“Oh my goodness!”

A corpus investigation of euphemisms from a sociolinguistic perspective

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and scope

"Swearing is a part of everyday language use"

-McEnery, Xiao & Tono (2006: 264)

Everyone knows what swearing is as swearing is a common feature of our language in today's society, but what is considered taboo has changed through history. One of the reasons why the status of swearing has changed is increased frequency of use. Also, there are many different types of swearing, and what is considered a bad word in one country or society may not be stigmatized in another. What is considered as inappropriate in one society or by one group of people is not necessarily as bad as we think. Swearwords are unique because they can be used to express different emotional states. They can also be used to express anger and frustration or to express surprise and to put emphasis on something.

When we want to avoid causing offence we can substitute swearwords with the less offensive euphemisms. Euphemisms are not only used to replace swearwords, but they are also used to mask words related to social taboos such as death with euphemisms like *pushing up daisies* instead of saying someone is *dead and buried*. But why do we swear, and why do we choose to use a euphemism instead of a swearword? Research has proven that swearing and swearwords are something we learn from an early age, but the swearing of young children is harmless and restricted to words such as *pooh-pooh* or *fraidy cat* (Jay & Janschewitz 2008: 272). Through the teenage years our language becomes more complex and we become more prone to swear, but as we get older the frequency of swearwords decreases, especially during the time period when people start having children. We know that swearing is a natural part of language development, but what is interesting is how much male speech differs from female speech in terms of swearing. Studies have shown that men have a tendency to use stronger swearwords than women.

McEnery (2006), McEnery, Xiao & Tono (2006), Thelwall (2008) and Jay (2000) are just a few of the main sources that discuss swearing compared to gender, age and social class. However, I have not been able to find any studies comparing swearing to euphemistic swearing. Learning that female speakers avoid using strong swearwords, I wondered if euphemisms would be more prominent in female speech. This thesis tries to shed light on sociolinguistic differences such as gender, social class and age in the use of euphemistic swearing, to see what communicative functions euphemisms have compared to swearwords mentioned in McEnery's (2006) study and to examine which euphemisms are favored by the different groups.

1.2 The aim of the thesis and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the evidence of differences in the usage of euphemisms by male and female speakers of English with other variables such as age and social class. The main goal of this study is to compare the use of euphemism to swearwords. Exploring the use of euphemisms in male and female speech may give us some insight for further studies. The motivation behind such a study as this one is to understand how male speech differs from female speech and why and how we choose to use one word over another. There are three research questions which are central to this study and will be discussed in chapter 5:

1. Do women use euphemistic swearing more often than men, and are there different euphemisms favored by male and female speakers?

2. Do people from the upper class use euphemistic swearing more than people from the working class? Are certain euphemisms favored by one social class more than the others?

3. Is there a similar pattern for the age groups, and are certain euphemisms favored by one group more than the others?

The present study is a corpus-based investigation and aims to answer the research questions by using material found in the British National Corpus. The euphemisms *gee, heavens, gosh, flaming, blasted, blooming, crikey, blimey, oh my goodness, sugar, heck,* and *darn* were chosen in reference to the swearwords from McEnery's (2006) scale of offence. The scale of offence will be explained more thoroughly in the next chapter. As many of the euphemistic swearwords have homonyms used in other ways, I had to go through the hits from the BNC manually. The method is described in more detail in chapter 3.

1.3 Theoretical Background and Previous Studies

There have only been a few studies related to gender difference in language use and swearing because of the absence of corpus resources. Corpora such as the BNC have made it easier to do research in the sociolinguistic field as the corpus allows us to search through spoken and written language with focus on different demographic variables or genres. Nevertheless**,** to my knowledge**,** no one has ever done a corpus study on the use of euphemisms based on variables such as age and social class. This study is, however, influenced by Thelwall's article 'Fk yea I swear: Cursing and gender in MySpace' (2008) and books such as McEnery's *Swearing in English* (2006). Both studies shed light on how factors such as gender, age and social class affect our choice of words, in this case swearwords, and the distinction between mild and strong swearwords. It was found that younger speakers swear more than older speakers, and that the higher up the social scale the less people swear. It was also found that female speakers swear almost as much as male speakers, but men have a tendency to use stronger swearwords than women. These claims will be discussed more in detail in Chapter 2. Based on the results from these studies the preliminary hypotheses are as follows:

- As women have a tendency to avoid strong euphemisms, I expect to see a higher frequency in their use of euphemisms, or at least in their use of euphemistic counterparts of strong swearwords.

- As people from the upper class have a tendency to swear less than people from the working class, I expect to see higher frequencies of all euphemisms produced by speakers from the upper class compared to the working class.

- As younger speakers swear more than older speakers, I expect younger speakers to use fewer euphemisms than older speakers.

1.4 Thesis outline

Following this introductory chapter, this thesis is organized as follows:

Chapter 2 will focus on the theoretical background of this study, giving insight from previous studies on swearing and how regular swearing compares to euphemistic swearing and how swearing relates to gender, social class, age and even cultural differences. Chapter 3 describes the material and method employed for this study. The selection of the corpus and the choice of material used for this study are made in relation to the historical background of sociolinguistics and corpus study, and also in compliance to previous studies. In Chapter 4 the material will be analyzed and each euphemism will be presented separately, providing a quantitative analysis of the findings. In Chapter 5 the results will be compared to previous studies and euphemisms will be discussed according to gender, social class and age, answering the research questions. Chapter 6 summarizes the main findings of Chapter 5. Chapter 6 ends with concluding remarks and suggestions for further work.

2 Theoretical Background

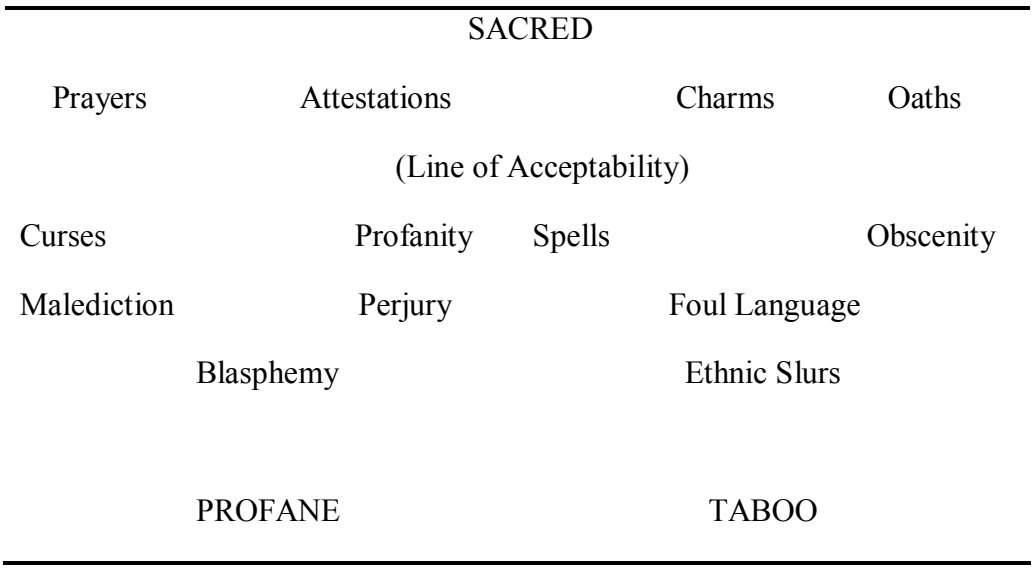
This chapter will define swearing and euphemisms and present theories about social class, age and gender-related language as well as previous studies describing swearwords and euphemism and their functions.

2.1 What is swearing and euphemistic swearing?

According to Jay (1992), swearing is the use of taboo language with the purpose of expressing the speaker's emotional state. The word *taboo* refers to certain words or deeds that are unmentionable because they refer to something sacred or unspeakably vile. "Taboo words are sanctioned or restricted on both institutional and individual levels under the assumption that harm will occur if a taboo word is spoken" (Jay 2009: 153). Swearing is also linked to how we express emotion and there are some emotional forces behind swearwords. They express our feelings and our attitudes and can be used to shock society. Crystal (2003: 173) differentiates between the language of taboo, abuse and swearing by saying that calling someone a *shit* is using a taboo word as a term of abuse, and it if it is said with enough emotional force it would be considered an act of swearing. Taboo words or swearwords can overlap or coincide, but swearing is underlined as a general label for all kind of 'foul-mouthed' language.

Believing that words have the power to change the world, Hughes (2006: 16) created a list of variations and terms of swearing and so-called 'word magic'. The model below shows the different categories of swearwords and the strength of each category.

Figure 2.1 Variations of swearing and Word Magic found in Hughes (2006: 16)



The figure shows that there are many different ways of swearing. The accepted types of swearing include formal swearing, which is a ritual of social compliance and obligation; we swear on the Bible in court. We swear an oath to tell the truth. Someone can be sworn in by being admitted to a particular position. In the case of attestations, we can swear by/on all religious referents, like Jesus or Mary, or we can swear by objects regarded as sacred like '*I swear on my mother's grave'*. Hughes says there is a distinction between mode and content: "In terms of mode, we swear *by* some higher force or somebody; and we swear *that* something is so; we swear *to* do something; we swear *at* something or somebody" (Hughes 2006: 15). When sacred names or objects are used to swear at somebody their modes changes to profanity, blasphemy, imprecation and malediction. Words that are generally used as swearwords do not always have to be offensive depending on the setting. Take for example *Jesus* and *Christ*, these words are not seen as blasphemous when they occur in religious speech or context. Hughes' model of swearing and word magic was designed to give the reader a basic map of the differences between what is accepted or not. It is also pointed out that even if we are familiar with all of these terms and modes today, many of these terms had a different mode in the past and what is called a swearword today may not have been so in the past.

Swearwords or taboo words vary from country to country and from culture to culture. Jay (1992) also offers a classification of different kinds of 'bad language'. He divides 'bad

language' into different types, but only 5 types (cursing, profanity/blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity and scatology) will be mentioned here.
The first category is cursing, which is to call upon divine or supernatural power to send injury upon. Swearing most often refer to holy or religious topics. The original meaning of swearing came from 'to swear an oath by something that is holy', like God, or in honor of someone. The meaning of cursing came from 'to put a curse on someone' (Tottie 2002: 195). Religious cursing would mean using words such as *damn you* or *go to hell*. There is also non-religious cursing where someone wishes to harm the target by saying something like: '*I hope you break your neck*' (Jay 1992: 2). *Hell* is often substituted with the euphemisms *heck* and *heavens*.

The other type is profanity and/or blasphemy, which mean to treat something sacred with abuse, irreverence, disrespect or contempt. However, profanity is often habitual, meaning that to be profane you ignore the guidelines of a particular custom or religious belief. Jay (1992) says that words of profanity are not used to degrade a religious referent or religion, but it shows the speakers' ignorance or indifference to these matters. An example of this is: '*For the love of Christ, get off the phone!*' Blasphemy is an act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God or an attack on religion. The difference between profanity and blasphemy is that blasphemy is more intentional or deliberate, aiming directly at something while profanity is indifferent to subjects such as religion (Hughes 2006: 17). Jay (1992) describes blasphemy as a term or mode that has lost its impact as an insult since the church no longer has power over the people. However, there are communities where blasphemy is not tolerated. Religious swearing differs from country to country. Sex and feces-related swearwords, such as *shit* and *fuck*, are considered the worst swearwords in the US, but swearing involving *God* and *Jesus* are milder swearwords. It is the opposite in Norway, where the strongest swearwords involve religious profanity or blasphemy. According to Ljung (1987); Norwegian swearwords are predominantly directed at religion, and there are only a few swearwords related to sex or sexual terms. Does that mean swearwords involving religion are becoming milder forms of taboo words in Norway? No, says Ljung. Not all of us are practicing Christians, but we can relate to Christianity in one way or another with varying degrees of respect and disrespect. We know that these words are bad and we will therefore shy away from them, at least in public. There are several euphemisms for religious swearwords in the UK, some of them being *crikey*, a euphemism for *Christ*, *blimey*, coming from '*God blind me'* or '*Blind me, God*', *oh my goodness* instead of '*Oh my God'*, *gosh* instead of *God* and *gee*, a euphemism for *Jesus*.

The third type is obscenity, which refers to words that are disgusting to the senses; repulsive: abhorrent to morality or virtue: designed to incite lust or depravity. Hughes (2006: 331) says that the problem with this term is that what is obscene depends on variables relating to age, culture and personal preferences. Nevertheless, obscene words are still considered the most offensive and are rarely used in public. The exception is the word *fuck*, which is the most frequently recorded swearword used in public (Jay 1992: 5).
The fourth type is vulgarity, which refers to the language of common unsophisticated, under-educated people who are lacking in cultivation. "Vulgarity does not serve any particular need or function beyond the normal communication demands of the common human" (Jay 1992: 6). Words that are considered vulgar: *bloody*, *slut*, *up yours*, *piss*, *crap* and *kiss my ass*. *Bloody* is the most common British swearword. It belongs to the group of stronger swearwords, but it has no connection to the traditional taboo words.
The firth type is scatological swearing, which refers to the study of excrement. Scatology is related to the interest in or the treatment of obscene matters. Scatological terms are among the early words that children learn and scatological insults are common among children even though the terms they would use are different from those an adult, like *poop* vs. *crap* or *shit*. Jay (1992) argues that classifying or putting of taboo words into categories allows us to define the types of reference or meaning that the taboo words employ. "One can see that what is considered taboo or obscene revolves around a few dimensions of human experience and that there is a logic or purpose behind dirty word usage" (Jay 1992: 9)

As mentioned in the beginning of section 2.1 swearing is related to the speaker's emotional state. A swearword can be described as a word that kidnaps our attention and forces us to consider its unpleasant connotations. "Connotation is a word's baggage, the emotional associations that go along with it, as opposed to its denotation, its dictionary description" (Mohr 2013: 6). The meaning of a word is usually defined in terms of connotation, the emotion evoked by a word or associations that go with it and its denotation, the mental representation of the set of objects or characteristics a word refers to (Jay 2000: 136). An example is the connotation *dirty* for pigs. Connotations play a role for the semantic motivation of swearwords. In utterances such as '*you pig!*' you attribute dirtiness on the basis of the use of *pig* as an offensive term for people. The attitude expressed by the swearword is not part of the meaning of *pig*. "Curse words are different in that the connotative meaning dominates over the denotative meaning" (Jay 2000: 136). The example from Jay's study is the use of the word *cunt* in Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover where characters describe

genitals, *cunt*, denotatively. This also the case in Chaucer's (2008: 69) Miller's Tale in The Canterbury Tales: "And prively he caughte hire by the queynte", meaning he caught her by her *cunt*. According to Hughes (2006: 133), this part of the Miller's Tale was so embarrassing to the middle-class that Chaucer apologized in advance. This brings us into the field of euphemisms. Instead of using a word such as *cunt*, Chaucer could have chosen a euphemism that would convey the message without upsetting people. While swearwords are emotionally charged words, euphemisms are used to mask or cover up obscenities or things that evoke strong emotions. Through the use of euphemism we can avoid taboo subjects such as death, sex and bodily functions.

Euphemisms can be described as the opposite of swearing. The word originates from Greek 'eu', which means 'good', and 'pheme', which means 'speech' or 'saying', as in to speak in a good way (Hughes 2006: 151). When we want to avoid using words and expressions that are unpleasant or inappropriate we might want to use euphemistic variations to suppress offensive words. In Western society, euphemisms has been related to politeness. Using euphemisms showed that people were aware of their public self-image (Wałaszewska 2010: 62) as cited in (Wałaszewska, Kisielewska-Krysiuk & Piskorska 2010). There are several ways in which a euphemism is formed. A euphemism can be formed by substituting another word free of negative associations for words such as taboo words connected to death. There are indeed a plethora of different euphemisms for the word 'death'. A person who has died is often referred to as *having passed away* or *having departed*. There are also several religious euphemisms referring to death such as *he/she has reunited with Father God* or even *go to meet one's maker* (Allan & Burridge 2006: 226) Even euphemisms such as *bite the dust*, *kick the bucket* and *pushing up daisies* can be used in a joking manner to say someone or something has died. Euphemisms can also be borrowed from other languages. Euphemisms and medical terms often go hand in hand. In conversation we often avoid topics concerning disease, bodily functions and body parts, but we have no problem with using the Latin medical terms to convey the message without making people uncomfortable or embarrassing ourselves. According to McGregor (2009: 98), words related to genitals are taboo and there are euphemisms for these words. However, words inherited from Latin such as *feces*, *penis* and *vagina* are usually accepted as 'clean' terms.

Euphemisms can also be formed by going through a process called 'widening'. What is meant by widening is "when a word is substituted for a term that has become too painful or vivid-

'we move up the ladder for abstraction'". An example of this is the word 'growth' which is another way of renaming cancer (Smith 2015: 24). Euphemisms are used in both spoken and written language, but are more typical of spoken language, as slang and obscene language are less likely to occur in written language. Hughes (2006: 151) refers to euphemisms as the "use of deliberately indirect, conventionally imprecise, or socially "comfortable" ways of referring to taboo, embarrassing or unpleasant topics". As mentioned above the word *taboo* refers to certain words or deeds that are unmentionable because they either refer to something sacred to something unspeakable vile. Some examples of this are euphemistic counterparts of swearwords such as *fuck*, *bloody* and *shit*. A euphemistic counterpart to *fuck* is *fudge*, while *flaming* is often used as a euphemism for *fucking*. Both *blasted* and *blooming* are typical euphemisms for *bloody* in the UK, and euphemisms such as *sugar* and *shoot* are often used instead of the swearword *shit*. Today we are beginning to see how certain swearwords are beginning to lose their effect. "Some people say that overuse of taboo words in unnecessary contexts will gradually diminish their power to shock and deprive us of useful language items: taboo terms supports us in the occasional need to shock, to register outrage, or to express disappointment or pain" (Beard 2004 : 74). A euphemism allows a person to express outrage, disappointment and pain without losing one's face.

McEnery (2006) focused on how offensive swearwords are, ranging from very mild so strong swearwords. We all know that swearwords are bad, but McEnery wanted to find out what distinguishes them from one another. As previous studies have shown that women were less prone to swearing than men, McEnery decided to create what he calls a 'scale of offence' where he would rank or grade swearwords. By having such a scale, McEnery believed that it would make it easier to explore the relationship between the strength of words and the speaker's sex (McEnery 2006: 30). Figure 2.2 below shows the different categorizations of swearwords and the swearwords within each category.

Figure 2.2 Scale of offence by McEnery (2006: 30)

Very mild: *bird, bloody, crap, damn, hell, hussy, idiot, pig, pillock, sod, son-of-a-bitch, tart*
Mild: *arse, balls, bitch, bugger, Christ, cow, dickhead, git, Jesus, Jew, moron, pissed off, screw, shit, slag, slut, sod, tit, tosser*
Moderate: *arsehole, bastard, bollocks, gay, nigger, piss, paki, poofter, prick, shag, spastic, twat, wanker, whore*
Strong: *fuck*
Very strong: *cunt, motherfucker*

Coates (2004) argues that previous research on gender differences in same and mixed-sex conversations has shown that women are more polite and indirect because they are subordinate to men while men are impolite and direct. This is not always the case. Speech is not based on gender itself, but is driven by factors such as setting or location, the situation, the relationship between the speaker/listener and the status of the speaker/listener. There is no general consensus on whether women use more or fewer swearwords in mixed or same-sex groups, and there has also been disagreement on the use of swearwords among women. Some studies have shown that they swear just as much as men, while others have shown that they use milder words, like McEnery (2006).

2.2 The changing nature of swearing

Swearwords have existed for centuries and swearing has alternated between oaths and obscenities, although the role of oath swearing has changed through time. Through centuries, people have sworn oaths to God, and during the Middle Ages using words of profanity against God and Christ was seen as something truly obscene and was greatly disapproved by the Church. In the 18th and the 19th centuries, obscenities possessed the greatest power to shock, and in the US informal sanctions were developed to prevent the use of taboo words, but it was

the social pressure that muted the public from using offensive words. Swearing became more connected to class connotations and antisocial behavior. “The basis for the stigmatization was that slang gave status and recognition to expressions identified with the lower orders and indeed with the lower-order and criminal behavior. Rightly or wrongly, people at that time did associate language with behavior” (Burnham 1993: 215).

Even today people are shying away from using certain swearwords because they are offensive as well as making us feel embarrassed. Taboo language has changed through time and words that was considered highly offensive in the past may not be as shocking in today’s society. An example of this is the word *fuck*. *Fuck* has always been a highly offensive word, but it has been discussed whether *fuck* is now less taboo than it once was. Theaters were faced with a dilemma when advertising for a new play called ‘Shopping and Fucking’ by Mark Ravenhill. The title was a serious problem and the theatres did not know whether to advertise the play by its full title or by blanking out the word. The asterisk method has been used to blank out the offensive bit. There have also been instances where the title of a play or movie have been changed because it was seen as too risqué. That was the case of the Swedish movie *Fucking Åmål* whose title was changed to *Show me Love*. There have also been examples of the use of swear words in the fashion world. The fashion brand French Connection is famously known for their controversial FCUK logo. According to Beard (2004:74), the fact that people are wearing clothes with the FCUK logo shows that no matter how shocking the logo, the word *fuck* has become less taboo. Using such a strong word publicly shows that swearing has become important in social functions. British newspapers such as the *Guardian* have argued that companies are beginning to use swearwords not only to shock us, but also to gain our attention. In an online newspaper article from 2014, David Boyle says the new way to make people aware of your brand is not just to shout louder, now you have to be even more shocking. He calls it the marketing equivalent of Tourette’s syndrome.

How is swearing connected to Tourette’s syndrome? Swearing has a shocking effect and it grabs everyone’s attention based on the emotional strength a swearword carries. Science has proved that taboo words tap into deep parts of the brain. The brain controls speech functions, which again control voluntary actions and rational thoughts. Swearwords are stored in the part of the brain which controls the limbic system, the nervous system which regulates heart rate and blood pressure, and it also controls our emotions (Mohr 2013: 7). Compulsive swearing occurs in brain disorders such as Tourette's and Alzheimer’s disease. In 1825 The Marquise de Dampierre, a 26 year-old French aristocrat was the first reported patient to suffer from Tourette’s syndrome. She was the subject of gossip for over half a century (Kushner

2000: 11). Not surprisingly though, she was known for her outbursts in public, shouting in the middle of conversations and calling out oaths as well as obscenities, such as *sacré nom de Dieu*, *merde* (*shit*) and *foutu cochon* (*fucking pig*). For a woman with her social status, not being able to control the outbursts frightened her and the more she was revolted by a word's grossness, the more she feared saying it.

Tests concerning the subject's 'unconscious processing' have been done to show that taboo words have a higher threshold for stimulus recognition than comparable words which lacks taboo connotations. In this kind of experiment, subjects are shown different words on a screen. Scientists were able to determine the amount of time each subject needed in order to recognize the word. It was discovered that subjects needed or used more time to recognize taboo words. The reason for this is because the taboo words were "perceived subconsciously and prevented from entering consciousness because their appearance in consciousness would have elicited anxiety" (Ledoux 1996: 56).

2.3 Gender and swearing

Previous studies have suggested that gender, age and social class are important factors in relation to taboo words and how they are used. Gender plays a powerful role in swearing. Swearing has been called a stereotypical masculine activity and something that is part of men's nature (Beers Fägersten 2012: 45). Haslam (2012: 98) says that gender differences in swearing may reflect the social expectations of men and women. There have been discussions whether women are more status conscious than men and therefore use a standard speech form. The linguist Lakoff discussed that the women's subordinate social status in American society is indicated by the language women use and the way language is used about them (Holmes 2008: 296). "Women, seen as aspiring to prestigious 'ladylike' behavior, have long been regarded as upholding such taboos and avoiding nonstandard or "dirty" words in particular " said De Klerk (1992: 277), but are we becoming careless in the way we are presenting ourselves and is it true that women shy away from swearwords? There have been some discussions about the reason why women use more standard forms than men. An explanation can be that women's speech is related to social class and status, women's role in society, and expressing gender identity. The claim regarding social class and status is that women are more aware of the way they speak and how this can signal their social class background.

Another theory is that women, as a subordinate group, must speak carefully and politely in order not to offend men (Holmes 2008: 166). In Who's Swearing Now? (2012: 14), Beers Fägersten mentions that studies by Oliver and Rubin (1972) and Bailey and Timm (1976) found a link between women's swearing and the feminist movement. Swearing and swearwords have always been seen as a male domain and in the language of swearing there are a plethora of terms for females and their body parts, like *bitch* and *cunt*. De Klerk (1992) discovered that women were familiar with and used swearwords referring to men and male body parts. Jackson (2006:12) suggests that the reason for gender difference or similarities in the use of swear words in the UK may be due to the rise of a new term called the 'ladette culture'. A ladette is the female counterpart of the archetypal 'lad'. She is someone who is portrayed by the media as trouble and in trouble, a girl who is loud, aggressive and someone who use swearwords frequently. There have been disputes about whether gender differences are driven by factors such as the relationship between the speaker and the recipient/listener and the situation/the setting or whether it has to do with the role women and men have or have had in society.

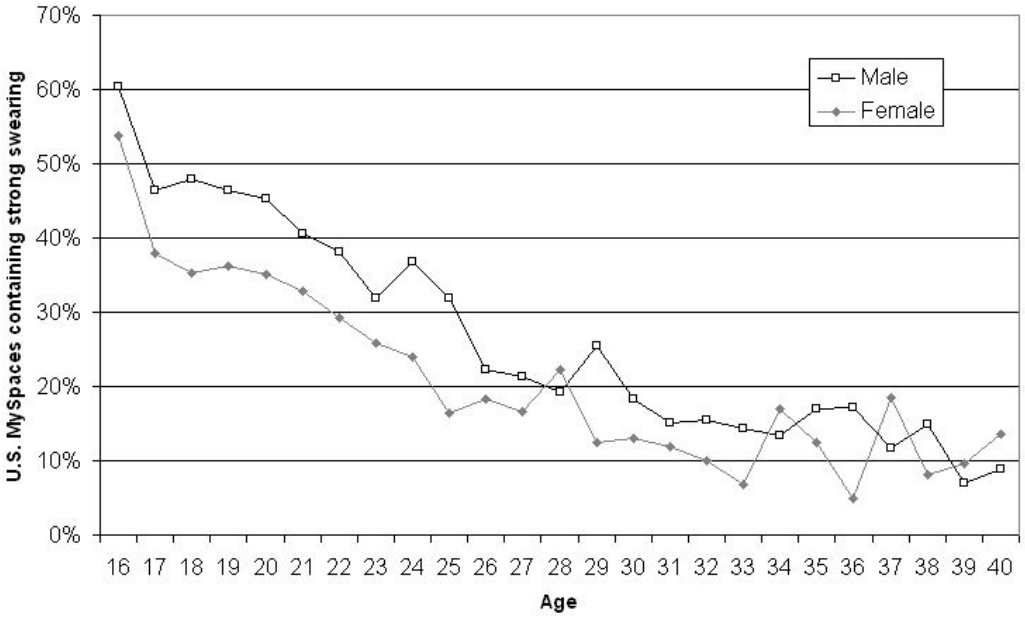
As we will see below it has been reported that women tend to swear less and use milder swearwords than men, but other findings have suggested that women swear more in conversations with men and show solidarity within a group. The general idea is that there are still 'typical' male swearwords and 'typical' female swearwords. It has been claimed that men and women have different roles and expectations on how they should behave. According to Baumeister and Bushman (2011), men accounted for 67% of using taboo words in public in 1986, but only 55% in 2006. It is also said that men use stronger and more offensive swearwords than women do, but women use milder swearwords with a high frequency than men. Jay and Janschewitz (2008: 274) also discovered that both genders were more comfortable with using swearwords in same-sex groups, while men were more prone to swear in public than women. While men used words such as *fuck*, *shit* and *motherfucker*, women used words such as *Oh my God*, *bitch*, *piss* and *retard(ed)* more frequently than men. "*Oh my god* accounted for 24% of the women's 2006 data and women were five times more likely than men to say it" (Jay 2009: 156). According to McEnery & Xiao (2004: 240), women prefer to use swearwords related to heaven, like *heavens* or *gosh*, while mean would use swearwords related to hell, like *damn*. Again there is a difference in usage between women and men and who these swearwords are aimed at. *Twat* is an example of this. *Twat* is a swearword that is commonly used by British males, not females. This also applies to

swearwords like *bitch* and *bastard*, which are used to say something nasty about somebody else, but *bitch* is normally only applied to females and *bastard* are usually used by men commenting on another men, not females. Studies by Limbrick (1991), Jay (1986) and Berger (2002) as cited in Beers Fägersten (2012: 31) found out that females increased their usage of swearwords in mixed-sex conversations. Their explanation for this was that women have an impression that males swear more often than women and therefore they try to accommodate them by using more swearwords. This is the opposite of men. In mixed-sex groups men will often decrease their use of swearwords because they think women swear less than them (Beers Fägersten 2012: 14) This is similar to what Stapleton (2003), cited in McHugh & Hambaugh (2010: 392) found in his study of undergraduate Irish drinking friends (both males and females). He reported that both genders deployed strong language, but there were gender differences in which words were used. Results showed that the women, not the men, swore as a strategy of intimacy and for group solidarity. Bailey and Timm (1976), cited in Murphy (2010: 176) noticed something interesting in their study on female speech and different age groups. One of the participants stated that she used swearwords because she felt that they had become more acceptable (Murphy 2010: 176). Another interesting observation is that the participants said they were more prone to use swearwords in company of other women, and if they were together with a man or even with their parents they would try to control their speech and use milder forms of swearwords.

In 'Fk yea I swear: cursing and gender in MySpace' (2008), Mike Thelwall discusses swearing found on youth-oriented social networking sites such as MySpace focusing on gender differences. Even though language on the internet is quite different from natural conversation, social networking sites can give us insight on how people of different ages, gender and social classes use swear words. Language on social networking sites is informal and their writings are much closer to speech than written forms. Thelwall argues that it is no longer true that men use strong swear words more frequently than women. He claims that younger women in the UK swear more than men, using stronger swear words too (2008: 85). The objective of his article was to test the gender gap hypothesis with data from MySpace, including age as a likely interacting factor. Previous studies mentioned in 'In Fk yea I swear: cursing and gender' described women as delicate creatures that could not hear bad language or any sensitive topic. Conversational data from the BNC from 1991-1993 showed that the most distinctive word in male speech was *fucking*. There were no swearwords found in the top 25 most associated with women speech (Thelwall 2008: 89). A later analysis showed that women swear as much as men, using milder forms of swear words. But there are gender

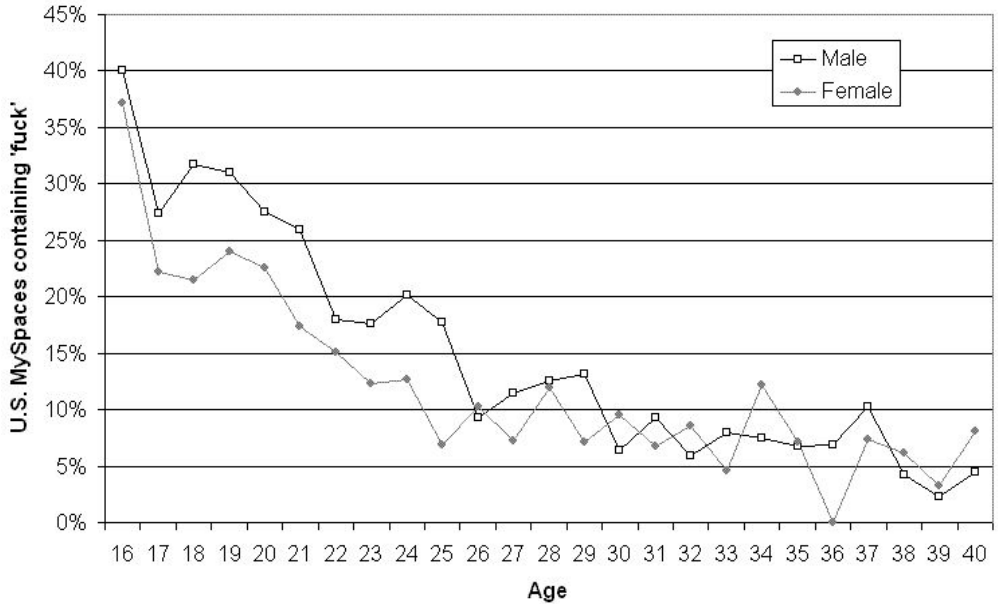
differences when it comes to who we are targeting. Females are more likely to be called a *cow*, and men *bastards*. While the results suggested that females use the word *cow* in association with other females, they also used female-oriented swear words such as *whore* and *slut* about other females, more so than men. The swear words used by men included sexual, racial, scatological and religious words. The first figure shows the profile owner's age and gender breakdown of all strong and very strong swearing in the US version of MySpace.

Figure 2.3 U.S MySpaces containing strong swearing as mentioned in Thelwall (2008)



The other figure from Thelwall shows age-related swearing pattern of the word *fuck*:

Figure 2.4 U.S MySpaces containing *fuck* as mentioned in Thelwall (2008)



Because there is a difference between social-networking sites and spoken (and offline) conversation these results cannot necessarily be generalized to other contexts. Therefore, we need more research on this subject.

According Lakoff and Jespersen, cited in Coates (2004), women do not use swearwords, but they are experts at euphemism. "There can be no doubt that women apply a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions, and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions" (Coates 2004:15). As we have seen, more recent studies have shown that women also swear and that the patterns depend on several factors. However, it has also been shown that women use more mild swearwords. Holmes (2008: 286) mentions that a special characteristic of female speech is the use of euphemisms, like using *fudge* instead of *fuck*, *for Pete's sake* instead *of for fuck's sake*, *Gee* instead of *Jesus*, *heck* instead of *hell*, *gosh* instead of *God*, *darn* instead of *damn* and *blooming* instead of *bloody*. There is a need for a study on euphemisms and gender as there has been little research on this subject.

2.4 Social Class and swearing

As mentioned earlier social class refers to the differences between people which are associated with social prestige, wealth and education. Status refers to the respect people give or do not give someone. Research in social dialects has revealed that there is a consistent relationship between social class and language patterns (Holmes 2008: 141). A study by Trudgill (1979) highlighted that working-class people, women and men used more stigmatized forms and their reason for using these forms was that they reflected the value and beliefs of the society and the system in question. In the 20th century the tough-guy machismo emerged. In order to fit in with the lower classes, tough guys had to master the obscene jargon of members of that class (Burnham 1993: 211). "One's social rank also plays a role in swearing: people of lower social rank swear more than people of high social rank do" (Baumeister & Bushman 2011: 376). In a study by McEnery (2006) he uncovered that socially low-ranking speakers produced higher rates of swearing than high-ranking speakers.

Because the investigation in the study will be carried out in the BNCweb, the thesis will follow the BNC's classification and divide speakers into the four different social classes, namely:

AB (Upper Middle Class)
C1 (Lower Middle Class)
C2 (Upper Working Class)
DE (Lower Working Class)

According to McEnery (2006:44), the relationship between social class and swearing is fuzzy. The results of his research showed that people belong to the AB group swore more than the C1s, and he found that adopting the swearing pattern of another social class was notably an English phenomena. Crystal (2003: 173) says that swearing can show either social distance or social solidarity. Research has shown that swearing is universal, but what is meant with social solidarity is that it marks a group's identity and their behavior towards swearing. In Britain social class is connected to and measured by your education, income, profession and even title. If we are to use a swearword among people they may infer something about your emotional state, social class or religious beliefs (McEnery 2006: 1). Also Hawkins (2009:

173) states that even though 'mouthing off' is a common feature in British culture, the discourse around the choice of words and bad language, in the form of defiance or conformity, can reveal, but also mask one's social class. With swearing it is said to be all too easy not only to offend people, but also make oneself appear stupid or incompetent (Tottie 2002: 195)

People from classes C2 and DE (the lower-middle and working classes) are the most frequent users of swearwords related to *fuck*, as in *fucking* and *fucker(s)*, followed by AB (McEnery & Xiao 2004: 243). Interestingly, the people in the age group 60+, belonging to the AB class, swore more than people from any other 60+ group.

Table 2.1 Speaker and Social Class from McEnery and Xiao (2004: 244)

Age	Class	Words	N. Freq
fuck	AB	696,819	133.36
	C1	427,872	16.36
	C2	485,682	92.65
	DE	267,818	205.36
fucked	AB	696,819	25.83
	C1	427,872	0
	C2	485,682	8.24
	DE	267,818	7.47
fucks	AB	696,819	4.31
	C1	427,872	0
	C2	485,682	2.06
	DE	267,818	3.73
fucking	AB	696,819	268.36
	C1	427,872	91.15
	C2	485,682	627.98
	DE	267,818	739.31
fucker(s)	AB	696,819	1.44
	C1	427,872	0
	C2	485,682	4.12
	DE	267,818	14.94
All forms	AB	696,819	433.4
	C1	427,872	107.51
	C2	485,682	735.05
	DE	267,818	970.81

Table 2.2 Cross-tabulation of speaker age and social class from McEnery and Xiao (2004: 245).

Age	Class	Words	N. Freq
0-14	AB	127,228	1642.72
	C1	5,722	0
	C2	4,439	225.28
	DE	2	0
15-24	AB	78,210	1022.89
	C1	40,544	24.66
	C2	29,072	977.52
	DE	42,303	1914.76
25-34	AB	101,503	0
	C1	55,654	467.17
	C2	192,484	1646.89
	DE	23,468	170.44
35-44	AB	81,002	24.69
	C1	201,306	84.45
	C2	97,480	102.59
	DE	0	0
45-59	AB	132,275	0
	C1	106,972	18.7
	C2	84,611	0
	DE	115,857	1450.06
60+	AB	94,332	74.21
	C1	17,674	0
	C2	77,596	0
	DE	48,244	0

The tables above shows that the people in the age group 60+, belonging to the AB class, say *fuck* more than people from C1,C2 and DE. McEnery and Xiao speculate that the reason

behind this is that the 60+ ABs wants to flaunt their seniority, while people from C1 use fewer swearwords to give an impression that they are upper class. People from the upper class, however, use stronger swearwords about other people. Their study showed that the word *fuck* had a higher frequency among AB speaker than C1 speaker in the age group 60+, but it should be mentioned this only pertained for the one word form. When they searched the BNC for other word forms of *fuck*, the results changed significantly.

2.5 Age and swearing

Comparing euphemistic swearing and age differences in the BNC will be interesting seeing that studies have discovered that children manage to learn taboo words at an early age. They will of course not understand what they mean at an early age, but as they get older they develop their own kind of 'swearwords' which they find offensive and which have a high emotional impact for them. These kinds of swearwords include name calling and insults (Jay 1992: 24-25). An observation study by Jay (1999), cited in Jay (2000: 460) discovered that 1- and 2-year-olds used taboo words. They repeated offensive words without understanding their meaning, but as they got older their swearing lexica changed because they began to gain more knowledge about taboo topics and began understanding how the world works. Jay says that it would be reasonable to predict that children use less offensive words at younger ages because parents are less likely to use swearwords around them. In the same study, he found out that insults recorded from children between the age of 3 and 8 were not found in the recordings of older children. Instead, older children produced more 'advanced' insults. Because swearwords are so common in music, movies, video games et cetera, it is more likely that children and teenagers will begin to use those words themselves. We have seen that swearwords are something we learn at a young age and our vocabulary change over time. We learn new swearwords as we grow up, but through studies we have seen that the frequency of swearwords diminishes as we get older, especially when we have children. However, certain swearwords have become more or less accepted in the society and we have begun to swear to show identity and to show a sort of fellowship within a group. This was illustrated in the study by Thelwall (2008) as well as McEnery & Xiao (2004), where teenagers or speakers between the ages of 15-34 swore because swearwords and swearing has changed in today's society. Many swearwords mentioned in Thewall's study would be considered offensive, but

the teenagers sometimes used a swearword to make it into a positive statement or emphasizing something. This could be a reason why we see such high frequencies in teenage speech in Figure 2.3 and 2.4. What these figures from Thelwall's study show us is that there is a difference in the usage of strong swearwords. Younger speakers are more prone to use strong swearwords than older speakers, and we can also see that swearing decreases as people get older. The problem with this study is that it only focuses on strong swearwords. Thelwall claims that his results show that for example the gender gap is disappearing in the UK, especially among younger users of MySpace, but we cannot be 100% sure of this because there is a difference between online talk and real-life conversations.

In McEnery & Xiao's (2004) investigation the swearword *fuck* and its other word forms were more frequently used by speakers between the ages of 15-34 than any other age group. Swearing started to decline after the age of 25, which corresponds with the previous statement about getting older and swearing. The study by McEnery & Xiao also showed that the speakers between the ages of 35 and 44 did not use a lot of swearwords probably due to the fact that they had children, while teenagers under the age of 15 swore more because they thought it was more adult-like. Many studies on swearing and age have focused on adolescent talk, but there have been studies that have examined swearwords or taboo words across different age groups. Bailey and Timm (1976), cited in Murphy (2010) looked at different age groups of females. Their findings were different to what has been said about women's talk and how women use mild swearwords with higher frequency. Bailey and Timm found out that women, especially those between the ages of 31-34 used strong offensive words. The younger participants also used strong offensive words, but only about one-third as frequently as the 31- to 34-year-olds.

2.6 Other factors

In addition to gender, social class and age, there are other factors to why we swear. In this section factors such as swearing in different situations and culture has been investigated. In *The Anatomy of Swearing*, Montagu discusses whether swearing is a learned for of behavior or not. According to her, swearing is a learned form of human behavior in cultures and under conditions where swearing is encouraged (1967: 71).

One of the main purposes of swearing is to express emotions such as shock and disappointment, but in particular anger or frustration (Montagu 1967: 72). However, the emotional impact of swearing depends on our experience with a culture and the language conventions in that culture. What is considered to be appropriate when talking to one another depends on the topic of conversation. Speaker-listener relationship also plays a part in determining swearing likelihood and appropriateness. People swear in a variety of contexts as a function of communication. We can swear or use euphemisms to show that we belong to a certain group.

Jay and Janschewitz have tried to explain why people swear, how we think and how we behave in a variety of situations. They believed that people have learned when, where and with whom it is appropriate to swear, and in which situations swearing would be inappropriate. They also mentioned that one's experience with a language influences the likelihood and offensiveness judgments about swearing. In their study native and non-native English-speaking college students were asked to rate the offensiveness and likelihood of hypothetical scenarios involving taboo words. In order to measure their perception of the effect of social status on swearing the students were given a list of male and female occupations and they were asked to judge how likely each man or woman in that occupation was to swear and how appropriate it would be if they did swear. The taboo words they used for this study was:

- words high in tabooness such as: *cocksucker*, *cunt* and *fuck*.

- words medium in tabooness like: *bastard*, *goddamn*, and *piss*.

- words low in tabooness: *crap*, *hell* and *idiot*.

There were different combinations of the taboo words, the speakers and the speakers' location, creating a total of 81 scenarios per questionnaire. The results of their study showed that swearing is related to social status and the situation. An example from their study: the students believed that it was less appropriate for a dean to swear than it was for the students, but it also depends on the setting. It was more likely that the dean would swear in his own environment, the dean's office, than in front of the students around/on campus. Also, the

students thought it would be inappropriate for a student to swear in the dean's office, while it was considered ok to do so at the dorm. This study shows that swearing is more tolerated in private or informal group-related settings than in formal, public settings. People are also less likely to swear in the presence of a person with a higher status.

Van Oudenhoven et. al, cited in Haslam (2012: 101), conducted a cross-cultural study in terms of swearing where participants from 13 different countries were asked what they would say if someone rudely bumped into them without apologizing. Norwegians prominently used devil-related swearwords, French and Croatians preferred to use genital-related or scatological terms while the Italians, Spanish and Greeks chose to use swearwords related to stupidity. The American said they used swearwords such as *asshole* et cetera. This study clearly shows the difference between swearing and culture. Swearing might not be an effective form of expression, but it is an effective form of communication.

3 Research Questions and Method

This chapter includes an overview of the material used in this investigation and describes the source(s) it was taken from and how it was collected. This study has its focus in the field of sociolinguistics, which is the study of variation and differences in speech by people from different social backgrounds. As mentioned in Chapter 2 there are different ways of swearing. While swearwords are used as an emotional emphasis and to show social solidarity, euphemisms are polite expressions that are used instead of words that can be considered too harsh or used as a way to mask profanity. We have seen that studies show differences between classes, age and genders with respect to swearing whereas much less is known about euphemisms and euphemistic swearing. The study aims to fill this gap and to give insight how euphemisms relates to swearing. The research questions will be described in more details in 3.1. Then follows an introduction to methods in sociolinguistics and corpus linguistics, and the BNC corpus will be described in details. Finally, in section 3.4 there will be a description of the material used for this study.

3.1 Research Questions

The aim of this study is to examine which gender is more prone to using euphemistic swearwords and how this is related to social class and age. As seen in the previous chapter, studies have shown that men use stronger swearwords than women, and that speakers from lower classes swear more than people from the upper and upper-middle classes. As euphemisms are supposed to alternatives to swearing, it is interesting to investigate the same factors with respect to euphemisms. If upper class people have a tendency to avoid using swearwords then we might expect to see higher frequencies in the usage of euphemisms by upper class speakers. Gender differences also play a part in the usage of swearwords and what is expected of men and women. Being more status conscious, women are more likely to use standard speech forms than men as they have been found to use milder swearwords than men. We might therefore expect them to choose euphemism more often than men.

Euphemisms will be investigating in relation to gender, social class and age. My research questions are thus as follows:

1. Do women use euphemistic swearing more often than men and are there different euphemisms favored by male and female speakers?

2. Do people from the upper class use euphemistic swearing more than people from the working class? Are certain euphemisms favored by one social class more than the others?

3. Is there a similar pattern for the age groups and are certain euphemisms favored by one group more than the others?

The euphemistic swearwords will be analyzed and compared to the list of very mild to very strong swearwords by McEnery (2006) which was described in section 2.1 in the previous chapter. The swearwords mentioned by McEnery are listed below:

Very mild: *bird, bloody, crap, damn, hell, hussy, idiot, pig, pillock, sod, son-of-a-bitch, tart*
Mild: *arse, balls, bitch, bugger, Christ, cow, dickhead, git, Jesus, Jew, moron, pissed off, screw, shit, slag, slut, sod, tit, tosser*
Moderate: *arsehole, bastard, bollocks, gay, nigger, piss, paki, poofter, prick, shag, spastic, twat, wanker, whore*
Strong: *fuck*
Very strong: *cunt, motherfucker*

As some of these swearwords do not have a euphemistic counterpart, only a total of 12 euphemisms will be compared to the swearwords by McEnery, which is:

gee, euphemism for *Jesus*

heavens, euphemism for *hell*

gosh, euphemism for *God*

flaming, euphemism for *fucking*

blasted, euphemism for *bloody*

blooming, also euphemism for *bloody*

crikey, euphemism for *Christ*

blimey, euphemism for blind me or '*Blind me, God*'

oh my goodness, euphemisms for '*Oh my God*'

sugar, euphemism for *shit*

heck, euphemism for *hell*

darn, euphemism for *damn*

Two other euphemisms *fudge* and *shoot* were originally going to be investigated in the BNC, but I found no signs of euphemistic swearing with these words in the BNC. People used *fudge* to refer to toffee, not as a euphemism of *fuck*, and *shoot* was used as in *I'm going to shoot someone* rather than *Oh, shoot* instead of *Oh, shit*. The euphemistic counterparts of McEnery's swearwords were chosen on the basis of what McEnery called the 15 swearwords that distinguishes male speakers from female speakers. *Fuck*/*fucking* and *Jesus* are more typical of male speakers, while *God*, *bloody*, *hell* and *shit* is more common for female speakers (McEnery 2006: 29). Although all the euphemisms are considered milder than the mildest swearwords, it is still interesting to compare euphemisms for different kinds of swearwords, because if we want to avoid using swearwords in order to not cause offence to the listener, then we would expect to see a higher frequency of euphemistic counterparts of strong and very strong swearwords.

3.3 Method

This study used a corpus-based approach to investigate how certain swearwords were used in conversations in terms of age, gender and social class.

In the field of sociolinguistics we are interested in understanding language variation in social and cultural contexts. The factors or variables that have been typically associated with sociolinguistics are speaker's age, gender, sex and social status. When we want to study these factors along with the research questions the most commonly research methods in sociolinguistics includes field observation, which is interviewing, observations, experiments and questionnaires. The main research tool for sociolinguistic studies has been interviews (Childs 2013: 66). Interviews are most often face-to-face on a one-to-one basis. While interviews are more flexible and elicit more extended stretches of unscripted speech, the data are often transcribed and are similar to that of a corpus (Krug and Sell 2013: 71). Even though an interview provides what Krug calls real and relaxed speech this sort of approach would not be ideal to this type of study because we cannot force people to produce swearwords or euphemisms. Work in the sociolinguistic field has shown that a combination of both approaches is beneficial to providing answers to a wide range of research questions (Angouri 2013: 30). If we for example wanted to study who euphemistic swearing is aimed at we would have to take a qualitative approach to get the answers we are searching for. This means we would have to study conversations in the corpus and see how swearwords are used and to whom it is aimed at. The second way of studying a sociolinguistic feature is to analyze data through a corpus. Corpus linguistics is the study of computer-aided language data. A corpus is basically a collection of transcribed utterances or written texts. The purpose of a corpus was to give a representative and balanced picture of a linguistic variety, register or genre (Gries 2009: 7). Today, corpora have a range of uses. It can be used in language teaching, giving information on how a language works. It can be used for translation, comparing two languages and how they have been translated. A corpus can also be used to explore cultural attitudes and how this affects our language (Hunston 2008: 13-14). In this study I will be using the BNC (British National Corpus) corpus to study sociolinguistic variation. In order to investigate and examine the use of euphemisms based on social class, gender and age research material was collected through the BNC. This corpus was chosen on the basis of that it is relatively large and it is marked for gender, social class and age. A corpus allows us to search through millions of texts and words by using different tools. Some of these tools include

concordances which allows the user to focus on words in context and there is also a word frequency list which tells us how many times a word occurs within the corpus. Baker says that "rather than making a claim such as 'men swear more than women', a corpus analysis would not only allow us to support or reject this hypothesis, but also show proportionally how often men swear then women, the range of swear words that they use, along with their relative frequencies, as well as affording evidence regarding differences and similarities of a particular contexts or functions of swearing" (2013: 94). According to Hoffman et al. (2008: 27), the BNC was created to represent British English in the late 20th century. The BNC corpus consists of over 100 million words of written and spoken language. The main focus will be on the spoken section of the corpus, which consists of 10 million words. Less than half of these 10 million words are face-to-face conversations (Atkins & Rundell 2008: 77). These are naturally occurring texts (or conversations) produced by members of the public from different parts of Britain. The naturally occurring texts in the spoken part of the BNC are transcriptions of previously recorded conversations. These texts can be called naturally occurring texts as they have been recorded in real-life situations or events without people being told what to say. The conversations collected in the corpus have different contexts, ranging from conversations in the court or in classrooms, interviews, broadcasting and pub debates. This means that it gives us a chance to study how people would produce language in a natural setting. An argument in favor of using a corpus is that it is a more reliable source of language use than native intuition. Hunston (2008: 20) claims that even though native speakers have much more experience of a language than what is contained in a corpus, a person's experience remains hidden because of introspection and according to Baker (2010: 94), social biases will be present in real-world instances of language, but may not occur in introspective judgments or in conversations where people have to answer a questionnaire. The spoken part of the BNC corpus was created by collecting conversations through volunteers. The British Market Research Bureau recruited 124 volunteers, with approximately equal numbers of men and women, equal numbers of age and social groupings (Gries & Newman 2013: 271). The BNC thus gives us access to variables such as the social class, the age and the gender of the speaker.

The different euphemisms that were studied in this thesis was individually typed into the BNCweb database to see how many hits there were per million words as well as how many hits there were in total. The BNC provides information about the speakers (and recipients) age, gender and social class, which is particularly important to this type of study. Because this study is focused on social class, the investigation carried out in the BNC will follow its

classification. The social classes are divided into four different categories in the BNC:

AB, which represents the upper class.

C1, the upper middle class.

C2, the lower middle class.

DE, the lower/working class.

The results from the BNC are not absolute, but can shed light on how euphemisms are used. There are a few disadvantages about using the BNC corpus in general. One of them is that the BNC was designed to function as a representative sample of the spoken British English in the late 20th century. Even though the data are not completely up to date, this may not be considered a huge drawback for this type of study. Swearwords have changed through time, but probably not so much in the matter of a few years. Differences between genders and classes are also important to general theory even if they are not found in data from a few years back. Also, the corpus will not give information about whether something is possible or not, nor can it show anything else besides its own contents. A corpus may be representative, but all the conclusions we make about the use of language found in the corpus can only be deductions. Lastly, the issue with transcribed data is that we cannot see or hear the intonation of words/sentences. We can read a dialogue, but we cannot see what body language a person uses. This is sometimes essential in swearing/euphemistic swearing. Take for example Thelwall's (2008) study. The word *gay* can have a positive and a negative meaning, but if someone calls another person *gay* how are we supposed to know if it was said as a joke or not? One can only make an assumption on these words or dialogues in the corpus.

3.4 The Material

As mentioned in the previous section, this study will limit itself to the spoken part of the BNC. The spoken part of the BNC is obviously smaller in size than the written corpus, but the reason for investigating the spoken part of the corpus is that swearing is more often used in

informal settings and oral language than in written language. In this study we are only concerned with which euphemisms people use in conversation, in conjunction with their age and social class. A simple search was made for all euphemisms mentioned above according to age, gender and social class. The findings were gone through manually and the non-euphemisms was weeded out, like in cases where *sugar* was not used as an euphemism, but rather to refer to the sweet substance you put in tea or coffee.

Whenever you search in the BNC you will come across concordances, which are lists of the occurrences of the feature that you searched for in the corpus. With every hit in the corpus there is a certain amount of context displayed, both preceding and following the word/lexical item you searched for. An example of this taken from the BNC:

27	A61 785	You are a right crafty **bastard** as far as women are concerned.'

An easier way of displaying concordance results are by using the KWIC View. The KWIC View displays the concordance lines, but with the word you searched for displayed in the center for the page, like this:

46	A73 1348	the labour to get them put back again.' 'You	**bastard**	,' said Cullam. 'I didn't hear that.

Along with examples similar to those above, there will be illustrated tables and figures in the analysis and in the discussion part of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. The tables and figures will include information about gender, age, social class, number of words in the BNC, number of hits and frequency per million words. An example of such a table is shown below:

Figure 3.1 Example of numbers for 'gosh' from the BNC

GENDER *gosh*	No. of words	No. of hits	Freq. per million words
Male	4,949,938	118	23.84
Female	3,290,569	52	15.8
Total	8,240,507	170	39,64

Below 'gender' the euphemism that was searched for will be mentioned. The column 'no. of words' refers to the total number of the euphemism included in the spoken part of the BNC. 'No. of hits' refers to the total number of utterances of the specified euphemism. The final column 'Freq. per million words' refers to the calculating formula:

Frequency per 1,000000 words = frequency/occurrence of euphemism ÷ number of words in text x 1,000000)

Frequency per million is an estimate of how many times a certain euphemism would statistically show up in a sample of 1,000000 words.

Only one word form, such as *darn*, was investigated in the BNC, meaning other forms of a word, like *darned* will not be included in this study. The euphemism searched for in the corpus and the frequency rate was then categorized through the restricted search for spoken demographic and dialogue based on age, gender, social class.

4 Findings and Analysis

This chapter contains a report of the results found in the spoken part of the BNC and a discussion of the results. There will be a general presentation of the findings in section 4.1. In the following sections there will be a more detailed analysis of each individual euphemism: *gee, heavens, gosh, flaming, blasted, blooming, crikey, blimey, oh my goodness, sugar, heck,* and *darn*.

4.1 Findings

The table below shows the results found in the spoken section of the BNCweb. The search was restricted to spoken demographic and dialogue for the interaction type. Using the BNC label sex of the speaker, the number of euphemisms produced by the female and the male speakers were calculated.

Table 4.1 The number of euphemisms produced by women and men in the 809 relevant examples.

Euphemism (total number)	Male speaker	Female speaker
gee (47)	28	19
heavens (45)	26	19
gosh (184)	63	121
flaming (33)	11	22
blasted (17)	4	13
blooming (183)	56	127
crikey (41)	15	26
blimey (116)	45	71
Oh my goodness (35)	6	29
sugar (5)	3	2
heck (94)	28	66
darn (9)	4	5
Total number: 809	289	520

If we are to believe the results in the table above, men produce only 289 utterances of euphemisms while women produce almost the double amount of euphemisms than men, 520 utterances of euphemisms in total. The euphemisms produced by women make up 64.2 % of the total number of euphemisms. The numbers of euphemisms produced by men may be influenced by the fact that there are a larger number of words produced by female speakers in the spoken part of the BNC than words produced by male speakers: 2,264,094 words against 1,454,344 words. Table 4.2 shows the number of female and male words in the spoken part of the BNC, using restrictions in the search such as spoken demographic and dialogues. If we were to calculate the frequency of euphemisms uttered by men and women per million words the results would look like this:

Table 4.2 The frequency of the euphemisms per million words

Euphemism	Male occurrences	Male words	Per million words	Female occurrences	Female words	Per million words
gee	28	1,454,344	19.25	19	2,264,094	8.39
heavens	26	1,454,344	17.87	19	2,264,094	8.39
gosh	63	1,454,344	41.31	121	2,264,094	53.44
flaming	11	1,454,344	7.56	22	2,264,094	9.71
blasted	4	1,454,344	2.75	13	2,264,094	5.74
blooming	56	1,454,344	38.50	127	2,264,094	56.09
crikey	15	1,454,344	10.31	26	2,264,094	11.48
blimey	45	1,454,344	30.94	71	2,264,094	31.35
Oh my goodness	6	1,454,344	4.12	29	2,264,094	12.80
sugar	3	1,454,344	2.06	2	2,264,094	0.88
heck	28	1,454,344	19.25	66	2,264,094	29.15
darn	4	1,454,344	2.75	5	2,264,094	2.20

Table 4.2 shows that the frequency of euphemisms per million words is not that much higher for female than for male speakers. The material for this study consists of 809 relevant euphemisms. 520 (about 64%) are produced by women, while 289 (ca 36%) are produced by men.

4.1.1 'gee'

There are 47 relevant occurrences of the euphemism *gee* in the spoken part of the BNC. The female speakers produce 19 instances of *gee* while men produce 28 instances. The numbers reveal that men use this euphemism more than women do. The numbers shows that men use the euphemism *gee* twice as much as women. Both *gee* and *gee whiz* are euphemistic

alternations of *Jesus* to signify surprise, enthusiasm or protest. In the BNC there were more examples of men using the euphemism *gee whiz* than women. There was only one occurrence of *gee whiz* produced by a female speaker. In order to find out what factors led to this result the following variables will also be examined: the social class of the speaker, the age of the speaker and the conversational situation.

The social class of the speaker was not registered in the BNC in 11 cases of the 19 occurrences of the euphemism *gee* produced by female speakers. Only 4 cases were not registered out of 28 occurrences of the euphemism *gee* produced by male speakers. The distribution of social class and gender shows a huge variation between the between the two genders. Because the social class of the speaker is not always registered in the BNC and because the hits are low one cannot be sure how reliable the results are. However, there is one interesting variation between gender and social class, especially if you look at the frequency per million words produced by male DE and C1 speakers as seen in 4.4 below.

Table 4.3 Social class and gee produced by female speakers

Social Class 'gee'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	2	4.87
C1	474,525	2	4.21
C2	468,320	1	2.14
DE	228,415	3	13.13
total	**1,582,116**	**8**	**5.06**

Table 4.4 Social class and gee produced by male speakers

Social Class 'gee'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	1	3.27
C1	307,709	12	39
C2	251,564	1	3.98
DE	185,651	10	53.86
total	**1,050,396**	**24**	**22.85**

The numbers are much higher than any other social class for both women and men. It is important to note, however, that the 12 hits in group C1 are only produced by two different speakers who have a habit of overusing the euphemism *gee*. This male speaker uses *gee* in his speech in 10 out of 12 hits in the BNC, for example:

(1) Gee whizz! BNC KDM 4847

(2) a mahogany, oh gee whiz. BNC KDM 7349

(3) Ooh good grief, oh gee whiz. BNC KDM 8700

This overuse clearly contributes to the large number of hits.

Table 4.5 Age and gee produced by female speakers

Age 'gee'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	0	0
15-24	321,471	6	18.66
25-34	451,700	6	13.28
35-44	433,728	2	4.61
45-59	459,769	3	6.53
60+	412,040	2	4.61
total	**2,233,145**	**19**	**8.51**

Table 4.6 Age and gee produced by male speakers

Age 'gee'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	0	0
15-24	179,148	4	22.33
25-34	239,020	4	16.74
35-44	272,154	0	0
45-59	273,372	16	58.53
60+	259,352	4	15.42
total	**1,424,282**	**28**	**19.66**

Table 4.5 above shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *gee* by female speakers while Table 4.6 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *gee* by male speakers. These tables shows that the use of the euphemism *gee* decreases with age among the female speakers, but *gee* is still quite frequent in speech of men over 45-years of age and 60+, compared to women. The total frequency for the euphemism *gee* is higher for male than female speakers.

4.1.2 'heavens'

There are 45 relevant occurrences of the euphemism *heavens* in the spoken part of the BNC. The female speakers produce 19 instances of *heavens* while men produce 26 instances of *heavens*. By looking at Table 4.2 one can see that men use the euphemism *heavens* twice as much as women do. Again, variables such as the social class of the speaker, the age of the speaker and the conversational situation will be examined in the BNC.

The social class of the speaker was not registered in the BNC in 1 case of the 19 occurrences of the euphemism *heavens* produced by female speakers. 9 cases were not registered out of 24 occurrences of the euphemism *heavens* produced by male speakers. The distribution in the cases where social class was identified is shown in the tables below.

Table 4.7 Social class and heavens produced by female speakers

Social Class 'heavens'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	8	19.47
C1	474,525	5	10.68
C2	468,320	5	10.54
DE	228,415	0	0
total	**1,582,116**	**18**	**11.38**

Table 4.8 Social class and heavens produced by male speakers

Social Class 'heavens'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	8	26.19
C1	307,709	6	23.85
C2	251,564	2	6.5
DE	185,651	1	5.39
total	**1,050,396**	**17**	**16.18**

The distribution of social class and gender shows there is a variation between the usages of *heavens* between the social classes. There is one interesting variation between gender and social class, especially if you look at the frequency per million words produced by male DE speakers. The numbers are much higher than any other social classes for both women and men.

Table 4.9 Age and heavens produced by female speakers

Age 'heavens'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	0	0
15-24	321,471	1	3.11
25-34	451,700	1	2.21
35-44	433,728	2	4.61
45-59	459,769	7	15.23
60+	412,040	8	19.42
total	**2,233,145**	**19**	**8.51**

Table 4.10 Age and heavens produced by male speakers

Age 'heavens'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	1	4.97
15-24	179,148	0	0
25-34	239,020	1	4.18
35-44	272,154	3	11.02
45-59	273,372	15	54.87
60+	259,352	4	15.42
total	**1,424,282**	**24**	**16.85**

Table 4.9 above shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *heavens* by female speakers while Table 4.10 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *heavens* by male speakers. The data shows that male speakers between the ages of 45 and 59 produce the highest number of *heavens*, and that male speakers in general use *heavens* much more than female speakers. In 8 out of 15 hits produced by male speakers in the age-range 45-59 *heavens* was not used as a way of swearing. In most cases it involved something in the heavens or when talking about a kingdom of the heavens in relation to religion and astrology, like:

(4) Your ruler Venus is also sparkling away in the heavens today. BNC KB1 3121

(5) in the heavens and let us make a celebrated name for ourselves for fear we may be scattered all over the earth, well that was God's command wasn't it there they said be scattered all over the earth. BNC KBX 186

(6) Many from eastern parts and western parts will come and decline at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of the heavens and erm as regards to these ones, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob erm, at the kingdom of the heavens, while these ones were born

before Jesus weren't they? BNC KBX 933

This was also the case of *heavens* produced by male speakers between the ages of 35-44. Out of the 3 hits none of the speakers used the euphemism *heavens*. Compared to male speakers, all the instances of *heavens* produced by female speakers was indeed euphemistic swearing.

4.1.3 'gosh'

There are 184 relevant occurrences of *gosh* in the spoken part of the BNC. The female speakers produce 121 instances of *gosh* while men produce 63 instances of *gosh*. Unlike *gee* and *heavens*, the results from the BNC show that women use *gosh* (65.7%) more than men. Only 88 of 121 instances of *gosh* produced by female speakers were registered in the BNC when using the search string social class. 51 occurrences were registered out of 63 occurrences of *gosh* produced by male speakers. The distribution in the cases where social class was identified is shown in the tables below.

Table 4.11 Social class and gosh produced by female speakers

Social Class 'gosh'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	50	121.7
C1	474,525	21	44.25
C2	468,320	8	17.08
DE	228,415	9	39.4
total	**1,582,116**	**88**	**55.62**

Table 4.12 Social class and gosh produced by male speakers

Social Class 'gosh'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	23	75.29
C1	307,709	16	52
C2	251,564	7	27.83
DE	185,651	5	26.93
total	**1,050,396**	**51**	**48.55**

The distribution of social class and gender shows there is not much variation between the between the two groups in the total frequency per million words, but the results are different if we take the dispersion over speakers into the account.

Category	**No. of words**	**No. of hits**	**Dispersion (over speakers)**	**Frequency per million words**
AB	305,472	23	4/	75.29
C1	307,709	16	4/	52

As shown above, there were 23 occurrences of the word *gosh* produced by male speakers belonging to the group AB. However, these were produced by 4 male speakers only. There were especially 2 male speakers who would use *gosh* repeatedly in their conversations.

A similar problem was found in the C1 group. One of the male speakers would produce the euphemism *gosh* 6 times, but what he says makes no sense at all. Examples from the BNC:

(7) Gosh, posh. BNC KD0 13127

(8) That is it, what's that one that [unclear] , gosh, posh, cosh, cough, gosh, posh, cosh, gosh posh, cosh, gosh. BNC KD0 13133

Occurrences like this interfere with the results. Nevertheless, men use *gosh* less than women regardless of their social status. These results have shown that both male and female speakers belonging to group AB (upper class) and C1 (upper-middle class) use *gosh* more than speakers belonging to the middle class and the working class.

Table 4.13 Age and gosh produced by female speakers

Age 'gosh'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	2	12.95
15-24	321,471	11	34.22
25-34	451,700	20	44.28
35-44	433,728	24	52.2
45-59	459,769	24	55.33
60+	412,040	40	97.08
total	**2,233,145**	**121**	**54.18**

Table 4.14 Age and gosh produced by male speakers

Age 'gosh'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	10	49.69
15-24	179,148	2	11.16
25-34	239,020	6	25.1
35-44	272,154	6	22.05
45-59	273,372	21	76.82
60+	259,352	14	53.98
total	**1,424,282**	**59**	**41.42**

Table 4.13 and 4.14 above shows the results for the use of the euphemism *gosh* in male and female speech according to their age. By looking at the distribution of *gosh* between the male and female age groups the results shows that women use *gosh* to a higher extent than men. These tables shows that speakers in the age-range of 45-60+, both male and female speakers, are the most frequent users of *gosh* as they have the highest frequency per million words, whereas the largest number of hits can be found among speakers within the age-range of 60+ for female speakers while highest frequency per million words among men speakers are found in the age-range 45-59. The high frequency per million words for male speakers belonging to the 0-14 group is misleading because most of the hits had nothing to do with euphemistic swearing.

4.1.4 'flaming'

There are 36 occurrences of the euphemism *flaming* in the spoken part of the BNC. The female speakers produce 22 instances of *flaming* were produced by female speakers, while 11 instances of *flaming* were produced by male speakers. Table 4.2 shows that women, 9.71 in frequency per million words, use *flaming* slightly more than men 7.58 in frequency per million words.

Only 6 of 22 occurrences of the euphemism *flaming* produced by female speakers, according to their social class, were registered in the BNC. The number of occurrences of *flaming* produced by male speakers, according to their social class, was 9. Table 4.15 and 4.16 in the below shows the distribution of gender and social class for the euphemism *flaming*.

Table 4.15 Social class and flaming produced by female speakers

Social Class 'flaming'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	2	4.87
C1	474,525	1	2.11
C2	468,320	3	6.41
DE	228,415	0	0
total	**1,582,116**	**6**	**3.79**

Table 4.16 Social class and flaming produced by male speakers

Social Class 'flaming'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	0	0
C1	307,709	2	6.5
C2	251,564	6	23.85
DE	185,651	1	5.39
total	**1,050,396**	**9**	**8.57**

The tables indicate that *flaming* is overly used by males in both frequency per million words and the total number of hits. *Flaming* is mostly used among speakers, both male and female, in the C2 middle class group. There were two cases in the BNC where *flaming* was not used as a euphemism. A female speaker from the social class AB used *flaming* in a way to describe

someone's appearance:

(9) Gwendoline went flaming red, as sneaks, fancy Miss Potts daring to call her that. BNC KCD 2658

While a male speaker from group C2 is upset because he has many bills to pay and says:

(10) three bills, my money's flaming. BNC KD3 3425

Table 4.17 Age and flaming produced by female speakers

Age 'flaming'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	2	12.95
15-24	321,471	1	3.11
25-34	451,700	9	19.92
35-44	433,728	6	13.83
45-59	459,769	2	4.35
60+	412,040	2	4.85
total	**2,233,145**	**22**	**9.85**

Table 4.18 Age and flaming produced by male speakers

Age 'flaming'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	1	4.97
15-24	179,148	0	0
25-34	239,020	6	25.1
35-44	272,154	1	3.67
45-59	273,372	2	7.32
60+	259,352	1	3.86
total	**1,424,282**	**11**	**7.72**

Table 4.17 and 4.18 above shows how the euphemism *flaming* is used by male and female speakers according to their age. Looking at the results from the BNC we can see that the highest frequency of usage belongs to the age groups of 25-34 and 35-44 for female speakers and 25-34 and 45-59 for male speakers. The high frequency of *flaming* produced by male speakers in the age-range 25-34 is caused by one speaker repeating the word about 5 times in the conversation.

4.1.5 'blasted'

17 occurrences of the euphemism *blasted* were found in the spoken part of the BNC. The female speakers produce 13 instances of *blasted,* while there were only 4 instances of *blasted* produced by male speakers. Even though the frequencies per million words are quite low for both female and male speakers, the numbers reveal that women use the euphemism *blasted* more than men.

The social class of the speaker was registered in 12 occurrences of the euphemism *blasted* produced by female speakers in the BNC, while 4 occurrences was registered for male speakers. The distribution in the cases where social class was identified is shown in the tables 4.19 and 4.20 below.

Table 4.19 Social class and blasted produced by female speakers

Social Class 'blasted'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	1	2.43
C1	474,525	2	4.21
C2	468,320	9	19.22
DE	228,415	0	0
total	**1,582,116**	**12**	**7.58**

Table 4.20 Social class and blasted produced by male speakers

Social Class 'blasted'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	2	6.55
C1	307,709	1	3.25
C2	251,564	1	3.98
DE	185,651	0	0
total	**1,050,396**	**4**	**3.81**

Based on the frequency per million words one would believe that women use *blasted* more than men, but when investigating the hits from the BNC the results are quite on the contrary. The highest frequency per million words and hits in the BNC of the euphemism *blasted* are produced by female speakers from the C2 group. However, those 9 hits are uttered by one speaker only. So are the 2 hits in the C1 group.

Table 4.21 Age and blasted produced by female speakers

Age 'blasted'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	0	0
15-24	321,471	0	0
25-34	451,700	0	0
35-44	433,728	3	6.92
45-59	459,769	9	19.58
60+	412,040	1	2.43
total	**2,233,145**	**13**	**5.82**

Table 4.22 Age and blasted produced by male speakers

Age 'blasted'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	0	0
15-24	179,148	1	5.58
25-34	239,020	0	0
35-44	272,154	2	7.35
45-59	273,372	0	0
60+	259,352	0	0
total	**1,424,282**	**3**	**2.11**

Table 4.21 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *blasted* by female speakers while Table 4.22 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *blasted* by male speakers. Even though the hits and the frequency per million words are relatively low the results from the BNC shows that female speakers use *blasted* more than male speakers. The analysis of the hits from the BNC revealed that male speakers use *blasted* just as much as female speakers based on the dispersion over speakers. The largest number of

hits was found among female speakers in the age-range 45-59 with 9 hits, but those 9 instances of *blasted* was uttered by one female speaker only. The two comparable instances we have based on the dispersion over speakers are found in the age-range 35-44 and in this case the frequency per million words tells us that men in this age-range use *blasted* more than female speakers.

4.1.6 'blooming'

There are 183 occurrences of *blooming* in the spoken part of the BNC. 56.09 instances per million words, of these occurrences were produced by female speaker and 56 instances, 38.51 instances per million words, by male speakers. The numbers shows that females use this euphemism more than men.

Out of 183 occurrences of *blooming*, 94 were produced by female speakers and 43 were produced by male speakers. Table 4.23 and 4.24 below shows the distribution of social class and the use of *blooming*.

Table 4.23 Social class and blooming produced by female speakers

Social Class 'blooming'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	11	26.77
C1	474,525	22	46.36
C2	468,320	53	113.17
DE	228,415	8	35.02
total	**1,582,116**	**94**	**59.41**

Table 4.24 Social class and blooming produced by male speakers

Social Class 'blooming'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	9	29.46
C1	307,709	20	65
C2	251,564	8	31.8
DE	185,651	6	32.32
total	**1,050,396**	**43**	**40.94**

The tables' shows that female speakers from the C2 group are the most frequent users of *blooming* based on the highest total number of hits and highest frequency per million words. The frequencies per million words are generally high in all the different class groups for both female and male speakers.

Table 4.25 Age and blooming produced by female speakers

Age 'blooming'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	6	38.85
15-24	321,471	12	37.33
25-34	451,700	17	37.64
35-44	433,728	14	32.28
45-59	459,769	53	115.28
60+	412,040	25	60.67
total	**2,233,145**	**127**	**56.87**

Table 4.26 Age and blooming produced by male speakers

Age 'blooming'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	4	19.88
15-24	179,148	14	78.15
25-34	239,020	4	16.74
35-44	272,154	5	18.37
45-59	273,372	6	21.95
60+	259,352	20	77.12
total	**1,424,282**	**53**	**37.21**

Table 4.25 above shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *blooming* by female speakers while Table 4.26 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *blooming* by male speakers. By looking at the tables we can see that the largest number of hits and the highest frequency per million words are among speakers in the age-range of 45-59 for female speakers and 15-24 for male speakers. The frequencies per million words are high for both female and male speakers in the age-range of 60+.

4.1.7 'crikey'

There are 41 relevant occurrences of the euphemism *crikey* in the spoken part of the BNC. 26 instances were produced by female speakers, while there were 15 instances of *crikey* produced by male speakers. The frequency per million words is 11.48 for female speakers and 10.31 for male speakers. The numbers reveal that female speakers use this euphemism more than male speakers.

20 occurrences of *crikey* produced by female speakers was registered in the BNC when using the search string social class. For male speakers 13 occurrences of *crikey* was registered. Table 4.27 and 4.28 below shows the distribution of social class and the use of *crikey*.

Table 4.27 Social class and crikey produced by female speakers

Social Class 'crikey'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	2	4.87
C1	474,525	6	12.64
C2	468,320	6	12.81
DE	228,415	6	26.27
total	**1,582,116**	**20**	**12.64**

Table 4.28 Social class and crikey produced by male speakers

Social Class 'crikey'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	3	6.55
C1	307,709	3	9.75
C2	251,564	1	3.98
DE	185,651	7	37.71
total	**1,050,396**	**13**	**12.38**

Females are the most frequent users of *crikey* by a small margin. The results from the tables show that speakers in the DE group, both female and male speakers, are the most frequent users of *crikey*.

Table 4.29 Age and crikey produced by female speakers

Age 'crikey'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	2	12.95
15-24	321,471	4	12.44
25-34	451,700	5	11.07
35-44	433,728	5	11.53
45-59	459,769	3	6.53
60+	412,040	7	16.99
total	**2,233,145**	**26**	**11.64**

Table 4.30 Age and crikey produced by male speakers

Age 'crikey'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	2	9.94
15-24	179,148	2	11.16
25-34	239,020	1	4.18
35-44	272,154	3	11.02
45-59	273,372	1	3.66
60+	259,352	5	19.28
total	**1,424,282**	**14**	**9.83**

Table 4.29 above shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *crikey* by female speakers while Table 4.30 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *crikey* by male speakers.

Crikey is most frequency used by males in the age-range 60+, however, in the BNC search the results showed that the 5 hits were produced by 2 speakers only. This was the case in all but one age group (45-59). Female speakers in the age-range 60+ were the most frequent users of

crikey. Those 7 hits in the BNC showed that the dispersion over speakers was 6. So even though the frequency per million words was higher for 60+ male speakers, there were more female speakers producing this euphemism.

4.1.8 'blimey'

Out of 116 occurrences of *blimey* in the spoken part of the BNC, 71 instances of *blimey* was produced by female speakers and 45 instances of *blimey* was produced by male speakers. The frequency per million words is quite similar for both genders: 31.35 for female speakers versus 30.94 for male speakers.

54 of 71 occurrences of the euphemism blimey produced by female speakers and 30 occurrences of blimey produced by male speakers was registered in the BNC. The distribution in the cases where social class was identified is shown in the tables below.

Table 4.31 Social class and blimey produced by female speakers

Social Class 'blimey'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	8	19.47
C1	474,525	15	31.61
C2	468,320	23	49.11
DE	228,415	8	35.02
total	**1,582,116**	**54**	**34.13**

Table 4.32 Social class and blimey produced by male speakers

Social Class 'blimey'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	5	16.37
C1	307,709	13	42.25
C2	251,564	11	43.73
DE	185,651	1	5.39
total	**1,050,396**	**30**	**28.56**

By using the search string gender and social class in the spoken part of the BNC we can see that women use *blimey* slightly more than men based on the frequency per million words. The group with the highest frequency per million words is C2 for both female and male speakers. The most noticeable difference is between female and male speakers belonging to the DE group where female speakers use *blimey* over 5 times more than men.

Table 4.33 Age and blimey produced by female speakers

Age 'blimey'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	2	12.95
15-24	321,471	20	62.21
25-34	451,700	12	26.57
35-44	433,728	16	36.89
45-59	459,769	12	26.1
60+	412,040	5	12.13
total	**2,233,145**	**67**	**30**

Table 4.34 Age and blimey produced by male speakers

Age 'blimey'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	6	29.82
15-24	179,148	3	16.75
25-34	239,020	7	29.29
35-44	272,154	12	44.09
45-59	273,372	2	7.32
60+	259,352	14	53.98
total	**1,424,282**	**44**	**30.89**

Table 4.33 above shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *blimey* by female speakers while Table 4.34 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *blimey* by male speakers. According to age and the gender of the speaker the results from table shows that male speakers use *blimey* just as much as female speakers, but there are a few differences between the age groups. The reason for the high frequency per million words for the age-range 0-14 for male speakers has to do with some of the speakers not using *blimey* to swear, but rather mimicking someone, for example:

Sandra 4506 No it's <unclear> , I mean I'm not very good at this <unclear> <voice quality: mimicking> cor blimey <pause> up the apples and pears <end of voice quality> <pause>

Alex 4507 <voice quality: mimicking>Cor blimey, cor blimey <end of voice quality>

Simon 4508 That isn't supposed to be posh <unclear>

We do not if Alex from the example above would actually use this euphemism in his own speech.

While *blimey* is mostly used by 60+ male speakers, only a few 60+ female speakers use this

euphemism. The numbers are much higher for female speakers between the ages of 15-24.

4.1.9 'Oh my goodness'

In the spoken part of the BNC 35 occurrences of the euphemism *oh my goodness* was found. 29 occurrences were produced by female speakers and only 6 occurrences produced by male speakers. Even though there were few hits and the frequency per million words was quit low for male speakers (4.12 in frequency per million words), the results reveal that women use *oh my goodness* more than men (12.80 per million words).

When searching the BNC there was only 22 instances of *oh my goodness* where the speaker's social class was identified. 22 occurrences of *oh my goodness* was produced by female speakers and there was 6 occurrences produced by male speakers. Table 4.35 and 4.36 below shows the distribution of social class and the use of *oh my goodness*.

Table 4.35 Social class and oh my goodness produced by female speakers

Social Class 'oh my goodness'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	6	14.6
C1	474,525	5	10.54
C2	468,320	1	2.14
DE	228,415	10	43.78
total	**1,582,116**	**22**	**13.91**

Table 4.36 Social class and oh my goodness produced by male speakers

Social Class 'oh my goodness'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	2	6.55
C1	307,709	2	6.5
C2	251,564	2	7.95
DE	185,651	0	0
total	**1,050,396**	**6**	**5.71**

To conclude, female speakers in the DE group are the most frequent users of *oh my goodness* and this social class group also have the largest number of hits. There were no occurrences of male speakers using *oh my goodness* in the DE group.

Table 4.37 Age and oh my goodness produced by female speakers

Age 'oh my goodness'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	0	0
15-24	321,471	1	3.11
25-34	451,700	7	15.5
35-44	433,728	3	6.92
45-59	459,769	10	21.75
60+	412,040	8	19.42
total	**2,233,145**	**29**	**12.99**

Table 4.38 Age and oh my goodness produced by male speakers

Age 'oh my goodness'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	0	0
15-24	179,148	2	11.16
25-34	239,020	0	0
35-44	272,154	2	7.35
45-59	273,372	2	7.32
60+	259,352	0	0
total	**1,424,282**	**6**	**4.21**

Table 4.37 above shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *oh my goodnes*s by female speakers while Table 4.38 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *oh my goodness* by male speakers.

The results from the tables above shows that female speakers in the age-range of 45-59 are the most frequent users of *oh my goodness*, while male speakers in the age-range 15-25 are the most frequent users of *oh my goodness*. However, the total frequency per million words was the highest among female speakers. While there were no evidence of male speakers using oh my goodness in the age-range of 0-14, 25-34 and 60+, the frequency per million words were high in female speech. The second highest number, after female speakers in the age-range 45-50, is produced by female speakers in the age-range 60+.

4.1.10 'Sugar'

There were 5 occurrences of the world *sugar* in the spoken part of the BNC. 2 occurrences of *sugar* were produced by female speakers while there were 3 occurrences of *sugar* produced by male speakers. What Table 4.2 tells us is that men use *sugar* slightly more than women, but other variables have been investigated for the purpose of this study.

Table 4.39 and 4.40 below shows the distribution of social class for the euphemism *sugar*.

Table 4.39 Social class and sugar produced by female speakers

Social Class 'sugar'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	0	0
C1	474,525	0	0
C2	468,320	1	2.13
DE	228,415	0	0
total	**1,582,116**	**1**	**0.63**

Table 4.40 Social class and sugar produced by male speakers

Social Class 'sugar'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	1	3.27
C1	307,709	0	0
C2	251,564	0	0
DE	185,651	0	0
total	**1,050,396**	**1**	**0.95**

2 occurrences of *sugar*, where the social class was registered, were found in the BNC. 1 occurrence was produced by a female speakers and 1 occurrence of *sugar* was produced by a male speakers.

Table 4.41 below shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *sugar* by female speakers while Table 4.42 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *sugar* by male speakers.

Table 4.41 Age and sugar produced by female speakers

Age 'sugar'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	1	6.47
15-24	321,471	1	3.11
25-34	451,700	0	0
35-44	433,728	0	0
45-59	459,769	0	0
60+	412,040	0	0
total	**2,233,145**	**2**	**0.89**

Table 4.42 Age and sugar produced by male speakers

Age 'sugar'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	2	9.93
15-24	179,148	1	5.58
25-34	239,020	0	0
35-44	272,154	0	0
45-59	273,372	0	0
60+	259,352	0	0
total	**1,424,282**	**3**	**2.1**

When searching the BNC for the word *sugar* the results were deceiving. When searching the BNC there is no way to investigate the context in which these words were uttered and the chances are these euphemisms or even swearwords might not have been used as euphemisms/swearwords in the hits found in the BNC. This was the case for *sugar*. There were only 5 cases in total where *sugar* was used as a euphemism. There were 2 occurrences of the euphemism *sugar* in female speech. The first example was produced by a female speaker

whose social status is unknown, but she is in the age-range 15-24. By looking at the excerpt from the BNC we can see that the female speaker, Melissa, uses the euphemism *sugar* in a joking matter:

Melissa 1674 and he stuck his dingaling through and the woman grabbed it and she put his foot against the wall and started stretching it, and he's going aaagh

Clare 1675 I've seen it and that and is

Melissa 1676 oh **sugar** plum

Clare <laugh>

Melissa 1677 I forgot, I got carried away <laugh>sorry about that missus

Clare <laugh>

Melissa 1678 I forgot this erm microphone was on, sorry students, I am very, very sorry, please forgive me, please forgive me

The second example is produced by a female speaker belonging to the social class C2, in the age group 15-24:

(11) Oh sugar, I've gotta start filling all these in now. BNC KCE 2480

There were also occurrences of the euphemism *sugar* in male speech. The first one was produced by a male speaker belonging to social class AB and age-range 15-14:

(12) Oh sugar you tell it mum, you tell it love. BNC KBM 1911

The last example is the only one where the word *sugar* is produced twice in a conversation by a male speaker whose social status is unknown, but he belongs in the age-range 0-14:

(13) Oh sugar! BNC KBS 562

(14) Oh sugar. BNC KBS 735

4.1.11 'heck'

There were 94 occurrences of the euphemism *heck* in the spoken part of the BNC. 66 occurrences, the frequency per million words being 29.15, were produced by female speakers and 28 occurrences, the frequency per million words being 19.25, were produced by male speakers.

There were 62 occurrences of *heck* where the social class was registered in the BNC. 40 of those occurrences were produced by female speakers and 22 occurrences of *heck* were produced by male speakers. Table 4.43 and 4.44 below shows the distribution of *heck* where social class was identified.

Table 4.43 Social class and heck produced by female speakers

Social Class 'heck'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	12	29.21
C1	474,525	8	16.86
C2	468,320	11	23.49
DE	228,415	9	39.4
total	**1,582,116**	**40**	**25.28**

Table 4.44 Social class and heck produced by male speakers

Social Class 'heck'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	5	16.37
C1	307,709	9	29.25
C2	251,564	3	11.93
DE	185,651	5	26.93
total	**1,050,396**	**22**	**20.94**

Table 4.43 shows that *heck* is most common among female speakers in the DE group, although most hits are presented within the AB group. By studying the hits in the BNC (*heck* produced by both females and males) the results revealed that *heck* was often preceded by euphemisms such as *flipping*, *flaming* and *blooming*, as seen in the examples below:

(15) Oh oh flipping heck, what's that? BNC KBM 1588

(16) Blooming heck it's [unclear] ! BNC KBC 2045

One female speaker from class C2 had a habit of repeating *heck* over and over again in the conversation, as seen in the example below:

(17) Oh heck, heck, heck and double heck! BNC KB7 6320

Table 4.45 Age and heck produced by female speakers

Age 'heck'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	2	12.95
15-24	321,471	2	6.22
25-34	451,700	6	13.28
35-44	433,728	14	32.28
45-59	459,769	16	34.8
60+	412,040	26	63.1
total	**2,233,145**	**66**	**29.55**

Table 4.46 Age and heck produced by male speakers

Age 'heck'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	6	29.82
15-24	179,148	4	22.33
25-34	239,020	2	8.37
35-44	272,154	6	22.05
45-59	273,372	5	18.29
60+	259,352	5	19.28
total	**1,424,282**	**28**	**19.66**

Table 4.45 above shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *heck* by female speakers while Table 4.46 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *heck* by male speakers. Looking at the tables we can see that the euphemism *heck* is the most frequent in the age range of 60+ for female speakers and the age-range 0-14 for male speakers. When searching the hits in the BNC one could see that the speech pattern for children and young adults were different from those in the age-range 45-59 and 60+. The

younger male speakers often used a combination of two euphemisms such as *blithering heck*, *flipping heck*, *blooming heck*, *flaming heck* and *blimming heck*. Older male speakers used *heck* by itself. There were only a few instances where female speakers would use *heck* in combination with other euphemisms or swearwords.

4.1.12 'darn'

There were 9 occurrences of the euphemism *darn* in the spoken part of the BNC. 5 occurrences were produced by female speakers and 4 occurrences were produced by male speakers.

Only 6 instances of *darn* were registered in the spoken part of the BNC. 3 occurrences were produced by female speakers whose social class was identified. The same number of instances of *darn* produced by male speakers was also found. Table 4.47 and 4.48 below shows the distribution of gender, social class and the use of *darn*.

Table 4.47 Social class and darn produced by female speakers

Social Class 'darn'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	410,856	0	0
C1	474,525	2	4.21
C2	468,320	0	0
DE	228,415	1	4.38
total	**1,582,116**	**3**	**1.9**

Table 4.48 Social class and darn produced by male speakers

Social Class 'darn'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
AB	305,472	3	9.82
C1	307,709	0	0
C2	251,564	0	0
DE	185,651	0	0
total	**1,050,396**	**3**	**2.86**

Table 4.48 shows that male speakers are the most frequent users of *darn* and they have the highest number of frequency per million words. Nevertheless, the search in the BNC showed that the number for dispersion over speakers were lower for male speaker than female speakers.

Table 4.49 Age and darn produced by female speakers

Age 'darn'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	154,437	2	12.95
15-24	321,471	2	6.22
25-34	451,700	0	0
35-44	433,728	0	0
45-59	459,769	0	0
60+	412,040	1	2.43
total	**2,233,145**	**5**	**2.24**

Table 4.50 Age and darn produced by male speakers

Age 'darn'	Number of words	Number of hits	Frequency per million words
0-14	201,236	0	0
15-24	179,148	1	5.58
25-34	239,020	0	0
35-44	272,154	0	0
45-59	273,372	3	10.97
60+	259,352	0	0
total	**1,424,282**	**4**	**2.81**

Table 4.49 above shows the distribution of age groups and the use of euphemism *darn* by female speakers while Table 4.50 shows the distribution of age groups and the use of the euphemism *darn* by male speakers. The euphemism *darn* is both most frequent and have the largest number of hits in the age-range of 15-24 for female speakers and in the age-range 45-59 for male speakers. The high number of frequency per million words for female speakers in the age-range 15-24 is due to one speaker 'swearing' two times in the conversation. What is interesting about her speech is that she says *oh god, darn*. Not only does she use a euphemism, but by saying *oh god* that can be considered as religious swearing. Here is an example from the BNC:

(18) oh god darn, it's not eleven yet is it? BNC KP2 1053

5 Discussion

In this chapter the presentation and the discussion of the results will be divided into three parts based on the parameters of this study: gender, social class and age, corresponding to the three research questions described in the previous chapter. The results will be compared especially with McEnery (2006) in relation to gender, age and social classes and Thelwall (2008) in the section on age differences.

5.1 Euphemistic swearing and gender

One of the aims of this study was to see how men and women use euphemistic swearwords and if there were any differences in their usage. As I have described in 3.1 the aim of this study is to investigate which gender are more prone to use euphemistic swearing and to see if there are any differences between men and women in relation to age and social class, and to see if there are specific euphemisms that are favored by either men or women.

The investigation on euphemisms in this study was chosen in relation to McEnery' study on bad language in present-day English where he explored the patterns of interaction and the usage of swearwords in male and female speech according to their age and their social background. McEnery discovered that not only does the frequency of the individual swearwords mark the genders apart, but the swearwords themselves also shows how male and females differ (McEnery 2006: 29). He also saw signs that women used words forms that would cause less offence, but in order to confirm this he created a so-called Richter's scale for swearwords known as 'the scale of offence' which was borrowed from the British Board of Film Classification.

For this study I tried to find euphemistic counterparts of the 15 most used swearwords by male and females from McEnery's study. All the euphemisms are by definition milder than these swearwords, and it is not clear whether they can be ranked in the same fashion as swearwords. Nevertheless, it is possible to compare the euphemistic counterparts to mild swearwords to the euphemistic counterparts to strong swearwords. McEnery observed that there were slightly more male than female examples of bad language (3,875 vs. 3,790). However, the log-likelihood test only showed a significance score of 0.96%. The difference was not considered to be significant (2006: 210). The difference between men and women

had to do with the strength of the swearwords they used.

According to McEnery (2006: 30), women are more prone to use very mild to mild swearwords while men have a tendency use moderate to very strong swearwords. Table 5.1 is based on McEnery's table showing the use of the 15 swearwords distinguishing male and female speakers. I have ranked them according to his scale of offence to make it easier to see the difference between men and women in this regard. The table shows that very strong to strong swearwords such *as fuck (-ing)* and *cunt* have the highest frequency per million words among male speakers, and while female speakers also swear they have a tendency to prefer very mild to moderate swearwords such as the mild swearword *God* or the moderate swearwords *pissed* and *pissy*. Women swear as much as men, because even though men prefer stronger swearwords these are relatively rare.

Table 5.1 Swearwords preferred by males and females in the BNC ranked by strength based on Table 2.3 in McEnery (2006: 29)

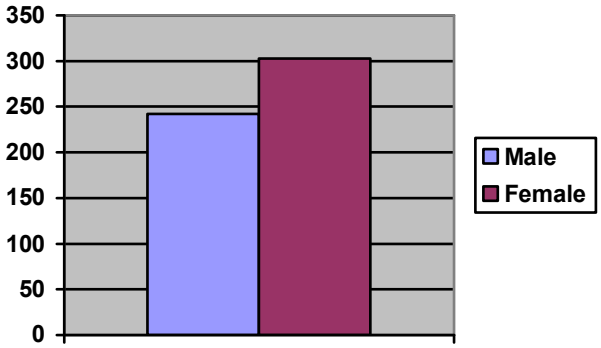
Swearword (from very mild to very strong)	Frequency of use by females per 1,000,000 words	Frequency of use by males per 1,000,000 words	Overuse by
god	459.38	172.33	Females
hell	146.29	114.21	Females
pig	11.32	1.42	Females
bloody	526.71	277.80	Females
Jesus	9.79	18.70	Males
bitch	17.14	8.54	Females
bugger	39.48	25.00	Females
arsed	2.45	0.20	Females
shit	80.19	63.81	Females
pissed	24.18	13.82	Females
pissy	1.22	0.00	Females
fucker	0.61	3.25	Males
fucking	99.77	284.10	Males
fuck	32.75	68.28	Males
cunt	5.51	11.18	Males

McEnery (2006:30) speculates whether women use milder swearwords to cause less offence. If this is the case, do women use euphemistic swearing more often than men?

5.1.1 Overall numbers

The figure below shows the overall numbers of the euphemisms searched for in this study (frequency per million words) used by male and females in the BNC.

Figure 5.1 Overall numbers (frequency per million words) of euphemisms by males and females



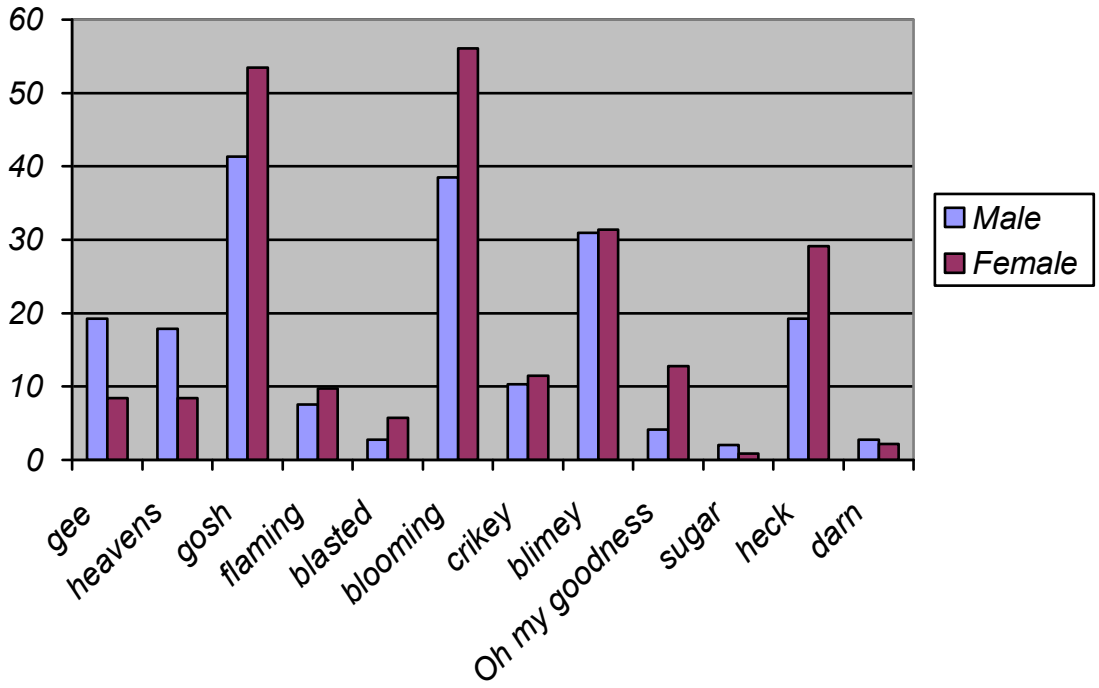
As the figure shows, there is a slight difference in the overall numbers of euphemisms between the two genders. Based on the euphemisms chosen in this study it seems that women use them somewhat more often than men.

5.1.2 Comparison with respect to individual euphemisms

It must be acknowledged that the results may have changed if we had included other euphemistic swearwords. Because of this, it is important to inspect the individual words. Is there a similar pattern in the usage of euphemism between female and male speakers? If women use euphemisms more than men because they do not want to cause offence and because they always use milder words than men, then we might expect this for all euphemisms in this study, especially for strong swearwords rather than the weak ones. These questions will be discussed in this section.

Figure 5.2 below shows the frequency of the euphemisms per million words for males and females. It is useful to compare the results of each euphemism to Figure 5.1 to see what may be the reason why a certain gender has such a high frequency in their use of euphemisms.

Figure 5.2 The frequency of the euphemisms per million words for males and females



The numbers from the figure above shows that women are not the most frequent users of all euphemisms, but they use euphemisms more frequently than men. Out of the 12 euphemisms investigated in this study female speakers use *gosh*, *flaming*, *blasted*, *blooming*, *Oh my goodness* and *heck* more than male speakers. Only *gee* and *heavens* had a higher frequency for male speakers than female speakers. Euphemism such as *blimey*, *darn*, *crikey* and *sugar* were used just as much by female speakers as male speakers.

According to Stenström (1991) as cited in McEnery and Xiao (2004: 240) female speakers prefer to use words related to heaven such as *heavens* and *gosh*, while male speakers use words related to hell, like *damn* and *devil*. This is not the case for euphemisms found in the BNC. While *heavens* are found to be more frequent in male speech than female speech, *gosh* is popular in both female and male speech. Based on the low frequency of *darn* in both female and male speech, I expect that *damn* is more commonly used by women and men. *Sugar* and *darn* were two of the euphemisms which were used with very similar frequency per million words by male and female speakers. They were also similar in resulting in a very low number of hits in the BNC. Does this mean that both men and women opt for swearwords instead of euphemisms in these cases? In case of *darn* it could be true. A search in the BNC for the

swearword *damn* resulted in 85.95 instances per million words for male speakers and 46.82 instances per million words for female speakers. The frequency per million words for *darn* is only 2.75 for male speakers and 2.20 for female speakers. Holder (2008: 146) claims that *darn* is still widely used for *damn*, but *damn* has lost its status as a strong swearword now that less people believe in hell. The results in this study do not agree with Holder's statement that *darn* is widely used. Figure 5.2 shows that *darn* have low frequencies in both male and female speech. The low frequencies may be connected to *damn* being considered mild nowadays that the use of *darn* would be felt less necessary. *Damn* was considered as risqué in the 18th and the 19th century, and when the character Rhett Butler uttered the infamous line 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn' in Gone with the Wind from 1939 people and the entire film industry was in shock (Zemel 2015: 40). *Damn* was not commonly used at the time. Crystal (2014: 131) also discusses the status of *darn* and says that as time has passed *damn* has become weakened in meaning to the point that the theological meaning is no longer there. It is important to remember that words that were originally seen as strong swearwords have undergone several shifts through the years as the society has changed. The other two euphemisms which are similar in relation to frequency per million words for male and female speakers are *crikey* and *blimey* which relates to the biblical term *Christ* and '*God, blind me*' or '*blind me, God*'. *Christ* is one of the words that is found on the scale of offence as a mild swearword, but does not appear in the top 15 swearwords produced by male and female speakers. Nevertheless, *crikey* is still common and seen as an innocent, but quite strong euphemism (Lambotte, Campbell & Potter 1998: 385). There is not much difference in the frequency per million words for male and female speakers for *crikey* and *blimey*: The frequency per million words for *crikey* is 10.31 for male speakers and 11.48 for female speakers and for *blimey* the frequency per million words is 30.94 for male speakers and 31.35 for female speakers. In the BNC the frequency per million words for male speakers were 90.9 compared to a frequency of 41.0 for female speakers of the swearword *Christ*, which supports the claim that women swear less than men.

A reason why *blimey* is used equally much by male and female speakers can be due to the fact that the original swearword is not commonly used. There were no hits in the BNC for '*God, blind me*' or '*Blind me, God*'. According to Lambotte, Campbell and Potter (1998: 385) people are not even aware that *blimey* derives from '*God, blind me'* so we can assume that these are no longer in use, thus challenging their status as swearwords.

We have seen that there is a difference between men and women in the euphemisms each group uses more than the other. But there is a similarity between men and women regarding which euphemisms are the most popular. The four most frequently used euphemisms among both men and women are *gosh*, *blooming, blimey* and *heck*. *Blooming* and *gosh* are the most popular euphemisms with the highest frequency per million words for male and female speakers. For *gosh* the frequency per million words is 41.31 for male speakers vs. 53.44 for female speakers. The numbers for *blooming* are 38.50 per million words for male speakers and 6.09 per million words for female speakers. These two euphemisms have different functions. *Gosh* is mostly used as a way of expressing surprise as we can see from the examples below. Example 19 and 20 are uttered by a man, while example 21 and 22 is uttered by a woman.

(19) Oh gosh, absolutely, yeah! BNC KDM 15247

(20) Oh gosh, I haven't seen them for a. BNC KE2 184

(21) Oh gosh, she is in't she? BNC KC5 1141

(22) Gosh the valley goes really far down there. BNC KE2 7207

Blooming is strictly used for emphasis. Example 23 is uttered by a man and example 24 is uttered by a woman.

(23) Well he's a blooming nuisance he is, at times. BNC KCP 3720

(24) It looks to me as if it's going to blooming rain again. BNC KBP 516

5.1.3 Comparison with respect to strength of swearword counterparts

I have previously discussed that the general claim is that women to always use milder words than men and therefore we might expect high frequencies for all euphemisms. The results showed that women are not the most frequent users of all the euphemisms investigated in this study. In this section we will investigate the claim that women might be expected to use more euphemisms corresponding to strong swearwords as to not cause offence. In McEnery's (2006: 29) study *fuck, fucking*, *Jesus*, *cunt* and *fucker*, in descending order, are typical male swearwords, while swearwords predominantly used by females are *god*, *bloody*, *pig*, *hell*, *bugger*, *bitch*, *pissed*, *arsed* and *shit*.

Again, euphemisms are milder than the mildest swearwords, but if women use euphemisms in order to avoid offence then we might expect to see overuse of euphemistic counterparts of strong swearwords by women. Even if the results have previously shown that women do not use all euphemisms, we would expect to see higher frequencies for women than men for euphemisms corresponding to the stronger/strongest swearwords.

Table 5.2 Euphemisms produced by males and females from the BNC ranked by frequency per million words based on McEnery's scale of offence (2006: 29)

Euphemisms	Frequency of use by females per 1,000,000 words	Frequency of use by males per 1,000,000 words	Overuse by
Gosh (God)	53.44	41.31	Females
Oh my goodness (Oh my God)	12.80	4.12	Females
Blimey (God, blind me/blind me, God)	31.35	30.94	Females
Heavens (hell)	8.39	17.87	Males
Darn (damn)	2.20	2.75	Males
Heck (hell)	29.15	19.25	Females
Blasted (bloody)	5.74	2.75	Females
Blooming (bloody)	56.09	38.50	Females
Gee (Jesus)	8.39	19.25	Males
Crikey (Christ)	11.48	10.31	Females
Sugar (shit)	0.88	2.06	Males
Flaming (fucking)	9.71	7.56	Females

In the table above we can see that the frequency of euphemisms per million words is not that much higher for female speakers than for male speakers. *Shit* and *fucking* are considered as strong swearwords based on the scale of offence. Because women have a tendency to avoid using strong swearwords we would expect to see high frequencies for *sugar* and *flaming* produced by female speakers. The results shows that women do not have a higher frequency of use compared to men the lower in the table we get. Women do, however, use the euphemistic equivalent *flaming*, more than men, which was expected. Women also use euphemisms for the milder swearwords more often than men, as seen in *heck* and *blooming*.

Nevertheless, there really is no clear scale from mild to strong as we can see that some of the euphemisms where women have very high frequencies and large differences from the men correspond to mild or medium swearwords.

According to Jay (2000: 137), "Cursing intensifies emotional expressions in a manner that inoffensive words cannot achieve." He believes that swearwords expresses the speaker's level of emotion and only the use of powerful language can show the intensity of our emotions. In that case we would expect that the intensity of our emotion cannot be achieved through the use of euphemisms. A simple search in the BNC showed that euphemisms such as *darn* and *flaming* were used to show emotions without offending anyone, like '*darn it*!' or examples like:

(25) You may pay all them flaming taxes and you get stuff all out of it. BNC KD3 1943

This subject needs further research and if we wanted to know the power of euphemisms we would have to investigate more euphemisms and to interview native speakers asking them to rate examples. Such a study might also reveal something about gender differences as we know woman have a tendency to use milder swearwords.

5.1.4 Co-occurrence of euphemisms and swearwords

A similar pattern was found in male and female speech in their usage of euphemisms. Both genders had a tendency to use two euphemisms in their sentences as a way of emphasizing or expressing outrage. 5 hits in the BNC showed double usage of euphemisms by female speakers. In most hits they uttered *flipping heck*, but they used *blooming heck* only once. 8 hits were found in the BNC produced by male speakers. Men were more creative in their use of *heck* and it often occurred in combinations such as *blooming heck*, *flaming heck*, *flipping heck* and *blimming heck*.
There were a few cases (3 hits) in the BNC where men would use swearwords co-occurring with euphemisms, like in examples (26) – (28).

(26) Flaming bloody hell. BNC KCP 2032

(27) I couldn't give a blooming damn! BNC KE4 2966

(28) You're fucking flaming cow. BNC KPL 498

If swearwords co-occurred with euphemisms in female speech they belonged to the category of milder swearwords such as:

(29) Bloody heck! BNC KB1 3215

(30) Oh God blimey! BNC KPX 840

When investigating the BNC for *blooming* co-occurring with other euphemisms or swearwords there were only 4 hits in the corpus for male speakers and it only occurred with *heck*. The same goes for *flaming*, which only occurred once with *heck*, while the 2 other hits included swearwords as seen in example 8 and 10. There were only 1 hit in the BNC where *blimey* was used with a swearword and that is from the example above. *Blimey* never occurred in a sentence with other euphemisms. *Gee* (4 hits produced by men, 5 hits produced by women), *gosh* (11 hits men, 32 hits women), *darn* (0 hits men, 2 hits women), *crikey* (8 hits men, 14 hits women) and *heck* (2 hits men, 15 hits women) shares a similar pattern with *blimey*. All of these euphemisms were often preceded by '*Oh*' or '*Oh God* + euphemism' as in:

(31) oh god darn, it's not eleven yet is it? BNC KP2 1053

(32) Oh heck, no thank you. BNC KBP 2860

One female speaker also had a tendency to repeat heck over and over again, as in:

(33) Oh heck, heck, heck and double heck! BNC KB7 6320

Female speakers avoid using euphemisms with swearwords, but the results show some examples of double euphemisms even though these are fewer than with the men. In theory, a euphemism is a less offensive word we use as to not trouble the listener, but results like the usage of swearwords combined with euphemisms makes the status of euphemisms fuzzy. If euphemisms are a way of avoiding stronger expression then why use both of them in a sentence? Further research needs to be done on this subject, but it is likely that it is a way of emphasizing without causing offence to the listener.

5.1.5 Summary

The results so far show that there are differences in the frequency of euphemism used by male and female speakers, supporting the claim that males have a preference for 'stronger' word forms while females have a preference for 'weaker' word forms" (McEnery 2006:30). However, the picture is more complex because they do not always use euphemisms more than men. It depends on the individual words. We have already seen in Figure 5.2 that male and female speakers have a few common favorite euphemisms while others are preferred by one gender only. The results have also shown that there is no connection between overuse by euphemisms by female speakers when they correspond to strong swearwords. Finally, we have seen in the results that euphemisms are not always being used to avoid swearwords as euphemisms sometimes occur in sentences with swearwords.

5.2 Euphemistic swearing and social class

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the BNC corpus is divided into four different social classes according to people's work-status and income. The different social classes are divided

into AB which represents the upper class, C1 the upper middle class, C2 being the lower middle class and DE being the lower, working class. There are also examples where the speaker's status is also unknown, but in this study these were left out as in the previous section. Figure 5.3 and 5.4 below shows the overall numbers of euphemisms per million words for male speakers and female speakers. With these figures we can see which social class has the highest frequency per million words and the difference between the genders, differences that we were not able to see in the previous tables and figures.

Figure 5.3 Overall numbers of euphemisms (frequency per million words) by females of different social classes

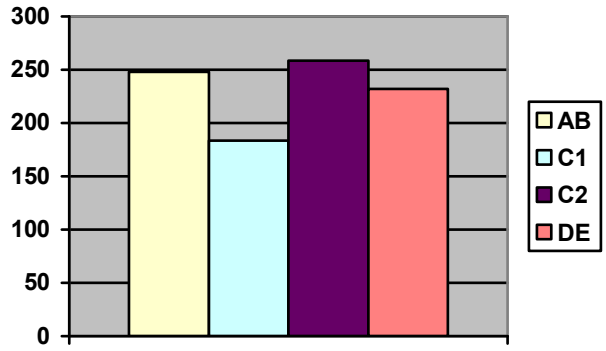
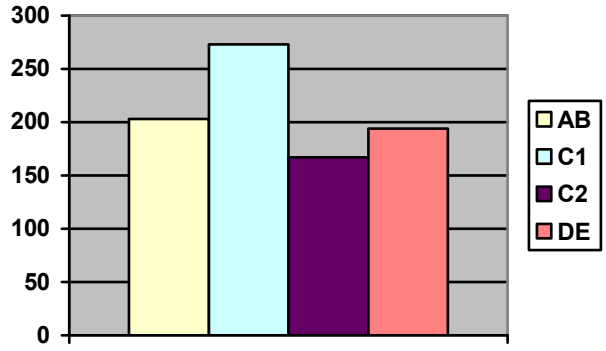


Figure 5.4 Overall numbers of euphemisms (frequency per million words) by males of different social classes

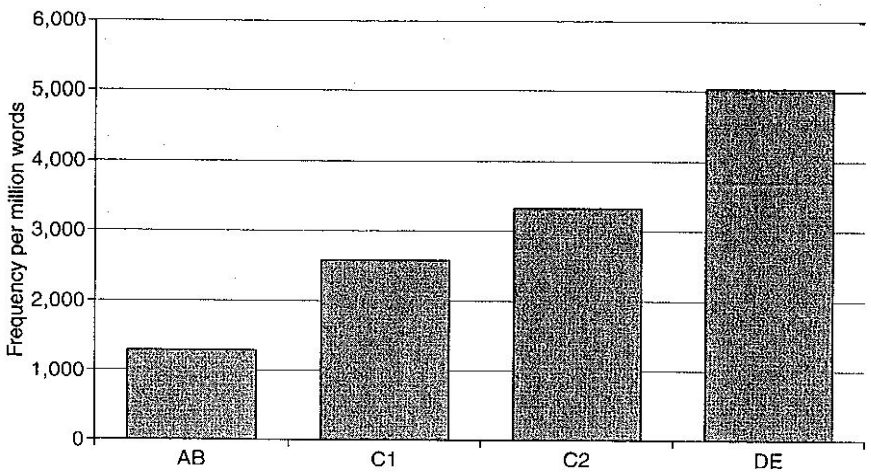


The figures show that while the frequency per million words are quite similar for both male and female speakers belonging to social classes AB, C2 and DE, the social class that stands out in this investigation is C1 for male and female speakers. The numbers shows that men from social class C1 use euphemism more than men from other classes while female speakers

from C1 have a lower frequency per million words than females from any of the other social classes. McEnery (2006: 42) examined whether the use of swearwords declined when looking higher up the social hierarchy and the results of his study showed swearwords was indeed significantly different depending on gender and their social class. With this hypothesis confirmed, McEnery looked at the strength of the swearwords to see if there were any differences in the usage between lower classes and upper classes. Figure 5.5 below presents the frequency of swearwords per million words produced by male and female speakers of different social classes from McEnery (2006:42). The results from his study shows that people from the upper class swear less than those from the middle class and the working class. The figure, however, would look slightly different if we ranked the classes according to the average strength of the swearwords used by each social class.

The figure, however, would look slightly different if we ranked the classes according to the average strength of the swearwords used by each social class. When McEnery (2006: 43) did this he discovered that the measure of strength was as follows: AB-1.82, C1-1.76, C2-2.16 and DE 2.47, meaning male and female speakers from the social class AB use stronger swearwords than C1s. McEnery points out that the low strength for C1s is evidence for what the calls hypercorrection. He believes that people from social class C1 tries to "copy the linguistic habits of the AB social class" and by doing so "they exaggerate what they view to be a feature of AB speech" (McEnery 2006: 43).

Figure 5.5 The overall number of euphemisms per million words for both male and female speakers from different social classes by McEnery (2006: 42)



The frequency ranking by social class for males and females in this study does not match with McEnery's swearword usage where the usage of swearwords decreases the higher the social class. Yet there are differences between male and female speakers across the classes in which euphemisms they favor and which ones they shun. Figure 5.6 and 5.7 below are supposed to shed light on the differences in euphemistic swearing between genders and across all different social classes. What we can tell from the figures is that there is a huge difference between the different gender and classes in the distribution of euphemisms. The frequency per million words for euphemisms produced by male speakers seems much more evenly distributed than for female speakers where euphemisms such as *gosh* and *blooming* have a very high frequency in social classes such as AB for gosh and C2 for *blooming* compared to male speakers. With the investigation on the individual euphemisms in relation to speaker's gender and class we can see whether certain social classes have a high overall frequency of euphemisms due to the high use of particular words only, and if the selection of specific euphemisms may therefore have affected the results.

Figure 5.6 The frequency of the euphemisms per million words for female speakers of different social classes

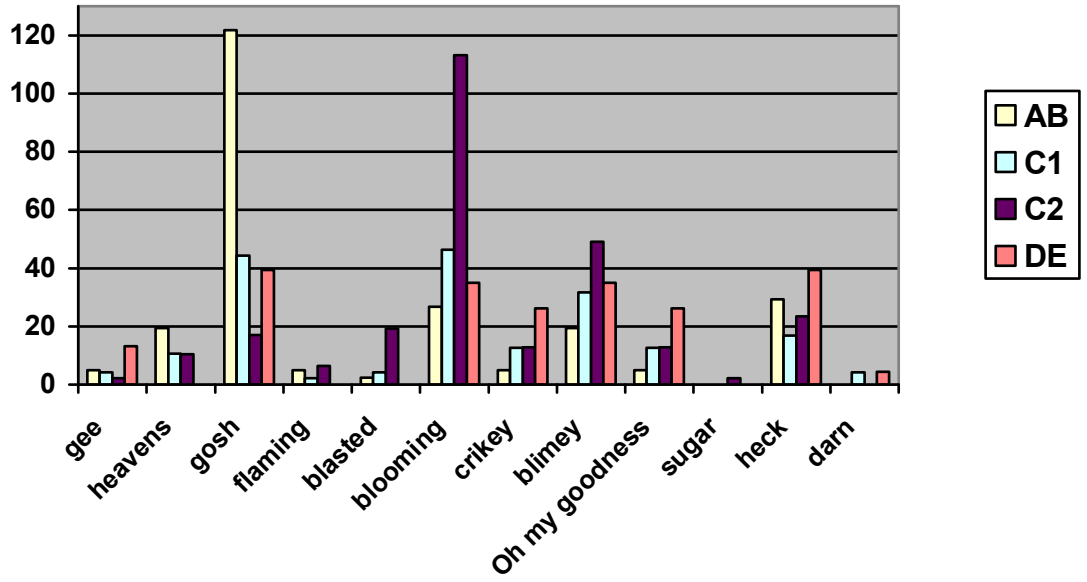
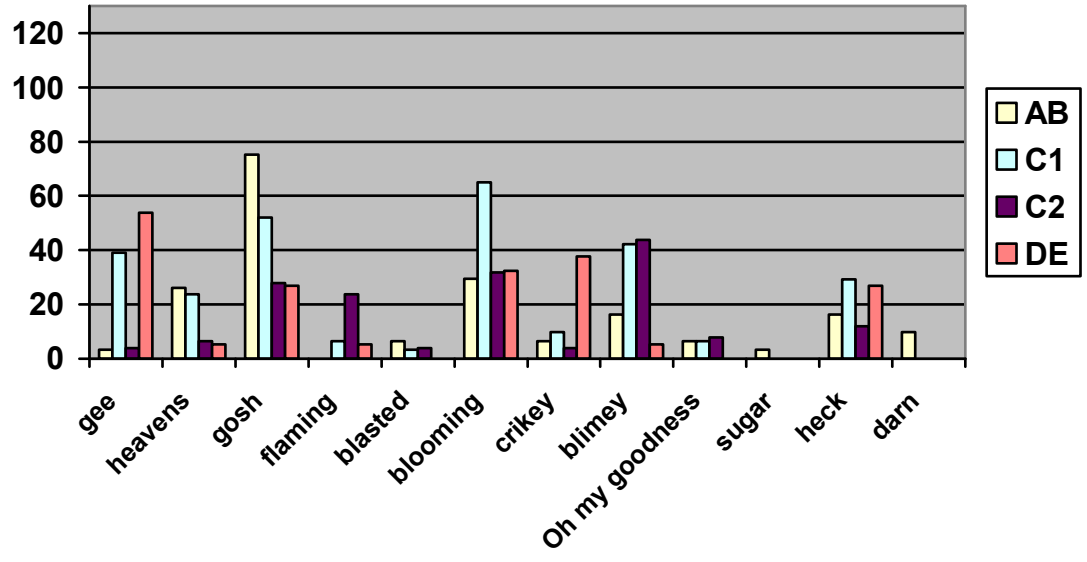


Figure 5.7 The frequency of the euphemisms per million words for male speakers of different social classes



The different classes seem to have different favorites among the euphemisms. Male and female speakers from social classes AB and C1 share a similar pattern in which they both prefer the euphemism *gosh*, female speakers more so than male speakers with a frequency of

121.7 per million words for female AB speakers and a frequency of 44.25 per million words for female C1 speakers vs. 75.29 per million words for AB male speakers and 52.0 per million words for C1 male speakers.

The second favorite euphemism by both genders is *blooming* which shows a high number of frequencies for social classes C2 for female speakers and C1 for male speakers. The high frequency of euphemisms such as *blooming* and *gosh* in female speech can affect the overall number of frequency per million words and this could be the reason why it looks like females from social class C2 use euphemisms more than other social classes. *Crikey* seems to be more popular for DE male and female speakers than for speakers of other classes, whereas C2 speakers seem to have a particular preference for *blimey* (also shared by C1 speakers among the men). It seems like the usage of euphemisms is more evenly distributed for male and female speakers from class DE than for the other classes, but there are certain swearwords that are avoided by male and female speakers of that social class. Female DE speakers avoid using euphemisms such as *heavens*, *flaming* and *blasted* while male speakers avoid using *blasted*, *oh my goodness* and *darn*. An explanation could have been that males avoid certain euphemisms because they have a preference for stronger swearwords and use them instead, and that women avoid certain euphemisms because the corresponding swearwords are so mild. But as we can see, the words that are avoided by the men and the women here are not exclusively corresponding to mild or strong swearwords. Men also have a tendency to avoid swearwords which are typical of females (McEnery 2006: 49). This might fit with the DE men avoiding *Oh my goodness*, which has a higher frequency among female speakers than male speakers. However, it does not explain the other cases.

The main difference between this study and McEnery's is that there is no clear trend as to which social class uses euphemisms more than the others. This may be because the overuses of certain euphemisms among those investigated for this project misrepresent the overall numbers. Maybe there would have been overall differences between classes if a fuller set of euphemisms were investigated.

5.3 Euphemistic swearing and age

Age has become an important variable in studies such as this one because as swearwords has become more accepted in society, more people have started to use them. However,

researchers still believe that swearwords are especially expected to be found in teenage speech. Thelwall's study showed high frequency of swearwords among teenagers, but the usage of swearwords was diminishing with age. As they get older and have children adults often tend to watch/mind their language. Maybe they use euphemisms instead.

5.3.1 Overall numbers

Figure 5.8 and 5.9 below show the overall numbers of euphemisms by female and male speakers of different ages. Both of these figures show a similar pattern in that we can see that the use of euphemisms increases as we get older and that both genders in the age-range of 45 to 60+ use euphemisms more than any other age group. This was expected as the theory is that we swear less as we get older. In the Figure 5.8 there is a steady increase in frequency per million words of euphemism produced by female speakers as they get older, while the frequency for male speakers drops suddenly at the age of 25-34. Is there an explanation why this occurs and is it similar to any previous studies?

Figure 5.8 Overall numbers of euphemisms by females of different ages

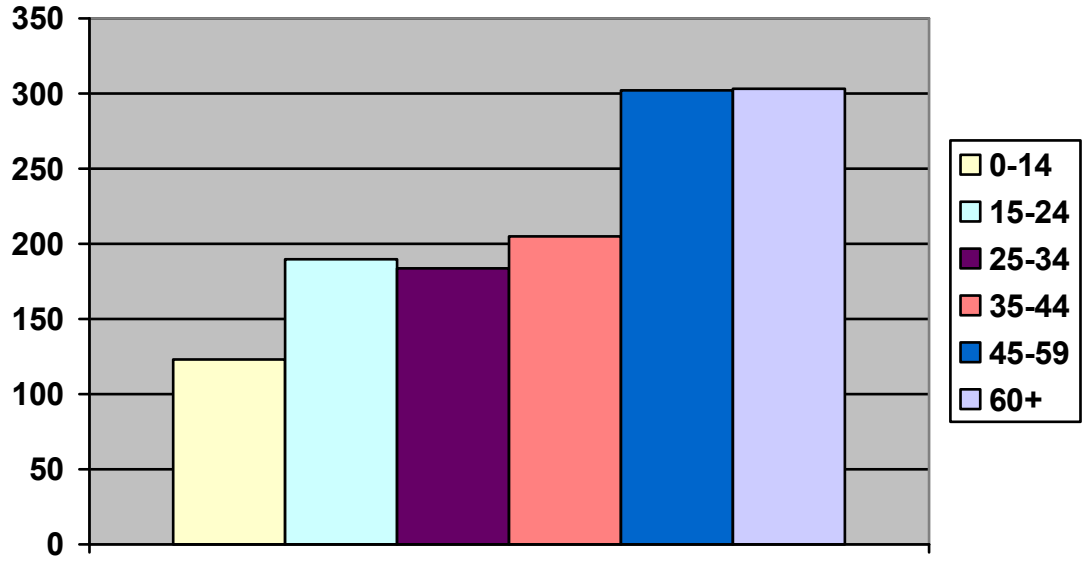
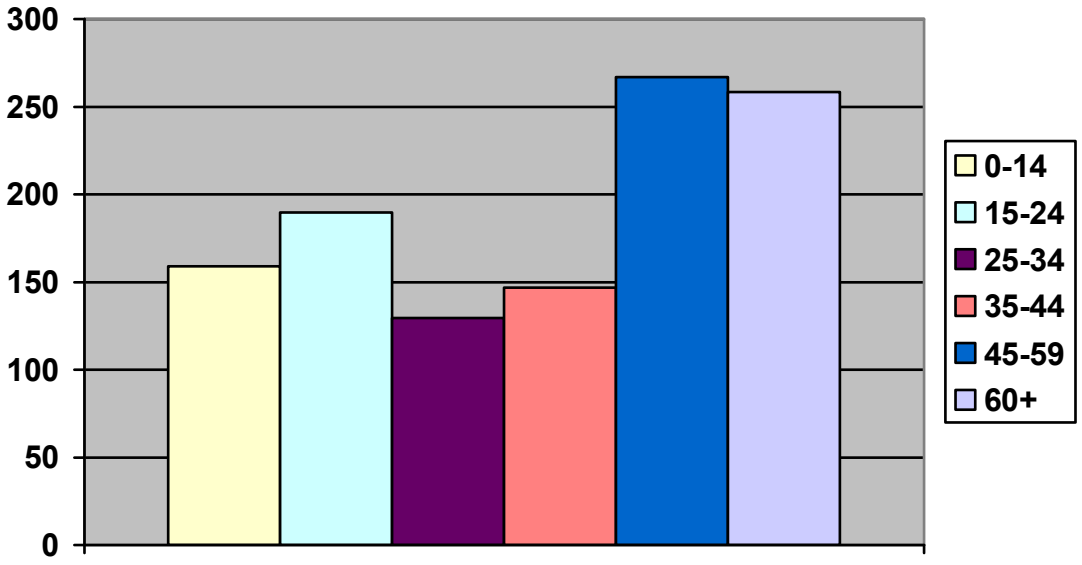


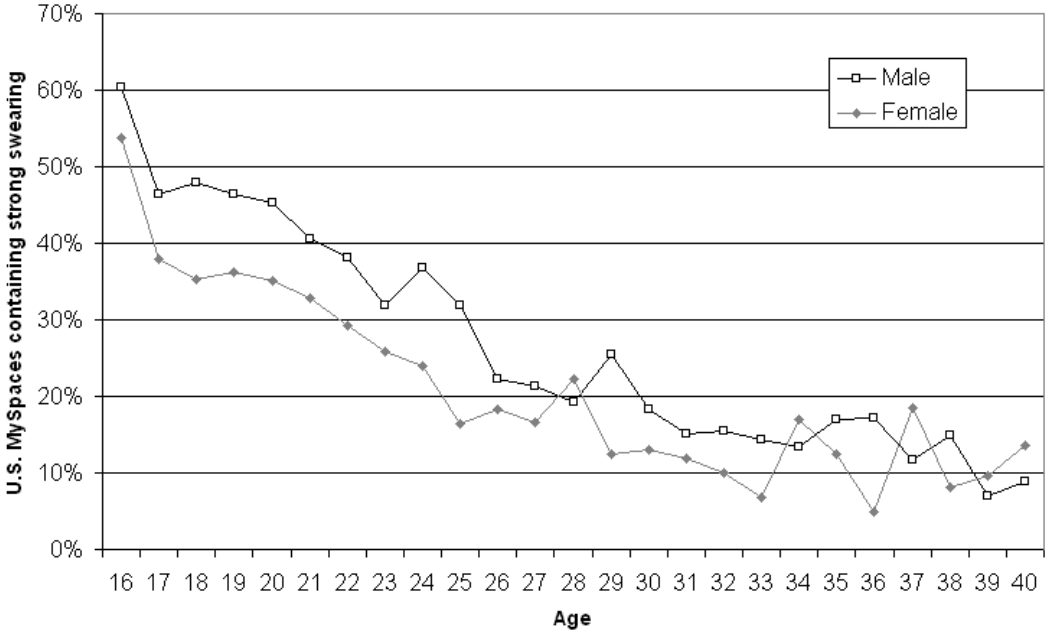
Figure 5.9 Overall numbers of euphemisms by males of different ages



As euphemisms are much milder than swearwords, this study conforms to the claim that adults swear less than teenagers and people under the age of 35. As mentioned before, female and male speakers between the ages of 45 and 60+ are the most frequent users of euphemisms. The different age groups and their overall numbers are quite similar in their distribution of euphemisms in both figures. However, male speakers in the age-range 25-34 stand out because their low frequencies break the pattern of increased euphemistic use as we get older. This was the only group that showed a low frequency rate among its speakers compared to the other age groups. McEnery and Xiao (2004: 241) claims that people without children or people who are not in contact with children and teenagers in everyday life are more prone to swearing. This does not explain the pattern found in this study as we would expect men between the ages of 25 and 34 to have contact with children in one way or another. McEnery and Xiao (2004) discovered that people with children adapted their language in front of their children, but one can only guess when it comes to the use of euphemisms. We might assume that people start having children in their twenties, but there is no explanation why the numbers of euphemisms go down for men in the age-range 25-34 as we would expect them to have a family. However, this investigation supports the hypothesis that euphemistic swearing is also connected to age and that older people use euphemisms at a higher frequency than teenagers and young adults. The results from Thelwall's study showed that younger users on MySpace used more swearwords on their profiles and also in their

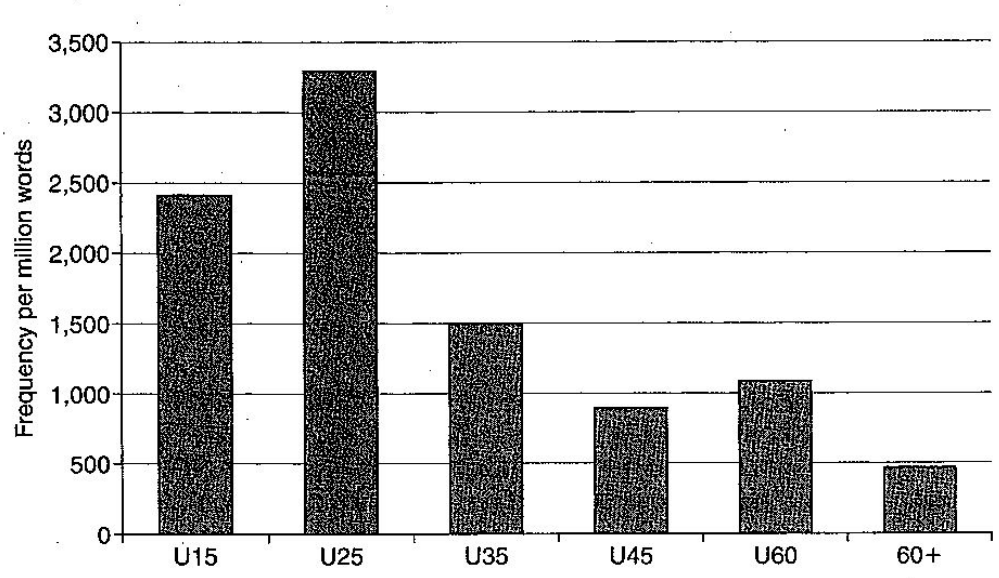
conversations than older users.

Figure 5.10 A profile owner age and gender breakdown of all unambiguous strong and very strong swearing in U.S. MySpaces from Thelwall (2008: 99)



He also noted that the overall usage of swearwords increased disproportionately for younger female speakers. Nevertheless, the swearing between younger male and younger female speakers from the UK was close in frequency per million words and did not change the general belief that females swear less than males. Thelwall did not examine any mild swearwords nor did he did look at swearing among older users of MySpace. Social networks are supposed to be closer to speech than other written forms, but it is debatable whether this is true or not since conversations online differs from normal conversations. What we can tell from Thelwall's study is that the usage of swearing and age is "closely related to psychological development and hence probably reflects much more fundamental shifts in the social psychology of the population" (Thelwall 2008: 102) There was also a correlation between the usage of swearwords and age in McEnery's study (2006: 39) where the results from the study showed the frequency per million words for speakers aged 15 was approximately 2,500 and almost 3,500 for 25 year-olds, confirming both Thelwall and McEnery's claim that teenagers use swearwords more than older speakers. The figure below shows the frequency of swearwords per million words for female and male speakers of different ages by McEnery.

Figure 5.11 Frequency of swearwords per million words in groups of different ages from McEnery (2006: 39)



While Figure 5.8 and Figure 5.9 showed that euphemistic swearing is more popular among older people, Figure 5.11 shows that swearwords are frequently used by adolescent under the age of 25 and then steadily decline as they get older. McEnery discussed a very important point that the results are not as straightforward as the figures show. According to McEnery it would have been better to have a corpus that was broken down into actual ages rather than fitting everyone under the age of, say, 15 into the same age group. This would give a more us a more nuanced picture of how language is used by people of different ages. Just because the age group under 25 has the highest frequency of swearwords per million words does not mean that everyone under the age of 25 swears. This is related to what McEnery calls the 'hidden peak'. The hidden peak refers to the high volume of U15 and U25 data that and could be caused by the overuse of swearwords by speakers of a specific age (McEnery 2006: 39). Regardless of the hidden peak, McEnery discovered that there is a decline in the use of swearwords from the age of 25. It is the opposite for euphemisms, but we can only speculate if there is a truth to McEnery' statement that high frequency among older speakers is due to overuse, in this case, of euphemism.

Figure 5.12 and 5.13 show the use of euphemisms per million words according to gender and age for each individual word. With these tables one can see if there are any euphemisms that are favored by men and women and also if there are any differences in usage by younger and older speakers. If the claims about swearwords and age are true then that may also apply to euphemisms and age.

Thelwall's graph shows a steady decline in the usage of swearwords, while McEnery notices a rise in numbers in the usage of swearwords especially among the group U60, but then a drop in numbers for the age-range 60+. We cannot compare Thelwall's numbers with McEnery's since the graph from Thelwall stops at the age of 40, but we can see that there is a similar pattern in the usage of swearwords among older speakers. This peak of usage that occurs in the U60 group can be explained by the overuse of certain swearwords. The result from McEnery (2006: 47) shows that the word *fucking* and *bloody* is the cause of the double peak in the U60 group. To understand what causes a hidden peak within an age group you have to look at the individual swearwords and see if the results are caused by overuse of a swearword by one gender or another.

A low frequency, as we find in the 60+ group from McEnery's study can be caused by omission of swearwords in terms of using a milder or weaker swearword instead of the original swearword as well as being the result of euphemisms. McEnery also proposes a hypothesis that there is a narrowing in our swearword lexicon as we get older. This means that we might swear less than before, but since our vocabulary in means of swearwords has shrunk, the frequency of certain swearwords may rise. Again we can see that there is a trend in which words that are favored by male and female speakers of different ages. *Blooming* and *gosh* was also high in frequency in the section on social classes. *Blooming* and *gosh* are highly frequent in female speech in the age-range of 45-59 and also in the age-range 60+, and *blooming* is the euphemism with the highest frequency per million words in the age-range 0-14 for female speakers. Among the men it is the age groups 15-14 and 60+ that use *blooming* most, and the age group 0-14 uses *gosh* much more often than among women. Just like with *blooming*, the patterns for the other words also show great variety among classes and genders. While the frequency numbers for older female speakers seems much more evenly distributed among the different euphemisms, older male speakers shows a preference for certain euphemisms such as *gee*, *heavens* and *gosh*. Again we can see that the overuse of one euphemism changes the overall number of frequency per million words. Nevertheless, the overall numbers indicate that it is true that older speakers are the most frequent users of euphemisms.

Figure 5.12 The frequency of the euphemisms per million words for female speakers of different ages

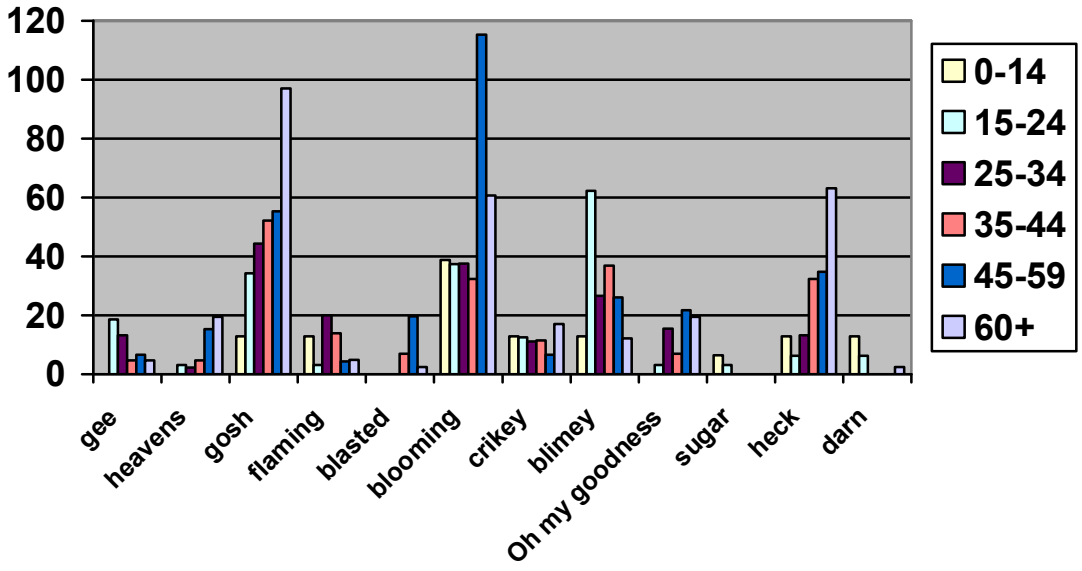
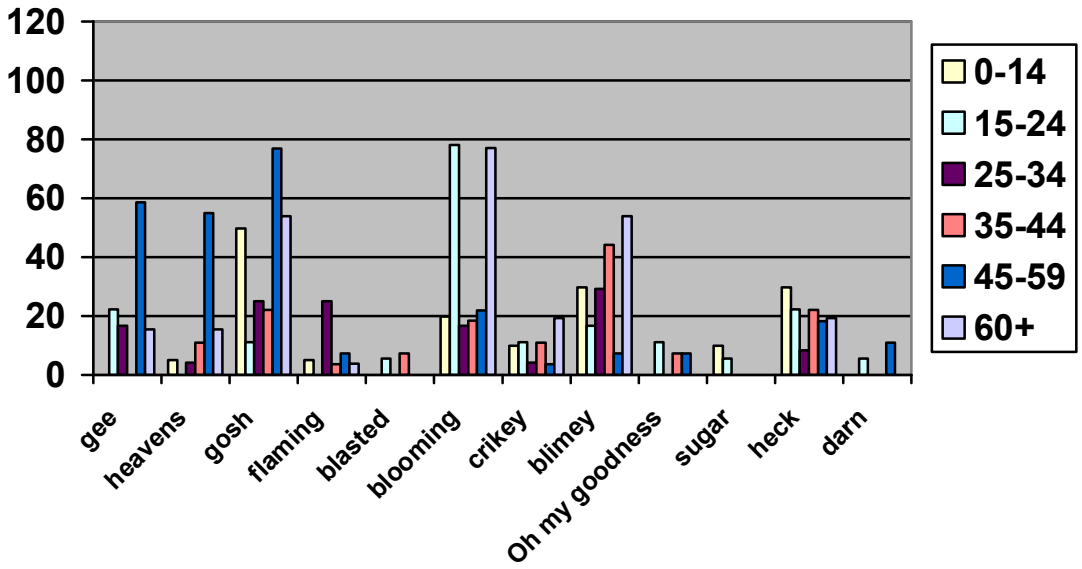


Figure 5.13 The frequency of the euphemisms per million words for male speakers of different ages



Regarding McEnery's (2006) observation on the narrowing of swearwords as we get older, this does not seem to be the case if we look at the figures above. While there is a noticeable difference in the frequencies for the older age groups, the results does not support the claim that there is a narrowing in our swearword (or euphemistic swearing) lexicon as we get older.

The older speakers in this study use a wide range of different euphemisms, but there are, however, no signs that the lower use of swearwords in older age groups is due to higher use of euphemisms because the frequencies for certain euphemisms are considerably low.

5.3.2 Type of swearword/euphemism use

Also in his study, McEnery discusses the preference of swearwords and the way they are used in correlation to certain age groups. In the table below we can see the top 4 swearword categories for each age group.

Table 5.3 The top-four swearword categories for each age group as mentioned in McEnery (2006: 41)

Rank	Type U15	Type U25	Type U35	Type U45	Type U60	Type 60+
1	Gen	Gen	EmphAdv	Gen	EmphAdv	EmphAdv
2	Personal	EmphAdv	Gen	EmphAdv	Gen	Gen
3	EmphAdv	Personal	Personal	PremNeg	PremNeg	PremNeg
4	PremNeg	PremNeg	PremNeg	Personal	Personal	Idiom

The categories are:

Gen= General expletive as in '(Oh) *Fuck*!'

EmphAdv= Emphatic adverb/adjective as in 'in the *fucking* car'

Personal= Personal insult referring to defined entity: 'You *fuck*! /That *fuck*!'

PremNeg= Premodifying intensifying negative adjective, like 'the *fucking* idiot!'

Idiom: Idiomatic 'set phrase': '*fuck* all' or 'give a *fuck*'

A certain pattern can be found with table above: all age groups frequently use similar categories of swearwords. In general, the 60+ speakers used swearwords the least or tried to avoid using them. The 60+ speakers are the only group who does not use the personal category, but instead uses the weaker Idiom. With this list McEnery shows that gender, age, and the strength of swearwords are indeed correlated as certain categories are more typical of female/male speech. For example, the Gen category is more typical of female speech, while EmphAdv are more typical of male speech (McEnery 2006: 31). As expected with euphemisms, the 60+ speakers from the BNC in this study used euphemisms frequently. *Gee*, *gosh*, *crikey* and *blimey* was often uttered as '*Oh gee/gosh/crikey/blimey*' or just as '*Gosh*!' There were also cases where they used the categories EmphAdv and PremNeg, but never idioms and oaths.

The younger groups in this study, 0-14 and 15-24, used the Gen category similarly to the older groups, but this is due to the fact that a lot of the euphemisms investigated in this study either have a Gen function or an EmphAdv/PremNeg function. As for *blooming*, a euphemism that was used a lot by both age groups, can only have the function EmphAdv/PremNeg, as in:

(34) I think it's absolutely, I think it's perfectly, thing is I think it's blooming awful I really do BNC KSV 809

(35) It's up to the [unclear] blooming restaurant BNC KDA 2007

(36) Means you could have played it to blooming anyone. BNC KPG 983

Therefore we cannot compare the use of the word and their choice of euphemisms. If we were to do an investigation similar to McEnery's we would need to find euphemism with different functions of use.

5.3.3 Comparison with respect to strength of swearword counterparts

This section is similar to the discussion about co-occurrence of euphemisms and swearwords. In that section I looked at how euphemisms were repeated twice or used together with a swearword in sentences. A similar pattern was found among younger speakers compared to older speakers. If younger speakers use swearing together with euphemism then what does this say about the status of euphemisms?

I discovered that men were more prone to use euphemisms together with a swearword than women. The same pattern was found in younger speaker groups. The euphemisms that often co-occurred with another euphemism were *heck* and *blooming*. *Heck* occurred 7 times together with another euphemism in male speech (age 0-24), but only once in female speech as seen in the examples below:

(37) Flaming heck. BNC KPA 2709 (Male speaker. Age: 13)

(38) Flipping heck! BNC KCT 7379 (Male speaker. Age: 10)

(39) Blithering heck. BNC KCT 2860 (Male speaker. Age: 10)

(40) Flipping heck! BNC KCE 3756 (Female speaker. Age: 13)

Blooming + *heck* only occurred once in male speech, but no hits were found in female speech. Example:

(41) blooming heck, British Airways and K L M BNC KSV 5294 (Male speaker. Age: 16)

There were only two cases where younger speakers would use a euphemism together with a swearword, as in the examples below:

(42) I couldn't give a blooming damn! BNC KE4 2966 (Male speaker. Age: 10)

(43) oh god darn, it's not eleven yet is it? BNC KP2 1053 (Female speaker. Age: 13)

The status of damn and God has previously been discussed and again the examples from the results show that they may not be considered as swearwords anymore. What is interesting is the double usage of euphemisms. Looking at the examples above, we can see that some of them are uttered by small children. The general claim is that younger people swear more than older people, but since none of the previous studies have be broken down into actual ages we do not know if this is true or not.

According to Thelwall, swearwords that would generally be considered as offensive was used among the teenagers in his study to either emphasize something in their conversations or to make something into a positive statement. This was not the case for euphemisms found in the BNC. The euphemisms in this study were used to emphasize something, like:

(44) Blasted traffic lights BNC KSV 950

but euphemisms were hardly ever used to make a positive statement. Only one positive statement by using a euphemism was found in the BNC:

(45) She's just darn right good looking! BNC KSV 2259

Even though this study shows that speakers of all different ages have a preference for the Gen category it must be said that many of the euphemisms from this study cannot be used in any other way than as for example a general expletive, such as *gee*, *gosh*, *crikey*, *blimey*, *sugar*

and *oh my goodness*. Seeing how particular age groups select euphemism or swearword categories differently and their preference for one particular category over another can also tell us how people swear. However, further research needs to be done on this subject with a substantial number of euphemisms.

6 Conclusion

This chapter will sum up the similarities and differences between male and female speakers in the BNC with focus on social class and age and then present some concluding remarks before reevaluating the research questions.

6.1 Summary and Findings

In this thesis the aim was to investigate the use of euphemisms from a sociolinguistic point of view, taking into account variables such as gender, social class and age. An analysis of all the euphemisms in the material has been given, and the results have been presented and discussed according to the different variables. As the material in the BNC is limited, this study does not claim that the result applies to all speakers in the UK. There were three research questions that served as a basis for the investigation:

1. Do women use euphemistic swearing more often than men and are there different euphemisms favored by male and female speakers?

2. Do people from the upper class use euphemistic swearing more than people from the working class? Are certain euphemisms favored by one social class more than the others?

3. Is there a similar pattern for the age groups and are certain euphemisms favored by one group more than the others?

There has been numerous of studies that claims that women swear less than men, but this study compared to previous studies by McEnery (2006) and Thelwall (2008) have shown that there is a tendency for female speakers to swear as much as male speakers, but their choice of swearwords are different. As for swearwords, men use stronger swearwords, like *fuck* and *cunt* while women use a range of mild swearwords such as *bloody*, *hell*, *Jesus* and *shit*. The reason why we can say that male and female speakers swear equally much is because strong

swearwords are relatively rare, especially if we search in a corpus. As for the first research question the hypothesis that women use more euphemisms than men was correct, as the overall numbers of euphemisms showed that the frequency of euphemisms produced by female speakers was slightly higher than men: 302,54 vs. 242,03. The difference is not very large, but it depended on the individual euphemism. If we had included more euphemisms in this study the overall numbers might be more similar. That is if other euphemisms turns out to be euphemisms that men use a lot. At this stage this is only speculation so further research is needed.

One of the hypotheses of this study was that we might expect a higher frequency for all of the euphemisms produced by female speakers based on the fact that they choose to use milder swearwords as to not cause offence to the listener. The results from this study showed that this hypothesis was not correct, female speakers did not have higher frequency in all of the euphemisms. They did, however, use some euphemisms more frequently than men, 6 out 12 euphemisms (*gosh*, *flaming*, *blasted*, *blooming*, *Oh my goodness*, *heck*) were preferred by female speakers. Only 2 of 12 euphemisms (*gee* and *heavens*) were preferred by male speakers, while 4 euphemisms (*blimey*, *darn*, *crikey*, *sugar*) were used almost equally by both genders. On the basis of less frequency in usage of euphemisms by both genders, this could be due to changes in the status of swearwords. As time has passed certain swearwords have become generalized and weakened. *Darn* is one of the euphemisms with low frequency for both genders in this study. Could the low frequency of *darn* be due to the fact that people prefer to use the swearword *damn* instead? Very much so, *damn* appear as a very mild swearword on McEnery's scale of offence and this may suggest that *damn* has become an accepted swearword nowadays, thus questioning the status of swearwords. When looking at the most frequently used euphemisms for both male and female speakers we can see that there is a pattern in the choice of words and the preference for the same euphemisms. While the frequency are higher for female speakers than male speakers for these euphemisms we can see in Figure 5.4 that *gosh*, *blooming*, *blimey* and *heck* are quite popular euphemisms by both genders. If women were to use euphemisms in order to avoid offence I would have expected to see high frequencies for all of the euphemisms as well as higher overuse of euphemistic counterparts of strong swearwords, especially for *sugar* and *flaming*. The results showed that *flaming* is used slightly more by female speakers than male speakers (9.71 vs. 7.56), but *sugar*, however, is used more frequently by male speakers (2.06 vs. 0.88). These results suggest that women do not use euphemisms in order to avoid strong swearwords.

In this study I also tried to find any differences in the usage of euphemisms between male and female speakers and discovered that male speakers showed a tendency to use euphemisms together with swearwords in their sentences, as mentioned in 5.1.4, while women avoided using euphemisms with swearwords and rather opted for double euphemisms when emphasizing something. Even if there were only a few hits found in the BNC it would be worth investigating in further studies as it may give us more insight on gender differences.
The first part of the second research questions refers to the upper class and if they use euphemisms more than the working class. The study by McEnery (2006) showed that the use of swearwords decline the higher up the social scale. For that reason, I expected to find a similar pattern of high frequencies of euphemisms among speakers from social classes such as C1 and AB.
The overall numbers for male and female speakers shows that euphemisms are equally used by both genders from social class AB, C2 and DE. The only difference is found in C1 where male speakers have a high frequency compared to the frequency for female speakers where we can see a drop in frequency. The numbers from this study reveal that my hypothesis about speakers from the upper class using more euphemisms than the middle and working class is wrong. There was no obvious tendency as to which social class uses euphemisms more than the others as different social classes seems to prefer different euphemisms. If more euphemisms had been included in this study then there might have been a difference in the overall numbers.
The last part of the research question is related to previous studies done by Thelwall (2008) and McEnery (2006) which has shown that younger speakers swear more than older speakers. My hypothesis was that if younger speakers swear more than older speakers then I would suspect that it would be the opposite for euphemisms. This hypothesis proved to be correct as numbers from this study showed that the use of euphemisms increase as we get older, the frequency was higher in speakers between the ages of 45 to 60+, even though the age groups and their overall numbers are similar in their distribution of euphemisms. A noticeably difference is found in the frequency for male speakers in the age-range 25-34 where there is suddenly a drop in the frequency. McEnery and Xiao (2004) discussed that people without children are more prone to swear, but this does not make sense compared to the general theory which is that adults swear less when they are in the company of children of when they start having children. If so, the low frequency of euphemisms produced by male speakers between the ages of 25 and 34 cannot be explained and has to be investigated in further studies. In order to find out exactly how language is used by people of different ages it would

be even better if corpuses were broken down into actual ages instead of age groups.
Another question related to age was if there were any differences in the usage of individual euphemisms between the age groups. McEnery (2006) observed a narrower range of swearwords for older speakers. This does not seem to be true for euphemisms. Not only are the older speakers the most frequent users of euphemisms, but they also use a wide range of euphemisms. This was especially seen in female speech between the ages of 45 and 60+ where the numbers show that female speakers use 9 out of the 12 euphemisms investigated in this study. Regardless of the individual euphemisms there are no signs that the lower use of swearwords in older age groups is due to higher use of euphemisms. If that was the case then I would expect higher frequency for all euphemisms by older speakers. In order to understand the general use of euphemisms compared to swearwords much more research is needed.
Although this study found similar patterns of usage of swearwords and euphemisms there is still more words that could be investigated and compared. One of the aims of this study was to find out whether euphemistic swearing was an alternative to real swearing, but the results from this study indicates that this might not be the case. If euphemistic swearing was an alternative to swearing then we would have expected higher frequencies for all euphemisms, especially for euphemistic counterparts of stronger swearwords. What we saw in the results was that a preference for certain euphemisms which again caused high frequencies that distorted the overall numbers.
An interesting phenomena that was found in the BNC was the usage of two euphemisms together or using a swearword together with a euphemism. The general impression is that people do not use euphemisms to avoid causing offence; in that case they would not use a swearword and a euphemism in the same sentence.

6.2 Further Research

First and foremost, the present study is in need for improvement due to the limited number of euphemisms investigated in this study. If a similar study is to be conducted we need a larger-scale research material. For further investigation on the subject gender, social class and age differences in swearing/euphemistic swearing it would be interesting to compare British speakers with American speakers. Thelwall (2008) investigated British and American speakers only by going through their MySpace pages, but comparing corpuses and doing

interviews can be proved fruitful in providing insights on gender and age differences. That is if there is a similar corpus to the BNC in regards to the demographics. Some studies rely on both quantitative and qualitative methods. The merits of doing interviews, as mentioned in Edley and Litosseliti (2010: 170), include: being able to discover new information and consolidating old or established knowledge, and we can obtain different perspectives on the 'same topics'. If we were doing an interview for a study such as this one a good starting point would be asking the participants to rank swearwords/euphemisms according to their beliefs or perception on the topic. Interviews can also give us information on the participant's views, attitude, responses and motivation about the topic. We can also gain insight in people's everyday lives, their everyday use of language and how they act in different group situations. In a study where we are interested to find out the differences between gender, social class and age, interviews can play an important role in explaining people's attitudes towards swearing, how they swear and in which situation they swear.

The results from the investigation in the BNC suggests that euphemisms are used equally often in variables such as gender and social class, but the numbers for gender according to their age suggests that euphemisms are more frequently used as we get older. Findings from this study indicate that there is less of a correlation between the use of swearwords and euphemisms. At this point there is no evidence that euphemisms are used instead of swearwords.

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