Taboo vocatives in the language of London teenagers

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This study focusses on the use and functions of so-called taboo vocatives (e.g. *dickhead, you bastard, bitch*) in the language of London teenagers, based on the analysis of over 500 examples extracted from COLT (*The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*) and LEC (*London English Corpus*). Findings illustrate a wide variety of items in this category, and show that these cannot be regarded as mere insults, since they often serve to reinforce the bonds between young speakers as well, and indeed can even carry affectionate connotations. The majority of these items are nouns and denote some kind of sexual reference, an abnormal or strange human condition, or a pejorative, animal-related allusion. There does not seem to have been any major changes in the use of these forms from the 1990s to the first decades of the current century, although many of them have broadened their meaning and can now be used with either male or female speakers.

Keywords: vocatives, address terms, teenage language, taboo word, London English

1. Introduction

Teen talk has been studied extensively in recent decades (Stenström et al. 2002; Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulos 2003; Stenström and Jørgensen 2009; Spiegel and Gysin 2016; Tagliamonte 2016; Drummond 2018), not least because teenagers are regarded as language innovators and precursors of language change (Eckert 1988; Tagliamonte 2016). It is generally taken to be the case that teenagers differ from adults in the way they talk, not only in terms of lexis but also at other levels of the language, such as morpho-syntax and pragmatics (Stenström et al. 2002; Tagliamonte 2016).

A wide range of distinctive grammatical features have been identified as characteristic of London and British teenaged speaker (Stenström et al. 2002; Cheshire et al. 2011; Palacios Martínez 2011a; Tagliamonte 2016; Drummond

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2018): the use of intensifiers such as *really, so, fucking* to the detriment of the more standard *very* (Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2016; Palacios Martínez and Núñez-Pertejo 2012); a high occurrence of vague terms (Cheshire 2007; Tagliamonte and Denis 2010; Palacios Martínez and Núñez-Pertejo 2015); a variety of (invariant) tags and pragmatic markers such as *innit*, (*do*) *you get me* (Torgersen et. al. 2011; Palacios Martínez 2015); a special quotative system including constructions with *be* (*like*), *this is* + pronoun (Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2004; Fox 2012); the proliferation of vernacular negatives (Cheshire 1991, 1999; Palacios Martínez 2011b, 2016, 2017); a mode of expression crowded with address terms/vocatives familiarisers (*man, brother,* etc), taboo or offensive ones (*bastard, dick*) in particular (Leech 1999; Kiesling 2004; Rendle-Short 2010; Palacios Martínez 2018).

The latter will be the focus of the present study, which will be organised as follows: in Section 2 below, I will define the notion of 'vocative' with particular reference to taboo forms, followed by a review of the literature here, Section 3; Section 4 will set out the objectives and methodology of the study; findings will be described and discussed in Section 5; Section 6 will be concerned with the pragmatics of these terms, and the final section will offer some conclusions.

2. Taboo vocatives

Vocatives can be defined, broadly speaking, as a particular type of address term, specifically nouns (Braun 1988; McCarthy and O'Keefe 2003), which are loosely integrated into the utterance (Leech 1999). That is, they are syntactically free forms outside the sentence construction (Braun 1988, 11) and "denote the one or more persons to whom the sentence is addressed" (Quirk et al. 1985, 773).

(1) I was like "Don't drink it ***man***". (LEC)[1]

They very rarely take articles or any other determiners, and some of them may be preceded by a pronoun (*you*).

(2) See ***you guys*** later. (COLT)

They can occur in different positions in the clause, be it initially, medially or finally, and in some cases they can even stand alone. They carry different pragmatic functions in discourse, and this may explain why at least some of them can

1. Most of the examples included in the study have been extracted from the *London English Corpus* (LEC) and the *Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language* (COLT). See Section 4 on aims and methodology for further details.

be regarded as genuine pragmatic markers (McCarthy and O'Keefe 2003; Clancy 2015).

Vocatives can be categorised into several groups, not only according to the meaning they convey and their formal features (Quirk et al. 1985; Leech 1999; Biber et al. 1999; Huddleston, Pullum et al. 2002), but also their function and context (Braun 1988): terms of endearment (*baby*), family terms (*mummy*), names and titles (*Mrs. Robinson, doctor),* honorifics (*sir)*, general plurals to address groups (*folks*), elaborate nominal clauses (*those of you who want to come*), familiarisers (*man*), and, finally, taboo vocatives, abusive or vocative terms of insult (Stenström 2006; Stenström and Jørgensen 2008; Rodríguez-González and Stenström 2011; Fägersten 2012), such as *bastard, dick(head), bitch,* etc. The degree of acceptance or appropriateness of these address terms can vary according to the context and/or the individual speaker. Some words, such as *twat, idiot* and *fool*, are seen to be broadly acceptable, whereas others, such as *bastard* and *motherfucker*, may be of more restricted use, in that they are considered to be offensive to some extent. On these lines, it might be useful to bear in mind Anderson and Trudgill's (1990, 55) observation that no word is bad in itself, since quality of badness is something that the users of the language will themselves decide upon in a given context. For the purposes of the present study, a wide range of terms, encompassing various degrees of acceptability, have been included within the group of taboo vocatives, since they all express something pejorative and derogatory, and share a number of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features, as will be discussed below. Note the following:

(3) Shut up ***dickhead***. (COLT)

Taboo vocatives, as with general ones, occur mainly after statements, although are also found directly after questions.

(4) You know that, ***bitch***? (COLT)

They may also occur, and in fact often do, after imperatives and directives, and in such cases might have a mitigating or strengthening effect, depending on the context.

(5) Shut up you ***prick***. (LEC)

As with other vocatives, they may occur in any sentence position, although final position is by far the most common, as the examples above illustrate. In the following I will define taboo vocatives in more detail.

3. Literature review

Address terms have been explored in depth (Braun 1988; Leech 1999), often focusing on their role and behaviour at the discourse level, and looking at their degree of integration into the clause and their pragmatic functions. However, corpus analysis studies, using large data sets, are in fact quite scarce, although the following are available: Leech (1999); Biber et al. (1999); Clancy (2015); McCarthy and O'Keefe (2003); Heyd (2010) and Palacios Martínez (2018).

The study by Brown and Ford (1961) is regarded as seminal in the examination of nominal address in American English. Leech (1999) compares the use of vocatives in British and American English, and concludes that it is in the latter that such terms appear most frequently in final position, thus contributing to greater familiarisation between speakers. In addition to these studies, other work has dealt with address terms in particular text types, such as telephone calls to radio programmes (McCarthy and O'Keefe 2003), family discourse (Wilson and Zeitlyn 1995; Clancy 2015), political debates (Jaworski and Galasiński 2000), and grime music (Adams 2018). All these have shown how the pragmatic function of vocatives changed according to discourse type. Thus, Clancy (2015) clearly illustrates that vocatives play an important pragmatic role in family discourse, and that they are indeed more important than traditional pragmatic markers. Meanwhile, Jaworski and Galasiński (2000) examined political discourse, and showed that the role of vocatives is closely related to the image that political leaders seek to project.

Several further studies have looked in detail at a single item: Luckmann de Lopez (2013) focuses on the vocative *man* in Tyneside English in its function as a distinctive feature of this northern variety of British English; Cheshire (2013) does the same for Multicultural London English, providing evidence of the adoption of features typical of the pronoun category; Heyd (2010) considers the address expression *you guys* in the television series *Friends*, Kiesling (2004) looks at *dude* in the conversations of young American speakers, in which it serves as a means of expressing solidarity, and Rendle-Short (2010) considers the use of *mate* in Australian English, which was found in the speech of young men and women.

Despite the extensive literature on general vocatives described above, taboo vocatives in particular have enjoyed far less attention. To my knowledge, there are no monographic studies here, with only brief references within more general studies on teen talk (Stenström et al. 2002; Drummond 2018), phatic language (Stenströnm and Jørgensen 2008; Rodríguez-González and Stenström 2011) and swearing and taboo words (Risch 1987; Anderson and Trudgill 1990; De Klerk 1992; Stenström 2006; Fägersten 2012; Mateo and Yus 2013; Adams 2016; Bergen 2016; Schweinberger 2018; Drummond 2019). In what follows I will briefly

describe the main studies in this area, although in the majority of cases taboo vocatives are dealt with only in passing.

Anderson and Trudgill (1990) devote considerable space to swearing and slang, and they make some brief references to taboo address terms. Thus, they claim that vocatives of the *bastard* and *bitch* type have an abusive function since they are often derogatory, including here name-calling and curses (1990, 61).

Rodríguez-González (2002, 48), in his study of Spanish youth language, notes that a number of taboo vocatives, such as *cabrón* "bastard" and *maricón* "homo/gay" are sometimes used with an affectionate tone rather than with their original offensive and insulting meaning. Stenström et al. (2002) note that the use of such lexical items may vary according to the gender group of speakers.

In fact, the gender factor in the use of taboo words has been the central issue in a number of studies. It has been traditionally accepted that males tend to make a greater use of these terms than females, in that women have in general been considered as more socially and linguistically conservative, and more closely associated with the norms of the standard. However, evidence for this in some studies has been neither conclusive nor fully convincing. In this vein, Risch (1987) discusses women's use of derogatory terms, "dirty words", to refer to men. The findings question the traditional assumption that women tend to stick to standard forms of speech, and also the fact that some of the terms cited were generally thought to refer to females rather than males. Five years later De Klerk (1992) confirms Risch's previous findings. Finally, Schweinberger (2018) claims that in Irish English abusive cases such as *you fucking bastard* are substantially less frequent than other uses amounting to only 2.4% of the total in his data.

The issue of gender from a contrastive perspective is also of concern in Stenström and Jørgensen's (2008) study on phatic talk in the language of Spanish and English teenagers. They find that taboo words prevail in male talk, are almost twice as frequent as in comparable female contexts, and are used as reaction signals, being more common than the actual interjections.

More recently, Rodríguez-González and Stenström (2011) note that the teenagers from Madrid tend to use far more vocatives in general, and taboo vocatives in particular, when addressing one another than do London teens.

The urban variety used by teenagers from Manchester has been the focus of an ethnographic study by Drummond (2019) who focuses on 13 key swear words and finds that *dick* is the term which shows the most distinctive differences according to gender use, being preferred mainly by males over females, while the opposite is true for *bastard,* which is more typical of female talk.

In light of the previous overview, a gap in the literature in this area of taboo vocatives has been identified, which this study will try to fill.

4. Aims and methodology

The first aim of the present study is to identify the most common taboo vocatives in the language of British teenagers. Are they as frequent as familiarisers such as *man, brother, guy*, etc.? Do these speakers make use of a wide variety of them, or are they restricted to a small number, these being frequently repeated? In connection to this, what are the possible reasons or factors accounting for the high frequency of these terms in teen talk? Second, I will explore the extent to which differences exist in terms of the frequency and use of such terms between the speech of teenagers and adults. Third, I will look for any changes in the use of these vocatives in recent times, that is, from the 1990s to the first decade of the current century, since our data will be from these two periods. Fourth, I am also concerned with the meaning of these taboo vocatives and how they are actually used in spontaneous conversations, paying special attention to the type of referents, animate or inanimate, that they have. Finally, I will consider their position in the sentence and examine how far this position has a bearing on their pragmatics.

This paper forms part of a more extensive project on the study of the spoken language of London teenagers (13 to 20 years old). Both a corpus-based and a corpus-driven approach were adopted, analysing data drawn primarily from the *London English Corpus* (LEC), the *Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language* (COLT) and the *British National Corpus* (BNC) (See Table 1) but also using as a starting-point material from previous studies together with the dictionaries OED and the *Urban Dictionary*.

The LEC was compiled by Cheshire and her team in London between 2004 and 2010 (Cheshire et al. 2011) and is formed by the *Linguistic Innovators Corpus* (LIC) and the *Multicultural London English Corpus* (MLEC). The data for the former corpus was collected between 2004 and 2007 and both teenagers and adult speech are represented. MLEC, compiled between 2007 and 2010, contains data not only from young speakers but also from small children, as well as from young and elderly adults. In addition to LEC, I also analysed data extracted from COLT, compiled at the University of Bergen (Stenström et al. 2002), and BNC. COLT contains some 438,531 words and is part of the BNC. It was collected in 1993 and consists of a total of 377 spontaneous conversations recorded by the teenagers themselves in the London area. Thus, the information here can be regarded as more natural than that provided by LEC, in which field workers were used to record mainly individual and group interviews. Data extracted from COLT will be contrasted with comparable samples taken from the spoken component of BNC itself, namely conversations by adult speakers of the London area, since these correspond to the same period and share a number of features, with the purpose

Table 1. Corpora used in the analysis

Corpus	Number of speakers	Speakers' ages	Geographical area	Number of words	Collection method and material	Compilation date
COLT (*The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*)	33	13 to 17	Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Camden, Barnet, Havering, etc.	438,531	Subjects recorded themselves. Spontaneous conversations	early 1990s
LEC (*London English Corpus*) young	149	12 to 20	Hackney and Havering	1,208,135	Sociolinguistic group interviews recorded by field workers	2004–2007 2007–2010
BNC *(British National Corpus*), adult sample	151	25 to 60+	London area	278,246	Oral recordings. Conversations	1990s (1991 onwards)
LEC *(London English Corpus*) adult	52	21–70	Hackney and Havering	460,022	Sociolinguistic group interviews recorded by field workers	2004–2007 2007–2010

of drawing correspondences between our findings and mainstream adult British English.

The different dates of compilation of the corpora used also give us an overview of the evolution of these vocatives, especially in terms of their frequency of use. However, for a correct interpretation of the data, differences in compilation methods across the different corpora should be borne in mind.

All tokens retrieved had to be filtered manually and, as a result, a large number of examples were discarded. The lack of access to the sound files was a problem, since intonation plays an important role in the use of vocatives and it is of particular importance when looking at their position in the sentence and their pragmatic value.

Moreover, it was sometimes difficult to determine the vocative position in the utterance, something that has been reported elsewhere (McCarthy and O'Keefe

2003, 158; Clancy 2015), and also to interpret the pragmatic meaning conveyed by some of these address terms, since the information deduced from the context is not always sufficient.

5. Findings

5.1 Frequency

I found a wide variety of taboo vocatives in the data, a total of 59, most of these being present in both corpora. In a previous study on familiarisers (Palacios Martínez 2018) in the same mode of expression, I identified a total of 16, so the present finding of 59 taboo vocatives here is indeed very broad. They also occurred quite frequently, with an overall normalised frequency of 32.70 per 100,000 words. However, this proportion is considerably lower than that for familiarisers, and I can thus state that the latter are much more commonly used than taboo vocatives, although fewer in terms of members of the category.

As can be seen in the first column of Table 2, all these items are generally used as insult words in everyday language and they function as address terms in about 1/4 of the total, varying in their frequency according to each item. For example, in the case of *(son of) a bitch*, from a total of 193 recorded tokens, 66 are vocatives (34%); for *bastard*, from a total of 143, I find 52 uses (36%) as address terms.

Table 2. Frequency of taboo vocatives in each of the corpora studied

	COLT 438,531 words				LEC young 1,208,135 words				Total 1,646,666 words			
	TN	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*	*TN*	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*	*TN*	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*
ass/arsehole	18	4.10	6	1.36	12	0.99	1	0.08	30	1.82	7	0.42
bastard	116	26.45	43	9.80	27	2.23	9	0.74	143	8.68	52	3.15
batty	4	0.91	1	0.22	10	0.82	4	0.33	14	0.85	5	0.30
big/bean/crack/ fish/peanuthead	3	0.68	3	0.68	34	2.81	10	0.82	37	2.24	13	0.78
black	2	0.45	2	0.45	3	0.24	2	0.16	5	0.30	4	0.24
bugger	18	4.10	15	3.42	–	–	–	–	18	1.09	15	0.91
chav	–	–	–	–	7	0.57	1	0.08	7	0.42	1	0.06
chicken	2	0.45	2	0.45	3	0.24	–	–	5	0.30	2	0.12
chopper	1	0.22	1	0.22	–	–	–	–	1	0.06	1	0.06
cow	6	1.36	2	0.45	11	0.91	3	0.24	17	1.03	5	0.34
crap	21	4.78	4	0.91	17	1.40	–	–	38	2.30	4	0.24
cunt	54	12.31	20	4.56	27	2.23	18	1.48	81	4.91	38	2.30

Table 2. *(continued)*

	COLT 438,531 words				LEC young 1,208,135 words				Total 1,646,666 words			
	TN	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*	*TN*	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*	*TN*	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*
dick/cock(head) (arse)	91	20.75	18	4.10	48	3.97	28	2.31	139	8.44	46	2.79
div(vy)	7	1.59	1	0.22	1	0.08	–	–	8	0.48	1	0.06
dumb	18	4.10	1	0.22	58	4.80	–	–	76	4.61	1	0.06
fag(got)	2	0.45	1	0.22	–	–	–	–	2	0.12	1	0.06
fool	51	11.62	19	4.33	11	0.91	5	0.41	62	3.76	24	1.45
freak	2	0.45	–	–	28	2.31	5	0.41	30	1.82	5	0.30
geek	–	–	–	–	7	0.57	1	0.08	7	0.42	1	0.06
git	15	3.42	8	1.82	5	0.41	2	0.16	20	1.21	10	0.60
goon	–	–	–	–	24	1.98	2	0.16	24	1.45	2	0.12
hussy	1	0.22	–	–	1	0.08	1	0.08	2	0.12	1	0.06
idiot	25	5.70	9	2.05	71	5.87	12	0.99	96	5.82	21	1.27
joker	2	0.45	–	–	19	1.57	4	0.33	21	1.27	4	0.24
knob	8	1.82	2	0.45	9	0.74	2	0.16	17	1.03	4	0.24
liar	19	4.33	8	1.82	13	1.07	5	0.41	32	1.94	13	0.78
(mother)fucker	12	2.73	9	2.05	8	0.66	1	0.08	20	1.21	10	0.60
moron	–	–	–	–	2	0.16	2	0.16	2	0.12	1	0.06
mug	3	0.68	–	–	14	1.15	8	0.66	17	1.03	8	0.48
muppet	–	–	–	–	4	0.33	2	0.16	4	0.24	2	0.12
nigger	13	2.96	5	1.14	2	0.16	–	–	15	0.91	5	0.30
nutter	6	1.36	1	0.22	9	0.74	1	0.08	15	0.91	2	0.12
paedophile	1	0.22	–	–	6	0.49	2	0.16	7	0.43	2	0.12
paki	4	0.91	2	0.45	6	0.49	1	0.08	10	0.60	3	0.18
pervert	13	2.96	2	0.45	20	1.64	3	0.32	33	1.98	5	0.34
pig(head)	2	0.45	1	0.22	1	0.08	–	–	3	0.18	1	0.06
poof(utter)puff	5	1.14	4	0.91	3	0.24	1	0.08	8	0.48	5	0.30
prat	12	2.73	6	1.36	2	0.16	1	0.08	14	0.85	7	0.42
prick	14	3.19	3	0.68	33	2.73	7	0.57	47	2.85	10	0.60
pussy(hole)	3	0.68	–	–	22	1.82	2	0.16	25	1.51	2	0.12
scum	2	0.45	2	0.45	12	0.99	2	0.16	14	0.85	4	0.24
shit	24	5.47	4	0.91	31	2.56	6	0.48	55	3.34	10	0.60
slob	–	–	–	–	2	0.16	1	0.08	2	0.12	1	0.07
slag	14	3.19	6	1.36	35	2.89	1	0.08	49	2.97	7	0.42
slut	5	1.14	–	–	8	0.66	1	0.08	13	0.78	1	0.07
sod	24	5.47	18	4.10	2	0.16	2	0.16	26	1.57	20	1.21
(son of a)bitch	104	23.71	44	10.03	89	7.36	22	1.82	193	11.72	66	4

Table 2. *(continued)*

	COLT 438,531 words				LEC young 1,208,135 words				Total 1,646,666 words			
	TN	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*	*TN*	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*	*TN*	*NF*	*TV*	*NF*
spud	–	–	–	–	1	0.08	1	0.08	1	0.06	1	0.06
stupid	215	49.02	34	7.75	196	16.22	2	0.16	411	24.95	36	2.18
tart	12	2.73	4	0.91	12	0.99	2	0.16	24	1.45	6	0.36
tit	1	0.22	1	0.22	–	–	–	–	1	0.06	1	0.06
tosser	7	1.59	1	0.22	2	0.16	1	0.08	9	0.54	2	0.12
tramp	2	0.45	–	–	24	1.98	3	0.24	26	1.57	3	0.18
twat	9	2.05	8	1.82	1	0.08	1	0.08	10	0.60	9	0.54
wanker	33	7.52	10	2.28	12	0.99	3	0.32	45	2.73	13	0.78
wasteman/ wastegashgasman	–	–	–	–	19	1.57	3	0.24	19	1.15	3	0.18
whore	7	1.59	2	0.45	13	1.07	1	0.08	20	1.21	3	0.18
wimp	–	–	–	–	4	0.33	2	0.16	4	0.24	2	0.12
zombie	–	–	–	–	6	0.49	6	0.49	6	0.36	6	0.36
Total	**1,033**	**235.55**	**333**	**75.92**	**1,027**	**86.64**	**206**	**17.11**	**2,080**	**126.29**	**538**	**32.7**

TN: Total number; *NF*: Normalised frequency; *TV*: Taboo vocatives

As can be seen in Table 3, there are high degrees of coincidence across the two groups of teenagers regarding those taboo vocatives with the highest frequency. Overall, the 7 most common are, in this order: (*son of a*) *bitch, bastard, dick(head)*, *cunt, stupid, fool* and *idiot*.

Table 3. Most frequent taboo vocatives in the language of London teenagers

COLT	LEC young
(son of a) bitch	*dick(head)*
bastard	*(son of a) bitch*
stupid	*cunt*
cunt	*idiot*
fool	*bighead*
dick	*bastard*

5.2 Evolution over time

Although the data show that taboo vocatives are far more common in COLT (75.92 per 100,000 words) than in LEC (17.11), I cannot assume from this that they

were more frequent in the 1990s than in the first decade of the present century. As mentioned above, differences observed here may have to do with the research instruments used for our research, and more particularly with the method followed for the compilation of each of the corpora: whereas in COLT participants recorded themselves (spontaneous conversations), LEC is based on individual and group sociolinguistic interviews carried out by field-workers. This difference in the compilation method might itself have had a bearing on the data collected, and thus on any subsequent analysis across corpora.

When comparing the data from the two corpora, certain differences are observed. Some terms (*bugger, chicken, chopper, crap, div, dumb, fag/got, nigger, pig(head, tit)*) are found in COLT but not in LEC, and vice versa; *chav, geek, goon, mup, muppet, tramp, wasteman* and *zombie*, for example, are recorded only in LEC. However, no firm conclusions can be drawn from this since the numbers of tokens for most of these are quite limited.

5.3 Meaning

All of the above terms can be regarded in their literal sense as offensive to a greater or lesser extent, although, as we will see below, there are cases in which they lose their power to insult and might even be used in an affectionate way.

The majority of them convey some kind of sexual reference, including male or female genitals and associated terms (*dick(head), cunt*) or sexual behaviour/identity with pejorative connotations (*wanker, bitch, whore, slut, hussy, tart*). Some also refer to some unusual forms of behaviour, with the meanings *mad/bizarre* (*stupid, twat, nutter*) or worthless (*prat, wasteman*). Animal references with a pejorative meaning are also quite common, as in *bitch, cow, chicken*; finally, some terms referring to race, often with clear racist overtones, are also recorded, these including *nigger* and *paki*.

Most of these terms have undergone semantic change in the sense of a widening or broadening of their meaning (Campbell 1998, 216). As a result, the range of meanings of these vocatives has increased so that they can be used in more contexts than was the case before such a change. For example, *bitch* no longer refers to a female dog but to an unpleasant person, although it might also refer to a girlfriend, as in (6), although on this occasion it is a metalinguistic use rather than a fully spontaneous one. The same applies to *prick* and *dick,* which are used in their non-literal sense. Witness the following:

(6) Interviewer.: ok what would be the informal name for a girlfriend?
Dave (17 years, male): girlfriend really
Int.: just girlfriend you haven't got any other terms that you use?

Dave: ***bitch*** <laugh> that's what you call them sometimes like "that's my ***bitch***" or "that's my girl" [Int: oh right] basically it's my girl. (LEC)

5.4 Referents of taboo vocatives

The effects of this broadening of meaning can also be observed in the personal references they denote. Note how speakers sometimes use *bitch* and *cunt* with male referents, whereas the contrary would be expected; something similar happens with *dick* and *prick*, which can be used to address female speakers. The following is an exchange between Dean and Chris. Note how Chris addresses Dean first as *cunt* and a few lines down the latter addresses Chris as *dickhead*.

(7) Dean (17 years, male): I'll class myself as mixed race as well then
Chris (17 years, male): #1 my dad is black you ***cunt*** so is my grandad /so I can say whatever I want/ #
Dean: #2 /so?. my godsister's black /so I can say whatever I want #
Chris: #1 she's mixed race /(name of person) is mixed race/ #
Dean: #2 /ok/ my godfather's black #
Chris: that's your godfather that's not actually your blood
Dean: doesn't matter. can say whatever I want then. you muggy ***dickhead***. (LEC)

Also, the referents of address terms such as these can be a third person (8) or even a group of people, as in (9), where the referents are not present and do not participate in the conversation, although they may be involved directly or indirectly in the chat, either because the speakers are talking about them or are referring to something concerning them. Here the taboo vocative functions as a kind of aside or comment; in this respect it should probably not be considered as a prototypical example, but rather a less central one, in that it mainly represents the speaker's thinking at the time, and the reference to the interlocutor is less direct. Consider the following:

(8) Andrew (17 years): he opened the door # laugh # and. the fella said "come then" and the boy got in the car with them oh ***stupid dickhead*** /[he got in there?] / yeah [why?] he got in the car. (LEC)

(9) cos we still looking for a club to get in. ***idiots*** wouldn't let us in. terrible. terrible she was (LEC)

Although less common, these address terms can even have non-human or inanimate referents such as human body parts (10) or an object such as a telephone (11). These are mainly non-literal and tend to have a humorous touch, this derived from the personification of the inanimate referents.

(10) i walk along brentwood high street with my friend and i hold her arm and i say do you want to turn this off i say "walk ***you bastard***" and she said "don't say that" I'm talking to my legs [yeah] she says "people think your talking to me" # laugh # (LEC)

(11) Chris (17): cos I'm quite powerful as everyone knows yeah my phone just flew and hit my table. hit all the chargers everything like that. picked it up i looked at it and i went. "***you bastard***". cos all my numbers are saved on the phone. (LEC)

5.5 Teenagers versus adults

Taboo vocatives are almost non-existent in the language of adults. Only 16 tokens were recorded, and these occurred in similar proportions in the two adult corpora (BNC subcorpus and LEC adult), together comprising over 730,000 words, with a normalised frequency per 100,000 words of 2.16. These terms are *idiot* (9), *sod* (3), *stupid* (2) *cow* (1), *dick* (1). So, taboo vocatives can be regarded as more typical of teen talk, and indeed are recorded in speakers as young as 12, that is, at an early age in the development of their interactional repertoires. However, the question that emerges here is exactly why so many more taboo vocatives are found in teen talk than in the language of adults?

Social relationships among peers and in-group identity are fundamental to teenagers. These speakers have a particularly urgent need to know that they form part of their own peer-group, in terms of being accepted by others and even by themselves, an issue that has been widely reported in the literature (Eckert 1988; Stenström et al. 2002; Stenström and Jørgensen 2009; Tagliamonte 2016; Drummond 2018, 2019). Taboo vocatives very often serve to establish, maintain and reinforce these relationships and can be considered a part of their special code or mode of expression. As Tagliamonte claims (2016, 53), "the two most powerful forces that govern language use in adolescence [are]: (1) solidarity with peers and (2) separation from adults." Furthermore, teenagers react more spontaneously than adults and there is an especially direct and tangible emotional function associated with such address terms. Moreover, these terms are very closely aligned with informal and colloquial registers.

5.6 Taboo vocatives: Further features

In this section I will describe further features of the members of this category in view of our findings. As such, this description will complement the one presented in the introduction.

Taboo vocatives are used in the singular mainly, although a few cases are also recorded in the plural, as in the case of *bastards, dickheads, idiots, pricks*. They are also quite frequently used in reported speech; hence they are not reserved for any special uses or communicative conditions, and we can say that speakers consider them to be typical of their everyday expression.

(12) i nearly/went mad i was like "you little ***bastard*** get out my house". (LEC)

I also find some metalinguistic uses, such as (6) above, in which the speakers themselves talk about the meaning and use of these vocatives, whether they are really offensive or not, and who uses them most frequently.

Taboo vocatives may occur together with other common address terms (e.g. *man, bruv*) in the same turn unit (13). Note how in these cases the taboo vocative does not generally convey any offensive meaning, since the familiarizer cancels out or mitigates any offense conveyed by the term.

(13) Dexter (male, 18 years): in your head but where's that tough girl man? ***dickhead bruv*** that tough girl where is she? //Dexter kisses teeth// she's not in there. (LEC)

They may even be found together with the referent's personal name, this being a means by which the speaker singles out the addressee.

(14) Shut up Miguel you ***stupid little motherfucking***. (COLT)

Sometimes speakers make use of a number of these address terms together, often with an intensifying meaning, which itself derives from this accumulation of vocatives (15), or as a means of showing aggression to others, as in (16), in which the situation involves a bus driver closing the doors before they can get on, resulting in the terms uttered. This will be further discussed in Section 6 when I turn to pragmatics.

(15) because of the fact that I know her ah fuck off.. ***cunt dickhead***.... (LEC)

(16) you're running up the the thing yeah, as soon as you get there yeah, they just close the doors and go, just like when Mike, and Steve were here, and er, they are going ***wanker, fucking wanker***, you ***cunt***, you ***cunt***. (COLT)

These terms are often modified by intensifying adverbs or adjectives, such as *(mother)fucking, little, diddy, stupid, fat, dirty, silly, loud, rotten, sad, queer, dumb, two-faced, old, smelly, bloody, ugly, bad, poor*; all of these, with the exception of *little*, carry pejorative connotations.

(17) I thought "who you getting rude to you little ***fat cunt***?". (LEC)

These are the main collocations found with each of them.

Table 4. Main collocations of the most frequent taboo vocatives in the language of London teenagers

fucking	**arsehole**
Irish, little, mercenary, sad, fat, rotten, queer, silly, black, fucking	**bastard**
fucking, silly, dumb, dirty, two-faced, stupid, little, lying, old, smally, fat, diddy, effing, sad	**bitch**
bloody, right, stupid, boring old, dirty, little, nosey, greedy	**cow**
fat, ugly, motherfucking, lying, little, flipping, dirty	**cunt**
fucking, little, stupid, muggy	**dick(head)**
poor, bad, little	**fuckers**
damn, stupid, loud, little	**idiot**
bloody, fucking, sod, stupid, silly, poor, lucky	**prick**
fucking	**tosser/ wanker**

As mentioned above, they can be preceded by *you*, and in fact this is the case almost half of the time (46.01%) (see Table 5). For *cow, bastard* and *idiot*, this figure is even higher, at 80%, 71% and 52%, respectively, although the low number of tokens here means that firm conclusions cannot be drawn.

When preceded by *you*, taboo vocatives are recorded mainly in final position. There seem to be two main roles for this pronoun when it comes to taboo vocatives: to single out or focus attention on the referent (18) or to intensify the message conveyed (19).

(18) You look around ≠ ≠2 /look and they're like "what you looking at ***you bitch***? (LEC)

(19) Oh shut up ***you prick***, you can't do that. (LEC)

5.7 Taboo Vocatives Position

As can be seen from Table 6 and Figure 1, my findings confirm previous studies on the sentence position of vocatives in general (Biber et al. 1999; Leech 1999; McCarthy and O'Keefe 2003; Clancy 2015; Palacios Martínez 2018). Final position is far more frequent than initial position and occurs with a shorter length than the latter. Initial position is associated mainly with gaining attention, whereas final position is more closely related to interpersonal issues and the maintenance and reinforcement of social relationships. When found in initial position, vocatives are frequently followed by a directive or a request.

Table 5. Taboo vocatives preceded by *you*

	COLT 438,531 words			LEC Young (1,208,135 words)			Total 1,646,666 words		
	TN	*Preceded by* you	%	*TN*	*Preceded by* you	%	*TN*	*Preceded by* you	%
ass/arse(hole)	6	1	16.66%	1	1	100%	7	2	28.57%
bastard	43	30	69.76%	9	7	77.77%	52	37	71.15%
big/bean/crack/ peanut/fish head	3	1	33.33%	10	4	40%	13	5	38.46%
black	2	1	50%	2	1	50%	4	2	50%
bugger	15	1	6.66%	–	–	–	15	1	6.66%
cow	2	2	100%	3	2	66.66%	5	4	80%
crap	4	1	25%	–	–	–	4	1	25%
cunt	20	8	40%	18	10	55.55%	38	18	47.36%
dick/cock (head) (arse)	18	14	77.77	28	7	25%	46	21	45.65%
dumb	1	1	100%	–	–	–	1	1	100%
fag(got)	1	1	100%	–	–	–	1	1	100%
fool	19	8	42.10%	5	2	40%	24	10	41.66%
freak	–	–	–	5	5	100%	5	5	100%
git	8	5	62.5%	2	–	–	10	5	50%
goon	–	–	–	2	1	50%	2	1	50%
idiot	9	6	66.66%	12	5	41.66%	21	11	52.38%
liar	8	2	25%	5	4	80%	13	6	46.15%
(mother)fucker	9	1	11.11%	1	–	–	10	1	10%
mug	–	–	–	8	5	62.5%	8	5	62.5%
muppet	–	–	–	2	2	100%	2	2	100%
nutter	1	1	100%	1	1	100%	2	2	100%
paedophile	–	–	–	2	2	100%	2	2	100%
pervert	2	1	50%	3	2	66.66%	5	3	60%
prat	6	5	83.33%	1	–	–	7	5	71.42%
prick	3	1	33.33%	7	4	57.14%	10	5	50%
pussy(hole)	–	–	–	2	2	100%	2	2	100%
shit	4	–	–	6	1	16.66%	10	1	10%
slag	6	4	66.66%	1	–	–	7	4	57.14%
slut	–	–	–	1	1	100%	1	1	100%
sod	18	1	5.55%	2	2	100%	20	3	15%
(son of a) bitch	44	13	29.54%	22	11	50%	66	24	36.36%
stupid	34	14	41.17%	2	–	–	36	14	38.88%

Table 5. *(continued)*

	COLT 438,531 words			LEC Young (1,208,135 words)			Total 1,646,666 words		
	TN	*Preceded by* you	%	*TN*	*Preceded by* you	%	*TN*	*Preceded by* you	%
tart	4	2	50%	2	–	–	6	2	33.33%
tit	1	1	100%	–	–	–	1	1	100%
tramp	–	–	–	3	2	66.66%	3	2	66.66%
twat	8	5	62.5%	1	–	–	9	5	55.55%
wanker	10	6	60%	4	1	25%	14	7	50%
wasteman/ wastegash	–	–	–	3	1	33.33%	3	1	33.33%
whore	2	–	–	1	1	100%	3	1	33.33%
wimp	–	–	–	1	1	100%	1	1	100%
Total	**311**	**137**	**44.05%**	**178**	**88**	**49.40%**	**489**	**225**	**46.01%**

(20) You ***fool***, turn it on now. (COLT) initial

(21) Cos we were still looking for a club to get in. ***idiots*** wouldn't let us in. (LEC) middle

(22) Hey buggered off. ***Bastards***! (COLT) final

This pattern is reflected in all the taboo vocatives under investigation in the present study, with no exceptions. *Fool* is the item found with the highest proportion in initial position (29.1%).

Table 6. Clause position of the most common taboo vocatives

	Initial	Medial	Final	Total
(son of a) bitch	1/**1.5%**	–	65/**98.5%**	66
bastard	1/**1.5%**	–	51/**98.5%**	52
dick (head)	1/**2.2%**	3/**6.6%**	41/**91.2%**	45
cunt	–	1/**2.6%**	37/**97.4%**	38
stupid	–	–	36/**100%**	36
fool	7/**29.1%**	–	17**70.9%**	24
idiot	–	1/**4.7%**	20/**95.3%**	21
bugger	–	–	15/**100%**	15
liar	–	–	13/**100%**	13
wanker	–	–	13/**100%**	13
Total	**10/3.1%**	**5/1.5%**	**308/95.4%**	**323**

Figure 1 visually represents the different positions of the most frequent taboo vocatives in the present data.

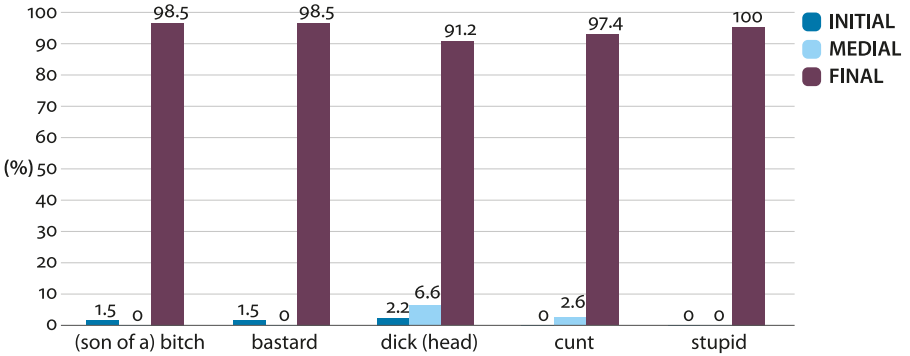


Figure 1. Clause position of the five most common taboo vocatives

6. Pragmatics

Taboo vocatives, like vocatives in general, are pragmatically loaded and have a multifunctional role in discourse. Although an exhaustive outline is difficult, two main broad groups of functions can be distinguished (McCarthy and O'Keefe 2003; Clancy 2015):

- Those that serve to express interpersonal relationships between participants in a conversation: insult or offence, disagreement, humour, expression of contempt and envy, reinforcement of identity and peer relationship, etc.
- Those that help to organise discourse in terms of engaging a conversation participant and managing topics (shift, expand, close) and turns (identify and interrupt speaker).

These two categories of functions are not mutually exclusive. That is, there are cases in which taboo address terms not only channel the expression of interpersonal relationships but also serve to organise discourse by closing the topic or interrupting the turn (see Section 6.2 below).

6.1 Interpersonal relationships

6.1.1 *Offensive*

These terms often function as straightforward insults (Sosa 2018) and are used by teenagers with a clearly offensive purpose.

The following extracts are a good illustration of episodes in which these terms attain an offensive value through a reaction to some sort of disagreement with, or a lack of consideration shown by, the interlocutor. In (23) the speaker is reporting how he felt when a friend told him about the drowning of a family member (the person who drowned was one of his cousin's sons). Note how in the account, in which there is alternation between direct and reported speech, the speaker uses the taboo vocative "silly old cow" to give more expressive force to his story.

(23) he said to me "there's so. a member one of you cousins or one of your family drowned" and when i come out i said to my mate "***silly old cow*** bleeding drowned no-ones drowned in my house" but it was it was my cousins little boy he got drowned on erm (LEC)

At times there is even an added value, in that these address terms, apart from being offensive, may also serve to reinforce the message (24) or even to engage the interlocutor's attention abruptly (25). The two following extracts involve two exchanges where speakers argue about the recording they are doing and the materials they are using to do it. As noted above (cf. Section 4), participants in COLT recorded themselves with devices which they had been given. This situation led to a number of conflicts, and these were often discussed by them during the recordings.

(24) Russel (male 15 years): Can you hear me?
Alistair (male, 15 years): You screwed up that tape ***you dick***. (COLT)

(25) Catriona (female, 16 years): I've only done two s= two tapes I've, where where are the other tapes?
Jess (female, 16 years): I don't know.
Catriona: What on earth have I done with [them?]
Jess: [They're] over here ***you dick***. (COLT)

6.1.2 *Arguments and disagreements*

It is also relatively common for these address terms to emerge over the course of arguments and disagreements between participants in a conversation. In the following extract, for example, the speakers maintain different views as to how good women can be at karate. At the end of the interaction, one of the speakers, Richard, responds with a taboo vocative (*you prat*), possibly because no further arguments occur to him in support of his views, but also because he is not interested in the discussion and seeks to close the topic and move onto another. Hence, what we find in the use of the vocative here is a combination of an interpersonal and discourse functions.

(26) Ben (male, 13 years): What Emma's gone on holiday?
Richard (male, 13 years): Yeah
Francais (female, 13 years): I, I've
Ben: Oh
Francais: Oi right erm, don't tell her I told you this but she'd kill me <unclear> she <mimicking Japanese accent> the karate! </>, she's beating me up
Richard: Women can't do
Ben: I bet she is
Richard: karate ***you prat***
Francais: some women
Ben: Why not? (COLT)

6.1.3 *To reinforce bonds and create solidarity and comradeship*

In this respect, taboo terms are no different from familiarisers such as *man, bro, dude*, and this explains their high frequency in teen talk. In the following example, one of the speakers invites a boy to join a group that is chatting. The taboo vocative (*you dickhead*) in initial position serves to engage attention but also to prepare the ground and promote a positive atmosphere, so that he can accept the invitation and join them. Note the use of the familiarizer *son* in the following line which also serves to strengthen this feeling of comradeship and solidarity. The taboo vocatives here, then, serve to favour the conditions for his taking part in the conversation.

(27) Sulema (female, 18 years): call (name) call (name=Will) call (name=Will)
Ryan (male, 18): (name=Will) won't come in
Sulema: why?
Ryan: cos as soon as I say to him (name=Will) come in the room he says not again. guarantee you.
Sulema: go on say it
Ryan: was in here for like
Sulema: can you call him?..
Ryan: let me
Sulema: he's been in here a few times
Ryan: that's it I've only been in here once. Twice
Sulema: oh there he is. <shouts> (name) #1 (name).. (name=Will) #
Ryan: #2 (name=Will) /[Int.: is that (name)?]/ ***you dickhead*** you # fancy having (name=Will). wanna have a chat ***son***?. <laughter> I've never seen him look like that. ah.. right yeah (LEC)

6.1.4 *To express affection*

This function is, clearly, the opposite of the offensive function. Here the taboo vocative reverses its meaning completely, conveying something positive rather than offensive or negative. In the following example, the speaker is telling an anecdote from the past, and is referring to a four-year-old boy, emphasising how "gorgeous" and "nice" he is, as in contrast to being "butters", that is, "ugly", the boy's probable current status, which seems to denote the opposite. Note once again how the speaker alternates direct and reported speech.

(28) Ahmed (male, 19): like four years he's probably butters now anyway. people do change over time….he is gorgeous I'm telling you.first time I see him I just fell in love with him I was like "you're fucking gorgeous ***you bastard***".. he is nice ain't he? (LEC)

6.1.5 *Expression of contempt and envy*

Here the speaker conveys a feeling which can be described as a mixture of both contempt and envy, in that her interlocutor is going to be bought a car by her father. As a reaction to hearing this, she responds "Ah bitch".

(29) Kath (female, 17 years): Guess what my dad told me
Claire: (female, 17 years): What?
Kath: He says erm he said he might er might be able to get me a car for the Christmas holidays
Claire: Ah! ***Bitch.*** (COLT)

6.1.6 *Badinage (humorous and witty)*

Humour is present in many conversations among teenagers, who are very fond of telling stories, dramatizing experiences, and talking about their peers or other members of their families and inner circle. This humour takes different forms: jokes, puns, amusing anecdotes and stories, playing with the language, mimicking and imitations of other accents plus exchanges where they make fun of each another, either directly or indirectly. Episode (30) is a good example of this. Jonathan and Rosh express different views as to the purpose of what they are recording, and they go on to engage in an exchange in which they pull each other's legs by insulting each other, as if this were the most natural thing to do.

(30) Ryan: Recording as we're speaking English, we can learn to speak English again.
Jonathan (male, 17 years): <nv>laugh</nv>
Josh: <laughing>Oh yeah</>.
Jonathan: That's the plot. That's it, the secret's out.
Rob: <nv>laugh</nv> …

Jonathan: Turn it on.
Rob: It is.
Jonathan: It's on?
Rob: Jonathan's a dancing queen.
Josh: <laughing>Yeah, <unclear></> ***you dickhead***.
Rob: Jonathan's a queen, period.
Jonathan: Yeah your mum's a queen. (COLT)

6.2 Organise discourse

Although the use of taboo vocatives as a resource to plan and organize discourse is not as commonplace as their use in relation to the expression of interpersonal relationships among speakers, I do find some examples in the data, particularly cases where a speaker is interested in closing the turn and changing the topic. This can be seen in (31) below, where the participants in the exchange have clearly differing views: Jonathan wants to go back to school, whereas none of the other speakers are attracted to this idea. After a brief and unproductive exchange of views in which several speakers intervene, John decides to stop the conversation by using the swear word *fuck* followed by the taboo vocative *bitch*. In this way he underlines the fact that he is not willing to continue arguing about this, seeking instead to change the topic.

(31) Jonathan (male, 17 years): We gotta go back to school.
Ryan (male, 19 years): I won't.
Jonathan: Have you got a course?
Ryan: We have an hour.
Jonathan: Oh.
Rob (male, 19 years): <unclear> fuck, off.
Jonathan: Fuck you I've gotta go back for chemistry.
Josh (male, 17 years): Fuck that ***bitch***.
Jonathan: Yeah er. (COLT)

7. Conclusions

Taboo vocatives can be regarded as a typical feature of teen talk (a total of 59 types were recorded in the data), in that they are very common in the language of these speakers, in contrast to the very scant presence of such items in comparable data on adult speech. Most of these are nouns, although they may also function as adjectives. They are associated with sexual (*dick, slut*), inappropriate (*sod, wanker*) or bizarre behaviour (*nutter, freak, twat*), and some others also refer

to animals pejoratively (*bitch, cow, pig*) or are directly or indirectly racist (*nigger, paki*).

While bearing in mind divergences in compilation methods used in the corpora here, the figures do seem to indicate that no major differences are found when comparing the most common taboo vocatives from the 1990s with those of the first decade of the current century, although some new terms seem to have emerged, including *chav, geek, tramp* and *wasteman,* and some others appear to be gradually becoming outdated, such as *bugger* and *sod*. Most items terms have suffered semantic change in the sense of a broadening or widening of their meaning (i.e. *bitch, prick, dick*), and some have come to allow both male and female referents, when originally, due to their meaning, they were more closely associated with a particular gender.

There are also some examples in which the referent is inanimate, a body part or a telephone for example, leading to the discourse acquiring a humorous tone derived from the personification of these referents. At times the referent of the taboo vocative may not itself be present. That is, a speaker might address a third person who does not participate in the conversation, yet is the topic of the discussion for some reason. In these cases, the taboo vocative functions an aside or indirect remark.

Taboo vocatives are found quite often in reported speech and may occur with other address terms, mainly *man, mate* and *brother/bruv*. Here the familiarizer tones down the possible offensive meaning of the taboo word. Taboo vocatives are very frequently modified by certain adverbs and adjectives: *fucking, little, fat*, etc. In 46.01% of cases they are preceded by *you*, this broadly in line with the frequency of other familiarisers (*you guys*).

Taboo address terms are found mainly in final position, as is the case with most vocatives. In terms of pragmatics they are multifunctional, in that they serve not only to express intersubjective relationships between the participants in the conversation but may also help to organize discourse. However, in this case intersubjective relationships clearly prevail over the discourse ones. Contrary to what might be expected, taboo vocatives are not always offensive or negative, and indeed can denote affection and badinage, this very often to reinforce the bonds between teenaged speakers through the underlining of their special code, thus helping them to reinforce their identity and to distinguish themselves from others through their use of language.

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