

Differences between men and women: the case of swearing

LESSON GOAL

To teach students about possible gender effects when people use taboo language.

LESSON OBJECTIVE

- to list relevant swearwords (knowledge)
- to discuss and compare different swearwords and their respective users and uses (comprehension)
- to formulate social patterns that correspond to the use of swearwords (synthesis)
- to inspect actual use of swearwords from BNC datasets (analysis)
- to evaluate and interpret findings (evaluation)

Task 1

Students should come up with at least 10-15 swearwords. A non-exhaustive list:

Arse, Bloody, Bugger, Cow, Crap, Damn, Git, Jesus Christ, Minger, Sod-off, Arsehole, Balls, Bint, Bitch, Bollocks, Bullshit, Munter, Pissed/pissed off, Shit, Son of a bitch, Tits, Bastard, Beaver, Bellend, Cock, Dick, Dickhead, Fanny, Knob, Minge, Prick, Pussy, Snatch, Twat, Cunt, Fuck, Motherfucker, Dog, Pillock, ...

Some research suggests that men use stronger swearwords than women. Generally, swearwords that are aimed at women are often highlighting appearance and promiscuity. For men, insults are often aimed at a lack of masculinity (and thus negatively reflecting feminine and/or non-hetero-conforming attributes) or intelligence.

Note: similar patterns are found in insults that are not taboo: 'throwing like a girl'

This shows how gender roles are perceived in society. For women, a common point that is aimed at with swearwords is their outwardly appearance and proper décor. Promiscuity is negatively evaluated. In some ways, this has somewhat changed over time with a reframing of certain swearwords by the targeted groups, or by new swearwords entering language use (e.g. 'fuckboy'). This is somewhat problematic and needs to be framed in the social context, as Cameron writes: "(...) describing a woman as a 'cunt' would still entail making her sexuality the defining feature of her identity as a person. And yes, you could argue that calling a man a 'prick' or a 'dick' does the same, but treating the two gestures as equivalent ignores the very different historical positioning of the two sexes: whereas men have never been valued primarily for their sexual utility to women, nor told that their only power is sexual power, that has been women's experience for thousands of years."

For an in-depth discussion, you can check Deborah Cameron's insightful commentary on 'cunt':
<https://debuk.wordpress.com/2018/06/03/cuntroversy-on-samantha-bee-and-the-c-word/>



Suggested time: 15 minutes

Task 2

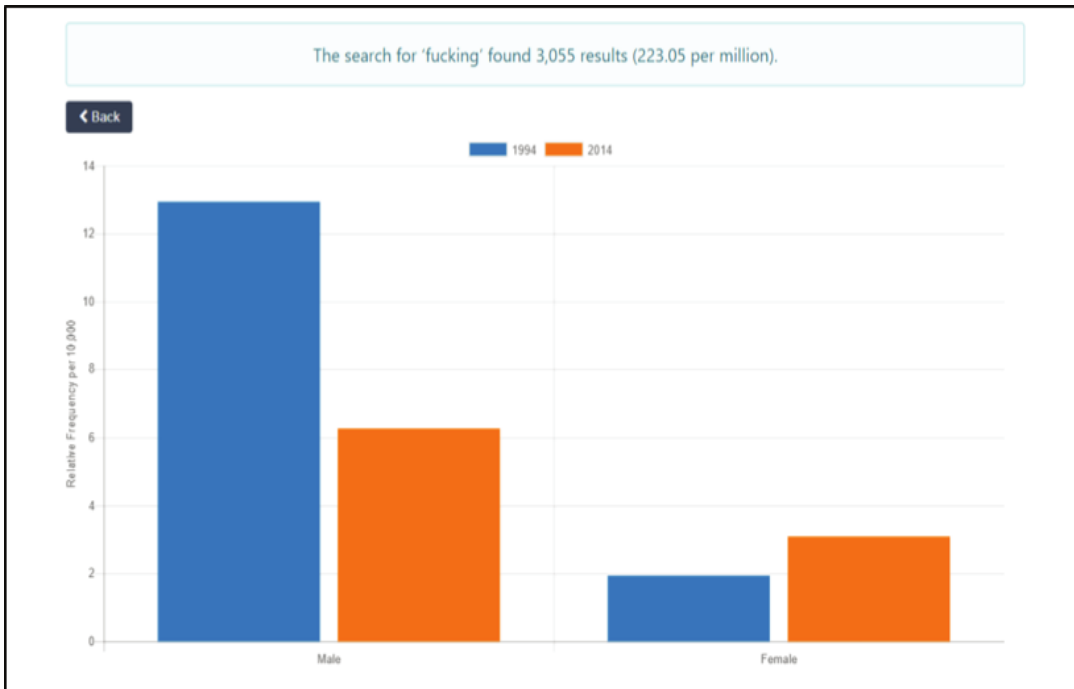
It might be useful here to ask students to include different levels of offensiveness of the individual swearwords in these searches.



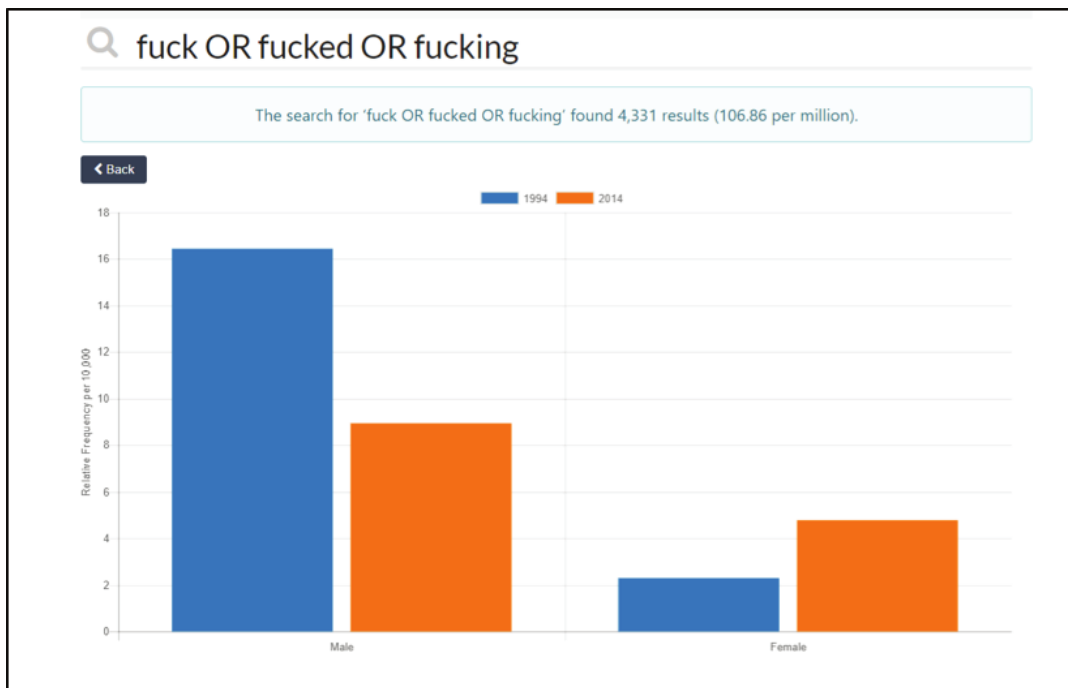
Suggested time: 5 minutes

Task 3

Gender/time



Gender/time distribution including different forms of 'fuck':



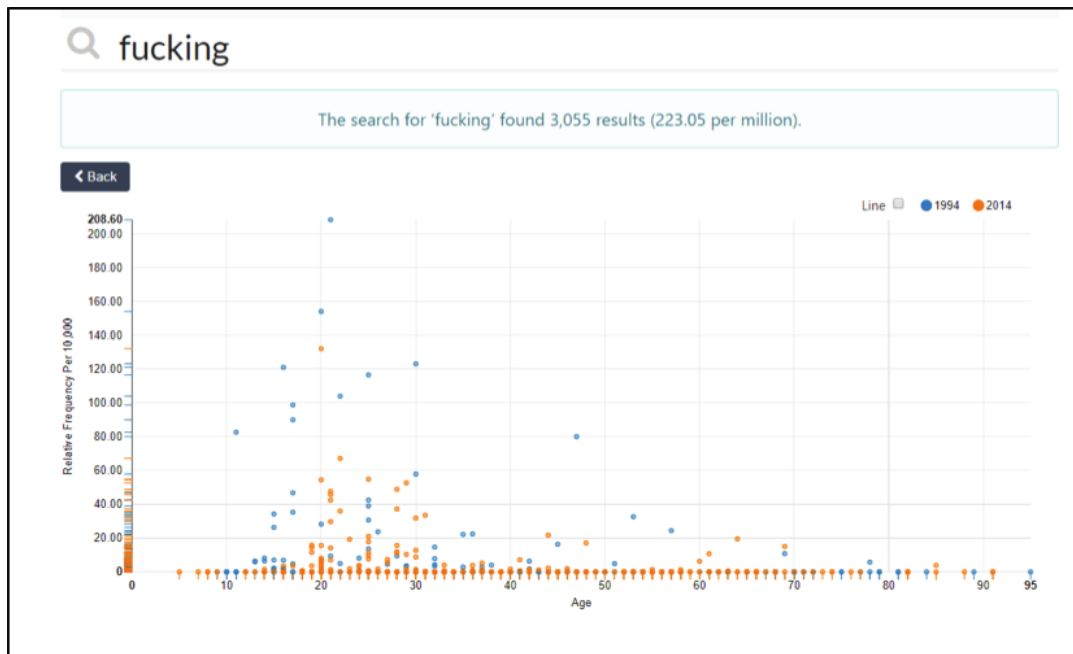
For both searches, the effect over time and across gender is similar. The overall use of 'fuck' is decreasing over time. Men use more 'fuck' than women, both in 1994 and in 2014. Interestingly however, while the use goes down for men, it is actually increasing for women.



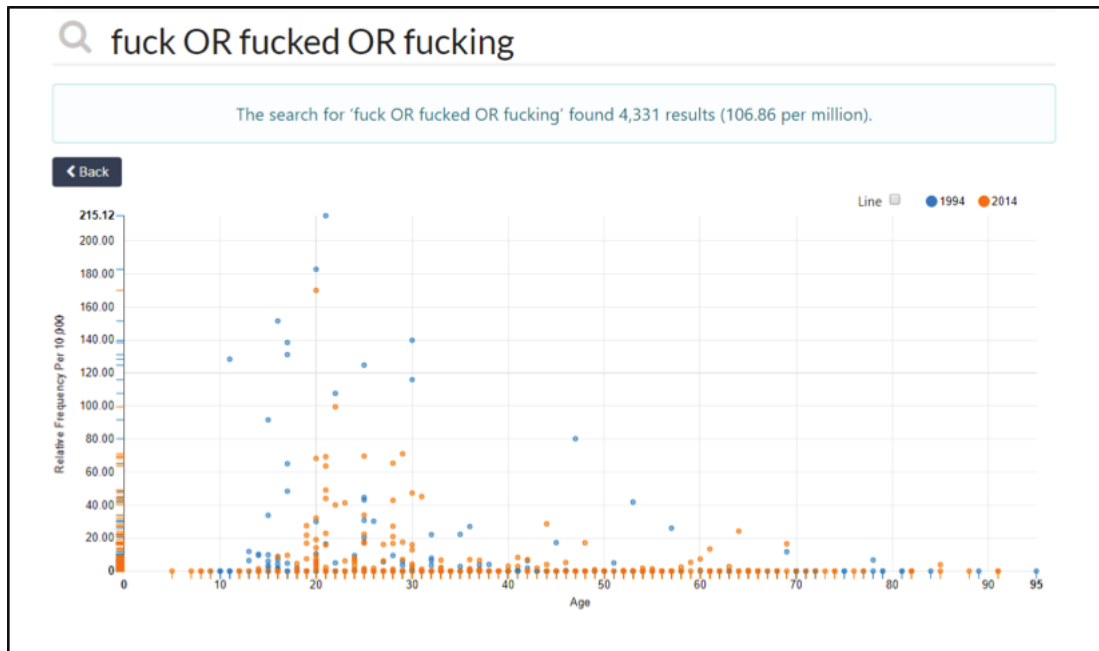
Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

Task 4

Age distribution for 'fucking':



Age distribution including different forms of 'fuck':



In both datasets (and for both searches), most speakers using 'fuck' as a swearword variant are between 15 and 30 years of age. This corresponds to the age where young speakers move away from the language of their elders in an effort to create their own vernacular and identity. When entering an age where new societal expectations (e.g. professional norms in the workplace, becoming parents, ...) appear, the use drops again.



Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

Task 5

Here, students should think of social expectations in terms of swearing more generally. Is anything currently changing?

Norms set in our society can be different for men and women, which has an effect on how language is used. For people of different age, however, societal norms, will have more or less of an effect and might even cause speakers to rebel against what is expected. Swearwords in particular can become markers of a generation and be appropriated within friendship groups. Discussions can focus on how this is changing over time for the individual speakers, but also for whole speaker groups: should there still be such a gender divide when it comes to swearing?



Suggested time: 10 – 15 minutes