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# British ‘Bollocks’ versus American ‘Jerk’: Do native British English speakers swear more –or differently- compared to American English speakers?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present study investigates the differences between 414 L1 speakers of British and 556 L1 speakers of American English in self-reported frequency of swearing and in the understanding of the meaning, the perceived offensiveness and the frequency of use of 30 negative emotion-laden words extracted from the British National Corpus. Words ranged from mild to highly offensive, insulting and taboo. Statistical analyses revealed no significant differences between the groups in self reported frequency of swearing. The British English L1 participants reported a significantly better understanding of nearly half the chosen words from the corpus. They gave significantly higher offensiveness scores to four words (including “bollocks”) while the American English L1 participants rated a third of words as significantly more offensive (including “jerk”). British English L1 participants reported significantly more frequent use of a third of words (including “bollocks”) while the American English L1 participants reported more frequent use of half of the words (including “jerk”). This is interpreted as evidence of differences in semantic and conceptual representations of these emotion-laden words in both variants of English.

**Keywords:** British English, American English, swearwords, offensiveness, emotion concepts

## 1. Introduction

Swearing and the use of offensive language is a linguistic topic that is frequently and passionately discussed in public fora. In fact, it seems more journalists and laypeople have talked and written about swearing than linguists. Websites such as the Swearsaurus propose wide selections of swearwords in 148 languages: “Swearsaurus is the best way to swear politely” ([www.swearsaurus.com](http://www.swearsaurus.com)). Foreign language learners have been initiated by gleeful native speakers to some of their most taboo words. The same foreign language users have discovered subsequently that it is easy to underestimate the power of these funny-sounding swearwords, and that “getting it right” is like dancing blindfolded on a tightrope (Dewaele 2010, 2013). Jay (2000, 2009a) pointed out that using taboo words injects a succinct emotional component into social interaction. It can serve a cathartic function, allowing the speaker to release cropped-up emotion. And while swearwords may offend listeners, they cannot harm them (Jay 2009b). Indeed, swearing is not necessarily negative as it can occur in humor, storytelling or self-deprecation. Dewaele

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(2015a) found that most swearing happens with friends and is linked to social bonding. The use of particular taboo words can be accepted within specific speech communities and signal in-group membership (Dewaele 2008, 2015a, b, Jay 2000, 2009a). Speakers who use a particular taboo word or insult during an interaction will have to make a quick sociolinguistic and pragmatic computation about the appropriateness. This will include the characteristics of interlocutors and both the local and more global context of the interaction. Jacobi (2014) noted that factors such as race, gender, and word choice need to be taken into account in the choice of an appropriate word. The judgments may not always be right, especially if the speaker's judgment is clouded by alcohol, or moved by uncontrollable emotion, or is hampered by insufficient understanding of the meaning or the offensiveness of a particular word or expression. It is not just foreign language users who are more likely to get the pragmatic computation wrong. Speakers of different variants of the same language may be astounded when told that a relatively inoffensive word in their home variant is considered much more offensive, or more frequent in another variant, or that the difference goes the other way. Oscar Wilde joked sarcastically that "the Americans and the British are identical in all respects except, of course, their language" (Crystal 2003: 142). The question is whether this quip is still valid today and whether it extends to the dark side of the English language.

It also raises serious questions about the relationship between different variants of the same language and about the perceptions speakers have of communalities and differences.

In the present study, the focus will be on differences between British and American English L1 speakers in semantic representation (understanding of meaning), and conceptual representation (offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of words ranging from those with mild to extreme negative emotional valence).

This paper starts with a reflexion about emotion-laden and concepts in the mind of "mono-varietal" and "bi-varietal" users of American and British English. This will be followed by a short overview of the popular and academic literature that underlies the present investigation, focusing firstly on variation **within** a variant of English before moving on to variation and cross-over effects **between** variants of American and British English at individual and group level. After that, the six research questions will be presented, followed by a section on the methodology. The results section will present the statistical analyses. The findings will then be discussed and some tentative conclusions will be presented.

## 2. Literature review

### *The theoretical basis: emotion concepts in variants of English*

English native speakers are aware of the existence of different variants of their language in different parts of the world, ranging from the UK to North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa. A number of these speakers may have had contact with other variants through cultural products (films, music, books) or through direct contact with speakers of another variant, possibly during a holiday or a period in the country where the other variant was used. It typically takes a moment to get used to the different accent, to different speech routines (the "good day!" in Australia, the "how are you today?" in the

US, the “how do you do?” in the UK. Even speakers who never had direct contact with another variant might have noticed words or expressions from another variant appearing in their own linguistic environment. Awareness and knowledge of the other variant thus ranges along a continuum, from close to zero, to receptive knowledge, to full knowledge of the other variant. Yet every person on that continuum is potentially able to communicate with a speaker of the other variant and may have stereotypical representations of the other culture. I would like to argue that a speaker who has been in contact with another variant could be considered a specific kind of bilingual or maybe a “bi-dialectal” or rather a “bi-varietal” monolingual. Rather than “L2 users”<sup>1</sup> (cf. Bassetti and Cook 2011), they could be labelled L1A or L1B users. Some L1A users manage to pass for native L1B users, while others struggle to hide their linguistic origin. The framework proposed by Pavlenko (2008) on emotion and emotion-laden words in the bilingual lexicon might be useful to consider negative emotion-laden in British and American English. Pavlenko (2008) argued firstly that emotion words “need to be considered as a separate class of words in the mental lexicon, represented and processed differently from abstract and concrete words” (p. 147). Secondly, she pointed out that “emotion concepts vary across languages” (p. 147) and that bilinguals may have different representations than monolinguals. Finally, she explained that “different languages and word types display different levels of emotionality” (p. 147). I argue that the second and third points apply equally to bi-varietal native English speakers. This includes those who have at least some awareness that other variants of English exist. Emotion words in British English are instantly recognisable as English words by Americans, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans or Nigerians. They will probably have very similar semantic representations for high frequency words like “angry” or “happy”, but they may have slightly different conceptual representations with different levels of emotionality. Pavlenko defined emotion concepts as “prototypical scripts that are formed as a result of repeated experiences and involve causal antecedents, appraisals, physiological reactions, consequences, and means of regulation and display.” (pp. 149-150). This conceptual information constitutes a crucial part of language users’ sociopragmatic competence, defined by Kasper and Rose (2001) as “the social perceptions underlying participants’ interpretation and performance of communicative action” (p. 2). It allows the user to know how often and in what situation a particular word or expression can be used, what its illocutionary effects will be, how interlocutors will react to a violation of the rules, how they will interpret the deviation of the rules, and what the social consequences may be of using particular words or expressions. The default position of a user of British English will be that if an emotion word exists in their English, it will also exist in another variant of English. It is very likely that the user will assume that the conceptual representation in the other variant will be almost identical. Exposure to emotion words in the other variant and active use of them with users other variant will quickly dispel the assumption of complete semantic and conceptual overlap. Words acquire unique emotional and cultural connotations. Scripts differ in all kinds of ways, and it is a good topic for dinner table conversations, especially when getting to swearwords. What is considered acceptable in what variant of English? Everybody has their opinion on the matter, and the use of swearwords in public always triggers avalanches of reactions in the press, social media and public opinion.

### *Research and controversy on variation within a variant of English*

A first perspective is that of users of one particular variant of English observing violations of sociopramatic norms by fellow users of that variant. A recent example in the UK was British defence minister Anna Soubry who shouted “sanctimonious cunt” at Ed Miliband (leader of the Labour opposition) in the House of Commons on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2015. The incident was quite difficult to report since the word is banned in newspapers and beeped out in radio and television reports. It caused journalists to dig up some facts and figures about swearing in British English that would make for catchy headlines without any offensive word such as *Don't mind your language, no one gives a . . .* by Oliver Moody, the science correspondent of the *Times* or the rather lengthy *Think the English are always polite? Don't swear on it! How the average Briton will use up to FOURTEEN curse words each day* by Sam Matthews from the *Daily Mail*. Although the journalists refer to Michael McCarthy's work on the Cambridge English Corpus, the figures seem to have been made up, or at least are the result of conjectures. It does allow Matthews to wonder whether the UK has become a nation of “potty mouths”. Similar questions have been raised in the US. Chirico (2014) noted that swearing has become more acceptable and frequent in the US since the 1960s. Swearwords seem to appear more frequently in books and music, on TV shows and in Hollywood movies. Ordinary people seem to use swearwords more freely, as do politicians, sports figures, musicians, actors and actresses in front of public audiences (Chirico 2014). It also shows that there is an interest among the general public about which swearwords exactly are considered acceptable, which ones remain taboo and how frequently English speakers swear.

Applied linguists, sociolinguists and psychologists have studied variation in the use and perception of swearwords and taboo words within a variant of English. They have created lists of the most offensive swearwords and the most frequently used ones, which often turned out to be the same (this is the so-called swearing paradox). Beers Fägersten (2007) investigated swearing in American English. She collected data from 60 American undergraduate students using three types of tasks: feedback on a list of single swearwords, feedback on swearwords embedded in utterances, and post-questionnaire interviews. The word list included 12 swearwords (“ass”, “asshole”, “bastard”, “bitch”, “cunt”, “damn”, “dick”, “fuck”, “hell”, “motherfucker”, “nigger”, “shit” (p. 19). The word “nigger” obtained the highest mean offensiveness rating, followed by “cunt”, “motherfucker”, “bitch” and “fuck”. Female participants' average ratings were slightly higher than the males' averages. Participants explained in the interviews that a lot depended on the situation in which swearwords were used: “African-American male: You know, I look on it by that scale, not necessarily how I use them. 'Cause I use them. [...] I use all of these. But I based it on how offensive they were if I used them in an aggressive situation” (p. 20). The second part of Beers Fägersten's questionnaire contained utterances including the words “ass”, “shit” and “fuck”. Contextual details (setting, race, gender, and social status of characters) were included. The analysis of the overall average ratings of the swearwords in these dialogues showed that the swearwords were perceived to be less offensive than in the word list (with the exception of “shit” and “fucking”). White females rated many of the contextualised swearwords as less offensive than the white males did: “White female: Like ‘fuck’, I'm always saying, ‘How the fuck are you?’ It's not that offensive to me. But this one, if he's

‘out fucking his girlfriend’, that’s just more, I don’t know why, it’s just more offensive’ (p. 28).

Concerning the swearing paradox, Beers Fägersten reports that when her American students used swearwords denotatively or injuriously, they were considered to be more offensive, while metaphorical use of these words in in-group, social interaction were judged less offensive.

Beers Fägersten (2012) developed her previous work on swearing among American students into a book and provided frequency lists. She presents the following (descending) rank order for same-sex interactions of white American females: “fucking, shit, bitch, fuck, fucked, hell, ass, damn, goddamn, bastard, motherfucker” (p. 65). The order was slightly different in mixed-gender interactions: “fucking, fuck, asshole, damn, shit, shitty, hell, bitch” (p. 66). She noticed that males produced more swearing utterances, and engaged in more self-echoic swearing. White participants used the word “fucking” most frequently while African–Americans preferred “shit” (p. 71). Frequency of swearing was lower in opposite-sex interactions. The descending rank order for offensiveness for all participants was as follows: “nigger, cunt, motherfucker, fuck, bitch, asshole, bastard, dick, ass, shit, damn, hell” (p. 78).

Rayson, Leech and Hodge (1997) used the conversational corpus in the British National Corpus (BNC) to investigate social differentiation in the use of British English vocabulary. They reported that the words “fucking” and “fuck” were among the 26 most characteristic words for male speech. The same words, and “shit”, were also used more frequently by under-35’s (p. 7). Skilled working class and working class speakers stood out for their higher use of “fucking” and “bloody” (p. 10).

McEnery and Xiao (2004) carried out a systematic sociolinguistic study of the use of “fuck” in modern British English, using the BNC. They found that the frequency of “fuck” is linked to a range of independent variables. It appears “150 times more frequently in dialogues than in monologues” (p. 239). A clear gender difference was found: “male speakers use fuck more than twice as frequently as female speakers” (p. 240). Speakers’ age was also linked to the use of “fuck”, with teenagers and young adults using it more frequently than people from other age groups (p. 241). Speakers from lower social classes (skilled working class and working class) were the most frequent users of “fuck” (p. 243). Lower levels of education were also linked with higher use of “fuck”, with people who left school at age 15-16 being the most frequent users (p. 246).

The psychologists Jay and Janschewitz (2008) studied perceived offensiveness and likelihood of hypothetical scenarios involving the use of mild to strong taboo words among 121 students at the University of California in Los Angeles (including both native speakers and non-native speakers of American English). The design included variation in social-physical context (Dean’s office, dorm room, parking lot), speaker status (Dean, student, janitor), and the degree of taboohood of the word (low: “crap”, “hell”, “idiot”; medium: “bastard”, “goddamn”, “piss”; high: “cocksucker”, “cunt” and “fuck”) (p. 277). Participants had to rate the offensiveness of the scenario and its likelihood of occurring. The analysis revealed significant main effects on offensiveness ratings for speaker (Deans are not supposed to swear), location (students swearing in the Dean’s office is more offensive than in their dorm) and taboohood (highly taboo words being perceived as

more offensive across contexts). A significant negative relationship was found between offensiveness ratings and likelihood ratings. Female native speakers had higher overall offensiveness ratings than male native speakers but no significant gender difference emerged among the non-native speakers (p. 283). In a later study, Jay (2009a) pointed out that the situation in which a swearword is uttered and the degree of formality of the speech style will affect its perceived offensiveness. A specific swearword may thus be considered acceptable in a casual conversation between friends but could cause offense with the same people at a formal meeting.

*Research and controversy on the use of words and expressions belonging to another variant*

A second perspective comes from Americans in the UK and British people in the US who have noticed differences in the emotion scripts of taboo words and insults.

Unsurprisingly, the opinions range from anecdotes produced by English users who have had very little contact with the other variant, to truly bi-varietal speakers of English who have lived on both sides of the Atlantic and have developed a fairly detailed list of differences in emotion concepts and scripts in British and American English.

One such mono-varietal user with limited exposure to another variant is Anna Kendrick, an American actress with a reputation for “filthy” language on her Twitter account. She seems to enjoy the more liberal British attitudes towards swearwords after a couple of visits to the UK. She explained to the British *Sunday Times* journalist Jonathan Dean how much she enjoyed the British use of “cunt”: “I just so appreciate this country’s use of the ‘c\*\*\*’ (...) I just hate that it’s such a taboo in America. It only hurts women if we don’t say it. I love that guys call each other that word here. It warms my heart” (Dean 2015: 7). Paradoxically, she seems to be unaware that because of the taboo nature of the word in the UK, it was censored in the text.

Another recent example is the British supermodel Kate Moss who allegedly had been disruptive during a flight with the pilot contacting the police at the airport. “She called the pilot a basic bitch as police led her off the plane” (Ellis-Petersen & Elgot 2015). The incident caused a flurry of reports on British social media and the press on the origin and the meaning of this American expression. It has been defined as “-a bum-ass woman who think she the shit but really ain’t” (<http://www.urbandictionary.com>). It is not clear whether Kate Moss picked that expression up in the US, or in the UK, where its use might increase after the attention it has been given. Those who wrote about the incident were clearly at a loss in describing the offensiveness of the expression. The word “bitch” is very offensive to British ears, but it seems to be neutralised by the adjective “basic”. It seems that the unfamiliarity with the expression meant the British public was not offended.

British people living the US have warned compatriots to be careful when swearing, as journalist Ruth Margolis (2013) pointed out: “Folks here tend to dismiss cursing as coarse and vulgar whereas, for Brits, it can signify affection or a well-rounded sense of humor.”

Another journalist, Laurence Brown (2013), a British expatriate living in Indianapolis, noted that some British swearwords seem to be creeping into the American vernacular: “One of the most interesting (and often hilarious) recent developments in this area is the

emergence here of British swearwords. There is something wonderfully unnatural about hearing otherwise harsh-sounding words uttered in an American accent: more so when it becomes clear that the speaker has no idea what the words mean.” The first one is the intensifier “bloody”: as in “bloody moron”, “bloody hell”. The second swearword is “bollocks” which means literally “testicles” but also “nonsense”; “rubbish” and can be used as an exclamation of annoyance or disbelief. Mohr (2013) pointed out that in American English “balls” is not particularly offensive but that “bollocks” is quite obscene in the UK. Brown (2013) expresses his shock about its use on US television:

the word "bollocks" featured prominently in a televised ad campaign for the British beverage Newcastle Brown Ale. Given the perceived shock value of the word back home, the advert would not have seen the light of day in the UK. So why was it aired so readily in the United States, where swearing on television is so heavily censored that the film *Die Hard* is listed under the silent movie genre? The simple explanation is that the majority of Americans (at least those who are familiar with the word) have no idea what “bollocks” means.

He adds that the third British swearword to appear in American conversations is “bugger”, which as a verb means “sodomize” and as an interjection is a general exclamation of annoyance and disbelief. The fourth and final swearword Brown mentions is “wanker”, an insult, referring to an extremely disagreeable person:

There is much confusion stateside over the definition of the word wanker. A lot of Americans I speak to are of the impression that it simply means idiot, unaware that its true usage - though still an insult - is much harsher than that. (...) Meanwhile, once you explain that the root word wank is a synonym of masturbate, Americans falsely make the connection that wanker must mean someone who masturbates. Hint: the English language is odd and doesn't always adhere to logic. But the word is in fairly common usage in certain parts of the United States, though the majority of users haven't yet learned to place true emphasis on the first syllable, as in WANKer!

A study of 1579 multilinguals who filled out the *Bilingualism and Emotions questionnaire* (Dewaele and Pavlenko, 2001-2003), showed that emotionality of swearwords is significantly higher in the L1 of multilinguals compared to languages acquired later in life (Dewaele 2013). Many multilinguals reported a preference for swearing in their L1, but some were strategic in their language choice for swearing, and used a foreign language (LX), knowing that it would be considered less offensive by their interlocutors.

Dewaele (2015a, b) investigated variation in swearing behaviour in a database of 1159 native English (L1) users and 1165 English (LX) users (the present study is based on a subcorpus of the L1 group). Dewaele (2015a) focused on self-reported swearing behaviour in English by 2347 participants. It revealed a significant effect of the type of interlocutor, with significantly more swearing with friends than alone, and gradually less swearing with family members, colleagues and strangers. LX users were found to swear significantly less in English than L1 users. Higher scores on the dimensions Psychoticism, Extraversion and Neuroticism were linked to significantly more self-reported swearing in English. Moreover, LX users of English with high self-reported levels of proficiency, who were frequent users, who had acquired English early and who



used it in authentic interactions during their learning reported more swearing in English with different interlocutors.

Dewaele (2015b) found that, against expectation, LX users overestimated the offensiveness of 30 mild to highly offensive words, with the exception of the most offensive one in the list, namely “cunt”. More in line with predictions were the findings that LX users were significantly less sure about the exact meaning of most words compared to the L1 users and that LX users reported more frequent use of relatively less offensive words while the L1 users reported higher use of the more offensive words in the list.

This brief overview of the press and academic literature on swearing and on the use of offensive and taboo words in British and American of English shows that everybody seems to have an outspoken opinion on the matter. It is clear that language contact phenomena exist both at macro- and micro (individual) levels. Some swearwords of one variant of English are slowly seeping into the another variant, though not necessarily with identical semantic and conceptual representations. English users of one variant who have been in contact with users of the other variant may also decide to innovate by including some new words and concepts in their repertoire. Playing with this linguistic dynamite without proper sociopragmatic competence can easily blow up in the face of the speaker, or can convey a cool frisson of transgression and credibility. To accurately judge the appropriateness of particular words in context it is crucial to have a good understanding of the emotion script. This includes a good understanding of the meaning and offensiveness, the typical rate of occurrence of a word and a number of paralinguistic variables such as intonation, prosody, volume and body language including gaze, facial expression indicating the speaker’s emotional state. The illocutionary effect of the word will be linked to the situation (houses of parliament or the local pub), and the characteristics of those involved in the interaction, including gender, social status and age of the interlocutors as well as usual practice within the speech community.

The present study will dig into variation in the semantic and conceptual representations of 30 negative emotion-laden words by L1 users of British and American English.

### **3. Research questions**

1. Do the British English speakers report more frequent swearing in various situations than the American English speakers?
2. Do the British English speakers have the same understanding of the meaning of the 30 emotion-laden words and expressions as the American English speakers?
3. Do the British English speakers have the same perception of offensiveness of the 30 emotion-laden words and expressions as the American English speakers?
4. Do the British English speakers report comparable frequencies of use of the 30 words and expressions as as the American English speakers?
5. Is there a link between the rank order of the 30 emotion-laden words in the BNC and the self-reported frequency of use among the British English and the American English speakers?

6. Is there a link between average scores of the 30 emotion-laden words for meaning, perceived offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use among the British English and the American English speakers?

## **4. Methodology**

### *4.1. Instruments*

Data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire. It was an open-access survey, advertised through several listservs, targeted emails to teachers and students, and informal contacts asking them to forward the link to friends. This is so-called “snowball sampling”. The questionnaire remained online for five months in 2011-2012 and attracted responses from mono- and multilinguals across the world. Participants started by filling out a short sociobiographical section with questions about gender, age, education, language history and language use. In the next section they were asked to report habitual frequency of swearing in five situations. The final section contained a list of 30 English words embedded in short sentences which participants were asked to assess (see below).

On-line questionnaires allow researchers to collect large amounts of data very efficiently and cheaply, tapping into diverse samples in terms of sex, age, race, socio-economic status and geographical location (Wilson and Dewaele 2010). Participants in this type of research typically do not represent the general population. Most importantly, they must possess sufficient metalinguistic awareness, and must be able and willing to engage with the questions on language preferences and use. The anonymity of the questionnaire means participants have no reason to lie about their linguistic behaviour. This limits the social desirability bias, (i.e. the tendency of participants to answer questions in a manner that they imagine will be viewed favourably by the researcher) is another crucial advantage of internet-based questionnaires. Also, with close to 1000 adult participants, the results will have stronger ecological validity. Finally, online versions of traditional questionnaires have been found to have very similar psychometric properties of pen-and-paper versions (Denissen, Neumann and van Zalk 2010).

### *4.2. Independent variables*

The independent variables were participants’ nationality and their first language. Only British and American participants who had English as an L1 were selected.

### *4.3. Dependent variables*

Information was collected for two types of dependent variables: general self-reported frequency of swearing in various situations and three kinds of quantitative feedback on a list of 30 English words in short utterances.

Data about swearing frequency of the participants with various interlocutors were elicited through the following closed question: “How often do you swear in English? When you are... 1) alone; 2) with friends; 3) with family; 4) with colleagues; 5) with strangers.”

Possible answers included: (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, 5 = very frequently).

One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showed that the values for self-reported frequency of swearing with different interlocutors are not normally distributed (all  $p < .0001$ ), with most participants reporting relatively low frequencies of swearing.

Thirty emotion-laden words were extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC), “a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the 20th century, both spoken and written” (<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>). The BNC is based for 90% on various types of written texts and for 10% of transcriptions of oral speech, including unscripted conversations between British English participants from different age groups, regions and social classes in different contexts, ranging from formal meetings to radio shows and phone-ins. The BNC has been used for the creation of frequency lists (Leech, Rayson and Wilson 2014). The selection of 30 emotion-laden words included words (and two multiword sequences) with a mild negative emotional valence (for example “fool”) ranging to words with a very strong negative valence, and who are even considered taboo swearwords (for example “cunt”). The inclusion of both mild and strongly negative emotion-laden words was intentional in order to keep participants on their toes when filling out the questionnaire. Most words were embedded in a short utterance, in order to include minimal script as it affects the evaluative meaning of unambiguous emotion words (Greasley, Sherrard and Waterman 2000). Two emotion-laden words (“shit!”, “damn!” and one two-word expression (“fucking hell!”) were simply presented as exclamations. The emotion-laden words were mainly nouns and adjectives. Some emotion-laden words in the corpus are of American origin, such as “jerk”, which refers to a stupid and obnoxious person.

All 30 utterances ended with exclamation marks, to suggest that they were uttered forcefully and/or with a loud voice (see table 1).

Data were collected through the following question: “For each word/expression, provide a score on a 5-point scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high) for the following: 1) how well you understand the meaning? 2) how offensive it is? 3) how frequently do you use it?”

Table 1: The emotion-laden words ranked according to frequency in the BNC

Expression	Frequency in British National Corpus	Rank order
He's <b>thick!</b>	4516	30
He's <b>stupid!</b>	3093	29
She's so <b>silly!</b>	2646	28
<b>Damn</b> , look what he's done!	1896	27
He's a bit of a <b>fool!</b>	1848	26
<b>Shit!</b>	1796	25
What a <b>bastard!</b>	1276	24
He's so <b>weird!</b>	1060	23
She's such a <b>bitch!</b>	879	22
That is <b>daft!</b>	635	21
What an <b>idiot!</b>	603	20
<b>Bugger!</b>	573	19
She's such a <b>loser!</b>	338	18
He's such a <b>comedian!</b>	330	17
<b>Bollocks!</b>	290	16
She's such a <b>lunatic!</b>	245	15
What a <b>jerk!</b>	234	14
He's a <b>prick!</b>	230	13
What a <b>cunt!</b>	213	12
<b>Fucking hell!</b>	154	11
He's a little <b>maniac!</b>	134	10
He's such a <b>wanker!</b>	96	9
She's such a <b>slut!</b>	92	8
What a <b>nutter!</b>	76	7
He's such an <b>arsehole!</b>	71	6
What a <b>moron!</b>	52	5
She's <b>bonkers!</b>	48	4
What a <b>fruitcake!</b>	19	3
He's a <b>wacko!</b>	17	2
Has he <b>lost his mind?</b>	14	1

One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showed that the values for meaning, offensiveness and frequency of use were not normally distributed (all  $p < .0001$ ). As a consequence, non-parametric statistical techniques were used.

Table 2 presents the list of words ranked according to means scores for the three dependent variables.

Table 2 Mean scores and Standard Deviation on meaning, offensiveness and frequency of the 30 words in descending order for all participants (N = 970).

Meaning	Mean	SD	Offensiveness	Mean	SD	Frequency	Mean	SD
bitch	4.9	0.5	cunt	4.6	0.9	shit	3.9	1.3
shit	4.9	0.5	slut	4.1	1.1	idiot	2.9	1.4
lost mind	4.9	0.6	fucking hell	3.8	1.2	weird	2.8	1.3
silly	4.9	0.5	bitch	3.7	1.2	fucking hell	2.7	1.4
moron	4.9	0.6	prick	3.4	1.2	stupid	2.6	1.3
bastard	4.9	0.6	arsehole	3.3	1.2	bitch	2.5	1.3
stupid	4.9	0.6	bastard	3.2	1.2	bastard	2.4	1.3
weird	4.9	0.6	wanker	3.0	1.2	jerk	2.4	1.5
slut	4.9	0.6	shit	2.8	1.2	silly	2.3	1.3
jerk	4.9	0.5	loser	2.4	1.3	arsehole	2.3	1.4
idiot	4.9	0.7	stupid	2.3	1.1	moron	2.1	1.3
fucking hell	4.9	0.6	moron	2.2	1.1	lost mind	2.1	1.2
lunatic	4.9	0.6	bollocks	2.2	1.1	prick	1.9	1.2
loser	4.9	0.7	thick	2.2	1.1	loser	1.9	1.2
prick	4.9	0.7	bugger	2.2	1.1	damn	1.8	1.2
cunt	4.8	0.7	lunatic	2.2	1.1	bollocks	1.8	1.3
arsehole	4.8	0.7	jerk	2.1	1.0	wanker	1.7	1.2
comedian	4.8	0.7	idiot	2.1	1.1	bugger	1.7	1.2
fool	4.8	0.7	wacko	2.0	1.0	slut	1.6	1.1
wacko	4.8	0.7	fruitcake	2.0	1.2	cunt	1.6	1.1
damn	4.8	0.8	bonkers	1.8	1.0	fool	1.6	1.0
bonkers	4.8	0.8	nutter	1.7	0.9	thick	1.5	0.9
fruitcake	4.7	0.8	damn	1.7	0.9	bonkers	1.5	0.9
maniac	4.7	0.8	weird	1.7	0.9	comedian	1.5	0.9
thick	4.5	1.0	lost mind	1.6	0.9	lunatic	1.4	0.9
nutter	4.4	1.2	maniac	1.5	0.8	wacko	1.4	0.9
wanker	4.4	1.1	fool	1.5	0.8	nutter	1.4	0.9
bugger	4.3	1.2	silly	1.3	0.7	daft	1.4	0.9
daft	4.2	1.3	daft	1.3	0.6	maniac	1.3	0.8
bollocks	4.2	1.3	comedian	1.1	0.5	fruitcake	1.2	0.7

The research design and questionnaires received ethical clearance from the research institution of the author.

#### 4.4. Participants

A total of 970 native speakers of British and American English participated in the research. They included 414 speakers of British English and 556 speakers of American English<sup>ii</sup>.

The British English group consisted of 255 females and 152 males (63% vs 37%). A comparable gender proportion existed in the American English group (396 females, 159 males (71% vs 29%). The mean age in the British English group was 34 (SD = 16) and 31 years (SD = 12) in the American English group. Both British and American English participants were generally highly educated. In the British group 46 participants had a high school diploma, 182 a Bachelor's degree, 111 a Master's degree and 74 a PhD. A similar distribution was found in the American group with 40 participants having a high school diploma, 185 a Bachelor's degree, 225 a Master's degree and 106 a PhD. The strong proportion of university-educated, female participants is typical in web-based language questionnaires (Wilson and Dewaele 2010).

A majority of British and American English participants lived in their home country (351 British English and 477 American English participants). A minority of British English participants resided in the US (n = 12) or elsewhere (n = 51). A small number of American English participants lived in the UK (n = 23) or elsewhere (n = 56).

The British English participants knew an average of 2.9 languages, which was very similar to the average of 2.8 languages for the American English participants.

The British English group rated their oral proficiency in English very high: (Mean = 4.8, SD = 0.9) on a 5-point Likert scale. The American English participants rated their proficiency even higher: (Mean = 5.0, SD = 0.4). The British English participants reported extremely frequent use of English (Mean = 4.8, SD = 0.8), as did the American English participants (Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.6) on a 5-point Likert scale.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Self-reported frequency of swearing across situations in the British English and American English groups

A Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples revealed non-significant differences in self-reported frequency of swearing across situations in the groups of British English and American English participants. The British English participants did score marginally higher in swearing with colleagues (see tables 3a, b and figure 1).

Table 3a: Comparison of British and American English participants' scores for self-reported frequency of swearing in five situations (Mann-Whitney test, 2-tailed)

Situation	Origin	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Friends	US	484	267594
	UK	471	189853
Alone	US	491	271569
	UK	464	187792
Family	US	486	269016
	UK	468	188431
Colleagues	US	465	256367
	UK	496	201080
Strangers	US	480	264420
	UK	475	192071

Table 3b: Mann-Whitney U values for difference in self-reported frequency of swearing by British and American English participants a in five situations

Meaning	friends	alone	family	colleagues	strangers	
M-W <i>U</i>		108446	105577	107024	104290	110260
<i>Z</i>		-0.7	-1.6	-1.1	-1.8	-0.3
<i>p</i>		ns	ns	ns	0.068	ns

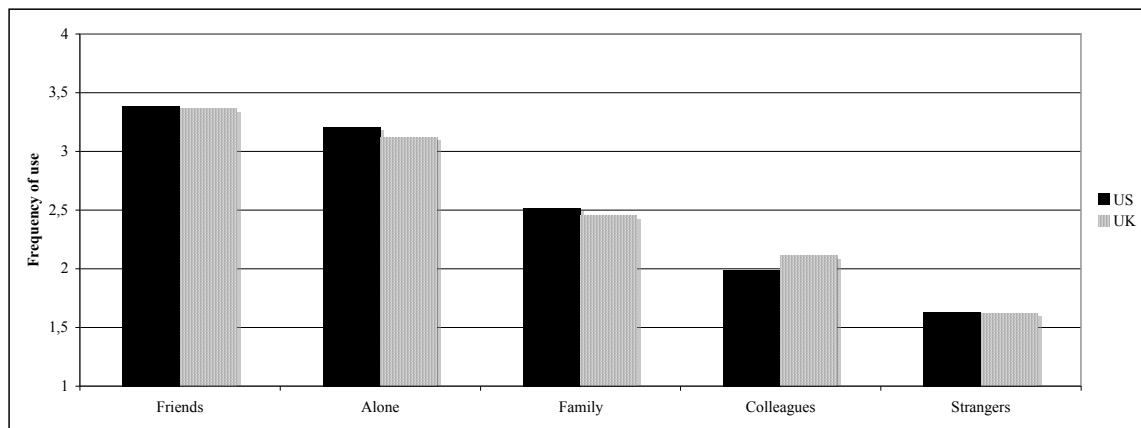


Figure 1: Differences between British and American L1 participants in self-reported swearing frequency in five situations

## 5.2. Understanding of the meaning of words in the British English and American English groups

A Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples showed that the British English participants scored significantly higher than American English participants on the

understanding of almost half of the words and expressions (see tables 4a, 4b and figure 2). The tables shows the differences based on mean ranks. The figure shows the amount of difference between the mean scores of both groups for each word. The difference was most significant ( $p < .0001$ ) for the words “maniac”, “thick”, “nutter”, “wanker”, “bugger”, “daft” and “bollocks”. American English participants scored significantly ( $p < .05$ ) higher than the British English participants for three words: “loser”, “jerk” and “wacko”. The 13 remaining words which were equally well understood by British and American English participants.



Table 4a: Comparison of British and American English participants' scores for meaning (Mann-Whitney test, 2-tailed)

Word	Origin	Ranks	Sum of Ranks	Word	Origin	Ranks	Sum of Ranks
daft	US	386	214691	bonkers	US	454	252542
	UK	618	255274		UK	526	217424
bollocks	US	375	208329	bitch	US	488	271305
	UK	634	261636		UK	481	198660
bugger	US	378	210051	lunatic	US	483	268818
	UK	629	259914		UK	487	201148
damn	US	462	256953	slut	US	490	272309
	UK	516	213012		UK	479	197657
fucking hell	US	481	267239	shit	US	486	270420
	UK	491	202727		UK	483	199546
lost mind	US	483	268665	arsehole	US	460	255882
	UK	487	201300		UK	518	214084
fool	US	463	257646	cunt	US	477	265004
	UK	514	212320		UK	496	204962
maniac	US	451	250892	fruitcake	US	466	258946
	UK	530	219074		UK	511	211020
stupid	US	486	269976	jerk	US	498	276934
	UK	484	199989		UK	467	193031
wacko	US	504	280129	moron	US	490	272499
	UK	460	189837		UK	478	197466
silly	US	482	267952	nutter	US	401	222888
	UK	489	202013		UK	598	247078
weird	US	486	269948	idiot	US	485	269607
	UK	484	200017		UK	485	200359
comedian	US	472	262457	bastard	US	485	269755
	UK	502	207508		UK	485	200210
wanker	US	392	217729	prick	US	482	268107
	UK	611	252237		UK	489	201859
thick	US	418	232194	loser	US	492	273302
	UK	576	237771		UK	476	196663

Table 4b: Mann-Whitney U values for differences in scores of understanding of the meaning by British and American English participants

Meaning	daft	bollocks	bugger	damn	fucking hell	lost mind	fool	maniac	stupid	wacko
M-W <i>U</i>	59845	53483	55205	102107	112393	113819	102800	96046	114498	104346
<i>Z</i>	-15.5	-16.8	-16.2	-5.2	-1.3	-0.7	-5.2	-6.5	-0.2	-4.3
<i>p</i>	0	0	0	0	ns	ns	0	0	ns	0
Mean	silly	weird	comedian	wanker	thick	bonkers	bitch	lunatic	slut	shit
M-W <i>U</i>	113106	114526	107611	62883	77348	97696	113169	113972	112166	114055
<i>Z</i>	-1.1	-0.2	-3.3	-14.8	-11.8	-6.6	-1.4	-0.5	-1.8	-0.6
<i>p</i>	ns	ns	0.001	0	0	0	ns	ns	0.071	ns
Mean	arsehole	cunt	fruitcake	jerk	moron	nutter	idiot	bastard	prick	loser
M-W <i>U</i>	101036	110158	104100	107540	111975	68042	114761	114719	113261	111172
<i>Z</i>	-6.0	-2.3	-3.7	-4.5	-2.0	-13.8	0.0	-0.1	-0.8	-2.3
<i>p</i>	0	0.02	0	0	0.05	0	ns	ns	ns	0.022

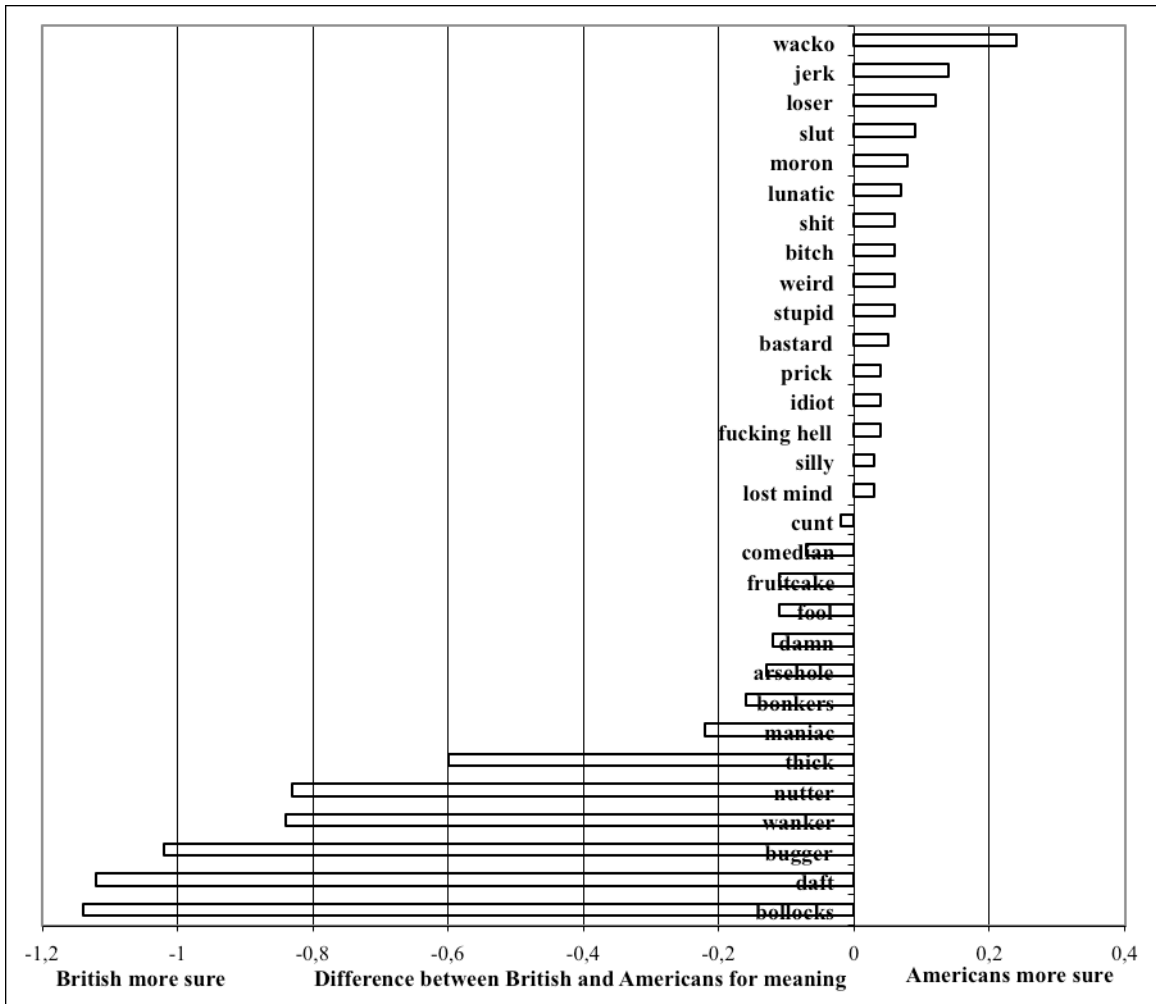


Figure 2: Differences between British and American L1 participants in the understanding of the meaning of the 30 words

### 5.3. Perception of offensiveness of words in the British English and American English groups

A Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples showed that the British English participants judged four words (“bugger”, “thick”, “bollocks” and “wanker”) to be significantly ( $p < .0001$ ) more offensive than American English participants (see tables 5a, 5b and figure 3). Sixteen words were judged equally offensive by both groups. The American English participants gave significant ( $p < .05$ ) higher scores for “fool” and “shit”. The difference was highly significant ( $p < .0001$ ) for “stupid”, “daft”, “slut”, “lunatic”, “idiot”, “bitch”, “damn” and “fruitcake”.

Table 5a: Comparison of British and American English participants' scores for offensiveness (Mann-Whitney test, 2-tailed)

Word	Origin	Ranks	Sum of Ranks	Word	Origin	Ranks	Sum of Ranks
daft	US	523	290903	bonkers	US	488	271179
	UK	434	179062		UK	481	198787
bollocks	US	403	224301	bitch	US	520	289098
	UK	595	245665		UK	438	180867
bugger	US	439	243957	lunatic	US	510	283503
	UK	547	226009		UK	451	186462
damn	US	547	303963	slut	US	514	285686
	UK	402	166003		UK	446	184280
fuckinghell	US	478	265677	shit	US	502	279143
	UK	495	204288		UK	462	190822
lost mind	US	487	270568	arsehole	US	476	264567
	UK	483	199397		UK	497	205398
fool	US	506	281378	cunt	US	489	271969
	UK	457	188587		UK	479	197996
maniac	US	498	276710	fruitcake	US	555	308322
	UK	468	193255		UK	391	161643
stupid	US	509	282848	jerk	US	475	264027
	UK	453	187117		UK	499	205939
wacko	US	479	266527	moron	US	486	270407
	UK	493	203438		UK	483	199559
silly	US	479	266068	nutter	US	486	270443
	UK	494	203897		UK	483	199522
weird	US	476	264818	idiot	US	511	284149
	UK	497	205148		UK	450	185816
comedian	US	483	268695	bastard	US	486	269988
	UK	487	201271		UK	484	199977
wanker	US	389	216143	prick	US	477	265387
	UK	615	253823		UK	495	204578
thick	US	445	247492	loser	US	495	275053
	UK	539	222473		UK	472	194912

Table 5b: Mann-Whitney U values for differences in offensiveness scores of British and American English participants

	daft	bollocks	bugger	damn	fucking hell	lost mind	fool	maniac	stupid	wacko
M-W U	93571	69455	89111	80512	110831	113906	103096	107764	101626	111681
Z	-7.1	-10.9	-6.2	-8.7	-1.0	-0.2	-3.2	-1.9	-3.2	-0.8
p	0	0	0	0	ns	ns	0.002	0.063	0.001	ns
	silly	weird	comedian	wanker	thick	bonkers	bitch	lunatic	slut	shit
M-W U	111222	109972	113849	61297	92646	113296	95376	100971	98789	105331
Z	-1.1	-1.2	-0.4	-12.9	-5.3	-0.4	-4.7	-3.3	-4.0	-2.3
p	ns	ns	ns	0	0	ns	0	0.001	0	0.023
	arsehole	cunt	fruitcake	jerk	moron	nutter	idiot	bastard	prick	loser
M-W U	109721	112505	76152	109181	114068	114031	100325	114486	110541	109421
Z	-1.2	-0.8	-9.5	-1.4	-0.2	-0.2	-3.5	-0.1	-1.0	-1.3
p	ns	ns	0	ns	ns	ns	0	ns	ns	ns

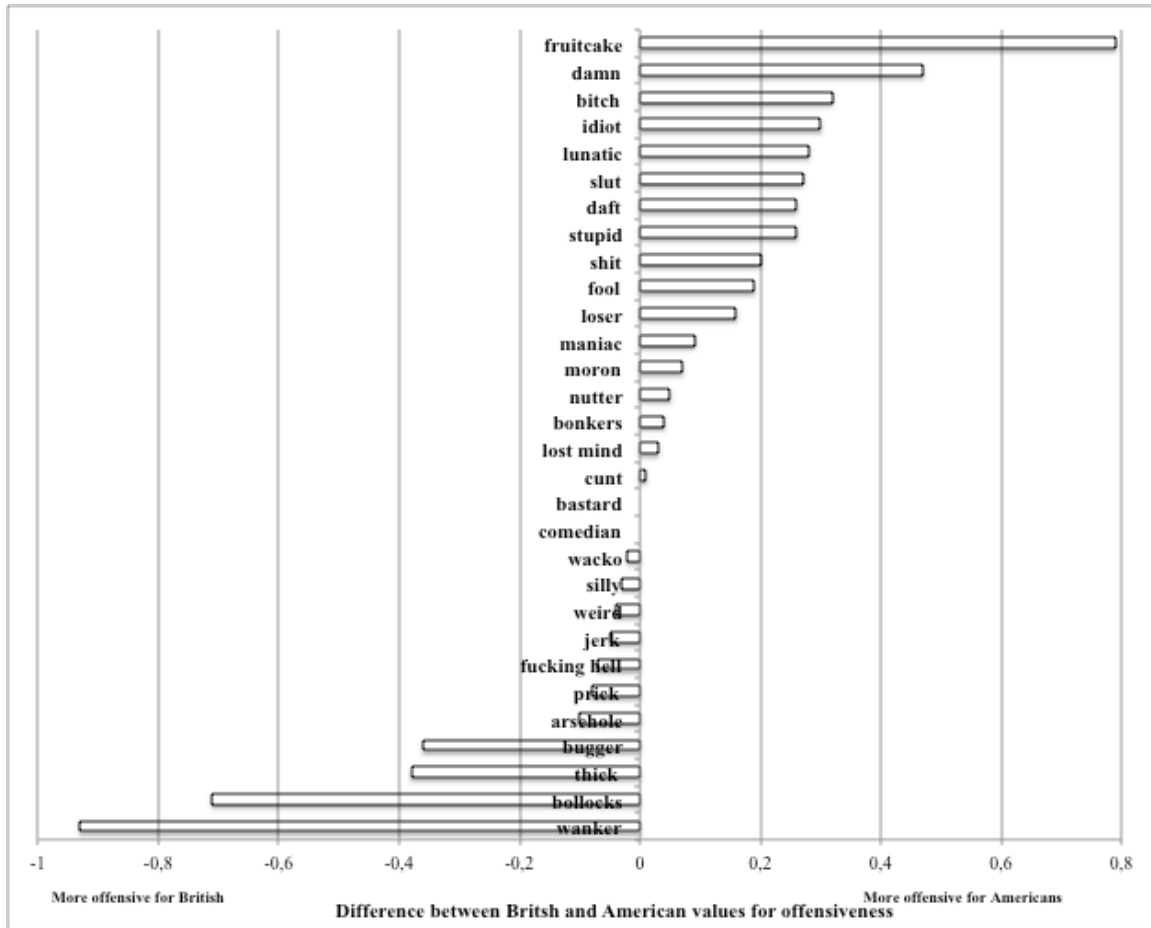


Figure 3: Differences between British and American L1 participants in the perceived offensiveness the 30 words

#### 5.4. Self-reported frequency of use of words in the British English and American English groups

A final Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples showed that the British English participants reported used “arsehole and “bastard” significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more frequently than American English participants and another nine words where the difference was highly significant ( $p < .0001$ ) namely “cunt”, “bonkers”, “fucking hell”, “nutter”, “thick”, “daft”, “wanker”, “bugger”, “bollocks”.

The American English participants used 17 words significantly ( $p < .0001$ ) more frequently than the British English participants (“maniac”, “fruitcake”, “comedian”, “damn”, “slut”, “lunatic”, “shit”, “loser”, “silly”, “wacko”, “idiot”, “bitch”, “stupid”, “lost your mind”, “weird”, “moron” and “jerk” (see tables 6a, 6b and figure 4). The only two words not being used significantly more frequently by either group were “fool” and “prick”.

Table 6a: Comparison of British and American English participants' scores for self-reported frequency (Mann-Whitney test, 2-tailed)

	Origin	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks		Origin	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
daft	US	424	235603	bonkers	US	438	243629
	UK	567	234362		UK	548	226336
bollocks	US	353	196173	bitch	US	531	295159
	UK	663	273793		UK	423	174806
bugger	US	367	204122	lunatic	US	505	280907
	UK	644	265843		UK	458	189059
damn	US	507	281679	slut	US	505	280724
	UK	456	188287		UK	458	189242
fucking hell	US	445	247147	shit	US	505	280658
	UK	540	222818		UK	458	189308
lost mind	US	556	309095	arsehole	US	465	256990
	UK	390	160871		UK	502	204291
fool	US	492	273458	cunt	US	456	253559
	UK	476	196508		UK	524	216407
maniac	US	498	276933	fruitcake	US	496	275705
	UK	467	193032		UK	470	194261
stupid	US	536	298033	jerk	US	641	356142
	UK	416	171932		UK	276	113823
wacko	US	542	301467	moron	US	560	311125
	UK	408	168499		UK	385	158840
silly	US	522	290348	nutter	US	422	234655
	UK	435	179618		UK	570	235311
weird	US	547	304055	idiot	US	528	293717
	UK	402	165911		UK	427	176249
comedian	US	506	281151	bastard	US	459	255227
	UK	457	188814		UK	520	214739
wanker	US	370	205442	prick	US	480	267009
	UK	640	264524		UK	491	202956
thick	US	413	229878	loser	US	524	291455
	UK	581	240088		UK	432	178511

Table 6b: Mann-Whitney U values for differences in scores for self-reported frequency of use by British and American English participants

Frequency	daft	bollocks	bugger	damn	fucking hell	lost mind	fool	maniac	stupid	wacko
M-W U	596173	582095	584241	622269	650052	592507	571462	636577	594134	62186
Z	-8.0	-6.9	-6.7	-3.5	-1.6	-5.3	-7.0	-3.1	-5.1	-4
p	0	0	0	0.001	0.121	0	0	0.002	0	
Frequency	silly	weird	comedian	wanker	thick	bonkers	bitch	lunatic	slut	shit
M-W U	628813	634044	644712	580302	618249	586257	626998	667790	643799	67018
Z	-2.9	-2.6	-2.3	-7.0	-4.3	-7.2	-3.0	-0.5	-2.2	-0
p	0.004	0.011	0.021	0	0	0	0.002	0.61	0.025	0.7
Frequency	arsehole	cunt	fruitcake	jerk	moron	nutter	idiot	bastard	prick	loser
M-W U	644000	600362	620959	584935	594127	607561	657401	614636	536581	61006
Z	-0.2	-5.9	-5.5	-5.8	-5.3	-5.7	-1.1	-3.8	-9.8	-4
p	0.876	0	0	0	0	0	0.279	0	0	



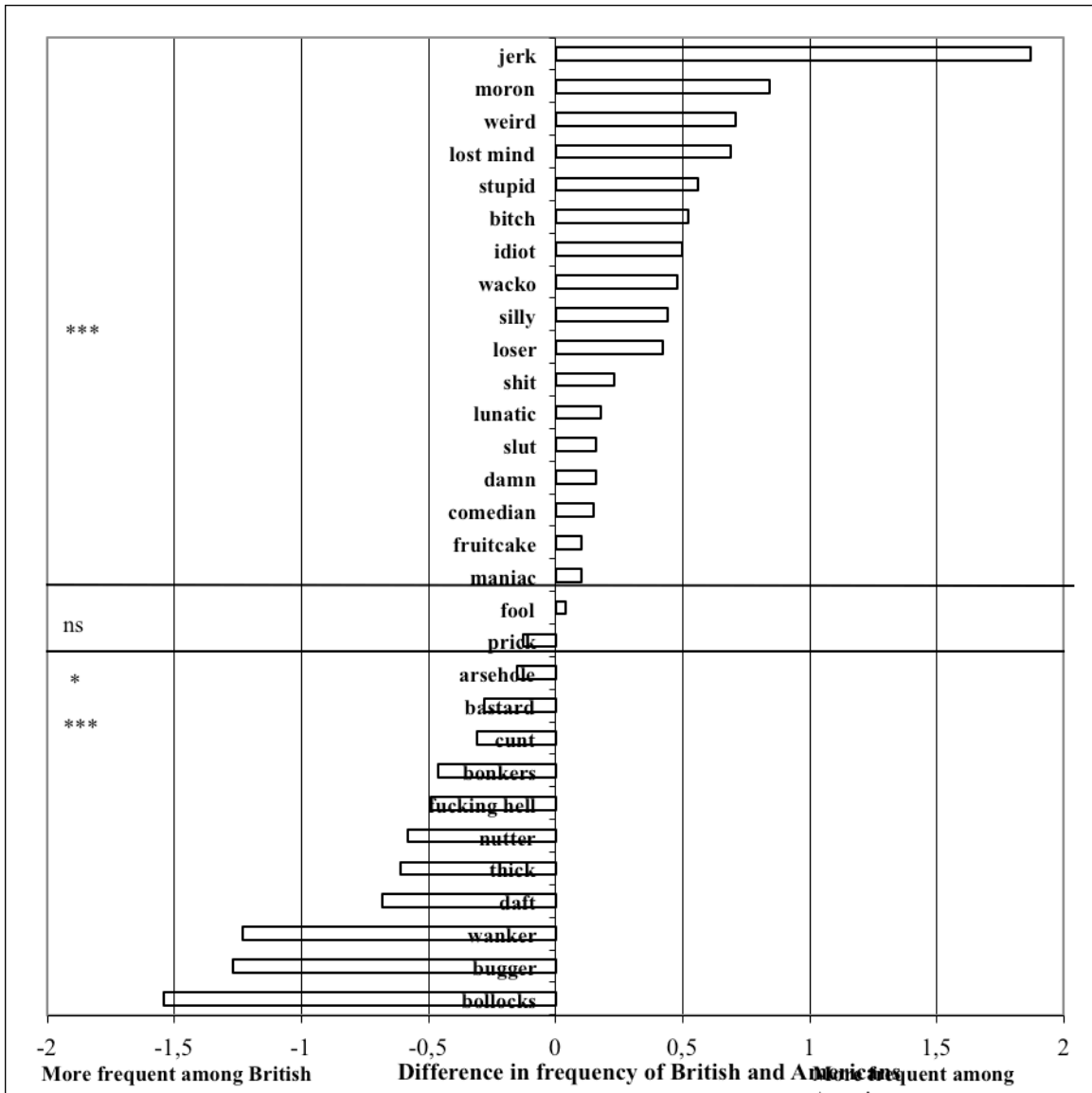


Figure 4: Differences between British and American L1 participants in the self-reported frequency of use of the 30 words

### 5.5. Relationship between BNC rank order of words and rank orders of the British English and American English groups

A Spearman correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between the rank order of the 30 words in the BNC and the average self-reported frequency of use of the words by the British English participants ( $N = 30$ ,  $\rho = .40$ ,  $p < .027$ ). The relationship between the BNC rank order and the average self-reported frequency of use of the words by the American English participants was equally positive, but not significant ( $N = 30$ ,  $\rho = .27$ ,  $p = ns$ ). In other words, the differences in frequency of use in the large BNC corpus were similar to those reported by the group of British English participants, but not that of the American English participants.

### 5.6. Relationship between mean scores for understanding of the meaning, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of words in the British English and American English groups

Is frequency of use linked to the mean scores for understanding of the meaning and the perceived offensiveness of the words? A Spearman correlation analysis confirmed this for the British English participants ( $N = 30$ ,  $\rho = .53$ ,  $p < .002$  and  $N = 30$ ,  $\rho = .45$ ,  $p < .013$  respectively). The understanding of the meaning was unrelated to perceived offensiveness ( $N = 30$ ,  $\rho = .05$ ,  $p = ns$ ).

A Spearman correlation analysis showed a slightly different picture for the American English participants: while frequency of use was positively related to the understanding of the meaning ( $N = 30$ ,  $\rho = .87$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), it was not linked to perceived offensiveness ( $N = 30$ ,  $\rho = .26$ ,  $p = ns$ ). Contrary to the British English sample, the understanding of the meaning was linked to perceived offensiveness ( $N = 30$ ,  $\rho = .37$ ,  $p < .037$ ).

## 6. Discussion

The answer to the first research question is negative: the British English speakers did not report more frequent swearing in various situations than the American English speakers, although they tended to swear more with colleagues. In other words, no group can claim superiority in number of “potty mouths”. The marginal difference for swearing with colleagues may suggest that British work environments are slightly more tolerant towards swearing. It was the point made by British journalist Anna Leach with a piece in the respectable broadsheet *The Guardian* in 2014, provocatively titled *Is swearing at work good for your career?* The author presented anecdotal evidence that in some industries, such as advertising, catering, probation and journalism, swearing is more frequent and accepted, and that new members of staff may be encouraged to accommodate to the norms of that specific speech community. She quoted an account director at a major advertising agency who said that in his office people are constantly swearing at each other, but never curse when speaking with clients. He added that swearwords do have a time and a place:

‘Sometimes no word will do apart from an expletive. We're all adults, we shouldn't be afraid of using certain words.’ His advice to people starting out in a job is to gauge the swearing culture among staff in that particular office. ‘Don't swear unless they swear and if they swear, crack on!’

(<http://www.theguardian.com/careers/careers-blog/swearing-at-work-good-career-acceptable-job>)

The British English speakers were found to report a better understanding of the meaning of 14 out of the 30 words compared to the American English speakers, who reported a better understanding of only three words, with no difference for the remaining 13 words. There thus seems to be considerable overlap in the understanding of the 30 words, words that both groups clearly have in common. Considering that the words were extracted from the BNC, it is not surprising that the meaning of more words was clearer to British English speakers than to American English speakers. It does confirm the opinion of Laurence Brown (2013) on the use of “bollocks” on US television and his intuition that Americans may not have a clear understanding of the word. The results also suggest that

the two variants of English do not seem to have identical semantic representations for over half of the words among the participants in the present study.

The findings on perception of offensiveness of the 30 words showed again that slightly over half the words were considered equally offensive by both groups. The British English speakers did rate the words “bugger”, “thick”, “bollocks” and “wanker” as being more offensive than their American English peers. Interestingly, three of these words were flagged up by Laurence Brown (2015) as words that have appeared in American conversations, apparently with a milder offensiveness value compared to British usage. The higher offensiveness ratings of American English speakers for “fool”, “shit”, “stupid”, “daft”, “slut”, “lunatic”, “idiot”, “bitch”, “damn” and “fruitcake” were interesting because it shows that perceptions of offensiveness vary between the two groups not just for the taboo words but also for words that have much lower offensiveness ratings such as “damn” or “stupid”. The words considered most offensive correspond roughly with the rank orders presented for American students in Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Beers Fägersten (2007, 2012).

Differences between the British English and the American English speakers turned out to be most striking for self-reported use. Only two words had similar mean frequency of use: “fool” and “prick”. Actress Anna Kendrick turned out to be right in her observation that the British use the word “cunt” more frequently, including in parliament (despite it being rated as equally offensive by both groups). The words “wanker”, “bugger”, “bollocks” that were mentioned earlier as creeping into the American vernacular seem to be still more popular among British English users, together with “arsehole”, “bastard”, “bonkers”, “fucking hell”, “nutter”, “thick” and “daft”.

The American English participants preferred the use of “maniac”, “fruitcake”, “comedian”, “damn”, “slut”, “lunatic”, “shit”, “loser”, “silly”, “wacko”, “idiot”, “bitch”, “stupid”, “lost your mind”, “weird”, “moron” and “jerk”. Interestingly, many of the preferred words were also rated as being more offensive by both groups (with the exception of “cunt”), which seem to generally confirm the existence of the “swearing paradox” (Beers Fägersten 2007, 2012), a question addressed more explicitly in the final research question.

What this suggests is that there is no complete conceptual equivalence between our British and American users of English for over half of the words (cf. Pavlenko 2008). This is an important finding because until now research on conceptual equivalence has focused on different languages, rather than different variants of the same language. It lends support to the view that bi-variatal speakers may have more in common with bilinguals rather than monolinguals.

The fifth research question dealt with the link between the rank order of the 30 words in the BNC and the self-reported frequency of use among the British English and the American English speakers. Unsurprisingly, the correlation turned out to be positive and significant among the the British English speakers and positive but non-significant among the American English speakers. It thus seems that the group of 414 British English reflect “national usage” represented in the frequency lists of the BNC, and that the rank order of American English speakers is only weakly related.

The final research question dealt with the relationship between understanding of meaning, perceived offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use in the two groups.

The patterns that emerged were slightly different for the British English and American English groups. Among the British English participants frequency of use was positively linked to both understanding of meaning and perceived offensiveness, which is a clear confirmation of the swearing paradox. However, understanding of the meaning was unrelated to perceived offensiveness.

Frequency of use was positively linked to the understanding of the meaning among American English participants, but not to perceived offensiveness. Contrary to the British English group, the understanding of the meaning was linked to perceived offensiveness. It thus seems that different mechanisms are at play, which merit further investigation.

In other words, the British participants reported using more of the words they understood well and that were more offensive. However, the understanding of the meaning was independent from the perceived offensiveness of words. While frequent use among the Americans English participants was linked to a better understanding, it was not linked to a higher level of perceived offensiveness. Finally, the better understanding of meaning was linked to a higher perceived offensiveness.

## **7. Conclusion**

The findings of the current study suggest that while our L1 users of British and American English do not seem to swear much more or less than each other in different situations, they do vary in their semantic and conceptual representations of over half of the 30 words extracted from the BNC.

The aim of the study was not to carry out a systematic comparison of swearwords and taboo words in both variants of English but to include a wide range of words with various levels of negative emotional valence. An important finding was that the differences between the L1 speakers of British and American English were strongest in self-reported use of the words. Significant differences between both groups emerged for about half of the words concerning the exact meaning and the perceived offensiveness. An important point is that the differences did not only include the most offensive words such as “cunt”, “bugger”, “bollocks”, “wanker” and “jerk” but also less offensive words such as “stupid” and “daft”. The swearing paradox was confirmed in the British English group, with a higher self-reported frequency of highly offensive words, but not in the American English group.

The observed differences are probably a reflection of different values in users’ conceptual representations linked to many of the words in the list (Pavlenko 2008). Having experienced specific words embedded in scripts in various contexts with other speakers of the same variety of English over a period of time means that individuals have internalised degrees of offensiveness, appropriateness and frequency of use. Further research could investigate to what extent conceptual representations shift as a consequence of immersion or contact with users of another variant. It would also be interesting to see whether media storms surrounding the controversial use of expressions coming from another variant, like Kate Moss’ use of “basis bitch”, lead to semantic and conceptual change.

Oscar Wilde’s joke about Americans and the British being identical in all respects except their language seems to hold up to a certain degree. As far as the semantic and conceptual representations of the 30 words is concerned, one could argue both ways, namely that

significant differences for half of the words show considerable difference between both groups, or – equally valid – that there is great communality. However, what is undeniable is that frequency of usage of the 30 words is very different in both groups of English speakers despite mutual influence. Using “bollocks” in the US might elicit a memory of Gordon Ramsay, the notorious swearing British celebrity chef in *Kitchen Nightmares USA*, while the use of “jerk” in the UK might be associated with the episode of *The Simpsons American Jerks are Going Home*.

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**Bionote**

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<sup>i</sup> The L2 user is “someone who knows more than one language, whether spoken, written, or signed, regardless of the number of languages known, the level of proficiency, how they were learnt, and whether knowledge is productive or receptive” (Bassetti and Cook 2011: 146).

<sup>ii</sup> No information was collected on their familiarity with another variant of English.