

Representations of Intercourse in American Literature

Gender, Patience, and *Fuck* as a Transitive Verb

Kim Ebensgaard Jensen

holds a PhD and is an Associate Professor of English at the Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University. His research falls within the areas of cognitive linguistics, construction grammar, corpus linguistics, and usage-based linguistics, and he is particularly interested in the interplay between language, discourse, culture, and cognition.

Abstract

This article investigates representations of sexual intercourse in American literature expressed via the use of *fuck* as a transitive verb. Its goal is to identify possible trends in the differentiation between men and women's roles and power relations in such literary representations. Drawing on theoretical notions from cognitive poetics, the present article assumes that literary representations of intercourse reflect and replicate in readers cultural-cognitive models of intercourse and the roles of, and power relations between, men and women therein. The analysis presented here is quantitative and falls under the rubric of corpus stylistics, and it is based on data from the FICTION component of the *Corpus of Historical American English*. The analysis measures the preference of male or female passive participants in propositional scenarios denoted by transitive *fuck*, thus allowing for the identification of large-scale patterns in sexual objectification of men or women in American literature.

Keywords American literature, cognitive stylistics, COHA, corpus stylistics, sexual objectification of women in literature

Introduction

In this article we will investigate representations of SEXUAL INTERCOURSE in American literature in which the word *fuck* is used to denote the act of INTERCOURSE. The concept INTERCOURSE is particularly relevant to the topic of gender, since INTERCOURSE is physically, biologically, emotionally, and culturally perhaps the most intimate type of interactive relation between men and women (and, of course, members of the same sex). The relations between the INTERCOURSE PARTICIPANTS are subject to construal and may be presented either as reciprocal or unidirectional, such that either both PARTICIPANTS are ACTIVE or only one PARTICIPANT is ACTIVE and dominant while the other is PASSIVE. *Fuck* may be used to express both specifications. If used intransitively, as in (1), it denotes reciprocal intercourse, and, if used transitively, as in (2), it represents intercourse as involving a PASSIVE-ACTIVE relation:

- (1) Within minutes, it seemed, they were fucking on the beach. (COHA 1998 FIC Ploughshares)
- (2) "You've got as much chance of fucking some woman as you've got of pole-vaulting six and a half feet," Baker said. (COHA 1978 FIC Whistle)

This is simply a fact of the English language, and, consequently, creators of verbal art who use *fuck* to denote INTERCOURSE must choose between the two construals. If choosing the latter, they also have the choice of assigning patiency to a MALE or a FEMALE PARTICIPANT (or a non-human entity). Patiency is the opposite of agency and thus refers to PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in propositional scenarios. Agency and patiency are what define the ACTIVE-PASSIVE relation.

In a large-scale perspective, it will definitely be interesting to see whether there is a tendency to assign patiency to men or women in American literary tradition. If this is the case, it may be reflective of deep rooted cultural conceptions of power relations in INTERCOURSE. Analyzing occurrences of *fuck* as a transitive verb in a large diachronic corpus of American literature, we will investigate whether or not there is a tendency towards construing one gender as PASSIVE in representations of INTERCOURSE by quantifying the distribution of MALE and FEMALE PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in the expressed INTERCOURSE scenarios.

Theoretical framework

Our theoretical framework is cognitive poetics, as defined by Stockwell (2003). Cognitive poetics is a branch of literary stylistics that draws extensively on contemporary cognitive science. Like traditional stylisticians, cognitive poetics are concerned with the functions of literary language, but their particular goal is to relate literary effects of linguistic forms to processes and structures in human cognition, including social and cultural cognition.

The analysis presented here assumes that literary representations of INTERCOURSE are reflective of underlying cultural-cognitive models of INTERCOURSE in American culture, and, as such, resonate with (or offend) readers at a deep cognitive level. In that sense, literature constructs MEN, WOMEN, and their roles in INTERCOURSE in the reader: whenever a reader encounters a literary representation of INTERCOURSE, the cognitive structure associated with it is activated, replicated, and further entrenched in the reader's mind.

Cognitive poetics operates with a broad conception of literature which is adopted in this article. Literature, then, to be understood broadly as including not just novels and short stories, but any genre of verbal art, or multimodal art in which the verbal is a substantial expressive element. Thus, literature in this article encompasses novels, short stories, poetry, theater, and cinema.

Fuck as a transitive verb

Fuck is arguably the epitome of profane language in Anglophone cultures. Perhaps the most notorious studies of profane language are those by James McCawley's pornolinguistic alter-egos Quang Phuc Dong (Dong 1971a; 1971b) and Yuck Phoo (Phoo 1971), which combined serious and insightful linguistic work with low-brow satire. Profane language is, as McEnery & Xiao (2004, 235) point out, "a part of everyday language use" which "has been infrequently studied". Notable examples of research into profane language include Sagarin (1962), Jay (1992), Sheidlower (1995), McEnery et al. (2000), McEnery & Xiao (2004), and McEnery (2004).

In Dong (1971a), McCawley observes that there are two types of *fuck*. The first type, designated *fuck*₁, displays verb behavior and semantically denotes INTERCOURSE. The second type is labeled *fuck*₂ and has a more expletive function. *Fuck*₂ does not necessarily predicate INTERCOURSE, scenarios and has more of a maledictive function.

Here are McCawley's own examples of the two types of *fuck* (Dong 1971a, 5):

- (3) Fuck seven old ladies by midnight or I'll take away your teddy-bear.
- (4) Fuck irregular verbs!

McEnery & Xiao (2004, 257) provide a more fine-grained typology of *fuck* which includes nine types. In their typology, *fuck*₁ is classified as a category L *fuck* and described as "[l]iteral usage denoting taboo referent". *Fuck*₂ is also included in their typology and classified as a category C *fuck*, whose function is that of a "[c]ursing expletive" (McEnery & Xiao 2004, 257). In this article, we are only interested in usages in which *fuck* actually denotes INTERCOURSE and not in its more pragmatic uses, so our focus is on *fuck*₁.

The following description of the propositional semantics of *fuck* as a transitive verb denoting INTERCOURSE takes its starting point in the distinction between *fuck*₁ and *fuck*₂ and is theoretically anchored in the cognitive theory of frame semantics (Fillmore 1982), in which linguistic units activate, not just their denotational contents but entire conceptual structures in speakers' minds, called semantic frames. Now, compare (3) and (4). The example in (3) clearly denotes SEXUAL INTERCOURSE, while (4) is an expletive with a maledictive speech act function and expresses the speaker's dislike towards, or frustration with, irregular verbs. Both *fucks* are associable with semantic frames, but the frames differ considerably. *Fuck*₁ in (3) would seem to have the semantic structure of PARTICIPANT ← INTERCOURSE → PARTICIPANT, in which the two PARTICIPANTS actively engage in the act of SEXUAL INTERCOURSE. Let us call this the INTERCOURSE frame. In contrast, *fuck*₂ would have the semantic structure of PERSON → MALEDICTION → OBJECT OF MALEDICTION, in which a PERSON utters a MALEDICTIVE CURSE towards someone or something that the PERSON dislikes. There is a metalinguistic dimension to this frame as well, as it contains the speech act type that features *fuck*₂.

We mentioned that *fuck*₁ activates the INTERCOURSE frame, but it is transitivity that specifies the relations between the two PARTICIPANTS. Let us revisit examples (1) and (2) to see role of transitivity. The cause of the different construals of the intra-INTERCOURSE PARTICIPANT relations is that *fuck* semantically interacts with two different argu-

ment structure constructions. Such a construction is an abstract constellation of sentence constituents which is associated with schematic propositional content (Goldberg 1995). In (1), *fuck* occurs in the intransitive construction. The intransitive construction combines a subject and a verb and expresses a scenario in which an AGENT engages in an ACTIVITY which is not directed at any other object or entity. By including both INTERCOURSE PARTICIPANTS into the subject via the third person plural pronoun *they*, (1) presents both PARTICIPANTS AS ACTIVE. In contrast, the transitive construction, which combines a subject, a verb, and a direct object, expresses a scenario in which an AGENT ACTS ON a PATIENT, such that the AGENT IS ACTIVE and the PATIENT IS the PASSIVE object of the AGENT'S ACTION. Seeing that *fuck*₁ in (2) and (3) is transitive, it arguably specifies INTERCOURSE in terms of this ACTIVE-PASSIVE relation, and its propositional scenario is better represented as ACTIVE PARTICIPANT → INTERCOURSE → PASSIVE PARTICIPANT.

Data and method

The overall methodological framework of the present study is that of corpus stylistics, described by Mahlberg (2014, 378) in the following manner: "Corpus stylistic research applies corpus methods to the analysis of literary texts, giving particular emphasis to the relationship between linguistic description and literary appreciation". While traditional stylistics is typically qualitative, corpus stylistics is quantitative and is often used in the identification of various patterns of style and other aspects of literary language – typically across multiple literary works. In comparison to qualitative stylistic analysis, which allows for in-depth analysis and close-reading of literary works, quantitative stylistic analysis may lack certain types of depth, but it enables more objective and empirical statements about patterns and trends in literary genres, periods, and authorships.

Our study is based on data from the *Corpus of Historical American English*, or *COHA*, which is a diachronic corpus of American English, covering the period 1810-2009 (Davies 2010). Since our focus is on patiency in representations of INTERCOURSE in literature, our study investigates only the FICTION component of *COHA*, ignoring the NEWSPAPER, MAGAZINES, and NON-FICTION components. The FICTION component covers literary texts such as, for instance, novels and short stories as well as scripts from films and theatrical

plays. The FICTION component consists of 207,633,395 words out of COHA's total size of 406,232,024 words.

All instances of *fuck* as a transitive verb in the active voice and in the passive voice were retrieved from the FICTION component of COHA in a series of queries. The data were then sorted such that all instances of *fuck*₂ and other cases where *fuck* did not refer to INTERCOURSE were weeded out. After the sorting process, there were 331 instances of transitive *fuck*, which were categorized in accordance with the gender of the PASSIVE PARTICIPANT. Our classificatory system consists of these four categories:

- MALE: the PASSIVE PARTICIPANT is a male human; see example (5)
- FEMALE: the PASSIVE PARTICIPANT is a female human; see example (6)
- UNSPECIFIED: the PASSIVE PARTICIPANT is a human whose gender is unspecified; see example (7)
- ANIMAL & INANIMATE: the PASSIVE PARTICIPANT is either an animal or an inanimate entity; see example (8)

In most cases, the gender of the PASSIVE PARTICIPANT was easy to determine. Examples of such cases are direct objects or passive voice subjects realized by a personal pronouns, a proper nouns, gender-specific common nouns (like *woman*, *husband*, *guy*, and *girl* as well as *pussy* or *cock*), and nouns determined by third person singular possessive pronouns (such as *his ass* or *her hole*). In some cases, the PASSIVE PARTICIPANT itself appeared to be unspecified in terms of gender, but could be determined from the co-text. Co-text is defined by Catford (1965 p. 31, fn. 2) as "items in the text which accompany the item under discussion" and essentially covers the text portion that immediately surrounds the linguistic phenomenon in question. Cases where the gender was truly unspecified were placed in the UNSPECIFIED-category. Below are illustrative examples of each category:

- (5) British girls want to fuck Arab men? (COHA 2005 FIC Mov:Munich)
- (6) Only by then, you're so mad at me, for being right about we never should have come here, that you fuck this maid, and you keep fucking this maid till she gets pregnant. (COHA 1988 FIC Play:SarahAbraham)

- (7) We've popped every pill, fucked the wrong people at the wrong times. (COHA 1982 FIC TrueLove)
 (8) "Shit, nobody fucks pigs," he told her. (COHA 1978 FIC Mortal-Friends)

The four categories were then quantified and subjected to a Fisher test to determine the statistical significance of their frequencies of distribution. The diachronic nature of *COHA* allows us to track any changes in literary representations of *INTERCOURSE* over time, so our quantitative analysis is applied to both the *FICTION* component of *COHA* in its entirety and to those decades in which *fuck*₁ appears. *COHA* is divided into twenty subcorpora that correspond to the twenty decades in the 1810-2009 period, and, because these subcorpora are of different sizes, frequencies of distribution of *PASSIVE PARTICIPANT* types were normalized to frequency per million words (FPM), allowing for comparison across decades.

Given that our focus is exclusively on *fuck*₁, there is no need to distinguish between *fuck*₁ and *fuck*₂ anymore and we will simply use 'fuck' or 'transitive fuck' with reference to *fuck* as a transitive verb literally denoting *INTERCOURSE* in the rest of this article.

Analysis

Having quantified the overall distribution of the four types of *PASSIVE PARTICIPANT* of *fuck* as a transitive verb in the *FICTION* component, we can see that *PASSIVE PARTICIPANT* belonging to the *FEMALE* class are the most frequent:

Table 1: Overall distribution of transitive *fuck* in the *FICTION* component:

<i>PASSIVE PARTICIPANT</i> type	Frequency
FEMALE	66.77% (n = 221)
MALE	27.49% (n = 91)
UNSPECIFIED	2.11% (n = 7)
ANIMAL & INANIMATE	3.63% (n = 12)

$p = 0.00372$

This seems to suggest a tendency in American literature to assign patency to female characters in literary representations of *INTER-*

COURSE, such that female characters are primarily seen as PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS and thus the dominated, or maybe powerless.

Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of the four types in the entire FICTION component, but it might also be interesting to track them over time to see if there have been any changes in this tendency since 1810. The following graph is based on the frequencies of transitive *fuck* in each of the twenty subcorpora:

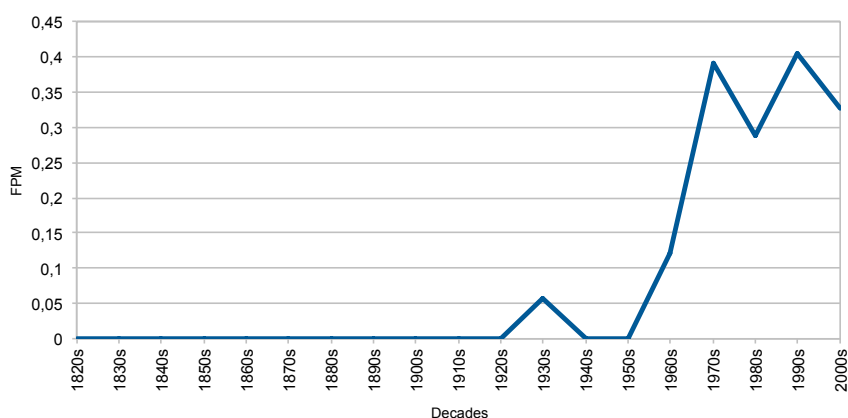


Figure 1: Overall frequencies of transitive ‘fuck’ from 1810 to 2009

It is not until the 1930s that transitive *fuck* appears in the FICTION component, and it is only in the 1960s that it really takes hold (its appearance in the 1930s primarily owes to the inclusion of Walter D. Edmonds’ 1933-novel *Erie Water* in COHA). There is a massive increase in its use in the 1970s, and subsequently, in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, transitive *fuck* remains relatively frequent. It is interesting to note the occurrence of transitive *fuck* in the 1960s and 1970s seems to coincide with the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, which also encompassed the sexual liberation movement and a general anti-establishment attitude. It makes sense that the arts’ embrace of sexual language, which was otherwise taboo, should follow on from such a cultural revolution, and it is probably no coincidence that there is an explosion in the use transitive *fuck* in American literature in the 1970s, during and immediately after the cultural revolution.

The following tables account for the distributions of the four types of PASSIVE PARTICIPANT in those decades where transitive *fuck* occurs:

Table 2: Distribution of PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in the 1930s

PASSIVE PARTICIPANT type	Frequency	FPM
FEMALE	11	0.9261601166
MALE	1	0.0841963742
UNSPECIFIED	0	0
ANIMAL & INANIMATE	0	0
Total	12	1.0103564908

Table 3: Distribution of PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in the 1960s

PASSIVE PARTICIPANT type	Frequency	FPM
FEMALE	23	1.9863751935
MALE	2	0.1727282777
UNSPECIFIED	2	0.1727282777
ANIMAL & INANIMATE	0	0
Total	25	2.1591034711

Table 4: Distribution of PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in the 1970s

PASSIVE PARTICIPANT type	Frequency	FPM
FEMALE	53	4.5583904444
MALE	23	1.9781694381
UNSPECIFIED	0	0
ANIMAL & INANIMATE	5	0.4300368344
Total	81	6.9665967169

Table 5: Distribution of PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in the 1980s

PASSIVE PARTICIPANT type	Frequency	FPM
FEMALE	43	3.5383366016
MALE	15	1.2343034657
UNSPECIFIED	1	0.0822868977
ANIMAL & INANIMATE	1	0.0822868977
Total	60	4.9372138627

Table 6: Distribution of PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in the 1990s

PASSIVE PARTICIPANT type	Frequency	FPM
FEMALE	45	3.3905553594
MALE	29	2.185024565
UNSPECIFIED	4	0.3013826986
ANIMAL & INANIMATE	6	0.4520740479
Total	84	6.3290366709

Table 7: Distribution of PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in the 2000s

PASSIVE PARTICIPANT type	Frequency	FPM
FEMALE	46	3.1528275586
MALE	21	1.4393343202
UNSPECIFIED	1	0.0685397295
ANIMAL & INANIMATE	0	0
Total	68	4.6607016083

PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS in the FEMALE class are by far the most frequent in all six decades, which suggests stagnation rather than change in the construal of the roles of men and women in literary representations of INTERCOURSE – women are still represented as PASSIVE and dominated. What may be surprising, given the general perception of the 1970s as a decade in which social equality and women’s liberation were promoted, is that it is in this decade that the FEMALE category has the highest FPM and where the difference between the FEMALE and the MALE categories is the largest. There seems to have been a conflict between the gender ideology expounded at the time and the way that sexual intercourse was represented in American literary tradition. It seems that only the liberation of sexual language was

embraced and not so much the liberation of women’s sexuality. Indeed, it might even be the case that the liberation of sexual language, at least in literature, actually served to further the representation as women of sexual objects rather than sexual subjects.

The reader may have noticed that the FPM of FEMALE type PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS has progressively dropped from the 4.5583904444 of the 1970s to the 3.1528275586 of the 2000s. Could this be indicative of the cultural-cognitive model of INTERCOURSE changing towards a more reciprocal one? The following graph, which tracks and compares the frequencies of all four categories of PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS across time in the period from the 1930s to the 2000s, seems to suggest otherwise:

As you can see, the MALE category, while less stable, has also

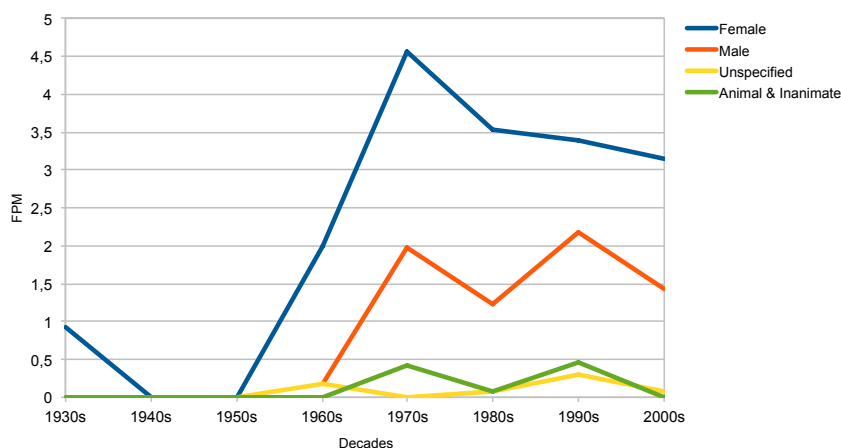


Figure 2: Frequency distributions of the four types of PASSIVE PARTICIPANT in the period 1930-2009

dropped, and the drop of the FEMALE category may simply be a reflection of the overall diachronic development seen in Figure 1 rather than of progressive leveling out of the differences between FEMALE and MALE PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS of transitive *fuck*. In fact, the preference for female passive participants over male ones is bigger in the 2000s than in the 1990s, suggesting an increased sexual subjectification of MALE characters in literature and an increased sexual objectification of FEMALE ones.

Concluding remarks

This study is admittedly quite limited in scope, as it only focuses on one verb and its *PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS*, and an investigation which also addressed agency would allow for more fine-grained analysis in which typical *ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS* could also be accounted for as well as relations between *ACTIVE* and *PASSIVE* ones, which would further provide insights into literary representations of both *HOMOSEXUAL INTERCOURSE* and *HETEROSEXUAL INTERCOURSE*.

However, I would argue that our study of the patterns of usage of transitive *fuck* and the assignment of patiency in the propositional scenarios it denotes has produced interesting results, which are worth following up on in future research. In our data, a model of patiency in *INTERCOURSE* in recent and contemporary American literary tradition emerges in which women are primarily presented as *PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS*. While one might expect a progression towards a more equality-based representation of *FEMALE* characters as *PARTICIPANTS* in *INTERCOURSE* which construes them as sexual subjects, it seems that *FEMALE* characters continue to be sexually objectified. This raises an interesting question that definitely needs to be addressed in future stylistic research into this issue – namely, if *FEMALE PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS* constitute the norm in representations of *INTERCOURSE* in American literature, are instances of transitive *fuck* in which the *PASSIVE PARTICIPANT* is *MALE* (and the *ACTIVE PARTICIPANT* is *FEMALE*), as in example (5), to be seen as examples of deviation as defined in traditional stylistics (e.g. Gregoriou 2014) and, if so, then what is their foregrounding function?

The findings presented in this study are probably not sensational, and many people would probably already have guessed, and maybe take for granted that there is this sexual objectification of women in American literature. In essence, this belief could be seen as a hypothesis, and what this study does is to provide statistical support for this hypothesis.

References

- Davies, M., 2010. *Corpus of Historical American English*. [online] 7 September, 2010. Available at: <<http://corpus.byu.edu/coha>> [Accessed 1 July 2014].
- Dong, Q. P. [J. D. McCawley], 1971a. English Sentences without Overt Grammatical Subject. In *Studies Out in Left Field: Defamato-*

- ry Essays Presented to James D. McCawley on his 33rd or 34th Birthday, ed. A. M. Zwicky, P. Salus, R. I. Binnick and A. Vanek, pp. 3-10. Edmonton, Alb.: Linguistic Research.
- Dong, Q. P. [J. D. McCawley], 1971b. A Note on Conjoined Noun Phrases. In *Studies Out in Left Field: Defamatory Essays Presented to James D. McCawley on his 33rd or 34th Birthday*, ed. A. M. Zwicky, P. Salus, R. I. Binnick and A. Vanek, pp. 11-18. Edmonton, Alb.: Linguistic Research.
- Fillmore, C. J., 1982. Frame Semantics. In *Linguistics in the Morning Calm*, ed. The Linguistic Society of Korea, pp. 111-137. Seoul: Hanshin.
- Foo, Y. [J. D. McCawley], 1971. A Selectional Restriction Involving Pronoun Choice. In *Studies Out in Left Field: Defamatory Essays Presented to James D. McCawley on his 33rd or 34th Birthday*, ed. A. M. Zwicky, P. Salus, R. I. Binnick and A. Vanek, pp. 19-20. Edmonton, Alb.: Linguistic Research.
- Goldberg, A., 1995. *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago, Ill: Chicago University Press.
- Gregoriou, C., 2014. The linguistic levels of foregrounding in stylistics. In *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics*, ed. M. Burke, pp. 87-100. London: Routledge.
- Jay, T., 1992. *Cursing in America: A Psycholinguistic Study of Dirty Language in the Courts, in the Movies, in the Schoolyards and on the Streets*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Mahlberg, M., 2014. Corpus Stylistics. In *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics*, ed. M. Burke, pp. 370-392. London: Routledge.
- McEnery, A., 2004. *Swearing in English*. London: Routledge
- McEnery, A. and Xiao, Z., 2004. Swearing in Modern British English: The Case of *fuck* in the BNC. *Language and Literature*, 13(3): 235-268.
- McEnery, A. M., Baker, J. P. and Hardie, A., 2000. Assessing claims about language use with corpus data – swearing and abuse. In *Corpora Galore: Analyses and Techniques in Describing English*, ed. J. M. Kirk, pp 45-55. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Sagarin, F., 1962. *The Anatomy of Dirty Words*. New York: Lyle-Stewart.
- Sheidlower, J., 1995. *The F Word*. New York: Random House.
- Stockwell, P., 2002. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.