ARE YOU FUCKING ME?:
OPPOSITIONAL STANCE TAKING AND AUTHORITY THROUGH PROFANE
ASSESSMENT

by

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Are You Fucking Me?: Oppositional Stance-Taking and Authority Through Profane Assessment
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This study explores the use of profanity in informal interactions among college-aged women at a public university in the western United States. In the corpus of over 100 instances of swear words, we see a recurrent practice through which profanity is used by the recipient of an extended telling to assess a facet of the telling. Through a profane assessment, the telling-recipient positions herself as authoritative. In these interactions, the roles of narrator and listener mostly remain consistent, with one woman as narrator and another as listener. In two- and three-person dynamics, the listener, or one of the listeners, will additionally take on an assessor role beyond assessments that can also be continuers (Goodwin, 1986). These assessments work to problematize the narrator’s story, in particular the opinion or stance (Du Bois, 2007) the narrator has taken regarding the events she is recounting. Through this practice, the assessor constructs her contrary stance and asserts her authority to contradict the narrator. These stances are taken by other participants in the interaction as more definitive—a stronger stance—in a kind of one-upmanship to the narrator. These stances, in turn, accumulate to something like Ochs and Taylor’s problematizer (1995), in which the assessor (in their work, ‘the father’) takes on the role of ultimate judge, which is accepted by the narrator. The use of swear words by young women within the interaction thus points to the repurposing of profanity to create an authoritative identity.
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Introduction

This thesis explores the use of profanity in informal interactions among college-aged women at a large public university in the western United States. In the small-group discussions analyzed in this study, recorded with IRB approval during 2012, women use profanity when assessing narratives told by other participants in the conversation. My analysis of informal talk reveals how these women position themselves as authoritative by problematizing the narrator’s story. This is in part achieved through the taking up of interactional roles in the conversation. Across the eleven interactions studied, participants consistently take on stable and continuous roles throughout the conversation, with one of the women in the group taking on the role of narrator and another woman taking on the role of the recipient of that narrative. Drawing on terminology from Conversation Analysis, I distinguish between the story, which is the information being conveyed, and the actions used to tell the story, which will be referred to as an extended telling or an extended turn. The producer of the extended telling will be referred to as the narrator, and the receiver of the story will be referred to as the recipient. Although the narrator produces the story with feedback from the recipient, and both participants therefore actively build the interaction together, my analysis reveals that the distinction between the interactional roles of narrator and recipient is critically important to the use of profanity. Recipients across the interactions reviewed take on assessor roles and are able to use profanity to successfully contradict the narrator, even though the narrator has a greater claim to the story.

The interactions examined are informal conversations between college-aged women who know each other either as friends or classmates and agreed to be filmed. In two- and three-person dynamics, one of the recipients will inevitably take on an assessor role and wage assessments of the narrative—offering evaluations of comments on the extended telling that go beyond
continuers such as “wow” or “yeah” (Goodwin, 1986), which means that their assessments can culminate in a stance, rather than just interactionally moving the telling along. These assessments work to problematize the speaker’s story, in particular the opinion or stance the speaker has taken regarding the events she is recounting. Stance will refer to the opinions or positions expressed by a speaker, as discussed by John Du Bois (2007) and Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2005); it is a social action wherein one speaker can align or disalign themselves with another speaker. In an interactional analysis, any turn taken by a speaker may align (agree) or disalign (disagree) with what has been said before.

Through this practice of using profanity to assert authority, the recipient constructs her contrary stance and asserts her ability to further contradict the narrator. Stances taken by the recipient are then taken up by the speaker, and the speaker moves her stance to align more closely with the stance of the recipient. The stances of the recipient, in turn, accumulate to something like Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor’s (1995) problematizer, in which the assessor (in their work, the father) takes on the role of ultimate judge, which is accepted by the narrator (in their work, a child or the mother). This use of swear words by young women to create an authoritative identity within the interaction points to a recognition of profanity as a potential indicator of power. This thesis will serve to establish, via an analysis of conversations between women, the ways that profanity functions in the construction of authoritative stances, and perhaps more critically, how profanity can come to index authority. This expands the function of casual swearing beyond previous literature where profanity functions for comradery (Sanchez, 2016) or joke-telling (Seizer, 2011; Holm, 2016).

Methodology and Data Collection
The data examined for this paper are a collection of filmed, natural conversations between college-aged women. The conversations total approximately seven hours of conversation and were collected by Joshua Raclaw for his doctoral dissertation at University of Colorado Boulder. The participants were his students and their friends, all of whom signed releases to share their videos. The women in the videos all were in attendance at University of Colorado Boulder, but no other biographical data on them was shared.

The videos were then transcribed following a modified Jeffersonian transcription method (Jefferson, 2004). The transcripts are modified to include notes on the gesture and eye gaze in brackets below the verbal transcript. This is to indicate when the gestures occur and the timing in which they coincide with speaking or pauses. A full reference of symbols used in the transcripts is included in Appendix 1. These data were then analyzed utilizing some methodology from Conversation Analysis (CA). CA, as explained by Marjorie Harness Goodwin (2002) “provides a powerful methodology for documenting how people position themselves relative to each other in their moment-to-moment conversation” (715). CA is utilized here to more finely examine the interactions in the data, and the ways the women position themselves relative to each other.

**Data Analysis**

When a listener takes a stance of disagreement regarding something that has been presented in a narrative, she must also index her authority to disagree. The expression of disagreement is complicated in interaction between friends or peers (as the women in the data are) because it is dispreferred (Goodwin and Heritage, 1990). As conversation analysts have amply demonstrated, there is a structural preference in conversations for agreement, which better moves along the exchange. Example 1 below, taken from my research corpus, offers a strong example of this. In
this exchange between college students Sarah and Liza, Liza tells Sarah about the date she went on with a man from their class, who subsequently asked her to be “Facebook official”, which Liza has indicated uncertainty about, both to Sarah and by Liza’s own account, to the man at the time. This segment is less than five minutes into a conversation that lasts a little over thirty minutes. The transcription begins at the end of Liza’s extended telling. At this point Liza has not explicitly requested an assessment or advice from Sarah, although both women have indicated (often verbally, such as at the onset of the interaction when Sarah says *start from the beginning*) that Liza fully relaying information to Sarah is important. While Liza’s extended telling continues on past this segment, it is in this example that Sarah begins to form a clear stance against Liza and the man becoming Facebook official. Beginning in line 11, Sarah specifically disaffiliates with Liza: *You didn’t want it at- ↑ You don’t want it right no: w* (line 14) and treats Liza as if she is wrong ↑*Are you fu(h)cking me! Li(h)ke, seriously!* (line 18). This treatment negatively affects Liza’s ability to be positively perceived by Sarah. Sarah also disaligns with Liza: that is, when she disagrees with her, she positions her own stance against Liza’s stance. Disalignment refers to negative alignment, which Du Bois (2007) explains, “can be defined provisionally as the act of calibrating the relationship between two stances, and by implication between two stancetakers” (144). The interaction between Liza and Sarah can be seen here in Example 1:

---

**Example 1**

```
01 L:    So yeah so he was like do you wanna make it Facebook of-er
02        d’you mind if I make it Facebook official=I don’t feel bad
03        talking about it now ca[use ]like no one’s [gonna see]i(h)t
04 S:                           [yea.]                          [yeah hah ]
05     {} ((0.7) )
```

---

1 This is a request for a higher level of commitment than just going on dates, similar to the older “going steady.”
2 All names have been changed
L: {coughs }
S: {picks up drink}
L: And (0.5) I think my fe-at first I like <paused for a second an then I was> like okay an then I’m 
thin[kin to myself]
S: (No but you d]on’t want that )=
L: (moves braid to other side, crosses arms)
S: =W↑ell it’s ___ not that I didn’t want i[t it’s ]
at- {You don’t want it right no:w}=
L: =No,[ I]
S: → [↑A]re you fu(h)cking me! {Li(h)ke, seriously! } {uncrosses arms, waves arms}
L: {hahah (.). Okay, no, [here’s] }
S: {tilts back head, motions hands in front of self}
L: {{Two like (0.2) Ahh for me, like } }
S: {gestures arms up front, crosses them}
L: looking at it, you guys {(0.5) Li ke (.) }
S: {sets down drink}
L: {have known} each other for like (. ) a week=
S: {air quotes}
L: =It’s been like {I–I understand what you’[re meaning]}
S: {hand in a sweeping motion towards S } {But like ]dating time {a week} }
S: {air quotes}
L: {{[No, I completely ] agree with you= }
S: {pointed hand gesture towards S}
L: =I completely agree with you= 
S: =Yeah= 
L: =that’s why it’s[ like]
S: =No I ]know like you’ve talked for you know (. ) for months= 
L: =Right! We’ve been spending a lot of time together but I never thought of him that way until lik[e Monday when he]=
S: {I k n o : w }
L: =asked me to watch a movie

At line 11 Sarah first gives an assessment of Liza’s story—or more specifically, of Liza’s narration of her boyfriend’s request to make the relationship Facebook official—by interrupting Liza and telling her No but you don’t want that. This comes either as a collaborative completion or an objection to Liza’s narration of her first reaction to this request in the “at first” construction in lines 8-9 (I think my fe-at first I like <paused for a second an then I was> like okay), depending on how Sarah has projected the next part of Liza’s utterance. However, since in line 13 Liza gives an account to mitigate her disagreement with Sarah’s interruption (W↑ell it’s not
that I didn’t want it it’s), which Sarah then disagrees with once again in lines 14 (You didn’t want it), Sarah’s projection becomes irrelevant. At line 14 Sarah maintains a stance against accepting the man’s invitation, and at line 15 Sarah even initiates self-repair for intensity (at-†You don’t want it right no:w), raising her pitch and volume as well as changing her face to amplify her stance—disagreement.

Initially, in lines 13 and 17, Liza begins to disagree with Sarah, but by the time Sarah has completely solidified her stance with Are you fucking me? in line 18, Liza backs down with I-I understand what you’re meaning (line 28) and finally I completely agree (line 33). Liza’s acceptance of Sarah’s assessment creates an interesting power dynamic where Sarah is allowed to correct Liza on Liza’s reactions and reported thoughts on an interaction that has both already passed and that Sarah was not present for. Initially, Liza pushes back against Sarah’s assessment, but when Sarah repairs her response to strengthen her stance, by adding in gesture, raising her pitch, and most critically for the argument in this thesis, using profanity, it becomes clear that Sarah is not repairing her disaffiliative assessment from line 11 but rather solidifying her assessment as indicative of her overall disapproving stance. This is important because Sarah epistemically has a significantly lesser claim to her stance than Liza has to hers. Harvey Sacks (1984) explains that the way conversationalists treat each other makes it clear that a speaker has privileged rights to her own experiences and the right to narrate those experiences (Thompson et al, 2015 also explain that some types of assessments can be used to disagree and to manage epistemic rights, but not to ignore another speaker’s epistemic rights). Geoffrey Raymond and John Heritage (2006) additionally discuss epistemic rights in regard to social relationships. In their formulation, a speaker like Liza would also have more epistemic rights in this instance because the subject of her narrative is Liza’s boyfriend, not Sarah’s. In these data, because the
story belongs to Liza and because the reaction is Liza’s own, Liza has more access and thus more rights to the knowledge than Sarah does. This right to knowledge is Liza’s epistemic claim (see also Clift and Raymond, in press).

Despite Liza’s greater claim, however, she ultimately surrenders to Sarah’s position. Her moving to align more closely with Sarah solidifies Sarah’s authoritative stance. The uptake of Sarah’s assessment becomes part of the formation of Sarah’s stance, and while her use of profanity is not the only component of this, it becomes a part of her authority and how she establishes it to Liza. From their exchange we can see profanity as a component of an authoritative stance in interaction. While this example does demonstrate the value of profanity to strengthening a dispreferred stance on the part of Sarah, the profanity and the negative assessment can seem too deeply intertwined to be parsed apart. While they do interact with one another, by only looking at the example above it would be hard to argue that the profanity itself is the primary way in which Sarah performs her authority.

However, Example 2 below—with the three women Kayla, Margot, and Oona—gives a clearer image of the role profanity can play. Both Oona and Kayla make negative assessments of Margot’s actions by questioning her about the surrounding circumstances, but only Kayla’s assessment receives uptake from Margot. This interaction begins after Margot has given an extended telling regarding a man she is dating who at the beginning of their relationship was doting on her and now no longer buys her presents. She is avoiding texting him to see if she can elicit more effort from him. Here, the same kind of authoritative stance Sarah took in the previous example is derived from a profane assessment by Kayla, and here the importance of that profanity becomes much clearer.

Example 2
M: Not lately he’s kind of annoying me (.) he’s not paying me
      enough attention that he used to and I don’t [like that]
      hehe
M: Hehehe you know what I mean-
      "I think you’re confusing yourself\" 
      Hehe
K: [I make eye contact with O, turns to M]
      (approx. 30 seconds omitted; subjects briefly discussed a pen)
M: He’s good it’s just like you know like the first
      month he like literally (.). took me out to get food
      twice a day. would buy me everything: got lots of presents:
      Kh-got lots of presents?
M: Now I haven’t gotten a present in like (.). weeks
K: Well, he’s probably sleeping with someone else (.) hahaha
O: Pf hahaha
K: He can’t give gifts to everyone!
O: [Yeah who ( ) presents] 
K: [ hahahahhh ]
M: ([ ) a very hot commodity (.) I should watch my back
      (finger snapping) an::: that’s[ how it needs to be]
      you’re a slave driver 
M: { I’m not a slave driver I’m just like if
      looks at K}
      I’m gonna be { dating someone then they need to
      scare quotes}
      like kiss my butt
      (1.0)
K: So what do you do to kiss his ass?=
M: =I don’t do anything to kiss his ass
K: So why,( h m m )
      {looks down}
O: Why is it like that?= 
K: =Yeah=
M: =Why is what like what?
      (0.2)
K: [Like]
O: [Like] why is that why does that the (0.2) dynamic of
      the relationship cuz you’re the girl an he’s the guy
      or jus cuz you require that of all people,
M: [Well ] um both of those reasons_
O: [Tehuh]
K: [huh.h]
O: Oh ;okay hehe.he 
      (1.0)
M: Not of all people just the boys that I’m dating.
      Right now. It’s what I feel like doing_
      (0.5)
O: {Oh }just like right 
      {taps table}
Oona initiates a negative assessment of Margot’s interaction with the man in lines 39–46 by questioning it (Why is it like that?) and 44-46 by questioning it (Like why is that why does that the dynamic of the relationship), which Margot does not take up. Margot does not attempt to align herself more closely with Oona, as indicated by her flat tone and eye-gaze away from Oona (Figure 1 below), instead addressing Kayla.

But when Kayla takes the same stance as Oona in line 58 with her own line of profane doubts (I would have no boyfriend if I required ass kissing), Margot takes this up and initiates repair in line 63 on her earlier claim against the man (I don’t have to I ask him). In this interaction, then, profanity again solidifies an authoritative stance. As in the first example, Kayla and Oona have
less epistemic ground here as they are not involved in the interaction upon which they are commenting. Furthermore Oona’s lack of profanity correlates with an assessment that does not create an authoritative stance. So while two different recipients, Oona and Kayla, both issue negative assessments and take a disapproving stance, only one of these assessments is taken up by the speaker, Margot. This is clear in more than just the words of their interaction. Margot maintains focus on Kayla and refrains from looking at Oona, even when answering Oona. For instance, in line 29 Margot answers Oona, but looks at Kayla while delivering her own account as to why she is not a “slave driver.” Margot’s reaction to Kayla but not to Oona indicates that disagreement is not enough to elicit the action of taking-up Oona’s assessment. Oona must use profanity to build the role with enough authority to have her disagreement taken up.

Even before Kayla makes an assessment, she uses profanity to one-up Margot in line 35. Her reworking of Margot’s *kiss my butt* (line 33) into *kiss his ass* (line 35) indicates towards Kayla’s own identity within their interaction—as the ultimate judge—even before she takes a clear stance. Margot’s maintenance of eye contact with Kayla would indicate that even before any repair work has been done, she has taken up Kayla’s authority and therefore positions herself to Kayla rather than Oona (transcribed in line 30, shown in Figure 1). This identity is then confirmed when Kayla agrees with Oona and uses profanity in her stance (*he’d be like fuck you like (. ) no.* line 62), which is constructed not as an outright affront to Margot, but rather as a commentary on what she sees as the consequences of behavior like Margot has described. Kayla’s stance then in turn creates a shift in Margot, who qualifies her actions and contradicts what she had just said to Oona (line 63: *[I d]on’t have to I ask him*).

The women’s construction of authority in these examples is similar to Ochs and Taylor’s (1995) *problematizer*. Ochs and Taylor examine “gender-relevant narrator and family-role
identities of women and men as mother and father, wife and husband, in white middle-class families in the United States” (100). The “father knows best” dynamic is demonstrated in the participant roles that interlocutors take up in conversation, where fathers assess the stories they are told by family members at the dinner table. This scheme of “father knows best” is created by both the father’s and others’ narrative practices, which puts the father in the position of “primary audience, judge, and critic” (101). As Ochs and Taylor explain, this “panopticon” positionality protects the father from criticism because he himself is never under scrutiny for his day; instead, he is the final judge of others without impunity. Ochs and Taylor name the father’s role the problematizer and the role of the family members recounting their days—often the mothers—problematizee. These roles map to a type of conversation where one person tells a story about their day (problematizee) and the other person listens and judges the narrator (problematizer). This same dynamic is enacted among college women in the data discussed in this thesis.

For example, this dynamic can be found in Liza and Sarah’s conversation in Example 3 below, an excerpt from the first example discussed earlier. Liza (L) is the problematizee because she is the one telling her story and exposing herself for potential judgement. In contrast, Sarah (S) is the problematizer because she is not only the recipient, but also an assessor who takes an authoritative stance.

Example 3

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>S: ([No but you d]on’t want that   )=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>{moves braid to other side, crosses arms}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>L: =Wdell it’s not that I didn’t want i[t its ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>S: =You didn’t want it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>at- ([You do]n’t want it right no:w]=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>{ furrows brows }</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>L: =No,[ I]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>S: → ([A]re you fu(h)cking me! {Li(h)ke, seriously! }</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>{uncrosses arms, waves arms}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In a manner similar to the father in Ochs and Taylor’s study, Sarah takes a stance against Liza potentially accepting a relationship with a man Liza has not known very long in line 11, quickly after Liza’s story about the man has ended (No but you don’t want that). When Liza does not immediately take up Sarah’s negative assessment in line 13 (Well it’s not that I didn’t want it its), Sarah continues to assert her disapproval (You didn’t want it at- You don’t want it right now). When Liza protests yet again in line 17 (No, I), Sarah intensifies her assertive stance in line 18 by using a profane assessment: Are you fucking me?

Sarah and Liza’s interactional identities emerge through the negotiation of roles, specifically the back and forth regarding Sarah’s assessment of Liza’s account when Sarah presses her stance until Liza concedes to Sarah, as seen in Example 4:

Example 4

```plaintext
20 L: {hahah (.). Okay, no, [here’s] } 
21 {tilts back head, motions hands in front of self} 
22 S: {Two like (0.2) Ahh for me, like } 
23 {gestures arms up front, crosses them} 
24 looking at it, you guys {(0.5) Li ke (.)} 
25 {sets down drink} 
26 {have known} each other for like (.). a week= 
27 {air quotes} 
28 L: =It’s been like {I-I understand what you’[re meaning]} 
29 {hand in a sweeping motion towards S } 
30 S: [But like ]dating 
31 time {a week} } 
32 {air quotes} 
33 L: {[No, I com]pletely agree with you= 
34 {pointed hand gesture towards S} 
35 S: =yeah= 
36 L: =I completely agree with you= 
```

This negotiation works to position Sarah as having more epistemic ground: Liza has to back down eventually, and she first hedges her stance (line 20: Okay, no,) and ultimately concedes to Sarah (lines 33 and 36: I completely agree with you). This negotiation ties into Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) discussion of identity, where the positioning of self and other can create
dichotomous interactional positions (see also Bucholtz and Hall, 2013; Hall, 2009). In this case, it seems that if Sarah has authority then Liza has to mitigate her authority in deference to Sarah’s. The use of disagreement and profanity thus contributes to the beginnings of what Bucholtz and Hall describe as identity emergence—here, teller/problematizee and assessor/problematizer:

On the one hand, the interactional positions that social actors briefly occupy and then abandon as they respond to the contingencies of unfolding discourse may accumulate ideological associations with both large-scale and local categories of identity. On the other, these ideological associations, once forged, may shape who does what and how in interaction. (2005:591)

In the interaction between Liza and Sarah, Sarah’s interpretation of her role as recipient of Liza’s narrative is realized in her taking an assertive stance against Liza’s potential relationship, which in turn allows her to begin shaping the identity of problematizer within their conversation. This is forged through the confluence of disagreement and profanity, with one underscoring the other to create a firmer stance, thereby cementing this identity within the interaction. When Liza submits to Sarah’s problematizing stance (in line 33), authority becomes part of Sarah’s identity in the interaction. Sarah’s use of profanity is thus an instance of what Ochs (1992) calls direct indexicality (Ochs, 1992). Direct indexicality refers to “the relation of language to stances, social acts, social activities, and other social constructs” (337) established within the contours of interaction. For Ochs, this type of indexicality is more basic than indirect indexicality, the
process by which stances, acts, activities, and constructs become linked to broader, ideologically laden categories of identity, such as gender.

In a second interaction that takes place between Kayla, Oona, and Margot, the indexical relationship between profanity and authority is clarified. As recipients of Margot’s narrative, both Kayla and Oona take issue with Margot ignoring the man she is seeing. When Oona takes a stance against Margot’s self-described attitude in favor of dismissive behavior to the man (Example 5), Margot does not alter her original stance in favor of ignoring the man. However, when Kayla takes her stance opposing Margot (Example 6), Margot back-pedals immediately.

Example 5

39 O: Why is it like that?=  
40 K: =Yeah=  
41 M: =Why is what like what?  
42 (0.2)  
43 K: [Like]  
44 O: [Like] why is that why does that the (0.2) dynamic of  
the relationship cuz you’re the girl an he’s the guy  
or jus cuz you require that of all people,  
M: [Well ] um both of those reasons_  

Example 6

58 K: [I would have no boyfriend] if I required ass  
kissing (..
Ga{be take me out now }  
{shifts shoulders} {points then slaps table}  
61  
62 he’d be like fuck you like (.) [no.]  
63 M: [I d]on’t have to I ask him  
64 "I’m really hungry hehe" "we should probably go somewhere  
really nice" huh.heheh

Margot’s reaction to Kayla but not to Oona indicates that disagreement is not enough to elicit the action of taking-up the assessment in these conversations. Instead, it appears that profanity is integral to building the role with enough authority to have a disagreement taken up. This then positions both Oona and Kayla as assessors, but only Kayla as problematizer.
In fact, even earlier in this interaction, Kayla uses profanity to one-up Margot in line 35 before more directly challenging Margot’s position in line 58.

Example 7

M: { I’m not a slave driver I’m just like if }
{ looks at K }
I’m gonna be { d a t i n g }
someone then they need to
{ scare quotes }
like kiss my butt
(1.0)
K: So what do you do to kiss his ass?

Kayla’s reworking of Margot’s *kiss my butt* into *kiss his ass* indicates towards her own identity within their interaction—as the ultimate judge even before she makes her oppositional stance clearer. Margot’s maintenance of eye contact with Kayla (see Figure 1; earlier in this section) would indicate that even before any repair work has been done, she has taken up Kayla’s identity as problematizer. Kayla can do this because she uses what Bucholtz and Hall describe as “linguistic forms generally understood not to ‘belong’ to them… to actively produce new forms of identity through language by disrupting naturalized associations between specific linguistic forms and specific social categories” (2005:591). In this case, the linguistic form is swearing.

Kayla’s identity as problematizer is then confirmed in Example 6 when Kayla agrees with Oona and uses profanity to construct a stance opposing Margot in lines 58-62 (*I would have no boyfriend if I required ass kissing*). Kayla’s stance is constructed not as an outright affront to Margot, but rather as a commentary on what she sees as the consequences of behavior like Margot has described. Kayla’s stance then in turn creates a shift in Margot, who qualifies her actions (line 63: *I don’t have to I ask him*) and contradicts her dismissal of Oona in line 47 (*Well um both of those reasons_*). This is Margot taking up Kayla’s “knows best” role. Both Kayla and Sarah are able to forge identities through their swearing; in this case, Kayla becomes a recipient
with authority who takes on a dispreferred action and is successful in doing so, thereby creating a forceful identity and position of power.

**Discussion**

The women in the data, then, recreate very similar roles to the problematizer/problematizee dynamic discussed by Ochs and Taylor (1995) and fall into it quickly as a normative construction of interaction. In Ochs and Taylor’s article, the roles of problematizer and problematizee become gendered through their interaction with family-roles of mother and father and husband and wife. In these data, all of the participants are women, yet they nevertheless make use of stances associated with gendered ideas to establish who falls into which role. The woman who does the telling falls into the problematizee role, putting herself and her actions up for negotiation and judgement, much like the mothers in Ochs and Taylor.

Ochs and Taylor (1995) argue that through this positioning of family members, masculinity and authority become intertwined via the father character, with masculinity and authority co-articulating one another. The indexical relationship of gender and language as described by Ochs (1992) explains there is no direct relationship between language forms and gender: “Rather the relation of language to gender is constituted and mediated by the relation of language to stances, social acts, social activities, and other social constructs” (337). For Ochs, the ongoing mediation of stances in interaction is the way in which men become connected to power.

The subjects in the current study, however, are young women. They are interacting casually with their friends, and they use profanity to create authoritative identities, rather than speaking from an already defined position of power (such as a father). I propose that
functionally, this authority comes from swearing and other intensity constructions that add up to
a powerful stance. Traditionally, however, the use of profanity by women is out of place. Here, I
surmise that profanity is closely connected to maleness in a manner similar to the association of
masculinity and authority in Ochs and Taylor’s (1995) problematizer. Through this connection,
where both authority and profanity co-articulate masculinity, authority and profanity become
themselves linked. There is work on profanity that has argued for swearing as a form of
solidarity, especially amongst working class men. Nicola Daly et al’s (2004) paper on New
Zealand soap factory workers3 and Andrew Sanchez’s (2016) paper on workers in an Indian
automobile plant4 are examples of such work. While the young women who are the focus of my
study are all acquainted with one another and often good friends, their interactions are not about
establishing solidarity in the ways described by these authors. The women in my study are
friends, not co-workers (as in the Daly et al and Sanchez articles), and they are disagreeing with
one another rather than telling jokes (as in Sanchez) or complaining (as in Daly et al). Yet the
women are nevertheless swearing, and as Daly et al note, swearing is a linguistic form that is
generally considered impolite. Indeed, to demonstrate just how persistently swearing is
discouraged, Daly et al even cite The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners
as categorizing fuck as “rude and offensive” and a word that speakers should “avoid using”
(949).

Since profanity is used, it is pertinent to discuss taboo, a topic that is pervasive in the
literature surrounding so-called “bad words.” This research overwhelmingly suggests that the
very act of breaking taboos regarding the use profanity may provide a source of power on its
own (i.e. Dowdy’s (2015) article on name taboos in Mayong, where using a shared first name to

3 The study focused on 20 core workers; only 4 of whom were women
4 All of these workers were male
address another can inflict harm on them; Black’s (2013) article on naming HIV/AIDS in isiZulu, where breaking the verbal taboo around HIV is able to recast the foreign—English terminology—as positive). As Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1939) explains about the clout of taboo, “The Polynesian, for example, does not think of a chief or a temple as holy and a corpse as unclean. He thinks of them all as things dangerous” (181). Radcliffe-Brown further asserts that a taboo action, under the right circumstances, can utilize that danger for power. When a Hawaiian king commits incest, he himself becomes more sacred, his already holy status magnified by taboo (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939:181). In taboo, there is command that can be drawn upon when used strategically and appropriately, as we see in the interactional effects of profanity as used by the women in this study.

The importance of taboo’s function in certain circumstances is central to Mary Douglas’ discussion of dirt in Purity and Danger (1966) as “matter out of place.” If we take Douglas’ sense of taboo as dirt out of place, then any power that is drawn from the tabooed must come from the out-of-place nature of those items. In this case, the items out of place would be the profane words used (fuck, ass), the people who are using them (women), and the space in which they are being used (the university). Where, then, do profane words belong? Surely the answer cannot be “nowhere” when there are abundant examples of profanity within mainstream society in diverse cultures. Be it workers on the clock (such as in Daly et al 2004 and Sanchez 2016) or the widely-watched Home Box Office show Game of Thrones (Turner, 2015), swearing is a certainly a part of everyday life.

The restriction of access to both spaces and linguistic forms is a part of what Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic domination” (1991), where the language and embodied practices of one group become valued over another. This is extremely relevant to taboo language such as
profanity because the space in which it occurs is what gives it its effects. For example, in her article on profanity and comedians, Susan Seizer (2011) states that Douglas’ (1966) explanation of place as key in the defining of dirt “clarifies my point: in a bar, dirty language is not out of place at all” (211). The example is well taken: a bar is an acceptable place for profanity, because in a bar is a place for so-called “dirt.” As a society, we acknowledge places for dirt even in our legal regulation of access to these types of places. In order to enter a bar, a strip club, or an R-rated movie, individuals have to be of a certain age. However, the types of spaces, like bars and strip clubs, where such linguistic dirt is the most acceptable tend to be highly masculinized. That is, the spaces for profanity often belong to men.

In our understanding of profanity, then, there is both a space and a linguistic form where access is restricted. In his 1991 book, Bourdieu expresses the efficacy of this kind of symbolic domination as it applies to the censorship produced by exclusionary practices:

Among the most effective and best concealed censorships are all those which consist in excluding certain agents from communication by excluding them from the groups which speak or the places which allow one to speak with authority. In order to explain what may or may not be said in a group, one has to take into account not only the symbolic relations of power which become established within it and which deprive certain individuals (e.g. women) of the possibility of speaking… (138)

If men maintain power over women in the contemporary United States, as studies on gender in diverse domains of social, economic, and political life have amply demonstrated, then Bourdieu might argue that the spaces and words that belong to men have more “symbolic capital”
(Bourdieu, 1991). Taking this one step further, this would mean that profanity has value because it belongs to the dominant group (men). It is in the interlink between masculinity and power that profanity can serve to index authority. Profanity itself has become a type of currency backed by the value of maleness. Profane currency then brings with it not only the value of masculinity, but also the authority that comes with maleness. That women are often on the receiving end of this domination creates space for pervasive ideologies in the United States about women as passive beings, and in turn excludes women from accessing forms that demonstrate dominance. This reifies women’s exclusion from profanity, leading to a top-down and bottom-up relation between maleness and obscenity on the one hand, and femaleness and politeness on the other. This is reinforced in the popular mind even in common adages such as “it’s unladylike to swear,” which bears classist as well as gendered implications against women. Certainly, ideologies surrounding this practice do not normally include the use of profane language by middle class and upper class young women.

Class and gender intersect in the space where women belong, yet swearing does not. The women in this study, as educated middle- and upper-class women, exist more closely to the category of “lady” used to explain gender-relations to profanity in Michael Gauthier’s (2012) thesis on the history of gender and swearing, which is a diachronic analysis of the ideologies around gender and profanity. Susan E. Hughes’ (1992) article on lower-working class women and expletives examines the reported usage of profanity by women at the Ordsall Family Center in Britain as a working-class form with covert prestige. Both Gauthier and Hughes deal with the history of women’s disassociation from profanity and, to some extent, the role of class in that prohibition.
Gauthier’s (2012) analysis explains that women have traditionally been excluded from profanity in part because they are relegated to spaces where profanity is not acceptable; namely, at home with the children. Given that we have established that the spaces where profanity does belong maintain age restrictions, there is a certain logic to this. If women belong at home with the children, then that is not a space for profanity because there are children there. Gauthier additionally juxtaposes the “rough truck driver” to the “refined lady” who is relegated to safer environments (76). Likewise, there is a common phrase in English, “swearing like a sailor” which points to the ideological connection between profanity and a profession that is notably masculinized, in addition to being spatially restricted (at sea) from women (at home). Both Gauthier’s truck driver and the metaphorical sailor are identified only by occupation, both of which are working-class, transient jobs. A similar theme appears in Hughes’ argument that working-class women do not adhere to the rules of propriety inflicted on middle-class women because the working-class women in her study find it necessary to project “toughness” to fit in with their community (300). Hughes’ (1992) explanation for the necessity of a rough exterior references the harsh and uncertain conditions the women live in. This includes bouncing between both jobs and social services (296-7). The young women of this thesis, then, certainly fit more closely with Gauthier’s ‘refined lady’ rather than Hughes’ working class woman. But perhaps more importantly, they are interacting in a space more closely associated with lady-like behavior. While the university setting is not feminized, it is certainly a polite, controlled environment and significantly different from life in a traditional working class occupation. The women of the data in this thesis are therefore distant from the stereotypical user of profanity not only by their gender, but also by their class.
In spite of the naturalized associations of obscenity and masculinity, the current study reveals that the use of obscenities by white, college women very much exists, despite common wisdom to the contrary. Both through its value as a symbolically dominant currency and in the way it indexes stances related to maleness, profanity can index the kinds of authority that are assigned to men. Just as authority and maleness become intertwined through authoritative male roles, so do profanity and masculinity connect in the spaces swearing is relegated to. This link allows profanity to become indexically tied to authority by processes of association to men. And this masculinized authority is precisely the function that profanity—as used by the women in these data—has in interaction. Swearing, as a linguistic practice, is able to index masculinity, and thereby index stances and social acts that are themselves also indexed by maleness, or rather, power. The women appear to use swear words for the exact reasons they are not supposed to—to show that they can take on authoritative stances that are so often relegated to the field of “men.” By asking *are you fucking me?*, these women index the authority to question and contradict. This repurposing of profanity across gender and space can help to build whole interactional identities, allowing for the dynamics of ‘knowing best’ without being a man.
References


Holm, N. (2016). Humour as edge-work: aesthetics, joke-work and tendentiousness in Tosh.0 (or Daniel Tosh and the mystery of the missing joke-work). *Comedy Studies*.


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Appendix: Transcription Methods (adapted from Jefferson, 2004)

IDENTITY OF SPEAKERS
D: initial of pseudonym of an identified participant.

SIMULTANEOUS UTTERANCES
D: Well [I don’t know]
H: [I don’t know]

Brackets indicate the beginning and end of overlap.

CONTIGUOUS UTTERANCES
(a) D: Well=
(b) D: Wel[l] I guess=
(c) D: Yea:h=I just

H: =Yeah
H: [Yea]
D: =it could be

= in (a) indicates there is no gap at all between the turns for two different speakers. In (b) =
indicates a continuation without a gap from the same speaker, with the lines stylistically broken
up for ease of reading. In (c) the = indicates no gap or a rush between words.

INTERVALS WITHIN AND BETWEEN TURNS
(. ) a pause of 0.1 second or less
(0.7) a pause of 0.7 second
(1.0) a pause of one second

CHARACTERISTICS OF SPEECH DELIVERY
? rising intonation, not necessarily a question
! strong emphasis, with falling intonation
. falling (final) intonation
, a comma indicates low- rising intonation suggesting continuation
↑ denotes marked rising shift in intonation
↓ denotes a marked falling shift in intonation
go:: one or more colons indicate lengthening of the preceding sound
-
- a hyphen indicates an abrupt cut-off, with level pitch

go underlined letters indicates marked stress

go bolded letters indicates increased volume

° degree sign indicates decreased volume, often a whisper.

hhh in-drawn breaths

hehe / g(h)° with vowels or in parenthesis in words are laughter tokens

>...< indicates speeded up delivery relative to the surrounding talk

<...> indicates slowed down delivery relative to the surrounding talk

( ) empty parentheses indicate inaudible speech

€ indicates smiley voice

GESTURE

( )

The transcripts are modified to include notes on the gesture and eye gaze in curved brackets below the verbal transcript. This is to indicate when the gestures occur and the timing in which they coincide with speaking or pauses. This is indicated using the curved brackets in the same style as the square brackets in CONTIGUOUS UTTERANCES.