

A study of male and female expletive use in single and mixed-sex situations¹

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Introduction

This project was conceived as an attempt to test, in a New Zealand setting, the folklinguistic belief that men swear more than women and that both groups are likely to swear less when in the company of the opposite sex.

This stereotype seems to have become pervasive, at least outside sociolinguistic circles, and is examined in Jennifer Coates' *Women, Men and Language* (1986). Coates found an early example of the stereotype in the views of Jespersen (1922):

'Among the things women object to in language must be specially mentioned anything that smacks of swearing.'

Jespersen adds in a footnote to the above:

'I think that in those countries and in those circles in which swearing is common it is found much more extensively among men than among women...'(Coates 1986:22)

More recent is Robin Lakoff's assertion that 'it is a truism to state that the "stronger" expletives are reserved for men, and the "weaker" ones for women.' (Lakoff 1975:10) She adds:

¹This project was initially undertaken as a research assignment for Donn Bayard's Fourth Year Honours Anthropology paper in Sociolinguistics at the University of Otago in 1990. On his encouragement, it has since been revised and expanded to reach its present form. My thanks are extended to the many people who helped in the production of this paper. Special thanks must go to the informants for their willing assistance, to Ingrid Gunby for her help in data collection and discussion of the results, and to Martin Fisher for producing the accompanying histograms. I am particularly grateful to Donn Bayard, whose constant advice, encouragement and ebullient enthusiasm sustained me through the various stages of this exercise.

Consider: (a) 'Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.'

(b) 'Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.'

It is safe to predict that people would classify the first sentence as part of "women's language", the second as part of "men's language". (Lakoff *ibid.*)

But as Coates rightly points out, Lakoff's hypothesis is bereft of any proof in the form of research. Coates declares:

These writers claim to describe women's more polite use of language, but we should ask whether what they are actually doing is attempting to prescribe how women ought to talk. Avoidance of swearing and of "coarse" words is held up to female speakers as the ideal to be aimed at....(Coates 1986:22)

Coates' concern, then, is that the claims of Jespersen and Lakoff are not backed up by research and although she states that there is very little evidence either to support or to refute such claims, she does cite an unpublished study by Gomm (1981) which concludes that women swear less than men and that, moreover, usage of swear words by both sexes drops in mixed sex conversations (Coates 1986:109).

Gomm's research was based on 14 recorded conversations between young British speakers. The participants were all female in five of these conversations, all male in a different five and mixed in another four conversations. Gomm found no qualitative difference in the swear words used by these speakers, but Table I shows the frequency differences found.

Table I: Incidence of swearing in single-sex and mixed groups (based on Coates and Gomm)

	Single Sex Groups	Mixed Sex Groups	Total
Men	21	4	25
Women	7	2	9

In Gomm's sample the male speakers swear more often than the women speakers and, moreover, both males and females swear more often when in the company of their own sex. Male usage of swear

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words also drops dramatically in a mixed-sex situation.

Prior American research conducted in U.S. universities provides more evidence on the issue of gender and expletive usage. Oliver and Rubin's study (1975) was instigated as a result of Lakoff's contentions. The authors felt that women's usage of swear words was likely to be determined by sociolinguistic factors such as age and that a range of interactional determinants are influential on women's expletive usage. Oliver and Rubin note that in their view, age is a determining factor in women's use of expletives and that in general, younger women are freer in their swearing than are those of an older age group. It is suggested that the feminist movement may be a contributing force in this possibility and that women in the 40-55 age group may display some division in their patterns between the freer traits of younger women and the more restricted older patterns.

A questionnaire was administered to 28 women aged between 40 and 55, all of whom were white, upper-middle class and college educated. It was surmised by the authors that within this group a variation in expletive usage might be discernible due to the marital status of the respondents and the extent to which they felt 'liberated'. Of the 28 women surveyed, 14 were single and had never been married; the remaining 14 were married at the time the study was conducted.

The questionnaire focussed on the use of eight expletives - *damn*, *shit*, *bastard*, *son of a bitch*, *darn*, *gosh* or a similar mild expletive, and *screw him*. Respondents were asked if they might use one of these expletives in each of eight situations which ranged between informal and formal settings and contrasted more intimate domains (e.g. in the presence of family or friends) with situations where one's presentation of face was more critical, for instance in a job interview. For each given situation, respondents were asked to place a tick indicating whether they would use the various expletives never, sometimes or frequently.

In attempting to assess the level to which the women in the survey felt liberated, Oliver asked a number of questions concerning the respondents' knowledge of the women's movement, each woman's particular feeling as to her own extent of liberation, membership of women's groups, the degree to which domestic tasks were shared with a male spouse, and the respondent's use of strong language as an overt expression of liberated feelings.

Oliver and Rubin found that all the women surveyed varied their

use of expletives depending on the formality of the situation or degree of intimacy. It was also apparent that single women tended to use expletives more frequently than their married counterparts. The question of feelings of liberation and their influence on swearing patterns was a complex one, made difficult by the obvious problem of how one is to assess the extent to which one feels liberated. The questionnaire asked respondents 'Do you consider yourself a liberated woman?' and the possible answers were (1) completely, (2) working at it, and (3) not at all. Of the 28 women surveyed, nine answered that they felt completely liberated, 16 said that they were working at it and three said that they were not at all liberated. Those women who did not feel liberated never used any of the expletives frequently. Those who replied that they were working at their liberation said that they would use the expletives in question in 75 out of 768 situations or about one tenth of the time, and those who said that they were completely liberated indicated that they would use expletives about one time in 30. It would thus appear that on the basis of this survey, women who are conscious of working towards liberation swear more than those who either feel that they are already there or who do not feel at all emancipated.

Oliver and Rubin thus concluded that Lakoff's statement that strong expletives are reserved for men requires a great deal of modification when dealing with the 40-55 age group of women which they surveyed. And they speculated that a study of women in the 20-40 age group would demonstrate an even higher use of expletives.

Bailey and Timm's study (1977) originated as a student project at the University of California, Davis. Their stated purpose was to see if differences in strong expletive usage would emerge along age and sex lines, based on data gathered in a self-report questionnaire. Bailey's questionnaire presented 21 familiar situations, all but one of which was in some way unpleasant or exasperating, and which were thought would elicit the use of an expletive from the respondent. 14 women and 15 men answered the questionnaire; all were selected from the university community in Davis, were white and middle class and with the exception of two were either Catholic or Protestant. Although Bailey's questionnaire did not ask for information on affiliation with the women's liberation movement, it did investigate history of religious training, as it was felt that a strong religious background might result in a less frequent use of strong expletives.

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The women respondents ranged in age from 19 to 56; the men from 19 to 61. Because of an uneven distribution of ages across each sex, three sub-groups were set up for the women: 19-23, 31-34, and 43-56 with five representatives in the first two groups and four in the last. The men were grouped in sets of 19-25, 28-32, 38-44, and 47-61 with five, three, three, and four members respectively.

Overall the common assumption that women use fewer expletives than men was borne out. Women used an average of 6.3 expletives in the survey as opposed to an average of 10.3 for the men.

Table II: Average number of expletives per questionnaire in Bailey and Timm (1977)

Women			
1(19-23)	2(31-34)	3(43-56)	
4.2	12	1.8	
Men			
1(19-25)	2(28-32)	3(38-44)	4(47-61)
9	14.7	9.7	9.3

However, as seen in Table II, the pattern changes in the second age group of women. Here the women used an average of twelve strong expletives per questionnaire, second only to Group 2 of the men in frequency. Bailey and Timm see this as a dramatic reversal of traditional female behaviour and suggest that this may be due to affiliation to or support for the feminist movement, although they have no way of knowing as they did not control for this factor in their questionnaire. They also suggest that the high number of expletives used by women in the 31-34 age group may be the result of more relaxed attitudes regarding sex roles in university circles. Interestingly, the youngest group of women in the survey, who the authors expected might be more likely than Group 2 to display a freer use of strong expletives were well behind their older counterparts in Group 2 in their frequency of usage. Bailey and Timm suggest that perhaps the feminist movement has had more impact on the 31-34 year-old women who have had more experience of life to sharpen their awareness of oppression. But as the authors themselves point out, the difference may have more to do with dishonest replies to the questionnaire. The example is cited of a 20-year-old

woman who stated: 'I generally feel comfortable using just about anything that pops into my head and in actuality use *fuck* much more than indicated on this questionnaire' (Bailey and Timm 1977:442). In fact, her questionnaire response has no instance of *fuck*. This revelation clearly has implications for the limitations of the self-response questionnaire as a method of gathering data on expletive usage and it is for this reason that it was not chosen as a technique in my own research.

Another interesting element of Bailey and Timm's research is the fact that the men surveyed used a far wider range of expletives than did the women. The women's expletives were found to centre around *damn*, *shit*, *oh (my) god* and *fuck*. These terms were also high-frequency ones for the men, but the males also used a number of others; many of them expressed a certain amount of pride in the variety and colour of their language.

Both sexes expressed an awareness of context as a mediating element in their expletive usage. Many said that they would tone down their swearing in a situation where they felt the listener might be offended, such as in the presence of elders, one's parents or 'straight' people (Bailey and Timm 1977:444). The sexual identity of others present was clearly a factor for many of the respondents, although this was sometimes not specified as a restraining influence by the respondents themselves. For example, only two of the men mentioned the presence of women as having a restraining effect on their use of swear words. However, a close analysis of the responses by Bailey and Timm showed that many of the men did in fact choose a weaker expletive in the hypothetical situation of tripping over when in the presence of the opposite sex (as compared with the same mishap occurring when in the presence of one's own sex). Four of the women in the survey also indicated in their responses that they would temper their choice of expletive when in the presence of men. Clearly there was some correlation for both men and women between the presence of members of the opposite sex and decreased frequency of strong expletive usage.

Bailey and Timm found no significant correlation between the extent of religious background and expletive usage. In fact, some of the highest frequencies of strong expletives were found in the responses of those who reported a strong religious background. It would have been interesting to ascertain to what extent these respondents still practised

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the religion in which they were trained, but this information was not elicited and so no theory of a backlash against learned prohibitions can be drawn.

Bailey and Timm suggest the existence of two opposing factors in either promoting or inhibiting expletive usage. The first is the desire to display a strong and powerful image and to gain attention. One of their male respondents, aged 21, said, 'Most of the time I use expletives to impress others....' (Bailey and Timm 1977:444). The other opposing force would appear, in the authors' view, to be the tendency towards weaker expletives when in the presence of strangers, an older person or in the company of the opposite sex, as a result of the pervasiveness of societal censorship of strong expletives.

The final study which is of relevance is that of Constance M. Staley, conducted at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs in 1978. Her research was an attempt to expand upon the work of Bailey and Timm through closer attention to some of their concerns and by introducing new factors worthy of consideration. Once again, a self-report questionnaire was drawn up and administered to 55 students of linguistics at Staley's university. The sample consisted of 25 females and 30 males with an average age of 22.6 for the females and 23.7 for the males. Students were almost exclusively middle-class whites. Subjects were asked about the extent of their religious training and whether they still practised that religion. A further development in Staley's study was an attempt to solicit from the respondents their predictions for what a member of the opposite sex would say in the situations posited in the questionnaire; it was hypothesised by Staley that in general men would predict weaker responses for women and women would predict stronger responses for men. In addition, it was expected that both sexes would be less likely to use strong expletives around members of the opposite sex.

With regard to the issue of religious background and practice, it was found that a negative correlation existed between the extent of religious training and expletive usage: out of those who no longer practised their religion, those who had received a great deal of religious training averaged 7.1 strong expletives per questionnaire for the men and 6.5 for women. Those who had little or no religious background averaged 4.2 for men and 5.3 for women, the reverse of what one might expect. Among those Protestants who said that they had received a

great deal of religious training, those that still practised averaged 3.8 strong expletives per questionnaire while those who did not practise averaged 9.5. Amongst Catholics with a strong religious background, however, those that still practised averaged 8.8 strong expletives per questionnaire compared to 7.3 for those who did not. It appears that a correlation between current religious practice and restraint in strong expletive usage is present only for the Protestants surveyed, although Staley is quick to point out that the results may not be generalised.

Another of Staley's hypotheses relates to the question of whether there is a difference in the type of expletives used by men and women. She found that women used significantly fewer excretory, sexual and mixed expletives (i.e. those that mix profanity with excretory and/or sexual words - *Jesus holy fucking shit* is one example found in her survey!). Responses from these categories constituted only 38% of their total as opposed to 50% for the men.

One of the more interesting facets of Staley's findings is her work on men's and women's predictions of expletive usage for the opposite sex. Although the frequency of expletive usage for men and women was approximately the same overall, the predictions of each sex for its opposite were unbalanced. The male respondents averaged 5.96 strong expletives per questionnaire but were predicted by the women to use an average of 8.76. Similarly, the female subjects actually used an average of 5.64 strong expletives per questionnaire but were predicted by the men to use only 3.06. These figures would seem to say much about the received stereotypes of men's and women's speech and bring to mind the view promoted by Lakoff in her statements regarding typical male versus female language (think back to the peanut butter in the refrigerator). Staley's conclusion is that at her time of writing, cultural expectations of male and female swearing patterns were out of synch with the realities of language use. In the light of my own research, I can only agree with her and my findings in many ways support her conclusions.

The present study

The research which I conducted has attempted to compare male and female expletive use in New Zealand, and how the use of strong expletives changes (if at all) in situations where there are both women and

men present. At this point, it is worth noting that swearing resists a concrete definition; exactly what constitutes a swear word is generally determined by social codes. For example, it could be reasonably assumed that *Jesus Christ!* would be an inappropriate exclamation to use in a church vestry meeting, although the same outburst may go unnoticed on a construction site. Therefore, rather than attempt to categorise swear words, I have subsumed various types such as blasphemy or excretory adjectives into the one category. Thus, I use the term 'strong expletive' to denote any word which I consider can be regarded as a swear word, at least by some members of society. *Hell*, *damn* and *shit* have thus been treated as strong expletives, whereas *goodness* or *golly*, had they occurred, would have been taken as weak expletives and would not have been surveyed. Obviously, such an approach is intuitive, but in the absence of an empirical test as to what constitutes a swear word, such a definition must suffice.

My initial hypothesis was that there would be less difference in strong expletive use amongst males and females than had been suggested by Lakoff and that the survey was more likely to discover a pattern similar to that which Staley found in her research, that is, that frequencies differed little between women and men when in their own company. Furthermore, I suspected that when observed in a mixed-sex situation, women's use of strong expletives would not drop significantly. Third, based on my own observation I felt that it was possible that women tended to use fewer gender-loaded terms such as *cunt* and *bitch*, which when used by men seem to me to imply a strong distrust and even underlying hatred of women. (In fact, *cunt* was not used by any of the participants and there was only one instance of *bitch* which occurred in the all-female group.)

The research was based upon tape-recorded conversations. As I have mentioned above, I felt that questionnaires such as those in the American studies cited were an inaccurate means of testing people's actual use of expletives in a conversational situation. Although data gained by questionnaires such as those discussed above is clearly useful, there is still a problem concerning the truthfulness of respondents' answers.

Peter Trudgill elaborates on this point in his discussion of Labov's self-evaluation test in New York for the presence or absence of the postvocalic /r/ (Trudgill 1983:173). In Labov's survey, informants who

used /r/ in formal speech more than 30% of the time were considered to be 'postvocalic /r/ users'. Of these /r/ users, 70% reported that they normally used /r/. However, 62% of those who were not /r/ users actually reported that they normally used the postvocalic /r/. Labov accounts for their inaccuracy by claiming that 'most of the respondents seemed to perceive their own speech in terms of the norms at which they were aiming rather than the sound actually produced' (Labov 1966:455).

Because of findings such as Labov's and the problem encountered in Bailey and Timm's research above, I chose not to gather data by the use of self-report questionnaires. My aim was to test as accurately as possible the actual swearing patterns of the participants and the best method of doing this seemed to be by recording real conversations. Recording data can also be problematical; I believe that subjects must be informed of the presence of a tape recorder but this knowledge can alter the results obtained. However, it was apparent that participants soon became accustomed to the fact that they were being recorded and conversation was, for the most part, uninhibited. Given that neither method of obtaining data is perfect, I believe that the recording method achieved a better picture of things than would have been possible with a questionnaire.

The subjects were all known to me, all resident in Dunedin, N.Z. at the time of the survey, and all except one were students at the University of Otago, Dunedin, N.Z. There were eight participants in the survey, four men (mean age 25) and four women (mean age 27). Three of the eight had had some religious background but none of the participants was a practising member of any church. One of the subjects identified as working class with the remaining seven identifying as middle class.

Recordings were made of single-sex groups in an informal social setting. A female friend acted as the technician for the all-female group and her data were not included, nor were my own contributions in the all-male and mixed-sex groups which I coordinated. Conversation was not directed by the other coordinator or myself. Since everyone in the room knew at least one other person, the sessions were fairly typical of a social gathering with a wide range of topics being discussed. Participants were aware that their conversation was being recorded but were not told exactly what was being sought in the way of data; they

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were informed only that the study was to focus on 'some aspects of New Zealand speech'. Hopefully this has gone some way to avoiding the problem by which knowledge of what is being researched renders the participants self-conscious. A third group was then set up which included three representatives from each single-sex group: it was found on the basis of the first two recordings with five people in the room that a recording of eight participants plus one co-ordinator would have been impossible to assess due to conversational overload. Attempting to listen to a recording of multiple conversations occurring simultaneously in the same room is not recommended, and the mixed group of six subjects plus myself proved to be the maximum workable number. The choice of which two participants from the first two groups would not be present for the third was made solely on the basis of who was available at the time suggested for the recording.

Each group was recorded in conversation over a C-90 cassette and the analysis was based on a conversation length of 83 minutes, that being the elapsed time of the shortest recording of the three. Analysis has been based on the total of strong expletives for each group rather than on a ratio of swear words per minute of speech for each respondent. A breakdown of speaking time for each participant, while beyond the scope of my original assignment, would prove fruitful in a further analysis of these results, and is something I hope to attend to in the future.

Single-sex groups:	Male	97
	Female	91
	Total	188
Mixed-sex group:	Male	64
	Female	83
	Total	147

As Table III shows, in the single sex situation the female participants used a total of 91 strong expletives; the total for the male respondents was 97. This result supports my initial hypothesis that there would be only a slight difference in the total number of expletives used by men and women when in the company of their own sex. In the

mixed-sex situation the totals were 83 (female) and 64 (male). This result was most interesting given the expectation that women restrict their strong expletive usage in the presence of men. It must be remembered that these totals are for groups of different numbers (only three members of each sex were present in the mixed situation), but when an average number of strong expletives is computed for each group as a percentage of the total number of tokens in each situation the trend is still marked.

Figure 1: Tokens as percentage of total for each context

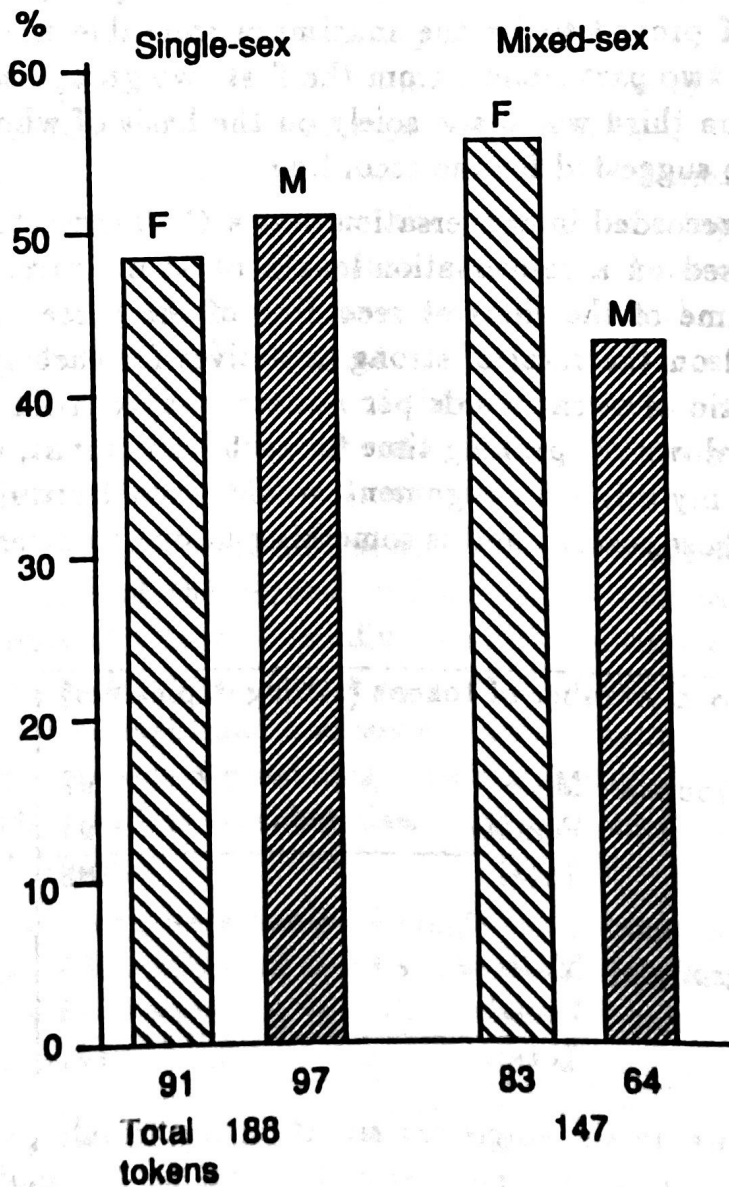


Figure 1 shows that from a total of 188 tokens (the combined figure of the tokens for each same-sex group) the male expletive tally of

97 constitutes 52% of the combined total. The female total of 91 constitutes 48% of this combined total. However, when the total of 147 tokens for the mixed-sex group is analysed it is found that the women contributed 56% of that total with 83 strong expletives, as compared with the men whose total of 64 strong expletives constitutes only 44% of the combined total.

Furthermore, with the exception of speaker A (male), who used more strong expletives in the mixed-sex situation than he did when with men alone, each speaker's total rose or fell in accordance with the trend for her or his sex. The reason for speaker A's rise in usage is unclear. In the course of a post-experiment interview, Speaker A predicted that his use of strong expletives would have declined in a mixed-sex situation. This decline, he said, would have been caused by his awareness that 'women swear less than men - don't they?' When I informed him of the results, and of his personal rise in expletive use in the mixed-sex situation, he speculated that perhaps he had been unconsciously attempting to assert his masculinity or make himself noticed (in the same way that Bailey and Timm's respondent indicated). At any rate, his trend is not indicative of the other male speakers present, since there is still a significant correlation between the number of expletives for each of the six speakers in single and mixed-sex contexts ($r = +0.74$, $p < 0.05$). This result is produced by the fact that the males reduced their strong expletive use more in a mixed-sex context (from 83 SS to 64 MS) than the females increased theirs in the mixed-sex context (from 76 SS to 83 MS).

Discussion

These results suggest that both sexes are demonstrating accommodation in the mixed-sex context. That is, each would appear to have modified its expletive use to take into account a situation where members of the opposite sex were present. An accommodation model such as that discussed by Bell (1984:162) hypothesises that speakers accommodate their speaking style so that it becomes more like that of the addressee (convergence) in order to win approval. I believe, however, that the forces behind the apparent accommodation here may be slightly different.

The findings of Oliver and Rubin and Bailey and Timm discussed

above suggest that men expect women to use fewer strong expletives than they do, and that women expect men to use more expletives in conversation than is actually the case. These expectations, nurtured by unsubstantiated claims like Lakoff's, have ramifications for linguistic accommodation in mixed-sex contexts. The males in the present survey have displayed a trend away from strong expletive usage when in the company of women. It is reasonable to assume that the reason for this is an awareness of the presence of female speakers and a consequent desire not to offend. By reducing their frequency of expletive use, the male participants have followed the expected stereotype that women are less coarse in their language. Rather than attempting to win approval from the female speakers, the male form of accommodation is more suggestive of an attempt not to give offence. Thus the downward trend displayed by the men is in keeping with male perceptions of female language as discussed above. The women, on the other hand, have displayed a move away from the expected norm by increasing their use of strong expletives, and I believe it necessary to attempt to explain this further.

Coates discusses the issue of how women express themselves in a male-centred society by reviewing the work of Henri Tajfel, a social psychologist who works in the field of inter-group relations and social change (Coates 1986:8). Tajfel argues that if a group rejects its inferior social status, several strategies may be employed. One of these is to assimilate to the values of the dominant ideology or power group. Coates finds evidence of this strategy in the actions of women who operate in the business and political arenas which have traditionally been the exclusive domain of men. She contends that women in these professions display an assimilatory linguistic style by using deeper voices, swearing and using taboo language and adopting a more assertive style of group interaction. These, she says, are examples of women redefining themselves in terms of male values (Coates 1986:10). One could thus argue, along the lines of Coates and Tajfel, that the women in this survey display an assimilatory tendency by increasing their expletive usage to fall in line with perceived male patterns.

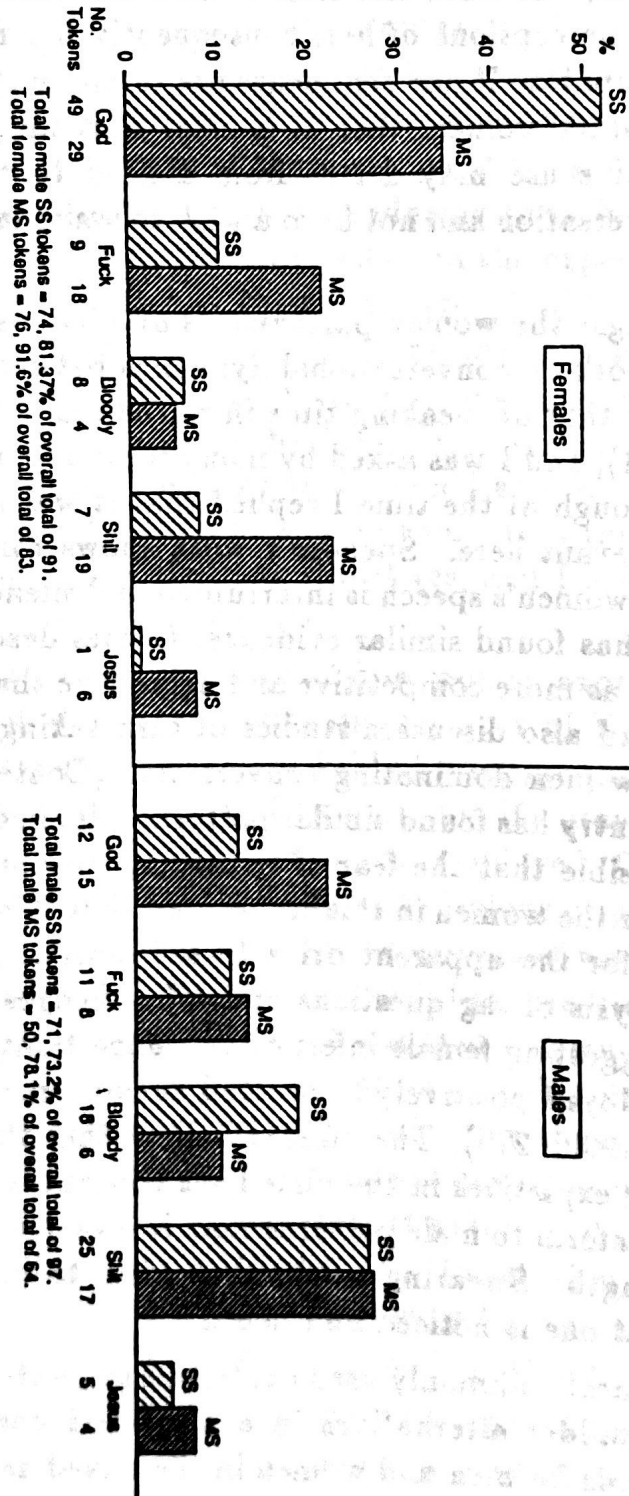
However, the model described by Coates implies that the women in question accept the male model as worth emulating. In fact, I suspect that the accommodation displayed by the female speakers here is more likely to be based upon a desire for self-assertion. When one

of the female participants was informed of the results of the survey, she suggested that she is more likely to use strong expletives to assert herself when in male company than in a situation where there are only women present. Here, she said, she feels more comfortable and less conscious of others' perceptions of her; consequently her need to use strong language dissipates. If her comments are in any way typical of the feelings of the other women, then it is clear that the motivation for increased expletive use may derive from a need to resist being marginalised in conversation and not from a wish to assimilate to male-focussed ideology.

There was amongst the women participants an obvious awareness of Dale Spender's work on conversational dynamics between men and women, particularly that of speaking time in mixed-sex conversations (Spender 1980:41-51), and I was asked by many if my research was on similar issues. Although at the time I replied that it was not, clearly such research is relevant here. Spender's work shows that in many speaking situations women's speech is interrupted and silenced by men and other research has found similar evidence. Coates describes male conversational style as more competitive and aggressive than women's (Coates 1986:11) and also discusses studies of turn-taking and interruptions which show men dominating conversation (Coates 1986:97). Research in this country has found similar patterns (Holmes 1990a:10). I thus feel it is possible that the fear of remaining unheard or unnoticed is quite real for the women in this survey and that this fact would have ramifications for the apparent drive to self-assertion. Furthermore, Holmes' analysis of tag questions and other hedges has shown that rather than suggesting female inferiority or uncertainty, these devices are often employed positively by women as conversational tools (Holmes 1990a:11, 1990b:270). Therefore, I believe that the increased female use of strong expletives in the mixed-sex context is less indicative of a desire to conform to male patterns than it is of a need to assert conversational strength. Swearing would thus seem to be a possible way of ensuring that one is noticed and heard.

Analysis of the most commonly used expletives suggests a tendency for women to use milder alternatives in a single-sex context. The highest-totalling items for men and women in the mixed-sex group are found in Figure 2. Male use of the five highest-totalling words was far more evenly distributed than was the case for women. In the all-female

Figure 2: Comparison for each sex of tokens in single and mixed-sex contexts.



group, not only did *(oh)(my)god* account for 54% of the total number of expletives used by the women, but it was also the most commonly used expletive for each individual speaker. It seems reasonable to suggest that *god* has a lower taboo loading than *shit* or *fuck*. If so, then a tendency is noticeable in the all-female group towards the use of *god* as a milder expletive than, say, *shit* or *fuck*. A chi-squared analysis based on the use of *god*, *fuck*, *bloody*, *shit*, and *jesus* by the three speakers of each sex who were present in the mixed group shows that the difference in expletive use of the men and women when in single-sex groups is highly significant. That is, the analysis of figures shows that the female speakers did use milder expletives (if we accept that *god* is milder than the others) than the males when in same-sex company. This result suggests further convergence in the mixed-sex context, where the female employment of expletives becomes more evenly distributed with *shit*, *fuck*, and *jesus* all becoming more prevalent (a rise of 23%, 12%, and 6% respectively) and *(oh)(my)god* dropping to 35% of the women's total of expletives in the mixed context. A chi-squared analysis of these figures found that the female speakers' apparent change in expletive usage is statistically significant. It seems plausible that not only did the women accommodate by using a higher total of strong expletives when in the company of the men, but that they also used a wider range of words, veering away from a milder form like *god* in favour of stronger expletives like *jesus*, *shit*, and *fuck*. Figure 2 shows that such a pattern is less clear for the men. Use of *god* rose by 9% and *bloody* dropped by 10%, suggesting a trend to milder words, but here the pattern ends, with instances of *fuck*, *shit*, and *jesus* rising by 2%, 1%, and 1%. In fact, these figures were not found to be statistically significant.

Conclusions

It will be clear that it is not possible to generalise too far from the results of this small sample. However, it is fair to say that this study does provide some evidence to suggest that Lakoff's views on male and female expletive use may not be valid in a contemporary context. Staley's discovery that male and female respondents in her sample used similar numbers of strong expletives is supported here. Although the men and women surveyed in this trial displayed only a small margin between their total of expletives used in a same-sex situation, the ac-

commodation that seems to have taken place in a mixed-sex context has several implications. Not only did the men decrease their expletive total in the mixed group, but women raised theirs to a level well above that of the men and used stronger terms than in an all-female group. I have suggested that it is possible to interpret the drop in the mixed-group male expletive total as a desire not to offend, given the stereotype of women's lesser expletive usage which is found in the work of Lakoff and is evident in the responses of the males surveyed in the studies of both Bailey and Timm and Staley. I have also suggested that the rise in the women's total of expletives in the mixed-sex context is possibly due to an awareness of the patterns of mixed-group interaction which typically see women excluded and interrupted. Such an awareness could easily lead to a higher frequency of strong expletives as the women take steps to ensure that they are not marginalised. This possibility does not presuppose an acceptance of the male standards and may instead reflect a positive move towards self-assertion. In addition, there is evidence here to suggest that women are using words of lower taboo loading than men in single-sex contexts (evidenced by the high occurrence of *god* in the all-female group). Although it would be unwise to accept Staley's final conclusion that the two sexes are becoming equal in their use of expletives (Staley 1978:377), it would seem that the expectations of swearing which Lakoff has promoted are far from accurate in this instance.

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