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Talk About Flipping Health Food – Swearing and Religious Oaths in Irish and British English

Patricia Ronan

This paper focuses on emotional expressions in Irish English in comparison with British English. More specifically, it examines the use of two categories of high-frequency expressives: religious oaths and expletives related to bodily functions. The data on which the investigation is based stems from the two relevant components of the *International Corpus of English*, ICE Ireland and ICE Great Britain and reveals strong differences in frequency and in the contexts of the use of both religious expressions and particularly of expletives of bodily function. It is argued that in the Irish data expressives like *God*, *Christ* and *Jesus* play a stronger role than in the British data because the cultural importance of religion is still stronger in Ireland than in England. Expletives based on bodily functions, especially *f*-based swearwords, are highly frequent in Irish English without having an obvious counterpart in British English. The higher frequency in Irish English is also paralleled by a larger pragmatic spread. The reason for the higher frequency in Irish English is explained as a marker of social bonding in Irish culture as compared with British culture.

1. Introduction

The division of speech acts into different subcategories largely goes back to the work of Austin and Searle.¹ Of Searle's five basic categories (Searle "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts"), *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *declaratives* and *expressives*, the first three have received consider-

¹ The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for the helpful comments.

able attention, while the latter two are less well researched. There is a particular dearth of research on expressive speech acts (Guiraud, Longin, Lorini, Pesty and Rivière 1031). So far select categories of expressive speech acts have been investigated; for corpus linguistics these are especially expressions of thanks and of more general politeness (Taavitsainen and Jucker). Even more recently, Guiraud, Longin, Lorini, Pesty and Rivière have used an approach based on emotion theory and formal logic to systemize expressive speech acts. However this, or other formal approaches to expressive speech acts, do not seem to have been applied to corpus data yet.

During the last two decades the research interest in variational pragmatics and studies of the use of Irish English have been growing. The first piece of major work to date has been provided by Schneider and Barron, whose edited volume offers, partly contrastive, descriptions of directness as a feature of politeness. Further, Kallen discusses politeness strategies in general and observes that politeness strategies in Irish English emphasize group identity markers and conventional optimism, and that speakers of the variety tend to avoid assertiveness and directness (see also Farr and O'Keeffe 42). While scientific research is thus particularly interested in the polite and oblique way in which interaction takes place between speakers of Irish English, popular perception often notes that Irish English contains a lot of swearing. The aim of the current study is to investigate the use of two categories of expressives in Irish English: religious oaths and expletives based on bodily functions. More specifically the use of these expressive acts is quantified in comparison with British English to verify to what degree comparable corpora of Irish and British English offer evidence of potential differences in the use of these categories in the two varieties.² The findings help us to assess, firstly, to what extent different expressive speech acts are in evidence in the Irish English spoken categories under investigation, and secondly, how prominent swearing is in the corpus data in comparison to British English. The general background of speech acts and expressives is explained in section two. Section three introduces the data and methodology used in the study and section four presents and discusses the results obtained.

² The ICE Great Britain corpus was used while working as a contract lecturer for the Department of English at the University of Zurich.

2. *Expressive Speech Acts, Swearing and Religious Oaths*

A discussion of the status and function of expletives as well as of religious expressions would not be appropriate without providing some background on speech acts and research on swearing and religious oaths. Thus, after introducing speech act theory according to Searle, we will discuss existing research on contexts and functions of the use of expletives and religious oaths.

2.1. *What are Expressive Speech Acts?*

The study of speech acts in general has been highly influenced by Searle's work. He has proposed that while utterances often describe the world around us, they also have other functions (Searle, *Speech Acts*). Searle ("A Classification of Illocutionary Acts") therefore distinguishes five types of speech acts in detail. These are *representatives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives* and *declaratives*. Representative speech acts are utterances in which the speaker's words mirror the world truthfully (Searle "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts" 10), for example:

1. There is a large elm tree in my front garden.

Second, there are directive speech acts, which can be either explicit or implicit, and lead the recipient to carry out a task, for instance:

2. Please shut the door.

Such directive speech acts can also be more implicit, for example uttering the statement *I'm parched* might lead the recipient to offer to put the kettle on for a cup of tea.

In the third category, commissive speech acts, we find a promise by a speaker to carry out a certain action:

3. I promise to give you a lift to the airport on Sunday morning.

The utterance of such a statement does not describe the world, but it makes the world fit the words (Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts" 11). Further, declarative speech acts are those which, if uttered by the right person under the right circumstances, create situations that fit

the words (Searle, “A Classification of Illocutionary Acts” 13), for example:

4. I declare this bazaar open!

Expressive speech acts, in contrast to representatives, do not represent the world. Rather, they express the state of mind, the attitudes, and the feelings of the speaker (Searle, “A Classification of Illocutionary Acts” 12; see also Taavitsainen and Jucker 159) as in the following example:

5. Oh, I absolutely love marshmallows!

Expressive speech acts have been formalized in a model of formal logic by Guiraud, Longin, Lorini, Pesty and Rivière. The authors define expressive speech acts as public expressions of emotional states (1031). They discuss the expression of the emotions of joy and of sadness, of regret, of disappointment and of guilt (1035) and connect the expressive speech acts of delight, sadness, approval, disapproval, sorrow and sympathy (1036), as well as of rejoicing, thanks, regret, deploring, apologies, satisfaction, complimenting, expressing guilt, reproaching, accusations and protests (1037). The two particular types of expressive speech acts with which the present essay is concerned are expressions of deploring and religious oaths. As such, these speech acts are closely linked to the society the speakers live in, and variation can be found within and between different varieties of a language such as English.

Religious expressions, such as *Oh God*, are not mentioned as expressives by Guiraud, Longin, Lorini, Pesty and Rivière but intuitively we would say that of all the speech acts identified by Searle they are more likely to be expressive speech acts than to belong to any other of his categories. Further, there are expressions of deploring, particularly by what has been classified as taboo areas such as swearwords or bad language. Both religious expressions and swearwords – or expletives – are considered taboo language in a classification by Andersson and Trudgill (15). They endorse the categorization of taboo expressions into words concerned with bodily functions like sex and excretion, such as *fuck* and *shit*, into words concerned with religion, such as *God* and *Jesus*, and into animal comparisons, such as *bitch*. The use of these categories is influenced by what is considered a social taboo in a given culture (Andersson and Trudgill 59). The third category of taboo words, animal appellations, differs somewhat from the two former ones in that they are directed towards persons, e.g. *she's such a bitch*, whereas the former ones

typically refer to a situation. As it is rather the impersonal use of swearing that interests us in this study, terms of personal abuse will not be considered here.

McEnery points out that different categories of swearwords can also be classified according to how likely they are to cause offence to other speakers of the language. According to this likelihood, McEnery (36) has classified swearwords along the five-item scale ranging from very mild (e.g. *bloody*, *damn*, *idiot*, *pig*), to mild (e.g. *christ* [sic], *cow*, *shit*), moderate (*arsehole*, *prick*, *whore*) strong (*fuck*) and very strong (*cunt*) swearwords. In the following we will particularly consider *fuck* and related items, as well as similar strong swearwords, which could fill the respective envelope of variation in both the British and Irish English corpora.

In considering these items in the two varieties of English under discussion, we will be working on the premise voiced by Wierzbicka that if we can identify common linguistic practices these can point to common ways of thinking: people can be understood best in terms of what they share, such as semantic and conceptual universals (1169-1170). By this token, if linguistic expressions differ, this may point to different attitudes to religious social experiences or different societal taboos.

2.2. Expletives and Religious Oaths

2.2.1. Swearing

Typically swearing is considered to be particularly frequent in youth language, but the use of swearwords has also been observed for older people. Swearwords can also be used where speakers want to portray themselves as youthful and cool (Aitchinson 23) or where the use of such language serves to create feelings of shared community. This use of words that are traditionally called swearwords as in-group markers has been discussed particularly by Wierzbicka, who investigates the use and the semantics of the word *bloody* in Australian English. Wierzbicka notes that the concept of *mate(ship)* is particularly important in Australian society. She also notes that the word *bloody* is ubiquitous in Australian English. In addition to being used as a strong swearword, it can also be used as an intensifier and a mild swearword in a number of different situational contexts (1172-1173). She observes that the adjective has become gentrified by having been used in learned and in political contexts as a symbol of a mix of educated and rough styles in Australia referred to as *larrikin style*. Wierzbicka finds that the use of *bloody* in Australian

English thus functions to show allegiance to the society's cultural values (1175). These would presumably be based on a shared experience of the toughness necessary to colonize and survive in a rough, unwelcoming environment. At the same time, Wierzbicka stresses that the use of *bloody* is by no means accepted by all sections of society (1176). On the contrary, the fact that it is still frowned upon by some increases its attractiveness to others, who we might term the socially rebellious.

In spite of possibly still extant resentments, Wierzbicka (1175, 1177) finds *bloody* to be used significantly more frequently in Australian English than, for example, in American English, and that it plays a more important role in Australian English than in other varieties. It has made its way into genres such as parliamentary debates. As a sign of its positive connotations, it can even be found to collocate with positive expressions such as *bloody good*, leading Wierzbicka to conclude that where *bloody* collocates with nouns it is negatively connoted, but if used with other word classes such as adjectives it functions as an intensifier and can be taken as a sign of truth and sincerity (1181-1182, 1188). As a result, the use of the adjective has become a stereotype of Australian English, and a feature that has developed also in opposition to British culture. Moreover, having been semantically bleached from a swearword, it now expresses high emotionalism and should be considered not only in terms of politeness discourse but also in terms of cultural scripts (1206). Wierzbicka (1179-1180) observes, however, that *bloody* is increasingly being replaced by the still more intense *fuck*. As far as Australian English is concerned, it seems as if the traditional *bloody* is a less relevant cultural taboo for a society in which bodily matters are now widely and publicly discussed. Explicit sexual topics are likely to be still more shunned and thus a better basis for taboo words. As is the case with *bloody* in Australian English, such shared cultural values in other societies should also be observable in distinct linguistic usage patterns of relevant lexical items in discourse.

The expletive *fuck* and its related morphological forms have already been identified as a prominent swearword in Irish English (Murphy 90-91). In Murphy's 90,000 word corpus of male and female speech the only other observed expletives, *shit*, *piss* and the euphemism *feck*, are used to a considerably smaller degree. Murphy finds that the use of *fuck* and its morphological derivatives is significantly more frequent in male than in female data in her Irish English corpus (Murphy 93), which is in line with what has been observed for its use in British English (McEnery and Xiao, 235-268). Of the three age groups investigated, 20s, 40s and 70/80s, the age groups using it most frequently are speakers within the

20s age bracket, followed by speakers in the middle age bracket in their 40s. The most frequently used forms are *fucking*, followed by *fuck*, *fucked* and *fucker*, the collocations *fuck it*, *fuck sake*, *for fuck's sake*, *fuck that*, *fuck off* and *fuck all* also appear (Murphy 93-94). Similar to *bloody* in Australian English, Murphy identifies the use of *fuck* as an “amplifier,” which can have negative connotations, but, like *bloody*, can also be used in collocation with positively connoted nouns, though this latter use is more rare (96-98). As Wierzbicka does for *bloody*, Murphy suggests the use of *fucking* to be an in-group marker and a sign of camaraderie, particularly of a younger generation. Particularly for the male language users, semantic bleaching of the expression has taken place to add intensity and dynamism to their discourse and to facilitate bonding by using taboo words which are still disregarded by mainstream culture (Murphy 100), particularly by older speakers who strongly identify with Catholic values (104). Research on both Irish English and Australian English thus suggests that the use of expletives is not necessarily only a phenomenon of uneducated speech, but that it can be used for bonding purposes, and is particularly done so by younger rather than older speakers. These observations concur with McEnery's findings for British English that speakers in the age group up to 25 use more swearing than older groups (McEnery 38), and that educated speakers of the upper middle class are in fact more likely to use strong expletives than are speakers of lower middle classes, who try to use what they consider more polite speech (43).

2.2.2. Religious Oaths

The second category of taboo language considered in this paper is the use of religious expressions. As addressed above, the use of religious expressions has been subsumed amongst linguistic taboo items (Andersson and Trudgill 15), and it has been argued by Stenström that particularly the taboo words used by females often come from this field. In research by Farr and Murphy it has been shown that these items are frequently found in Irish English. In order to determine whether religious expressions are more frequent in written or spoken English, Farr and Murphy (539-540) searched for the key words *Almighty*, *Christ*, *Damn*, *Devil*, *God*, *Hell*, *Holy*, *Jesus*, *Lord* and *Sacred* in one million word extracts from the spoken and the written component of the British National Corpus (BNC). They found that more instances of these are found in the spoken than in the written corpus texts. On the basis of spoken

Irish corpora (Limerick Corpus of Irish English and Limerick Belfast Corpus of Academic Spoken English), a spoken British corpus (Corpus of London Teenage English) and spoken American Corpora (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English and Corpus of Spoken Professional American English) it was also determined that these items are considerably better represented in informal than in formal contexts (Farr and Murphy 541-543) and only about 10 percent of the overall tokens in fact refer to religious contexts. The types *God* and *Jesus* were found to be the best-represented with 785 and 462 tokens per one million words respectively in the Limerick Corpus of Irish English data. *God* collocates, amongst others, with appropriate religious expressions such as *oh my God*, *honest to God*, *thank God* or *God almighty* creating notions of honesty, help, hope and gratitude, and particularly in female speech it is used in contexts of surprise, annoyance, pity, emphasis and excitement (Farr and Murphy 543, 552), but its use is also observed to cause laughter and nervousness. Particularly high instances of *Oh my God* have been observed in female speech from the 20s age bracket, which the authors related to the popularity of this expression in the wake of the American TV series *Friends*.

Jesus and *Jesus Christ* are thought to be stronger expressions than *God* (Farr and Murphy 555) and found in contexts of excitement and may be used to intensify accounts (545), for younger female speakers it particularly expresses surprise (554). Overall, the use of religious expressions was observed to be higher for males than for females. For the female speakers it was highest for adult speakers of the oldest age group, 70/80 years of age, the 40s age group providing a middle ground and the 20s age group providing the lowest use (Farr and Murphy 547-551). Overall, younger speakers use religious expressions with higher frequencies in what might have been considered offensive uses by older speakers or in the past (558). Based on these findings we will assume that the level of religious references will correlate with the level of importance of religion in society, and that the comparison of religious expressions in the ICE corpora for Ireland and Great Britain will allow us to judge the relative importance of religious references in this data.

3. Data and Methodology

The current study is corpus-based and the data on which this study is based stems from ICE Great Britain and from ICE Ireland. The ICE-family of corpora spans a growing number of first and second language

varieties of English throughout the world. All corpora contain approximately one million words from clearly specified domains in 500 files of about 2,000 words each. Throughout the corpora, 300 files are from spoken categories, the remaining 200 files are from written categories (Greenbaum). The language that is aimed for in the collection of the corpora is a standardized version of the local variety of English, expressly vernacular or basilectal varieties are not included. This, as well as the fact that similar categories from both formal and informal registers are present in each of the corpora, ensures maximum comparability of the different varieties of English, even though certain idiosyncrasies in each corpus can of course not be avoided. These similarities were used as a basis for the present research project. Common expletives and religious expressions found in the literature (Farr and Murphy, Murphy, McEnery) have been searched for in ICE GB and ICE IRE by using the online interface provided by corpus web-interface Corpus Navigator.³

4. Expletives and Religious Oaths in ICE Ireland and ICE Great Britain

As indicated in section three above, the two expressive categories investigated here are from the taboo expression areas of expletives and of religious expressions. It has been shown for varieties of English, both British (McEnery) and Australian (Wierzbicka) as well as indeed for Irish English (Murphy), that far from being used only to express anger, expressions belonging to the expletives category may also be used as in-group markers to increase bonding. Further, as Ireland is well known for being a religious country, religious expressives may also be considered to convey shared cultural values and should thus be found with some degree of frequency particularly in Irish English. In the following we will therefore compare the use of overtly religious expressions that have been found to be most frequent in the Limerick Corpus of Irish English, *Jesus*, *Christ* and *God* (Farr and Murphy 541) on the one hand, and the frequent expletives *bloody* and *fuck* on the other hand.

4.1. Religious Expressions in the ICE Corpora

In the following we will compare the uses of *God*, *Christ* and *Jesus* in the two corpora under investigation. A fourth possible appellative for *God*, *Lord*, has been left out of scrutiny as only a small number of its occur-

³ <http://es-corpnav.uzh.ch/>

rences were used in this sense. The vast majority of attestations of *Lord* in both corpora stem from political and legal contexts and only very few examples with a religious context were observed in both corpora.

For the first item under investigation, *God*, a comparison of the roughly one million-word ICE Ireland and ICE Great Britain reveals strong similarities in use, but there are considerably higher numbers in ICE Ireland than in ICE Great Britain. In ICE Ireland, we find a total of 454 attestations of *God*. Most of the instances of *God*, 396, come from the spoken component, only 58 derive from written genres. There are four examples referring to Celtic deities, one example refers to other gods, the “Elephant God” (W1B-011:1:1), 59 examples stem from religious discourse. The majority of examples can thus be seen as invocations of God, either just as *God*, or *my God* or *oh my God*, but we also find clear utterances with religious senses, such as *God rest him* (S1A-004:1:48:A), *God love him* (S1A-051:1:72:E) or *God bless us* (S1A-023:1:83:B).

Searches in ICE Great Britain reveal 300 examples of references to *God* or *god(s)*. Of these, 41 are in the context of religious discourse. In 33 examples, other deities are referred to, such as *Goddess* or *Sun God*. The remaining 168 instances can be seen as types of invocation, such as *Goodnight and God bless* (s2b-030:1:75:A), or the frequent *God*, *oh God* or *my God*. References to *God* are more frequent in spoken discourse (219 examples) than in written discourse (48 examples). Thus, the cultural importance of the reference to God is very similar in both British and Irish English, but invocative use of *God*, or *oh God* and *my God* is highly significantly higher in the Irish English corpus.⁴

Searches for the stem *Christ* reveal 38 true positives in ICE Ireland, the majority of which are religious references, such as:

6. <W2B-005:2:3> The four Sundays of Advent are days of preparation for the celebration of Christmas and Christ's coming into the world.

The remaining 9 instances are expressives. In the ICE Ireland corpus we find *Christ* being used both in agitation or exasperation, as in 7, and like an invocation as in 8 and 9:

7. <S1A-042\$A> Shut up <S1A-042\$B> *Jesus Christ* it's only a Kit Kat <S1A-042\$C> It's not a giant Snicker, which you'll probably get in Angela's anyway.

⁴ The p-value according to chi-square is <.0001.

8. <S1A-065\$A> We'd never done this before. <S1A-065\$C> Oh God. *Christ*. He crawled out of where <#> Out of that.
9. <S1A-065\$B> (. . .) We thought the thing was going to go right off the edge <S1A-065\$C> (. . .) Yeah, *Christ* (. . .) <S1A-065\$B> <#> It's going so fast. And then you come down and you just go into a twist (. . .).

ICE Great Britain has 28 examples of *Christ*. Of those 28, 23 stem from religious discourse, 5 are expressive examples; the context suggests that all of these are examples of exasperation or agitation. The arguably most interesting example is the following:

10. <w1b-010:2:92> I'd have to exclude all the theological people because if I wasn't allowed *Christ* I'd certainly have a few questions for St. Peter and the Virgin Mary.

Here religious discourse is mixed with what seems an expressive indicting agitation rather than invocation of divine help. Farr and Murphy (556) classify *Christ* as a strong form, indicating shock, surprise and incredulity, and these semantics are visible here as well. *Christ* is further used in exasperation, but also an invocation and perhaps a plea for divine support.

Finally, ICE Ireland contains 89 examples of *Jesus*, 20 of which stem from religious discourse, and only 4 from written sources. The majority of the other examples can be considered expressives such as:

11. <S1A-066:1:184:C> *Jesus* don't eat me.
12. <S1A-067:1:51:C> *Jesus* I've no messages at all now so I haven't.

However, overtly religious contexts have not been found with this form, there is one example of *Sweet Jesus*, but the context *Sweet Jesus they weren't calling Lou good-looking* (S1A-003:1:220:C) is not at all religious.

Jesus is considered a stronger evocative than *God* by Farr and Murphy, expressing surprise and disbelief, and it may still be a taboo word for the oldest age group (Farr and Murphy 554-555). Interestingly, it is the only religious expressive which is explicitly used in the context of swearing in the corpus:

13. <S1A-011:1:63:B> We were like oh for fuck sake like *Jesus*
14. <S1A-051:1:178:A> She went to put her hand through it and he goes *Jesus* fuck's sake don't touch my hair
15. <W2F-004:1:164> I might have expected it, you worthless creeping *Jesus*.

If indeed *Jesus* is the strongest of the group of religious terms and still a taboo word for some parts of society, this may mean that it is explicitly selected in the context of swearing to increase the impact of the utterance.

In ICE Great Britain, we only find 28 instances of *Jesus*, from which two references to *Jesus College* should be deducted. 20 of the examples stem from religious discourse, leaving us with only 6 examples of expressives, five of which are from spoken language. All of these are either just single-word appellations or use *Oh Jesus*. On the basis of these few examples, no special pragmatic value can be described for the use of *Jesus* in ICE Great Britain.

An overview of the use of *God*, *Christ* and *Jesus* in ICE Ireland and ICE Great Britain is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Uses of *God*, *Christ* and *Jesus* in ICE Ireland and ICE Great Britain in raw values (and normalized per one million words in brackets).

Corpus	<i>God</i>	<i>Christ</i>	<i>Jesus</i>	Total
ICE Ireland	454/(430) ⁵	36/(24)	89/(85)	582/(554)
ICE IRE excluding religious discourse	395/(374)	16/(15)	69/(66)	480/(457)
ICE GB	267/(249) ⁶	30/(28)	26/(24)	323/(302)
ICE GB excluding religious discourse	226/(211)	10/(9)	6/(6)	242/(226)

These religious exclamations are used significantly more frequently in the spoken than in the written genres: of the 89 examples of *Jesus* only 4 (4.5 percent) stem from written corpus data, of the 454 examples of *God*, 58 (13 percent) are from the written components in ICE Ireland. In ICE GB, *God* appears more often in the less spontaneous written discourse, 48 out of the 267 attestations (18 percent), while *Jesus* is mostly a spoken appellation also in ICE GB, with only 4 of the 26 examples (15 percent) stemming from written data. Thus, as already noted for a different set of corpora by Farr and Murphy, in the ICE corpora the use of religious expressions is clearly mainly a feature of spoken language, except where religious discourse is concerned. Appellations to *God*, *Christ* and *Jesus* in non-religious contexts are considerably more frequent in

⁵ Additionally there are four references to Celtic deities (Lug, Goibhniu, Cailleach Bhéara). Place names and references to godparents are not considered.

⁶ Additionally there are 33 references to various deities from international pantheons or to godparents.

Irish than in British English. While this might indicate that there is a greater taboo associated with using the name of God in Britain than in Ireland, the already good attestation of the appellation in everyday contexts makes this unlikely. On the other hand it may also indicate that religion is a more central component of life in Ireland than in Britain and that therefore more invocations are based on expressives from the religious field. Further information on this issue could be gleaned from investigations of more varied corpora, and from investigating a larger set of religious expressions in the two corpora.

4.2. Expletives in ICE Ireland and ICE Great Britain

As noted in section 2.2.1 above, authors working on expletives in varieties of English have repeatedly stressed that such expressions can fulfil various functions. In the current study we want to examine two strong expletives that have been observed in a number of varieties of English, *bloody* and *fuck(ing)*. There seem to be few swearwords that have the same breadth of syntactic and pragmatic variation. Therefore we are restricting our approach to these two, plus the variants of *bloody*, *bleeding* and that of *fuck*, *feck*.

In ICE GB, the arguably most prominent swearword, *fuck* and its derivations, appear 14 times in total, 5 times in a rather linguistic style discussion:

16. <s1a 092:1:134:B> Can you say bo- *fucking* ring?

This discussion accounts for 5 of the 14 examples. In the other examples, the corresponding gerund is used like an adverb of quality three times: *I'm fucking weak* (s1a-052:2:110:a), *do some real fucking journalism then* (s1a-052:2:127:A) and *It's fucking yellow* (s1a-085:1:149:A). The negative entity is used as an intensifier in these cases. This use of a negatively perceived entity as an intensifier is a well-documented pattern cross-linguistically, and can also be observed in the use of the English adverb *terribly* (Jing-Schmidt).

Additionally, in the same conversation *fuck* is used twice in a semantically intransitive context with the particle *around*, in the sense of pottering about:

17. <s1a-074:5:336:A> I'm still *fucking around* sorting things out

18. <s1a-074:5:337:B> Well don't be *fucking around* sorting things out

Here we observe an interesting semantic shift from a taboo word denoting a specified action towards the unspecific description of a (perceivedly) unproductive action. Finally, *fuck off* is attested twice (s1a-052:2:94:B and s1a-052:2:129:A). And in the only attestation of the item in the written corpus, it is used in its literal sense (w2f-003:1:127). The use of this item is thus found with a frequency of 0.2 attestations per 10,000 spoken words and 0.14 attestations per 10,000 words in the written and spoken material from ICE Great Britain.

The situation is different in the ICE Ireland data. There, the *f*-word is used 130 times. The majority of the attestations, 96 are in spoken discourse, 34 in written discourse. Of the spoken discourse, 79 are in face-to-face and 18 in telephone conversations. This yields a ratio of 1.56 examples per 10,000 words in the total spoken component of ICE Ireland as compared to the 0.2 per 10,000 from ICE GB. This difference is statistically highly significant at $p < 0.0001$ according to chi-square, as are the differences in the combined written and spoken frequencies of 1.24 in ICE IRE and 0.14. The higher frequency of *fuck* and its derivatives in the Irish data is also confirmed by a comparison with data from the British National Corpus, where its frequency is somewhat higher than in ICE GB, namely 0.56 per 1 million words, but the difference is still statistically significantly lower than in ICE Ireland.

The *f*-word also shows a considerably broader semantic spread, expressing, in addition to the items named for ICE GB above, also general swearing (example 19), semantically transitive expressions of flinging (example 20) or intransitive moving (example 21):

19. <S1A-017:1:186:B> Och for *fuck's* sake

20. <S1A-015:1:166:A> He's had a few too many to drink and the cops *fucked him back* into the house again

21. <S1A-014:1:71:D> One of them drinks a pint of Bass and then *fucks up* to bed again.

Its use as a personal characteristic includes indicating something like an idiot (*awkward fucker* S1A-024:1:52:D), a rascal (*cheeky fucker* S1A-044:1:13:A), and expressing that someone is in trouble (*you'll be fucked* S1A-024:1:119:D).

In contrast to British English, there is also a larger selection of corruptions, such as *frigg* (4 examples), with similar semantics of general swearing (see example 22), but also of troubledness (example 23):

22. <S1A-041:1:151:D> See the whole film it's brilliant up until you find out that he's a *frigging* half bat creature thing.
23. <S1A-036:1:103:B> He smoked all his life and his breathing's absolutely *frigged*.

Further we find *feck* (9 examples), which is used similarly to *fuck*, as an expression of despise (<S1A-049:1:117:A> *I said ah feck it I'll go down*), as a negative adjective (<W1B-004:2:95> *Maybe she's got the right feckin' idea eh what!*), and as a verb of movement (<S1A-050:1:7:C> *Give me the shitty mattress and you feck off*). *Feck* and its derivatives seem to be taken by most speakers as corruption of *fuck*, even though, as also indicated by Murphy (91-92), it can in fact be derived from Old English *feccan* "fetch, bring, draw" (Bosworth s.v. *feccan*) and may have been connected to *fuck* due to its phonetic similarity.

There further are three examples of *flipping*, for which only examples with a more restricted semantic spread are attested, namely a modifying adjective, probably suggesting a stupid entity or an entity of low value such as in:

24. <S1A-031:1:80:A> I mean talk about *flipping* health food!
25. <S1A-017:1:197:A> And he got on the *flipping* minibus with his kilt on him.

None of these corruptions are found in ICE GB, but they are frequent and have a high semantic spread in ICE IRE. This indicates that even though *fuck* is better established, both in terms of numbers and semantic spread, in Irish colloquial speech, it retains a taboo value for a number of speakers who try to avoid the stronger expletive by using a softer corruption.

The use of this semantic cluster of swearwords does not seem to replace other well-known examples of English swearwords, such as *bloody* or *bleeding*. *Bloody* appears 48 times in ICE GB and 44 times in ICE IRE. In both varieties, its use is restricted to adjectival, typically pre-nominal contexts:

26. <w1b-003:1:92> *bloody* cheek!
27. <ICE GB w1b-002:3152:3> I already get excited thinking about it.
<W1b-002:3:153> it's going to be *bloody* excellent!
28. <ICE IRE S1A-033:1:106:B> Probably goes back to the *bloody* ark

Negatively connoted uses of *bloody* by far dominate in the two ICE corpora under investigation, with 27 above forming the only exception

where it is used in a positive context. In all these contexts it seems to serve predominantly as an intensifier. In contrast to *fuck* and its corruptions, *bloody* is more similarly distributed amongst written and in spoken data both in ICE Great Britain (32 spoken out of a total 48) and in ICE Ireland (23 spoken out of 44), and is particularly used in fictional writing. Thus the use of *bloody* is quite similar in ICE Great Britain and ICE Ireland. It is mainly in evidence as a noun-modifying, intensifying adjective. The related adjective *bleedin(g)*, used as an expletive, only features once each in the corpora, e.g. *Another bleeding cowboy stupidity* (ICE GB w2f-001:1:84) and *The bleeding nuns'll do the same* (ICE IRE S1A-037:1:93:C).

A survey of these items in both ICE Great Britain and ICE Ireland is given in Table 2.

Table 2: The use of *f*-based and *b*-based expletives in ICE GB and ICE IRE in raw frequencies (relative frequencies per one million words given in brackets.)

Corpus	<i>Bloody</i>	<i>Bleedin(g)</i>	<i>Fuck-</i>	<i>Feck-</i>	<i>Frig-</i>	<i>Flip-</i>	Total
ICE GB	48/(45)	1/(1)	14/(13)	0	0	0	63/(59)
ICE IRE	44/(42)	1/(1)	130/(124)	9/(8)	4/(4)	3/(3)	191/(182)
Total	92	2	144	9	4	3	254

Especially the use of *f*-based swearwords is significantly larger in the Irish English than in the British English data. Their semantic spread shows that they are used not only as swearwords, but that their usage has also been bleached to include use as intensifiers and expressions of general movement. This semantic bleaching, together with the increased applicability, is likely to make the original swearword more broadly applicable in colloquial speech. However, the higher use of the expletive *fuck* in Irish English as compared to British English does not seem to have led to a lower use of *bloody* in Irish English, but the relatively high use of *f*-forms in Irish English seems to be in addition to the forms of *bloody*. It may thus have a slightly different pragmatic value; it clearly has a more varied semantic content and subjectively seems to still have a higher taboo value than *bloody* as shown by the continued absence from more monitored genres of spoken language, such as broadcasting and classroom language. The data examined here gives further support to the idea that *f*-based swearwords, particularly *fuck* and its derivatives, may be used to increase group bonding within a certain cultural identity.

An interesting question is of course how items with this semantic content come to be used as intensifiers in the first place. Traugott (34-35; 48-51) traces the typical pathways of change, which expressions undergo when developing subjective pragmatic or discursive functions. During linguistic development items will increasingly come to be used as discourse markers, as hedges, interjections, in swearing or politeness markers and textual and conversational routine expressions; this process is known as *pragmaticalisation* (Claridge and Arnovick 165-167). Along these lines, Traugott (49) argues that the items in question newly transmit information on speaker attitude in the communicative situation. Throughout linguistic history, she argues, such shifts are often metaphorical.

From the vantage point of the evolutionary development of humans, Jing-Schmidt explains that negative, potentially threatening events are more salient to human perception than positive events because they have the potential of endangering our lives. Such negative experiences lead us to being over-cautious and lower the threshold of fear (Jing-Schmidt 418-422). Therefore, expressions of fear, disgust and anger are more salient than positive expressions, which makes them more accessible for becoming grammaticalized as intensifiers in various languages. Most often they stem from the domains of fear, from contexts of both emotional and threat-related fields such as religious domains (*damned*), threats to life (*terribly*) or moral threats (*sinfully*) (Jing-Schmidt 426-429). Jing-Schmidt affirms that the literal senses of these symptoms are usually bleached and the intensifiers primarily come to signal high emotive intensity (429). Items from the other typical negative domains, disgust and anger, are typically based on human and animal characteristics (*stinking*) or body products or on abstractions of the threat caused towards their environment by a person's anger. She shows that emotive intensifiers therefore boost dramatic effect; they elicit attention and establish inter-speaker rapport (Jing-Schmidt 425). The emotional intensity of the situation is first distilled through processes abstraction and metonymic relations. This meaning-component of high emotional intensity is then metaphorically mapped to semantic intensity. This schema is also applicable to our case, in which *fuck* and its derivatives can be seen initially as moral taboos (with high emotional intensity), which would be sufficient ground for electing them as a negatively biased intensifier. A similar process has been described for Australian English and its use of *bloody* (Wierzbicka).

5. Conclusion

This essay has investigated the use religious expressions and of swearwords in Irish English compared to British English. Returning to Wierzbicka's study of *bloody*, we wanted to answer the question what the differences observed in the use of swearing and religious oaths might tell us about the differences in Irish and English culture. The use of religious expressions is rare in the semi-formal registers, as is the use of swearwords in both varieties. A comparison of the general use of religious expressions and swearwords in ICE Ireland and ICE Great Britain shows that these categories are considerably more frequent in the Irish data than in the English data, and that the spread of their usage is also wider than in the English data. The higher use of religious expressions in Irish English confirms that religion plays a larger role in the mind of Irish people than it does in the minds of English people and the taboo to use religious expressions is more frequently broken in Irish English where the stronger cultural impact of religion results in higher evocative power of religious expressions.

As far as swearwords are concerned, in Irish English they particularly derive from the field of sexual taboo language. Their considerably broader semantic spread and their higher frequency in Irish English indicate that their lexical contents have, at least for some speakers, bleached to express more general senses. These general senses do not only include the cross-linguistically common extension of negative-bias expressions towards intensifiers but also more general verbal senses like movement verbs.

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