

Title: Understanding pragmatic uses of cuss words: The influence of age, gender, and first language background

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Introduction: The use of profane language, expletives, or cuss words is observed in various social settings and commonplace situations (e.g., the workplace, conversations amongst friends). How frequent do people swear, under what circumstances, and what attitudes do listeners develop from hearing these words and phrases? We are interested to provide exploratory answers to these and related question by looking at linguistic patterns and trends that can be interpreted using sociolinguistic and discourse analytic approaches.

Purpose: The purpose of our research is to gather quantitative data that exhibits the influence of age, gender, and first language background of speakers (i.e., English native-like status) on the use of cuss words and the attitudes towards them coming from a small sample of GSU students, staff, and faculty. We are interested in comparing data from our specific context relative to previously reported studies in the field of applied linguistics (e.g., Eckert, 2003, McFarland, 2004).

Methods: In this study, we conduct an informal survey and interview of participants primarily from a convenience sampling. We set out to determine variations of attitudes across social correlates (e.g., gender and age) and also related factors such as personality, intellectual identity, and social class categories. Using a Likert scale (of 1-10), we measure participant responses based on sub-categories and questions. Video materials are also utilized to elicit some attitudinal responses from our participants.

Results: Our results which will be outlined in our conference poster indicates and isolates patterns that suggest the interaction of gender, age and native like status as influencing the culture at Georgia State University's community when it comes to reactions to cuss words. In our discussion we include observations about the nature of profane language, social and attitudinal implications, and identify trends in pragmatic use of cuss words in an urban, educated setting.

Conclusion: The use of expletives and cuss words may reflect social norms and linguistic expectations within a certain community. Our study contributes descriptive data that will be useful in further understanding the nature of cussing, formality in language, and social relationships. There are certainly limitations of this exploratory survey and observations and we hope to continue working on this project for future research applications.