An Analysis of Gender Differences in the use of Swear Words on Facebook

Melika Muhanović   **Nejla Babić**   **Esma Latić, MA**

International Burch University

Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

melika.muhanovic@stu.ibu.edu.ba   *nejla.babic@stu.ibu.edu.ba*   *esma.latic@ibu.edu.ba*

Abstract: The question of gender differences in language use has been repeatedly explored and claims about these distinctions that were once considered invariable have been questioned and refuted. One of the less explored areas within this issue, however, is the phenomenon of swearing. This paper aimed to explore how and why men and women swear on one of the most popular social media sites, Facebook, and how the context in which such utterances are produced modulates their frequency and form. The study found that both men and women are more likely to swear when commenting on the content produced by the same gender and also when surrounded by other males and females, respectively. Furthermore, the research confirmed some previous studies in which men were found to swear more out of aggressiveness, while women do so to exaggerate their words.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research into language use in social media websites has shown it to reinforce and reproduce the gender dichotomy and gender roles of the offline world (Miller et al., 2016). In other words, the gender, here understood as a sociocultural category constructed through social upbringing and nurturing (Beauvoir, 1949; Haslanger, 1995; Millett, 1971) that one projects in the real world is likely to mirror the one projected on social media. Furthermore, taking into consideration that individuals form their identities, and thus different parts of it, including gender, by continually exploring and embodying different selves (Waterman, 1999), it is natural for individuals to find social media a suitable place for such an endeavour (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008).

This paper focuses on the use of taboo language as one of the features through which this formation of gender identity is realized. More specifically, it explores whether and how men and women differ in their use of taboo language on one of the most popular social media sites, Facebook, and what kind of image they desire to portray about themselves while using the language. Moreover, it attempts to clarify the question of whether certain patterns of behaviour or use of this kind of language might be gendered, i.e. attributed to one of the genders. Furthermore, the study looks at how the environment allows and encourages different types of behaviour as well as how some specific web pages reinforce the expressive language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Taboo language has been broadly defined as the category of expressions socially prohibited or evaded due to their, more or less severe, psychological harm that may affect the society's members (Jay, 2009; Wardhaugh, 2010). The vagueness of this phenomenon makes its categorization quite difficult, but Jay (2009) suggests they can be classified into "sexual references; those that are considered blasphemous; scatological references and disgusting objects; animal names; ethnic-racial-gender slurs; insulting references to perceived psychological, physical, or social deviations; ancestral allusions; substandard vulgar terms; and offensive slang" (p. 154). Gauthier (2012) suggests that profanity is "bad language" that provokes many tensions and debates, similarly to slang, jargon, misuse, new forms etc. (p. 8). He further notes that *bad language* refers to linguistic performances deemed unacceptable by a majority due to their lack of conformity to the traditional linguistic rules of the culture in which they are uttered (Gauthier, 2012). Furthermore, Fägersten (2012) proposes that swearing refers to the use of words which have the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, objectionable, or unacceptable in any given social context. She adds that not every use of a swear word is an instance of swearing, nor has the definition of swearing

traditionally been restricted to the use of a particular subset of words, which implies that what is considered a swear word is quite subjective (Fägersten, 2012).

Being stereotypically portrayed as "leaders, as dominant, aggressive, independent, objective, and competitive", and juxtaposed with women, being "emotional, subjective, tactful, aware of the feelings of others, and as having their feelings easily hurt" (Aries, 1996, p. 164), it comes as no surprise that males, as is the case with many other linguistic forms demonstrating assertiveness, have often been associated with the use of swearing (Coates, 2013; Latić & Brdarević-Čeljo, 2018). Although the accounts of real language use have shown that taboo language usage is found to be prevalent both among men (Coates, 2003; Gomm, 1981; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003) and women (De Klerk, 1992; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Uhlman, 2015), the inclination to use strong swear words has been found among males mostly (Bailey & Timm, 1976; McEnery, 2005; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003). One of the explanations for this phenomenon states that, in our ancestral communities, women probably adopted the so-called "tend-and-befriend" reaction, i.e. a less aggressive response to stress and danger (Lee & Harley, 2012; Taylor et al., 2006), since the costs of aggressive behaviour, involving the actions of fighting or fleeing, was often higher than its benefits, as the mother's presence was more essential to the progeny's survival than the father's (Campbell, 1999). Consequently, as some studies of brain biology have shown (Gur et al., 2000; Jordan et al., 2002), these differences in the roles of men and women affected our brain development, causing the female brain to have a larger orbital frontal cortex that regulate amygdala-generated anger. The linguistic consequence of this phenomenon is thus reflected in the overall inclination of males to use taboo language more than females (Guvendir, 2015).

In the context of social networking, commenting on threads online, as a form of social interaction, is a type of identity and hence gender performance (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Thelwall, 2008). Studies on gender differences in online behaviour have shown that individuals tend to emphasize different aspects of their identity through varied linguistic behaviour (Nguyen et al., 2014), including the use of stereotypically feminine (e.g. a heart emoticon written as <3) or masculine (e.g. taboo words) language. Moreover, a variety of studies have researched online spaces including blogs (Mukherjee & Liu, 2010; Schler et al., 2006), Twitter (Bamman et al., 2014; Bergsma and Van Durme, 2013), YouTube (Filippova, 2012) and social network chats (Peersman et al., 2011) in search for differences in linguistic behaviour of men and women, and found that the former tend to use more links, numbers, technology words, etc., while the latter generally use more first person pronouns, emoticon, words expressing emotions, etc. (Bamman et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2013). In online spaces, although men have been found to swear more on sites such as MySpace (Thelwall, 2008), the difference that has been gaining more attention is the context as well as types of swearing (Murray, 2012), since, as Hall (2003) suggests, linguistic studies on gender should aim to "document the diverse range of women's and men's

linguistic repertoires as developed within particular contexts" (p. 375). Furthermore, these virtual spaces, just as any other space for social interactions in which people read contextual cues in order to understand what constitutes appropriate behaviour (Boyd & Heer, 2006), set and encourage certain social norms. This paper, therefore, aims to explore whether males and females on two different Facebook pages differ in their frequency as well as type of swearing, taking into account different contextual cues that might have encouraged such behavior.

3. METHODOLOGY

The corpus of language data for this study was Facebook – a social website with over one billion daily active users. As a source of linguistic data, it does not only provide researchers with authentic language but also allows for inferences based on the users' publicly available information such as age, education, gender, etc. In addition to that, the website contains interactive groups, i.e. Facebook pages, gathering users with common interests, which enables researchers to collect data from highly specific communities and thus infer more contextualized and reliable conclusions. In order to analyse data from demographically, socially, and psychologically varied language users, the data in this study was collected from five different public Facebook pages, all of which are considered popular, with millions of followers and hundreds of comments on every post: *YouTube, 9gag*, and the official pages of Nicky Minaj, Eminem, and Miley Cyrus. The pages receive comments that are mostly in English and this paper analysed only what is considered taboo in the English language.

The total number of language users whose data was analysed is 50. The manner in which the data was gather is by searching through the comments of the most recent posts on these five pages and selecting only those containing taboo language. Further, the comments were categorized based on the users' gender and the page the comments were found on. In addition to that, the swear words were categorized according to their purpose into those used humorously, for exaggeration, assertively/aggressively, and for disrespecting/insulting.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As is shown in Table 1, with 29 comments containing taboo words, males produced swear words more frequently than females (n=21), outnumbering them in three out of five pages. More specifically, on 9gag's and YouTube's Facebook pages, respectively six and nine out of ten comments observed were written by a male. When it comes to Nicki Minaj's as well as Miley Cyrus' official Facebook pages, more comments containing taboo language were written by

females. Finally posts on Eminem's page had seven swearing comments written by males and only three written by females.

Table 1: Frequency of Comments Containing Swear Words

	9gag	**YouTube**	**Nicki Minaj**	**Miley Cyrus**	**Eminem**	**Total**
Male	6	9	4	3	7	**29**
Female	4	1	6	7	3	**21**

Interpreting these distinctions, certain patterns may be discriminated. First of all, the pages with more swear words used by females were the ones of female celebrities – Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus. Although they contain roughly equal number of female and male users' comments, it seems that females here feel more encouraged to use swear words. Another important thing to note is that the swear words used by females on these posts were of the descriptive nature, i.e. they were mostly used to enhance their compliments or exaggerate their current feelings. On the other hand, men used swear words mostly to objectify or insult these female celebrities, and their usage of taboo words increased when commenting on pictures of a provocative nature. Furthermore, following the same pattern of using taboo language when commenting on the content produced by the same gender, more male fans (n=7) employed swear words on Eminem's Facebook page.

Based on these findings, it seems reasonable to infer that the use of taboo language is influenced and encouraged by the context. Both females and males used more swear words on pages of female and male celebrities, respectively, implying thus that males, as well as females, seem to generally feel bolder and more encouraged to use such words when writing comments about the same gender. In addition to that, taking into consideration that these pages usually attract either men or women, depending on the gender of the celebrity, it seems that both males and females find it safer to use taboo language in interaction with the same gender, while the opposite might lead to their losing of face. These findings are in line with Uhlman (2015), who found that 75% of participants believed to be more conscious of swearing when surrounded by the opposite gender as well as the study by Jay and Janschewitz (2008), where men were found to use swear words more often in company of other men.

Table 2 - Frequency of comments containing swear words classified according to their purpose

Gender	Humorously	Exaggeration	Anger/Assertiveness	Disrespect/Insult
Male	5	7	10	5
Female	5	13	3	2

In terms of the purpose of their swearing, as the data in Table 2 shows, male and female users used swear words equally for the purpose of being humorous, while women used them more than men for the purpose of exaggeration. On the other hand, males were found to swear more when angry or when trying to be assertive, as well when they are being disrespectful or insulting someone. Therefore, it seems that the results obtained by this study support previous research that have found men to be more likely to swear out of anger and frustration (Bird & Harris, 1990; Jay, 1996; McEnery, 2005; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003).

5. CONCLUSION

The study found that both men and women use swear words when commenting on social media, but with slight variations influenced by different factors, including the context in which the utterances are produced, the type of interaction being either single or mixed-gender one, and the purpose of the act of swearing itself. More specifically, men were found to swear on the site where the male community is larger, while women were found to do so on the website of a female celebrity, arguably attracting more female users. Furthermore, both men and women were more likely to use swear words when commenting on the sites of same-gender celebrities. Finally, the results have shown that men utter swear words mostly to express aggressiveness and assertiveness, while women do so to exaggerate their comments.

In general, what may be inferred from this study is that swearing, be it online or offline, is a highly complex linguistic phenomenon that cannot be simplified through a mere calculation of its frequency of appearance in one's language without taking into account a variety of other factors that cause, influence, and shape their use by individuals across different demographical, social and psychological categories.

REFERENCES

Aries, E. (1996). *Men and Women in Interaction*: *Reconsidering the Differences.* New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press.

Bailey, L. A., & Timm, L. A. (1976). More on women's—and men's—expletives. *Anthropological Linguistics*, *18*(9), 438-449.

Bamman, D., Eisenstein, J., & Schnoebelen, T. (2014). Gender identity and lexical variation in social media. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *18*(2), 135-160.

Beauvoir, S. D. (1949). Introduction to the second sex. *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, 11-18.

Bergsma, S., & Van Durme, B. (2013). Using conceptual class attributes to characterize social media users. In *Proceedings of the 51st Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics (Volume 1: Long Papers)* (Vol. 1, pp. 710-720).

Bird, G. W., & Harris, R. L. (1990). A comparison of role strain and coping strategies by gender and family structure among early adolescents. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *10*(2), 141-158.

Boyd, D. (2007). Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life. *MacArthur foundation series on digital learning–Youth, identity, and digital media volume*, *119*, 142.

Boyd, D., & Heer, J. (2006, January). Profiles as conversation: Networked identity performance on Friendster. In *System Sciences, 2006. HICSS'06. Proceedings of the 39th Annual Hawaii International Conference on* (Vol. 3, pp. 59c-59c). IEEE.

Campbell, A. (1999). Staying alive: Evolution, culture, and women's intrasexual aggression. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *22*(2), 203-214.

Coates, J. (2003). *Men talk: Stories in the Making of Masculinities*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Coates, J. (2013). *Women, men and language: A sociolinguistic account of gender differences in language*. London, UK: Routledge.

De Klerk, V. (1992). How taboo are taboo words for girls? *Language in Society, 21*, 277–289.

Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet S. (2003). *Language and gender*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Fägersten, K. B. (2012). *Who's swearing now? The social aspects of conversational swearing*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Filippova, K. (2012). User demographics and language in an implicit social network. In *Proceedings of the 2012 Joint Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing and Computational Natural Language Learning, 1478-1488.* Association for Computational Linguistics.

Gauthier, M. (2012). Profanity and gender: A diachronic analysis of men's and women's use and perception of swear words. *Profanity and Gender: A Diachronic Analysis of Men's and Women's Use and Perception of Swear Words*.

Gomm, I. (1981). A study of the inferior image of the female use of the English language as compared to that of the male. *Unpublished BA dissertation, Edge Hill College, Ormskirk*.

Gur, R. C., Alsop, D., Glahn, D., Petty, R., Swanson, C. L., Maldjian, J. A. & Gur, R. E. (2000). An fMRI study of sex differences in regional activation to a verbal and a spatial task. *Brain and language, 74*(2), 157-170.

Guvendir, Emre. (2015). Why are males inclined to use strong swear words more than females? An evolutionary explanation based on male intergroup aggressiveness. *Language Sciences.* 10, 1-7. 10.1016/j.langsci.2015.02.003.

Hall, K. (2003). Exceptional speakers: Contested and problematized gender identities. In J. Holmes & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (pp. 353–380). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Haslanger, S., 1995, Ontology and Social Construction, *Philosophical Topics, 23*, 95–125.

Jay, T. (1996). What To Do When Your Students Talk Dirty. Resource Publications, Inc., 160 E. Virginia Street,# 290, San Jose, CA 95112-5876.

Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(2), 153-161.

Jay, T., & Janschewitz, K. (2008). The pragmatics of swearing. *Journal of Politeness Research. Language, Behaviour, Culture*, 4(2), 267-288.

Jordan, K., Wustenberg, T., Heinze, H.-J., Peters, M. & Jancke, L., 2002. Women and men exhibit different cortical activation patterns during mental rotation tasks. *Neuropsychologia 40*, 2397–2408.

Latić, E., & Čeljo, A. B. (2018). An Exploration of Beliefs about Gender Differences in Language Use. *Journal of Language and Education*, *4*(3), 48-57.

Lee, J., & Harley, V. R. (2012). The male fight-flight response: A result of SRY regulation of catecholamines?. *BioEssays*, *34*(6), 454-457.

Manago, A. M., Graham, M. B., Greenfield, P. M., & Salimkhan, G. (2008). Self-presentation and gender on MySpace. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *29*(6), 446-458.

Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New media & society*, *13*(1), 114-133.

McEnery, T. 2005. *Swearing in English*. London: Routledge

Mehl, M. R., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2003). The sounds of social life: A psychometric analysis of students' daily social environments and natural conversations. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *84*(4), 857.

Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S. & Wang, X. (2016). *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press.

Millett, K., 1971, *Sexual Politics*, London: Granada Publishing Ltd.

Murray, T. E. (2012). Swearing as a function of gender in the language of Midwestern American College students. *A cultural approach to interpersonal communication: Essential readings*, 233-241.

Mukherjee, A. & Liu, B. 2010. Improving gender classification of blog authors. In *Proceedings of the 2010 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, 207–217.

Nguyen, D., Trieschnigg, D., Doğruöz, A. S., Gravel, R., Theune, M., Meder, T., & De Jong, F. (2014). Why gender and age prediction from tweets is hard: Lessons from a crowdsourcing experiment. In *Proceedings of COLING 2014, the 25th International Conference on Computational Linguistics: Technical Papers* (pp. 1950-1961).

Schler, J., Koppel, M., Argamon, S., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2006, March). Effects of age and gender on blogging. In *AAAI spring symposium: Computational approaches to analyzing weblogs* (Vol. 6, pp. 199-205).

Taylor, S. E. (2006). Tend and befriend: Biobehavioral bases of affiliation under stress. *Current directions in psychological science*, 15(6), 273-277.

Thelwall, M. (2008). Fk yea I swear: cursing and gender in MySpace. *Corpora*, 3(1), 83-107.

Uhlman, K. M. (2015). Use and perception of taboo language in college-age females. *Honors Theses and Capstones*, 227. Retrieved from: https://scholars.unh.edu/honors/227.

Wardhaugh, R. (2010). 6st ed. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. USA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Waterman, A. S. (1999). Identity, the identity statuses, and identity status development: A contemporary statement. *Developmental Review 19*, 591–621.