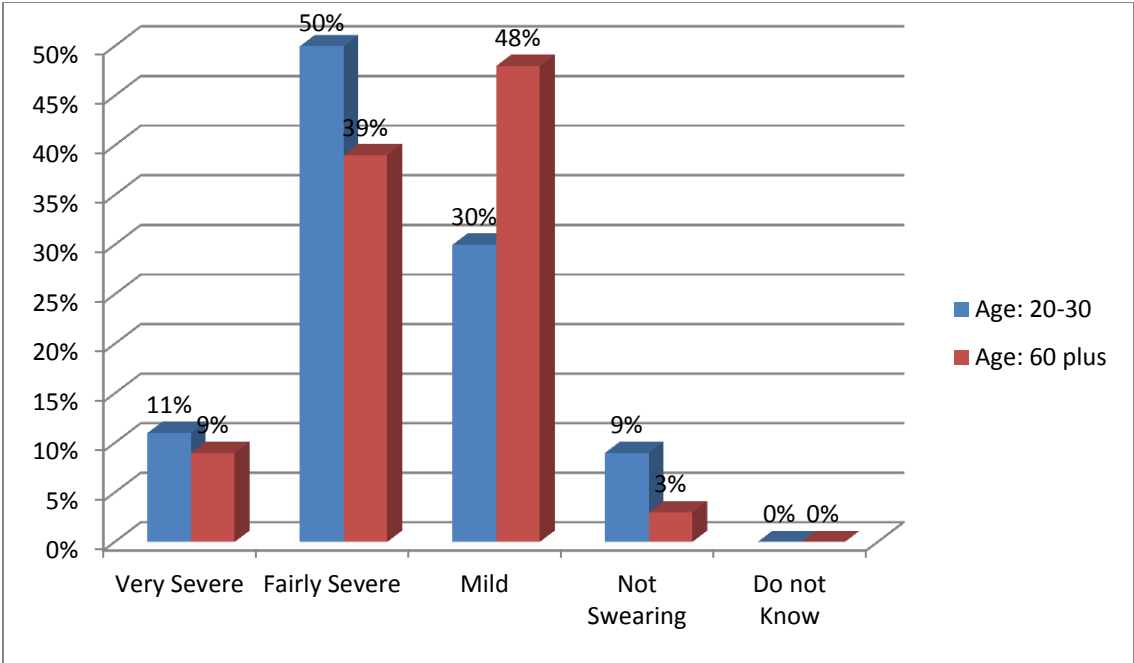


Table 9 shows that half of the young respondents view *wanker* as a ‘fairly severe’ swearword, while 39% of the mature respondents give the same rating. Nearly one in two among the mature respondents regard *whore* as ‘mild’. One in three among the young respondents provide the same rating. 11% and 9% among young and mature respondents respectively, view *whore* as ‘very severe’.

**Table 10: Reactions to the term *arse***

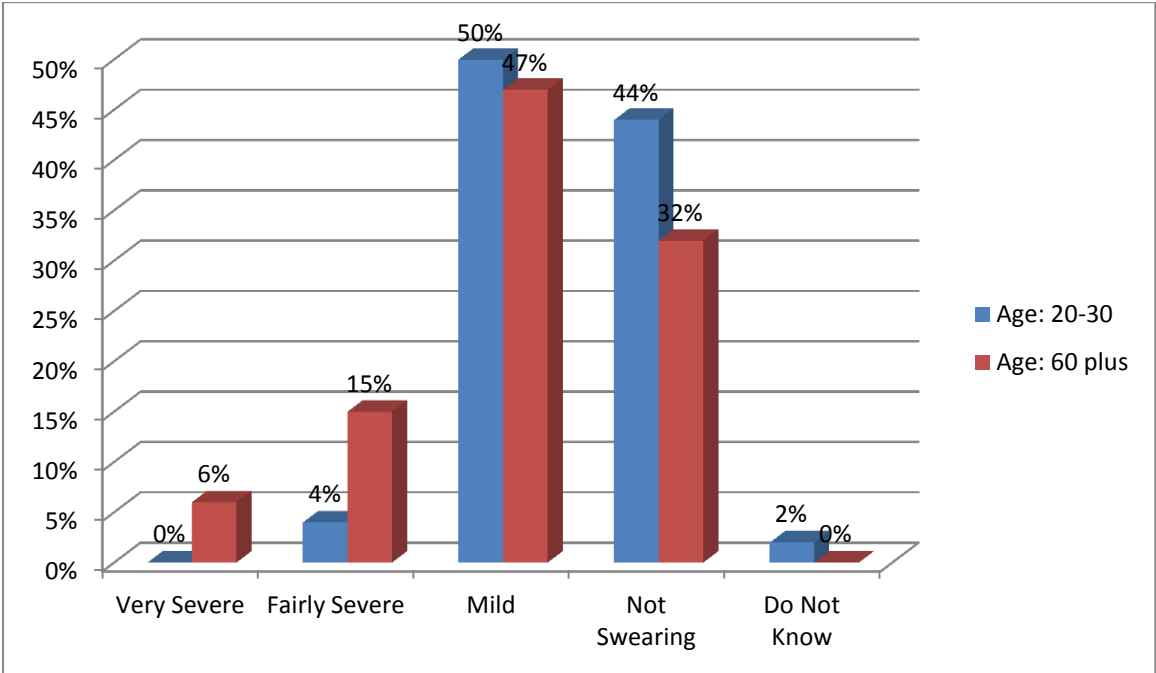


Table 10 shows that 6% and 15% of the mature respondents aged 60 and above regard *arse* as ‘very severe’ and ‘fairly severe’ respectively. The rest of the mature respondents, 47% and 32%, marked the ‘mild’ and ‘not swearing’ options. Nearly all young respondents felt *arse* was either ‘mild’ or ‘not swearing’, 50% and 44% respectively.

The tables above indicate that the most offensive swearwords are unquestionably *nigger* and *cunt*. *Shit* and *arse* were regarded as considerably less severe than the aforementioned words, with majorities within both age groups regarding *shit* as ‘mild’, and big proportions of both groups viewing *arse* as either ‘mild’ or ‘not swearing’. Although a total of one in four had *jew* as a ‘very severe’ word used offensively, most respondents thought the word was not a swearword.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

In this section, the testing of my hypotheses (listed in section 3.0) will be discussed. This will then be followed by a comparison between my own research results and those from previous studies. My study compared attitudes to swearing between two age groups. One of the groups of respondents consisted of young people aged 20-30, and the other group consisted of mature people aged 60 and above. The aim was primarily to elicit generational differences from the results. In addition, any discrepancies in attitudes to swearing between the two groups might give an indication whether a word has increased or decreased in severity over time. However, discrepancies between the age groups in attitudes to swearing do not take into account factors such as whether a person’s vocabulary naturally changes as a person gets older, and, as a result, colours the results. Therefore, it is vital to compare my results with previous studies as well. It is worth noting that the interviews I conducted included questions that mostly differed from the questions in the interviews in the Millwood-Hargrave (2000) study. The interviews in the aforementioned study were largely aimed at finding attitudes about swearing in the media. Nevertheless, I will draw comparisons where possible. The complexity of the first hypothesis, H-1, requires it to be discussed after the discussion of the other hypotheses. Therefore, hypothesis H-1 will be discussed in section 4.5 (‘other observations’).

Hypothesis 2-A was as follows:

Some swearwords have seen an increase in severity. Words such as *nigger*, *paki*, *cunt* and *motherfucker* have increased in severity, while *shit* and *fuck* have seen a decline (see ‘hypotheses’ 3.1)

Table 1 (see ‘results’ 4.3) illustrates a striking difference between young and mature respondents concerning the term *nigger*. While 86% of the young regarded *nigger* as ‘very severe’, only 45% of the mature did the same. However, it is worth noting that 30% of the older respondents regarded *nigger* as ‘not swearing’. Comments from the interviews indicate that some of the mature respondents felt that *nigger*, per definition, was to a large degree a racist slur, and not swearing. Interestingly, the question of whether *nigger* and *paki* can be said to be swearing was not brought up by the young respondents during the interviews nor was it brought up while, or after, they were filling out the questionnaires. Nevertheless, the statistics indicate that the young were considerably more adamant in that *nigger* is a ‘very severe’ word, which in turn may demonstrate that *nigger* has become more severe over the years. The interviews with the mature respondents also suggested that only a few decades ago, *nigger* was not regarded as a swearword. In fact, according to the respondents, it was a normal word to use. This might give evidence that, indeed, *nigger* has increased tremendously in severity perhaps only in the last four decades. The mature respondents cited public awareness as the chief engine behind the increase in severity of the word.

Interestingly, among the young respondents, *nigger* was rated as the most severe word out of the list of 28 words. Comparing my specific findings with regards to *nigger* with those from Millwood-Hargrave’s study (2000), a great discrepancy is evident. In her study, *Nigger* was rated ‘very severe’ by 45% of the respondents aged between 18-34 years (Millwood-Hargrave: 2000) while in my study 86% of the people aged 20-30 rated *nigger* as ‘very severe’. Clearly, there are slight differences between the two young groups of respondents in Millwood-Hargrave’s study and mine, as my group of young respondents were aged between 20 and 30 and not 18-34. Nevertheless, the great divergence between hers and my findings on the severity of *nigger* are particularly astonishing as it might suggest that *nigger* has seen a substantial increase in severity. Even among the mature group of respondents, the difference is similar. Millwood-Hargrave’s (2000) findings show that 37% of the respondents aged 55 plus rated *nigger* as ‘very severe’. My findings among the respondents aged 60 plus illustrate that *nigger* is rated ‘very severe’ among 45% of the respondents. This might give evidence of an increase in the severity of *nigger* among elders as well.

In the assessment of the word *fuck*, my findings suggest that there is indeed a noticeable rating divergence between the two age groups. 57% of those aged 60 plus evaluated the word as ‘very severe’ while only 32% among the group aged between 20 and 30. Among the young respondents, 54% rate it ‘fairly severe’ while 30% of the mature give the same rating. Thus,

one could suggest that mature people feel more strongly about *fuck* than young people do, as the majority of the young respondents in my study rate it as a 'fairly severe' word. This generational divide might indicate that attitudes to *fuck* have evolved. Moreover, comparing my results with Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) findings gives sound indications that *fuck* has decreased in severity, as 65% of the young respondents in her study rated the word as 'very severe' and 82% of the those aged above 55 years give the same assessment. These percentages are remarkably higher than the findings in my study.

Indisputably, *cunt* was rated by my respondents as the most severe swearword. The dissimilarity between the two groups of respondents in the rating of other swearwords did not persist in this particular instance. In fact, the evaluations of *cunt* as a 'very severe' word were nearly identical between the group between 20 and 30 and the group of respondents above 60, with numbers being 82% and 84% respectively. Comparatively, the numbers in Millwood-Hargrave's study are 78% and 85% respectively (Millwood-Hargrave 2000: 10). The dissimilarities are so unsubstantial that one cannot make any claims with regards to the development of the word other than that the word is still one of the most severe English swearwords, and in my study the most severe swearword.

My results illustrate that the young respondents viewed *paki* more severely than their elders. In the assessment of *paki*, discrepancies between the mature and young respondents were not particularly considerable, as 66% of the young and 45% of the mature respondents rated *paki* as a 'very severe' swearword. In other words, only in the assessment of the other racially abusive word, *nigger*, is a striking difference between the two groups of respondents apparent. In addition, a substantial one third of the mature respondents stated that *paki* was 'not swearing' for them. It is, however, impossible to tell from the numbers whether this sizable proportion of respondents feel *paki* to be a 'very severe' swearword, or that they simply react to the definition of a swearword. However, comparing my results with Millwood-Hargrave's, interesting discrepancies emerge. In Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) study, 36% of respondents aged 18-34, rate *paki* as a 'very severe' word and 29% rate it 'fairly severe'. Furthermore, 27% of those aged above 55 rate it as 'very severe' and 26% rate it as 'fairly severe' (ibid: 15). Evidently, it can be suggested that *paki* has quite astonishingly grown in severity, especially among the group of young respondents.

In both Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) and my study, *shit* was generally rated as a 'mild' word. However, there are discrepancies, both between the two generations and between the two studies. In my study, there was no-one among the young respondents that regarded *shit* as

‘very severe’: 24% and 72% rated it ‘fairly severe’ and ‘mild’, respectively. Similarly, 30% and 64% of the mature respondents rated *shit* as ‘fairly severe’ and ‘mild’, respectively. The pattern is similar, but in Millwood-Hargrave’s study (2000), a greater number of respondents rated the word as more severe; 53% of those aged 18-34 and 42% of those aged 55+ rated it ‘mild’. The leading difference is between the two groups of mature respondents. In my study, only 3% rated *shit* as ‘very severe’, while on the other hand, a dramatic 26% in Millwood-Hargrave’s (2000) study rated *shit* as ‘very severe’. Comparing the numbers, I’m inclined to believe that *shit* has seen a momentous dive in severity.

*Motherfucker* was in Millwood-Hargrave’s (2000) study rated the second most severe word in England. Little differed in the opinion among the youngest group of respondents and the most senior respondents, as 78% and 83%, accordingly, rated *motherfucker* as ‘very severe’. My results did not support these findings. Among the young respondents, 49% rated it ‘very severe’ and 42% rated it as ‘fairly severe’. 67% of the mature respondents assessed it ‘very severe’ and 15% rated it as ‘fairly severe’. Observing the differences, especially the near 30% plunge among the young respondents, one could possibly suggest that *motherfucker* has been dethroned out of the infamous top three swearwords list (ibid: 10).

As previously stated in section 2.4, McEnergy’s (2006) data suggested that those aged above 60 swear much less than young people, where the rate of swearing peaked between the ages of 15 and 25. Therefore, it might prove difficult to draw any conclusions that the discrepancies between two generations alone give indications of a development towards a more liberal use of swearwords. Conversely, matching my data with the data produced by McEnergy (2006) and Millwood-Hargrave (2000), it is not impossible to suggest that indeed there has been a movement towards a more liberal use of swearwords. The general tendency among all my respondents is to rate most of the swearwords listed in the questionnaire as less severe than Millwood-Hargrave’s (2000) respondents. This might give evidence that with respect to swearing, a liberal movement between the date of my study and the date of Millwood-Hargrave’s (2000) study has occurred, and, importantly, could still be occurring.

In retrospect, McEnergy’s scale of offense (2006: 36) has *cunt* and *motherfucker* rated as ‘very strong’ words, while *fuck* is found alone in the bracket of ‘strong’ words, which reflects Millwood-Hargrave’s list of the top three words (2000 : 10). Interestingly, *nigger* and *paki* are words regarded as ‘moderate’ in McEnergy’s study. The frequently used word *shit* is, not surprisingly, regarded as ‘mild’. Depending on how you perceive the case, my findings are

somewhat similar to McEnery's (2006). Unexpectedly, however, *nigger* is in McEnery's (2006) study a 'moderate' word, which does not correlate with my findings.

Hypothesis 2-A (see 'hypotheses' 3.1) proposed that *nigger*, *paki*, *cunt*, and *motherfucker* have increased in severity, while *shit* and *fuck* have seen a decline. Considering the amount of tokens for 'very severe', my data suggest that *cunt* and *nigger* are still the most severe swearwords in the English language. *Motherfucker* and *paki* are placed third and fourth, respectively. What is evident then, when comparing my data with the previous studies, is that *nigger* has increased substantially in strength. This also applies to *paki*, another racially abusive slur. *Cunt*, however, has seen very limited movement, and is still regarded as the most severe swearword. Contrary to my proposal, *motherfucker* has not increased in severity. In fact, the data suggest that it has dropped slightly in severity, and as a consequence below *nigger* in terms of severity. It is suggested that *shit* has dropped marginally in severity, being still widely understood to be a 'mild' swearword among respondents. My data also advocate that *fuck* has dropped critically in severity.

Hypothesis 2-A was corroborated both by the fact that *paki* and *nigger* have increased in severity and that *fuck* and *shit* have dropped in severity. However, no evidence was found to support the notion that *cunt* and *motherfucker* have increased in severity. Hence, hypothesis A can neither be rejected nor confirmed.

Hypothesis 2-B (see hypotheses 3.1) was that certain categories of swearing have increased in severity, while others have decreased in severity. This hypothesis then generated four sub-hypotheses, where a comparison between the young and the mature generations in each category was present, in an effort to investigate attitude change. The categories were racially abusive swearwords, swearwords relating to sex and bodily effluvia, blasphemy and disability. The two groups of respondents were systematically asked whether each of these categories of swearing has seen an increase or a decrease in severity. Thus, the content of the following paragraphs will be a discussion of the data gathered from the interviews. Where possible, information from the questionnaire will be used.

The first sub-hypothesis (see 'hypotheses' 3.1) proposed that the young rate racially abusive words more severe than the mature respondents. The data from the questionnaire suggest that this is indeed the case, as substantial discrepancies were present in rating *nigger* as 'very severe'. The same pattern applied to *paki*, although the divergences were not as great as with *nigger*. From the interviews, the general trend among the young respondents aged between 20 and 30 was that racially abusive words such as *paki* and *nigger* are words that are



not socially acceptable in any contexts, and were words held to be 'very severe'. *Paki* was by some believed to be a word that has considerably increased in severity in recent years, becoming taboo today. It is worth noting that from the interviews in the Millwood-Hargrave (2000) study, a young man from Manchester stated that people working in TV broadcasting should be sanctioned if they said *paki* on the air (see 'attitudes to swearing' 2.4). In view of the fact that he is young and that his opinion is reflected by the young respondents in my study, it might indicate the initiation of change in the perception of the term in late 90s. This could strengthen the aforementioned statements on views about racist terms among my young respondents. Additionally, most of my young respondents claimed racially abusive words to have increased in severity in recent years.

The mature respondents observed, some reluctantly, that racially abusive words have become less acceptable in the public and as a result more severe. In contrast with the young respondents, a majority among the mature respondents claimed that *nigger* and *paki* were common terms when they were growing up. In addition, they stated that there was no malice behind the use of these terms. One respondent mentioned that *paki* was merely a practical abbreviation of *Pakistani*.

On the basis of the above-mentioned comparison, it might be possible to suggest that sub-hypothesis H-2Bi is strengthened, as the young view racially abusive words as more severe than the old. I believe this is largely due to public awareness and upbringing. The young respondents have been exposed from an early age to attitude formations through school, network and media. Most likely, the majority of the young respondents have a friend with a multi-ethnic background, which undoubtedly makes them think twice about the use of terms like *paki* and *nigger*. Contrarily, those aged above 60 have learnt later in their life, through public awareness, that terms that were previously common are now deemed taboo. Perhaps a slight difficulty in changing habits makes the senior respondents less likely to rate racially abusive words as severe, compared to their junior respondents.

The answers from the two respective age groups were vague when they were probed about words relating to sex. What was evident was that both groups agreed that talking about sexuality, and as such the use of sexual related terms, were more acceptable among the young people than the mature ones. One mature respondent felt that sexual words have become increasingly severe parallel to the decline in severity of blasphemous words. Hence, on the basis of my analysis, one could conclude that young people generally feel that swearwords relating to sexuality are more acceptable and less severe. Sexuality being so common in the

media today, especially TV-shows directed at youngsters, might be a major culprit behind the openness to these words among young people. However, there were two exceptions. First, both groups were adamant that *cunt* was an extremely severe word and should be avoided. Secondly, *wanker* was generally rated slightly more severe among young than mature respondents.

There were certain differences in the views on swearwords relating to bodily functions between mature respondents aged above 60 and young respondents between 20-30 years. The mature indicated that overall these words have become less severe and were prone to being used more frequently, especially in the private business sector. The young respondents had an entirely different approach, as they wholeheartedly claimed these words were extremely well suited for jokes and humour. In fact, the young simply did not take the words seriously. These views are also reflected in the questionnaire as striking differences were palpable. Results from the ratings of *arse* showed that 5% and 15% among the mature respondents rated *arse* as 'very severe' and 'fairly severe' respectively. Only 4% of the young respondents, on the other hand, felt *arse* was 'fairly severe', with no one rating it 'very severe'.

Thus, the evidence above indicates that my proposed sub-hypothesis H-2Bii, in which the young generally view swearwords in the category of bodily functions and sexuality less severe than mature people, is highly corroborated. Speculatively, TV-shows with a young demography and especially comedy's embrace of swearwords in said categories might have played substantial in altering and increasing the use of swearwords among young people.

What was telling from the interviews was that both groups of respondents agreed that, generally, blasphemous words have become much less severe; however the severity and use of swearwords were massively dependent on context. Some mature respondents mentioned that in their younger days TV-reporters were heavily sanctioned for merely uttering *Jesus Christ* on TV. Contrarily, most of the mature respondents felt the swearwords relating to blasphemy are not particularly severe today. This might indicate a significant decrease in severity, which is reflected among the young users as well. Both groups, however, mentioned that Muslims were considerably more sensitive about swearwords relating to religion than they themselves, as non-Muslims, were (none of the respondents who were in groups were Muslims). Interestingly, *Jew* used in an offensive manner was observed by some of the young respondents as an increasingly offensive word. This was also observed by a few of the mature respondents as one of them claimed that, decades ago, people were mostly using *Jew* in

circumstances dealing with business and money. Today however, they indicated that *Jew* has a much more widened use with '*he's a fucking jew*' as an example.

As for sub-hypothesis 2Biii, that young find swearwords related to religion less severe than mature people, is neither strengthened nor rejected in light of the findings above. England is a secular state where the belief in Christianity is not particularly strong. It is clear from the views of the mature people that blasphemous words were regarded much more severe in public media several decades ago (1960s) than today. However, exceptions were expressed as respondents, both young and mature felt that minority groups such as English Muslims took greater offense to blasphemy than Christians. Interestingly, both groups of respondents felt that *Jew* used as a swearword was increasingly used. Whether this reflects the Israeli-Palestine border dispute, an increase in anti-Semitism, or a result of previous anti-Semitism, is not an issue I pursued in my interviews.

When questioned about the offensiveness of swearwords relating to disability, a perceived change was evident. The mature respondents indicated that a massive change in perception of terms relating to disability has occurred, as the words were common and normal when they were growing up to being perceived taboo today. This was also apparent in the old school system, where they had put up special classes for disabled kids, effectively dissimilating disabled and the abled. Most respondents from both groups were quick to claim that political correctness and public awareness have helped tremendously in making words relating to disability unacceptable. Keen observers also accredited the Special Olympics in England as a milestone in positive attitude formation. Respondents from my interviews claimed that a person's disability was not the person's fault, and as such it was wrong to make ill comments towards people with disability. A similar statement was found in Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) study as well (see 'attitudes to swearing' 2.4). In addition, as my questionnaire data indicated, the responses from both groups of respondents were virtually identical. Both groups had a small majority rating *spastic* either as a 'very severe' or a 'fairly severe' word. Comparing my data with the data from the Millwood-Hargrave (2000) study, *spastic* has overall increased in severity, as both respondents aged 18-34 and 55+ years in Millwood-Hargrave's study rated the word less severe than both my groups of respondents.

As for sub-hypothesis 2Biv, that there was no difference in perceived offensiveness in swearwords relating to disability between the two age groups, I find that there is durable correlation between the evidence above and the sub-hypothesis. Thus, the sub-hypothesis 2Diii can be said to be corroborated. Interestingly, evidence also indicated that *spastic* has

increased in severity between 2000, when Millwood-Hargrave's study was conducted, and today.

#### 4.5 Other observations

Respondents in my study were asked whether the level of swearing should change and were allowed to speak freely about swearing in general. It was here that vast discrepancies between the two age-groups were found. While many of the young respondents claimed that the level of swearing was fine, nearly all of the mature respondents thought otherwise. They held that the rate of swearing should be decreased, and that young people used swearing excessively.

Both groups agreed that swearing was appropriate when they were emotional or physically hurt. This evidence was also found to be the case in Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) study, where a young Irish family based in London felt it was natural to utter a swearword if they accidentally dropped eggs on the floor. However, the young respondents in my study claimed swearwords were effective and 'cool' as emphasisers, i.e. 'that was fucking amazing'. This was especially interesting as one young respondent indicated that swearing was 'face-saving'. This might reflect the general attitude young people have to swearing. They find swearing a natural and 'cool' part of their daily vocabulary. Although the young are fully aware that some words are not appropriate in certain contexts, they generally have a relaxed approach to swearing. This relaxed approach was also reflected when I encountered my potential respondents. The young laughed and were very welcoming, while the mature people responded with scepticism. It was also very telling that the young enjoyed talking about the topic of swearing, while some of the mature were not particularly amused. In Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) study, the youngest respondents claimed swearing was second nature and accepted to them, while it was more telling among the older respondents that they felt swearing represented poor vocabulary and aggression.

Swearing being a natural and 'cool' part of young people's vocabulary is apparent if one looks at one of the biggest science websites on Facebook called 'I fucking love science'. This website is 'dedicated to bringing the amazing world of science straight to your newsfeed in an amusing and accessible way' (*I fucking love science on Facebook.com* 2013). This science news portal has over five million users, and its reported main demography is users aged between 18 and 34, which is similar to my group of young respondents (ibid). Speculatively, people might find the news portal appealing as a result of the inclusion of *fucking* in the title.

Perhaps it is a way to stress the fact that the purpose is to bring remarkable, bizarre and ‘awesome’ (ibid) news from the world of science to its users. This again gives evidence that the inclusion of swearwords, such as *fucking*, into one’s vocabulary is regarded as ‘cool’, among young people.

Interestingly, respondents referred to *nigger* and *cunt* as the ‘n-word’ and the ‘c-word’, respectively. This self-censoring did not occur when respondents talked about other highly rated swearwords such as *motherfucker*, *fuck* et cetera. This might stress the severity of *cunt* and *nigger* among people. Additionally, the fact that *fuck* was not even once self-censored into ‘the f-word’ by respondents might indicate a decrease in severity.

Captivatingly, a significant number of young respondents claimed that young females are swearing as much as young males. When questioned whether the boys felt that this development was troubling, few had any reservations. This is in stark contrast to the old myth that females do not swear and to the norm that one should not swear in the company of females. Similarly, this belief was noticeable among the mature respondents where openness to swearing was much more present among males than females, with the former having an aversion to females swearing. In fact, one of the mature respondents reported that he was inclined to be more offended by a woman swearing than a man swearing. One young female proposed that the believed increase in swearing among females was a result of equal rights.

Although, in my findings it proved difficult to find clear discrepancies in relation to some specific categories of swearing between the generations, the differences were much more apparent when respondents were asked questions about swearing in general. Here, it was evident that among my respondents, the young have a more relaxed relationship to swearing. This trend was also indicated by the young respondents in Millwood-Hargrave’s (2000) study. There was also another curious trend drawn out from the interviews. Respondents claimed that females’ use of swearing has increased. This statement is of particular interest, as differences in relation to attitudes to individual swearwords and swearing in general between the genders in Millwood-Hargrave’s (2000) study were much more apparent in her study than in mine. I simply did not manage to record any significant and re-occurring differences between genders, especially in relation to the questionnaire. However, I need to stress that some males above the age of 60 claimed that swearing traditionally has been a part of masculine language, often occurring at pubs and other similar arenas. One of those respondents also claimed that they felt more offended by females swearing than males.

However, most young respondents stated that they had no problems with females swearing, with some claiming that it was a part of females' fight for equal rights.

The notion of this increase in female swearing could be parallel to the increase of equal rights between the genders, as indicated by some of my respondents. McEnery (2006) claimed however, that the rate of female swearing was equal to males', but that females and males used different vocabulary. On the basis of my study, one can surmise that the difference in the use of swearwords among males and females is diminishing. Clearly, more studies on this particular topic should materialise to see whether the discrepancies in female and male swearing are fading.

Hypothesis 1, H-1, proposed the following:

Among users of British English, the generation between twenty and thirty express more positive attitudes towards swearwords compared to people aged over sixty.

In view of the other hypotheses, hypothesis 1 is can be said to be corroborated as young people generally express more positive attitudes towards swearwords, with the clear exception of attitudes to *nigger*, *paki* and *spastic*. H-1 is also strengthened by the suggestions that a) young people implement swearwords to a larger degree in their daily vocabulary than mature people do and b) swearing is widely regarded by young people as 'cool'.

#### **4.6 Reservations**

My data collection spurred many challenges, where, in hindsight, my approach could have been different. With limited resources, it proved difficult to find a perfect mixture of respondents, in terms of age, gender and occupation. Realistically, the only variable I was able to control was age. People at the university were much more accessible than 'the man on the street'. This was largely due to the fact that through contacts at the Norwegian study centre I was granted audience with classes of students, as well as people working at the University of York. The people at the University being much more accessible than random people at other places was a worry I had in mind when I was in York, so I made an extra effort in trying to seek out other people at public places outside the University campus. Initially, I attempted to stop people in the street and at super markets, but nearly every one of these rejected my invitation to answer questions about swearing. I found people at local pubs and cafes at libraries much easier to access, and these were the places I usually frequented.

Clearly, as with most cities, I was told that some areas in York had a greater percentage of people with a middle class background. As an outsider, I could not distinguish these areas. In contrast to students at the University, what I could not control at the public pubs and cafes was the occupation of the respondents. Pubs in York were generally suitable places to find potential respondents, but lacked the perfect gender mix. If I had substantial resources, heed would have been taken to try to approach a perfectly mixed group of respondents. The greater accessibility among the young people than the mature ones, as most of the young respondents were students, resulted in a larger quantity of respondents between the age of 20 and 30 than those above 60. Additionally, it proved difficult to find an equal number of male and female respondents in the group of mature respondents.

Besides, my study was conducted in the geographical area of York. Traveling expenses and time prohibited me from carrying out the study in all of Great Britain. In Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) study, the research was carried out in all larger counties of Great Britain. My findings might have been different if my study was conducted from a pool of respondents from all parts of the UK. Neither could I possibly say that my findings represent the attitudes of the people of York, as many of my respondents were students who are not originally from York. Additionally, I did not control whether they actually were born and raised in the UK.

Another issue I encountered related to the questionnaire, where respondents were asked to rate 28 swearwords in terms of severity. Five options were given: 'Very severe', 'Fairly severe', 'Mild', 'Not swearing' and 'Do not know'. Words such as *nigger* and *paki* are literally racially abusive slurs, and some people would naturally disagree with the decision to mark these terms under the umbrella of swearwords. As such, instead of rating these as potentially 'very severe' words, a small number of respondents chose the 'not swearing' option. If the option said 'not offensive', rather than 'not swearing', then perhaps the results would have been somewhat different. However, both the rating-options and the list of words in the questionnaire were taken directly from Millwood-Hargrave's (2000) study in order to obtain comparable data.

Moreover, my intent was to give as little information about the questionnaire task as possible and not to introduce any form of bias, in an attempt to avoid respondents into answering in a particular way. However, what I could have done otherwise was to categorise the swearwords into whether they were used as expletives or directed at others. Respondents often said that the severity of words depended on the context. Also, I could have chosen to include information about my chosen definition of a swearword. The proposed added

information could have effectively reduced misunderstandings and potentially let respondents provide more precise feedback.



## 5 CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

### 5.1 Conclusion

This thesis has given an account of the underlying mechanics of swearing, a history of swearing, attitudes to language and, finally, attitudes to swearing. The aim of this study was to investigate whether there has been a change in attitudes to swearing in the last 50 years, and if this change only related to some types of swearwords. The study was carried out through the help of questionnaires and interviews with respondents, where respondents rated the severity of a selection of swearwords and answered questions related to daily-life swearing, respectively. In the study, my aim was to see if there is indeed a generational divide in attitudes to swearing.

The study found that overall, *nigger* and *paki* have increased substantially in severity, while *fuck* has dropped critically in severity. *Spastic* has also increased in severity. The most obvious finding in this study was that the young respondents were, generally, considerably more liberal-minded towards swearwords than the mature respondents. The exceptions were racially abusive swearwords, which the young respondents very much avoided. The liberal attitudes to swearing among the young respondents were also evident when they regarded swearing as a daily part of their vocabulary, face-saving, and ‘cool’. Young respondents also felt that swearwords relating to bodily effluvia were suitable for humour and comedy. The mature respondents, however, generally wanted to decrease the frequency of swearing. In addition, they felt there was a correlation between a limited vocabulary and high rate of swearing.

Furthermore, my results advocated that no discrepancy was found in perceived severity of swearwords relating to religion and disability between the two groups of respondents. Religious swearwords were generally regarded as mild, and swearwords relating to disability, were generally regarded as very severe.

The interview processes also gave room for new insights on swearing, that I previously was unaware of. It was claimed by a number of young females and males that a change in females’ swearing vocabulary and frequency is on-going towards that of mirroring the males’ swearing. This was particularly interesting, as older studies (McEnery 2006) have claimed that, although the frequency of swearing is nearly the same, females’ use of swearwords have been different compared to males’. Some respondents in my study stated that this was an expression of females’ fight for equal rights. Additionally, and contrarily to the mature

respondents, the young felt that swearing was a part their everyday speech, and even acted as a face-saving act in dialogues.

While the pool of respondents and the scope of this study are small in comparison to other studies in the field, the findings in this study have gone some way in enhancing our understanding of attitude changes to swearwords and made a contribution to sociolinguistic research. Additionally, the thesis may increase our knowledge of when and where to use swearing, and which swearword to use.

## **5.2 Further research**

Several questions have emerged as a result of this study. Further investigations are necessary to establish whether a change in female swearing is on-going. For example, is females' choice of swearwords becoming more similar to that of males'? Moreover, more evidence from a significantly larger pool of respondents is essential in investigating whether *nigger* and *paki* have indeed, as suggested in this study, become abundantly more severe. Likewise, it is also recommended that investigations into the severity of *cunt* and *fuck* should be carried out in the near future, in an attempt to grasp whether a movement in frequency of use and severity has occurred. Another interesting topic to investigate is swearing on the Internet. With many people hiding behind avatars, limited control of what people write in forums, on social media sites, the Internet is a different arena to our daily life, where swearing might occur more frequently. Lastly, I believe that investigating whether there is a correlation between the sound of a swearword and the perceived severity of it could be of interest.

## **Appendix:**

A) Questionnaire used in the field study. The list of words is directly taken from Millwood-Hargrave's study (2000).

'Dear respondent

My name is Sverre Humberst Hagen, a master student at the University of Bergen, Norway. I am studying attitudes to swearing. The data from this survey will only be used for scholarly purposes.

**Age:**

**Gender:**

**Occupation:**

Please rate the following words by circling around one of the following options: 'Very severe - Fairly severe - Mild - Not swearing - Do not know'.

**Arsehole:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Arse:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Bastard:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Bollocks:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Bugger:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Balls:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Bloody:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Cunt:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Crap:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Dickhead:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Jew:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Jesus Christ:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Fuck:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**God** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Motherfucker:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Nigger:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Piss off:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Pissed off:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Paki:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Prick:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Spastic:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Slag:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know

**Shit:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Shag:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Sodding:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Twat:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Wanker:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

**Whore:** Very severe - Fairly severe – Mild - Not swearing – Do not know.

Thank you for participating!

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