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# The use of *fuck*: A sociolinguistic approach to the usage of *fuck* in the BNC and blog authorship corpus

Ryan Howe

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The Use of *Fuck*: A Sociolinguistic Approach to the Usage of *Fuck* in the BNC and Blog

Authorship Corpus

by

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Thesis

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## **Abstract**

The present study is a corpus-based approach using both the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Blog Authorship Corpus (BAC) to identify variance in spoken use of *fuck* between genders, age groups, and social classes. The resulting analysis shows that there is little variance in use between male and female speakers, while use is most prevalent during the teens and early 20s. This study offers further support of the idea that there are two distinct meanings of *fuck* that can be separated into two distinct words, *fuck1* and *fuck2*, by showing that a non-referential definition of *fuck* (*fuck2*) is the dominant use between all genders, ages, and social classes.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

*Fuck* has long been regarded as a taboo word, although it seems as if the times are changing. Hughes (2006) states that “the most powerfully taboo term for copulation over several centuries, *fuck* is still regarded as unmentionable by the vast majority of middle-class people” (188). However, this seemingly “unmentionable” word is becoming more and more mainstream. “Although still widely considered taboo and marked as such in most dictionaries, the actual currency of *fuck* is steadily encroaching on areas of polite discourse” (Hughes 2006: 192). In fact, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995) listed *fuck* in the top 3,000 most spoken words and an analysis by Kaye and Sapolsky (2005) showed that *fuck* is among the seventy-five words most often verbalized. As Hughes put it, “Suffice it to say, *fuck* is everywhere” (2006: 13). One recent Internet search even revealed that *fuck* “is a more commonly used word than mom, baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet<sup>1</sup>” (Vanatta 2004: 285). To quote Roy Blount, Jr. “the f-word is a fact of life. It thrives” (1999; xv).

Although it seems that the use of *fuck* is on the rise, many people are upset with the increase in its use in Modern English. Barbara Holland (1995) argues “we ought to get up a committee to protest the increasing use of obscene language in movies and on radio and cable television” (148). One such committee is the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Founded in 1934, the FCC is responsible for regulating radio and television broadcasts for many things including vulgar language. But does regulating speech on radio and television actually stop speakers from using obscene language? The FCC has banned the

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<sup>1</sup> Vanatta 2004 noted that *fuck* had 24.9 million search engine hits compared to *baseball*, its closest competitor, with only 13.6 million hits.



use of *fuck* on radio and television; however, its use has continued to increase, showing that efforts to regulate the media have proven to be ineffective at stopping speakers from using such words.

While many may wish to end the use of profanity, others such as McEnery and Xiao (2006) believe “swearing is a part of everyday language use” (264), and Fairman (2006) argues that “refraining from the use of *fuck* only reinforces the taboo” (5).

*Fuck* is an unusual word in that it can be used as many different parts of speech. It can be used as a noun, adjective, adverb, or interjection. In fact, it can be used as practically any word in a particular sentence such as *Fuck the fucking fuckers* or *The fucking fucker’s fucked*, as spoken by a garage-owner passing judgment on an old car (Ljung 2011: 40). Also, it is one of the few words that can be utilized as an infix in words such as *Absofuckinglylutely* and *Infuckingcredible* and even as an expletive slot filler inside non-clausal units such as noun phrases, as in *Henry the fucking Eighth* (Ljung 2011: 143). Fairman (2006) shows that *fuck* can reflect all kinds of emotions: “dismay (*Aw, fuck it*), aggression (*Don’t fuck with me*), intensification (*It’s fucking freezing*), confusion (*Where the fuck are we?*), disinterest (*I don’t give a fuck*), dissatisfaction (*I don’t like what the fuck is going on here*), and suspicion (*Who the fuck was that?*)” (45). Fairman also explains that *fuck* can essentially be two distinct words: *Fuck1* and *Fuck2*. *Fuck1* means literally “to copulate” and is referential, encompassing other uses such as “to cheat,” “to exploit,” and “to deceive.” *Fuck2* does not have any intrinsic meaning at all; rather, it is merely a word that has offensive force (2006: 45). *Fuck1* can be found in the examples for dismay, aggression, and disinterest above, while *fuck2* is shown in intensification, confusion, dissatisfaction, and suspicion.

It becomes clear that there is more to the word *fuck* than simply “to copulate,” and even though the word is still deemed obscene and taboo, there seems to be something to this word that makes people continue to use it. This study has two goals: the first is to determine whether gender, age, or social class affect the use of *fuck*, and the second is to show which meaning of *fuck* (*fuck1* or *fuck2*) is primarily being used.

In the sections to follow, I will begin by giving a background of a few of the previous studies conducted in regard to *fuck* (Chapter 2), followed by a clear outline of the methodology undertaken to complete this study (Chapter 3). This will be followed by an analysis of the findings in the present study divided into sections based upon the search criteria including age, gender, and social class (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 will discuss the findings and any shortcomings of this study. Finally, Chapter 6 will discuss the conclusions we can draw from this study as well as outlining avenues for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Even though the study of swearing has increased over the years, and despite the fact that it is a part of everyday language, to date it has been infrequently researched, with the first studies on swearing not emerging until the 1960s with publications such as Sagarin's (1962) *The Anatomy of Dirty Words* and Montagu's (1967) *The Anatomy of Swearing*.

One of the most common research avenues for scholars studying swearing is to compare and analyze how each gender swears. It was once believed that it was only men who used swearwords, and that women were supposed to be more polite, more correct ones who utilized more standard forms than men. Research by Wayne Wilson (1981) supports this hypothesis, showing that men use *fuck* significantly more than women. Wilson surveyed Midwest college students and asked them to rate their use of certain taboo words. The results showed that male use of *fuck* was 82%, while female use was significantly lower at 50%.

However, newer studies by Trudgill (1983) and Coates (1986), among others, show that the notion of men swearing more than women is outdated and incorrect. Trudgill (1983) argues that "the use of taboo vocabulary is now much more evenly distributed between the sexes than formerly" (163). And Coates (1986) claims that "there is little hard evidence on male/female differences in swearing, though the folklinguistic belief that men swear more than women and use more taboo words is widespread" (108). Coates cites studies such as Gomm (1981), who analyzed transcripts, which showed no quantitative difference in the use of swearwords by men and women. This finding is further supported by a study conducted by Risch (1987), which shows that females do use derogatory language and that they appear to be doing so in increasing numbers.

More specifically with *fuck*, Timothy Jay, in his 1992 book *Cursing in America*, conducted an extensive amount of fieldwork showing that *fuck* is one of the most frequently used taboo words by both men and women. His research found that males uttered *fuck* 379 times compared to the second ranked word *shit*, which was uttered only 224 times. *Fuck*, for females, ranked as the second most uttered taboo word with 136 utterances behind *shit*, which was uttered 159 times. Interestingly enough, his research also confirms the old notion that men swear more than women.

Age is another common research area for scholars studying swearing. Research in this field has been conducted to show when swearing starts and at which ages swearing is most common, as well as comparing how males and females swear at various ages. Timothy Jay (1992), in his seminal work *Cursing in America*, collected instances of swearing in children between the ages of three and ten. His research showed that instances of *fuck* were found in both boys and girls as young as three. The use of *fuck* by children so young may come as a shock; however, it is important to consider that the use of a word like *fuck* by a 3-year-old does not have the same meaning it would have if an adult spoke it. The child is mostly likely just repeating what s/he has heard parents or caregivers say, although what is especially interesting is that the children are using *fuck* with the appropriate intonation and in the right context, showing they know when to use this particular word in its various functions.

Jay explains that “in the first two years boys and girls produce about the same small number (4) of dirty words. At three and four years girls are producing more (23 versus 17) words, but after that age, boys begin to clearly outproduce females” (1992: 37). He goes on

to claim that the trend of males using more dirty words and using them more frequently will continue into adulthood.

As children grow into adolescents, their perception of taboo words seems to change. Vivian de Klerk claims that “adolescents’ perception of these words is obviously not the same as those of many adults. They seem less inhibited in their use of swearwords, not even perceiving them as taboo” (1992: 287).

Most swearing occurs in the course of normal conversations, not just as a result of aggressive, confrontational interactions (Johnson 2012). Swearing is a part of daily life and is used even in the workplace. In a 1969 study of conversations heard in natural settings, Kaye and Sapolsky (2001) found that foul language was used in 3.5 percent of on-the-job conversations. Furthermore, in a study of swearing in the “Tradie” environment in Australia, McLeod (2011) observed that swearing, and in particular *fuck*, was functioning as a marker of solidarity in the workplace context. Although this is a study of the Australian dialect of English, its findings still show that this word is used frequently and in ways other than the referential *fuck1* manner. These recent studies go to show that swearing is used everywhere, including the workplace.

Swearing is often thought to be reflective of poor education and inadequate vocabulary; however, the study of swearing between the social classes has shown that it is present in all social classes, although research has shown that lower social classes swear with a greater frequency than higher social classes. Coates (1986) believes that there seems to be a conflict occurring between women and their social classes. As stated above, women are said to strive for use of more Standard English; however, the working, lower class is characterized as using more slang, swearing with more frequency, and, as Hughes suggests,

is linked with masculinity and toughness (1992: 291). Gordon (1997) reports that “in societies where social stratification is reflected in speech, women – especially middle-class women – tend to use more of the standard or prestige variants than men” (47). Coates (1986) suggests that “the behavior predictable on the basis of their social class will be incompatible with the behavior predictable on the basis of their sex” (74), meaning that women seem to be judged according to their gender, rather than other aspects including class and economic situation. This is demonstrated by women being expected to not swear because of the stereotypes of their gender; the fact that they may be in a lower social class and therefore would be more likely to swear is not considered.

Instead of collecting data through field studies for each research endeavor, corpora are now being utilized to provide large quantities of data to be used for analysis. McEnery and Xiao have used one such corpus to specifically study *fuck*. Their 2006 study of the use of *fuck* in the British National Corpus (BNC) serves as the primary inspiration for this study. In their work, McEnery and Xiao incorporated much of the previous research in the individual categories of gender, age, education, and social class to analyze *fuck*'s use in each of these categories. Not only did they study the word *fuck*, but also they considered its various forms including *fucking*, *fucked*, *fucker(s)*, and *fucks* (plural noun as well as in verb form).

Tony McEnery (2006) details how *fuck* and many other swearwords are used in Britain. He also takes a look at the sociolinguistic categories such as gender, age, and social class similar to those he used in his study with Xiao. In addition to the focus on swearing in modern English, McEnery analyzes swearing throughout history, starting in the sixteenth century.

Magnus Ljung (2011) provides an extensive cross-cultural linguistic study of swearing. In his book, Ljung utilizes the BNC to identify how specific swear words were used and attempts to provide one single definition of swearing applicable to all languages.

In her comparison of the use of *fuck* in the business worlds of British and American English, Julie Esbensen (2009) argues that there is a difference in the use of *fuck* between Brits and Americans. She analyzed the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) as well as the BNC and categorized the use of *fuck* into one of four categories: Abusive swearing, insult, dysphemism, and expletive (Esbensen 2009; 105). Her results showed that *fuck* was much more prevalent in British English than in American English, indicating that “a difference in taboos exists between the two cultures” (Esbensen 2009; 118).

Esbensen’s analysis may not be correct, however; as Magnus Ljung (2011) notes, “It is a well-known fact that the BNC has no American counterpart, and that to form an opinion of American expletive slot fillers we have to turn to American corpora that differ from the BNC in several respects” (146). He goes on to argue that “one of these is the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*,” which is precisely the basis for Esbensen’s American data.

Although I believe Ljung is correct in his declaration that the COCA cannot stand up with the likes of the BNC, I disagree with his claim that such an American corpus does not exist. I believe there does exist such an American corpus of spoken language that can compete with the BNC, and that corpus is the Blog Authorship Corpus. Although much research has already been conducted studying *fuck* in the BNC, no research has yet been conducted attempting to analyze the use of *fuck* in blogs, which is where the present study will fill in the gaps.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

The present study was carried out by conducting an analysis of two different corpora: the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Blog Authorship Corpus (henceforth BAC). The BNC was available online and was accessed via BNCweb, a web-based application available for free access to the BNC. The BNC is a 100-million-word corpus containing both written and spoken British English samples. This corpus was designed to include data from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with the intention of creating a representative sample of the written and spoken British English at that time. Because this study is only concerned with how *fuck* is spoken, only the spoken section of the BNC was used. The spoken part of the BNC accounts for 10% (approximately 10 million words) of the total data included in the corpus and consists of “orthographic transcriptions of unscripted informal conversations (recorded by volunteers selected from different age, region, and social classes in a demographically balanced way) and spoken language collected in different contexts, ranging from formal business or government meetings to radio shows and phone-ins” ([bnc]).

The BAC was available for free download online. This corpus consists of “the collected posts of 19,320 bloggers gathered from blogger.com in August 2004” and contains over 140 million words from American English speakers (“The Blog Authorship Corpus”). The blog is separated by gender and then into various age groups ranging from ages 13-17, 23-27, and 33-47 and contains an equal number of male and female bloggers.

Both corpora were analyzed according to age and gender, while the BNC was additionally analyzed according to social class. The BNC was annotated to include four categories of social classes: AB, C1, C2, and DE. AB represents the upper class, while DE represents the lower class, with C1 being upper middle class, and C2 being lower middle



class. Even though the BAC was not annotated for social class by its creators and is not included in the analysis of social class use of *fuck*, it is nevertheless important to see how *fuck* is used in the different social classes, which is why the study will use data from the only corpus included in this study that was annotated for social class: the BNC.

In contrast to the other studies included in Chapter 2, this study is only concerned with one form of the word—namely *fuck*. Other forms like *fucking*, *fucked*, and *fuckers* were not included in this study. *Fuck* was searched for in each corpus and frequency rates were recorded and categorized according to the search-criteria (age, gender, social class). Clusters were also of importance to this study and were recorded from both the BNC and the BAC in Tables 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14. Clusters are a string of words occurring in succession. Some examples of clusters found in this study would be *what the fuck* or *fuck it*. For this study, two to four word clusters involving *fuck* were collected and analyzed. The clusters from the BAC were compiled using the freeware program AntConc, while the clusters from the BNC were compiled from the website “Phrases in English.” By analyzing clusters involving *fuck*, the exact meaning of *fuck* becomes apparent.

The data shown in Chapter 4 will be illustrated in tables. An example table has been included below with fictitious data included for explanatory purposes.

<b>Gender</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	30,000	35	4/39	1166.67
<b>Female</b>	30,500	37	12/48	1213.11
<b>Total</b>	60,500	72	16/87	1190.39

**Table 1: Example Table**

In these tables, “No. of words” refers to the total number of words included in the corpus from the specified category, in this case Gender. “No. of hits” refers to the total number of

utterances of *fuck*. The first number included in the data under the “Dispersion (over speakers)” heading refers to the total number of speakers producing instances of *fuck*, whereas the second number refers to the total number of speakers who produced the total number of words included in the “No. of words” heading. Finally, “Frequency per million words” was calculated using a formula dividing the total number of hits by the total number of words for a given category, then multiplied by one million. This frequency statistic attempts to show how many times the word *fuck* would statistically show up in a sample of one million words. Another term that will be used in this study is ‘teenage’. For the purposes of this study, ‘teenage’ will refer to the first two age groups included in the respective corpora, namely 0-14 and 15-24 for the BNC and 13-17 for the BAC.

## Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

After searching both the BNC and the BAC, the data were compiled and will be displayed in Tables 1-23 to follow in sections according to gender, age, and social class, as well as an analysis of clusters involving *fuck*.

### 4.1 Gender

Tables 2 and 3 show the frequencies of *fuck* in the BNC and the BAC according to gender. The data show that males produced a higher total number of words included in the BNC (4,949,938 compared to 3,290,569) totaling approximately 60%, while females produced the larger number of total words in the BAC, although the distribution is more even with the females producing approximately 51% of the total words in the given corpus.

<b>Gender</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	4949938	336	77/2448	67.88
<b>Female</b>	3290569	107	35/1360	32.52
<b>Total</b>	8240507	443	112/3808	53.76

**Table 2: Gender Usage in BNC**

<b>Gender</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	336	77/2448	3.15%	4.36
<b>Female</b>	107	35/1360	2.57%	3.06
<b>Total</b>	443	112/3808	2.94%	3.96

**Table 3: Gender Usage in BNC cont.**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, a study by Wilson (1981) showed that men used *fuck* significantly more than women; however, other studies such as those by Trudgill (1983), Coates (1986), Gomm (1981), and Risch (1987) suggest that the use of swearwords and specifically *fuck* is much more evenly distributed. When looking at the BNC, the present

study appears to side with Wilson’s findings with the data suggesting that men are twice as likely to produce *fuck* than women (Table 2). More than twice as many males were found to produce over three times as many instances of *fuck*. However, after normalizing the data, a process by which the total number of speakers producing instances of *fuck* for each gender were divided by the total number of speakers contained in the corpus from each gender, the data suggest that the studies by Trudgill, Coates, Gomm, and Risch, not Wilson, are correct in that the use of *fuck* is evenly distributed between men and women. Table 3 shows that 3.15% of the males included in the corpus produced at least one instance of *fuck*, compared to 2.57% of females. Furthermore, although the number of males and females using *fuck* is almost equal, males are still using *fuck* slightly more frequently than females, with the average male speaker in the BNC producing approximately 4.36 *fucks* compared to 3.06 for females.

<b>Gender</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	70,857,961	15,308	2166/9660	216.04
<b>Female</b>	73,307,163	13,656	2122/9660	186.28
<b>Total</b>	144,165,124	28,964	4288/19320	200.91

**Table 4: Gender Usage in BAC**

<b>Gender</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	15,308	2166/9660	22.42%	7.07
<b>Female</b>	13,656	2122/9660	21.97%	6.44
<b>Total</b>	28,964	4288/19320	22.19%	6.75

**Table 5: Gender Usage in BAC cont.**

The data from the BAC again suggest that men produce more instances of *fuck* than women (Table 4); however, the difference is only slight. Males produced only 53% of the

total number of instances of *fuck*, and an almost even number of males and females produced *fuck* with 22.42% of males and 21.97% of females producing at least one instance of *fuck*. As with the data from the BNC, even though there are an almost equal number of males and females producing *fuck*, males still produce a higher number of *fucks* at 7.07 than females at 6.44.

## 4.2 Age

Age is considered a strong factor when it comes to the use of swearwords as use is thought to decrease as speakers' age increases. Tables 6 and 7 show that this is indeed true.

Age				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
0-14	385,234	103	23/258	267.37
15-24	594,400	186	48/302	312.92
25-34	1,120,516	86	19/351	76.75
35-44	1,075,749	8	8/335	7.44
45-59	1,638,364	47	4/436	28.69
60+	1,137,433	3	2/318	2.64
Total	5,951,696	433	104/2000	72.75

**Table 6: Age Usage in BNC**

Age				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
0-14	103	23/258	8.91%	4.48
15-24	186	48/302	15.89%	3.88
25-34	86	19/351	5.41%	4.53
35-44	8	8/335	2.39%	1.00
45-59	47	4/436	0.92%	11.75
60+	3	2/318	0.63%	1.50
Total	433	104/2000	5.20%	4.16

**Table 7: Age Usage in BNC cont.**

After diving into the BNC we are able to see that the highest frequency of usage belongs to the age groups of 0-14 and 15-24. In fact, these age groups produce the largest

number of hits even though they are responsible for the fewest number of words in the BNC of any other age group. Table 7 shows that 8.91% of those in the 0-14 age group and 15.89% of the 15-24 year-olds included in the corpus produced at least one instance of *fuck*.

Once moving beyond the teenage group, the instances of *fuck* decrease along with the percentage of speakers from each age group who used *fuck* in every case except for the 45-59 age group. As shown in Table 6, the 45-59 age group produced 47 instances of *fuck*, which would indicate a drastic increase in use. This is seemingly significant; however, the Dispersion (over speakers) column of the table shows that only four speakers were responsible for these 47 hits, and upon further inspection, 34 of the 47 hits come from one speaker. This means that even though there is a drastic increase in number of hits, this increase is directly affected by one particular speaker and is not characteristic of the age group as a whole.

The above data show that swearing decreases after the teenage years, which is an idea shared by Holmes (1992), who argues:

The extensive swear word vocabulary which some teenagers use is likely to change over time [...] Though they continue to know these terms, the frequency with which they use them often diminishes, especially as they begin to have children and socialize with others with young families (183).

Age	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
13-17	47,075,376	12,572	2040/8240	266.06
23-27	69,131,227	13,477	1792/8086	194.85
33-48	27,958,521	2,915	456/2994	104.26
Total	144,165,124	28,964	4288/19320	200.91

**Table 8: Age Usage in BAC**

<b>Gender</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>13-17</b>	12,572	2040/8240	24.76%	6.16
<b>23-27</b>	13,477	1792/8086	22.16%	7.52
<b>33-48</b>	2,915	456/2994	15.23%	6.39
<b>Total</b>	28,964	4288/19320	22.19%	6.75

**Table 9: Age Usage in BAC cont.**

When analyzing the BAC it is again clear that the highest percent of speakers using *fuck* belongs to the youngest age group, in this case the 13-17 year old group, with 24.76% of speakers using *fuck* at least once (Table 9). Just as in the BNC, the data in the BAC show that as the age of the speaker increases, the number and percentage of speakers in the group using *fuck* decreases (Table 9). It is interesting to note that even though the percentage of speakers using *fuck* is at its highest in the 13-17 age group, these speakers produce the fewest *fucks* per person on average. It is the 23-27-year-olds who are responsible for the greatest number of instances of *fuck* as well as the largest average number of *fucks* per speaker.

### 4.3 Age and Gender

When comparing age and gender in the BNC, it becomes evident that males are producing more instances of *fuck* than females in each age group (Table 10).

<b>Gender/Age: 0-14</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	224,388	91	19/152	405.55
<b>Female</b>	160,846	12	4/106	74.61
<b>Total</b>	385,234	103	23/258	267.37
<b>Gender/Age: 15-24</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	237,033	109	25/143	459.85
<b>Female</b>	357,367	77	23/159	215.46
<b>Total</b>	594,400	186	48/302	312.92
<b>Gender/Age: 25-34</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	549,763	82	15/201	149.16
<b>Female</b>	570,544	4	4/149	7.01
<b>Total</b>	1,120,307	86	19/350	76.76
<b>Gender/Age: 35-44</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	558,419	7	7/190	12.54
<b>Female</b>	517,330	1	1/145	1.93
<b>Total</b>	1,075,749	8	8/335	7.44
<b>Gender/Age: 45-59</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	1,086,180	36	2/303	33.14
<b>Female</b>	550,563	11	2/132	19.98
<b>Total</b>	1,636,743	47	4/435	28.72
<b>Gender/Age: 60+</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	537,802	2	1/117	3.72
<b>Female</b>	599,631	1	1/201	1.67
<b>Total</b>	1,137,433	3	2/318	2.64

**Table 10: Age and Gender Comparison in BNC**

Throughout every age group, men have a higher frequency than do women. The previous finding in section 4.2 suggesting that the use of *fuck* decreases with age again proves true; however, the outlier present in the 45-59 age group is again causing the data to be skewed. As noted in 4.2 above, 34 of the 47 total instances of *fuck* present in the 45-59 age group were spoken by one speaker. Looking further into this anomaly, it becomes evident that these 34 *fucks* were spoken by a single male speaker, causing the average



number of *fucks* per speaker statistic to result in a figure much higher than would be truly representative of the age group. When a large number of hits are observed with very few speakers producing such instances, it is important to dive further into the data and check for outliers like this. After noting 11 hits by two female speakers in the same 45-59 age range, which could indicate another outlying speaker, a closer look at the corpus reveals a more balanced distribution with one speaker producing 6 instances of *fuck* and the other producing 5. This shows that the average *fucks* per speaker statistic is more representative of the present data than it was for the males in this age group.

Table 11 shows us that a higher percentage of males are producing *fuck* than females and that statistically each of these males is producing slightly more instances of *fuck* than females.

<b>Gender/Age: 0-14</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	91	19/152	12.50%	4.79
<b>Female</b>	12	4/106	3.77%	3.00
<b>Total</b>	103	23/258	8.91%	4.48
<b>Gender/Age: 15-24</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	109	25/143	10.29%	4.36
<b>Female</b>	77	23/159	8.88%	3.35
<b>Total</b>	186	48/302	15.89%	3.88
<b>Gender/Age: 25-34</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	82	15/201	7.46%	5.47
<b>Female</b>	4	4/149	2.68%	1.00
<b>Total</b>	86	19/350	5.43%	4.53
<b>Gender/Age: 35-44</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	7	7/190	3.68%	1.00
<b>Female</b>	1	1/145	0.69%	1.00
<b>Total</b>	8	8/335	2.39%	1.00
<b>Gender/Age: 45-59</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	36	2/303	0.66%	18.00
<b>Female</b>	11	2/132	1.52%	5.50
<b>Total</b>	47	4/435	0.92%	11.75
<b>Gender/Age: 60+</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	2	1/117	0.85%	2.00
<b>Female</b>	1	1/201	0.50%	1.00
<b>Total</b>	3	2/318	0.63%	1.50

**Table 11: Age and Gender Comparison in BNC cont.**

In the BAC, a search comparing age and gender produces data suggesting again that males are producing more instances of *fuck* than females (Table 12) although further analysis shows that females actually produce more instances of *fuck* than males in the age group of

33-48 (1585 compared to 1330). In fact, this is the only occurrence of females producing *fuck* more than males in any age group in both the BNC and the BAC.

<b>Gender/Age: 13-17</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	23,566,248	6971	1067/4120	295.80
<b>Female</b>	23,509,128	5601	973/4120	238.25
<b>Total</b>	47,075,376	12,572	2040/8240	267.06
<b>Gender/Age: 23-27</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	33,710,157	7007	891/4043	207.86
<b>Female</b>	35,421,070	6470	901/4043	182.66
<b>Total</b>	69,131,227	13,477	1792/8086	194.95
<b>Gender/Age: 33-48</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>Male</b>	13,581,556	1330	208/1497	97.93
<b>Female</b>	14,376,965	1585	248/1497	110.25
<b>Total</b>	27,958,521	2915	456/2994	104.26

**Table 12: Age and Gender Comparison in BAC**

Table 13 shows that 16.57% of females included in this age group produced at least one instance of *fuck* compared to only 13.89% of males.

<b>Gender/Age: 13-17</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	6971	1067/4120	25.90%	6.53
<b>Female</b>	5601	973/4120	23.62%	5.76
<b>Total</b>	12,572	2040/8240	24.76%	6.16
<b>Gender/Age: 23-27</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	7007	891/4043	22.04%	7.86
<b>Female</b>	6470	901/4043	22.29%	7.18
<b>Total</b>	13,477	1792/8086	22.16%	7.52
<b>Gender/Age: 33-48</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	1330	208/1497	13.89%	6.39
<b>Female</b>	1585	248/1497	16.57%	6.39
<b>Total</b>	2,915	456/2994	15.23%	6.39

**Table 13: Age and Gender Comparison in BAC cont.**

It is also of note that although females produced a fewer number of hits in the 23-27 age group, a higher percentage of speakers was found producing at least one *fuck*. Even though slightly higher percentages of females were found to be using *fuck*, the percentages are almost equal, unlike the data from the BNC. What is important is that although an approximately equal number of males and females were found using *fuck*, males are still continually found to be producing more instances of *fuck* per person than females, which has been the case throughout both the BNC and BAC.

#### 4.4 Social Class

As stated in Chapter 3, the BAC is not annotated for social class, so the only data collected for this section came from the BNC. The BNC classifies speakers into four social classes: AB, C1, C2, and DE<sup>2</sup>. AB is composed of top or middle management, administrative, or professional persons. Those in C1 are junior management, supervisory, or clerical. C2 are skilled manual workers, and DE are semi-skilled or unskilled workers. Table 14 shows the distribution between the social classes of the data present in the BNC.

<b>Social Class</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
<b>AB</b>	<b>817,205</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>8/131</b>	<b>35.49</b>
<b>C1</b>	<b>782,234</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>10/114</b>	<b>46.02</b>
<b>C2</b>	<b>719,884</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>14/99</b>	<b>130.58</b>
<b>DE</b>	<b>451,485</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>13/85</b>	<b>210.42</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,770,808</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>45/429</b>	<b>91.67</b>

**Table 14: Social Class Usage in BNC**

<sup>2</sup> Not all of the speakers included in the entire BNC spoken section are labeled according to social class, as can be seen with the total hits for all social classes being only 254. The following analysis is of those speakers whose social class was marked.

Research into swearing between social classes discussed in Chapter 2 has shown that there is a belief that speakers of a lower social class would produce more utterances of *fuck* than those in higher classes, and the data collected from the BNC show that this is true (Table 14).

<b>Social Class</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>AB</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>8/131</b>	<b>6.11%</b>	<b>3.63</b>
<b>C1</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>10/114</b>	<b>8.77%</b>	<b>3.60</b>
<b>C2</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>14/99</b>	<b>14.14%</b>	<b>6.71</b>
<b>DE</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>13/85</b>	<b>15.29%</b>	<b>7.31</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>45/429</b>	<b>10.49%</b>	<b>5.64</b>

**Table 15: Social Class Usage in BNC cont.**

Even though the total number of words decreases steadily when moving top down through the social classes in Table 15, the number of hits and number of speakers producing hits continues to rise, producing a much higher frequency per million words for speakers in class DE (210.42) than for speakers in class AB (35.49). When considering Table 15, the percentage of speakers using *fuck* also increases when moving down through the classes; however, there seems to be an interesting grouping occurring. The percentage of speakers using *fuck* and the statistics for the average instances of *fuck* per speaker are almost equal for those in classes AB and C1. The same can be seen with C2 and DE. It appears as if there is some close relationship among the groups with a clear dividing line separating those in C1 and C2.

#### **4.5 Social Class and Age**

When looking at the use of *fuck* through various ages within different social classes, interesting information presents itself.

<b>Age/Social Class: AB</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
0-14	67,473	8	2/23	118.57
15-24	88,307	19	4/11	215.16
25-34	117,463	1	1/14	8.51
35-44	103,224	0	0/10	0
45-59	197,650	0	0/20	0
60+	176,814	1	1/12	5.66
<b>Total</b>	<b>750,931</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>8/90</b>	<b>38.62</b>
<b>Age/Social Class: C1</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
0-14	93,000	12	5/36	129.03
15-24	93,106	16	2/18	171.85
25-34	145,282	8	3/18	55.07
35-44	238,661	0	0/21	0
45-59	156,749	0	0/13	0
60+	53,007	0	0/7	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>779,805</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>10/113</b>	<b>46.17</b>
<b>Age/Social Class: C2</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
0-14	79,536	31	3/21	389.76
15-24	65,060	20	4/21	307.41
25-34	186,252	38	3/18	204.02
35-44	152,500	3	3/15	19.67
45-59	152,153	0	0/15	0
60+	77,583	0	0/6	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>713,084</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>13/96</b>	<b>129.02</b>
<b>Age/Social Class: DE</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
0-14	5,626	0	0/8	0
15-24	84,996	43	6/16	505.91
25-34	78,205	5	3/11	63.93
35-44	51,753	0	0/4	0
45-59	106,493	45	3/15	422.56
60+	88,019	0	0/9	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>415,092</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>12/63</b>	<b>224.05</b>

**Table 16: Social Class and Age Comparison in BNC**

For instance, the only social class with any data in the 45-59 age group that was so anomalous earlier is DE. In the DE social class there are 45 instances of *fuck* produced by the 45-59 year old age group, which happens to be more than any other age group in any of the

four social classes, followed closely by the 15-24 year old age group, which contains 43 utterances (Table 16) and happens to also belong to the DE social class. This means that the outlying male speaker in the 45-59 age group who produced 34 instances of *fuck* discussed above belongs to this social class. It is also interesting to note that the 25-34 age group in the C2 social class produces by far the most utterances of *fuck* out of any other social class in the same age group even though there is roughly the same number of speakers. These large numbers of hits from such a small group prompt further digging to check for more outliers.

<b>Age/Social Class: AB</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
0-14	8	2/23	8.70%	4.00
15-24	19	4/11	36.36%	4.75
25-34	1	1/14	7.14%	1.00
35-44	0	0/10	0.00%	0.00
45-59	0	0/20	0.00%	0.00
60+	1	1/12	8.33%	1.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>8/90</b>	<b>8.89%</b>	<b>3.63</b>
<b>Age/Social Class: C1</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
0-14	12	5/36	13.89%	2.40
15-24	16	2/18	11.11%	8.00
25-34	8	3/18	16.67%	2.67
35-44	0	0/21	0.00%	0.00
45-59	0	0/13	0.00%	0.00
60+	0	0/7	0.00%	0.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>10/113</b>	<b>8.85%</b>	<b>3.60</b>
<b>Age/Social Class: C2</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
0-14	31	3/21	14.29%	10.33
15-24	20	4/21	19.05%	5.00
25-34	38	3/18	16.67%	12.67
35-44	3	3/15	20.00%	1.00
45-59	0	0/15	0.00%	0.00
60+	0	0/6	0.00%	0.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>13/96</b>	<b>13.54%</b>	<b>7.08</b>
<b>Age/Social Class: DE</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
0-14	0	0/8	0.00%	0.00
15-24	43	6/16	37.50%	7.17
25-34	5	3/11	27.27%	1.67
35-44	0	0/4	0.00%	0.00
45-59	45	3/15	20.00%	15.00
60+	0	0/9	0.00%	0.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>12/63</b>	<b>19.05%</b>	<b>7.75</b>

**Table 17: Social Class and Age Comparison in BNC cont.**

Further research into the BNC data shows that, in the 25-34 age group of the C2 social class, 34 of the 38 hits were spoken by one speaker, resulting in another outlier.



Additional research into the large number of hits produced by 0-14-year-olds in the C2 social class shows that 13 of the 31 instances of *fuck* were spoken by one speaker in one sentence: “She goes, Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck really loud yeah she goes fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck” (KR2 335<sup>3</sup>). This same speaker produces an additional four instances recorded in another similar sentence bringing the total *fucks* for this speaker up to 17. Due to these outliers, the data displaying the percentage of speakers using *fuck* and the average instances of *fuck* per speaker statistics in Table 17 may be distorted.

#### **4.6 Social Class and Gender**

When considering social class and gender, the data in Table 18 show that males continue to produce more instances of *fuck* than females. And again, when looking at Table 19, males are shown to produce higher average instances of *fuck* than females, continuing the trend shown throughout the rest of the data.

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<sup>3</sup> Data cited herein have been extracted from the British National Corpus, distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. All rights in the texts cited are reserved.

<b>Gender/Social Class: AB</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
Male	382,183	27	6/82	70.65
Female	433,301	2	2/48	4.62
<b>Total</b>	<b>815,484</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>8/130</b>	<b>35.56</b>
<b>Gender/Social Class: C1</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
Male	307,709	18	6/52	58.5
Female	474,525	18	4/62	37.93
<b>Total</b>	<b>782,234</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>10/114</b>	<b>46.02</b>
<b>Gender/Social Class: C2</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
Male	251,564	71	9/52	282.23
Female	468,320	23	5/47	49.11
<b>Total</b>	<b>719,884</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>14/99</b>	<b>130.58</b>
<b>Gender/Social Class: DE</b>				
	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	Frequency per million words
Male	211,405	76	8/46	359.5
Female	236,991	19	5/35	80.17
<b>Total</b>	<b>448,396</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>13/81</b>	<b>211.87</b>

**Table 18: Social Class and Gender Comparison in BNC**

<b>Gender/Social Class: AB</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	27	6/82	7.32%	4.50
<b>Female</b>	2	2/48	4.17%	1.00
<b>Total</b>	29	8/130	6.15%	3.63
<b>Gender/Social Class: C1</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	18	6/52	11.54%	3.00
<b>Female</b>	18	4/62	6.45%	4.50
<b>Total</b>	36	10/114	8.77%	3.60
<b>Gender/Social Class: C2</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	71	9/52	17.31%	7.89
<b>Female</b>	23	5/47	10.64%	4.60
<b>Total</b>	94	14/99	14.14%	6.71
<b>Gender/Social Class: DE</b>				
	No. of hits	Dispersion (over speakers)	% of speakers using fuck	Avg. fucks per speaker
<b>Male</b>	76	8/46	17.39%	9.50
<b>Female</b>	19	5/35	14.29%	3.80
<b>Total</b>	95	13/81	16.05%	7.31

**Table 19: Social Class and Gender Comparison in BNC cont.**

By looking at social class C2, the outlier producing 34 instances of *fuck* from the 25-35 age group must be male because females are only recorded as uttering *fuck* a total of 23 times in this class. Furthermore, the 0-14 year old C2 speaker who produced 17 instances of *fuck* is shown to be male as well.

As the data throughout this study have so far shown, a higher percentage of male speakers have been found to use *fuck* at least once in each of the social classes. As with the finding in 4.5 above, there seems to be a grouping between classes AB and C1 and then C2 and DE, as well as with the males and females in the grouped classes. In fact, an almost equal

percentage of males in C2 and DE produced at least one instance of *fuck* (17.31% for C2 males and 17.39% for DE males) as shown in Table 19.

#### 4.7 Clusters

Word clusters can help to understand words in context, and an analysis of the clusters involving *fuck* will help to shed some light as to how *fuck* is being used. A common belief and stigma associated with the word *fuck* is that it is a negative word—a *swearword*. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) gives various definitions of *fuck* as well as listing several phrases/clusters involving the word; however, it does not take into account the cluster that appears on average more than twice as often as any other cluster (Simpson & Weiner 1989). The cluster *the fuck* shows up as the most frequent cluster involving the word *fuck* in the entire BNC, in each of the age groups in the BAC, as well as in the BAC as a whole (Tables 20-24)<sup>4</sup>. It seems a bit odd that the world’s most respected English dictionary would not include a cluster shown to be overwhelmingly the most frequent use of *fuck*.

In the case of *the fuck*, *fuck* has no precise meaning and is similar to a particle in that it does not affect the overall meaning of the sentence, as is the case in a sentence such as *Who the fuck are you?*, but simply is responsible for adding emphasis. The data below also show that this cluster appears most often with a *wh-* word (such as: who, what, when, where, why) as indicated by the appearance of *what the fuck* in the second ranking spot in the BNC for 2-4 gram clusters involving *fuck*, as well as its appearance in the remaining top cluster lists of the BAC.

As explained in Chapter 1, Fairman (2009) notes that there can essentially be two distinct words: *Fuck1* and *Fuck2*. *Fuck1* means literally “to copulate” and is referential,

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the lack of data from the BNC, analysis of age and gender clusters was not included for this corpus.

encompassing other uses such as “to cheat,” “to exploit,” and “to deceive” (45). However, the data in Tables 20-24 show that the vast majority of the time *fuck* is not used in a referential manner and does not fit into Fairman’s *Fuck1* definition, but rather into the definition of *Fuck2*. *Fuck2* is a word without any intrinsic meaning at all. Rather, it is merely a word that has offensive force (45). By analyzing the clusters involving *fuck*, it becomes apparent that the most common use of the word *fuck* is not the referential *Fuck1*, but rather *Fuck2*, which contradicts the entry in the OED.

Rank	Cluster	No. of hits
1	the fuck	208
2	what the fuck	96
3	to fuck	91
4	oh fuck	72
5	a fuck	43
6	the fuck are	29
7	to fuck off	28
8	who the fuck	23
9	the fuck is	23
10	the fuck are you	23

**Table 20: 2-4 Gram Clusters for BNC**

Rank	Cluster	No. of hits
1	the fuck	6712
2	fuck fuck	3407
3	fuck you	3148
4	what the fuck	2978
5	fuck fuck fuck	2279
6	fuck it	1911
7	to fuck	1484
8	fuck I	1418
9	fuck fuck fuck fuck	1396
10	fuck up	1259

**Table 21: 2-4 Gram Clusters for entire BAC**

Male			Female		
Rank	Cluster	No. of hits	Rank	Cluster	No. of hits
1	354	the fuck	1	383	the fuck
2	179	what the fuck	2	171	what the fuck
3	91	fuck you	3	132	fuck you
4	81	to fuck	4	131	to fuck
5	79	fuck up	5	84	fuck me
6	70	fuck it	6	83	fuck it
7	51	fuck is	7	59	fuck up
8	49	fuck the	8	54	fuck fuck fuck
9	48	the fuck is	9	54	fuck that
10	43	a fuck	10	53	fuck off

**Table 22: 2-4 Gram Clusters in BAC for Males and Females 13-17**

Male			Female		
Rank	Cluster	No. of hits	Rank	Cluster	No. of hits
1	1719	the fuck	1	1496	the fuck
2	763	what the fuck	2	690	what the fuck
3	596	fuck you	3	502	fuck you
4	439	fuck it	4	418	to fuck
5	327	fuck up	5	402	fuck it
6	308	to fuck	6	256	fuck up
7	262	fuck off	7	252	fuck off
8	246	fuck is	8	225	a fuck
9	238	a fuck	9	214	fuck is
10	229	the fuck is	10	195	the fuck is

**Table 23: 2-4 Gram Clusters in BAC for Males and Females 23-27**

Male			Female		
Rank	Cluster	No. of hits	Rank	Cluster	No. of hits
1	1470	the fuck	1	1109	the fuck
2	713	fuck you	2	518	fuck you
3	629	what the fuck	3	496	what the fuck
4	400	fuck it	4	308	fuck it
5	289	fuck off	5	258	fuck off
6	263	fuck up	6	224	fuck fuck fuck
7	256	fuck is	7	221	to fuck
8	236	to fuck	8	216	fuck up
9	231	the fuck is	9	215	a fuck
10	209	a fuck	10	187	fuck fuck

**Table 24: 2-4 Gram Clusters in BAC for Males and Females 33-48**

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The data presented thus far have shown that males and females use *fuck* at approximately the same rate, with males producing slightly more instances. The teenage age group has been shown to be responsible for the highest frequency of use, with use trailing off as the speakers age increases. The data have also shown that the lowest social class use *fuck* with the highest frequency, with this frequency decreasing as the social classes rise. Finally, the data have shown that the non-referential use of *fuck* (*fuck2*) is by far the most common way this word is being spoken. The most common cluster is *the fuck*, which is not even included as a possible use in the OED, demonstrating that this word needs to be relooked at.

One of the main things to consider when analyzing the results from both the BNC and the BAC is that the corpora contain different types of speech. The BAC contains blog entries, while the BNC contains strictly spoken conversations. Blog entries are a difficult medium to classify because they are not necessarily written speech; however, they are not exactly spoken speech either. Because of this reason, the information included in the BAC may be somewhat distorted. With a blog, a person is free to discuss anything including things that the blogger may feel too embarrassed to discuss in a public setting or with another person directly. These speakers may feel they have more freedom in their speech due to anonymity and lack of any repercussions they may have had to deal with if they had produced the same utterances in conversation.

Another thing to take into account is the size of the corpora. The BNC is a 100 million-word corpus with only 10% being spoken, while the BAC contains over 140 million words. While these corpora are of drastically differing size, Chapter 4 has shown that, in both corpora, a slightly higher percentage of male speakers used *fuck* at least once and that

again males produced a higher average number of *fucks* per speaker than women. By having significantly more data, the BAC may be considered to produce a more accurate description of male/female use of *fuck*.

The common belief that men swear more frequently than women is supported by the data; however, the present study has shown support for the findings of Trudgill (1983), Coates (1986), and Risch (1987) in that the use of *fuck* is much more evenly distributed between males and females.

Age seemed to be a factor when it comes to the use of *fuck*. Those fitting into the teenage group (the youngest groups in both corpora) seemed to produce some of the most instances of *fuck*. This may be surprising to those who choose to believe that children at this age should not have been exposed to words such as *fuck*, but children are exposed to this type of language and, from the data presented above, it is clear that they are beginning to experiment with using this language on their own.

When considering the sections on age, it is important to note some variables that may have influenced the data. First, a common trend showed that the number of words for an age group generally decreased as the age increased, excluding the “teenage” age group. As discussed in Section 4.2, Holmes’ argument as to the high frequency belonging to the teenage group is supported by the data found in the BNC and the BAC. Comedian Lewis Black describes the first time young people utter this word by stating:

...Because it’s a sin, using it is so enticing to the young that when they hear it for the first time they are spellbound. And when they *use* it for the first time, that F and the U bang so deliciously against the hard K, ripping through the lips, it’s as if a caged animal has been unleashed. They feel that they have taken that first mighty step



toward adulthood. Some of them may even repeat it over and over, testing to see if God will strike them down for saying it.

(Lewis Black in Sheidlower 2009: vi)

Swan (1980) argues that “children usually avoid swearing in front of adults, so as not to shock or annoy them, and adults avoid swearing in front of children for similar reasons” (589). Although this may be true, it appears as if children are nevertheless using *fuck* in increasing frequency.

For females, age seems to be a crucial factor affecting use of *fuck*. In a study conducted by Bailey and Timm (2005), the authors found that females over 43 refrained almost entirely from using strong expletives. A similar study by Oliver and Rubin (1975) produced similar results, noting that “the avoidance of strong expletives seemed more characteristic of women over 40 than of their younger counterparts” (438). The present study presents similar results in that the percentage of female speakers using *fuck* drastically drops in this age group; however, in the case of the BAC, a higher percentage of female 33-48 year-old speakers were found to be producing *fuck* than their male counterparts (16.57% to 13.89%). Even so, females of this age group were found to be producing only a slightly lower average number of *fucks* per speaker than they did in each of the other age groups.

The study of clusters provided interesting information about the use of *fuck*. The most common cluster was *the fuck*, which, unfortunately, is not included in the OED as a common cluster/phrase. Many believe that *fuck* is simply a vulgar word referring to a sexual act; however, when its clusters are analyzed it is shown that *fuck* takes on a completely different, non-referential meaning. *The fuck*, when used together most often with a *wh-*

word, becomes a means for emphasis, which is contrary to the vulgar definition included in the OED.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to identify whether the use of *fuck* varies between genders, age groups, and social classes, as well as to determine which meaning of *fuck* (*fuck1* or *fuck2*) is primarily used. To complete this analysis, a study was conducted of the data presented in both the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Blog Authorship Corpus (BAC). The corpus analysis found that *fuck* was used slightly more by males than females. Although the difference is slim, it was found throughout the various categories in questions. These findings challenge those of Wilson (1981) by showing that males and females are using *fuck* with approximately the same frequency. By considering clusters, the present study showed that *fuck* is not being used in the traditional referential manner (*fuck1*), but is being used for emphasis (*fuck2*).

### 6.1 Future Study

I hope to be able to revisit this topic again in my future research. It would be interesting to attempt to discover which conversational topic triggers the most instances of *fuck* in both the BNC and the BAC.

Another issue that needs to be investigated would be to examine the varying forms of *fuck* and how they are used over the same categories as researched in this study. A study of this nature could ideally include such forms as *fucking*, *fucked*, and *fucker(s)*. This research would be more similar to that of McEnery and Xiao (2004).

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