

The Case of *Fuck* in American Ted Talks

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Abstract Swearing is part of everyday interaction. Such swear words as *fuck*, *suck*, *cunt*, *tits*, *cocksucker* are used more often in informal situations for a number of purposes. This study aims to explore how the American Ted talkers use *fuck* in their talk. The data were constructed from the Ted Corpus Search Engine. The corpus of male talk consisted of 45,037 words whereas the corpus of female talk contained 18,852 words. The raw frequency of morphological variants of *fuck* was counted using Concordance tool in AntConc 3.3.4. The raw frequency of the morphological variants of *fuck* generated from the Concordance tool was then put into SPSS software to calculate Log-likelihood scores and significance level. The results showed no statistically significant difference in the use of *fuck* in male and female talk. The results indicated that using *fuck* in male talk can show surprise, promote in-group membership, and exaggerate the problem to create humor. *Fuck* and *fuck*ing in female talk were integrated with other expletives such as *whore*, *shit*, and *slut* to bring humorous effects to the audience. The current findings underscore the importance of helping second language learners

understand how such language functions in digital discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Swearing is part of everyday language use (McEnery & Xiao, 2004) and public interaction (Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023). Swear words are of great varieties including *fuck*, *shit*, *hell*, *damn*, *ass*, *bitch*, *suck*, *cunt*, *tits*, and *cocksucker* (Jay, 2009). Previous studies showed that swearing has been widely used in informal situations as a way to foster intimacy between those close to us and promote solidarity among members in a community (Debray, 2023; Dynel, 2023; Fägersten, 2017; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023). Swearing, in workplace settings, is often seen as a way to relieve stress, introduce fun and possibly create an in-group culture (Debray, 2023). However, swearing among students, in school settings, is seen as a moral problem, impolite and immoral behaviors (Doherty et al., 2018; Downes et al., 2021). On social media contexts like YouTube or Facebook and movies, the act of swearing might be seen as a key to success due to its contribution to drawing attention from viewers and fishing subscribers from potential viewers (Fägersten, 2017; Pavesi & Formentelli, 2023).

Depending on the contexts of use, swearing varies in communicative functions. On the one hand, swearing is associated with something “undereducated, obscene, and profane language in society” (Wang, 2013, p. 71), or with bad behavior, lack of education and linguistic poverty (Ljung, 1986), or “be offensive, inappropriate, unacceptable” (Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023, p. 147). On the other hand, swearing is known as a source of humor, a way to reduce social distance, mitigate face-threatening acts, enhance social bonds, and contribute to the effectiveness of the message (Debray, 2023; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023). Some swear words like *fuck* may fulfill the role of politeness in order to help facilitate the communication.

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Fuck has been reported as a high-frequency swear word in several previous studies (Debray, 2023; Downes et al., 2021; Dynel, 2023; Guillot, 2023, Love & Strenstrom, 2023; Pavesi & Formentelli, 2023; Smith & Adendorff, 2021). Like other swear words, *fuck* may serve numerous communicative functions in a wide range of contexts. *Fuck* can exist in a variety of forms including “fuck, fucked, fucks, fucking, fucker(s)” (McEnery & Xiao, 2004, p. 237), which aims to convey a number of meanings. *Fuck* was one of the most interesting and colorful swear words in the English language as it may release emotions (e.g., pain, pleasure, hatred and even love) in everyday language use or even in the broadcast media (Trudgill & Anderson, 1992).

An investigation of #FuckPutin by Dynel (2023) demonstrates a very interesting function of *fuck*. #FuckPutin was used among Twitter users who side with Ukraine and are against Putin. #FuckPutin referred to the fact that “Putin is symbolically abused and condemned as the malefactor and the enemy of not only the Ukrainian nation but also citizens from all over the world active on Twitter” (Dynel, 2023, p. 120). In this sense, *fuck* referred to a negative interpersonal meaning.

Fuck, with 100 of the total 372 instances, was found the most popular swearword in Debray’s (2023) study about swearing in professional settings. In Debray’s (2023) study, *fuck* serves as a positive and a negative communicative device. For a negative meaning, *fuck* in “fucking students” aims to create a distinction between “normal students” and “older mature professionals who work as experts for the business in question” (p. 154). *Fuck* in “we can’t play a fucking video” aimed to “emphasize the ridiculous of the situation” (p. 154). For a positive meaning, *fuck* in “oh fuck” as interpreted by Debray (2023), was a way to show awareness of the speaker of his mistake and served as a face-saving act. *Fuck* in Debray’s (2023) study was found as a device to enhance solidarity in communication.

Investigating the use of swear words among high school students as recalled by the teachers and school leaders, Downes et al. (2021) found *fuck* and its

derivatives (i.e., cunt, bitch, shit) to be “quite prevalent in social use” (p. 8), of which *fuck* showed a high level of social acceptability. However, it is worth noting from the study that the teachers and school leaders reported a feeling of displeasure and disrespect when being sworn directly by the students. Swear words may change a good and competent teacher/school leader to an incompetent one. Saying differently, the study by Downes et al. (2021) has supported the fact that a swear word like *fuck* or others would bring a negative effect to hearers (teachers/school leaders) in a school setting.

From a corpus-pragmatic perspective, Love and Stenstrom (2023) explored the pragmatic functions of *fuck* among British English teenagers in casual conversation from two youth language corpora, the 1990s and the 2010s. Consistent with the findings of McEnery and Xiao (2004), *fuck* in Love and Stenstrom’s (2023) study was performed by three forms: *fucking*, *fuck* and *fucked*. Love and Stenstrom (2023) described *fuck* as a sign of idiomatization and so losing its taboo value.

Fuck and its variants were also used very commonly in films. Pavesi and Formentelli (2023) investigated the pragmatic dimensions of swearing in Anglophone films and their translations and found various functional categories of *fuck* words. Around 31% functioned as emphatic adjectives, 28 % as expletives, 13% as emphatic adverbs, 9% as a figurative extension, and some others. Pavesi and Formentelli (2023) found that the major functions for the act of swearing in films varied, such as an “offensive potential to attack interlocutors’ faces but also express camaraderie and mark informality” (p. 136).

Though several studies have investigated swear words, little work has focused on a gender difference and on the usage of *fuck* in digital discourse like TED talks. Wang (2013) analyzed the pragmatic functions of swearing in everyday situations by collecting data from five naturally occurring conversations. She did not take into account the gender factor and morphological variants of swear words. The use of swearing in social networking sites was not her focus. More interestingly, Twenge et al. (2017) examined the use of swear words in American English books, but disregarded the variants and meanings of swear words like *fuck* in public talks

in digital discourse. Even though McEnery and Xiao (2004) examined the case of *fuck*, their data were collected from the British National Corpus (BNC). Their fundamental focus was on the morphological variants and pragmatic functions of *fuck* in modern British English through BNC corpus. Noticeably, Fagersten (2017) collected data from video-sharing website, YouTube, but this study only concentrated on the use of English-language swear words by Swedish non-native speakers. Most of the previous studies have investigated the use of swear words in everyday situations, in English books, in British English, or in non-native speech without any consideration of sociolinguistic variables in digital discourse.

Little research has focused on a gender-based analysis of morphological variants as well as pragmatic functions of *fuck* on social networking sites like TED talks or YouTube. The goal of this study is to explore how male and female American speakers used *fuck* in TED talks by examining the morphological variants and pragmatic meanings of *fuck* in male and female American TED talks. Since the usage of *fuck* in male and female American TED talks may provide us a better understanding of the pragmatic functions of *fuck* in digital discourse, this paper aims to answer the following questions.

1. Is there a gender difference in the use of *fuck* in American TED talks?
2. What are the pragmatic functions of *fuck* in American TED talks?

METHOD

Corpus Data

The data consisted of two corpora constructed from the Ted Corpus Search Engine (TCSE). The male and female TED talks were searched on the TCSE corpus with the keyword *fuck*. A total of 83 talks were found at the time of the study. As the study aimed to examine the use of *fuck* among American English speakers, only the talks including swear words and being presented by speakers from the country 'United States of America' with an American accent were selected for the corpus construction. Only 20 of the total met this criteria, of which thirteen were male and seven were female. The male corpus consisted of 45,037 words whereas the female

corpus included 18,852 words. The speakers of both male and female talk came from different occupations (e.g. actress, lawyer, writer, soldier, actor, cartoon editor, museum director, and film director). The duration of these TED talks was between 10 and 23 minutes. Due to the focus of the study being on the talks made by American English speakers, a small sample size was unavoidable and an imbalance was observed in male and female data. Regardless of such an imbalance between male and female corpus, both male and female data represented the entire population of the talks meeting the inclusion criteria and reflected the language as it exists at the data collection time (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). Achieving statistical significance with such small data is also challenging, so the present study does not aim to generalize the findings to a broader pattern. The main aim was to provide preliminary and illustrative observations of the data.

Analytical Procedures

The purpose of this study was to explore whether there exists a significant difference in the morphological variants and pragmatic functions of *fuck* between males and females in American TED talks. To answer the first research question, the raw frequency of common morphological variants of *fuck* - *fuck*, *fucked*, *fucks*, *fucking*, *fucker(s)* reviewed in McEnery & Xiao (2004) - was counted in both male and female talks, using the Concordance tool in AntConc 3.3.4 which is known as a multiplatform corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing, text analysis, and generating word/keyword lists (Anthony, 2014). Since the number of words in two corpora was completely different (Male talk 45,037 words vs. Female talk 18,852 words), the normalized frequency (nf) of the common morphological variants of *fuck* was calculated based on occurrences per thousand words. The raw frequency of the morphological variants of *fuck* generated from the Concordance tool in both male and female corpora was then put into SPSS software to calculate Log-likelihood scores and significance level. To answer the second research question, the Concordance tool in AntConc 3.3.4 - the tool designed to display search terms in a KWIC (Keyword in context) format (Anthony, 2014) - was used to look into specific contexts in which each variant of *fuck* occurs. On the basis of the excerpts

obtained from the Concordance tool, a qualitative analysis was conducted to examine the pragmatic functions of variants of *fuck* in male and female talk following McEnery and Xiao's (2004) framework (see Table 1).

Table 1. Pragmatic functions for swear words

Code	Description Examples
G General expletive	(Oh) fuck!
P Personal insult referring to defined entity	You fuck!/that fuck
C Cursing expletive	Fuck you!/me!/him!/it!
D Destinal usage	Fuck off!/he fucked off
L Literal usage denoting taboo referent	He fucked her
E Emphatic intensifier	Fucking marvellous!/in the fucking car
O 'Pronominal' form	Like fuck/fat as fuck
I Idiomatic 'set phrase'	Fuck all/give a fuck/thank fuck
X Metalinguistic or unclassifiable due to insufficient context	fucking

(Source: McEnery & Xiao, 2004, p. 257)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

FINDINGS

Is there a gender difference in the use of *fuck* in American TED talks?

Table 2 shows that there was no significant difference in using *fuck* across genders. As can be seen from the normalized frequencies when all the word forms of *fuck* were taken as a whole, the female speakers were more likely to use *fuck* more than their male counterparts. However, the difference was not statistically significant with the level of $p > .05$. Such variants as *fucks*, *fucker* were not found in male and female speakers' talk.

Table 2. Morphological variants of fuck by gender of speakers

Form	Gender	Words	Freq	nf	Log-likelihood score	Sig. Level
Fuck	Male	45,037	9	0.2	2.773	.096
	Female	18,852	4	0.2		
Fucked	Male	45,037	1	0		
	Female	18,852	0	0		
Fucks	Male	45,037	0	0		
	Female	18,852	0	0		
fucking/ fuckin'	Male	45,037	8	0.2	2.773	.096
	Female	18,852	5	0.3		
Fucker	Male	45,037	0	0		
	Female	18,852	0	0		
All forms	Male	45,037	18	0.4	2.773	.096
	Female	18,852	9	0.5		

nf: normalized frequency (based on occurrences per thousand words)

The difference in the frequencies of the male and female speakers' use of *fuck* and *fucking* was not statistically significant. Although the normalized frequency indicated that female speakers were more likely to use *fucking* than male speakers, this likelihood was not significant with $p > .05$. Both genders employed *fuck* and *fucking* most frequently whereas the other morphological variants of *fuck* were almost not in use. The word *fucking* occurred 0.3 times per thousand words in female talk, reaching a highest frequency of the morphological variants of *fuck*. Likewise, *fuck* and *fucking* had more common occurrence in male talk (approximately 0.2 times per thousand words in the corpus).

What are the pragmatic functions of fuck in American TED talks?

Table 3 presents a number of contexts in which *fuck* occurs according to the highest mutual information scores generated by the collocates tool in AntConc 3.3.4. The mutual information scores demonstrate the likelihood that *fuck* may appear

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within certain span of words. The higher mutual information scores show the higher probability that the words may occur together. The particular span of words provides specific contexts of *fuck* in the corpus. These contexts lay the foundation for an analysis of the pragmatic meanings of *fuck* in male and female talk. As manifested in Table 3, the highest mutual information score of *fuck* was in the idiomatic and humorous effect in both male and female data.

Table 3. Specific contexts of fuck by gender

Fuck	MI score	Specific Contexts	Pragmatic Function
Male	12.33	But you fuck one goat Fuck with me	Idiomatic Idiomatic
	11.74	What the fuck do you	Idiomatic
	11.32	Very bad. Fuck you (laughter)	Humorous effect
	11.01	Fuck it (laughter)! (Applause)	Humorous effect
	10.74	Well, fuck it! We'll just change the rule	Solidarity-building
	10.33	We don't give a fuck	Idiomatic
Female	13.32	Fuck the form, get the horn	idiomatic
	11.74	If you can't handle the Internet, fuck off, whore.	Humorous effect
	11.00	If I had to fuck an older woman, oh my god	Self-deprecating humor
	10.74	I would fuck the shit out of Ashley Judd,	Humorous effect

MI score: mutual information score

The following excerpts extracted from male corpus show that *fuck* was not associated with any negative emotions such as anger, stress, or tension. In Excerpts 1-3, *fuck* was used as idiomatic phrases to create humor in talk and to capture the audience's attention.

Excerpt 1

Points out the window. You see that pier on the lake out there? I built that pier with my bare hands. Drove the pilings against the tide of the sand, plank by plank. But do they call me MacGregor the pier builder? No. But you **fuck one goat** ... ".
(Laughter)

For example, instead of saying a long sentence like ‘If you do something great, nobody remembers you for it, but if you do one thing wrong, that is what you are remembered for’, it would be more interesting for the speaker to say ‘But you *fuck* one goat’. This joke could draw gales of laughter from the audience.

Likewise, ‘*fuck* with me’ and ‘what the *fuck*’ in Excerpt 2 and Excerpt 3 aim to express solidarity and decrease the distance between the speaker and the audience. Saying ‘help me out or let’s get together’ and ‘whatever’ in Excerpt 2 or ‘we don’t care at all what happens’ in Excerpt 3 fails to provide comfort and pleasure in the talk. It is obvious that in digital discourse like TED talks, variants of *fuck* were not used as ‘dirty words’ by default. Their communicative purpose was to help the speaker bring laughter to the audience during the talk.

Excerpt 2

My heart beating right through it in a Morse code for: "**Fuck with me**, just once. Come on.

You can imagine the hailstorm of questions I got. The opening one was, "**What the fuck** do you know about the National Guard?" I started with the 1607 Massachusetts Bay Colony Pequot Indian Wars. Gave them about a nine minute response, and there we went.

Excerpt 3

Because you know what the last word was, what the last sentence was of that meeting. It was: "Fuck it." (Laughter) (Applause). That -- that is the message of this form of architecture. The message is: **We don't give a fuck!** We don't give a fuck.

Fuck in Excerpts 4 and 5 supports the fact that fuck could be used to express a negative state of mind to some extent. ‘Fuck it’ or ‘Well, fuck it’ showed the speaker’s no interest in the topic, expressing their nonchalance and boredom of what is being said or what is in progress. The same was true of ‘fuck you’ in Excerpt 5 when the speaker possibly attempted to signify frustration of such a sensitive topic. Using cursing expletive like ‘fuck you’ to say the fact as well as to point out the social reality may be more accepted in digital discourse like TED talks. The communicative purpose was to help the audience feel most comfortable with such

an offensive topic and bring humor to the audience (Laughter being observed in Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 4

What if some group gets really seriously organized and comes in and wants to vote?" Then I said, "**Well, fuck it**, we'll just change the rules." That's my job in the community: to say we won't allow our openness and freedom to undermine the quality of the content.

Excerpt 5

The first question on the survey that he was sent to ask was: "How do you feel about being poor and Black in America?" Makes you wonder about academics. (Laughter). So the choice of answers were: [A] Very Good B) Good C) Bad D) Very Bad]. What Sudhir found out is, in fact, that the real answer was the following: [A] Very Good B) Good C) Bad D) Very Bad E) **Fuck you**] (Laughter).

Similar to the male counterparts, the female speakers were more likely to use variants of *fuck* to create humor in their talk. Excerpt 6 shows that the females used different forms of fuck for a number of pragmatic functions. *Fuck*, in female talk, can be used as an idiomatic like 'Fuck the form, get the horn' (see [a]), 'fuck the shit' (see [c]), or as a solidarity-building strategy like 'fuck an older woman' (see [c]), as a humorous effect like 'fuck off, whore' (see [b]). It is likely that they tended to combine *fuck* with another swear words like whore, shit to have good humor, to express solidarity and to bring pleasure to their talk.

Excerpt 6

[a] I mean, confidence is kind of like being cocky, but in a good way. But determination, you know, it's like just, you know, '**Fuck the form**, get the horn.'(Laughter)

[b] If you can't handle the Internet, **fuck off**, whore."

[c] If I had to **fuck an older woman**, oh my God, I would **fuck the shit** out of Ashley Judd.

Though the results showed no quantitative difference in the use of *fuck* in male and female talk, an analysis of the pragmatic functions of *fuck* indicated that *fuck* performed different pragmatic functions. *Fuck* and *fucking* were dominant in the current data.

Table 4. Specific contexts of fucking/fuckin' by gender

Fucking	MI score	Specific Context
Male	13.50	I went fucking ballistic , right? I went nuts. That's a fucking car bomb! We don't fucking ride with the goddam windows down.
	12.91	And I was just fucking furious . You really sold a cartoon to the fucking New Yorker magazine.
	10.91	Hey, get over the fucking --yeah, yeah
	10.49	But what to get the man who broke your fucking neck.
Female	13.49	Her fucking brother should also be arrested for selling her Ashley Judd, stupid fucking slut. Gimme me the fuckin' cash!
	12.49	and you smiled for the fucking camera they told you to or you could kiss your birthday party goodbye.
	10.32	and show them, be the most lovable thing since fucking Eminem?

MI score: mutual information score

Table 4 provides a range of contexts in which *fucking* occurs according to highest mutual information scores generated by the collocates tool in AntConc 3.3.4. The higher mutual information scores show a higher probability that the words may

occur together. In most of cases *fucking* functions as an emphatic intensifier and, thus most frequently appears before a noun (e.g., fucking car bomb, fucking New Yorker magazine, fucking brother, fuckin' cash, fucking camera) or before an adjective (e.g., fucking ballistic, fucking furious). In both male and female talk, *fucking* was used most frequently for an emphasis. In these examples, *fucking* acted as an intensifier to strengthen the force of the adjective ballistic, furious and the nouns including both animate and nonanimated objects like brother, car, New Yorker magazine, cash, and camera.

In comparison to male speakers, the females were more likely to combine the expletive *fucking* with another offensive words like 'stupid fucking slut', 'fucking Eminem'. *Fucking* in female talk functions as an intensifier to express something more dramatic. Although *fucking* was used very frequently in male talk, it was not accompanied by any other expletives. In male talk, the expletive *fucking* was added simply to exaggerate the problem, implying that the car, the neck, the magazine, or the anger was unbearable. The speaker probably needed to do something about it in order to reduce his unpleasant feelings. In digital discourse like TED talks, the use of such an emphatic intensifier might bring laughter and fun into the talk. By contrast, *fucking* in female talk conveys more dramatic and humorous meanings. Female speakers made an attempt to create humor in their talk by utilizing *fucking* to exaggerate the problem, for self-deprecating humor, and solidarity building.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study show that *fuck* and *fucking* were the two morphological variants of *fuck* in American TED talks. Though the females used *fuck* more often than the males, the difference was not statistically significant with the level of $p > .05$. This result suggests that there was no gender difference in the use of *fuck* in American TED talks. This result was not surprising as these observations are consistent with the study's parameters. Given that the dataset encompasses the entire target population, the current findings provide a comprehensive reflection of the discourse within this specific context.

Allard and Holmstrom (2023) examined how university students evaluated instructors' responses to exam complaints at a large Midwestern university in the United States. They found that students preferred instructors who did not swear and rated them more positively when they avoided repeating swear words. Instructors who repeated swear words were seen as less professional, less trustworthy, and less competent. Allard and Holmstrom's (2023) findings suggest that students expect instructors, as higher-power figures, to maintain professionalism through more formal language. The instructor's sex did not significantly affect students' reactions to swearing behavior. The findings from Allard and Holmstrom (2023) can help to explain why no gender difference was found in the use of *fuck* in American TED Talks. Their study showed that listeners evaluated swearing mainly in relation to the speaker's professional role and the expectations attached to that role, rather than in relation to the speaker's sex, since the instructor's sex did not significantly affect reactions to swearing. This suggests that in institutional or semi-formal settings, audience judgments are shaped more by norms of professionalism, authority, and context than by gender. In the case of TED Talks, both male and female speakers operate within the same public speaking format and are subject to similar expectations about presentation style, credibility, and audience engagement. As a result, the use of *fuck* may be constrained or enabled by the discourse norms of TED Talks themselves rather than by whether the speaker is male or female. Thus, the absence of a significant gender difference in the use of *fuck* can be understood as reflecting the stronger influence of contextual and role-based expectations over speaker gender.

The results of the present study show that the American males and females used *fuck* for different pragmatic purposes. *Fuck* in male and female speakers' talk served as idiomatic phrases and humorous effect to their talk. These findings were in line with Love and Stenstorm (2023) that *fucking* was considered as a semi-delexicalized intensifier and that *fuck* was a sign of idiomatization. The current findings strongly support previous findings that such swear words as *fuck* and its variants were used for achieving humor and releasing users' emotions in everyday

interaction (Debray, 2023; Baruch et al., 2017). It is interesting to observe consistencies between the present study and Love and Stenstorm's (2023) study since the former collected the data in an American context while the latter focused on British English teenagers in casual conversation from two youth language corpora, the 1990s and the 2010s. Over decades, *fuck* in two varieties of English has gradually lost its original (taboo) meanings of swear words (Love & Stenstorm, 2023) and its acceptability has been increasingly prevalent in British and American society. The taboo meaning of *fuck* among teenagers was "highly social and stylistic and unlikely to be abusive, which appears to reflect a weakened taboo value of *fuck*" (Love & Stenstorm, 2023, p. 178). *Fuck* was more acceptable as a means to facilitate the conversation and to contribute to a friendly atmosphere between teenagers.

Prawianto et al. (2020), in their analysis of swearing expressions used by the main character (Keara) in the Indonesian novel *Antologi Rasa*, reported a similar pattern. They found that auxiliary swearing such as *shit* and *fucking* was more frequent than other forms and was used less as insults than as markers of intimacy and solidarity. For example, *bitch* in 'just two cool bitches strutting their stuff hahaha' functioned humorously between close female friends. Prawianto et al. (2020) argued that swearing was generally avoided when addressing higher-power figures such as mothers, bosses, and other authority figures, and that in some cases swearwords could be directed at the self rather than at others. More broadly, the interpretation of swearing varies across cultures, from Arabic contexts (Abdelal & Sarhani, 2021) to Australian society (Doherty et al., 2018), and across settings such as schools (Allard & Holmstrom, 2023; Doherty et al., 2018), workplaces (Debray, 2023), and social media platforms (Kaya & Bicen, 2016).

In the present study, the male TED talkers used *fuck* to show surprise, promote in-group membership, or exaggerate the problem to create humor. These findings were consistent with previous findings with respect to the weakening of the taboo meaning of *fuck* over time (Debray, 2023; Downes et al., 2021; Love & Stenstorm, 2023; Pavesi & Formentelli, 2023). Debray (2023) investigated the use of swearwords among multinational MBA students at a UK higher education

institution. His study confirmed that ‘oh fuck’ was used not for a taboo meaning. According Debray (2023), ‘oh fuck’ was a way to “show awareness of his misspelling and to indicate that he does in fact know the correct spelling of the word in question, thus indexing competence and mitigating a perceived face threat” (p. 155). *Fuck* in ‘oh fuck’ was not interpreted as its original meaning of swearword. The acceptability of *fuck* in society especially in media channels like films and prime-time television was more prevalent in previous studies (Downes et al., 2021; Pavese & Formentelli, 2023) and was confirmed again in the present study. *Fuck* was originally used as a swearword for a taboo value, but over decades it has gradually lost its original meaning. The findings of the present study argue that *fuck* integrated with whore, shit, slut may bring interesting effects to the audience.

The findings of the present study contribute to the fact that swearing clearly functions differently across contexts rather than carrying a fixed meaning. In professional settings, it can serve as a group-defining and solidarity-building feature rather than a taboo act (Debray, 2023), whereas in classrooms it may be interpreted as resistance to institutional authority and judged according to school norms and moral expectations, usually as a form of dirt going beyond moral boundaries (Doherty et al., 2018). In cross-cultural media translation, swearwords are often omitted or softened because their acceptability depends on cultural values, as shown in Arabic subtitling practices (Abdelaal & Sarhani, 2021). For example, ‘get the fuck out of my car’ became simply ‘get out of my car’, or ‘fuck you’ was softened into ‘damn you’. This happened because Arab societies are more conservative to sexual and vulgar language (Abdelaal & Sarhani, 2021). On social media, swearing may be viewed as misconduct (Kaya & Bicen, 2016), while in literary discourse it can function as emphasis, humor, intimacy, solidarity, self-criticism, or emotional expression depending on the relationship between speakers and the situation (Prawinanto et al., 2020). As Virginia and Mubarak (2022) also argue, the meaning and force of an expression are shaped by context, emotion, and speaker intention. Taken together, these studies show that swearing is highly context-dependent. The

same word may be interpreted as offensive, humorous, expressive, or socially bonding depending on where, how, and by whom it is used.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The present study provides a better understanding of using variants of *fuck* on TED talk media channels among male and female American speakers. The findings showed that there was no quantitative difference in using variants of *fuck* across genders in American TED talks. Of all the variants of *fuck*, *fuck* and *fucking* were found the most predominant in both male and female talk. The analysis of pragmatic function of *fuck* and *fucking* indicated that the primary purpose of using variants of *fuck* was for the speaker to bring joy, humor, and laughter to the audience during the talk. Using *fuck* in male talk aimed to show surprise, promote in-group membership, and exaggerate the problem to create humor. *Fuck* and *fucking* in female talk were frequently integrated with other expletives such as *whore*, *shit*, *slut* to create self-deprecating humor and solidarity building. With a relatively small size of the entire population, the present study does not aim to generalize the findings to a broader pattern. The main aim of this study was to provide preliminary and illustrative observations of the data in digital discourse.

The study opens a newer understanding of the case of *fuck* as well as their pragmatic functions in digital discourse like TED talks or YouTube. Although dirty words such as *fuck* and its variants were often considered as uneducated, obscene, and rude language that might be unacceptable in public talk, the current findings confirmed that *fuck* has its good value in communication. Using *fuck* appropriately in a number of ways may add more color and humor to our language use. Hence, the findings of this study were believed to be very useful for potential speakers who would like to use the case of *fuck* in their speech. The present study emphasizes that swearwords can play important pragmatic roles in digital discourse, such as signalling humor, solidarity, emphasis, or emotional stance; however, recognizing these functions should not be confused with promoting their use. The current findings underscore the importance of helping second-language learners understand how swearwords such as *fuck* and its variants function in contexts; however, this

should not be taken as encouraging their use, since appropriateness depends on audience, setting, and socio-cultural norms.

Despite its value, the study has its unavoidable limitations. First, this study utilizes a specialised and focused corpus, providing a granular look at gendered discourse in specific digital settings. While these findings are context-specific, they offer illustrative insights that pave the way for larger-scale comparative studies. The current findings serve as a critical baseline and provide preliminary evidence of pragmatic shifts in digital communication. Future studies should expand the corpus by including the talks by speakers from other regions of the world. Second, although it was relatively convenient and time saving to collect the data through the TCSE corpus, a deeper insight into the issues might not be gained. Additionally, the study did not concentrate on analyzing the case of *fuck* by age group, social status or education. Future studies should include more talks from various media channels over and above TED talks. It would also be more interesting to explore the case of *fuck* by age group (e.g., teenagers vs. elderly people), education (the educated vs. uneducated), or occupation (e.g., factory workers vs. teachers) in another type of discourse in future research.

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