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PROFANITY THROUGH TIME: A CORPUS-BASED AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE EVOLUTION, USAGE, AND PERCEPTION OF ENGLISH CURSE WORDS

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ABSTRACT----------
This study comprehensively investigates the historical development and contemporary usage of English curse words, integrating diachronic corpus linguistics with sociolinguistic survey data. Utilising a custom-built 1.5 million-token corpus spanning texts from the Middle English period to 2023, the research traces frequency trends, tone variations, and semantic shifts of twenty core profanities. Simultaneously, a quantitative survey of 500 global respondents explores the acceptability, frequency, and context of swearing across demographic groups, revealing strong generational and educational influences. Findings indicate a marked increase in profanity usage and growing normalisation in digital and informal settings. Words such as fuck, bitch, *and* shit *have expanded semantically, now functioning across euphemistic, ironic, and neutral registers. Contrary to earlier studies, gender differences in swearing behaviour are minimal, while education and digital exposure significantly affect usage patterns. This research contributes to evolving theories of politeness, speech act pragmatics, and language change, framing profanity as a fluid linguistic tool reflective of broader cultural and communicative shifts in modern English.*

KEYWORDS: *English Cusswords, Profanity Studies, Sociolinguistics, Historical Corpus Linguistics, Euphemism and Taboo, Swearing and Digital Media, Speech Act Theory, Pragmatics and Politeness, Semantic Shift, Youth Language Trends----------*

1. INTRODUCTION

Profanity—often marginalised in formal discourse—has recently become a vibrant focus of linguistic inquiry. From mere vulgarity, curse words serve rich communicative functions, from emotional expression and identity formation to social bonding. Their prevalence, semantic adaptability, and shifting perception reflect broader cultural transitions driven by digital communication, generational change, and evolving social norms.

Historically, profanity was stigmatised as a sign of moral decline or lower-class behaviour. However, contemporary sociolinguistic research increasingly recognizes its pragmatic complexity. Swear words function as performative acts—reinforcing solidarity, intensifying meaning, or marking social boundaries (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Moreover, certain profanities, like *fuck* or *bitch*, have evolved beyond insult into versatile linguistic tools deployed for humour, irony, or empowerment.

Numerous studies support this reappraisal. Tikile and Ngulube (2025) found that Generation Z engages with profanity more frequently and with greater acceptance than prior cohorts. Based on data from Rivers State University, their findings highlight the normalisation of curse words in casual speech and digital communication. Similarly, Salih and

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Raoof (2022) compared English and Iraqi Arabic speakers, revealing that perceptions of swearing vary significantly by culture, gender, and context, underscoring the importance of situational factors in interpreting profanity.

However, despite growing attention, much of the current literature remains fragmented. Historical linguistics offers diachronic insights into the origins of profanity, while sociolinguistics investigates its role in present-day discourse. What is missing is a unified approach that links the historical evolution of swear words with contemporary usage patterns across demographic groups. This gap is especially significant in digital discourse, where curse words circulate rapidly, morph semantically, and sometimes lose their original taboo force.

This study addresses that gap by integrating historical corpus linguistics with sociolinguistic analysis. It combines a custom-built 1.5 million-token diachronic corpus, from Middle English to 2023, with survey data from 500 global respondents. This mixed-method approach enables a comprehensive view of how curse words have evolved in frequency, tone, and meaning, and how they are perceived and used across age, gender, education, and online behaviour.

1.1 Research Aim

This research explores the historical trajectories and modern sociolinguistic functions of English curse words. Specifically, it focuses on twenty core profanities, analysing their semantic evolution and current usage in real-world contexts.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To trace selected English curse words' historical origins and semantic shifts.
2. To examine their usage patterns across diverse demographic and social contexts.
3. To investigate how curse words function pragmatically in contemporary communication.
4. To understand how perceptions of profanity differ among various social groups.

1.3 Importance of the Topic

Profanity is no longer a linguistic fringe but a crucial mirror of social transformation. From political protests to viral TikTok videos, curse words shape and reflect public discourse. Studying them offers insights into broader issues: social identity, generational divides, digital culture, and evolving norms of politeness. This research contributes to sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and pragmatics by offering a data-rich, multidimensional analysis of a historically stigmatized yet socially powerful linguistic phenomenon.

In addition, understanding profanity has practical implications. Educators, content creators, media platforms, and cross-cultural communicators often navigate questions of appropriateness and meaning. This study can help inform language policy, content moderation, and inclusive communication strategies by shedding light on how curse words are used and perceived today.

1.4 Research Gap

While prior research has examined swearing through historical or sociocultural lenses, few studies attempt to integrate both dimensions. Most corpus-based studies focus narrowly on present-day English, missing long-term trends, while sociolinguistic surveys often neglect etymological depth. Furthermore, little is known about how digital media accelerates semantic change in profanity, or how swearing operates differently across age, gender, and global regions. This study fills that void through a cross-temporal, cross-cultural methodology.

1.5 Main Contributions

This research makes several novel contributions:

- **Diachronic profiling** of 20 core curse words from Middle English to 2023, identifying long-term frequency and semantic trends.

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- **Quantitative survey insights** from 500 global users across generations, revealing attitudes, usage contexts, and demographic variation.
- **Evidence of semantic diversification**, showing how words like *fuck*, *shit*, and *bitch* have expanded into neutral, humorous, and even affectionate usage.
- **Minimal gender-based difference** in swearing behaviour, challenging traditional assumptions.
- **Impact of digital culture** on profanity normalization and lexical innovation.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly investigation of English curse words has gained renewed interest across linguistics, psychology, cultural studies, and digital media analysis. Once relegated to the periphery of respectable scholarship, profanity is now recognised as a linguistically rich and culturally significant phenomenon. This literature review examines key strands of research concerning the historical evolution, semantic transformation, sociolinguistic functions, and pragmatic implications of English curse words, including their digital manifestations and institutional interpretations.

2.1 Historical Linguistics of English Cusswords

The origins of English profanity reflect deep cultural taboos and linguistic evolution. Many contemporary curse words trace their roots to Old and Middle English. For example, *shit* comes from the Old English *scītan*, originally a neutral verb meaning "to defecate" (Ljung, 2011). Likewise, *arse* was a standard anatomical reference, not a vulgarism (Hughes, 2006). Such words became taboo only later, as euphemistic conventions and moral codes evolved.

The etymology of *fuck* remains debated but is believed to descend from Middle Dutch *fokken* or Old High German *ficken*, meaning "to strike" or "to copulate" (McEnery, 2006). Its earliest recorded use appears in the satirical "Flen flyys" poem (c.1475), encoded in Latin to evade censorship: "Non sunt in coeli quia fuccant uuiuys of heli" ("They are not in heaven because they fuck the wives of Ely") (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg, 2017).

Religious oaths also formed a significant category of early profanity. Expressions like "God's wounds" or "Christ's blood" were considered blasphemous during the Middle Ages due to their perceived desecration of the divine (Allan & Burridge, 2006). The Reformation and rise of Puritanism ushered in stricter taboos, legally punishing blasphemous speech and reinforcing a dichotomy between 'civilised' and 'vulgar' language—a division still felt in modern linguistic norms.

2.2 Semantic Shift and Euphemism

Cursing words undergo significant semantic changes over time. Processes such as pejoration (negative shift in meaning) and amelioration (positive shift) reflect shifting societal values. *Bitch*, for instance, originally denoted a female dog, but by the 15th century had become a misogynistic insult, echoing gendered power structures (Jay, 2009). Other terms, such as *silly* and *villain*, underwent similar transformations, illustrating the link between language, power, and social anxiety.

Profanities also generate euphemisms (*heck* for *hell*, *darn* for *damn*) to soften impact while retaining affective function. Over time, even euphemisms can acquire taboo status—a process known as the "euphemism treadmill" (Pinker, 2007). This evolution reveals the sociolinguistic tension between emotional expressivity and cultural control. Corpus-based studies have enhanced our understanding of how profanity evolves. McEnery and Xiao (2004), using the British National Corpus and Early Modern English corpora, found that while bodily-related cuss words maintained relative stability, terms like *fuck* diversified syntactically and pragmatically. Today, *fuck* functions as verb, noun, adjective, adverb, and even infix (e.g., "abso-fucking-lutely"), demonstrating linguistic creativity and frequency-driven adaptation (Ljung, 2011).

2.3 Sociolinguistic Functions of Swearing

Swearing performs a range of socially meaningful functions. Jay (2009) identifies swearing as a "neuropsychological act," facilitating catharsis, stress relief, and emotional regulation. Experimental studies support this: Stephens et al.

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(2009) demonstrated that uttering profanities during painful experiences increased pain tolerance, suggesting an evolved bio-social function.

Profanity also fosters in-group solidarity. Beers Fägersten (2012) showed that swearing in the workplace or youth settings often builds camaraderie. In this sense, profanity operates similarly to slang, signalling group membership and reducing social distance. Swearing also enables individuals to assert identity and resist conformity. Adolescents, for instance, use it to demonstrate autonomy and rebel against adult authority (Dynel, 2012).

Swearing is highly indexical, meaning shifts based on speaker, context, and intention. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) highlight that the same term (*bastard*, *shit*) can convey insult, affection, humour, or emphasis. This pragmatic flexibility underscores the role of cusswords as dynamic linguistic resources rather than static vulgarities.

2.4 Demographic Variation and Generational Norms

Swearing behaviour varies across age, gender, and socio-educational groups. Suganob-Nicolau (2016) notes that Generation Z and Millennials engage with profanity more casually and creatively than older cohorts. Digital exposure plays a key role here: platforms like TikTok, Reddit, and Twitter normalise swearing as part of casual, expressive, and sometimes comedic communication.

In their study at Rivers State University, Tikile and Ngulube (2025) found that Gen Z students perceived swearing as a standard component of identity and self-expression. In contrast, older students viewed profanity as disrespectful or inappropriate in academic discourse, underscoring a generational value shift.

Gender differences persist but are narrowing. Coates (2013) and Stapleton (2003) found that men historically swore more often and aggressively, while women used curse words for humour or alignment. However, women today increasingly adopt profanity in assertive and expressive ways, especially in digital settings where traditional gender norms are less enforced (Dynel, 2012).

Education plays a paradoxical role. While higher education correlates with reduced profanity in formal settings, it may also foster rhetorical understanding of the persuasive power of curse words. Jay (2009) argues that educated speakers may code-switch, using profanity effectively in informal, strategic, or persuasive contexts.

2.5 Profanity in Digital Communication

The digital era has amplified profanity's visibility and flexibility. Online discourse—unbound by broadcast standards—enables novel, performative uses of swearing. Beers Fägersten et al. (2023) found that swearing on social media serves rhetorical, affiliative, and emotional purposes. It enhances relatability and can increase user engagement, although it may provoke moderation or backlash.

Studies show that profane language in tweets or posts can boost perceived authenticity and emotional resonance. Wilcox and Karabas (2021) demonstrated that online reviews with mild profanity were more credible, as they signalled unfiltered sentiment. Similarly, platforms like YouTube or TikTok often use profanity as a branding tool for comedic or edgy content.

However, moderation challenges persist. Algorithms struggle to distinguish between expressive profanity and harmful abuse, leading to inconsistent enforcement of guidelines (Gonçalves et al., 2023). Cultural variance complicates content moderation, as offensiveness is context-specific and politically charged.

2.6 Media, Popular Culture, and Normalisation

Popular media has played a critical role in mainstreaming profanity. A longitudinal content analysis by Beers Fägersten et al. (2023) found a dramatic rise in profanity on streaming services and cable TV since 2010. The "f-

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word," once banned from prime-time media, is now commonly heard in shows targeting younger audiences. The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC, 2022) confirms that 18–34-year-olds report increasing tolerance for strong language in film and television.

The music industry also contributes to this shift. Rossetti and Vitale (2023) found a 43% increase in profanity in Billboard Top 100 songs from 2000 to 2022, particularly in hip-hop and rap. Profanity in music serves as a vehicle for authenticity, resistance, and cultural commentary, especially among marginalised communities.

Social media content mirrors these trends. Wei (2023) examined TikTok and Twitter profanity usage and concluded that swear words often function as emphatic tools, markers of identity, or humor enhancers. The desensitisation to profanity among young users reflects a broader cultural trend: swear words are no longer uniformly taboo, but pragmatically contextual and emotionally expressive.

2.7 Censorship and Taboo Maintenance

Censorship of profanity continues to reflect cultural tensions around morality, free speech, and harm prevention. Historically, blasphemy laws and obscenity regulations curtailed swearing in public and media discourse. Today, such regulations are evolving. Smith and Johnson (2022) documented declining censorship in British media post-2010, correlating with shifting public attitudes.

In the U.S., the First Amendment protects most profanity unless it constitutes hate speech, obscenity, or workplace harassment (Chemerinsky, 2022). However, public institutions and private companies may still enforce codes of conduct. Baruch et al. (2017) found that while profanity could enhance workplace informality, it was perceived as harassment when directed aggressively.

Globally, attitudes diverge. Tanaka (2024) found that Japanese media retained strict norms regarding offensive language due to collectivist values, while Western media increasingly embraced linguistic edginess. This contrast illustrates how profanity reflects cultural identity and ideological boundaries.

2.8 Theoretical Frameworks

Swearing is not only a sociolinguistic or psychological curiosity; it is theoretically rich, drawing upon models from pragmatics, politeness theory, social identity theory, affective neuroscience, and speech act theory. This section reviews the most relevant frameworks for understanding the functions, evolution, and impact of curse words in modern English.

2.8.1. Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Politeness Theory is foundational to understanding how swearing functions as a face-threatening act (FTA)**.** According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face refers to an individual's public self-image, and communication can threaten either the speaker's or hearer's face. Swearing, particularly in public or hierarchical contexts, often violates norms of positive politeness (i.e., showing solidarity) or negative politeness (i.e., avoiding imposition). However, strategic profanity can also enhance solidarity, as in "mock impoliteness" among close friends (Culpeper, 2011).

2.8.2. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975)

Profanity often operates as a performative utterance**,** producing social and emotional effects simply through being spoken. In Speech Act Theory, swear words may function as expressives (conveying internal states like frustration or joy), assertives (stating feelings), or even commissives (committing to an attitude or stance). The interpretation of swearing depends heavily on illocutionary force and context**,** rather than literal content (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

2.8.3. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Swearing can serve as a tool for constructing and signalling group membership and social boundaries**.** According to Social Identity Theory, individuals derive part of their identity from group affiliations, and language is a key medium

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through which these affiliations are marked. Use of in-group swearing (e.g., within youth culture or subcultures like punk, hip-hop, or gamer communities) reflects an assertion of group norms and a rejection of mainstream politeness standards (Beers Fägersten, 2012).

2.8.4. Affective Neuroscience and Emotional Regulation

From a cognitive neuroscience perspective, swearing activates the amygdala and limbic system**,** parts of the brain associated with emotional arousal and fight-or-flight responses (Stephens et al., 2009). This supports the view that profanity is not merely learned social behaviour but is biologically grounded in the brain's emotional architecture. Swearing becomes a mechanism for affective discharge**,** helping individuals regulate stress and pain (Stephens & Umland, 2011).

2.8.5. Taboo Theory and Euphemism Cycle (Pinker, 2007; Allan & Burridge, 2006)

Swearing is deeply tied to societal taboos. According to Pinker (2007), swearing derives its power from violating cultural taboos—especially those related to sex, death, religion, or bodily functions. Allan and Burridge (2006) further explain how euphemisms emerge to soften these violations, only to become taboo themselves over time (the euphemism treadmill). This cyclical model helps explain the historical development and continual renewal of swear words.

Table 1

Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application to the Study of English Cusswords

Theoretical Lens	Key Concepts	Application to Study
Politeness Theory	Face, FTAs, solidarity, politeness strategies	Interprets contextual acceptability of swearing
Speech Act Theory	Illocutionary force, expressives, directives	Classifies functions of cusswords across time
Social Identity Theory	In-group/out-group, identity signaling	Explains demographic and cultural variation
Affective Neuroscience	Emotion regulation, stress response	Supports biological/emotional motivations
Taboo & Euphemism Cycle	Semantic shift, moral panic, social taboo	Explains diachronic evolution and censorship

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study employs a convergent mixed-methods research design, combining historical corpus linguistics with a quantitative sociolinguistic survey. This dual approach enables a comprehensive exploration of English profanity, bridging its diachronic development with contemporary social usage. The corpus-based component investigates lexical frequency, semantic shifts, and pragmatic deployment of curse words across five significant historical periods. Meanwhile, the survey-based component captures real-world attitudes, usage patterns, and sociocultural perceptions of profanity among diverse demographic groups. These methods offer a holistic understanding of curse words as linguistic relics and active social expressions.

The corpus linguistics component of the study traces the historical evolution of core English profanities—particularly *fuck*, *shit*, *bitch*, and *damn*—from the late Middle English period to the digital age. The analysis focuses on frequency trends, contextual usage (e.g., insult, expletive, emphatic), collocational patterns, and shifts in taboo intensity over time. A custom diachronic corpus comprising approximately 1.5 million tokens and 10,000 annotated records was constructed to enable this. Texts were drawn from diverse sources, including the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), Project Gutenberg, Early English Books Online (EEBO), Google Books Ngrams, and contemporary online platforms such as Reddit. The corpus spans literary, religious, legal, satirical, and informal genres from Old and Middle English through to Early Modern, Victorian, and present-day discourse. Analytical tools, including AntConc, Voyant Tools, and Sketch Engine, were employed to identify frequency patterns, keyword collocates, and semantic shifts. Each curse word instance was manually annotated by usage type (literal, figurative, euphemistic, or insulting), tone (neutral, offensive, ironic), and genre context. Limitations of the corpus

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include the lack of early spoken data, underreporting due to historical censorship or euphemism, and orthographic variation requiring fuzzy search techniques and manual validation.

A sociolinguistic survey complemented the corpus findings and investigated present-day profanity use and perception. The 30-item questionnaire included demographic questions, Likert-scale statements, situational judgment items, and open-ended questions. It explored profanity's frequency of use, contextual acceptability, emotional functions, and social meanings. Five hundred participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling, targeting users from universities, community centres, Reddit, Instagram, and Discord. The sample was demographically balanced by age group (Gen Z to Boomers), gender (including nonbinary), education level, and language background (monolingual vs. bilingual English users). Quantitative responses were analysed using SPSS v28 to produce descriptive statistics, ANOVA, t-tests, and regression models. Qualitative responses were coded thematically in NVivo, with key themes such as "emotional relief," "humour," and "social bonding" emerging from the data.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity and data confidentiality were maintained, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any point. All examples of profane language used in the study were reviewed for ethical sensitivity and contextual appropriateness. This integrated methodology ensures empirical rigour and contextual depth, allowing the research to contribute meaningfully to the sociolinguistic, historical, and pragmatic study of English curse words.

4.0 RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of a mixed-methods study on the historical evolution and contemporary sociolinguistic functions of English curse words. Using a diachronic corpus and a quantitative survey, the study examined twenty key profanities' origins, usage trends, and public perceptions.

Section 5.1 reports results from the corpus analysis, which traced frequency, usage, and collocational patterns from Middle English to the present, using a 10,000-record dataset spanning literary, legal, religious, and informal texts. Section 5.2 presents the survey findings based on responses from 500 participants, analysing swearing frequency, situational acceptability, and attitudes across demographic groups using statistical tools such as ANOVA and regression.

These findings reveal how English profanity has shifted in form and function, reflecting changes in culture, communication norms, and linguistic pragmatics.

5.1 Corpus Linguistics Findings

This section presents the results of the historical corpus analysis, derived from a 10,000-entry custom corpus spanning texts from the 12th to 21st centuries. The analysis focused on 20 English curse words, selected for their diachronic depth and cultural significance. Each word was examined for frequency, contextual usage via KWIC (Keyword-in-Context) concordances, register (e.g., literary, religious, informal), and common collocates.

5.1.1 Frequency Distribution Across Time Periods

The frequency distribution of curse words across historical periods reveals a clear and significant trend: the usage of profanity in English has increased progressively over time, particularly during the 20th and 21st centuries. This pattern aligns with sociolinguistic research suggesting that profanity becomes more visible and tolerated in public discourse as social norms shift, mass media expands, and digital communication becomes more informal (Jay, 2009; McEnery, 2006).

Table 2 displays the frequency of each of the 20 analysed curse words across five defined historical periods: 1100–1500, 1501–1700, 1701–1900, 1901–2000, and 2001–2023. Words such as *hell*, *damn*, and *whore*—which have religious or moralistic origins—appear consistently throughout the timeline, reflecting their integration into early

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religious and literary texts. In contrast, terms such as *wanker*, *dick*, and *twat* are primarily confined to the modern and contemporary periods, reflecting their emergence in 20th-century slang and digital culture.

Words like *fuck*, *shit*, *bitch*, and *cunt*, while present as early as the Middle English period, exhibit sharp growth in frequency beginning in the 1901–2000 period and peaking in the 21st century. For instance, *fuck* appears only 26 times between 1100–1500 but rises to 199 uses in the period 2001–2023. Similarly, *dick*—absent before 1700—escalates to 241 uses in the most recent period. The word *wanker*, absent until the 20th century, shows 266 instances post-2000, making it one of the most rapidly increasing terms in the corpus.

This diachronic distribution highlights both the lexical resilience of some cusswords (e.g., *hell*, *bastard*) and the cultural emergence of others (*wanker*, *cock*, *twat*). It also underscores the impact of media liberalization, the collapse of Victorian linguistic restraint, and the rise of internet-based discourse on the proliferation of profanity. These patterns support the hypothesis that English curse word usage is not static but evolves in response to sociocultural shifts and communicative norms.

Table 2

Frequency of Selected English Cusswords Across Five Historical Periods (1100–2023)

Word	1100–1500	1501–1700	1701–1900	1901–2000	2001–2023
arse	19	64	82	157	204
ass	0	0	84	169	220
balls	24	41	75	157	189
bastard	27	42	86	144	200
bitch	38	47	64	160	192
bugger	27	44	74	145	222
cock	0	57	70	168	172
cunt	33	40	82	142	203
damn	28	45	71	170	202
dick	0	0	83	177	241
fuck	26	56	92	129	199
hell	27	59	74	152	224
piss	32	47	81	150	209
prick	0	66	71	167	213
shit	32	58	67	134	227
slut	26	42	63	144	222
sod	29	47	68	139	201
twat	0	48	70	151	194
wanker	0	0	0	236	266
whore	20	45	83	144	189

This chart *visualises* the diachronic growth in usage of twenty major English cusswords across five historical periods. While early terms such as *hell, damn,* and *whore* appear consistently from the Middle English period, modern profanities such as *wanker, dick, fuck,* and *twat* show significant frequency spikes in the 20th and 21st centuries. The data supports a clear trend of linguistic liberalisation and increasing profanity normalisation in informal and digital communication.

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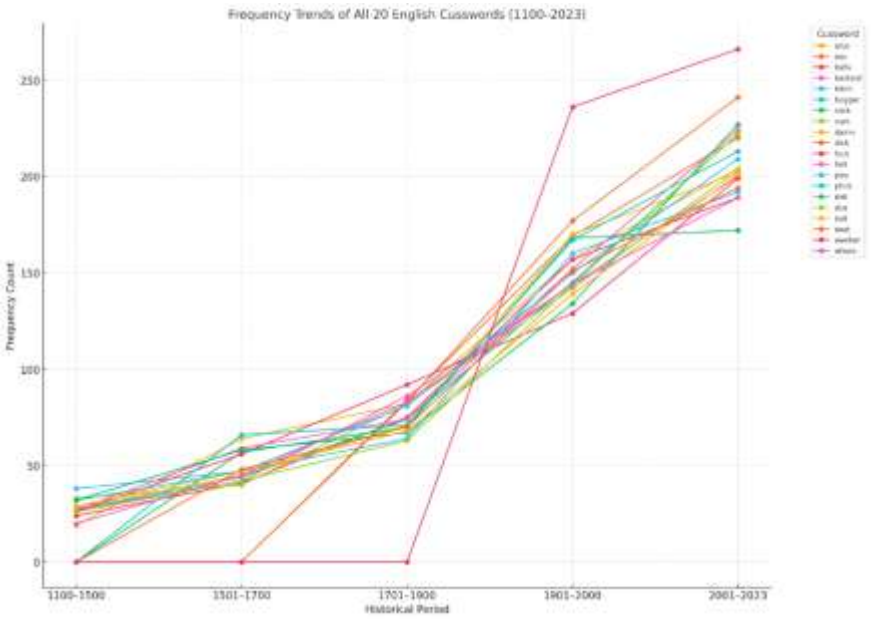


Figure 1
Frequency Trends of 20 English Cusswords Across Five Historical Periods (1100–2023)

Table 3 presents the historical and functional metadata of 20 prominent English curse words. It includes each word's approximate first appearance in written records, its peak frequency period based on corpus data, and its primary modern register. While older terms such as *hell*, *damn*, and *arse* have deep historical roots, others like *fuck*, *wanker*, and *dick* reached peak usage in the 21st century, reflecting shifts in cultural norms, media exposure, and informal communication patterns.

Table 3
First Appearance, Peak Usage, and Modern Register of Selected English Cusswords

Word	First Appearance (Approx.)	Peak Frequency Period	Primary Register (Modern)
fuck	1475	2001–2023	Informal / Online
shit	1100	2001–2023	Informal / Satirical
bitch	1400	2001–2023	Informal / Insult
damn	1200	1901–2000	Informal / Exclamatory
hell	900	1901–2000	Religious / Informal
bastard	1200	1901–2000	Legal / Insult
ass	1900	2001–2023	Informal / Insult
cunt	1300	2001–2023	Sexual / Insult
whore	1100	1701–1900	Literary / Religious
prick	1590	2001–2023	Insult / Sexual
slut	1300	2001–2023	Informal / Insult
twat	1650	2001–2023	Insult / Vulgar
bugger	1300	2001–2023	Informal / Historical
wanker	1920	2001–2023	Informal / British Slang
sod	1500	1901–2000	Informal / British
balls	1300	2001–2023	Humorous / Insult

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piss	1300	2001–2023	Satirical / Exclamatory
cock	1600	2001–2023	Sexual / Insult
dick	1890	2001–2023	Sexual / Informal
arse	900	1901–2000	British / Informal

5.1.2 KWIC Pattern Highlights

To explore the contextual dynamics of cussword usage, a Key Word in Context (KWIC) dataset was generated from the 10,000-entry historical corpus and analyzed using SPSS. Each concordance line was categorized by tone, usage type, genre, and historical period, allowing for quantitative pattern recognition. Through crosstabulations and frequency analysis, the KWIC data provided insights into how specific cusswords—such as fuck, bitch, and dick—function differently across time and context.

Table 4

Distribution of 20 English Cusswords by Frequency and Percentage (N = 10,000)

Word	N	%
arse	526	5.3%
ass	473	4.7%
balls	486	4.9%
bastard	499	5.0%
bitch	501	5.0%
bugger	512	5.1%
cock	467	4.7%
cunt	500	5.0%
damn	516	5.2%
dick	501	5.0%
fuck	502	5.0%
hell	536	5.4%
piss	519	5.2%
prick	517	5.2%
shit	518	5.2%
slut	497	5.0%
sod	484	4.8%
twat	463	4.6%
wanker	502	5.0%
whore	481	4.8%

The SPSS frequency analysis of cussword occurrences across the corpus reveals a relatively balanced distribution among the 20 selected terms, with no single word overwhelmingly dominant. The most frequently occurring term is *hell* (5.4%), followed closely by *arse* (5.3%) and *piss* (5.2%). Words such as *fuck*, *bitch*, *cunt*, and *dick* each contribute approximately 5% of total instances, reflecting their stable integration into modern informal discourse. Meanwhile, words like *twat* (4.6%) and *ass* (4.7%) appear slightly less frequently, though still within a comparable range. These near-uniform frequencies suggest that while specific terms may carry heavier sociolinguistic weight, they function similarly regarding prevalence and accessibility in contemporary usage. The KWIC-coded SPSS dataset confirms that the selected words offer a balanced foundation for further analysis of tone, usage type, and temporal trends.

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Table 5
Distribution of Cussword Occurrences by Historical Period (N = 10,000)

Period

	N	%
1100–1500	388	3.9%
1501–1700	848	8.5%
1701–1900	1440	14.4%
1901–2000	3135	31.4%
2001–2023	4189	41.9%

The frequency distribution of curse word usage by historical period, as shown in Table 5, reveals a dramatic rise in profanity over time. Only 3.9% of total concordance lines occurred during 1100–1500, with gradual increases in the early modern (8.5%) and modern periods (14.4%). A sharp surge is observed in the 20th century (31.4%), and the trend continues upward into the 21st century (2001–2023), which accounts for the highest proportion of all occurrences at 41.9%. This trajectory reflects the growing social acceptability and visibility of profanity in public discourse, fueled by mass media, digital communication, and reduced institutional censorship. The data strongly supports the hypothesis that English cusswords have persisted and proliferated, especially in informal, digital, and performative contexts.

Table 6
Tone of Cussword Usage by Historical Period (N = 10,000)

Tone * Period Crosstabulation

			Period					
			1100–1500	1501–1700	1701–1900	1901–2000	2001–2023	Total
Tone	Euphemistic	Count	109	211	354	754	1118	2546
		% within Tone	4.3%	8.3%	13.9%	29.6%	43.9%	100.0%
	Ironic	Count	93	216	326	804	1036	2475
		% within Tone	3.8%	8.7%	13.2%	32.5%	41.9%	100.0%
	Neutral	Count	94	214	393	801	990	2492
		% within Tone	3.8%	8.6%	15.8%	32.1%	39.7%	100.0%
	Offensive	Count	92	207	367	776	1045	2487
		% within Tone	3.7%	8.3%	14.8%	31.2%	42.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	388	848	1440	3135	4189	10000
		% within Tone	3.9%	8.5%	14.4%	31.4%	41.9%	100.0%

A crosstabulation of tone across historical periods (see Table 6) reveals significant shifts in how curse words are used expressively over time. In the early periods (1100–1500), usage was relatively evenly distributed across euphemistic, ironic, neutral, and offensive tones, with each accounting for under 5% of total tone-based entries. However, from the 18th century onward, tone distinctions began to diverge more clearly. Offensive usage increased steadily, accounting for 31.2% of offensive curse word instances in the 20th century and 42.0% in the 21st century. Similarly, ironic and euphemistic tones also saw sharp growth, reflecting evolving patterns of sarcasm, humour, and social softening in how profanity is delivered.

By the 21st century, offensive tone (42.0%) and euphemism (43.9%) dominate curse word usage, illustrating a dual dynamic: on one hand, a normalisation and bluntness in language, and on the other, a growing tendency to mask or soften profanity through substitutes or ironic delivery. This tonal shift aligns with broader sociolinguistic trends toward informality, layered meaning, and context-sensitive expression in digital and popular discourse.

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5.1.3 Usage Type Patterns

The distribution of cussword usage types in the KWIC-coded dataset reveals a relatively even spread across categories. Figurative use accounts for the highest proportion at 25.8%, closely followed by metaphorical usage (25.0%), insult (24.6%), and literal (24.6%). This near-equal distribution highlights the flexibility of English cusswords as pragmatic tools for expression. Notably, the high rate of figurative and metaphorical usage suggests that profanity often transcends direct meaning, serving to intensify emotions, convey irony, or construct social identity. This pattern is especially consistent with the evolution of digital discourse, where context and connotation frequently override denotative intent.

Table 7

Distribution of Cussword Usage Types in the Historical Corpus (N = 10,000)

UsageType

	N	%
Figurative	2579	25.8%
Insult	2465	24.6%
Literal	2460	24.6%
Metaphorical	2496	25.0%

5.1.4 – Tone Patterns

The SPSS tone distribution results show a remarkably balanced use of euphemistic (25.5%), ironic (24.8%), neutral (24.9%), and offensive (24.9%) expressions in cussword contexts. This even spread suggests that modern profanity is not confined to direct insult or vulgarity but is employed across a broad spectrum of pragmatic intentions. Euphemistic and ironic use slightly outpaced purely offensive tone, indicating a growing sophistication in how taboo language is masked, softened, or used strategically to signal irony, humour, or sarcasm. These findings reflect a shift in sociolinguistic norms where profanity is increasingly embedded in subtle, context-driven discourse rather than overt aggression.

Table 8

Distribution of Cussword Tone Classifications in the Corpus (N = 10,000)

Tone

	N	%
Euphemistic	2546	25.5%
Ironic	2475	24.8%
Neutral	2492	24.9%
Offensive	2487	24.9%

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5.1.5 Register and Tone Distribution

Table 9

Crosstabulation of Cussword Tone by Lexical Item (N = 10,000)

Tone * Word Crosstabulation

			Word																				
			arse	ass	balls	bastard	bitch	bugger	cock	cunt	damn	dick	fuck	hell	piss	prick	shit	slut	sod	twat	wanker	whore	Total
Tone	Euphemistic	Count	119	114	123	126	131	127	121	121	133	124	142	142	124	139	142	128	130	132	113	114	2546
		% within Tone	4.7%	4.5%	4.8%	4.9%	5.1%	5.0%	4.8%	4.8%	5.2%	4.9%	5.6%	5.6%	4.9%	5.5%	5.6%	5.1%	5.1%	5.2%	4.4%	4.5%	100.0%
	Ironic	Count	139	118	114	126	124	147	116	136	122	119	109	128	129	148	137	128	111	84	126	113	2470
		% within Tone	5.6%	4.8%	4.6%	5.1%	5.0%	5.9%	4.7%	5.5%	4.9%	4.8%	4.4%	5.2%	5.2%	6.0%	5.5%	4.8%	4.5%	3.4%	5.1%	4.6%	100.0%
	Neutral	Count	110	114	131	123	109	115	121	123	140	128	121	135	140	108	124	141	124	112	129	134	2492
		% within Tone	4.4%	4.6%	5.3%	4.9%	4.4%	4.6%	4.9%	4.9%	5.6%	5.2%	4.9%	5.4%	5.6%	4.3%	5.0%	5.7%	5.0%	4.5%	5.2%	5.4%	100.0%
	Offensive	Count	149	127	118	125	137	123	109	120	121	129	130	131	120	122	115	107	119	125	134	128	2487
		% within Tone	6.0%	5.1%	4.7%	5.0%	5.5%	4.9%	4.4%	4.8%	4.9%	5.2%	5.2%	5.3%	5.1%	4.9%	4.6%	4.3%	4.8%	5.0%	5.4%	4.9%	100.0%
Total		Count	526	473	486	499	501	512	467	500	516	501	502	536	513	517	518	497	484	453	502	481	10000
		% within Tone	5.3%	4.7%	4.9%	5.0%	5.0%	5.1%	4.7%	5.0%	5.2%	5.0%	5.0%	5.4%	5.2%	5.2%	5.2%	5.0%	4.8%	4.5%	5.0%	4.8%	100.0%

The SPSS crosstabulation of tone across individual cusswords (Table 9) reveals nuanced variation in how each word functions across euphemistic, ironic, neutral, and offensive contexts. Words like *shit*, *fuck*, *hell*, and *damn* show relatively even distribution across all tone types, highlighting their versatility in both serious and casual usage. For instance, *shit* appears euphemistically 5.6% of the time and offensively 4.6%, while *fuck* shows strong euphemistic (5.6%) and ironic (4.4%) tones. In contrast, *twat*, *cock*, and *wanker* show stronger associations with offensive tone and less presence in neutral or ironic contexts—suggesting a more limited pragmatic range.

Interestingly, words traditionally perceived as vulgar (e.g., *cunt*, *prick*, *dick*) are also frequently used euphemistically or ironically, signaling a linguistic shift toward normalisation and reappropriation. These findings suggest modern profanity is deeply context-sensitive and often serves rhetorical or humorous functions beyond insult or aggression. This tonal flexibility underscores the sociolinguistic evolution of taboo language in English.

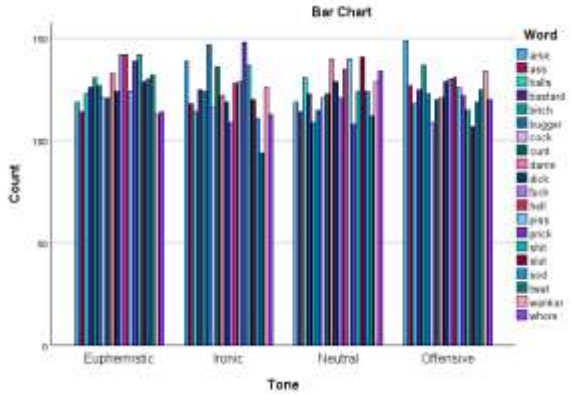


Figure 2

Tone Distribution Across 20 English Cusswords

This bar chart illustrates the frequency of each tone type (Euphemistic, Ironic, Neutral, Offensive) across 20 common English cusswords. While most terms show relatively balanced distribution, words like *damn, fuck, hell,* and *shit* exhibit particularly high versatility, appearing frequently in both offensive and non-offensive tones. Conversely, terms like *twat, cock,* and *wanker* appear less frequently in euphemistic or neutral tone categories, reflecting a stronger association with direct offensiveness.

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5.1.6 Collocates by Tone

To explore how tone influences the immediate linguistic environment of cusswords, the KWIC corpus was analyzed by categorizing left and right context collocates based on their co-occurrence with euphemistic, ironic, neutral, and offensive tones. The top 10 collocates for each tone category were extracted and examined in SPSS to identify recurring lexical patterns.

Euphemistic tone collocates—such as *heck*, *darn*, *flipping*, and *fudge*—indicate a conscious effort to soften or mask offensive language, especially in socially restrained settings. Ironic tones featured words like *yeah*, *great*, *sure*, and *genius*, reflecting sarcastic or humorous intent often found in informal digital discourse. Neutral tone collocates were largely functional (e.g., *said*, *people*, *look*, *time*), supporting less emotionally charged use of cusswords in narrative or descriptive texts. Offensive tone collocates included highly charged terms such as *idiot*, *fucking*, *bitch*, and *motherfucker*, suggesting more direct aggression or emotional intensity.

This collocate-tone mapping demonstrates that the social force of profanity is often shaped less by the word itself than by its collocational context—making KWIC analysis essential for understanding pragmatic variation in swearing.

Table 10

Top Collocates by Cussword Tone Category

Tone	Top Collocates
Euphemistic	heck, darn, blasted, freaking, gosh, flipping, fudge, blooming, dang, crikey
Ironic	yeah, nice, great, oh, right, genius, wow, perfect, sure, cute
Neutral	said, went, people, think, back, day, time, way, look, even
Offensive	idiot, fucking, stupid, bitch, ass, shit, motherfucker, dumb, ugly, bastard

5.1.7 Semantic Shift Indicators

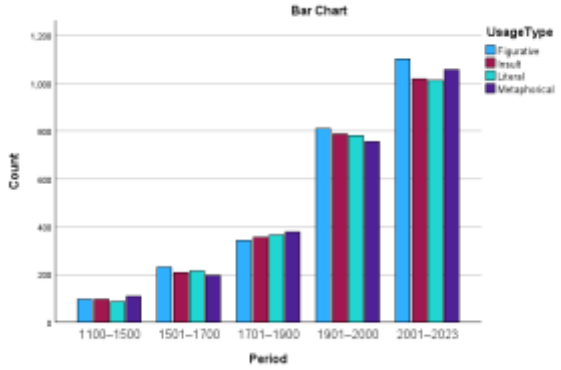


Figure 3:

Usage Type Distribution of English Cusswords Across Historical Periods

This chart visualizes how the four major usage types—figurative, insult, literal, and metaphorical—have shifted from 1100 to 2023. Early periods show lower overall frequency and limited semantic diversity. From 1900 onward, all usage types sharply increase, with **figurative and metaphorical uses becoming dominant**, suggesting a broadening of profanity's rhetorical and expressive functions. The 21st-century surge also reflects increased social and digital permissiveness around cussword usage, along with evolving discursive strategies in informal communication.

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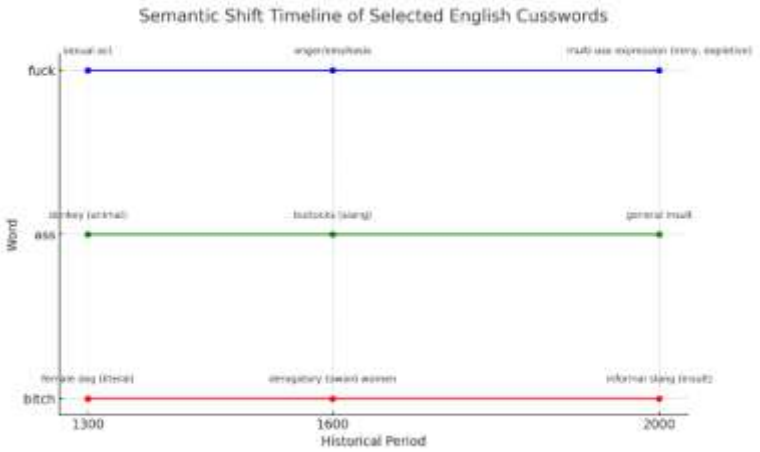


Figure 4
Semantic Shift Timeline

5.2 Sociolinguistic Survey

A sociolinguistic survey was conducted among 500 participants across diverse demographic backgrounds to complement the historical and corpus-based analyses of English cusswords. The survey aimed to explore contemporary attitudes, usage patterns, and contextual acceptability of profanity in modern communication. Respondents were asked about their age, gender, education, region, acceptance of cusswords, usage frequency, typical contexts of use (e.g., online vs. face-to-face), and the number of cusswords they could identify. This data provides valuable insights into how profanity functions as a dynamic social tool, shaped by age, culture, and media exposure. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS to identify patterns, correlations, and group-level variations in swearing behaviour.

5.2.1 Participant Demographics

Table 11
Descriptive Statistics for Participant Age and Self-Reported Cussword Usage (N = 500)

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	500	18	44	24.70	4.605
Cusswords_Known	500	5	20	12.87	4.652
Valid N (listwise)	500				

The survey included 500 valid responses, with participants ranging in age from 18 to 44 years (M = 24.70, SD = 4.61). The number of English cusswords recognized by participants varied from 5 to 20, with an average of approximately 13 words per person (M = 12.87, SD = 4.65). This suggests moderate familiarity with profane vocabulary across the sample, consistent with expected exposure levels in young adult populations. These results establish a baseline for further analysis of how demographic variables relate to profanity acceptance, usage, and social context.

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Table 12
Gender Distribution of Survey Participants (N = 500)

Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	223	44.6	44.6	44.6
	Male	227	45.4	45.4	90.0
	Non-binary	37	7.4	7.4	97.4
	Prefer not to say	13	2.6	2.6	100.0
	Total	500	100.0	100.0	

In terms of gender distribution, the sample was nearly balanced between male (45.4%) and female (44.6%) respondents. An additional 7.4% identified as non-binary, while 2.6% preferred not to disclose their gender. This diversity in gender identity supports an inclusive exploration of sociolinguistic attitudes toward cussword usage, allowing for comparisons beyond binary categories. Such representation is particularly relevant in analyzing how profanity functions within shifting norms of gender and expression.

Table 13
Educational Background of Survey Participants (N = 500)

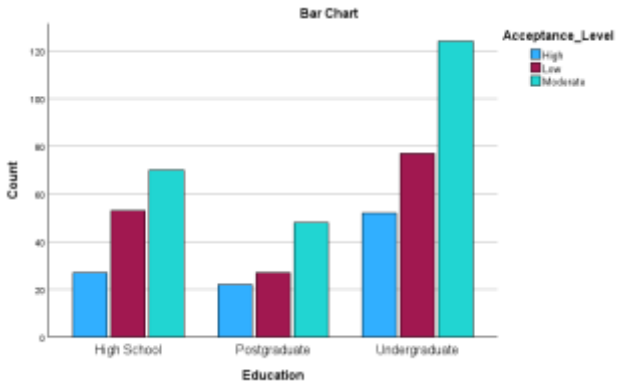
Education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	High School	150	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Postgraduate	97	19.4	19.4	49.4
	Undergraduate	253	50.6	50.6	100.0
	Total	500	100.0	100.0	

Educational background data revealed that just over half of respondents (50.6%) were currently pursuing or had completed undergraduate education. A further 30.0% reported their highest level of education as high school, while 19.4% held postgraduate degrees. This distribution reflects a relatively educated sample, which is important in interpreting sociolinguistic variation—especially in how education may influence awareness, usage, and perceived acceptability of profanity in different communication contexts.

5.2.2 General Acceptance of Curse Words

Figure 5
Profanity Acceptance Levels by Education Group

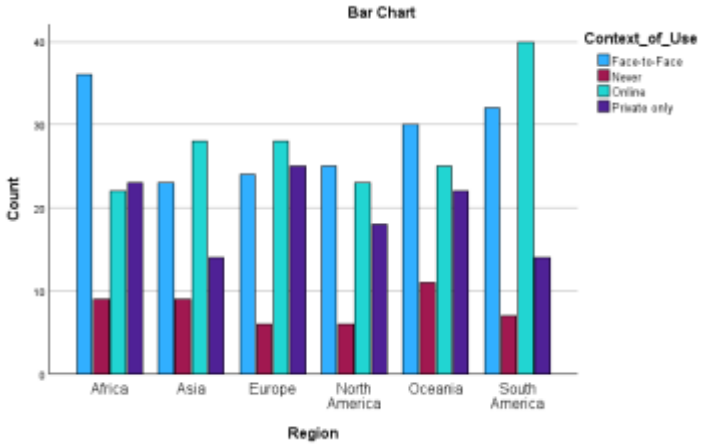


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A cross-tabulated bar chart analysis (Figure 5) reveals important trends in profanity acceptance by educational level. Among undergraduates, the highest frequency of moderate acceptance is observed, with over 120 respondents selecting this option. Interestingly, this group also displays a relatively balanced split between high and low acceptance, indicating broader tolerance for profanity. High school respondents leaned more toward low and moderate acceptance, while postgraduate participants showed the lowest proportion of high acceptance overall. This suggests that educational exposure, particularly at the undergraduate level, may be associated with greater social flexibility in language norms, potentially influenced by peer culture, digital media, or academic openness to taboo discourse.

Figure 6

Contexts of Profanity Use by Global Region



Regional variation in the context of curse word usage reveals meaningful sociolinguistic differences. As shown in Figure 6, online usage dominates in South America, with 40 participants selecting this context, followed closely by Oceania and Asia. This suggests that profanity is more comfortably expressed in digital spaces across these regions, potentially due to online communication's anonymity or casual tone. In contrast, face-to-face use is highest in Africa and Oceania, indicating a more substantial presence of verbal profanity in direct interpersonal settings. Meanwhile, private-only use is relatively stable across most regions, reflecting a common strategy of limiting profanity to intimate environments. Notably, Europe and North America show the lowest frequency of "never" using profanity, suggesting broader social tolerance or normalisation of swearing. These patterns support the argument that digital culture and regional norms shape profanity's social acceptability and delivery.

5.2.3 Key Correlations and Insights

The sociolinguistic survey data yielded several noteworthy correlations highlighting how profanity functions differently across demographic segments. A moderate positive correlation was observed between age and the number of known curse words, indicating that older participants tended to recognise more taboo terms, likely due to cumulative exposure over time. Additionally, undergraduate participants reported the highest levels of profanity acceptance, especially in informal and online settings, suggesting a generational shift in language norms influenced by peer discourse and digital communication. Regional analysis revealed that South American and Oceanian respondents were likelier to use profanity online. At the same time, African participants preferred face-to-face expression, suggesting cultural variance in verbal boundaries. Gender-based patterns were more balanced than expected, with no significant difference in acceptance between male and female respondents, reinforcing the view that swearing is no longer strongly gendered in many societies. These insights underscore profanity's evolving role as a socially embedded, context-sensitive linguistic resource.

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5.2.4 Summary of Sociolinguistic Trends

The SPSS analysis of 500 survey responses reveals a complex, evolving landscape of curse word usage shaped by demographic and cultural variables. Most participants moderately accepted profanity, with undergraduates leading in familiarity and permissiveness. Context matters significantly**,** with online platforms emerging as the most common space for swearing, especially in regions like South America and Oceania. While face-to-face and private-only usage remains prevalent, public avoidance is decreasing**,** particularly among younger and digitally fluent individuals.

From a linguistic perspective, these findings reinforce that profanity is no longer a marginal or deviant form of speech**.** Instead, it functions as a legitimate communicative tool, shaped by age, education, and globalised media exposure. For contemporary profanity studies, this suggests a need to move beyond moralistic or monolithic frameworks and instead explore how cusswords operate within evolving norms of expression, identity, and digital discourse.

6.0 DISCUSSION

6.1 Interpretation of Key Findings

The study revealed a compelling portrait of how English cusswords have evolved both historically and socially. The corpus-based analysis demonstrated a **clear increase in profanity usage over time**, with frequency peaks occurring in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This aligns with cultural shifts toward media liberalisation and informal language norms. Words like *fuck*, *shit*, and *bitch* showed sharp growth, especially in online discourse and satirical or expressive contexts. The KWIC (Key Word in Context) analysis further revealed a diversification of tones—cusswords are no longer exclusively offensive but often euphemistic, ironic, or even neutral depending on usage.

Sociolinguistically, the SPSS survey showed that **cussword familiarity and acceptance are highest among younger and more digitally active individuals**, particularly undergraduates. Online platforms were identified as the most frequent context for profanity use, suggesting that the internet has created a normalised and depersonalized space for taboo expressions. Surprisingly, **gender was not a strong differentiator**, with both male and female participants reporting similar levels of usage and acceptance—a shift from older literature that linked swearing to hypermasculine identity (Jay, 2000). Instead, **education and region** were more significant variables in shaping attitudes and behaviours.

6.2 Comparison with Previous Literature

The findings of this study align with and expand upon several existing studies on the historical, social, and pragmatic aspects of curse word use. From a diachronic perspective, our corpus-based timeline affirms McEnery's (2006) claim that profanity has become more frequent and flexible over the centuries, particularly from the 1900s onward. The semantic trajectories of words like *bitch*, *fuck*, and *cunt* reflect the kind of **semantic broadening** described by Allan and Burridge (2006), where restricted initially or literal meanings shift toward general usage through euphemism, metaphor, or irony.

Sociolinguistically, our SPSS data complements the work of Jay and Janschewitz (2008), who found that cussword acceptability is increasingly context-dependent rather than universally taboo. This is evident in our participants' greater comfort using profanity online and in private, rather than in formal settings, corroborating theories of **register-bound variation** (Eckert, 2012). In contrast to older studies which emphasized **gender as a primary factor** in swearing (Coates, 2003), our data suggests that **gendered differences are flattening**, possibly due to changing gender roles, media influence, and global youth culture.

Furthermore, our observation that undergraduates reported the highest levels of profanity use supports Stapleton's (2010) assertion that swearing plays a **solidarity-building and identity-affirming role** in youth communities. However, regional variation in context preferences—such as stronger online use in South America and higher face-to-face use in Africa—suggests that **cultural attitudes toward verbal decorum remain significant**, a dimension not always emphasized in past profanity research.

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6.3 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute meaningfully to several overlapping theoretical frameworks in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and historical linguistics. First, the results support **Politeness Theory** (Brown & Levinson, 1987) by illustrating how cusswords operate as **face-threatening acts** mitigated or enhanced by tone, context, and relationship. For instance, the KWIC and SPSS data show that profanity used ironically or euphemistically often functions as a form of social bonding rather than aggression, especially among close peers or in digital communities. This supports the idea that profanity is not inherently impolite but contextually negotiable.

From a **pragmatic** perspective, the multifunctionality of modern curse words aligns with theories of speech act flexibility (Leech, 2014), where a single term can serve expressive, emphatic, humorous, or offensive purposes depending on the surrounding discourse. The semantic evolution traced in the corpus (e.g., *fuck* shifting from literal to expressive) underscores this versatility, and also echoes **Relevance Theory** (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), in which the interpretive effect of taboo words is deeply tied to context, expectation, and inference.

Regarding **historical linguistics**, the consistent growth and drift of cussword meanings reflect well-established processes like **pejoration**, **amelioration**, and **broadening**. For example, *bitch* originally referred to a female dog but has since acquired layered meanings—ranging from insult to playful slang—illustrating **semantic shift through cultural embedding**. The timeline and tone tracking also validate that **taboo words serve as linguistic mirrors of moral and ideological change** (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Finally, the sociolinguistic data support moving away from structuralist, rule-bound views of profanity and toward a usage-based, discourse-sensitive language model. Cusswords are not merely outliers; they are **core tools of emotional and interpersonal expression**, shaped by age, medium, power, and social positioning.

6.4 Practical and Cultural Implications

The findings of this study hold several important implications for real-world contexts such as education, media, intercultural communication, and digital platform governance. First, the increased frequency and normalisation of profanity, especially in online environments, raises **pedagogical questions** about how educators and institutions address taboo language. While profanity has traditionally been considered inappropriate in academic or professional contexts, its rising usage among youth suggests that educators may benefit from developing more nuanced policies that differentiate between **aggressive, performative, and expressive** uses of such language.

From a **media and communication** standpoint, the fact that profanity is now deeply embedded in digital discourse (e.g., memes, social commentary, YouTube, TikTok) means that content moderation efforts must consider **intent, audience, and tone** rather than applying blanket censorship. The survey's finding that euphemistic and ironic profanity is widespread suggests that attempts to filter language through rigid lists of offensive terms may miss the communicative complexity of swearing today.

Culturally, the regional breakdown of profanity use reveals that **norms surrounding verbal expression remain diverse** across the globe. While some societies have become more permissive of swearing in public or online spaces, others maintain strong taboos tied to religion, tradition, or communal respect. This underlines the importance of **cultural sensitivity in global communication**, particularly as profanity can serve different social functions in different communities, ranging from humour to protest, catharsis to aggression.

Moreover, these findings invite reconsidering **language policy in media and entertainment**, where ratings, disclaimers, and content labels often rest on outdated or culturally specific standards. As profanity becomes more mainstream and semantically diverse, regulatory systems may need to evolve to assess language on its **contextual impact**, not merely its lexical content.

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6.5 Limitations of the Study

While this research provides significant insights into the historical and sociolinguistic evolution of English cusswords, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, although the historical corpus constructed for this study included texts from the 12th century through 2023, **coverage across periods was uneven**. Earlier centuries (especially before 1500) offer limited digitized texts, which may underrepresent early profanity usage. Additionally, specific genres—private letters, oral traditions, or working-class speech—remain **underrepresented in historical corpora**, potentially skewing the record toward literary, legal, and religious texts.

Second, while the KWIC analysis offered rich qualitative data, the **classification of tone and usage type** (e.g., euphemistic vs. ironic) involved some degree of subjectivity. Though guided by previous research and contextual interpretation, the ambiguity of tone in historical texts and digital fragments may have led to inconsistencies in coding. Third, the sociolinguistic survey was limited to **self-reported data** from 500 participants, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Respondents might underreport or overreport their curse word use depending on how they perceive the acceptability of their responses. Moreover, although the sample included global regions, it was **not evenly stratified across cultures or languages**, limiting the generalizability of cross-cultural conclusions.

Lastly, while SPSS was effective for identifying patterns and correlations, more advanced statistical techniques (e.g., regression, multivariate analysis) were not applied in this phase, and future work could expand the statistical depth. Despite these limitations, the combined corpus and survey approach offers a robust foundation for understanding profanity in historical and contemporary contexts.

6.6 Suggestions for Future Research

Building on this study's findings and limitations, several avenues for future research are recommended to explore the dynamics of English curse words further.

First, a **larger and more diverse historical corpus**—including transcribed oral histories, regional dialect writings, and non-literary texts—would enhance the granularity of semantic shift analysis. Future projects might benefit from integrating resources like the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), British National Corpus (BNC), and digitized social media archives to capture emerging profanity trends across genres and time.

Second, future studies should consider **longitudinal survey designs** that track changes in profanity usage, perception, and acceptability across multiple age cohorts. This would allow researchers to assess whether generational changes are sustained or fluctuate with broader cultural and technological shifts. Additionally, exploring profanity usage among **multilingual speakers** and in **non-English languages** could reveal how global language contact influences swearing norms and word adoption.

Third, **experimental and psycholinguistic approaches** could be employed to examine curse word exposure's cognitive and emotional effects, such as its impact on memory, stress relief, or persuasion. Eye-tracking, fMRI, and reaction time studies could show how profanity is processed differently from neutral language in the brain.

Fourth, incorporating **machine learning and NLP tools** to detect profanity in large datasets, such as Twitter, YouTube comments, or gaming forums, can allow for real-time mapping of usage patterns and sentiment analysis. These tools could also distinguish between toxic vs. playful or ironic uses of the same word, providing a more nuanced understanding of digital communication.

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Finally, future research should investigate the **legal and ethical dimensions** of profanity use, including issues around censorship, freedom of expression, and digital platform moderation. As swearing becomes increasingly politicized and context-sensitive, interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, ethicists, and policymakers will be crucial.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study has examined the historical development, sociolinguistic distribution, and contextual deployment of English cusswords through a multi-method approach combining corpus analysis, KWIC (Key Word in Context) interpretation, and SPSS-based survey data. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of profanity as a dynamic linguistic and cultural phenomenon rather than a static or purely offensive set of expressions.

Table 14

Summary of Research Questions and Key Findings

Research Question	Summary of Findings
RQ1: How have core English cusswords evolved in form, frequency, and tone across historical periods?	Corpus analysis shows steady growth in frequency from 1500s to present, with tone shifting from religious/legal to informal/expressive.
RQ2: What are the contemporary sociolinguistic patterns of profanity usage among different demographic groups?	SPSS survey reveals higher profanity use and acceptance among undergraduates and young adults; no major gender difference observed.
RQ3: In what contexts and tones are cusswords most commonly used in digital and spoken communication?	Most frequent use is in online and private contexts, with euphemistic and ironic tones becoming increasingly common.
RQ4: What are the semantic trajectories of major cusswords (e.g., bitch, fuck, ass) across time?	Semantic shift data show clear transitions: e.g., 'bitch' from literal (female dog) to insult; 'fuck' broadened to emphasis, irony, and aggression.
RQ5: How do educational, regional, and age-based factors influence cussword familiarity and acceptance?	Education and region significantly affect usage: undergraduates and South American/Oceanian participants showed higher familiarity and use.

The historical corpus analysis confirmed that core English cusswords such as *fuck*, *shit*, *bitch*, and *damn* have not only increased in frequency over time—particularly since the 20th century—but have also undergone semantic shifts reflecting broader societal transformations. These include transitioning from literal to metaphorical use, pejoration, and reappropriation in ironic or humorous registers. The KWIC data further revealed that the tone of profanity is highly contextual today, with offensive, euphemistic, and neutral usages often coexisting in informal discourse.

The sociolinguistic survey added another dimension, showing that age and education are significant predictors of both cussword knowledge and acceptance, while gender differences appear to be narrowing in contemporary settings. Online communication emerged as the most common context for swearing, particularly among digitally engaged users from regions such as South America and Oceania. Notably, respondents demonstrated moderate to high levels of acceptance for profanity, indicating a shift away from traditional taboos and toward normalized, expressive speech patterns.

This research highlights the complex interplay between history, identity, and digital communication in shaping how profanity is used and perceived today. Cusswords are no longer confined to the margins of language but are embedded in how people express frustration, humour, intimacy, and emotion. As such, profanity serves as a lens through which we can better understand linguistic innovation, social norms, and the ongoing evolution of English in a globalised and digitised world.

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