

Taboo Language in *Sex and the City*

**An Analysis of Gender Differences in Using Taboo Language
in Conversation**

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1. Introduction

Taboo refers to forbidden phenomena in our custom in general, as well as language. For example, in English-speaking countries, it is profane and tabooed to use words connected with sex, and Christian religion; and in some African tribes, women are forbidden to mention their husbands, fathers or father-in-laws directly by their name. Taboo has existed for a long time in our world and it continues developing in a dynamic way all the time. In terms of language, taboo relates to both taboo words (e.g. *fuck* and *cunt*) and taboo topics (e.g. *abortion* and *death*).

Taboo language is a broad definition, and researchers have defined it in various categories. Using taboo language, to a great extent, is widely considered as offensive and inappropriate, as well as a specialty of men rather than women. However, the attitude towards taboo language and its function is undergoing change in light of different societies, given contexts and users' identities and genders. Meanwhile, with the advent and development of the women's liberation movement, more and more women, due to their increasing independent social and economic status, "have adopted and adapted the typical male patterns of forbidden language use for their own purpose" (Spears 1992: X)

Men and women are often said to use taboo language differently. Thus, the concepts of sex and gender should be taken into account when we analyze language discourse. Briefly speaking, sex distinguishes men and women in a biological way, while gender is used to "describe socially constructed categories based on sex" (Coates 2004: 4). Both sex and gender are factors which will influence one's speech.

1.1 Aim and Scope

This study aims to analyze the use of taboo language in conversations of women's, men's and mixed-gender talk in some episodes from the American TV series *Sex and the City*. The study will examine the differences and similarities of using taboo language in male and female

speech in terms of gender differences, and conversational strategies in general.

1.2 Material

The primary material consists of six episodes of the prevailing HBO TV series *Sex and the City*, which was aired in 1998 and ended in 2004 with six seasons in total. The six episodes are as follows:

Season/ Episode	Title/ Original Airdate	Creator	Total Lasting Time	Time to analyze
101	<i>Sex and the City</i> June 6, 1998.	Darren Star	25:20 mins	9:25 mins
102	<i>Models and Mortals</i> June 14, 1998.	Darren Star	23:44 mins	10:5 mins
201	<i>Take Me Out to the Ballgame</i> June 6, 1999.	Michael Patrick King	23:50 mins	9:00 mins
202	<i>The Awful Truth</i> June 13, 1999.	Darren Star	23:53 mins	9:35 mins
301	<i>Where There's Smoke...</i> June 2, 2000.	Michael Patrick King	23:55 mins	9: 46 mins
302	<i>Politically Erect</i> June 11, 2000	Darren Star	24:00 mins	10 mins

Conversations containing taboo language in those episodes will be picked out as the object of analysis. These six episodes are picked at random, and each lasts about thirty minutes. All of them contain female-female, female-male, male-male and male-female conversations. As is shown in the table above, each episode has around 10 minutes to analyze. There are 58 minutes and 36 seconds in total to analyze, in which female characters constitute 71% of the total time with 41 minutes and 20 seconds. That means that the male and female characters did not get equal time to speak. More precisely speaking, female characters apparently had more chance to speak in these six episodes.

This TV series is definitely a women's story – a story of four unique and typical women who live and pursue love in the city Manhattan. Carrie Bradshaw, getting inspirations through experiences of herself and her three closest friends, writes a column called *Sex and the City*

for a newspaper. Samantha Jones owns her own PR Company, and at the same time she is keen on pure sexual pleasure with no personal feeling involved. Miranda Hobbes is a successful lawyer and feminism advocator. The last one, Charlotte York, is a typical material woman and also the most traditional woman of the four. The four female characters date different men, get different experiences and share their stories together, and thus prompt the whole TV series to develop.

1.3 Method

Firstly, conversations involving taboo words, like words related to sex, homosexual and religious terms, were selected, and the words were examined in terms of their numbers and frequency of occurrence. The three major resources which were selected to define taboo words are: Spears' *Forbidden American English: A Series Compilation of Taboo American English*, *Oxford English Dictionary* [online, 2008] (*OED* in short afterwards) and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary And Thesaurus Deluxe* (2003). The taboo word was firstly chosen in light of the context in which it occurs, and then filtered further by Spears' definition, *OED* and *Webster* respectively. Precisely speaking, the word was listed as a verbal taboo or euphemism in the first place if it is marked as taboo by any of the resources. Then, the word without being labeled by any of resources was defined according to its form and function with concern for the context. Finally, words were classified in light of which category they belong to, who use them (both gender and character in this study). The reasons why the user(s) does so with concern for their status and the given context were analyzed in the analysis part.

2. Theoretical Background

In this section the previous research that is correlated to gender differences in conversation and taboo language will be presented.

2.1 Language and context

Context is an indispensable factor when we analyze all language phenomena. In a narrow

sense, context can work as a linguistic verbal context in which a word, a phrase or a conversation occur. This kind of context is quite helpful for us to understand the particular meaning of the word and phrase. However, when people want to dig deeper into the meaning hidden behind some kind of utterances, social context is much more workable than verbal context. Social contexts involve various social variables, such as conversational setting, gender or race. The same speech act could possess differentiated meanings due to the interplay of those external factors. For instance, mentioning body part directly in public conversation could be taken as rude and improper, while it could also be a formal speech act if the context is a clinic. However, more recently “social contexts tend to be defined in terms of the social identity being construed and displayed in text and talk by language users.” (Wikipedia, 2008, Context (*Language Use*)). That means more attention are being paid to what speaker achieves through his/her speech with concern for gender, race, status and the like. Both verbal and social context should be taken into consideration to guarantee a more precise and valid analysis result.

2.2 Women’s Language

As for as “Women’s Language” is concerned (WL afterwards), some certain words will enter picture immediately: correct, polite, cooperative, powerless and lady talk. That is the conventional and ineradicable thoughts towards WL. Women are taught to talk like lady, and not supposed to talk rough like men do. The most standard and systematical features of WL were concluded by Robin Tolmach Lakoff, among which there are two items related to taboo and the like:

1. (Super) polite forms e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms - avoidance of strong swear words, e.g. *fudge*, *my goodness*.
2. Lack of a sense of humor. (Lakoff 2004: 78-81)

These two points portray the features of WL accurately, but do not apply to the reality totally. WL will be affected by various factors, such as gender, experience and status of the speaker,

and WL turns out not always like what Lakoff described. When it comes to swearing for example, Lakoff suggests that “men are expected to know how to swear and how to tell and appreciate the telling of dirty jokes” (Lakoff 2004: 84), while on the other hand women are expected to speak properly, and they usually use euphemism to replace off-color or indelicate expressions. Lakoff even emphasizes that “women are experts at euphemism --- while men carelessly blurt out whatever they are thinking” (Lakoff 2004: 80). However, this is not always the case, researchers like Eckert found that in some communities with tight-knit-networks females would speak at both ends of the vernacular (Coates 2004: 84). It is contradictory to Lakoff’s theory. Besides, the same thing goes for humor where Lakoff claims that women are claimed to have no sense of humor by Lakoff (Lakoff 2004: 81). However, Coates discusses that researchers such as Holmes found that women did use humor to establish solidarity and collegiality in workplace. Moreover, another researcher Mullany found that humor was more likely to occur in meeting where there were more women present. Male-dominated meetings produced fewer instances of humor (qtd. in Coates 2004: 203). It is also opposite to Lakoff’s description.

Even though these research results do not prove Lakoff’s theory, it does not mean that Lakoff is wrong, since language is always undergoing change, and the changes are always prone to the direction of “the favored group, the group that holds the power, (and) along with its nonlinguistic behavior, is generally adopted by the other group”(Lakoff 2004: 44). Women as conventional subordinates and a powerless group have the needs to adopt more masculine language to guarantee their places. This power-oriented theory is also supported by Labov, who divided language changes into two types - conscious and unconscious. He claims that women seem to initiate changes consciously so as to approach prestige norms (qtd. in Coates 2004: 185). The adoption of swear words and humor is the very convincing proofs that manifest Labov’s theory. However, women are always confronted with a kind of dilemma. On one hand, they are taught to talk like lady. However, talking like lady is also taken as a sign of incompetence and lacking precision. When women adopt a more masculine way, they will be criticized as unfeminine or aggressive. This is especially true for some women with high status.

2.3 Denotation, Connotation and Language Choice

“Denotation” literally means “the act of naming something with a word; the actual object or idea to which the word refers” (*OED*). “Connotation” refers to “an idea suggested by a word in addition to its main meaning” (*OED*). More specifically speaking, denotation defines a word in a narrow sense, while connotation does so in a more broader way. The link between denotation and connotation could be established due to some associations like similar shape, color and characteristics. For example, the word *fox* denotes a kind of wild animal with reddish-brown fur, a pointed face and a thick heavy tail, and it could also connote a person who is cunning and vulpine, or attractive and young. The formation of connotation is impacted by tremendous external factors: such as gender, society, context and politics ... However, connotation can never be separated from denotation. When someone encounters a word, the denotative meaning will come up first to his/her mind, based on which the connotative meaning will be formed with the help of both denotation and external factors.

The interplay of denotation and connotation plays an important role in language choice. As it is widely known, people always use language with certain aims - self-expression, information transition, or identity reinforcement – and the choice of language will vary accordingly. Comparatively speaking, connotation is more flexible, and it is the connotation of a word that convinces the speaker to use the word most of the time. Connotation could be positive and negative, which also would make an original neutral denotation good or bad accordingly. “When a word acquires a bad connotation by association with something unpleasant or embarrassing, people may search for substitutes that do not have the uncomfortable effect” (Lakoff 2004:51). This kind of substitute is euphemism which is used to avoid adverse connotation or something tabooed (euphemism will be explained in detail in next section). However, not all the negative connotations will be eliminated, sometimes taboo words are also used denotatively “in humor, vulgarity, sexual talk, slang, and colloquial conversations” (Timothy 1999:152).

The connotative meaning of a word is multiple not only linguistically but also socially. Coates

mentioned the investigation of language choice in post-Franco Catalonia by Pujolar (1970), in which some young working-class men in Barcelona stuck to Spanish even though Catalan was taught in school as a medium of instruction, for the “unspontaneous, inauthentic or unmasculine” connotations of Catalan are “in conflict with the way the men wanted to present themselves” (Coates 2004: 101). It is clear in this case that the young men chose to achieve masculinity through adjusting their language choice due to the connotation of Catalan. It is also proved that speakers can do either masculinity or femininity through their language choice with the help of both denotation and connotation.

2.4 Definition of Verbal Taboo, Euphemism and Neutral term

According to Trudgill, taboo refers to something prohibited, and he described taboo as following:

[b]ehavior which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden, or regarded as immoral or improper; it deals with behavior which is prohibited or inhibited in an apparently irrational manner” (Trudgill 2000:18).

And in terms of language, taboo “is associated with things which are not said” (Trudgill 2000: 18). Widely speaking, Taboo is a broaden conception which could be divided into Cursing, Profanity, Blasphemy, Obscenity, insults, Sexual Harassment, Vulgar Language... (Categories of Taboo Words). Jay Timothy used the term cursing to define taboo language, and divided it into: swearing, obscenity, profanity, blasphemy, name calling, insulting, verbal aggression, taboo speech, ethnic-racial slurs, vulgarity, slang, and scatology (Timothy 1999: 25). Edwin Battistella defined taboo words as offensive language which falls into several categories: epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity (Battistella 2005: 38). Actually, these types of taboo language can not be separated completely, they are always interwoven. For instance, when you curse someone, you are probably insulting him/her at the same time. This study has chosen the six types to analyze: cursing, profanity and blasphemy, obscenity, epithet and insults to categories taboo words occur in the conversation.

Although different researchers have their own versions of taboo category, to a real extent, they agreed on the most of the taboo category definitions. Timothy defines “cursing” as based on an attempt “to invoke harm on another person through the use of certain words or phrases” (Timothy 1996: 8). There is another terms “swearing” is considered as confidential as cursing mostly. Timonthy holds that the difference between cursing and swear lies in the issue of time. When someone curses another person, he/she probably aims to have it take effect happen in future, while one will swear when he/she wants it to affect immediately. This study employs cursing rather than both of them as a category.

“Profanity” and “blasphemy” are both religion related terms, both of which “usually refer to the irreverent use of the name of Deity” (Brewerton). According to Battistella, the most obvious feature of profanity is that “it involves the coarse use of what is taken to be sacred” (Battistella 2005: 38). The difference between profanity and blasphemy is that profanity could be simply calling name of supernatural or infernal powers, like *Oh my God*. However, Blasphemy refers to “the act of vilifying or ridiculing the divine being” (Montagu 2001: 101).

“Obscenity” is “a form of swearing that make use for indecent words and phrases” (Montagu 2001: 105). More specifically, obscenity term refers to “words or expressions which characterize sex-differentiating anatomy or sexual and excretory functions in a crude way” (Battistella 2005: 38), such as *shit* and *fuck*.

“Epithet” is “various types of slurs, such as *wop*, *raghead*, *bitch*, or *fag*”. Epithet could refer to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, as well as one’s appearance, disabilities, or other characteristics, like *midget*, *gimp*, and *retard* ((Battistella 2005: 38). Timothy defined epithet as a short but forceful burst of emotional language which is motivated by frustration or anger. Such as *Goddamn* or *son of a bitch*, and they can be aimed at dead objects or another person. Thus here in this study, taboo words or phrases which have either of these features are included as epithet.

“Insult” is used to attack some one by calling them e.g. *bastard* or *bitch*. At large, insult

relates to “(the) lack of respect for others on the part of the speaker” (Timothy1996: 22). It could also become ethnic insult when one uses term like *nigger* or *kike*.

Beside the six types mentioned above, there is another term which is often associated always comes up with taboo language – “euphemism”. Briefly speaking, euphemism is employed to avoid taboo language. There are lots of euphemistic words which are widely used nowadays, for example, *f-word* for *fuck*, *c-word* for *cunt* or *cock*, and *gosh* for god so as to avoid calling God directly. Furthermore, sex is a taboo topic all the time no matter in which era, county or culture, so “many euphemisms have developed to describe genitals, sexual acts, sexual body parts, and body products” (Timothy 1999: 144), there are a series of implicit terms to replace *have sex*, e.g. *making love*, *sleeping together*. In Timothy’s book, he mentions the sex-related euphemism category made by Allan and Burridge who argue that euphemisms for sex could be divided into: menstruation (*the woman’s complaint*); masturbation (*self-abuse*); birth control (*rubber*); intercourse (*hanky panky*); orgasm (*come*); body parts (*member*); and body functions (*tinkle*) (Timothy 1999: 144). As a matter of fact, euphemism could be quite flexible, since speaker could choose euphemisms according to the speaker-listener relationship, the setting, and the topic at hand, thus certain speaker in certain conversational setting could produce certain new euphemism.

“Neutral term” does not belong to any category mentioned above. And as it is indicated literally, neutral term itself, having no positive or negative tendency or denotation, just refer to some object or action, e.g. *sex*, *gay*, *nipple*...However, when these neutral words occur in some certain context, new meaning will be connoted new meaning. For example, when the word *gay* is employed by someone who is heteronormative, it could be used in an insulting way.

2.5 Function of taboo language

As long as taboo language is forbidden and inappropriate, why do people use them? People use taboo language for reasons such as hurting others, expressing themselves. And the most

crucial reason is *power*.

Timothy (1999) emphasizes that taboo language, first of all, is emotionally powerful. As emotional, sexual and aggressive animals, human beings have the needs to express and relieve themselves of depression, as well as establish an identity through his/her speech at the same time, and using taboo language is definitely an effective way to accomplish this aim, since language is a major vehicle everyone can approach most frequently and conveniently. Furthermore, “breaking the rules (may) have connotations of strength or freedom which (people) find desirable” (Trudgill 2000: 18). Besides it could be also “largely because taboo words are frequently used as swear-words, which is in turn because they are powerful” (Trudgill 2000: 19). Timothy calls this factor as psychosocial factor underlying cursing. However, “psychological factors are necessary, but not sufficient” (Timothy 1999: 95). Psychological factors are influenced by other factors such as linguistic and sociocultural constraints because human is social animal anyway. The other two major influential factors are pragmatic factor and cultural/social factor.

The former is more than a linguistic term, focusing more on things like pragmatics contains terms like identity of speaker, conversational strategy, social network, and the like which involves the context in which the conversation occurs. “Speakers will use curse words based on their social utility” (Timothy 1999: 164), which means that the usage of taboo language depends on the consequences following the speech act – if the employment of taboo language will lead to a costly end (e.g. *embarrassment, punishment, banishment*), it will be eliminated. While if it will lead to a beneficial consequences (e.g. *relaxation, solidarity, humor*), it could be quite a sensible option. In this sense, the usage of taboo language could be positive when it occurs in circumstances like joking and sexual enticement, but it could also be negative when used to harm someone, like name calling and sexual insults (e.g., *kiss my ass, piss off*) (Timothy 1999: 164).

The latter one cultural/social factor is the underlying norm defining what taboo language is. Different culture has different ways to define taboo language. For instance, the British

English takes words like *bloody*, *wog* as tabooed (*OED*), but it does not apply to the American English (*Webster*). The culture/social factor could vary from place to place and at the same time “the type of word that is tabooed in a particular language will be a good reflection of at least part of the system of values and beliefs of the society” (Trudgill 2000: 18).

2.6 Gender Differences in Conversation

There exist various factors which could influence people’s speech act, among which sex and gender are no doubt two major factors interplaying at the forefront.

As is mentioned above, sex refers to biological features that determine male and female. But on the other hand, gender refers to the meaning our society imposes on sex. It is obvious, in the first place, that Language is personal, since each person is unique biologically - Individuals differ, and men and women differ – the different biological structures, to some extent, decide that men and women would talk differently. However, as social animal, no one could escape from being influenced by the social surroundings, which means biological base - Sex is far from a conclusive factor to shape one’s speech, and the external factor Gender also plays a quite crucial role, and its influence can be quite considerable: a person’s biological sex could not match his/her own speech, or he/she could maintain traits of more than one gender. Therefore, in this sense, it is obvious our language style is formed through both Sex and Gender, and meanwhile “... language is also an important part of our personal and social identity; (and)...linguistic habits reflect our individual biographies and experiences” (Graddol & Swann 1991: 7).

Most of the previous researches on gender differences in same- sex conversation demonstrate an agreeable result: women are more polite, indirect and collaborative in conversation, while men are more impolite, direct and competitive on the other hand, which reveals that “men pursue a style of interaction based on power, while women pursue a style based on solidarity and support” (Coates 2004: 126). The reason for that lies in the social fact, according to some researches, that men usually occupy the dominate position and women are considered as

stooge and subordinate to men. Therefore, in order to guarantee a steadier place, women more often choose to cooperate. In terms of speech act, cooperative discourse could be achieved through some conversational patterns such as “topic and topic development; minimal responses; hedges; questions; turn-taking patterns” (Coates 2004: 127). However, on the other hand, impacted by the hierarchical system, men tend to be more competitive in conversation so as to grab the floor, maintain their power and achieve masculinity.

However, it is not always the case – there exist exception. Since, as is mentioned above, gender, rather than sex, could be an overwhelming factor which molds the speech act of a speaker. Therefore, driven by various factors, like conversational setting, the aim and social status of speaker and listener, and the relationship between them, the speaker will choose to do gender rather than being simply man or woman in conversation. By doing so, the speaker is expressing him/her self as well as establishing his/her identity through the conversation at the same time. So, women could act competitively in conversation, and men could also be collaborative and polite vice versa. It all depends on the social context.

Moreover, Coates (2004) also points out that “cooperative” and “competitive” always come up together in conversation since “different way of talking may share the goal of creating group solidarity” (143). Though men are conventionally considered as the dominators, the dominant norms are always flexible and changeable.

2.7 Gender Differences in using taboo language

Taboo is never a belonging for women in convention. Because “women are expected to exhibit control over their thoughts, while men are more free to exhibit hostile and aggressive speech habits” (Jay 1999: 181). In the discussion of Lakoff’s theory of “features of ‘women’s language’”, Holmes also mentions that there are two features characterizing women’s speech: “‘superpolite’ forms, e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms; and avoidance of strong swear words, e.g. *fudge*, *my goodness*” (Holmes 2001: 286).

Generally speaking, it is widely believed that “men curse more often than women; men use a

larger vocabulary of curse words than do women; and men use more offensive curse words than do women” (Timothy 1999: 166). Meanwhile, Gomm’s research (1981) shows that “both men and women swear more in the company of their own sex;” and “male usage of swear words in particular drops dramatically in mixed-sex conversations” (Coates 2004: 97). Moreover, Coates’ researches indicate that both sexes seem to be prone to adapt the perceived norms of the other gender in mixed-sex conversation, thus men will produce less taboo language in mixed context. Compared with men, women will speak more taboo language in a mixed setting so as to pursue man’s norm of taboo language (Coates 2004: 98).

Another reason why women would use more taboo language in some contexts could be explained by the term covert prestige. Taboo language is also kind of stigmatized language and people choose to use it because they will get covert prestige which could also enhance social-network and solidarity in certain community. Basically speaking, it is widely said that men have more covert prestige than women, because women always try their best to make their language standard. However the researches mentioned above have proved that is not always the case – women would use more taboo language than men in some context to guarantee covert prestige. They need covert prestige to reinforce their place and their community.

Apart from the frequency of usage, men and women also employ and use taboo words differently. According to Timothy, to insult someone, a woman usually uses *bastard* or *prick* to a man, and more *bitch*, *slut* to a woman, while a man usually uses *cunt*, *slut* to a woman and *faggot*, *gay* to a man (Timothy 1999: 165). Gender differences are also found in the use of sexual terms, joke telling, verbal dueling, harassing speech, and fighting words. Researches show that men use more racist and aggressive sexual terms than women, and at the same time, they are more sensitive to harassing speech and easier to be provoked into fighting when insulted or harassed. However, there is an exception, in joke telling, women tend to tell more absurd jokes, morbid jokes, Pollack jokes, jokes about authority figures, and jokes with plays on words. Finally, women tell more jokes to women, while men tell more jokes in mixed-gender conversation (Timothy 1999: 183).

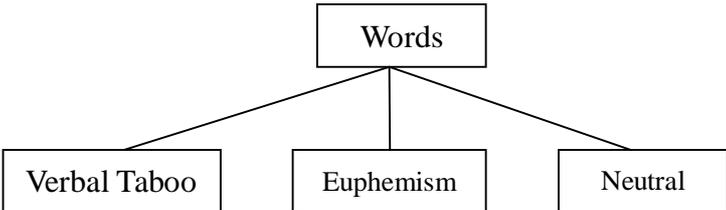
3. Analysis and Results

The analysis focuses on data so as to demonstrate whether females and males use taboo language, how they use taboo language respectively, and the reasons why they do so. As part of this some attention is paid to the speakers' socio-economic background in general in addition to gender factors alone. This part is divided into two parts: the first part is about the gender differences in using taboo language in all conversations, words selected from taboo topics are categorized as verbal taboo, euphemism and neutral term. The second part mainly analyzes gender differences in using taboo in terms of verbal taboo which includes cursing, profanity and blasphemy, obscenity, epithet and insults.

3.1 Gender Difference in Using Taboo Related Language

This section aims to analyze the primary material by following the mould shown in diagram 1. Taboo related words are selected from conversation with taboo topic in the first place, and then categorized into three types: verbal taboo, euphemism and neutral term. Gender differences in use of taboo language are demonstrated through figure contrast and comparison of occurrence frequency of each type.

Diagram1. Categories of taboo-related words in all the conversations



Verbal taboo refers to some expressions that are considered inappropriate and unpleasant, and forbidden to say. Euphemism always comes up with verbal taboo due to its function of replacing the latter one as well as avoiding embarrassment, impoliteness and the like. Neutral term is word which do not belongs to either of two types above, but have a connotation correlated to taboo term such as body part, homosexuality, sexuality, so on and so forth.

Chart 1 Percentage of taboo, euphemistic and neutral term in all conversations

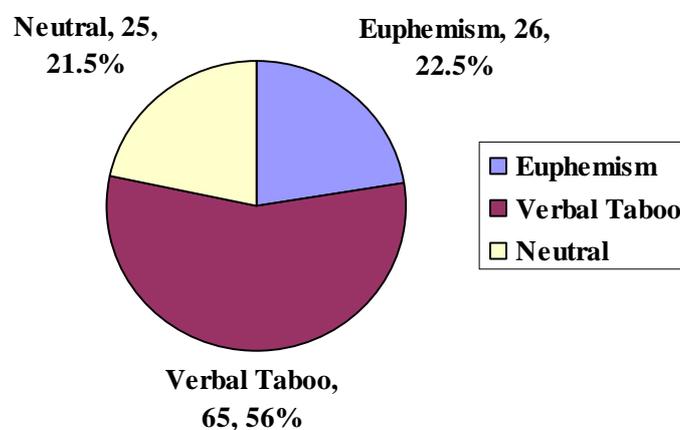


Table1. Percentage of taboo, euphemistic and neutral term in all conversations

Category	Number	Percentage
Verbal Taboo	65	56%
Euphemism	26	22.5%
Neutral	25	21.5%

As it is shown by Table 1, verbal taboo is most frequently used, and the make-up of euphemism and neutral remains almost even. There are 65 taboo words out of 116 words in total which account for 56%. Examples of the use of such words or phrases are as Mr. Big says *abso-fucking-lutely* to Carrie (101 – season 1 episode 1) or Samantha says to Miranda *We're just friends. I don't put my dick in you* (301). Next, euphemism takes up the second place by occupying 22.5% with 26 words in total. Following are two examples about euphemisms of taboo term *have sex*: in season 3 episode 2, Carrie uses *sleep with* to tell Miranda and Steve the intimate relationship between her and Bill the politician (301). Bill also uses *spend the night* alternatively (302). The rest of words are neutral terms, which is a little bit less than euphemism – 25 words making up 21.5%. One example is when Jeff says to Samantha *sweetheart, give me an hour in sack, you'll swear I'm the Jolly Green Giant* (302). *Sack* is originally neutral in denotation, while when it is used by Jeff to indicate a sex-related

affair, it gains a tabooed connotation of woman's body due to its denotation of loose-fitting women dress.

Verbal taboo, euphemism and neutral term are all used purposely on account for the users' intentions. The choices of taboo related words are impacted by psychological, pragmatic and cultural/social factors. Therefore, the use of any single taboo related word is a conglomeration "based on [speakers'] social utility" (Timothy 1999: 164). Both male and female characters use verbal taboo, euphemism and neutral term. However, the two sexes have their own specialties in using these three types of word at the same time. As it is demonstrated in Chart 2, there are only 21 words used by both sexes accounting for least 18%. The remainder is occupied by females at large – 71 words comprising 61% which is much higher than male's 21% and 25 words. One reason causing this phenomenon is because *Sex and the City* is absolutely a women's TV series, most lines in which is involved with female, thus the percentage of women's speech is raised involuntarily. Words like *prick* and *asshole* are only used by females to males; *bitch*, *hooker* and *whore* are only used by males to females. This proves Timothy's theory (1999) that both sexes have their own preferences in picking taboo related words. Timothy also claims that the word *bastard* would be used by females to males, but there is an exception in episode 2, season 2, where Stanford uses this word in mixed-gender conversation to Mr. Big (301). The reason why Stanford picks such a feminine word towards a man lies in his gender identity. Precisely speaking, Stanford is gay and always does gender more femininely. In this sense, it also confirms Timothy's theory.

Chart 2. Percentage of words used respectively by female only, male only and both sexes

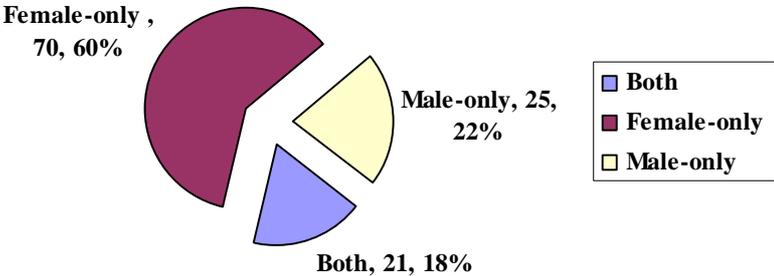


Table 2. Percentage of words used respectively by female only, male only and both sexes

Category	Number	Percentage	Examples
Both	21	18%	<i>damn, make love, breast...</i>
Female-only	70	60%	<i>prick, asshole, pervert...</i>
Male-only	25	22%	<i>bitch, whore, nasty...</i>

Looking into gender differences in using these taboo, euphemism and neutral terms, we can see some noticeable features of each gender. As is shown in Chart 3 and 4, both males and females use all three categories in the six episodes, and verbal taboo makes up the largest percentage in both sexes. Female characters use 22 neutral terms which is slightly more than the euphemism. Male characters use an equal number of euphemism and neutral term. Lakoff suggests that women are quite good at using euphemisms, while on the other hand men prefer to speak out directly. However, the data in Chart 4 disproves Lakoff’s description and manifests that men also use euphemism. For example, male characters also use euphemism like *make love* as female characters did; meanwhile they even create euphemism like *jolly green giant* to achieve precise expression with no uncomfortable side effect.

Chart 3. Female use of words related to taboo in all conversations

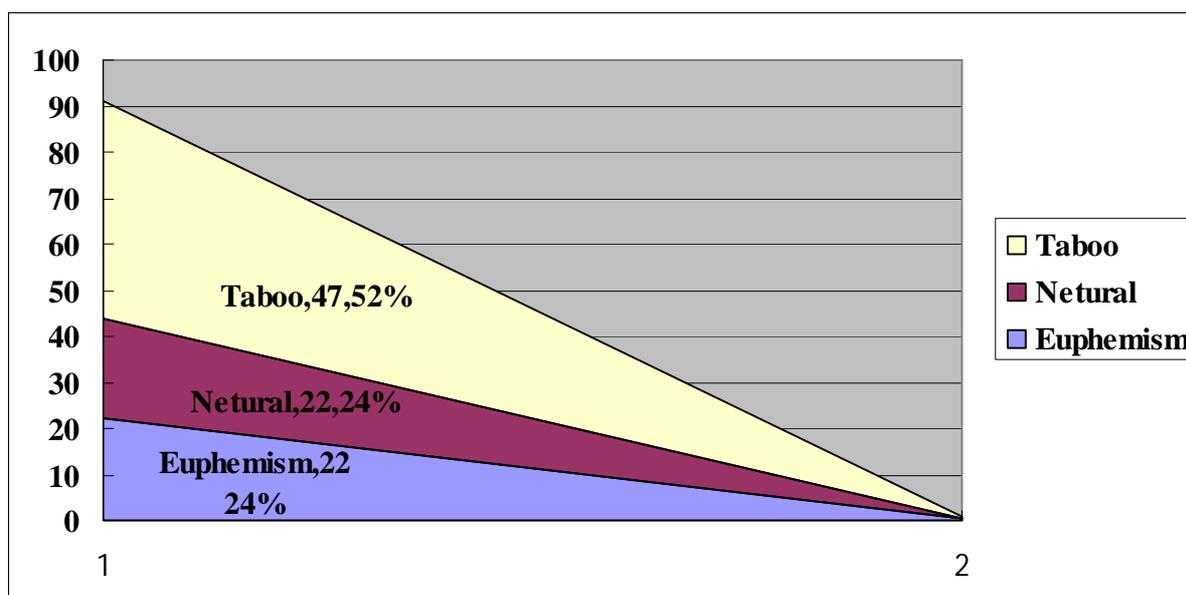


Table 3. Female use of words related to taboo in all conversations

Category	Number	Percentage
Verbal Taboo	47	52%
Neutral	22	24%
Euphemism	22	24%

However it should be noted that the percentage of euphemism of male characters is still lower than female's, though they did use euphemism. The same situation occurs in neutral term, male characters use 8 neutral terms, which constitutes 17%, by contrary, female characters use 22 neutral terms which make up 24%. In terms of taboo words, though the data shows that female characters use more taboo words (48) than male characters (30), the percentage still tells us that female characters do use taboo words less frequently – taboo words that used by female characters takes up 52% in total amount, while 67% of words male characters use are taboo words. Also, it should be reminded again, the higher figures of female characters are directly related to the higher rate of female appearances in this TV series.

Chart 4. Male use of words related to taboo in all conversations

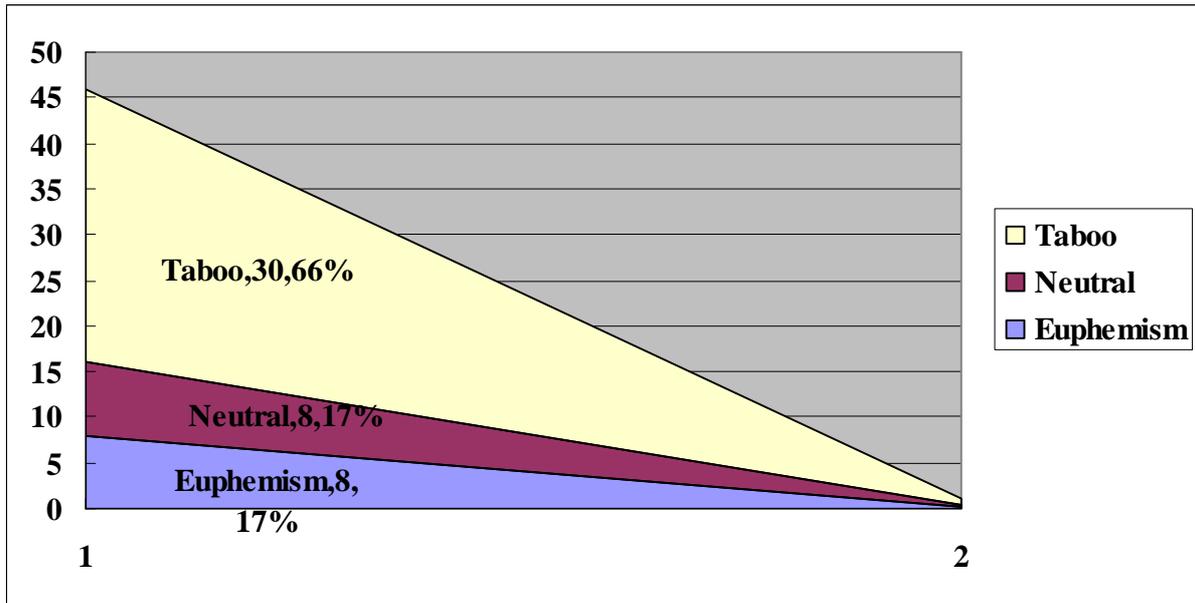


Table 4. Male use of words related to taboo in all conversations

Category	Number	Percentage
Verbal Taboo	30	66%
Neutral	8	17%
Euphemism	8	17%

Some researchers like Gomm focused on the gender differences under different context. The findings showed that both men and women use taboo language dissimilarly in various contexts. Graph 1 below shows male and female characters' use of taboo, euphemism and neutral term in four different contexts in *Sex and the City*.

Graph 1. Male and female use of taboo related words in all conversational types

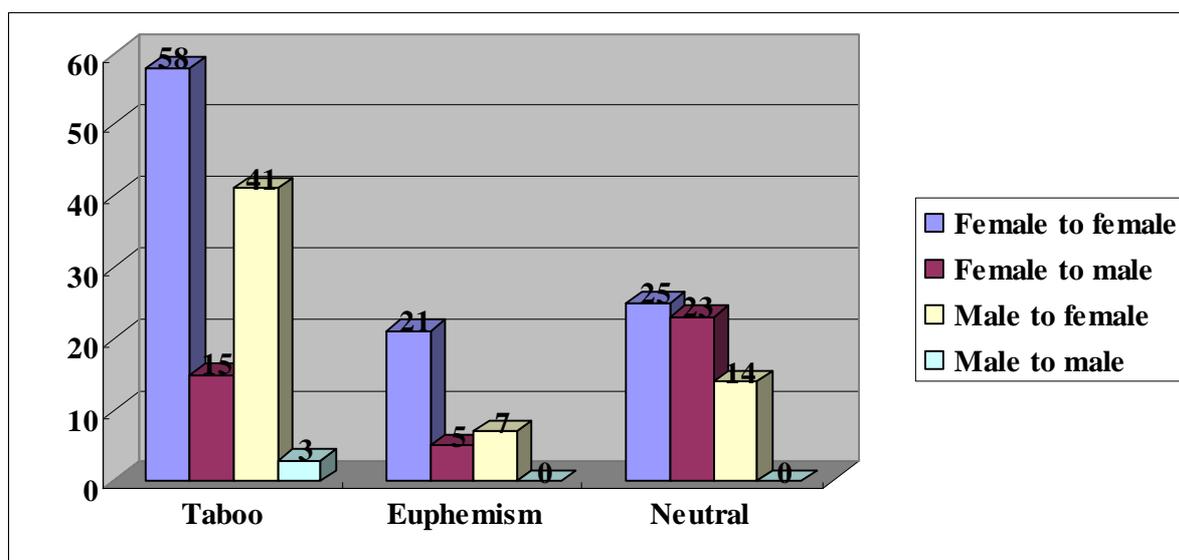


Table 5. Make-up of both sexes' use of taboo related words in all conversational types

Types	Taboo	Euphemism	Neutral	Total
Female to female	58	21	25	
	56%	20%	24%	104
Female to male	15	5	23	
	35%	12%	53%	43
Male to female	41	7	14	
	66%	11%	23%	62
Male to male	3	0	0	
	100%			3

In female-only conversations, verbal taboo is used most frequently which is followed respectively by neutral term and euphemism. In female-male conversations, neutral term takes the first place with verbal taboo coming in second place and euphemism last. In male to female conversations, the orders of these three types turn out to be as same as in female-only conversations. At last, in male to male conversations, only verbal taboo is used.

Gomm's research (1981) points out that both sexes would use more taboo language in same-sex conversation; and male would use less taboo language in mixed-sex group. The result shown in Table 5 proves the Gomm's point: both male and female characters really use more verbal taboo with company of their own sex. In female-only context, 58 verbal taboo

words are used, which make up 56% out of 104 in total. In male-only conversation, though there are only 3 verbal taboo words, it still makes up 100% of all words in this conversational type, and it is also much higher than the corresponding percentage of female characters.

Besides Gomm's research, Coates also points out that females would use far more swear words in mixed-gender conversation to accommodate to the perceived male norm, and males would use less to take female norm in account (Coates 2004, 97-98). However, the findings of this study do not support Coates' theory. In mixed context, female characters use only 15 verbal taboo words to male which constitute 35% in total amount, while on the other hand, male characters speak 41 verbal taboo words making up percentage 66%. It is obvious that in the six episodes selected male characters do use more verbal taboo words than female characters do. It could be attributed to the fact that the topics of most conversations involving male characters are about sexuality and intimacy, as Aaron likes to talk about body part such as *tits*, *pussy* when he is making love to Miranda (202); another possible reason could be that the relationship between speakers is close enough to make the male characters ignore the gender differences in using taboo language, like Stanford, who is quite close to Carrie and gay at the same time, uses comparatively more verbal taboo words to female characters than any other male characters.

In terms of euphemism and neutral term, the data shows that female characters use them almost equally in same-sex conversation. However, male characters use neither euphemism nor neutral term to other males. Combined with the result shown above in Chart 4 that male characters do use 8 euphemisms, it indicates that in these six episodes, male characters only use euphemism to female characters rather than both sexes. In mixed-gender conversations, both male and female characters use euphemism and neutral term, and both sexes used more neutral term than euphemism. Also, the average percentage female characters' use of these two categories is higher than that of male characters, which means that female characters use euphemism and neutral term more often than male characters do.

These findings above partly show us the fact that female characters are more cooperative and

polite than male characters in all conversations selected. They use more euphemism and neutral term in mixed context than male characters in order to avoid embarrassment and awkwardness. In same-sex conversation, however, female characters choose more verbal taboo words to confirm solidarity and friendship. Male characters, on the other hand, use more taboo words in both same-sex and mixed-sex contexts, from which it could be seen that male characters are more offensive and competitive. However, at large, what causes them to do so seems to be the same as female characters' purpose in these six episodes, namely to achieve solidarity with female characters. This confirms Coates' theory that "women pursue a style based on solidarity and support" (Coates 2004: 126)

Moreover, as a female-centered series, female characters are definitely in a more crucial place than male characters. The rise of femininity is usually accompanied by so-called masculinity crisis. Therefore, led by the rule "lady first", male characters are just supporting roles who got about 30% of time to speak in all conversations selected. That to some extent lessens the chance of male characters to use other language forms in same-sex conversation besides verbal taboo. Also, in order to demonstrate the independent images of four female characters that put their sisterhood at the very first place, creators could have designed more lines and masculine expressions to show female characters' strength as well as solidarity. Thus, we can see the conversation in this series is probably not only led by their own topic but also the function of making female characters stand out.

3.2 Gender Difference in Using Verbal Taboo

Gender differences do not only exist in the use of taboo words, euphemism and neutral term, but also appear in all categories of verbal taboo. There are various categories of verbal taboo, and this study employed five main categories as shown in Diagram 2.

Out of 116 words, taboo words make up 56% by 65 words in total as shown in Chart 1. Among these 65 taboo words, female characters used 47 words and male used 31 words as shown in Chart 5. This result is true for these six episodes, but may not be true in the reality,

since female characters occupied the most lines on camera.

Diagram 2. Categories of taboo words

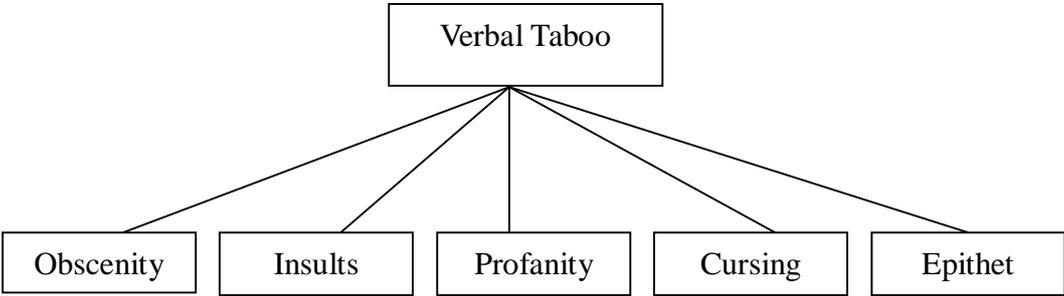
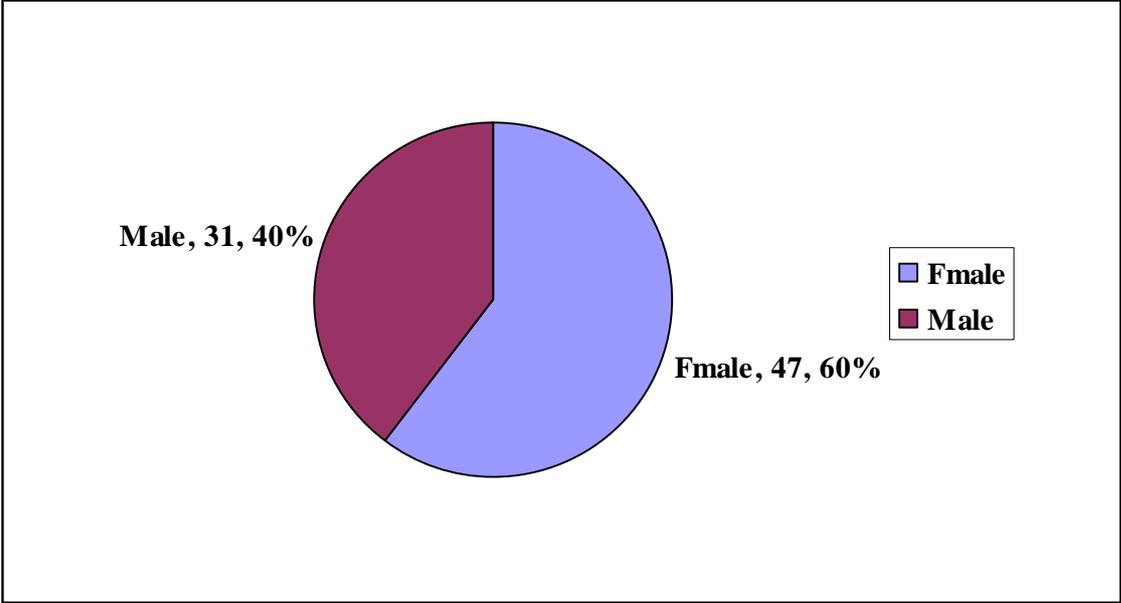


Chart 5. Male and female uses of taboo words in all conversations



Among these 65 taboo words, we do not see an even distribution of the use of each type. As Chart 6 shows, obscenity and insult share more than 2/3 of the chart. Both of them have 22 words and constitute 34%. The rest of the chart is combined respectively by profanity with 15%, epithet with 11% and cursing with 6%.

Chart 6. Make-up of all taboo categories in all conversations

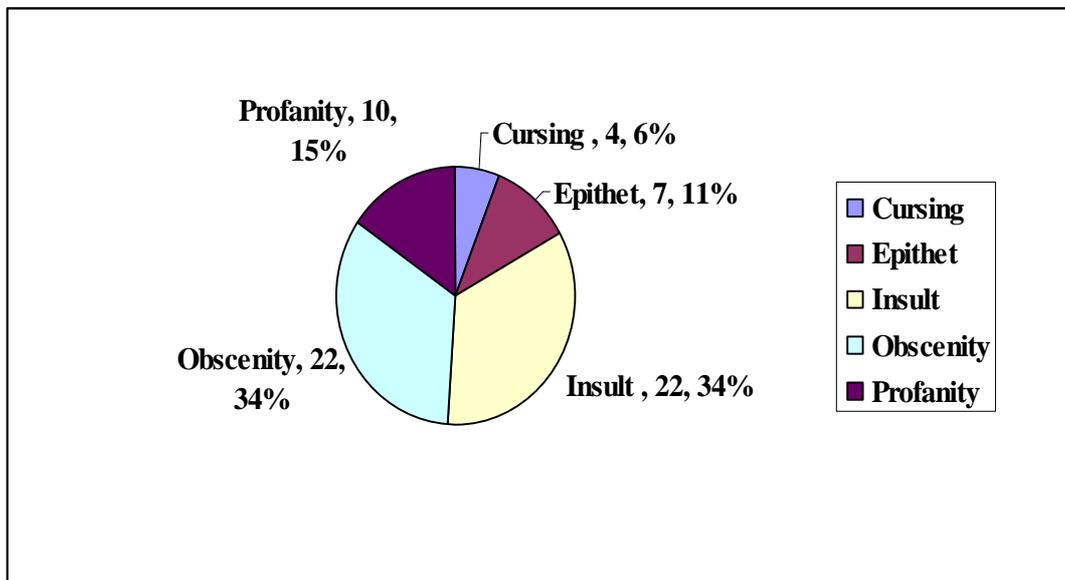


Table 7. Make-up of all taboo categories in all conversations

Category	Number	Percentage
Cursing	4	6%
Epithet	7	11%
Insult	22	34%
Obscenity	22	34%
Profanity	10	15%

Taking a closer look at data of both sexes' use of taboo words shown in Graph 2, we can see that both male and female characters use all the five types of taboo words. And except cursing and profanity, female characters use a bigger number of taboo words than male characters in all the other three categories. The largest gap exists in insult, in which female characters use 11 more words than male characters. Insult usually contains name calling and is always offensive and disrespectful. Like Elizabeth calls the man who dumped her *bastard* (202) and Barkley calls those models that had even had sex with him as *things* (102). However, insult does not always intend to be rude. For example, when Samantha uses *put dick in you* to Miranda with a mysterious smile, she does not mean to insult Miranda but to show their closeness through directness. The same situation appears when Mr. Big asks Carrie whether

she is a *hooker* with confusion on his face (101) – this insult word plus facial expression just indicates Mr. Big’s curiosity about Carrie rather than his intention to insult her.

Graph 2. Male and female use of taboo words in all conversations

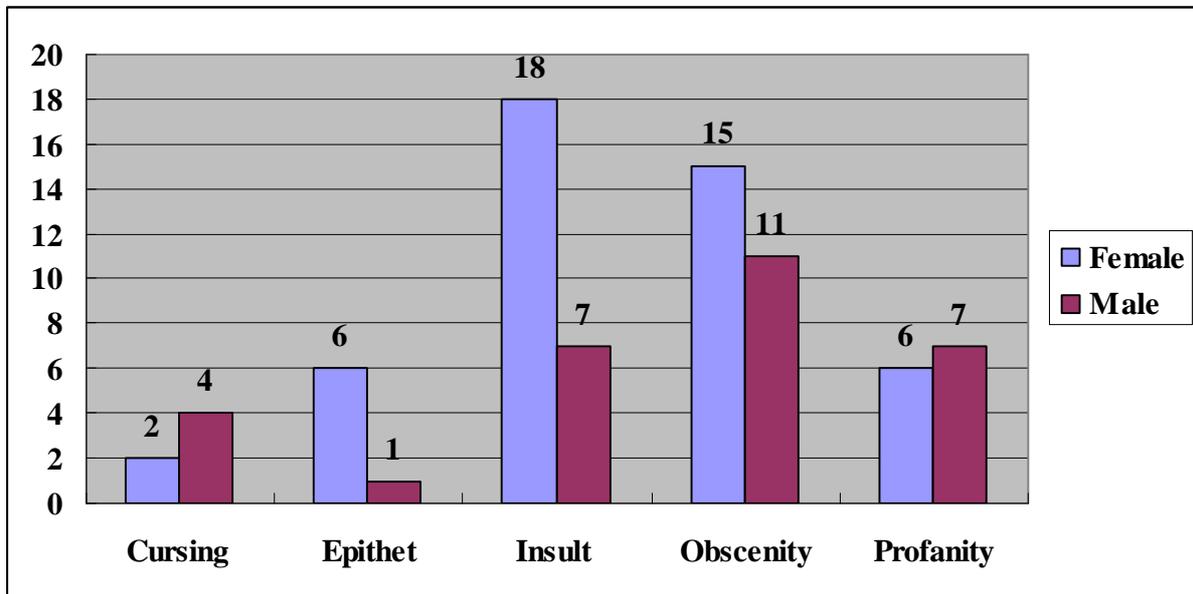


Table 8. Male and female use of taboo words in all conversations

Category	Female	Male
Cursing	2	4
Epithet	6	1
Insult	18	7
Obscenity	15	11
Profanity	6	7

The second and third largest gap is in epithet and obscenity, female characters used 5 more epithet and 4 more obscenity than male characters. Epithet refers to some short forms used to express one’s feeling like *damn it*, *screw’em*, or some terms related to someone’s disability like Samantha calls Jeff *midget*. Obscenity in these six episodes mostly refers to body part such as *ass*, *balls* and *dick*, and sexual related terms like *hose*, *dildos* and *stud*. Words belonging to this category are usually rude and vulgar.

In the category cursing and profanity, it is male characters that used more words than female

did, though the gap is comparatively slight: male characters used 2 more cursing and 1 more profanity than female. Cursing is used to execrate others by using e.g. *damn*, *fucking* and the like. For example, two men fought for Charlotte in a restaurant, one man cursed another by *fuck you* (301). Profanity refers to religious terms like *for Christ's sake*, *Jesus* and *Thank God*, and profane term will usually cause euphemism to avoid calling divinities directly. The only one euphemism of profanity is *gosh* used by a female character.

This result indicates that, under some circumstances, verbal taboo dose act in light of their own offensive and aggressive nature, while the function of verbal taboo is not fixed. The consequence caused by any single taboo word is depended on the context it is used. A tabooed word which will lead to beneficial consequences (e.g. *relaxation*, *solidarity*, and *humor*) no doubt is a good choice. (Timothy 1999: 164)

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that both male and female characters use taboo related language including verbal taboo, euphemism and neutral term in a differentiated way. Data shows both sexes used more taboo language in same-sex context, which had been also proved by other previous researchers. In this study, male characters used 100% of verbal taboo when accompanied by males, which is definitely more verbal taboo than female characters. However, what should be noted is that, in a female-oriented TV series, male characters could probably be arranged to use language in order to serve the needs of plot. That means men in real life may not act as dramatic as male characters do.

Besides, in mixed-sex conversation, male characters also used far more taboo words than female characters did, which does not confirm Coates' findings that both man and women speakers will adjust their speech act to accommodate other gender (Coates 2004: 98). This could be caused by the specific topics of all the conversation, for the conversations gathered from *Sex and the City gathered* are mainly sex-related. Moreover, the study has found that not only female characters use euphemism, but also male characters. This is contradictory again to Lakoff's theory that men always employ directness (Lakoff 2004: 78-81), but it is verified

female characters do use more euphemism than male characters.

Gender differences also exist in the use of different types of taboo words. Female characters use insult most frequently, while male characters used obscenity instead. One thing should be noted is that the function of taboo words is not fixed. The relationship between form and the function of any single taboo words is not steady and will vary in different contexts.

Finally, it should be made clear again that what have been done in this study is still limited. First all of, the primary material is a TV series, which could not be real portrayal of the reality. Then, this study used all kind of conversation on the whole without categorizing them into detail. However, people will use taboo language in both taboo and non-taboo topics, and there exist possibilities that people will use taboo language differently in taboo and non-taboo topics, and it is also worthwhile to make a follow-up study in this direction.

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