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Introduction to the Discursive Functions of *Fuck* and *Shit*

I. INTRODUCTION

Profanity operates under a number of aliases, including “swearing,” “cussing,” “cursing,” “profanity,” “expletives,” “blaspheme,” “bad words,” and “obscene or foul language” (Mohr 2013: 10-11, Oxford English Dictionary). These descriptions all point at language (on the lexical level) that can be regarded as taboo in certain situations. Although the terms can be distinguished from each other, I will use them interchangeably in my analysis.

By the very nature of the class of words, profanity has historically been largely ignored by the academic community. English profanity has been studied very little apart from small-scale investigations into the offensiveness of certain words, and the profanity of non-Western languages is nearly untouched (Bergen 2016: 18). To be sure, profanity is more difficult to study due to a lack of discourse data involving profane tokens. Conversations that tend to be recorded are not those in which profanity thrives. One relevant note is that it is not just a lack of conversational data that hinders analysis of profanity. In the class corpus of HONOR narratives, for example, there were no instances of *fuck*, *shit*, or *bitch*, and only one instance of *damn*. *God* was used in a “profane” manner only twice. From this, we can see that there are a number of conditions that must come together for profanity to be studied in depth.

I set out to investigate profanity because it reveals aspects of language that might otherwise go unnoticed and, in doing so, reveals hidden characteristics of human interaction (Bergen 2016: 5). My aim was to uncover and begin unpacking the language we so often try to keep boxed up. I intended to understand how and why speakers use profanity. I used J. R. Firth’s well-cited philosophy that we should “know a word by the company it keeps” as a guiding approach to the analysis (Firth 1957).

II. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To investigate profanity from a discourse-functional approach, I used The Santa Barbara Corpus of American English (SBCSAE), which is a “large body of recordings of naturally occurring spoken interaction from all over the United States” (Du Bois et al.). Among other relevant characteristics, it includes a wide range of conversational types and speaker backgrounds.

Bergen (2016) identifies four categories of human interaction that tend to “produce” profane words, which they describe as the Holy, Fucking, Shit, Nigger Principle (Bergen 2016). These, respectively, correspond to religion and religious activities (such as “hell” and “goddamn”); sex/copulation; bodily functions such as excretion; and slurs, which refer to groups of people. Interestingly, these categories are not necessarily taboo in themselves, but language describing them “tend[s] to become profane” (Bergen 2016: 25).

In my analysis, I began with five prototypical, though somewhat arbitrary words: *bitch*, *shit*, *fuck*, *god*, and *Jesus*. After an initial sift through the queries with these words, I decided to focus on non-slur and non-religious categories of profanity. That left the Fuck and Shit classes. Fuck and Shit tend to be less offensive in that they are not explicitly demeaning (as slurs are) and don’t directly infringe on the most sacred of topics (as Holy words do). *Nigger* doesn’t occur in the SBCSAE, whereas *god* alone is used over 160 times in the corpus conversations.

Specifically, I turned to the two most prototypical and obvious words in the Fuck and Shit categories: *fuck* and *shit*. Clearly, no analysis of these two words can properly address the use of all taboo language. However, the words were used enough in the corpus to make them appropriate for an initial discourse-functional dive into a small subset of profanity in English.

With the investigation in a more manageable scope, I looked at queries of all forms of *fuck* and *shit*. This included instances of *fuck*, *fucks*, *fucking*, *fucked*, but only the unmarked form *shit* appears in the corpus. There were ten instances of *bullshit*. However, they were not included in the data analysis as I concluded that they were far enough from *shit* to be considered another swear word. In the end, I performed analyses on all intonation units involving *fuck* and *shit*, accompanied by the preceding and succeeding five intonation units of the occurrence. An example of an occurrence is shown in excerpt (1). I used a simple text editor to view the excerpts, and CLAN and ANTCONC to browse through audio-linked files of interest.

(1) SBCSAE003

302 ALICE: ... About % ... the way ... they were feeling,

303 ... of them being the only ones cleaning the house,
 304 and all this other shit?
 305 ... (H) I mean what they don't realize,
 306 is like,
 307 ... **[[shit]]**,
 308 when !Ron gets home from wor=k,
 309 ... I wanna spend time with !Ro=n,
 310 because !Ron,
 311 ... usually doesn't get home till @nine or ten.
 312 MARY: ... Yeah=.

The gathered data is summarized in **Table 1** of the appendix; the instances number of instances of *fuck* and *shit* are detailed for each recording that included speaker(s) using *fuck* and/or *shit* at least once, along with a description of the conversation as given in the SBCSAE. Some of the descriptions were shortened. In total, there are 45 instances of *fuck* and 61 instances of *shit* in the corpus. These were distributed over 19 of the 60 transcripts; the other 41 recordings did not include any instances of *fuck* or *shit*. Noteworthy in terms of number of uttered *fuck*'s and *shit*'s is transcript 024, involving an intimate couple in a very relaxed environment. The speakers in this transcript utter almost five times more the number of *fuck*'s than in any other transcript. This involves repeated exclamatory instances in response to the video game in which the speakers are engaging.

Also included in the appendix (**Table 2**) is listing of the some of the lexical items used in this paper with their definitions according to the Oxford English Dictionary. “Fuck”, “profanity”, and “expletive” are among the entries. The table is primarily relevant only in that it serves as contrast between the discursive distribution and function of words and their prescriptive definitions. For example, “curse” is defined as using an “offensive word” to “express anger or annoyance.” As we will see, this limited-scope definition is far from describing how speakers “curse” in the discourse.

III. ANALYSIS

The data reveal three trends that I will focus on in my analysis. The first is that *fuck* and *shit* frequently co-occur with the discourse marker *oh*. The second is that both *shit* and *fuck* also collocate with the discourse marker *you know*. We will then discuss the turn-taking

characteristics of *fuck* and *shit*. Lastly, I will argue that these trends suggest that *fuck* and *shit* are markers of speaker engagement in the SBCSAE. Before enumerating these patterns in detail, I will begin with general comments of the data relating to publicly-held beliefs about swearing.

It is notable that *shit* is used only once in its most literal sense: to refer to feces. Similarly, speakers did not use *fuck* to index copulation or any sort of sexual interaction in the corpus. Clearly, these expletives extend semantically far beyond their denotations as defined in the public eye (again, see **Table 2** for prescriptive definitions of these terms). Another public-inspired association with profanity is that it is aggressive and impolite (Jay and Janschewitz 2008: 268). Jay and Janschewitz found that, in practice, profanity is only sometimes used aggressively. Based on “thousands of instances of recorded swearing,” they conclude that “swearing can be polite, impolite, or neither and it may be used with any emotional state” (Jay and Janschewitz 2008: 269). Data from the SBCSAE suggests likewise. Although concluding whether or not an interlocutor considered an utterance impolite is a complex task, identifying aggression is more manageable; *fuck* was used (as a verb) only twice with a human object (exemplified in excerpt (2)), and *shit* is used twice in a demeaning way (exemplified in excerpt (3)). Thus, profanity can be used in aggressive, offensive ways, but it is certainly not restricted to that context. In fact, we find that the majority of utterances involving *fuck* and *shit* in the SBCSAE are not intended to be hurtful or demeaning, at least from the point of view of an observer.

(2) SBCSAE006

75 ALINA: and he keeps star2]ing at my chest,
 76 and it's [3like3],
 77 LENORE: [3@3]@[4@@@@@@@@@4]
 78 ALINA: [4You know,
 79 [[f=uck]] you,
 80 asshole,
 81 why don't you look at my <F fa4]=ce F>.
 82 LENORE: @@ [5<@ Oh shit @>5].

(3) SBCSAE001

3 LYNNE: ... Anyway,
 4 this girl must only weigh like,
 5 a hundred and ten pou=nds.
 6 (H) .. I mean,
 7 **she's just a little [[shit]].**
 8 and she's out there,

9 and she's got hu=ge arms.

Fuck and *shit* collocate with *oh* in the corpus data. In ten of the instances of *shit*, *oh* occurred either in the same or immediately preceding intonation unit. The former case is exemplified in (4), in which Lenore offers a surprised reaction to Alina's narrative. Her "Oh" precedes "shit," and occurs in the same intonation unit. The same pattern is followed almost exactly in five other instances of "oh" and "shit" collocations.

(4) SBCSAE006

243 ALINA: [4You know,
244 f=uck you,
245 asshole,
246 why don't you look at my <F fa4]=ce F>.
247 LENORE: @@ [5<@ Oh [[shit]] @>5].
248 ALINA: [5(H)5] But he didn't believe me I was ma=r[6ried6].
249 LENORE: [6(H)6]

The other case is exemplified in (5), in which Mary similarly expresses surprise in response to Alice's introduction of new information. In this situation, the "Oh" precedes "shit" as in the previous example, but they occur in distinct intonation units. Three other instances of *shit* are patterned very similarly.

(5) SBCSAE007

327 MARY: ... (TSK) Oh,
328 ma=n.
329 ALICE: ... Cause that five-car pile up they had between Hardin and Crow?
330 MARY: ... Oh=,
331 [[shit]],
332 really?
333 I didn't hear about it.
334 ALICE: ... Yeah.
335 ... !Ron was s=inglehandedly there.

I was not able to identify any factors that would influence which pattern was exhibited, and more data would be needed to address this question thoroughly. As such, I considered the two cases (same IU versus preceding IU) to be the same in my analysis.

The last case of *shit* that I considered to be in co-occurrence with *oh* is actually preceded by *ah* (see excerpt (6)). This begs for research on the distribution of *oh* and *ah*; how, if at all, are they related? The parallel form suggests the expressions could be related but is not sufficient to make any conclusions.

(6) SBCSAE006

220 LENORE: [3% <@ She's terrified @> @@@@3].
 221 ALINA: and she's going,
 222 <Q Ah=3],
 223 [[sh=it]].
 224 LENORE: @
 225 ALINA: Auntie ~Lina's here again,
 226 .. I am leaving Q>.
 227 @@@@ @So @she wants to [go out on the balcony],

Although not as strong of a pattern, speakers also use *fuck* to follow and *oh* exclamation. This is the sequence we see in example (7). A similar pattern is attested five more times in the recordings. However, four of these are from the same recording.

(7) SBCSAE024

149 ... That's me,
 150 ... XX
 151 JENNIFER: ... <WH Oh= [[fuck]] WH>.
 152 DAN: ... <WH Wow,
 153 he wiped my ass out WH>.
 154 >MAC: ... ((BEEP_BEEP_BEEP))
 155 JENNIFER: ... Ah=,

The collocation of *oh* and *shit* and of *oh* and *fuck* in the corpus may be part of a larger linguistic pattern. In the Corpus of Contemporary American English, *oh* is the most frequent collocate of *shit* and the second most frequent collocate of *fuck*, when searching with a range of plus or minus four words (these are ignoring “!” as a collocate). Additionally, *fuck* and *shit* are among the most frequent collocates of *oh*; *fuck* ranks 30th while *shit* ranks 16th.

The discursive function of *oh* has previously been addressed in literature. Strauss and Feiz point to Heritage (1985) in labeling *oh* as a “change of state token,” signaling a state transition involving “a change in [their] locally current state of knowledge, orientation, or awareness” (Strauss and Feiz 2014: 196, Heritage 1984: 299). Strauss and Feiz later argue that the utterance of *oh* by a speaker B in response to a speaker A indicates that speaker B considers speaker A’s utterance “new” and “newsworthy” (2014: 197). In doing so, speaker B frames the information as valuable and, in turn, communicates a high degree of interest in speaker A -- or, at the very least, the information that speaker A transmitted. In summary, *oh* is a marker of engagement among interlocutors. With this in mind, and in finding that *shit* and *fuck* collocate with *oh*, it seems reasonable to conclude that *shit* and *fuck* may also be markers of engagement.

Fuck and *shit* often co-occur with another discourse marker: *you know*. In eight of the 45 instances of *fuck* in the corpus, *you know* occurs within five intonation units of the profane utterance. Perhaps a more convincing consideration is when we discount the 19 instances in recording 024 in which the speakers are less focused on their interaction than their conversation (and in which no *you know*'s occur), *you know* appears 30% of time in conjunction with *fuck*. An example of *fuck* and *you know* collocation is shown in excerpt (8). Immediately following Fred's strong assertion involving profanity is the discourse marker *you know*.

(8) SBCSAE047

437 RICHARD: [That's the last thing you] wanted to hear.
 438 FRED: Yeah really.
 439 % .. This [[**fuck**]]ing mayate.
 440 **You know**,
 441 getting on my case.
 442 RICHARD: Yeah.
 443 FRED: ... @@@
 444 ... [(H)]

Similarly, eleven of the 61 *shit*'s in the SBCSAE occur within five intonation units of *you know*. An example of *fuck* and *you know* collocation is shown in excerpt (9).

(9) SBCSAE015

364 (TSK) (H) He drops the goldfish into the tank,
 365 and the goldfish goes and sw- swims around,
 366 minding his own little business,
 367 eating glop and all that [[**shit**]],
 368 **you know**,
 369 that fish do,
 370 (H) and the Oscar sneaks up behind it,
 371 and opens its mouth.

You know is less predictable than *oh* in the recordings as it does not consistently occur in a specific location relative to the swear word. Whereas *oh* occurred before the profanity, *you know* simply accompanies it.

Like *oh*, *you know* has been studied with a discourse-function approach. Östman (1981) offers an extensive analysis of *you know* as a “pragmatic particle” or discourse marker (Östman 1981: 15). They propose a “prototypical meaning” of *you know* that can be characterized by “a speaker striv[ing] towards getting the addressee to cooperate and/or to accept the propositional content of [their] utterance as mutual background knowledge” (Östman 1981: 17). Further, they emphasize

that it is a *striving* by one speaker to engage a speaker in a specific way. They suggest that *you know* is a speaker begging for a sort of common ground between them and their addressee.

In studying the “Oh shit” occurrences, I noticed that, not surprisingly, they often occur in a turn transition. In fact, only one did not occur in a turn transition. In other words, all but one either marked the beginning or the ending of a turn for the speaker. This led to identification of a larger trend: 38 of the 61 *shit* instances in the corpus occur as a turn transition. Additionally, 31 of the 45 *fuck* instances occurred “in transition.” We see this sort of speaker turn transition in excerpt (10). Perhaps more evident than with *oh* and *you know*, *fuck* and *shit*’s correlation with turn transition can be analyzed as an index of interactivity and speaker engagement. Indeed, the swear words coincide with the back-and-forth -- the interaction -- itself.

(10) SBCSAE004

- 52 SHARON: and I can't acce]ss the file.
 53 (H) <<THUMP>> li[2ke2],
 54 CAROLYN: [2@G2]o=d.
 55 SHARON: what kind of [[fuck]]ing @law [3is tha=t.
 56 KATHY: [3@@@@@3]
 57 SHARON: (H)3] that you're gonna tell me=,
 58 that,
 59 you know,
 60 this [kid might] have to wait,

In summary, we have seen that *fuck* and *shit* in the SBCSAE tend to:

- a) co-occur with *oh*,
- b) co-occur with *you know*,
- c) and occur in turn transitions.

Further, I have argued that these three correlations, both independently and jointly, suggest that *fuck* and *shit* are highly interactional; they mark a high degree of engagement among interlocutors. The cause and effect of the engagement and swearing remains unclear as we have simply identified a correlation between the two.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I used the SBCSAE to perform a simple discourse-motivated analysis of profanity. Although there were many possible characterizations of the data, I found three trends particularly relevant: collocation with *oh*, collocation with *you know*, and coincidence with speaker turn transitions. From these characterizations emerged a common theme: a high degree of speaker engagement. Thus, we have identified reason to believe that profanity is related to levels of interactivity in discourse. Of course, we used only two cases of profanity (*fuck* and *shit*) and a single corpus to suggest such a correlation. The conclusions must therefore be considered within that context. The first natural step in expanding this limited-scope analysis of English profanity is to look at a larger range of words, perhaps over multiple corpora. More research on profanity will be necessary before we gain a cursory understanding of the language that we are often told to steer away from. Most importantly, there is a need to investigate profanity in non-Western languages.

Appendix

Table 1: Summary of instances of *fuck* and *shit* in the SBCSAE

SBCSAE Index	Title and Description (from SBCSAE)	<i>fuck</i>	<i>shit</i>
001	This is a conversation recorded in rural Hardin, Montana. Mae Lynne is a student of equine science, and is the main speaker. She is telling Lenore (a visitor and near stranger) about her studies. *	0	1
002	After-dinner conversation among four friends in San Francisco. Participants are in their late twenties or early thirties. Harold and Jamie are a married couple, Miles is a doctor, and Pete is a grad student from Southern California.	0	1
003	A conversation among three friends who are preparing dinner together, recorded in Southern California. Roy and Marilyn are a married couple, and Pete is a friend visiting from out of town. All participants are in their early thirties.	4	7
004	Family conversation recorded in Santa Fe, NM. The primary participants are three sisters all in their twenties.	2	7
006	A very lively interaction between two female cousins in their mid-thirties, recorded in Los Angeles.	1	7
007	Late-night conversation between two sisters, recorded in Montana. The participants are Crow Indians.	2	6
015	A conversation among three friends, recorded in Los Angeles. Ken and Joanne are a couple, and Lenore is a friend of theirs.	1	2
017	A conversation between two male friends, recorded in Southern California.	1	0
024	This segment consists of game-playing and game-teaching on a computer, and was recorded near Cape Cod, MA. Jennifer and Dan are a couple in their early twenties.	19	6
028	A very intimate telephone conversation between a romantic couple in their early twenties.	1	0
032	A face-to-face conversation that takes place at an outdoor neighborhood 'block party' in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The three main participants are neighbors, age 60 and upward, all of whom happen to be named Tom.*	0	1
033	A lively family argument/discussion recorded at a vacation home in Falmouth, Massachusetts. There are eight participants, all relatives or close friends.*	1	1
042	Family argument and task-related talk, recorded in Pasco, Washington. The recording begins in a car, and moves to the kitchen of a family home. Main participants are three teenage sisters (Sabrina, Kendra, and Marlana), their mother (Kitty), and step-father (Curt).*	1	4
045	Face-to-face conversation recorded in the living room of an apartment in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Two friends (Corinna and Patrick) are talking and watching TV. Topics are at times rather raunchy.	3	9
047	Face-to-face conversation between two cousins (Fred and Richard) in their early thirties, recorded in a private home in east Los Angeles, CA.*	3	1
051	Conversation recorded before and during dinner, in a private home in Laguna Beach, CA. There are four speakers, ranging in age from mid forties to early fifties. Sean and Bernard are a couple, Fran is a long-time	1	0

	friend visiting from New York. Alice is also a friend of Sean and Bernard, but had never met Fran.*		
052	Phone conversation between family members at Christmas. Andrew and Cindy, a couple in their mid forties in Albuquerque, NM, are calling Andrew's sisters in San Antonio, TX.*	0	1
057	Task-related talk, a recording of a judo class in Shreveport, Louisiana. The five students and their instructor are males between the ages of 22 and 37.*	1	0
060	Face-to-face casual conversation recorded in an office in Shreveport, LA. The two speakers, Jon (age 72) and Alan (age 66) are friends/co-workers taking a break from work.*	4	7
Total		45	61

* Description shortened from that given in the SBSCAE

Table 2: Oxford English Dictionary entries for several words frequently used in this paper

Entry	Sample of Definitions
“fuck”	1. v. Have sexual intercourse with (someone). 2. v. Damage or ruin (something).
“shit”	1. n. Faeces 2. n. Something worthless; rubbish; nonsense. 3. n. Things or stuff, especially personal belongings. 4. v. Expel faeces from the body. 5. v. Tease or try to deceive (someone). 6. (vulgar slang) An exclamation of disgust, anger, or annoyance.
“profanity”	1. n. Blasphemous or obscene language.
“curse”	1. n. An offensive word or phrase used to express anger or annoyance. 2. v. Utter offensive words in anger or annoyance.
“expletive”	1. n. An oath or swear word.

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