

# ***Swamp-donkeys and Rippers:* The Use of Slang and Pejorative Terms to Name 'the other'**

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## **Introduction**

The term 'slang' is defined by the Collins English Dictionary (1979) as vocabulary and idiom that is not appropriate to the standard form of a language or to formal contexts. While the notion of 'standard' is itself problematic, in that it is associated with connotations of prestige and power, it usually refers to a codified form of language (usually written), which is commonly understood by most or all the members of a linguistic community. In contrast, slang is more typically restricted and localised in relation to social status or distribution, and is characteristically much more metaphorical and transitory than standard language. This is quite a loose and general definition, however, as the notion of slang is not stable and precise, but 'is a relative concept ... [and therefore] changes in neutral or formal usage will lead to changes in what is seen as slang' (Anderson & Trudgill 1990:69). Other, more creative, definitions have been used to describe slang. Carl Sandburg, for example, calls slang 'a language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands, and goes to work' (cited in Anderson & Trudgill 1990:69), and Hayakawa (1941:195) refers to it as 'the poetry of everyday life ... [it] vividly expresses people's feelings about life and about the things they encounter in life'.

Slang is typically localised and largely verbal, and functions primarily in order to show that one belongs to a particular sub-culture, to be

witty or humorous, or to break norms, shock and show disrespect for authority. Creativity is also an essential aspect of slang and the 'constant desire to create new and dramatic expressions' (Anderson & Trudgill, 1990:84) means that slang is often short-lived, since many slang words are 'local in both time and place' (Anderson & Trudgill, 1990:79). As old expressions become stale, so they are replaced by fresh, new alternatives, but this aura of freshness attached to slang may instead have something to do with the fact that it is constantly recycled in new groups, as well as its rarity in formal contexts. Slang is therefore often used in an attempt to creatively break away from stereotypical language and thus slang words vary in their longevity and influence. Some slang words become so entrenched that they are accepted as colloquial (or even acceptable in formal contexts). On the other hand, some terms come and go in only a week or so.

Distinguishing slang from swearwords or expletives, including profanity (in which the name of a deity is used to express negative affect or disrespect) is not always a simple task. While swearing is thought to be 'language in its most highly charged state' (Hughes, 1991:4), and expletives are generally connected with taboos of some kind, slang terms are not restricted in such a way (Anderson & Trudgill 1990), and for most Western middle and upper classes, swearwords and slang form a continuum of non-standard forms, with expletives comprising the more shocking or taboo range of words and slang coming closer to acceptability. Research over the years confirms this hypothesis: Dumas and Lighter (1978:9) found that most speakers could not clearly distinguish slang from expletives with any degree of reliability. More recently, Linda Hall (2002) reports that even educated, well-read people tell her that slang words are 'not slang at all. They are the way we speak now'. And according to Tweedie (2003) only 16 of the 70 taboo words listed in the earlier edition of *Collins Dictionary* remain taboo, and the rest (e.g. 'bollocks') have been downgraded to mere slang or informal expressions on the basis of frequency of use and of the 'majority' view of perceptions of the shock value of these words. Increasingly, erstwhile 'shocking' words such as 'fuck' are used so liberally on the media and in some subcultures that we scarcely notice them.

Slang is typical of any tight-knit linguistic community where a relaxed atmosphere among peers or people of equal status provides a space where language is liberated from the conventions and pretensions of

politeness and formality that govern the ideal standards for language use in society. Thus, slang may be found amongst factory workers, sailors, and miners, for example, and the more isolated a particular social group is from mass social intercommunication, the higher the propensity that group has for using language that deviates from formal standard language use. For this reason, slang is often found amongst younger generations of people, especially adolescents. Educational institutions such as secondary schools often provide and promote an environment where a common identity is established in terms of attitude and language use.

Adolescence is in this sense a social and linguistic hothouse, involving intense preoccupation with clothing, other adornments, and general social behaviour, of which language is an important part. As Milroy (1992) says, it is in adolescence where linguists discover the highest levels of linguistic innovation, because of the high density of their social networks.

Adolescents' slang is imaginative and innovative and is frequently derived from their social context as well as their need to have their own 'private language', often with the intention of being ambiguous and misunderstood in order to exclude outsiders from that particular group. Here, slang is not generated for lack of a lexicon, but from the need to create an identity specific to a particular social group. For adolescents, slang forms part of a shared linguistic code, reinforcing group membership, and indicating shared knowledge and interests and the all-important sense of belonging (de Klerk 1992, 1997; Matthews 1997:343). As Crystal puts it, 'the chief use of slang is to show that you're one of the gang' (1987:53). Evidence for this comes from the fact that there are many slang terms for adolescents who do not fit in this way, such as *geek* or *nerd*. Thus while this shared code reinforces group membership, at the same time it excludes those who do not use it (such as parents and teachers), and signals a certain level of rebelliousness and disrespect for authority.

The less appealing aspect of slang is its pejorative and abusive side. While it can indeed be used to reduce seriousness and to be witty and clever, it is often devastatingly cruel and harshly critical of deformity or inadequacy of any kind; its words aptly summarise group attitudes to outsiders and towards the unfortunate fat, ugly or mentally retarded people of this world. There are no holds barred, particularly in areas of social taboo. In his questionnaire-based research, surveying 377 high-school adolescents,

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Thurlow (2001) received 100% percent responses to one question: 'what words do people at school use for slugging someone off?' (2001:27) (*slugging* means to criticise harshly or speak disparagingly). Derogatory and pejorative names, such as those ascribed to certain individuals or groups, can be extremely hurtful to the recipients (Valentine 1998:2 cited in Thurlow 2001:26), marking them as deviating from some sort of externally imposed 'norm'.

### **Attitudes Towards Slang**

Slang and expletive usage are commonly associated with confidence and rebellion against adult norms. For this reason, these words are more strongly associated with men, although, as this paper will point out, such a view is probably no longer accurate. As early as 1943, Schlauch (1943, p. 287) regretfully notes tendencies for women to encroach on this all-male precinct, and Hertzler (1965) and Maurer (1976) make the same point.

In consonance with social expectations of masculinity and toughness, men stereotypically use more abusive language than women, and even tend to over-report their use of it in order to enhance this reputation (Sutton 1995). Thurlow (2001:35) cites several other studies in this regard. It is likely that they also fear being labelled so negatively, so in an effort to distance themselves from ostracised groups, potential members of these very groups use these same pejorative terms in a chameleon-like effort to disguise themselves.

It would appear that with shifts in power, norms and habits of pejorative and expletive usage are being challenged. Signs of change are revealed in more recent studies by Oliver et al. (1975), Bailey et al. (1976), Staley (1978), Risch (1987), de Klerk (1997) and Sutton (1995), all of whom indicate a growing resistance by women to conform to expectations about the use of slang and swearwords. In their use of slang and expletives adolescent women reveal a need to do so, while ironically most male adolescents might know and use more slang and expletives than female adolescents, not because they want to, but simply because they have very little choice: society expects them to. Linguistic behaviour in adolescence is not simply a matter of conformity to clear and unambiguous role models, and there is plenty of evidence suggesting that linguistic differentiation is neither

smooth nor consensual. We also need to acknowledge that while it is tempting in such articles as these to over-generalise and give an impression that all adolescents behave in the same way, there are adolescents who do not use slang, and who assert their identities in ways which are their own, and which reflect their intelligence and personalities uniquely.

## **Methodology**

This paper centres primarily on the use of slang at two local private schools, School A (a boys school) and School B (a girls school), in order to report on the usage of selected slang and derogatory terms, analyse its variation, and observe any trends or developments which may be underway. De Klerk (1989, 90, 91) reports on slang and expletives elicited from pupils in the same schools 13 years earlier, and the primary method for data collection was a questionnaire closely based on that used by de Klerk (1989), with slight modifications in terms some of the examples of slang, to avoid those which had become dated or obsolete (e.g. the suggestion for 'an ugly/ fat/ unattractive girl' in 1989 was 'blort', and this was changed to 'bus' / 'grunter'). While 26 items were elicited in the larger study (Antrobus 2003), this paper reports on only 7 of these, all semantic areas that name the 'other' in some way, and are potentially pejorative or abusive. These items include ugly/fat/ unattractive people, unpleasant people, social misfits and effeminate men.

Since both of the target schools are private English-medium schools, which charge significantly higher fees than state schools (full boarding fees for 2003 were R70,000 per annum), it can be assumed that the majority of scholars come from middle to upper-class socio-economic backgrounds and have a reasonable command of English. This eliminates a number of independent variables and therefore increases the validity of the research data. Altogether 188 pupils were issued with the questionnaire, and although there was a gender imbalance in responses (71 women and 117 men), results have been calculated so as to represent them proportionately.

While the methodology used to elicit words may legitimately be regarded as somewhat artificial and decontextualised, since it reflects reported rather than actual usage, responses nevertheless give some insight into exposure to and familiarity with such words, and into the informant's

willingness to write them down. Also, while the questionnaire may have elicited known or general slang not currently in use at the schools, it is hypothesised that since the schools are predominantly (over 90%) boarding schools, outside or 'exotic' slang is unlikely to survive in such strong multiplex social networks, unless it is adopted and becomes absorbed by the majority.

## Results

### *Section 1: Naming the 'other'*

Space constraints prevent a report on all 26 lexical items which were elicited, so the focus will fall only on those items which relate to naming 'the other', those who do not 'fit in' socially for a range of reasons. Responses are classified according to the gender of the informant, spellings are based on the written originals, and numbers in brackets indicate the number of times a word was proffered if greater than 1.

#### a. An ugly / fat / unattractive girl (193 responses)

Terms suggested by males:

gravel (49), siff (30), swamp donkey (10), whale (6), tuckshop (5), grunter (2), bus (2), 18-wheeler, 1<sup>st</sup> team prop, amoeba, biscuit barrel, bitch, blimp, brak, brick, plank, bungu, cow, dog, fat fuck, feta, fotloza, gorilla, gravel pit, grot, grotweiler, growler, large-and-in-charge, mbimbi, miff, minger, monster, mountain goat, muck, mule, pie, pig, ripper, road kill, roller, sghughu / sghukhu, slut, snorter, steamroller, swamp, tank, vacuum, vuyani (= 47 terms, 146 responses).

Terms suggested by females:

beaut(y) (11), grunter (5), siff (4), whale (4), bus (2), swamp donkey (2), gravel (2), bongo, butch, cold, looker, lorry, mare, nasty, picasso, pig, plonker, porky, rip snorter, ripper, slob, slut, special, swampy, troll (= 25 terms, 47 responses).

#### b. An ugly / fat / unattractive boy (135 responses)

Terms suggested by males:

pie (30), tuckshop (21), gravel (9), siff (6), beefcake, blimp, blob, boing-boing, boulder, elephant, fat ass, fat fuck, feta, fridge, fudge-packer, growler,

gwere, heavyweight, nasty sghubghu / sghukhu, slob, Spar, stroll, tuck-box, tuckus, vet gat, whale (= 27 terms, 90 responses)

Terms suggested by females:

siff (8), tuckshop (7), ripper (7), nasty (4), beaut, cold, donkey, dork, geek, grunter, loser, mountain ogre, nerd, pearl, peasant, plonker, porky, rash, runt, special, swamp donkey, troll, wanker (= 23 terms, 45 responses)

c. An unlikeable / unpleasant woman (199 responses)

Terms suggested by males:

bitch (52), cow (14), hoe (13), whore (9), slut (7), beaut (2), cunt, dick-head, dog, fat cow, gravel, gwere, hoer, hog, ice-packer, old goat, pussy, cat, rash, siff, skank, sour, swamp donkey, teef, write-off (= 25 terms, 116 responses).

Terms suggested by females:

bitch (38), cow (24), hoe (5), slut (3), beaut (2), B.O.B<sup>1</sup>, brat, cruella, hog, idiot, pain in the arse, pratt, rash, skank, ripper, whore (= 16 terms, 83 responses).

d. An unlikeable / unpleasant man (182 responses)

Terms suggested by males:

dickhead (15), prick (14), bastard (11), arsehole (8), idiot (5), wanker (3), bashi, cock-sucker, cunt, duckweed, fag, faggot, fudge-packer, gay, gravel, gweru, jackass, jew, loner, loser, motherfucker, numbnuts, pig, POTA<sup>2</sup>, penis eater, poes, ripper, scrotum, shithead, siff, snorter, steek, toss, troll, winner (= 35 terms, 85 responses).

Terms suggested by females:

bastard (28), arsehole (24), prick (11), wanker (6), pig (5), dickhead (4), idiot (4), beaut, brak, brat, dog, fag, gay, nasty, nerd, rash, ripper, son of a bitch, special, toss, weirdo, winner (= 22 terms, 97 responses).

e. An effeminate/cowardly male (128 responses)

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<sup>1</sup> An acronym for 'Bitches over Buddies'.

<sup>2</sup> An acronym for 'part of the action', pronounced [p etc].

Terms suggested by males:

pussy (19), fag(got) (14), gay (8), weed (4), chicken (3), wimp (3), beauty, bitch, chicken-shit, coward, duckweed, dude, fudge-packer, gay-dog, germ, homo, loser, moffie, packer, poofter, ripper, sprout, tit, wanker, white-trash, winner, woosey, write-off, yellow, yellow bellied.(= 30 terms, 75 responses).

Terms suggested by females:

gay (8), fag(got) (6), loser (7), weed (5), wimp (5), chicken (4), baby, beaut, drip, dweeb, fudge-packer, geek, gerkin, nerd, pansy, poofter, ripper, runt, slow, soft, toss, winner, wuss.(= 23 terms, 53 responses).

f. One who joins in a social situation when not wanted or uninvited (123 responses)

Terms suggested by males:

POTA (84), gay (8), third wheel (5), lurker (3), rash (2) ABC, ABC your way out, beached whale, blocked, bog-fly, given the bat, Kudu, latch-on, leuer, loner, outsider, parasite, spare(wheel), suckshine (suction?), trailing, vacuum, wannabe(= 22 terms, 119 responses).

Terms suggested by females:

attachment, bog-fly, gay, leech (= 4 terms, 4 responses).

g. Prefects (65 responses)

Terms suggested by males:

wankers (14), cops (7), pigs (5), ass/arseholes (4), cock-suckers, detectives, dicks, 5-0, f(i)lchers, faggots, fagmasters, flimters, fuckheads, gomas, lost ones, wankholders (rankholders), rankies, ranks, suck-ups, top-dogs, traitors (= 21 terms, 44 responses).

Terms suggested by females:

cops (9), pigs (3), bitches, bastards, godzilla, goodie-goodie, killers, patrols, policemen, prefects, raters (= 11 terms, 21 responses).

Table 1 summarises numbers of responses (tokens) and table 2 lexical items (types) in order to demonstrate differences between gender groups. Altogether 188 questionnaires were processed, of which 38% (71) were females and 62% (117) males. In the tables actual frequencies for each



gender group have been converted to percentages, and the final column shows the difference between actual scores and 'ideal' or expected scores. For example, since they were in the majority, males would be expected to supply 62% of the tokens for 'ugly female' (item one), but they actually supplied 14% more than this (and females conversely supplied 14% fewer).

**Table 1: Tokens**

	Actual frequency	M	F	Difference
Ugly female	193	76%	24%	M + 14%
Ugly male	135	67%	33%	M + 5%
Unpleasant female	199	58%	42%	F + 4%
Unpleasant male	182	47%	53%	F + 15%
Effeminate male	128	59%	41%	F + 3%
Uninvited person	123	92%	8%	M + 30%
Prefect	65	68%	32%	M + 8%
Total	1025	66%	34%	M + 3%

**Table 2: Types**

	Actual frequency	M	F	Difference
Ugly female	72	65%	35%	M +3%
Ugly male	50	54%	46%	F +8%
Unpleasant female	41	61%	39%	F + 1%
Unpleasant male	57	61%	39%	F + 1%
Effeminate male	53	57%	43%	F + 5%
Uninvited person	26	85%	15%	M + 23%
Prefect	33	64%	36%	M + 2%
Total	332	62%	38%	0

## Discussion

Much research (reported in Spender 1980, Graddol and Swann 1989 and Gibbon 1999) has been done on the 'ugly' names for women and men, with most of it reporting that there are far more negative terms for women than men, most of which carry sexual connotations. These results, however, reveal interesting developments, especially in the terms that females are using to refer to themselves. While there were more terms proffered for ugly females than ugly males, and more tokens as well, in the 'unpleasant /

unlikely' category there were actually more words for males than for females, and it was females who were leading in terms of frequency (proportionately, they suggested 14% more of the names than males did). This goes strongly counter to Sutton's (1995) claims that women are more linguistically conservative, adhering closely to the standard.

In the 'physically unattractive/fat/ugly' category, the terms suggested are harshly critical, and animal or dehumanising metaphor abounds. Most animal comparisons express negative attitudes, and these are no exception, and as expected, there are more that refer to females. For girls we have *swamp donkey*, *brak* (Afrikaans term for an ill-bred dog), *cow*, *dog*, *gorilla*, *grunter*, (*g*)*rotweiler*, *mare*, *mountain goat*, *mule*, *pig* and *whale*. For males we have *elephant*, *whale*, *donkey*, *grunter*, and *swamp donkey*. Other dehumanising metaphors for females (e.g. *steamroller*, *lorry*, *pie*) and males (e.g. *fridge*, *boulder*, *tuckshop*) are similarly harshly critical, and the majority of these again label females more than males. Only one term (*slut*) has sexual overtones. It is also interesting to note that amongst the words suggested by the girls are several which have strongly ironic or sarcastic overtones (e.g. *beaut*, *looker*, *pearl*, *special*), which are notably absent from the male examples.

In the 'unpleasant' category, far more sexual terms have been suggested by males to refer to females (*hoe* (a play on the sound of 'whore'), *hoer* (Afrikaans for whore), *whore*, *slut*, *cunt*, *dick-head*, *pussy*). Terms referring to males have similarly strongly negative sexual overtones and some are unambiguously homophobic (e.g. *faggot*, *gay*). It is also evident that many of the words used refer to both males and females by synecdoche, reducing them to a mere body-part, usually scatological or strongly sexual (e.g. *cunt*, *prick*, *dickhead*, *poes* (Afrikaans for cunt), *penis*, *arsehole*). These terms are not reserved to derogate females only, and are in fact more prevalent in reference to males. However, in keeping with Sutton's claim that 'it is extremely rare to hear one woman refer to another as a cunt' (1995:281), it was almost solely the males in this study who used these terms.

Terms for effeminate males elaborate on the homophobic terms of the 'unpleasant' category by including *homo* and *moffie* (an Afrikaans term for homosexual), and once again females are generally far less harsh in their judgements of males. Thurlow's (2000) findings were similar: the vast

majority of homophobic terms reported referred to male homosexuality, with only 14% referring to female homosexuality. 'Ugly' names for women reported by Sutton are similarly devoid of female homophobic terms. This is attributable either to a proportionate lack of available homophobic terms for females, or broader issues of inequality which disregard women in general.

Fairly high numbers of responses, in the 'outsider' and 'prefect' categories reaffirm the important function that slang can play in delineating membership of the in-group and the out-group among both genders. The words used to refer to social misfits are particularly hurtful and derogatory.

Overall, contrary to expectations, when viewed proportionately males supplied only 3% more tokens than the females, and each group supplied an *equivalent* number of actual lexical items (types). This reinforces the growing view that females are not avoiding pejorative words at all, at least not in terms of numerical frequency. Where there is an undeniable difference, however, is in the strength or 'shock-value' of the items supplied, and data consistently reveals that females have suggested milder and less offensive items on the whole. Thurlow's (2000) findings were similar: boys reported only slightly more items than girls, but there was no significant difference in terms of their self-rating of how offensive these words were. He also found that the boys ranked these pejorative terms as more taboo or 'hard-core' than girls, recognising their potential for hurt, especially with regard to homosexuality. In addition, male terminology seemed more creative than female words. For example, girls' words like *lorry*, *porky* and *slob* to refer to ugly females are not nearly so evocative as the boys' words: *heavy vehicles engage in lowest gear*, and *keep it in the zoo*.

## **Section 2: Slang Borrowed from Other Languages**

The schools which were sampled are both private English medium schools, which have accommodated learners of all racial groups since the early eighties. The data contains a number of slang words which have been borrowed from other languages, specifically from Afrikaans and isiXhosa (both local languages of the Eastern Cape Province). These levels of usage may be attributable to the shifting demographics in the schools, which, while still 65% white, increasingly reflect a wider range of other population groups. In addition, as South Africa strives towards equality in a post-apartheid era, language bias is probably lessening as a result of

increasing media exposure to a wider range of varieties and languages, along with the rising status and acceptability of indigenous Black South African languages.

Code-switching and code-mixing has also lost some of its negative stigma and is celebrated and encouraged through television and the media as an acceptable means of cultural exchange and interaction (as is evident in its use in sitcoms and advertisements). The increases in non-English words at these English schools may well reflect some of these changes in attitude toward language.

The high number of borrowed words representing slightly taboo areas is also to be expected: borrowed words, because they are unfamiliar to the user, lack the connotations and emotive effect of a mother-tongue equivalent. This explains why mother tongue (MT) English speakers use Afrikaans swearwords (e.g. *donner* or *bliksem*) with little awareness of their shocking effect on MT Afrikaans speakers. Similarly *gwere* and *vuyani* are taboo words in the Xhosa community which don't carry the same shock-value amongst the second-language users. (Below are alphabetical lists of this 'borrowed' slang). Although it is difficult to ascertain whether the borrowed words have shifted in meaning (given the vagueness of slang), it would seem that these adolescents have embraced the lexicon of other languages to find new and exciting forms of language expression as a symbol of overarching solidarity.

While words have been faithful to the original spellings provided, in several cases those borrowed from Xhosa have retained their original phonetic properties. For example, the word *costile*, is actually derived from the English word *cost* which describes a mistake or failure, and has the past tense verbal suffix from Xhosa (*-ile*) added, to indigenize the word so that it fits in with the sound and rhythmic structure of the 'other' language, thus disguising itself as a non-English word. In the same way *wacooka* is based on the English word 'cook', with a Xhosa prefix. Similarly, *nqooze*, pronounced to rhyme with 'booze', is a Xhosa-isation of an English slang word,<sup>3</sup> and *mnca* and *nqube* are pronounced with an alveolar and palatal click respectively.

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<sup>3</sup> In similar vein, 'overated' has become *nqovarated*, and 'overboard' has become *nqovaboard*, each with a resounding click at the start.

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### Slang terms from isiXhosa

banga	attractive girl	bixa	hectic / exciting
Bungu	ugly girl	costile	detrimental
chonga sticks	cigarettes	fotloza	ugly girl
(u)gwayi	cigarettes	gwere	ugly boy
gwere	unlikeable woman	imbadla	party
inkwoza	cigarettes	kopwa	nice
layisa	make out / kiss	mbimbi	ugly girl
mnca	nice	mnyama	drunk
nqooze	alcoholic drink	ntoza	alcoholic drink
sghubhu / sghukhu	ugly girl / boy	tsau /tsaw	nice
tsu	drunk	masheshe	alcoholic drink
nqube	party	vuyani	ugly girl
walala	rugby side-step	wacooka	'hot', cooking, expert
zol	cigarettes		

### Slang Terms from Afrikaans

babbelas	drunk	babelaas	alcoholic drink
Ballie	old man	blom	hang around, relax
bossies	cigarettes	brak	ugly girl
brak	unlikeable woman	donker	nice
dop	alcoholic drink	doppies	cigarettes
duidelik	nice	eentjie	cigarettes
fontein	hard worker	gaar	drunk
gefokked	drunk	haare	party
heldrank	alcoholic drink	hoer	whore
jol	party	joil	kiss and cuddle
kind	pretty girl	klap 'n dos	have a snooze
kops	cigarettes	lekker	nice / enjoyable
leuer	outsider	lus	want / effort
moffie	effeminate male	mooi	pretty girl
nooit bru	unbelievable	ou	nice chap
pomped	drunk	scafe	cigarettes

skeef	disapproving look	steek	unlikeable man
stekkie	pretty girl	stompies	cigarettes
swak	unfair / distasteful	teef	bitch
twak	(stick) cigarettes	vetgat	ugly boy
vry	kiss / cuddle	witrus	nice chap

### Attitude Survey

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate people who use a lot of slang, on a 5-point scale in which 1 implied strong disapproval and 5 strong approval and admiration. They were asked to rate each of the following groups independently as slang users: junior school boys, junior school girls, senior school boys, senior school girls, adult males and adult females. 179 of the 188 learners responded to this section, of whom 40% (71) were female. Table 3 reports the average ratings attributed by males and females to the use of slang by each of the groups (e.g. it shows that male respondents were more disapproving of junior girls (2.2) who use slang than female respondents (2.4)) While there are some minor differences within categories, the overall trends amongst males and females are the same as were reported in de Klerk (1989): general disapproval of those younger than the peer-group and even stronger disapprobation of those older than the peer group (i.e. adults). It would seem that only group members are sanctioned in their use of these words, with slightly more leeway given to males by both males and females. Clearly such attitudes are strongly linked to social power, and to in-group and out-group status.

**Table 3: Attitudes towards slang users**

Slang users	Male	Female
junior boys	2.7	2.6
junior girls	2.2	2.4
senior boys	4.0	3.9

senior girls	3.5	3.2
adult males	2.6	2.0
adult females	2.1	1.8
Average	2.7	2.7

### Concluding Remarks

Waksler (1995) predicts a steady linguistic neutralisation of gender, going into the future, with words which were previously reserved for males and/or females being used more freely across categories (e.g. *guys* to refer to both males and females). This is only evident to a limited extent in the terms elicited in this study, several of which (e.g., *slob*, *ripper*, *porky*, *special*, *swamp donkey*, *troll*) referred equally to both gender groups. However, none of the terms with any sexual connotations had this versatility.

This small-scale study has shown that females and males alike indulge in the hurtful practice of criticising and excluding those who are socially ostracised for one reason or another. Such language usage is undoubtedly a contributing factor in 'the reproduction of social inequalities and power relations' (Thurlow 2001:35), and can be harsh, abusive, critical exclusionary and coercive. Contrary to expectations, and claims that 'most studies in slang... have seen women as linguistically conservative, adhering closely to the standard form of speech' (Sutton 1995:282), this study reveals a fairly vigorous pejorative vocabulary used by females. One has two options in interpreting this trend: firstly, it could be seen as an attempt by young women to mimic male behaviour, and associate with the socially dominant group. An alternative view would be to recognise that there is an increasing number of women who aim to assert a new image of women which runs contrary to stereotyped images of being pure, sensitive and caring. While the terms used by males in this study continue to devalue females and reinforce the dominant social order, the terms used by females do the same in reverse, and appear to be taking control (albeit tentatively) of a semantic space in which they formerly had no place at all. As Sutton puts it (1995:290), rather



than trying to appear like men by buying into these behaviours, one could interpret their behaviour as trying to construct a new identity which runs contrary to traditional definitions of femininity.

While a wide range of fairly hard-hitting words have emerged from this study, including derogatory and homophobic terms, notable by their absence are racist terms, possibly because of high levels of awareness in South Africa and strong social sanctions against using such words, and also because these learners attend a multiracial school, and have no doubt been sensitised to such issues.

Abusive naming practices reveal the social attitudes of the community of users, distinguishing the outgroup from the insiders, and implicitly or explicitly declaring who one is and who one is not. Thurlow (2001:26) points out that during adolescence, when belonging to the peer-group is vital, language (and naming) is a primary resource to constitute the self, social categories and social relations. Part of this is 'the continual, vocal branding of Other'. 'With apparently little concern for their antisocial ramifications, homophobic pejoratives, many of them vitriolic, constitute one of the most predominant categories of abusive language among adolescents' (Thurlow 2001:32). It is this combination of exclusion and bonding which makes slang and swearwords especially attractive to teenagers.

It is nonetheless important to remember that using a slang word, a pejorative term or an expletive does not necessarily imply that one knows its meaning. These words tend to be used in informal contexts among peers with a high degree of shared knowledge and common interests, as part of a shared, restricted code. Asking about the meaning of such words would be like admitting failure as a member of the group. In any event, clear definitions are often not readily available, and such words are inherently vague. As Sornig puts it 'It is extremely difficult ... to explain their [slang terms] real and complete meaning to an outsider ... the reason for their very existence lies in the connotative part of the meaning of slang terms and colloquialisms' (Sornig 1981:1). In addition, peer pressure alone or habit can dull the power of words that are strongly taboo for most speakers. These words may therefore not always be used with deliberate intent to exclude or criticise, although their careless use nonetheless has a negative effect.

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