

SWEARING ON TELEVISION - GENDER, LANGUAGE, AND POWER IN *THE THICK OF IT*

by
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My master thesis investigated gender differences in the use of swearing in the British television series *The thick of it*, a political satire known for its strong language. On the basis of material from four episodes, the use of swearing was studied through quantitative and qualitative analysis. The corpus used in the investigation contains 21029 words, broadcast between 2009 and 2012. The study draws on, and challenges, previous research which claim that women swear less than men do (Coates 2004, Lakoff 1975). The study also discusses gender differences in how and whether the relative status of speakers influences their use of swearing, and finds that powerful women swear more than do other women.

1. Introduction

The thick of it is a British political satire, known for its strong language. Television shows usually engage and entertain the viewer in one way or another, but scripted shows in addition present an opportunity to study how identity is constructed through language. Language can be used to deliberately construct characters who are at once gendered and assigned social status. This study will consider one aspect with this function in the television series *The thick of it*: swearing. Swearing in this television show is considered in terms of gender distribution as well as status distribution.

Swearing is a linguistic and interpersonal activity and as such there are expectations, norms, and communicative functions of swearing. Swear words can be remarkably versatile, and the same swear word can

perform distinct interpersonal functions in different contexts (Trudgill and Andersson 1990; Stapleton 2003 and 2010; Beers Fägersten 2012; Baruch and Jenkins 2006). With scripted language, the writers can use the norms and expectations of for instance femininity, to create and present characters of interest to the viewer.

In this study, some focus will be on social status and powerful and powerless speakers. Here, social status is seen as the status acquired through the professional position the character holds, as well as by how the person speaks and acts. That is, two characters who hold the same position might not have the same social status. Similarly, power is seen as something that is performed through what and how something is said. A character can be charismatic or invoke fear, and thereby display power. As the satire studied here is set in a political workplace, it is not surprising that the contextualized power that operates in this setting is used to form characters that promote and challenge norms and expectations. In *The thick of it*, characters can hold a socially powerful professional position, but still be the less powerful speaker in certain contexts. One example is Nicola, who as the leader of a political party is powerful, but who sometimes is portrayed as powerless. This is context-based, and many aspects interact to create identity: gender, age, socio-economical background, as well as status. Several characters shift between being powerful and powerless speakers, depending on the situation. As we shall see in this study, swearing plays a part in the construction of characters, and had each swear word been coded for context in the corpus, stronger claims could have been made on the relationship between powerful speakers and swearing.

Gender and language are not only performed by people, but are also concepts people are exposed to by society, through, among other things, the media. *The thick of it*, as a television series aired recently, should be able to give some clues to how the media portray men's and women's language today. One must bear in mind that *The thick of it* is a scripted television series, which means that the language cannot be seen as spontaneous speech. Furthermore, the writers of the series are male, and the language

is restricted to British English. There is also, supposedly, a fair amount of improvisation incorporated when recording the episodes (Addison 2009)¹.

This paper aims to discuss and answer two questions: How do men and women differ in their use of swearing in *The thick of it*? Are there any gender differences in how and whether the relative status of speakers influences their use of swearing in *The thick of it*?

2. Background

The following brief background brings up earlier research on relationships between gender, swearing, and workplace, gender and social power, communicative functions of swearing and on fictional language.

Robin Lakoff's *Language and woman's place* (1975) is a starting point for much of the research on gender and language, and many researchers have both agreed and disagreed with her. Talbot (2010) points out that 'the value of [Lakoff's] early exploration of issues in gender and language lies not so much in the identification of particular speech characteristics as in the political argument that she was making, namely that "women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behaviour"' (Lakoff 2004:42, quoted in Talbot 2010:41). Lakoff (1975) claimed that certain features are typical of women's speech and that one of these is its lack of swearing. Though not invariably found, Lakoff's claims have been corroborated by other researchers (e.g. Coates 2004). Holmes and Schnurr (2006) discuss the issue of gender in the workplace, and as *The thick of it* is set in a professional environment, Holmes and Schnurr's discussion on gender is relevant. They claim that 'in all workplaces individuals unavoidably enact gendered roles, adopt recognisably gendered stances, and construct gender identity in the process of interacting with others at work' (2006:33). Power and politeness in the workplace are also discussed in Holmes and Stubbe (2003), and gendered talk at work has been further elaborated upon by Holmes (2006). Baruch and

Jenkins (2006) discuss swearing in workplace discourse and conclude that different domains dictate the use of different speech modes, which sometimes include the use of swearing. They describe that confrontational language which violates taboos is viewed as a powerful style of speech in Western culture, and that swearing is considered powerful because it challenges the societal class codes.

The fact that social power often is a more important factor than gender has been shown in Vivian de Klerk's early research on social power in South African adolescents' use of expletives. Her results on swearing supported the hypothesis that 'high-intensity language is associated not only with sex of informant but with other factors, all of which can be linked to the idea of 'social power' in some way' (1991:165) and showed that adolescents 'test the strength of taboos in direct proportion to the amount of social power they appear to have' (1991:166). Romaine (1999) discusses gendered play, and how boys tend to have more hierarchically organized groups, where high value is placed on obscene language and swearing. The image that women should not swear has been defended many times. This norm is changing but was firmly held historically. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) describe earlier studies showing that older respondents in a study by Vincent (1982) thought that swearing was more 'ugly' in a woman than in a man, and that men especially held this view. The view that it is not 'ladylike' to swear has been corroborated in Beers Fägersten's quite recent interviews (2012:140).

Swearing fills certain communicative functions, and these can be highly versatile. The same swear word can be used in several ways, as well as perform different interpersonal functions in different contexts (Trudgill and Andersson 1990). Stapleton identifies four categories: 'expressing emotion; humour and verbal emphasis; social bonding and solidarity; and constructing and displaying identity' (2010:290). Research on rudeness also shows that it can display pragmatic competence. Beebe (1995) argues that rudeness has two functions: to obtain power and to vent negative feelings. Even though rudeness, or impoliteness, is beyond the scope of

this study, it can be tied to the use of swearing. Jay (2000) suggests that the primary purpose of swearing is the expression of an emotional state and that the cathartic function of swearing is to substitute for physical aggression - something that is linked to notions of power, dominance and masculinity (de Klerk 1991).

The fact that *The thick of it* is fictional language is also of importance. Richardson (2010) discusses how dramatic dialogue on television shows audiences that characters behave in different ways in their various narratives, and brings up *The thick of it* as one example of a comedy that is in the business of language display: ‘This behind-the-scenes sitcom about British politics has been described as offering “a masterclass in creative swearing” (2010:58). Bednarek (2010) argues that ‘while TV dialogue may well in general be more “emotional” than naturally occurring conversation, different series and genres are distinguished in how they express such emotionality’ (2010:87). She mentions the fact that many series, being aimed at a certain type of audience, use or refrain from using swear words or taboo language: this, however, does not mean that they do not use any emotive interjections. *The thick of it* does not aim to be a family friendly show and can build humorous characters and dramatic dialogue by the use of strong language. What makes characters interesting is the fact that they break the presumptions the viewers might have of a character (Richardson 2010; Culpeper 2001). In the case of *The thick of it*, the fact that politicians continuously use strong swear words creates interesting characters. As Alvarez-Pereye explains, ‘the idea that the representation of the world through any medium raises issues of faithfulness is neither new nor controversial’ (2011:53). One issue raised is that the writers or production team may wish to construct an image of, for instance, how women should or could behave and speak. Furthermore, genre and narrative practices also influence the language of film and television. The rhythm of dialogue tends to change considerably depending on whether the film is a comedy or a drama, and it has been shown that certain genres or shows influence how exchanges are portrayed. In the sitcom *Friends*,

as Quaglio (2009: 35) noted, greeting-exchanges were over-represented when compared to a corpus of natural conversation. And Alvarez-Pereyre concludes that even though non-spontaneous dialogue in film and television is not suitable for research on spontaneous speech, films ‘are appropriate linguistic specimens for the study of social representations, narrative conventions, etc. (2011:66).

As shown in previous literature, language can be used to deliberately construct characters who are at once gendered and assigned social status. As swearing serves interpersonal functions, it is certainly interesting to look at it from a perspective where the language used is scripted. The language used on television does not necessarily represent real-world swearing – but it can provide rich insights into such cultural representations and expectations of social categories as gender and swearing.

3. *Material and Method*

The primary material in this investigation was collected from four episodes of the British political satire *The thick of it*. The series, which is a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) production, was first broadcast in 2005 and revolves around the inner workings of modern British government. The episodes were selected randomly, from season three, broadcast in 2009, and season four, broadcast in 2012, by using an online randomizing service (www.random.org). A total of 121 minutes of spoken data was used, representing 18,3% of the total eleven hours of programming in the series. The main reason for collecting the data from episodes within the last two seasons is the fairer gender balance in the last two seasons, due to the introduction of a strong female character. The episodes chosen are the fourth (S03E04)² and the eighth (S03E08) from season three, and the fifth (S04E05) and seventh (S04E07) from season four.

The episodes were transcribed, and the material was collected in a spreadsheet. By transcribing all the material, every word could be counted and analysed, thereby enabling an accurate quantification. For the

four episodes used in the investigation, only the actual spoken language is transcribed. No descriptions of sounds, laughter, etc. are taken into account. Nor is any text that is added in the subtitles, but not part of the spoken dialogue (e.g. speaker indications) included. The material was sorted in chronological order and coded for several features, such as speaker name, the gender of the speaker, and whether the turn contained any swearing. The corpus used in the investigation contains 21029 words.

3.1. Defining and categorising swearing

The thick of it is renowned for its swearing (Sherwin 2012). As swearing and taboo language were so frequent in *The thick of it*, the bar was set low, and anything that could be seen as swearing was included; thus, all cases that appeared to be taboo when transcribed were coded as possible swearing. All possible swear words were then checked in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Longman) as well as double-checked with the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). If at least one of these reference works listed the word as *taboo* (Longman) or *coarse slang* (OED), the word was included in the investigation. Since the definition of swearing still is quite a heavily debated one, such that the listener can interpret swear words in very different ways, there was a need to use criteria that were not too reliant on one single person's subjective view. However, this strict way of deciding what counted as a swear word meant that many innovative insults, examples of rudeness, and cases where offensive words appeared in this study but did not meet the criteria for inclusion, were excluded from the quantitative investigation.

Example (1) shows two clear cases of swearing (*fucking* and *shit*) in *The thick of it*.

- (1) You *fucking* drive off like that again, I'll stick your meter so far down your throat you'll be able to tell the price of your next *shit*.
(Malcolm, So4Eo7)

The swear words were categorised and classified according to word class. Many of the swear words used belonged to more than one word class. For instance, the word *fucking* was classified into four different types. In examples (2), (3) and (4) the word is classified into the respective types of: *fucking* [adjective], *fucking* [adverb] and *fucking* [interjection]. In (2) and (3), the type is *fucking* [adjective] and *fucking* [adverb], since in example (2) the word *fucking* modifies a noun, while in (3) it modifies an adjective. In (5), *fucking* is a noun heading the NP, and is classified as *fucking* [noun].

(2) I made my daughter come to this fucking school. (Nicola, So3Eo4)

(3) This is *fucking* awesome (Adam, So4Eo7)

(4) *Fucking!* ... Why is he still here? (Malcolm, So4Eo5)

(5) ...doing his best to be heard over a force 10 *fucking* from the Fucker.
(Ollie, So3Eo8)

All types are displayed in Table 2. Most of them are quite straightforward and have been classified in the same manner as were examples (2) – (5). However, *the fuck* [emphasis] might need some explanation. *Longman* lists the phrase *the fuck* as a special instance of the noun, where the combination of noun and article is used to emphasize something. Because of this, in example (6), the function of *the fuck* is seen as being more that of a prepositional phrase than of what it technically is: a noun. For a phrase to be treated as *the fuck* [emphasis], *fuck* must be singular and co-occur with the definite article.

(6) Ollie, what *the fuck* are we doing here? (Dan, So4Eo7)

4. Results and Discussion

The results focus on the types and frequencies of swear words, in order to answer the question of how men and women differ in their use of

swearing in *The thick of it*. Moreover, results of individual characters' use of swearing are presented to answer the question regarding gender differences in how and whether the relative status of speakers influences their use of swearing in *The thick of it*.

In the entire corpus, women only speak about a quarter of the time (5447 words), compared to men (15582 words). The fact that men tend to dominate mixed gendered conversations has previously been discussed by among others Swann (1997), Coates and Cameron (1989), Spender (1998): also outside the academic world it has been acknowledged in newspaper articles (for example in the tabloid *Metro* (Scott 2016)).

In the present study, swearing has been analysed from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. These perspectives will complement one another, in that the qualitative analysis will provide context to the figures presented in the quantitative section. The qualitative section presents one scene from the material, which is analyzed in order to briefly exemplify and discuss the quantitative findings. Normalized frequencies will be the starting point for the discussion on swearing. When discussing normalized frequencies for individual characters, the word count for individual characters was calculated, and only those characters that spoke more than 500 words were included in the analysis. Type/token ratios will be looked at in the quantitative section, and a discourse analysis will be conducted in the qualitative section. In the present study, the term *discourse* is used in the sense of 'interaction in particular social situations' (Talbot 2010:118). Again, it should be recalled that the data is from a scripted show, and therefore the mentioned previous studies of real-world swearing cannot be directly compared to the results of this study. Even so, the data gives rich insights into how the characters are represented.

4.1. Men and women swearing

In accordance with this investigation's quite strict definition of what counts as a swear word, there were 71 instances of swear words uttered

by women found. To compare, the men used 341 swear words, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Frequencies of swearing by gender*

	Swearing women	Swearing men	Total
Raw frequencies	71	341	412
Normalized frequencies	13.0	21.9	19.6

The data shows that the men swear more than do the women, as also previously found to be the case for real-world data (e.g. Coates 2004; Beers Fägersten 2012; De Klerk 1991; Jay 2000).

There were nineteen different swear words used, together making up 40 types, presented in Table 2. The swear words are generally written in the base form, and presented as the *form* [word class] types discussed in the method section. The words might have appeared in many different forms in the material. By classifying the swear words into *form* [word class], lexical diversity could be measured by type/token ratios. By using a randomizing formula from Excel, 71 instances of male swearing were randomly selected to arrive at the same number of tokens from both women and men.

As shown in Table 2, there are two words that constitute the majority of all swearing; *fuck* and *shit*. Types derived from the word *fuck* are used 63.4% of the time when women swear. In comparison, some derivative of *fuck* is used 73.3% of the time when men swear. The type *fucking* [adjective] is the most commonly used type both by women (26.8% of their swearing) and by men (34%).

Women use the word *shit* foremost as an interjection, in agreement with previous research by McEnery, Baker and Hardie (2000), who found that the word *shit* was most frequently used as a general expletive of anger, and

secondly as a third person insult (the shit or similar). In general, women use swear words to a large extent as interjections, while men do not do this as often. Men use the same words a lot, especially variants of *fuck*. Stapleton (2010) points out that the single expletive *fuck!* can express many different things, including anger, frustration, fear and vulnerability.

Women do not use all types of swear words, but when it comes to lexical diversity, women obtain a higher type/token ratio, since they present greater variation in, and how they use, their swear words. However, men score higher on the stronger swear words. Even though the frequencies are very low, there are a number of types never used by women, which can be interpreted as showing that swearing still is, to some extent, portrayed as a male domain, at least in television (see Lakoff 1975).

Table 2: *Types of swearing by women and men, with percentages*

Word	Frequency women	%	Frequency men	%	Total	%
<i>arsehole</i> [noun]	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	0.2
<i>bastard</i> [noun]	1	1.4	3	0.9	4	1.0
<i>bloody</i> [adjective]	2	2.8	3	0.9	5	1.2
<i>bollock</i> [interjection]	2	2.8	0	0.0	2	0.5
<i>bollock</i> [noun]	1	1.4	2	0.6	3	0.7
<i>bollock</i> [verb]	1	1.4	1	0.0	2	0.5
<i>bullshit</i> [noun]	1	1.4	2	1.2	3	0.7
<i>cock</i> [verb]	1	1.4	0	0.3	1	0.2

<i>cock</i> [noun]	1	1.4	4	1.2	5	1.2
<i>crap</i> [adjective]	2	2.8	1	0.3	3	0.7
<i>cunt</i> [noun]	0	0.0	2	0.6	2	0.5
<i>dick</i> [noun]	0	0.0	4	1.2	4	1.0
<i>fanny</i> [noun]	0	0.0	2	0.6	2	0.5
<i>fuck</i> [adjective]	0	0.0	2	0.6	2	0.5
<i>fuck</i> [interjection]	10	14.1	15	4.4	25	6.1
<i>the fuck</i> [emphasis]	1	1.4	12	3.5	13	3.2
<i>fuck</i> [noun]	1	1.4	13	3.8	14	3.4
<i>fuck</i> [verb]	5	7.0	32	9.4	37	9.0
<i>fucker</i> [noun]	4	5.6	12	3.5	16	3.9
<i>fucking</i> [adjective]	19	26.8	116	34.0	135	32.8
<i>fucking</i> [adverb]	5	7.0	45	13.2	50	12.1
<i>fucking</i> [interjection]	0	0.0	2	0.6	2	0.5
<i>fucking</i> [noun]	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	2
<i>piss</i> [adjective]	1	1.4	2	0.6	3	0.7
<i>piss</i> [noun]	0	0.0	3	0.9	3	0.7
<i>piss</i> [verb]	0	0.0	3	0.9	3	0.7

<i>prick</i> [noun]	0	0.0	2	0.6	2	0.5
<i>pussy</i> [noun]	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	0.2
<i>shagger</i> [noun]	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	0.2
<i>shit</i> [noun]	3	4.2	29	8.5	32	7.8
<i>shit</i> [adjective]	3	4.2	8	2.3	11	2.7
<i>shit</i> [interjection]	4	5.6	3	0.9	7	1.7
<i>shit</i> [verb]	1	1.4	1	0.3	2	0.5
<i>sod</i> [adjective]	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	0.2
<i>sod</i> [verb]	1	1.4	3	0.9	4	1.0
<i>twat</i> [adjective]	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	0.2
<i>twat</i> [noun]	1	1.4	4	1.2	5	1.2
<i>twat</i> [verb]	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	0.2
<i>wank</i> [verb]	0	0.0	2	0.6	2	0.5
<i>wanker</i> [noun]	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	0.2

Total	71	100.0	341	100.0	412	100.0
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Looking at lexical diversity, women use 23 of the 40 types, thereby showing a ratio of 32.4%. Men on the other hand, in a randomly selected sample of 71 tokens, only use 19 of the 40 types of swearing, thus showing a type/token ratio of 26.8%.

4.2. Individual characters' swearing

To see if certain characters swore more than others, normalized frequencies were calculated for each individual character who spoke more than 500 words in the corpus. Table 3 presents the normalized frequencies for the individual women, and Table 4 presents the figures for the men. When looking at individual characters it is apparent that the social status of a female character is related to the use of swear words, as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: *Normalized frequencies of swearing by individual women*

	Number of swear words	Spoken words	Normalized frequencies
Nicola	54	2463	21.9
Emma	10	915	10.9
Terri	2	1292	1.55

Table 3 shows that Nicola swears more than twice as much as does Emma, and Terri only uses 1.6 swear words per 1000 spoken. This is in clear correlation with their social status; as Nicola is the woman who has the highest social position, it does not come as a great surprise that she swears the most frequently of the women. Emma is aspiring to power, and swears about half as often as does Nicola, compared to Terri, who only uses 2 swear words in total (and is in fact being provoked into using one of them). Terri seems to display more of the type of language Lakoff (1975) describes as feminine, with more use of hedges and euphemisms. Still (2006) describes that in many traditional models of leadership, the required and desirable qualities of being an effective leader have been assumed to be masculine. This suggests that women in power positions are more likely to use a language, thought of as male, and Nicola's swearing can be interpreted as a display of this.

Nicola also swears more than quite a few of the male characters do, in this way challenging the norms of femininity, and contradicting previous research according to which men swear more than women (e.g. Coates 2004; Beers Fägersten 2012; Jay 2000). The character that clearly outnumbers all others is Malcolm, the aggressive, profane and feared director of communications, who uses 44.5 swear words per 1000 words spoken, as can be seen in Table 4. Malcolm's use of swearing is an important part of the characterization of his character (Alvarez-Pereyre 2011; Culpeper 2001).

Table 4: *Normalized frequencies of swearing by individual men speaking more than 500 words in the corpus*

	swearing	Spoken words	<i>Normalized frequencies</i>
Malcolm	173	3884	44.5
Adam	25	710	35.2
Fergus	17	736	23.1
Peter	29	1800	16.1
Phil	19	1305	14.6
Ollie	25	1859	13.4
Glenn	18	1341	13.4
Julius	5	591	8.46
Stewart	4	1443	2.77

Peter Mannion, Nicola's equivalent in the opposing party, only utters 16.1 swear words per 1000 words spoken. However, even though this is less than Nicola's normalized frequency, it is still higher than those of five of

the other males. The higher normalized frequencies for certain characters, such as Malcolm and Nicola, can possibly be explained by the fact that they, because of their political roles, hold relatively powerful social positions.

De Klerk's study (1991) on South African adolescent use of expletives, which focused on social power, argued that the dominant, socially powerful do not stoop to use expletives. They uphold the taboo, in a sense they impose it; those with less power appear to break the taboo in accordance with their power within their subcultures and with their degree of confidence in rejecting the dominant. (1991:158)

In the present study, the pattern described by De Klerk does generally not occur. The people with the most power are those who swear the most, with the possible exception of Peter, who does not swear to the same extent as the others, but could not be described as resisting the swearing. The one character that would support De Klerk's claims more fully is Julius. With his position as advisor to the Prime Minister, he represents a character with great social power, and swears less frequently. However, this might also be the case because of the limitations of the social situations he appears in. De Klerk also stressed that males using expletives are condoned, while women generally are condemned, being seen as presumptuous and inappropriate. This argument would also explain why women in general are portrayed as swearing less than men in the material under analysis here. However, one must keep in mind that even though her results were corroborated by Beers Fägersten (2012), de Klerk's article was written at the beginning of the 1990s. De Klerk continues,

[i]f expletives usage is indeed a correlate of social power, then one would expect that as the social role of women in Western society changes, patterns of expletive usage will change accordingly. As long ago as 1943 Schlauch noted (with a hint of regret?) that “[the set of] rough masculine words, formerly limited to bar rooms and exclusively male haunts, is shrinking under the incursions of women into all these realms” (p. 287). Hertzler (1965) and Maurer (1976) also note the same trend: With shifts in power, habits of expletive usage are changing. (1991:158)

These thoughts do seem to tally with what the quantitative data in this investigation shows; Nicola, a woman with much power acting in a traditionally male domain, swears extensively. The social situations in which the characters were swearing have not been considered here: had they been, stronger claims could have been made for the relationship between being the powerful speaker in the given situation and his or her swearing. Here, it can be assumed that the powerful role the characters hold would allow them to act in places where contextualized power operates, and that the authors of the televised show use swearing as a tool to communicate interpersonal functions to construct and display a character's identity.

4.3. A brief look at the qualitative aspect

As Nicola is the woman who has the highest social position, it is not surprising that she swears the most frequently of the women, as shown in the quantitative findings. Swearing occurs in many different situations in *The thick of it*, and Excerpt 1 is a conversation between Nicola and Ollie, that both exemplifies the quantitative findings, as well as challenges them. Here, the one dominating the conversation, in terms of number of words, is Nicola. She is the one that swears, but as will be shown here, the swearing might not signal strength in this specific situation. In the excerpt, as indicated by her swearing, Nicola is clearly not happy about the fact that Malcolm is back at work.

Excerpt 1. *Conversation between Nicola Murray and Ollie Reader face-to-face, SO3EO8*

- 1 Nicola: Hello. You all right?
You've got that "cock in the cookie jar" look.
- 2 Ollie: He's back
- 3 Nicola: Who? Barrymore?

- 4 Ollie: No
- 5 Nicola: Clement Attlee? Oh, *fuck!*
- 6 Ollie: Yes
- 7 Nicola: Malcolm.
- 8 Ollie: Yes
- 9 Nicola: Oh, no. God, he's going to kill me. I was there when he was
 10 being sacked and he asked me for help and I held out and
 11 now he's going to want revenge, isn't he? *Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*
 12 It's gonna be like Kill Bill or Get Carter. Only it's going to be
 13 get and kill Nicola and then get Carter and Bill to *fucking*
 14 kill her, too. How did you hear about it?
- 15 Ollie: Well, I just connected his computer for him in the old
 liaison...
- 16 Nicola: *Fuck!* He's in the building?
- 17 Ollie: Yeah.
- 18 Nicola: *Shit!* Where is he?
-

All the swear words in this excerpt are spoken by Nicola. The types used are *cock* [noun], *fuck* [interjection], *fucking* [adverb], and *shit* [interjection]. In this situation, it is quite clear from the language used that Nicola is upset about the situation, and Ollie is not. As six out of the eight swear words in this excerpt are interjections, this illustrates the quantitative finding in the present study, that women are prone to use interjections when they swear. *Cock* [noun] (line 2) is used in a humorous way, playing with the saying 'caught with one's fingers in the cookie jar'. In Stapleton's 2003 study, the most common reasons for using swearing were for humour/storytelling and to create verbal emphasis. Here, both are used

by the writers to construct Nicola's character. The topic of women and humour has further been discussed by Talbot (2010), where she brings up the negative stereotype presented in Lakoff's work. The lack of any sense of humour as the supposedly female characteristic described by Lakoff is then refuted when Talbot readapts a case study carried out by Holmes (2006) where a female boss happily goes along with the joking at the workplace, and uses humour as a tool of communication (2010:196). In excerpt 1, Nicola's usage of humorous remarks, especially by its incorporation of swearing, can be interpreted as a way of adapting to the male environment and to her own power position. Still, Ollie's coolness makes it seem like he is somewhat in control, he holds the answers, and Nicola's repeated swearing (line 11) accentuates the difficult position she is in.

5. Concluding remarks

The present study partly supports the claim that women swear less than men, however, this does not hold true for all of the examined characters in the show. Results further showed that women and men tend to use different functions of swearing, the biggest difference being in the use of interjections. The study also discussed gender differences in whether and how the relative status of speakers influenced their use of swearing. Arguably, while swearing in *The thick of it* can be used to construct powerful female characters, as powerful women swear more than other women in this series, context is crucial, and stronger claims could have been made for the connection between power and swearing if the data had been coded for context. Even so, it can be assumed that the powerful role the characters hold allows them to act in places where contextualized power operates, and that the authors of the show use swearing as a tool to construct and display a character's identity (Stapleton 2003, 2010; Beers Fägersten 2012; Baruch and Jenkins 2006, Alvarez-Pereyre 2011).

The thick of it, as a television series that was aired fairly recently, gives some clues to how the media portray men's and women's language

today. The fact that it is a scripted television series, makes it particularly interesting to study how characters are constructed, as male or female, powerful or powerless, through language.

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Notes

1. One could speculate that the feature looked at in this investigation, swearing, could belong to a category that is likely to appear in spontaneous speech. However, to confirm this theory a comparison between the scripts and the transcribed speech would have to be conducted.
2. The code should be read: Season03Episode04.

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