

“Wicked” women in contemporary pop culture: “Bad” language and gender in *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie* and *Saving Grace*

© Monika Bednarek

Note: This is the pre-print version of a journal article and not identical with the published version.

Reference for published article:

Bednarek, M. 2015 “Wicked” women in contemporary pop culture: “Bad” language and gender in *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie* and *Saving Grace*. *Text & Talk* 35/4: 431-451.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/text-2015-0011>

Abstract

In this article I discuss “wicked” women in contemporary pop culture, analyzing the language of the “heroines”, or protagonists, of three popular American television series: *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie* and *Saving Grace*. All feature female characters who are “flawed” in some way and can be described as “non-conforming”, since they engage in behavior that would be socially and morally condemned – they deal in drugs (*Weeds*), are addicted to pills (*Nurse Jackie*) or are alcoholics (*Saving Grace*). While this has attracted some comment in the mainstream media, such comments are not based on any empirical research and have tended to center on these women’s behavior. In contrast, the approach taken here focuses on their linguistic practices, in particular their use of “bad language”, including taboo words and swearing. The analyses show that all three female protagonists challenge stereotypical expectations about appropriate “feminine” behavior for white heterosexual Anglo-American women through their use of “bad language”, while the impact of such cultural representations depends on a range of factors.

Key words: gender, swearing, bad language, taboo, TV series, Nurse Jackie, Weeds, Saving Grace

“Wicked” women in contemporary pop culture: “Bad” language and gender in *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie* and *Saving Grace*

1 Popular television and cultural representations of the female

This article investigates the use of bad language (BL) by “wicked” or “flawed” women in three contemporary American television series: *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie* and *Saving Grace*. It aims to make a contribution to four areas of linguistic interest: the study of language and gender (e.g. Cameron 2006), the study of characterization (e.g. Culpeper 2001, Bednarek 2010), the sociolinguistic study of TV series (e.g. Richardson 2010, Androutsopoulos 2012), and the study of bad language (e.g. McEnery 2006).

The female protagonists of these three TV series are important cultural representations of the female voice. All three series had very high ratings in the US, with the pilot episodes of *Nurse Jackie* and *Weeds* reaching over a million and *Saving Grace* reaching 6.4 million viewers.¹ Such popular symbolic representations

are resources for the active process of self-fashioning which is now understood by most feminists to have a significant role in the construction of gender identity, and also distillations of the social norms which constrain that process in a given time or place. People learn what is considered normal and desirable femininity or masculinity from representations as well as from first-hand observation and experience; indeed, representations may be even more powerful in forming desires and identifications just because they are idealized. (Cameron 2006: 15)

However, linguistic studies of the “female voice in public contexts” (Baxter 2006b) tend to focus on the voices of “real-life” women, rather than cultural representations, and few studies exist on cultural constructs of gender in contemporary TV series. Given the recent shift in popular discourse to biological or evolutionary explanations for gender, which are inadequate in many ways (Cameron 2010), investigating cultural representations of gender is all the more important.

The focus on *TV series* is motivated by their significance (Bednarek 2010: 7–11). To briefly summarize here: US television series are popular cultural products, consumed by millions if not billions of viewers world-wide, many of whom speak English as a second language or use a different national variety of English. Audiences engage with the characters and narratives as well as the language used in constructing these fictional worlds, including in conversation with others. Outside linguistics, TV series have attracted a high level of academic attention, for instance in cultural and media studies. The argument for taking popular culture seriously in linguistic research “is an argument that would not be necessary for a cultural studies audience” (Pennycook 2007: 13) and “we would be foolish to ignore [popular culture] or to reduce it to dismissive comments” (Pennycook 2007: 81).

The few existing *linguistic* studies on female gender representation in TV series have focused only on individual series, most of which are “cult” rather than contemporary: Rey’s (2001) analysis of different *Star Trek* series over time proposes that “traditional differences between female and male language ... appear to be breaking down” (Rey 2001: 155). Bubel and Spitz’s (2006) analysis of *Ally McBeal* focuses on the performance of two jokes by two female characters, mainly with respect to humor and characterization, although they also briefly discuss gender. Gregori Signes (2007) analyses one character in 3rd *Rock from the Sun*, noting that the breaking of gender stereotypes can function both to perpetuate traditional gender roles and prompt a renegotiation of those roles. Both Bednarek (2010) and Paltridge et al (2011) draw on Butler’s (1999) notion of performativity to explore how characters can reproduce and oppose gender identities, in *Gilmore Girls* and *Sex and the City* respectively.

To contribute a more contemporary perspective, the case studies in this article focus on characters in three recent cable television series, one of which is still being produced (at the time of writing): *Weeds* (2005–2012), *Saving Grace* (2007–2010), and *Nurse Jackie* (2009–present). These seemed to start a trend of shows with female leads who behave “badly”, continued in programs such as *Enlightened* (2011-2013) and *The Big C* (2010-2013). When comparing different female TV

characters with respect to bad language and gender, it is important to compare characters and series that are similar: All three feature well-known actresses (Mary-Louise Parker, Holly Hunter and Edie Falco) who were nominated for or have won a Golden Globe/Emmy for their role. In each of the shows the main protagonist is white and heterosexual and, importantly, all were rated TV-MA (“Mature Audience Only”) in the US (Wikipedia), and thus “may contain one or more of the following: crude indecent language (L), explicit sexual activity (S), or graphic violence (V)” (Understanding the TV ratings and parental controls, no date). All feature female characters who are “flawed” in some way and can be described as “wicked” women, since they engage in behavior that would be socially and morally condemned – they deal in drugs (*Weeds*), are addicted to pills (*Nurse Jackie*) or are alcoholics (*Saving Grace*). While this has attracted some comment in the mainstream media (e.g. Ritchie 2012), such comments are not based on any empirical research and have tended to center on these women’s behavior. The three shows have also recently been the object of scrutiny in Communication and Cultural Studies, including in relation to gender issues: Bemker LaPoe (2012: 4) argues that Jackie’s role challenges gender stereotypes and Liebling (2009) points out that Grace’s character refutes expectations about women while also taking on stereotypical roles of femininity (such as “nurturer” or “mother”) and that *Saving Grace* is ultimately “a postfeminist text—one in which the narrative (and trajectory of its central character) is both informed by a second wave feminist history and, at times, serves to undermine that history” (Liebling 2009:1).

While there is no scope here for providing an overview of current theories on language and gender (see e.g. Cameron 2005, Mullany 2007), my approach in this article is to examine the extent to which the three female characters diverge from (stereotypical) gender norms and what the potential impact might be. In contrast to a cultural studies approach, this article focuses on *linguistic* practices: do these construct these female characters as “wicked”, and if yes, how? This question will be explored via an analysis of “bad language” (McEnery 2006), including the use of taboo words and swearing. I will start by providing an overview of the relationship between the use of “bad language” and gender, before briefly describing the three TV series and their protagonists as

well as the data and analytical focus. I will then present the results of this initial study before discussing the potential impact of such and similar cultural representations.

2 Bad language and gender

There appears to be no consensus on whether or not men use more bad language than women, with different findings depending on factors such as national variety, class, race and so on. For example, with respect to British English, McEnery (2006) states that it is *not* the case that bad language (BL) is used less by women, which is also Stenström's (1991) finding, whereas Precht's (2006, 2008) investigation of American English conversation found that "[m]en clearly use more profanity" (Precht 2006: 17). Brezina and Meyerhoff (2014) argue that "aggregate data methodology" (where only groups of speakers are compared, e.g. comparing *all* male vs. *all* female speakers) and associated statistics such as Log Likelihood foreground inter-group differences at the expense of within group variation and do not measure gender differences reliably. Work-in-progress by Brezina on British informal speech proposes that age is more of an influencing factor than gender (personal communication, 24/8/2013).

In her review of the literature, Murphy (2010) mentions findings that young (English-speaking) South African females use a wide range of taboo items and that lower working-class *female* speakers use strong expletives, which middle-class *male* speakers would avoid. In the context of African American women's language, Troutman (2006) states that swearing means "violating a social code of feminine politeness" (p. 232), but also notes that "bawdy language" (which includes vulgar language, swearing, taboo words) is "used in public contexts [sic] by many African American women, creating a different voice/availability of voice for these women in contradistinction to the domain of the female voice in public contexts established in the literature for European American women" (p. 233). These different findings highlight the problems associated with a monolithic approach to bad language, where gender is seen as the only distinguishing dimension. In this respect, it is always worth asking "which women and which men

do you mean” (Cameron 2005: 6). In addition to social and individual factors, findings concerning BL and gender depend on the specific bad language words (BLWs) included in the investigation: A study that *excludes* BLWs commonly used by women would result in lower frequencies for the general use of BL by female speakers.

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish actual practice from ideological representations (Cameron 2006: 5). Regardless of *actual* linguistic usage, there are historical and contemporary *assumptions* that men use BL more than women, that men use stronger BLWs (such as FUCK), and that the use of BL in general is not very “refined” or “ladylike” (Jespersen 1922: 210–211, Lakoff 1990/1975: 224–225, McEnery 2006: 29). In this sense, BL is gendered, and associated with stereotypical norms around femininity and masculinity. Such assumptions about BL are in line with wider stereotypical expectations of white, heterosexual “Anglo-American” female speech, such as indirectness or emotionality (see Mullany 2007: 34). These linguistic expectations can in turn be linked to the type of femininity that is commonly promoted across the mass media – “emphasized femininity” (Milestone and Meyer 2012: 20, citing Connell 1987), where women are, *inter alia*, framed as irrational/emotional, kind, caring, fragile, weak, peaceful, unassertive, and non-confrontational.

Concerning the use of BL in TV series, Bednarek’s (2008) study of *Gilmore Girls* found that the female characters used more expletives than the male characters, but that male characters were more varied in their usage of the most common expletives. There was also an overuse of *oh my god/god* for female characters and *geez/damn* and *damn it* for male speakers. Bednarek (2010) found that regardless of gender, individual characters are distinguished from each other both in terms of the frequency of and the preference for particular emotive interjections (including expletives). This study argued that their use is related to characterization – for example a more “genteel” character will use them less frequently. This points to the importance of BL for the construction of *individual* character identities, rather than gender identities. We can thus change Cameron’s question above to “which *woman* and which *man* do you mean?”.

To conclude, I argue that a female character who uses a significant amount of BL, in particular “strong” BLWs, may be perceived as breaking the norms of what is considered as stereotypically “feminine” behavior and as not being very “refined” or “ladylike”. The use of strong BLWs by female characters also challenges discourses that associate “strong”, “powerful” speech with masculinity, rather than femininity (Baxter 2006a: xvi). In contrast, the use of less “strong” BLWs, especially those that are typically associated with female speakers (such as *oh my god*) will not have the same effect. Indeed, the use of such words may instead conform to stereotypical assumptions that females are more “emotional” and “irrational” than men (cf. Burton 2000: 181, Mullany 2007: 185ff). Further, I argue that the use of BL in TV series is strongly related to individual characterization rather than solely gender. For this reason, the dialogue of one character (the “wicked” woman) will be compared with that of all other characters, whether male or female, as well as comparing them with each other.

3 Introducing *Weeds*, *Saving Grace* and *Nurse Jackie*

This section provides a brief description of the fictional worlds of the three TV series investigated in this article.

3.1 *Weeds*

Weeds is a Showtime comedy/crime/drama (Imdb) whose premise can be summarized as follows:

After her husband’s unexpected death and subsequent financial woes, suburban mom Nancy Botwin (Parker) embraces a new profession: the neighborhood pot dealer. As it seems like everyone secretly wants what she’s selling – even city councilman Doug Wilson (Nealon) – Nancy is faced with keeping her family life in check and her enterprise a secret from her neighbor/pseudo-friend/PTA president, Celia Hodes (Perkins).

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0439100/>

In addition to Doug Wilson and Celia Hodes, other main characters include Nancy's two sons, 15-year old Silas and ten-year-old Shane, and her brother-in-law Andy. The character of Nancy Botwin is variously described as a "soccer mom who had to learn how to deal", "determined to do anything to keep her kids in suburbia" (DVD blurbs), a "danger junkie", "up to her neck in sex, scams, and spliffs", manipulating both friends and family, and the law and "ready and willing to take desperate measures" (Showtime website). Redeeming features include the fact that she was suddenly widowed, and that she "is willing to risk life and limb for the love of her family" (Wikipedia). In the pilot episode, Nancy is shown being adamant about not dealing drugs to children and acting very supportively towards her youngest son:

Extract 1:

SHANE: Can we go home now? Please?

NANCY: It's not even half-time.

SHANE: I don't feel well. I think I have rickets.

CELIA: No, you've gotta tough it out, little man. See, that's what your father would have said.

NANCY: How about this? How about you relax and have a drink, and sit out this quarter, and you'll play again in the second half, okay? Okay?

SHANE: Fine. Can I have fruit punch?

NANCY: You can even have fruit punch. I love you.

3.2 *Saving Grace*

Saving Grace is a TNT (crime) drama series. Its storyline is summarized on Wikipedia as follows:

The plot focuses on Grace Hanadarko (Hunter), a smoking, heavy drinking, and promiscuous Oklahoma City detective. In the series opener, Grace meets up with her "last-chance" angel, when after a night of drinking she runs down and kills a pedestrian with her Porsche. In desperation she calls out for God's help, and a scruffy, tobacco-spitting man

who calls himself Earl (Rippy) appears. [...] Earl appears to Grace throughout the series, hoping she'll turn away from her more self-destructive tendencies and seek God's help. Other main characters include Grace's colleagues Ham, Butch, Rhetta, Bobby and Kate, and her nephew Clay. Grace is described as "self-destructive", someone who "drinks heavily, engages in numerous one-night stands and casual encounters with men, and is having an affair with her married police partner, Ham" (Wikipedia). In the pilot episode, angel Earl accuses her of "sleeping with different guys and getting drunk every night, lying, stealing, using people, and overall just being a major dick to everybody you meet". Incidentally, the BLW *dick*, which literally refers to the male genitals, and which one might assume to be preferably applied to males, may work to label Grace's bad behavior as masculine here (although gender targeting of BLWs can be unexpected; see McEnery 2006: 40 for British English). Grace's redeeming features include that she is "passionate in her job" and "an extraordinarily loving and generous person to those around her. In particular she loves her young nephew, Clay (Dylan Minnette), and devotes a great deal of her time to him." (Wikipedia)

3.3 Nurse Jackie

Nurse Jackie is a Showtime comedy-drama set in a hospital. The story line features:

Jackie Peyton, a sharp tongued, quick witted, pill popping, pharmacist-humping nurse trying to survive the chaotic grind of a hectic New York City hospital whilst juggling this with her family life. With a white lie here and a bent rule there, Jackie does whatever it takes to get the job done and to tweak the balance of the scales of justice when need be. (DVD blurb, season 1)

Other main characters in season 1 include Jackie's husband Kevin and daughters Grace and Fiona, her best friend Dr Eleanor O'Hara, Dr Cooper (Coop), pharmacist Eddie, hospital administrator Gloria Akalitus and nurses Mo-mo, Zoey, and Thor. Jackie's character is addicted to pain medication, and has an affair with Eddie. Bemker LaPoe et al (2012) tie her character to the "bad

mother” myth. DVD blurbs characterize her as “strong-willed and brilliant – but very flawed”, and “playing fast and loose with hospital rules”. Redeeming features of the character include that she is “a loving [...] mother, and a first-class nurse” (DVD blurb, season 2), with “street smarts and sardonic wit” (DVD blurb, season 4). Her pill addiction is introduced in the first episode as being motivated by a fear of unemployment:

Extract 2:

Jackie: What do you call a nurse with a bad back? Unemployed. Budump-bump. One left. That sucks. 16 grains. No more, no less. Just a little bump to get me up and running.

Zoey, who is unaware of Jackie’s addiction, assesses her as a “saint”, in response to which Jackie later ruminates:

Extract 3:

Jackie (voice-over): If I were a saint, which maybe I wanna be, maybe I don’t, I would be like Augustine. He knew there was good in him and he knew there was some not so good. And he wasn’t going to give up his earthly pleasures before he was good and ready. Make me good, God, but not yet. Right?

So while these three characters are “wicked women” to a certain extent, they have redeeming features (at least in the pilot episodes), which are in line with “conventional ideas of femininity as caring, emotional, loving and considerate. These female attributes are positive qualities” (Milestone and Meyer 2012: 102). They are complex “flawed” characters rather than “evil” caricatures.

4 Analyzing bad language

In analyzing bad language in these complex cultural representations of the female voice, the focus is on transcripts of the first episode of the first season. Early episodes are important to analyze because they are particularly significant in establishing characters: “The first few episodes of a television series tag the central characters with the speech/behavior that defines the major traits that will motivate them over the course of the season” (Pearson 2007: 42). It is in the first episode of the first season that viewers engage with these female characters and the narrative for the first time, and the success or failure of these episodes often dictates the fate of the program. Transcripts were obtained from online sources but carefully checked against the actual dialogue to remove any errors. The dialogue of the female protagonist (Nancy, Jackie, Grace) was then separated from that of all other characters (Table 1).

<Table 1 here>

In my analysis and interpretation of BL I use techniques that are more commonly associated with corpus linguistics (frequencies, visualization in the form of concordances) – although I analyzed all transcripts *manually*, using transcripts and video data rather than any corpus software. Quantitative and qualitative results for the use of BL are combined with comments on selected scenes.

5 The use of bad language by the three “wicked” women

5.1 (Very) strong bad language

McEnery (2006: 36) suggests that *CUNT*, *MOTHERFUCKER* (both “very strong”), and *FUCK* (“strong”), are perceived as the strongest BLWS in the UK.² In the US the F-word is clearly considered unacceptable in all its usages, as can be seen by a decision by the Federal Communications Commission who ruled against the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) following the broadcast of an awards-ceremony where *fucking* was used as an intensifier. The commission argued that:

given the core meaning of the “F-Word,” any use of that word or a variation, in any context, inherently has a sexual connotation, and therefore falls within the first prong of our indecency definition. [...]

The “F-Word” is one of the most vulgar, graphic and explicit descriptions of sexual activity in the English language. Its use invariably invokes a coarse sexual image. (p. 5)

Figure 1 lists *all* occurrences of the F-word in *Nurse Jackie* [NJ] and *Weeds* [W], as there are no instances in *Saving Grace*. Jackie’s dialogue includes five instances (4.47 per 1000 words) of FUCK used in different ways (categories from McEnery 2006: 32): premodifying intensifying negative adjective (*a total fucking retard*), cursing expletive (*fuck you*), destinal usage (*fuck off*), emphatic adjective (*smart fucking nun*) and idiomatic phrase (*stay the fuck out of my way*). Nancy’s dialogue includes three instances of FUCK (2.96 per 1000 words) used as premodifying intensifying negative adjective (*a fucking liar*); personal insult referring to defined entity (*a fuckwad*); and literal usage denoting taboo referent (*to fuck in my guest room*).

<Figure 1 here>

Table 2 shows examples for the use of the F-word by other characters in *Nurse Jackie* and *Weeds*, with information on speaker name and gender in brackets.

<Table 2 here>

As Table 2 indicates, other characters also use FUCK, with quantitative differences not statistically significant (even in terms of log likelihood which emphasizes inter group differences, as pointed out above). In other words, Jackie/Nancy do not *overuse* FUCK in contrast with all other characters.³

However, the sheer presence of this strongly vulgar BLW in the two female characters’ dialogue is significant, and can be seen as breaking norms of stereotypically “feminine” behavior. Interestingly, in *Weeds*, it is a female character other than Nancy – Celia Hodes – who pronounces the strongest BLW (CUNT).

Extract 4:

QUINN (on video, inaudible miming, accompanied by the respective gesture): Fuck you. Fuck off.

CELIA: That little *cunt*. I should have had an abortion.

As becomes apparent, to a certain extent the universe of *Weeds* is about the breaking of taboos.

Celia's dialogue in extract 4 is a very good example, as she not only calls her daughter Quinn a *cunt* but also references the taboo subject of abortion. Another example from the *Weeds* pilot episode involves the taboo subject of a man's anal stimulation:

Extract 5:

DOUG: Well, last week, she [Dean's lover] stuck the handle of a racket up Dean's ass when he was plowing her. He said it felt unbelievable, but, you know, if you ask me, any guy who lets anything up there is at least part fag.

[...]

NANCY: Did Judah ever say anything about *our* sex life at these games?

DOUG: No, no. The guys who still have sex with their wives usually don't wanna jinx it by saying something out loud. He was a great guy, Nance. We miss him a lot.

NANCY: Yeah. Me too. If only he'd lived long enough for me to stick foreign objects up his ass. I never even got a finger up there.

DOUG: Oh, man. You're an amazing lady.

Cameron and Kulick (2003) draw on Freud in explaining that "prohibited words, images and actions have the power to entice and excite" (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 117) precisely because they are forbidden and normally hidden. This could partially explain the success of taboo-breaking programs such as *Weeds*. In sum, two of the three investigated female characters – Jackie and Nancy – use strong BL and thereby break social norms of "femininity". In *Weeds* this breaking of

social norms is reinforced by the breaking of other taboos. Whether or not viewers agree with Doug in finding Nancy's taboo breaking "amazing" is another matter, as is the general question of how they view Jackie's and Nancy's use of the F-word (as discussed further below).

5.2 Male/female bad language

Precht's (2006, 2008) study of American English conversation suggests that *ass*, *damn*, *fuck*, *gee*, *hell* and *shit* are used more by men and *god/gosh* by women.⁴ In addition, there are stereotypical assumptions that men use stronger BL than women and *oh my god* is stereotypically associated with female speakers. Table 3 shows the extent to which Jackie, Grace and Nancy make use of these BLWs.⁵

<Table 3 here>

Table 3 demonstrates that all three characters only rarely use the "female" BLW *god*, with only Grace uttering *oh, god* once. In fact, *god* (*oh god*, *oh my god*) is used by a mix of male/female characters (Coop, Zoey, Rhetta, Ham, Dean) and the only occurrence of *gosh* occurs in a male character's speech (Ham).

Thus, the dialogue in all three pilot episodes does not conform to the supposed pattern of associating *god/gosh* with female speakers. Further, the three characters all diverge from gender stereotypes by using "male" BLWs (MBLWs): Jackie's dialogue includes 8 instances (7.15 per 1000 words), Nancy's includes 11 (10.84 per 1000 words), and Grace's includes 31 (17.9 per 1000 words). Grace hence uses a particularly high amount of MBLWs, which is likely to be cognitively salient for the audience, as it is also explicitly referenced in the dialogue: In extract 6, Earl's metalinguistic comment *You gotta stop cussing, man* foregrounds and negatively evaluates Grace's use of *God damn it*, which is also juxtaposed with her use of "doggie" talk (including the euphemistic *wee-wee*) which arguably makes her subsequent swearing more powerful and possibly more noticeable. Earl's use of the familiarizer *man* in the presence of a female character here appears similar to his (non-vocative) use of *dick* to refer to Grace's behavior (see Section 4.2),

although it is somewhat ambiguous whether the familiarizer is used to address Grace or as exclamation.

Extract 6:

Grace [to her dog]: Come on, big head Gus head. Go make wee-wee. [Possibly stepping into dog excrement] God damn it!

Earl: *You gotta stop cussing*, man.

Table 4 shows the specific categories of BL usage, following McEnery's (2006: 32) categorization unless otherwise specified.⁶ Not only does Grace use the most "male" BLWs, she also uses them in most categories (7), followed by Nancy (6) and Jackie (5). Only three categories are shared among all characters: cursing expletive, personal insult and idiom/image, with a further three shared among two of the three characters (emphatic adjective, premodifying intensive negative adjective, and general expletive). Jackie and Nancy only have one category not used by others: destinational usage (Jackie) and literal usage (Nancy), whereas Grace has three categories: predicative negative adjective, adverbial booster, and pronominal form. In other words, while Grace does not use the strong F-word, she stands out in terms of frequency, variety and uniqueness of MBLWs.

<Table 4 here>

Interestingly, Figure 2 shows that Grace [G] has a high amount of pronominal usage (where *my/your/his ass* can be replaced by a personal pronoun), which may be an attempt to index a particular US dialect (the narrative takes place in Oklahoma), as it is also used by other characters [O] in *Saving Grace*. No such clear pronominal uses occur in *NJ*, and only in dialogue by African-American characters in *Weeds*. This is an example of the multifunctionality of BLWs with respect to characterization.

<Figure 2 here>

6 Questions around impact

In sum, all three female protagonists challenge stereotypical expectations about appropriate “feminine” behavior for white heterosexual Anglo-American women through their use of BL, not just through their non-conforming behavior (drug-dealing, etc). What is the potential impact of such (pop) cultural representations? An argument could be made that female characters who perform gender in ways that are *not* stereotypically feminine and at times stereotypically masculine may appeal to a broader audience (including men) and thus be commercially more viable.⁷ It could also be argued that women are only allowed to act like this in a fictional world where they provide entertainment to a mass media audience. There is in fact a long tradition of what Rowe (1995: 109) calls “unruly” women or “women on top” in drama and comedy, ranging from Shakespeare’s comedic heroines to more contemporary televisual and filmic characters. Cameron (2006: 8) argues that: “It is less threatening for the female voice to be heard in public if the setting, subject matter and form of speech is ‘profane’ – considered by the community to be trivial, or vulgar, or in conflict with its ‘real’ values”. On the other hand, pop culture has the potential to reach billions of viewers around the world, and, as argued above, to offer viewers resources for self-fashioning. Characters such as Jackie, Grace and Nancy increase the variety of cultural representations of femininity for viewers. Rowe (1995: 44) further argues that we should not dismiss “the impact of the symbolic, the lingering and empowering effect of the sign of the woman on top outside and beyond privileged moments of social play”.

This impact, however, depends on how these representations of the female voice are evaluated: Are they presented as *positive* or *negative*? It would have been possible to set these characters up as clear villains or negative caricatures. However, all three are complex characters and all are the main protagonist who viewers are meant to identify with and care about. They are “flawed”, rather than “evil”. While there is explicit text-*internal* evaluation of the use of BLWs by other characters in both *Weeds* (positive – Doug: *Oh, man. You’re an amazing lady*) and *Saving Grace* (negative – Earl:

You gotta stop cussing, man.), and explicit positive evaluation of Jackie's character in *Nurse Jackie* (Zoey: *I think you're a saint.*) the audience can choose to share this evaluation or not.

There is an epistemological problem here: as each woman is presented as a complex character it is difficult to tell which character traits the audience is set up to disapprove of and what counts as "bad" behavior. There is no overt moralizing in these shows, whether about bad language use or other behavior. In fact, both *Nurse Jackie* and *Weeds* have been criticized by certain commentators, *Nurse Jackie* for the character having "no qualms about repeatedly violating the nursing Code of Ethics" (New York State Nurses Association 2009) and *Weeds* for glorifying drug use (e.g. Maher 2012). Such reactions – whether or not we agree with them – suggest that these TV series do *not* explicitly or unequivocally condemn the women. I am not arguing here that they should; the point is that there is no clear message, at least in the pilot episodes. Rather, the audience can choose which parts of the character they embrace/condemn, depending on their own identity and background. Arguably, this complexity creates suspense and attracts audiences, who wonder what these characters' journey will be and how they will react to them. It may well be a conscious strategy of scriptwriters with the aim of making us care and engage, and ultimately of ensuring that we keep watching.

The possible exception to this is *Saving Grace*, with its premise that Grace needs to be saved (Liebling 2009: 17, 18). However, in the first episode at least the audience is not forced to side with angel Earl's negative evaluation of Grace's general behavior (such as having casual sex) or of her use of BL. In fact, Earl *himself* uses a BLW (... *just being a major dick...*), which suggests a more ambiguous message towards the use of BL in *Saving Grace*. Ultimately, an analysis of the message of *Saving Grace* as a whole needs to take into account Grace's journey throughout the show's three seasons; as such, an analysis of the first episode is limited to how audiences are positioned at the *beginning* of this narrative. However, a retrospective analysis of the whole series would differ from the way audiences perceive the show on an episode-by-episode basis.

Further, audience reactions to the characters and their use of BL will depend on a range of factors, such as viewers' national context (e.g. US vs. Britain), age, gender, education, or religion. Audiences from non-English speaking backgrounds who watch these programs in the original may react very differently than native English speakers, as swear words acquired through classroom learning may not be offensive to the learners (Pavlenko 2005: 238). Ultimately, an investigation of how audiences respond to these cultural representations would need to involve audience research using techniques such as interviews, focus groups, questionnaires or systematic analysis of audience discourses (e.g. social media posts).

Popular culture can be regarded as a site of political struggle over ideologies where dominant gender norms and ideologies can be resisted, adapted or reproduced (Milestone and Meyer 2012: 5–6). *Nurse Jackie*, *Weeds* and *Saving Grace* are instances of popular culture where dominant gender norms around the use of BL are resisted, and challenge social norms and stereotypes in complex and interesting ways. The female protagonists of these three TV series are important cultural representations that millions of viewers have engaged with, and, as idealized representations, they may have a powerful impact. Indeed, observations and engagement with fictional representations may have more of an impact than observations of local practice by “real” people. Nakamura (2006) recounts how Japanese female students imitated the “schoolgirl” speech represented in novels, arguing for “the crucial role of fiction and metalinguistic commentary in constructing language ideology” (Nakamura 2006: 283) and social identity.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Deborah Cameron and two anonymous reviewers for commenting on an earlier version of this article.

References

- Anderson, Lars and Peter Trudgill. 1990. *Bad language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Androutsopoulos, Jannis (ed.). 2012. *Language and society in cinematic discourse*, Theme Issue, *Multilingua* 31, issues 2/3.
- Baxter, Judith. 2006a. Introduction. In Judith Baxter (ed.) *Theorising the female voice in public contexts*. Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan. xiii–xviii.
- Baxter, Judith. 2006b (ed.). *Theorising the female voice in public contexts*. Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bednarek, Monika. 2008. “What the hell is wrong with you?” A corpus perspective on evaluation and emotion in contemporary American pop culture. In Ahmar Mahboob and Naomi Knight (eds.) *Questioning linguistics*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press. 95–126.
- Bednarek, Monika. 2010. *The language of fictional television: Drama and identity*. London/New York: Continuum.
- Bemker LaPoe, Victoria, Benjamin LaPoe II and Daniel Berkowitz. 2012. Sticking it to the mother myth: Discussing race and gender in Nurse Jackie and HawthoRNe online. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, Phoenix, AZ.
- Brezina, Vaclav and Miriam Meyerhoff. 2014. Significant or random? A critical review of sociolinguistic generalisations based on large corpora. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 19: 1–28.
- Bubel, Claudia and Alic Spitz. 2006. “One of the last vestiges of gender bias”: The characterization of women through the telling of dirty jokes in *Ally McBeal*. *Humor* 19: 71–104.
- Bucholtz, Mary and Qiuana Lopez. 2011. Performing blackness, forming whiteness: Linguistic minstrelsy in Hollywood film. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15: 680–706.
- Burton, Graeme. 2000. *Talking television: An introduction to the study of television*. London: Arnold.

- Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York/New York: Routledge.
- Cameron, Deborah. 2005. Language, gender and sexuality: current issues and new directions. *Applied Linguistics* 26: 482–502.
- Cameron, Deborah. 2006. Theorising the female voice in public contexts. In Judith Baxter (ed.) *Theorising the female voice in public contexts*. Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 3–20.
- Cameron, Deborah. 2010. Sex/gender, language and the new biologism. *Applied Linguistics* 31: 173–92.
- Cameron, Deborah and Don Kulick. 2003. *Language and sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Connell, Bob. 1987. *Gender and power*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. 2001. *Language and characterisation: people in plays and other texts*. Harlow: Longman.
- Davies, Mark. (2008–). *The corpus of contemporary American English: 450 million words, 1990–present*. Available at <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>.
- Federal Communications Commission. 2004. Memorandum opinion and order in the matter of complaints against various broadcast licensees regarding their airing of the “Golden Globe Awards” program. Available at http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-04-43A1.pdf (26/6/2013).
- Gillota, David. 2012. “People of colors”: Multiethnic humor in *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle and Weeds*. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45: 960–978.
- Gregori Signes, Carmen. 2007. What do we laugh at? Gender representations in 3rd *Rock from the Sun*. In José Santaemilia, Patricia Bou, Sergio Maruenda and Gora Zaragoza (eds.) *International perspectives on gender and language*. Valencia: Universitat de Valencia. 726–750.

- Jespersen, Otto. 1990/1922. The woman. In Deborah Cameron (ed.) *The feminist critique of language. A reader*. London/New York: Routledge. 201–220. [Reprinted from Jespersen, Otto. 1922. *Language: Its nature, development and origin*. London: Allen and Unwin.]
- Lakoff, Robin. 1990/1975. Extract from *Language and woman's place*. In Deborah Cameron (ed.) *The feminist critique of language. A reader*. London/New York: Routledge. 221–233. [Reprinted from Lakoff, Robin. 1975. *Language and woman's place*. New York: Harper and Row.]
- Liebling, Heather. 2009. DisGraceful woman? Postfeminism and TNT's Saving Grace. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the NCA 95th Annual Convention, Chicago, IL.
- Maher, Brittany. 2012. Media under the influence. *The Sentinel* 13 November 2012. Available at <http://www.ksusentinel.com/2012/11/13/media-under-the-influence/> (25/6/2013).
- McEnery, Tony, Paul Baker and Andrew Hardie. 2000. Assessing claims about language use with corpus data – swearing and abuse. In John M. Kirk (ed.) *Corpora galore. Analyses and techniques in describing English*. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi. 45–55.
- McEnery, Tony. 2006. *Swearing in English: Bad language, purity and power from 1586 to the present*. London: Routledge.
- Milestone, Katie and Anneke Meyer. 2012. *Gender & popular culture*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity.
- Mullany, Louise. 2007. *Gendered discourse in the professional workplace*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murphy, Bróna. 2010. *Corpus and sociolinguistics: Investigating age and gender in Female Talk*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Nakamura, Momoko. 2006. Creating indexicality. Schoolgirl speech in Meiji Japan. In Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (eds.) *The language and sexuality reader*. London/New York: Routledge. 270–284.
- New York State Nurses Association. 2009. NYSNA responds to “Nurse Jackie” series. Available at <http://www.nysna.org/general/communications/nursejackie.htm> (25/6/2013).

- Paltridge, Brian, Angela Thomas and Jianxin Liu 2011. Genre, performance and Sex in the City. In Roberta Piazza, Monika Bednarek and Fabio Rossi (eds.) *Telecinematic discourse. Approaches to the language of films and television series*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 249–262.
- Pavlenko, Aneta. 2005. *Emotions and multilingualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pearson, Roberta. 2007. Anatomising Gilbert Grissom. The structure and function of the televisual character. In Michael Allen 2007 (ed.) *Reading CSI. Crime TV under the microscope*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris. 39–56.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2007. *Global Englishes and transcultural flows*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Precht, Kristen. 2006. Gender differences and similarities in stance in informal American conversation. Unpublished manuscript. Ohio: Kent State University. Available at www.kprecht.net/MyWork/Precht%20Gender%202006.pdf (4/3/2007).
- Precht, Kristen. 2008. Sex similarities and differences in stance in informal American conversation. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12: 89–111.
- Rey, Jennifer M. 2001. Changing gender roles in popular culture: Dialogue in *Star Trek* episodes from 1966 to 1993. In Douglas Biber and Susan Conrad (eds.) *Variation in English: Multi-dimensional studies*. London: Longman. 138–156.
- Research and Development Unit for English Studies. 1999–2013. *WebCorp. The web as corpus*. Birmingham: Birmingham City University. <http://www.webcorp.org.uk/live/>.
- Richardson, Kay. 2010. *Television dramatic dialogue. A sociolinguistic study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ritchie, Ruth. 2012. Sobering reality. *The Sydney Morning Herald Spectrum* January 14–15 2012. Available at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/sobering-reality-20120112-1pvy0.html?skin=text-only> (6/11/2013).

- Rowe, Kathleen. 1995. *The unruly woman. Gender and the genres of laughter*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Stenström, Anna-Brita. 1991. Expletives in the London-Lund corpus. In Karin Aijmer and Bengt Altenberg (eds.) *English corpus linguistics. Studies in honour of Jan Svartvik*. London: Longman. 239–253.
- Troutman, Denise. 2006 “They say it’s a man’s world, but you can’t prove that by me”: African American comediennes’ construction of voice in public space. In Judith Baxter (ed.) *Theorising the female voice in public contexts*. Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 217–239.
- Understanding the TV ratings and parental controls. No date. Available at http://www.tvguidelines.org/resources/TV_Parental_Guidelines_Brochure.pdf (19/11/2013).

Tables

Table 1 Word counts (obtained through Microsoft Word)

	<i>Saving Grace</i>	<i>Nurse Jackie</i>	<i>Weeds</i>
Female protagonist's dialogue	1732 words	1119 words	1015 words
Dialogue of all other characters	2604 words	1281 words	2963 words

Table 2 Other characters

<i>Nurse Jackie (other characters)</i>	<i>Weeds (other characters)</i>
<p>That leg's <i>fucked</i> up (Coop; male); <i>Fucking</i> bleeding heart (male relative of patient); What the <i>fuck</i> (male relative of patient); <i>Fuck</i> Beth (male relative of patient); <i>Fucking</i> Manolo Blahnik (O'Hara; female); a <i>fucking</i> asylum (O'Hara; female); The <i>fuck</i> am I supposed to do (female relative of patient); <i>Fucking</i> Peter (female relative of patient); the <i>fucking</i> Libyan ambassador (male official); <i>fucking</i> a pool boy (Momo, male); <i>fucking</i> asshole (Momo, male); <i>fuck</i> you (male cyclist) (f = 9.37 per 1000 words)</p>	<p>Maybe <i>fucking</i> so (Conrad; male); That will <i>fuck</i> a kid up (Vaneeta, female); <i>fucked</i> up (Heylia, female); that little <i>fucker</i> (Celia, female); a <i>fuckwad</i> (Silas, male); shut the <i>fuck</i> up (Silas, male teenager); you <i>fuckwad</i> (Shane, boy); <i>Fuck</i> you (Quinn, female teenager). <i>Fuck</i> off (Quinn, female teenager); That little <i>cunt</i> (Celia, female) (f = 3.37 per 1000 words)</p>

Table 3 Use of “male” and “female” BLWs

		Jackie	Grace	Nancy
“male”	<i>ass</i> + variants	no occurrences in Jackie’s dialogue	8 (<i>his</i> ass; <i>your redneck</i> ass; <i>sit your</i> ass down; <i>you’ve been</i> on my ass ... <i>about</i> ; <i>why should my</i> ass be <i>the only one</i> saved?; <i>why would he</i> save my ass?; <i>freezing my</i> ass off; asshole)	2 (<i>get your</i> head out of <i>your</i> ass; <i>up</i> his ass)
	<i>damn</i> + variants	2 (<i>a goddamn</i> scan; <i>goddamn</i> it)	6 (<i>damn</i> it (3x); <i>so</i> damn <i>ethical</i> ; <i>the</i> damn <i>window</i> ; <i>god</i> damn it)	2 (<i>goddamn</i> it; <i>the</i> goddamn <i>city council</i>)
	<i>fuck</i> + variants	5 (<i>a total</i> fucking <i>retard</i> ; <i>fuck</i> you; <i>fuck</i> off; <i>smart</i> fucking <i>nun</i> ; <i>stay</i> the <i>fuck</i> out of <i>my</i> way)	no occurrences in SG pilot episode	3 (<i>a</i> fucking <i>liar</i> ; <i>a</i> fuckwad; <i>to</i> fuck <i>in</i> my <i>guest</i> room)
	<i>hell</i>	no occurrences in Jackie’s dialogue	3 (<i>get</i> the hell out of; <i>what</i> the hell; <i>What</i> the hell for?)	1 (<i>What</i> the hell)
	<i>shit</i> + variants	1 (<i>you</i> dumb shit)	14 (<i>annoy</i> the shit out of; shit (7x); <i>holy</i> shit;	3 (<i>Oh</i> , shit (2x); <i>you</i> little

			<i>full of shit; shit me; I used to hide shit; this is bullshit (2x)</i>	shit)
"female"	<i>god + variants</i>	no occurrences in Jackie's dialogue	1 (<i>oh, god</i>)	no occurrences in Nancy's dialogue
	<i>gosh</i>	no occurrences in episode	no occurrences in Grace's dialogue	no occurrences in episode

Table 4 Categorization of MBLWs

McEnery's (2006) category	Jackie	Grace	Nancy
Predicative negative adjective (<i>the film is shit</i>)	--	<i>this is bullshit</i> (2x)	--
Emphatic adjective (<i>He fucking did it/in the fucking car</i>) ⁸	<i>smart fucking nun</i>	<i>the damn window</i>	
Premodifying intensifying negative adjective (<i>the fucking idiot</i>)	<i>a total fucking retard; a goddamn scan</i>	--	<i>a fucking liar; the goddamn city council</i>
Adverbial booster (<i>fucking marvellous/awful</i>)	--	<i>so damn ethical</i>	--
Cursing expletive (<i>fuck you/me/him/it</i>)	<i>goddamn it; fuck you</i>	<i>damn it (3x), god damn it; shit me</i>	<i>goddamn it</i>
Personal insult referring to defined entity (<i>you/that fuck</i>)	<i>you dumb shit</i>	<i>the poor, depressed, pissed-off pedophile murderer asshole</i>	<i>you little shit; Devon Rensler's a fuckwad</i>
General expletive (<i>(oh) fuck</i>)	--	<i>holy shit; shit</i>	<i>oh, shit (2x)</i>

Idiom/image (<i>kick shit out of; fuck all, give a fuck</i>) ⁹	<i>stay the fuck out of my way</i>	<i>you've been on my ass ... about; freezing my ass off; annoy the shit out of; full of shit; get the hell out of; what the hell; what the hell for</i>	<i>get your head out of your ass; what the hell</i>
Literal usage denoting taboo referent (<i>we fucked</i>)	--	--	<i>up his ass; to fuck in my guest room</i>
Pronominal form: undefined referent (<i>got shit to do</i>) or specific referent (<i>new category: sit your ass down</i>)	--	<i>I used to hide shit; why would he save my ass?; why should my ass be the only one saved?; his ass; your redneck ass; sit your ass down</i>	--
destinational usage	<i>fuck off</i>	--	--

Figures

1 a good time, and boom, daddy drop. That will fuck a kid up. HEYLIA well, you show me who [W]
2 ting himself killed on that goddamn bike. The fuck am I supposed to do? I can't even pay f [NJ]
3 t is. what, you want Beth to have it? Second: Fuck Beth. The mother: Beth is the girlfrien [NJ]
4 e, gets suspended, two of you ditch school to fuck in my guest room. I've got everything u [W]
5 ok the last three, this one is yours. Jackie: Fuck off, Mohammed. No offence. Akalitus: Th [NJ]
6 t in! Oh, my god! QUINN (inaudible) Fuck you. Fuck off. CELIA That little cunt. I should h [W]
7 t you can do for me is this: you can stay the fuck out of my way, that's what you can do f [NJ]
8 He's been going crazy. SILAS Shane, shut the fuck up. NANCY Doug. DOUG Jesus, Nance, you [W]
9 rt. Give it all away, Petey. Second: what the fuck with the language? Look at where you ar [NJ]
10 love you too Jackie: Be careful. The cyclist: Fuck you. Jackie: If I were a saint, which m [NJ]
11 do for attention? Jackie: I'll be right back. Fuck you. Momo: what does one offer as a sid [NJ]
12 len! Put it in! Oh, my god! QUINN (inaudible) Fuck you. Fuck off. CELIA That little cunt. [W]
13 a kid up. HEYLIA well, you show me who ain't fucked up. (Unknown speaker): Shit. HEYLIA w [W]
14 know what I'm doing. Jesus, bossy. That leg's fucked up. Jackie: ortho, seriously? He's go [NJ]
15 you'll excuse me, I'm gonna chase that little fucker out of here. Did you hear? They found [W]
16 n the lookout for Vincent Van Gogh in a Zegna fuckin' suit. She got the blade away from hi [NJ]
17 his stupid head overboard when you catch him fucking a pool boy on a cruise to celebrate [NJ]
18 to pay for because he is such a narcissistic fucking asshole. Jackie: How is Randy? Momo: [NJ]
19 e that you're the only sane one there? It's a fucking asylum. I'm telling you, Jack, if I [NJ]
20 n organ donor? Jackie: He was. First brother: Fucking bleeding heart. Give it all away, Pe [NJ]
21 year-old got busted. A TEN-YEAR-OLD! You're a fucking liar. JOSH The kid told me he was th [W]
22 he cuffed? Kalil: Executive secretary to the fucking Libyan ambassador. Can't detain him. [NJ]
23 on ice. Puke away from the ear, Zoey. O'Hara: Fucking Manolo Blahnik. Hurt like hell, but [NJ]
24 es with the greatest capacity for evil. Smart fucking nun. All right, I got one for ya. wh [NJ]
25 posed to do? I can't even pay for a cab home. Fucking Peter. He made me pancakes this morn [NJ]
26 ht? Test scores through the roof, but a total fucking retard when it comes to actual patie [NJ]
27 t stealing a little bit bigger. CONRAD Maybe fucking so. NANCY Hey, that bag looks a litt [W]
28 called me Orphan Boy. NANCY Devon Rensler's a fuckwad. Get in the car. Are you two coming? [W]
29 . SHANE He called me Orphan Boy. SILAS He's a fuckwad. QUINN Did you hit him? SHANE No. Ju [W]
30 ANE No, I think pink's really your color, you fuckwad! who's "fruit punch" now? NANCY Nice [W]

Figure 1 Instances of FUCK in *Weeds* (W) and *Nurse Jackie* (NJ)

Why should **my ass** be the only one saved? [G]
If there's a god, why would he save **my ass** last night? [G]
I say we drag **his ass** out and scare the snot out of him. [G]
Next time you annoy the shit out of some woman, Alvin, remember she might just deck **your redneck ass**. [G]
Sit **your ass** down on your knees, Earl, now! [G]
I'm whopping **your ass**. [O]
Know why **his ass** was on death row? [O]
Tell her get **her skinny ass** in here and get her own damn pie.
[Heylia, *Weeds*]
Then why Ronnie dump **her ass**? [Keyoon, *Weeds*]
Writing checks **your ass** can't cash. [Heylia, *Weeds*]

Figure 2 Pronominal usages of *ass*

Captions for Figures

Figure 1 Instances of FUCK in *Weeds* (W) and *Nurse Jackie* (NJ)

Figure 2 Pronominal usages of *ass*

Notes

¹ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2005-08-09-nielsen-analysis_x.htm;
<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2009/06/09/showtimes-nurse-jackie-pulls-in-135-million-viewers-and-is-picked-up-for-season-two/20426/>;
<http://www.thefutoncritic.com/news.aspx?id=20070724tnt01>

² I am not using McEnery's (2006) complete scale of strength, as it relates to British English and there are problems with the scale itself, e.g. *sod* and *bitch* are listed twice with different strength (p. 36, p. 41).

³ *Weeds* appears to show an overuse of BLWs by African-American characters, which would require further analysis in terms of racial stereotyping (see Bucholtz and Lopez 2011, Gillota 2012).

⁴ Interestingly, Precht (2006: 17) found that *god*, but not *gosh*, is used more by women; but Precht (2008: 107) reports the opposite. Unpublished work by McEnery (personal communication, 2/9/2013) on spontaneous American speech suggests that both *god* and *gosh* are used more by women than men and confirms Precht's findings for *shit*, *fuck*, *damn*, *hell* and *ass*, although it suggests that *gee/geez* together appear to be used more by female speakers.

⁵ These numbers exclude one instance where a BLW is attributed to another character (...*my brother-in-law's exact words were "Dude, meet the finest jit with the finest shit."*) and one instance where it is pronounced in a "stylized" way by Nancy to imitate African American speakers (*Fine. I'm a "bitch ass bitch."*). Also excluded is one instance of *gee* (originally *Jesus*), since Anderson and Trudgill (1990, in Murphy 2010: 168) state that this is no longer regarded as having a religious origin. This is therefore treated as exclamation rather than BLW.

⁶ This categorization scheme was set up by Tony McEnery and colleagues and draws on previous classifications (see McEnery et al 2000). My thanks go to Andrew Hardie who answered several questions about the scheme. Many examples in Table 4 could be doubly-classified if we considered both the level of the individual word *and* the pragmatics of the whole phrase (Andrew Hardie, email

communication, 20/6/2013); for instance *what the hell*, *goddamn it*, *shit me* are also general expletives.

⁷ As suggested by one of the anonymous reviewers.

⁸ The difference between premodifying intensifying negative adjective and emphatic adjective is that for the former (“negative”) the speaker’s purpose is to express negative evaluation of the noun, whereas for the latter (“emphatic”), the speaker’s purpose is to add emphasis to the proposition as a whole rather than the noun (Andrew Hardie, email communication, 20/6/2013). Arguably, where the head noun is negative (e.g. *retard*, *liar*) the most likely purpose of the BLW is also negative evaluation, and where a positive evaluation is present in the noun phrase structure, e.g. in a pre-modifier (smart *fucking nun*) the most likely purpose is emphasis. In all other cases, the BLW was classified based on its most likely purpose identified while viewing the relevant scene, although cases were not clear-cut. For example, in *If I tell you to order a scan you order a goddamn scan*, the negative evaluation does not concern the head noun per se (*scan*) but rather the addressee. However, there is clear negativity rather than pure emphasis, and this was therefore classified as “negative”. Thus, precedence was given to the difference between negative evaluation and emphasis rather than to whether or not the BLW concerned the noun or the proposition.

⁹ The original categorization differentiates between the categories of Imagery based on literal meaning (*kick shit out of*) and idiomatic “set phrase” (*fuck all*, *give a fuck*), which are included here in one category (idiom/image). The criterion for Imagery is that the phrase is bound to the semantics of the BLW, i.e. bound to its literal meaning, and other BLWs cannot be found in the same slot (Andrew Hardie, email communication, 20/6/2013). The criterion for the “idiom” category is that different BLWs can be found in the same slot, showing that the idiom has been divorced from the semantics of any particular BLW (Andrew Hardie, email communication, 20/6/2013). I used the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008) as well as Webcorp (Research and Development Unit for English Studies 1999–2013) to check if any other BLWs could occur in the relevant slots and found examples such as *annoy the crap/hell/piss out of*; *full of crap*; *the crap*

out of; what the fuck (all from CoCa); *freeze my nuts/butt/tits/nips/dick off, BE on my butt/shit about*, and *get your head out of your butt/arse* (all from Webcorp). However, some of the other BLWs fitting in the relevant slot are clearly semantically related (taboo words for part of the body) and restricted (rather than any BLW occurring), and such examples do seem to be bound to the literal meaning of the words in the slot, thus could be “imagery” rather than “idiomatic”.