

What Did She Say?!?

How Context Affects Hearer Perceptions of Offensive Language

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Primary Research Objectives

- Objective 1** – To discern whether the perceived offensiveness of a taboo word depends more on its intrinsic semantic content or on the social context of a specific utterance
- Objective 2** – To determine to what extent male and female participants differ in their perceptions of language offensiveness (is there a difference? If so, is it the word itself, or the context?)

Getting on the Same Semantic Page

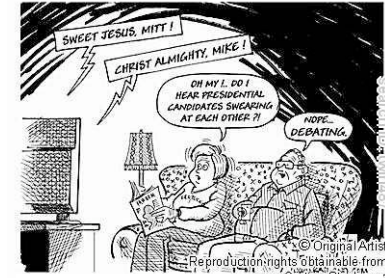
- Taboo Language** – Swear, curse, blasphemy, epithetical, euphemistic (etc.) words
- Gender** – Biological gender, not ‘gender’ as it is socially constructed
- Face-Threatening Acts (FTA)** – an utterance that challenges the hearer’s self image, e.g. criticism, disagreement, accusations
- Face-Building Acts (FBA)** – an utterance that promotes group or organizational solidarity, e.g. friend-speak, compliments, shared humor
- High-frequency words** – taboo words that previous research has shown to be the most offensive, e.g. “motherfucker”, “nigger”
- Low-frequency words** – taboo words that previous research has shown to be the least offensive, e.g. “hell”, “damn”
- Non-taboo/no-frequency words** – words used in this research project (for control) that do not have semantically offensive or abrasive meanings, e.g. “women”, “boy”

Study Population

- 110 college students from a Midwest university
- 73 females, 37 males
- Age median: 19.34 years old
- 93% ‘white’, 6% ‘Asian’, 1% ‘African American’

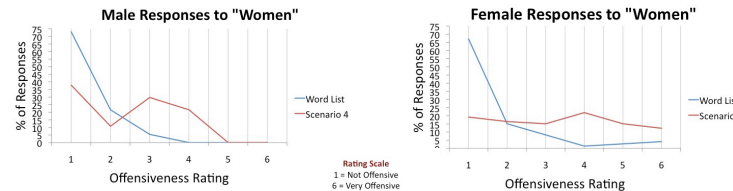
Methodology

- De-Contextualized Word List** – participants rated the offensiveness of 16 words (high, low and no-frequency) on an alphabetized list, outside of any context using a 6-point Likert scale.
- Dialogical Scenarios** – participants rated the offensiveness of the same 16 words as they appeared in a variety of dialogue-based scenarios representing real interactions
 - each word was used in a FTA and a FBA
 - contextual variables include various speaker types, social environments, speaker relationships
- Participants were instructed to rate words from their own personal perspective** as opposed to how media or others would feel

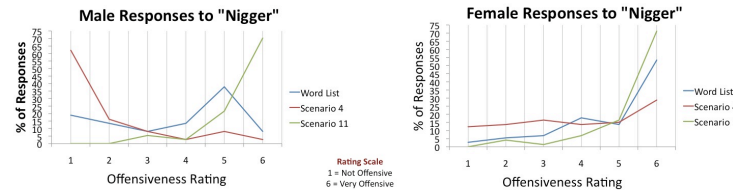


In the cartoon above, the wife is offended by the blaspheme (taboo) words that are being used by the senators, whom she thinks are fighting, while the husband is not offended because he perceives the context differently

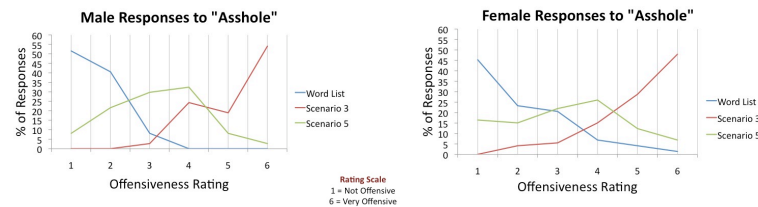
Significant Results



- Word list** – Ratings to “Women” on the de-contextualized word list
- Scenario 4 – FTA.** “Women” was used in Scenario 4 by two males (sexually) objectifying women



- Word list** – Ratings to “Nigger” on the de-contextualized word list
- Scenario 4 – FBA.** “Nigger” (-a variant, “nigga”) was used in Scenario 4 by an African American male speaking to his friend, another African American male
- Scenario 11 – FTA.** “Nigger” was used in Scenario 11 by two white males directed at an African American male



- Word list** – Ratings to “Asshole” on the de-contextualized word list
- Scenario 4 – FTA.** “Asshole” was used in Scenario 3 by a male student directed at a male professor
- Scenario 11 – FTA.** “Asshole” was used in Scenario 5 by a female undergraduate student indirectly referring to two males undergraduate students

Conclusions

- Males are less offended than females
- Gender agreement on which words are most offensive in the face-threatening contexts
- High-frequency words are *not* inherently offensive for males, some are for females
- Non-taboo words (e.g. women, boy) can be offensive in face-threatening contexts
- Low-frequency words (e.g. hell, damn) showed little variance in ratings, despite context
- Non-swearers were more offended than swearers
- Over 80% of all participants said they use about 12 of the 16 words used in this study on a regular basis

Survey Instrument and References Available Upon Request

