

# What the @!&#?: UT Students' Bad Language Ideologies

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**Abstract**  
 Most languages in the modern world have a whole host of words that are “off limits” or “bad”. These words have been deemed taboo by the social elite. Taboo words are usually related to taboo topics; for instance, the American social elite have determined that words referring to sex, scatology, and blasphemy are under the taboo umbrella.

**Research Question**  
 •What ‘Bad Language Words’ (BLWs) are students using?  
 •How do students use and feel about *fuck*, *god/God*, *cunt*, *bitch*, and *nigger/nigga*?  
 •How offensive are these words to students? Why?

**Background**  
 Much research has been conducted on BLWs, particularly around older generation’s swearword language ideologies (Jay 1992), the relationship between purity and power (McEnery 2006), and the relationship between gender and BLW usage (Kiesling 1998, de Klerk 1992, Wells 1989, etc.). There is little research revolving around Millennial/ Generation Z language ideologies of BLWs, though. This study is a sociolinguistic analysis of the University of Tennessee (UTK) students’ use of and ideologies concerning BLWs. I restricted the survey sample to UTK students as most every student registered at UTK is in the Millennial/ Generation Z population.

**Methods**

- Distributed a survey (n=60) through various social media platforms and online group chats
- Survey asked students: what BLWs they used most frequently, in what context (description, anger, sarcasm, etc.), their daily usage of five specific BLWs- *fuck*, *god*, *cunt*, *bitch*, and *nigger/nigga*, and their rating of the offensiveness of these words on a 1 (not offensive) to 10 (highly offensive) scale.
- Compared and synthesized data to draw a general conclusion about UT students’ language ideologies

**Results**

- 37% of students said *fuck* is their most used BLW. *Shit*, also at 37%, is tied for first place
- *Nigger/nigga* was rated as the most offensive and least frequently used. This pattern is consistent with *cunt*, though *cunt* is seen as less offensive and used more often than *nigger/nigga*.
- *Fuck* was rated as most frequently used by UT students, but was in the middle regarding offensiveness. This pattern is similar for *bitch* and *God/god*.
- 36% of responses explaining word offensiveness mentioned the social stigmatization and tabulization of the 5 BLWs. 31% mentioned the context in which each BLW is used.

| Most Offensive (% of responses w/ score ≥ 5 on offensiveness scale) | Most Frequently Used (% of responses w/ usage of 4+ times a day) |
|---|--|
| Nigger/nigga (86.7%)  | Fuck (60.1%)   |
| Cunt (81.8%)  | Bitch (50%)  |
| Fuck (58.4%)  | God/god (48.3%)  |
| Bitch (51.7%)   | Cunt (8.4%)  |
| God/god (48.4%)   | Nigger/nigga (5.1%)  |

|                                      | # of Responses that mention Context | # of Responses that mention Stigma/Taboo | # of Responses that mention destigmatization due to overusage |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Fuck                                 | 27/60                               | 13/60                                    | 7/60  |
| God/god                              | 11/60                               | 33/60                                    | 7/60  |
| Cunt                                 | 11/60                               | 17/60                                    | 0/60  |
| Bitch                                | 30/60                               | 9/60                                     | 17/60   |
| Nigger/Nigga                         | 14/60                               | 35/60                                    | 3/60  |
| <b>Total #/ Total # of Responses</b> | <b>93/300</b>                       | <b>107/300</b>                           | <b>34/300</b>   |
| <b>Total Percentage:</b>             | <b>31%</b>                          | <b>36%</b>                               | <b>11%</b>  |

**Conclusion**  
 UT students perfectly demonstrate what Fägersten (2012) calls the Swearing Paradox (p. 77): UTK students’ usage of BLWs does not directly correlate with how offensive students find each word. For example, 58.4% of respondents found *fuck* to be mildly to highly offensive, while 60.1% of respondents reported using *fuck* most frequently. Gendered or racial pejoratives showed more consensus on offensiveness, but there was little consensus on the contexts students used them. The findings suggest that UTK students know there is social stigma around BLWs, but they aren’t entirely sure why. This reflects a need for more research on language ideologies of taboo words and the social reasons for the restricted usage of BLWs.

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