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Exploring the weakening of *fuck* in casual conversation

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- Swearing performs a range of useful functions beyond ‘causing offence’ e.g. emotional expression, emphasis, humour, social bonding, and displaying identity
 - Most casual swearing “is not aimed at aggression, impoliteness, or even the expression of negative feelings” (Stapleton et al., 2022: 8)
- Swearing can be viewed as:

“a type of so-called bad language, which, when used literally, relates to taboo topics (typically sex, bodily functions and religion), but can also be used figuratively to perform a range of functions, including abuse, humour and expression of emotion”

(Love, 2021: 4-5)

Judge rules the F-word has officially lost its shock value in the workplace

 Comment



Gergana Krasteva

Monday 30 Jan 2023 11:04 am

Dropping the ‘F-bomb’ at work is no longer shocking in Britain, a judge has ruled.

Phrases like ‘I don’t give a f**k’ are now ‘fairly commonplace’ and no longer have the ‘shock value’ they once did.

Employment judge Andrew Gumbiti-Zimuto ruled such swear words have a ‘lack of significance’.

His comments came as he presided over a case about an account manager who complained her boss swore during a ‘tense’ meeting. [...]

The judge said: [...] ‘The words allegedly used in our view are **fairly commonplace and do not carry the shock value they might have done in another time.**

‘It is in our view something that might have been said and is not recalled now by [two other colleagues] because of its lack of significance at the time.’

<https://metro.co.uk/2023/01/30/judge-rules-the-f-word-has-officially-lost-its-shock-value-in-the-workplace-18187786/>

Millwood-Hargrave (2000)

- 71% rated *fuck* “very severe” + 22% “fairly severe”

Ofcom (2021)

- “**There was greater diversity in views towards *fuck* [...]** *fuck* was categorised variously as strong, moderate and mild by different groups of qualitative participants”
- “**Older participants** from the general groups were more likely to rate *fuck* as **strong**, while **middle-aged** participants consistently saw it as **moderate**. **Younger participants** held more mixed views, with different groups rating it from **mild to strong**.”
- “Those who felt *fuck* was not strongly offensive suggested that it tended to be **used in a more general way** rather than targeting an individual or group”

Spoken British National Corpora

- Transcriptions of recorded conversations: 1990s and 2010s
- **Spoken BNC1994** (BNC Consortium, 2007)
 - c. 5 million words casual conversation
- **Spoken BNC2014** (Love et al., 2017)
 - c. 11 million words casual conversation



“Diachronic short-term changes have been studied in corpus linguistics on the basis of written corpora for several decades. Leech and his colleagues (Leech et al., 2009) used comparable written corpora with the purpose of studying changes in the English verb phrase over time, an enterprise that they referred to as **‘diachronic short-term corpus-based research’**.”

Studies of changes going on in spoken language have lagged behind the investigation of short-term linguistic changes based on existing written corpora.” (Aijmer, 2022: 11)

McEnergy et al. (1999, 2000)

- Analysed bad language words ('BLWs', which include swear words and terms of abuse) in a conversational sample of the BNC1994 – the Lancaster Corpus of Abuse

McEnergy (2006)

- “the use or lack of use of BLWs is a fault line along which age, sex and social class may be differentiated” (p. 50)
 - e.g. males draw “typically from a stronger set of words than females” – including *fuck* (p. 30)

McEnergy & Xiao (2004)

- Frequency and function of FUCK in the BNC1994

Love (2021)

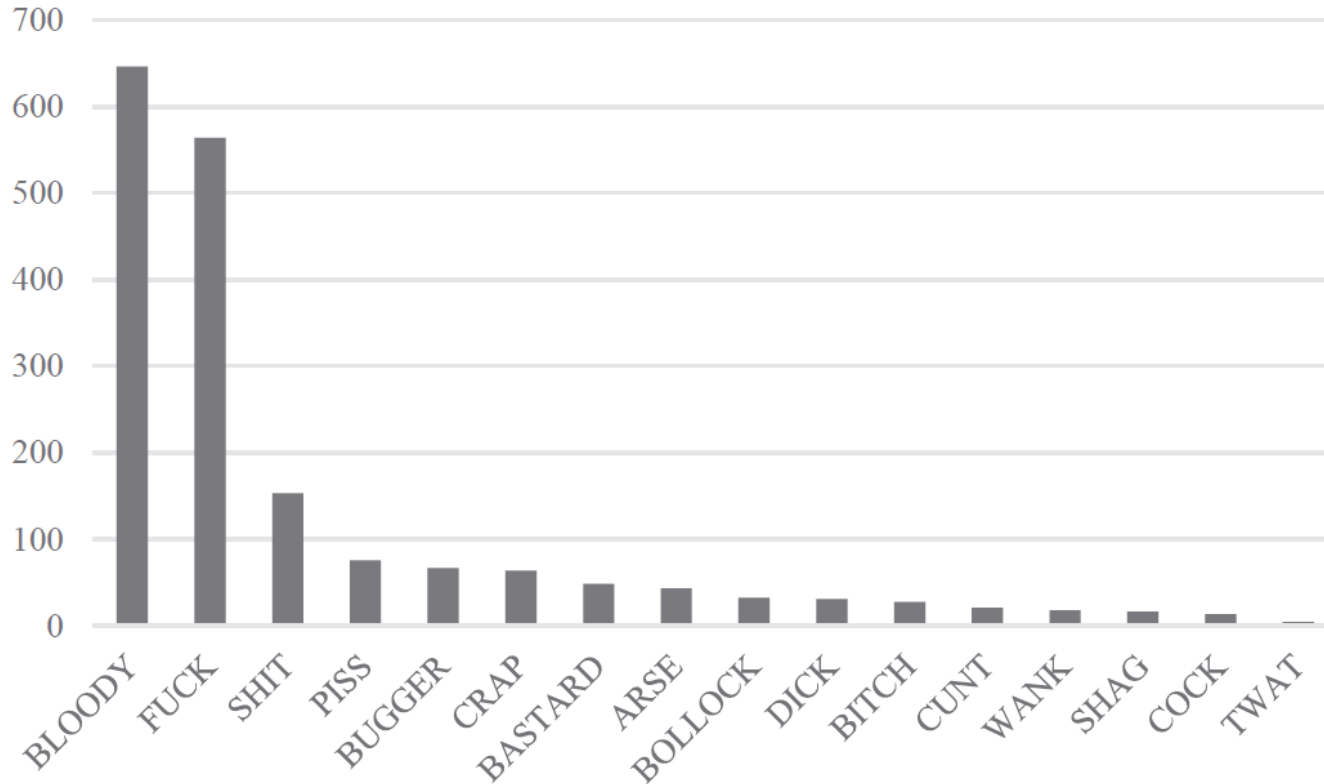
- Comparing swear word frequency among all speakers in conversational components of the BNC1994 and BNC2014

ARSE, BASTARD, BITCH, BLOODY, BOLLOCK, BUGGER, COCK, CRAP, CUNT, DICK, FUCK, PISS, SHAG, SHIT, TWAT, WANK

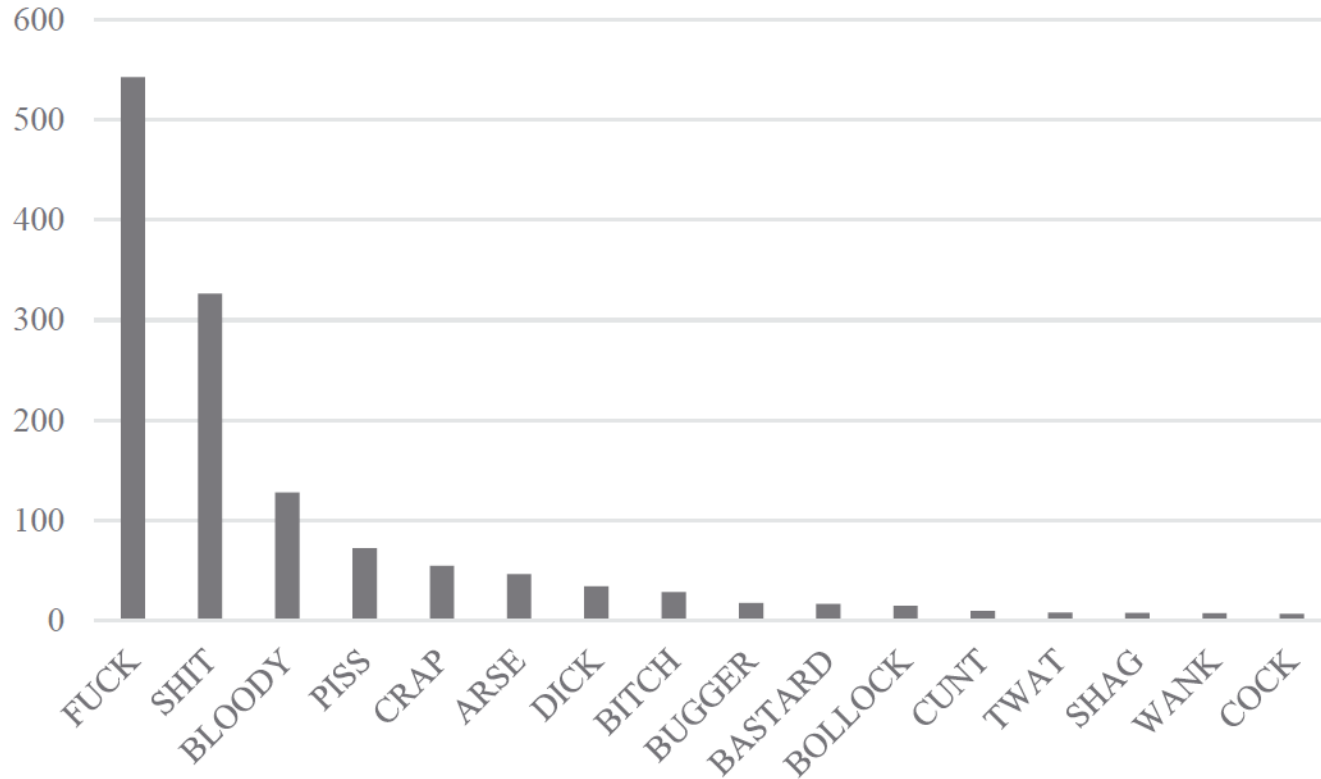
- Frequency
 - BNC1994: 2,265 per million (**0.23%**)
 - BNC2014: 1,428 per million (**0.14%**)
- Most British English conversational swearing is performed using three words:

FUCK, SHIT and BLOODY

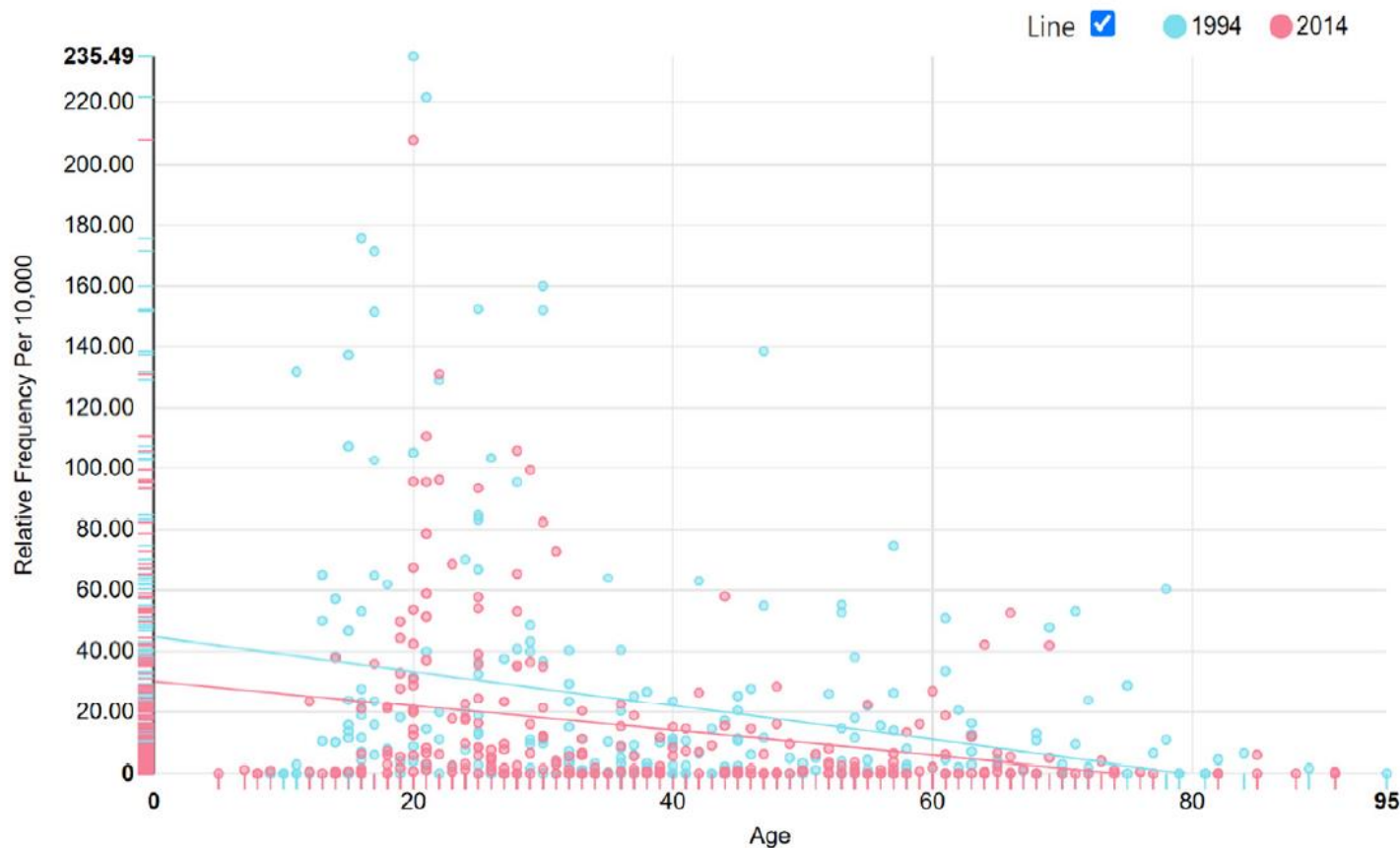
Ranking swear words (1990s)



Ranking swear words (2010s)



Swearing and age



ARSE
BASTARD
BITCH
BLOODY
BOLLOCK
BUGGER
COCK
CRAP
CUNT
DICK
FUCK
PISS
SHAG
SHIT
TWAT
WANK

- The most common swear word is **FUCK**, and swearing is most common among younger speakers

Stenström & Love (in review)

- Comparing functions of *fuck* among London teenage speakers in BNC1994 and southeast England teenage speakers in BNC2014
 - **COLT** (Stenström et al., 2002): corpus comprising London teenage speakers
 - 83 speakers, c. 600,000 tokens
 - **Spoken BNC2014** (Love et al., 2017): sub-corpus comprising southeast teenage speakers from BNC2014
 - 15 speakers, c. 300,000 tokens
- Word class and swearing function (McEnery & Xiao, 2004)

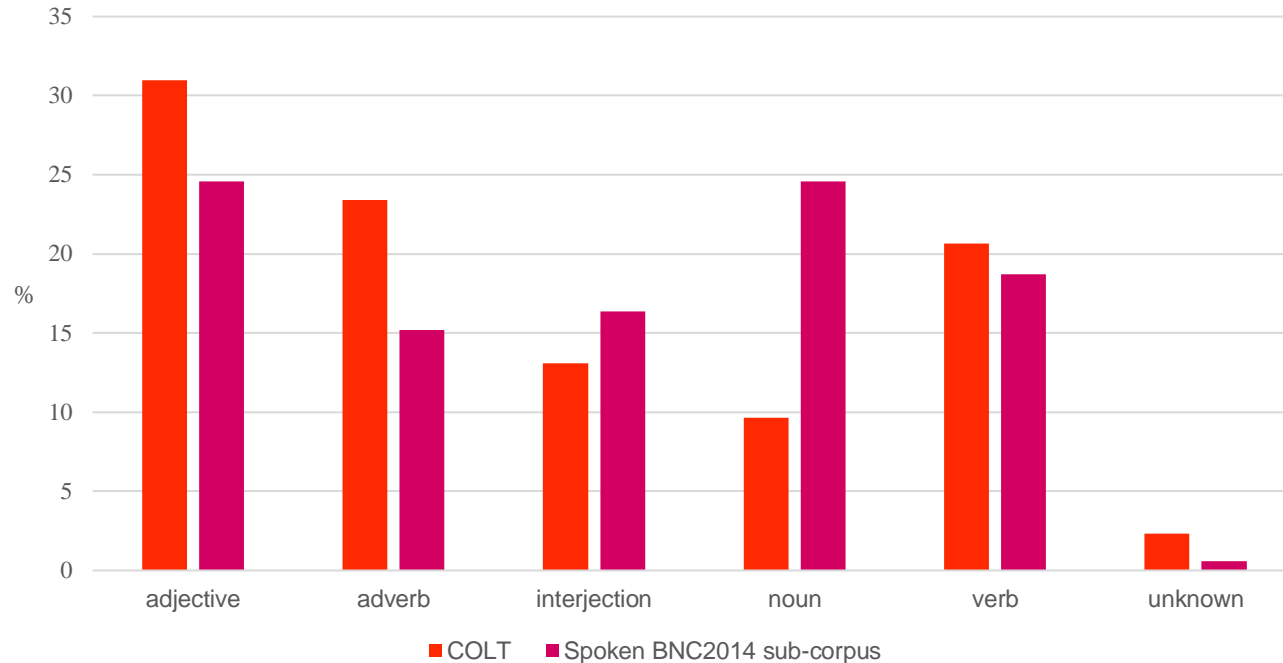
Functions of FUCK (based on McEnery & Xiao, 2004)

Category	Criteria	Example(s)
G	General expletive	<i>(oh) fuck</i>
P	Personal insult referring to defined entity	<i>you fuck / that fuck</i>
C	Cursing expletive	<i>fuck you / me / him / it</i>
D	Destinational usage	<i>fuck off / he fucked off</i>
L	Literal usage denoting taboo referent	<i>he fucked her</i>
E	Emphatic intensifier	<i>fucking marvellous / in the fucking car</i>
O	'Pronominal' form	<i>like fuck / fat as fuck</i>
I	Idiomatic 'set phrase'	<i>fuck all / give a fuck / thank fuck</i>
A	Predicative negative adjective	<i>this game is fucked</i>
X	Metalinguistic or unclassifiable due to insufficient context	The use of the word "fuck" / you never fucking

- COLT: 727 instances of FUCK (652 pmw)
- BNC2014 sub-corpus: 171 instances of FUCK (547 pmw)
- Most swearing by FUCK is performed by three forms: *fuck*, *fuck* and *fucked*
 - This aligns with the findings of McEnery & Xiao (2004: 258) for all BNC1994 speakers

Word form	COLT		Spoken BNC2014 sub-corpus	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>fuck</i>	395	54.33	60	35.09
<i>fuck</i>	239	32.87	88	51.46
<i>fucked</i>	62	8.53	20	11.70

- Significant difference in distribution of word class categories between corpora
- Biggest difference: FUCK as noun (9.6% → 24%)



Swearing function

Code	Description	COLT		Spoken BNC2014 teenage sub-corpus		% diff
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
A	Predicative negative adjective	29	3.99	12	7.02	3.03
C	Cursing expletive	17	2.34	6	3.51	1.17
D	Destinational usage	59	8.12	5	2.92	-5.19
E	Emphatic intensifier	359	49.38	54	31.58	-17.80
G	General expletive	90	12.38	28	16.37	3.99
I	Idiomatic 'set phrase'	86	11.83	59	34.50	22.67
L	Literal usage denoting taboo referent	40	5.50	4	2.34	-3.16
O	'Pronominal' form	1	0.14	1	0.58	0.45
P	Personal insult referring to defined entity	23	3.16	1	0.58	-2.58
X	Metalinguistic or unclassifiable due to insufficient context	23	3.16	1	0.58	-2.58
	Total	727	100	171	100	

- **A common category in both: emphatic intensifiers**
 - *I can't be **fucking** bothered anymore* (BNC1994)
 - *my teacher was a weird **fucking** psycho who fed us conspiracy theories* (BNC2014)
- **Strong negative semantic prosody**, but less explicit in BNC2014, e.g. as an adjective, pre-modifying other taboo words:
 - COLT: *arse** (4), *bastard** (4), *bitch* (7), *bollocks* (1), *cunt* (3), *dick* (2), *gay boy* (1), *lesy* (1), *penis* (1), *poofter* (1), *shit* (4), *slag* (1), *tart* (1), *wanker* (4), *whore* (1)
 - BNC2014: *bitch* (1), *idiot* (1), *prick* (1), *pussy* (1), *queer* (1)

More idiomatic usage

- *did I **fuck something up**?* (BNC2014)
- *Jesus that's like two Jager Bombs each which yeah will **fuck you over*** (BNC2014)

In BNC2014 sub-corpus, 64% of idiomatic cases used FUCK as noun (up from 47%)

- *we were just sitting here thinking okay **what the fuck** is going on?* (BNC2014)
- *oh **for fuck's sake** when was that like four AM or something?* (BNC2014)

More general expletive usage

- *I mean that's the reason you should want to go to uni oh yeah **fuck yeah** for the course if you if you end up it's not for the drinking (BNC2014)*

Even less literal usage

- *You know I'm the one, who **fucked** your mum (BNC1994)*
- *the beginning bit when she's **fucking** a man she sticks an axe through him (BNC1994)*

Biggest development of FUCK is **increased usage in idiomatic expressions**

- The root form *fuck* “is most frequently used idiomatically, as in *what the fuck*, *for fuck’s sake*, *give a fuck* and *fuck up/around/about*” (McEnery & Xiao, 2004: 258-9)
- **Idiomatization** (Brinton & Traugott, 2003)
 - “a semantic process which occurs within lexicalization and/or grammaticalization and causes the obscuration of meanings of combinations” (Rodriguez-Puente, 2012)

High proportion of **expletive and intensifying functions**

- **Subjectification** (Traugott, 1989)
 - “Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition”
- **Semantic bleaching** (Traugott, 1989)
 - “the development from lexical to grammatical meaning as a “process of generalization or weakening of semantic content,” whereby “meanings are emptied of their specificities”

- FUCK is highly frequent but still considered overall to be ‘strong’ (Ofcom, 2021)
– an example of the **‘swearing paradox’**:

“how this highly offensive behaviour (according to ratings studies) can also enjoy such a high rate of occurrence (according to frequency studies)”

(Beers-Fägersten, 2007: 16)

- Beers-Fägersten (2007) posits that the swearing paradox may be caused by deficiencies in the methods used to elicit public opinion on the strength of swearing

Operationalising the functional coding scheme

- It was challenging to establish mutual exclusivity of function categories, as revealed by inter-rater reliability testing¹
- This was helped by noting **correspondence between word class and function categories**, as most functions were limited to specific word classes, e.g. emphatic intensifier = adjective or adverb
 - “Parts of speech are clearly important to the categorisation scheme, but the scheme itself is not simply a relabelling of parts of speech. Also, and interestingly, just because a particular word covered in the LCA has a part of speech connected with a category does not mean to say that the word will appear in that category.” (McEnery, 2006: 28)
- For a few cases of one function category – idiomatic ‘set phrase’ – we could not establish full exclusivity from other categories, e.g.
 - *fucking hell* = idiomatic (I) **and** general expletive (G)?
 - *fuck off* = destinational (D) **and** idiomatic?

¹With thanks to Sarah Atkins, Aston University

Data comparability

- The sampled corpora are not a perfect match in terms of speaker region
 - Gathering more contemporary data from London teenagers would allow testing of observations
 - And/or considering all (teenage) speakers in both BNC1994 and BNC2014
- Swearing strength is known to be highly context-dependent, even within a specific register like casual conversation
 - “[T]here is a strong and selective interaction between swearwords and macrostructures in discourse” (McEnery et al., 2023: 46)
 - Differences in data collection procedure – speaker awareness of being recorded

Thank you

@lovermob

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