

## TERMS OF ABUSE IN BRITAIN AND NORWAY

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*Abstract*

Terms of abuse are words used towards or about others with the intent of causing harm (insulting, offending, name-calling etc.) i.e. (you are a) *bitch, cunt, dickhead, wanker, idiot*. Drawing on 2000 examples of terms of abuse from Norway and Britain collected via an online self-report sociolinguistic survey in 2021, this paper suggests that the most popular Norwegian terms of abuse are currently undergoing changes, partly driven by the influence of English and the popularity of English culture within today's globalised youth. Additionally, it is suggested that despite progress towards gender equality in both cultures, terms of abuse still provide evidence of inequalities and discrimination.

*1. Introduction*

English has a special status in Norway. It is taught from the first year of primary school (age 6), but it also functions almost as a second language with many Norwegians using or at least hearing English daily (Graedler, 2002; Simensen, 2011; Sunde, 2018). Norwegian TV and radio are filled with English productions mostly from the US or UK and films and TV shows are typically not dubbed but subtitled. As many songs, TV shows and films include swearing or so-called “bad language”,<sup>1</sup> Norwegians are therefore frequently exposed via both the original English words and through translated subtitles (see, e.g. Werner 2021; Bednarek 2019, 2020; Beers Fägersten & Bednarek 2022). Further, the internet and gaming often make use of written and spoken English, and English use can be found throughout business and trade, politics, travel, hospitality and tourism, and in education within Norway.

High levels of exposure are likely one contributing factor in making “bad language” highly borrowable, as has been shown for Dutch by Zenner, Ruetten & Devriendt (2017). There are other social conditions which likely contribute, such as positive attitudes towards English and English cultures (Graedler, 2014), use of English as part of modern identity repertoires (Rindal, 2013), and the general lure and excitement of swearing or using things which are taboo. There are also further linguistic reasons which suggest that swearwords might be open to change: lexical borrowing is common, swearwords show innovation and change reflecting current cultural ideas and values, and Norwegian and English are both Germanic based languages and hence share similar structures. Cognate forms are already used in similar, if not identical ways, i.e. Norwegian *hore* and English *whore* both refer to an ‘unpleasant woman, sexual promiscuity’ and originate in Proto-Germanic (OED, 2002).

It is therefore unsurprisingly that studies have shown that English profanities are in widespread use in the Nordic countries. For example, *fuck* is widely used in Swedish, Finnish, and Danish (Beers Fägersten, 2014, 2017; Fjeld et al, 2019; Hjort, 2017; Rathje, 2014). Both *fuck* and the Norwegian spelling *føkk* are in the top 20 Norwegian swearwords found in recent social media texts (Coats, 2021). Influence need not always be from direct borrowing of the swearwords themselves. Sinar (2015) provided some evidence that a subset of swearing, terms of abuse

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<sup>1</sup> What counts as swearing or bad language is difficult to define as it is subjective, varies from individual to individual, and from context to context (see discussions in Beers Fägersten & Stapleton (eds), 2017; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Ljung, 2011; Love, 2021, Rathje & Andersen, 2005).

(ToA), were undergoing change in Norway away from using religion as a theme towards using sexual organs, in a mirroring of how ToA are used in English (indirect borrowing).

This paper therefore analyses data drawn from a small-scale self-report study into Norwegian and British ToA by young people in order to consider whether there is any (further) evidence for change in Norwegian under the influence of English. As many previous studies have shown that ToA within and across cultures exhibit significant differences based on the gender of the target of abuse (Kremin, 2017; Norri, 2000; Waksler, 1995), this paper presents the data with a binary division between male and female targets. This provides further evidence of cultural values and norms having a significant effect on ToA but also reveals evidence of inequalities and discrimination within both societies with respect to gender roles.

The paper is structured so that first previous findings on abuse terms in Norway and Britain are briefly summarised to provide recent historical context (section 2) and then the results of a recent small-scale study are presented, first for Britain (section 4.1) and then for Norway (section 4.2). The findings are compared and discussed (section 5), before a conclusion and suggestions for further research are presented (section 6).

## 2. *Previous research terms of abuse in Norway and Britain*

Terms of abuse or personal insults are words which are used with the intent of causing harm towards another (Allen & Burrige 2006; Andersen & Trudgill, 1990; Battistella, 2005). There is little consensus on which terms should or should not be considered abuse. Some definitions and studies exclude certain terms arguing that they are separate categories i.e. racist, sexist, blasphemous, homophobic etc. and others suggest those that are “name-calling” should be considered separately (see e.g. Rathje & Andersen, 2005; McEnery 2006). An inclusive approach is taken in this short working paper where any term which is listed by participants as being a ‘term of abuse’, is considered to be a term of abuse regardless of the semantic field(s) from which the word is drawn, the history of the term or its other uses. ToA are taken to be part of impolite or “bad” language without any further attempt to discuss where exactly they fit.

In order to look for patterns, ToA (alongside other instances of swearing) are often sorted into themes or semantic fields. Key semantic fields identified in western cultures include sexual organs and other body parts, sexual behaviours, mental capabilities, animals, family relations, disabilities, behaviour, and religion (Allen & Burrige, 2006; Stapleton, 2010). Words are typically sorted by their original and literal sense rather than by the intended meaning, which in this case is to insult, abuse and/or offend. For example, whilst the original meaning or denotation of the word *twat* is the ‘female genitals, vagina, vulva’ (OED, 2022) when used as a ToA it means ‘a contemptible or obnoxious person’ or ‘a person who behaves stupidly; a fool, an idiot’ (OED, 2022). The original meaning would be categorised as sexual organs (the practice also followed here) but the actual use could be categorised as either behaviour or mental capabilities.

Cross-cultural comparisons of abuse terms are few (Drange, Hasund & Stenstrom, 2014; Ljung, 2011; Menuta & Fjeld, 2016). The consensus is that there are often many similarities and some differences which express and reinforce cultural values, identities and concerns (e.g. De Raad, Van Oudenhoven, & Hofstede, 2005; van Oudenhoven et al, 2008). Perhaps the most commonly observed difference within and across cultures relates to gender roles (Preston & Stanley 1987; Ljung, 2011; Stapleton, 2003), with almost all studies to date taking a binary approach to gender. Due to the small-scale nature of this study, a binary approach is also assumed here, with a more complex view of gender left for future research.

Van Oudenhoven et al (2008) and Sinar (2015) both conducted questionnaire studies into ToA towards males and females which included Norway and Britain. In order to establish the most commonly used terms in both cultures, both studies provided a top five ToA, summarised in table 1 for Britain and table 2 for Norway.<sup>2</sup> These terms will be used for comparison with data collected in 2021 (section 4) to discuss possible recent developments in both cultures (section 5). ToA recorded in Britain will be used to represent ‘English’. Consideration of the differences in the forms and use of ToA across the English speaking world are left for future research (see Jay, 2000; McEnery, 2006; van Oudenhoven et al., 2008).

Abuse terms towards males		Abuse terms towards females	
Van Oudenhoven et al (2008)	Sinar (2015)	Van Oudenhoven et al (2008)	Sinar (2015)
Twat/Cunt	Fuck/Fucking etc.	Bitch	Bitch
Dick(head)/Prick	Twat	Rude	Cow
Idiot	Wanker	Cow	Idiot
Wanker	Arsehole	Cunt/twat	Slag
Ass(hole)/Arsehole	Dickhead	Idiot/moron	Slut

Table 1: Summary of the top 5 terms of abuse in British English

Abuse terms towards males		Abuse terms towards females	
Van Oudenhoven et al (2008)	Sinar (2015)	Van Oudenhoven et al (2008)	Sinar (2015)
Faen/Jaevel/Satan	Jaevel/Jaevla	Faen/Jaevel/Satan	Kjerring ‘hag’
Idiot/Mongo	Idiot	Idiot/Mongo	Hore/Hora
Dust ‘stupid’	Drittsekk ‘Dirtbag/shitbag’	Bitch/Hore	Bitch
Penis/Scrotum <sup>3</sup>	Kukk ‘cock’	Dust ‘stupid’	Fitte ‘Cunt’ <sup>4</sup>
Drittsekk ‘Dirtbag/shitbag’	Dust ‘stupid’	Kjerring ‘hag’ <sup>5</sup>	Idiot

Table 2: Summary of terms of abuse in Norwegian

Whilst these two studies categorise the data differently, most notably in the treatment of terms which might be considered synonymous i.e. *twat* and *cunt* (see discussion in Sinar 2015), they

<sup>2</sup> Frequency counts provided in the original studies are not provided in these summary tables as the purpose is to establish the most popular terms and the semantic fields from which they are drawn.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst these are the terms reported, it’s likely that this represents words such as *kukk* ‘cock’ and *pikk* ‘prick’

<sup>4</sup> *Fitte* relates to the female genitals (NAOB, 2022) and is most frequently translated into English as ‘cunt’ showing the abusive use of the term. However, it must be recognised that the use and meaning(s) of *cunt* varies across the English speaking world and it is unclear therefore exactly how the use of *fitte* in Norway maps onto *cunt* in English.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Hag’ is the definition given in these two papers, but others are found in the dictionaries. For example, google translate has *kjerring* as ‘bitch’, whereas the Nynorskordboka (2022) has four meanings: ‘married woman, old woman, cowardly man and inhumane vessel’.

suggest the most frequently used terms of abuse in both cultures fall into four broad categories: (1) sexual organs, (2) sexual behaviours, (3) animals/appearance/behaviour, (4) mental capabilities, with a fifth category, religion (5), in the case of Norway. Within these categories, there are some differences. For example, in Norway male sexual organs are used towards men *kukk* ‘cock’ and female organs towards females *fitte* ‘cunt’, however in Britain both genitalia are used towards men: *prick/dick* and *twat/cunt*. There is evidence that the use of female organs *twat/cunt* towards females may be declining (not found in top 5 in Sinar 2015) and that male terms are not frequently used towards women (outside top 5).

The data shows broad consistency in ToA towards males between 2008 and 2015. In Norway the same terms are recorded but with a different order of frequency. In Britain mental capability (*idiot*) is replaced in the top 5 by sexual intercourse (*fuck*), but otherwise there is stability. However, there is evidence of change towards women in both cultures. In Norway religion has declined in favour of using the female sexual organs (*fitte* ‘cunt’). Sexual promiscuity, already found with *bitch* (both cultures) and *hore/hora* (Norway), is enhanced in Britain with *slag* and *slut* with the loss of the modifier *rude* and the female sexual organs *twat/cunt*. Sexual promiscuity is not referenced in the male data.

Arguably the biggest difference is that Norway makes use of religion as the top ToA towards males and females, a theme which is entirely absent from the British frequent ToA. The use of terms relating to the diabolical are well attested across the Nordic countries (Coats, 2021; Drange, Hasund & Stenstrom, 2014; Hellquist, 1918; Ljung, 2011), with their prevalence and frequency of use setting them apart from other western cultures. Van Oudenhoven et al (2008: 178) attribute their findings “to a strong Christian influence on Norwegian Culture” and

....Norwegian specialization in terms of the dark side of Christianity, the devil. It reflects the anxiety about what may happen to us after we die. In this sense it is possible that it refers to little devils who resided in forests in pre-Christian times. In further reactions we found additional evidence for this anxiety in the high frequency of references to hell, more than in any other language. Norway has been a relatively homogeneous Protestant community in relative isolation, so that this unique feature could develop.

(van Oudenhoven et al 2008:183)

However, Sinar (2015) suggests a change, only recording diabolical use towards males and not towards females. She suggests that this might show the beginnings of change away from religious terms to terms relating to sex and body parts (a change which has happened in the history of British swearing cf. Hughes, 2006; McEnery, 2006; Mohr, 2013 and for which there is also tentative evidence for Swedish: Stroh-Wollin, 2010).

In conclusion, previous studies show that (1) religious terms are frequently used in Norway but not in Britain, although this might be undergoing change in Norway (2) the semantic fields from which terms are drawn are not the same for male and female targets: women have more terms about their sexual behaviours, animals and appearance in both cultures. In both cultures it appears there is more stability towards the males but change towards females: in Britain away from sexual organs and in Norway towards using sexual organs.

### 3. Methodology

A short online self-report sociolinguistic survey was administered to students aged between 18 and 24 during the on-going Covid-19 pandemic in 2021. This age group was chosen as previous studies have suggested younger people make more use of offensive terms (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Drummond, 2020) and recent studies of teenage ‘swearing’ such as Drange

et al (2014) and Strenstrom, (2006) suggest on-going change in “bad language” amongst these ages. These are also the groups most exposed to the influences of social media as a significant part of “youth culture” and are most likely to use English as part of their social repertoire and identities in Norway.

The Norwegian participants all had Norwegian as their first language (L1), but were all also studying English at different Higher Education Institutions (HEI) across Norway. The British participants were all studying at UK HEIs, identified as having *British* English as their L1, and were studying a range of different subjects. Each participant was asked to list 5 terms of abuse from their L1 that they themselves might use towards a cis-gender heterosexual male and 5 terms that they themselves might use towards a cis-gender heterosexual female. A wider approach including different gender identities and a range of sexualities was left for future research.

If a participant wished they could record exactly the same terms towards males and females (none did). The order in which participants were asked for terms was varied so that they did not always begin with terms towards males or females. Unlike in Van Oudenhoven et al (2008) and Sinar (2015), participants were asked to only provide the head noun and not modifiers or intensifiers i.e. *man* but not *grumpy man*, *old man* etc. Participants who listed the same head noun with different modifiers were excluded from this analysis. Compound nouns were included, and seem more common in Norwegian i.e. *drittkjerring* ‘shit hag/bitch/old woman’, *fittetryne* ‘cunt face/fuck face’ than in English *motherfucker*, *cocksucker* etc. For a recent study of compounds in English swearing using recent online data see Morris (2022).

Sinar (2015) suggested that some insult terms might be frequently modified *fat cow*, *stupid cow*, *skinny cow*, etc. or themselves be used as modifiers to increase the intensity of the abuse i.e. *motherfucking cunt*. She also found that ToA towards males were more often modified than towards women in both Norway and Britain. Further investigation of this falls outside the scope of this paper, but would likely reveal some interesting results particularly given the recent rise in English towards identifying bitch types i.e. *boss bitch*, *basic bitch*, *lady bitch* etc. and evidence that the religious theme is often used as an intensifier in Norway akin to the use of *fucking* in English i.e. *javela idiot* ‘devil idiot’ = *fucking idiot*.

From the collected data a random sample of 50 males and 50 females from each group were chosen for this initial analysis (=200 participants). As each participant provided 5 ToA towards a male and 5 towards a female, the dataset for each culture comprises 1000 examples (=2000 examples overall). For the purposes of categorisation, words were treated separately unless they were simply spelling variations i.e. *ho/hoe*, *hore/hora*. Shortened forms, such as *lezza* for lesbian were treated separately but are commented on further where necessary. This paper looks at the core set of abuse terms as self-reported, extending the discussion beyond the top 5 to the top 10 in a bid to also see emergent changes and trends as well any potential declines in usage.

#### 4. Results

In both cultures, there was more agreement with the words chosen to insult females (58 unique words in Norwegian and 81 unique words in British English) than males (89 different words in Norwegian and 118 different words in British English). This is consistent with the suggestion that males and females are treated differently when it comes to what is considered to be abusive (Norri 2000; Kremin, 2017; Stapleton, 2003; section 5.5) and perhaps also points to the idea that women are more delicate/need protection, whereas men are more thick skinned requiring more unique and stronger insults to gain the intended effect, a somewhat surprising result given

moves towards gender equality in both cultures, and across the globe. Sinar (2015) suggested that levels of perceived offensiveness were behind the need for ToA towards males to be more frequently intensified than ToA towards females.

In both cases there were more words used in British English than in Norwegian, but the ratio of male words to female words is almost identical in both cultures (2 female words to 3 male words).

#### 4.1. Britain

The ten most frequent words towards males and females in Britain are given in Table 3. As these are the most frequently self-reported terms, they are the ones which Norwegians are most likely to be exposed to, and are therefore the ones most likely to have an effect on Norwegian ToA (see also discussion in Zenner, Ruetten & Devriendt 2017).

Males	Frequency	Females	Frequency
Cunt	30	Bitch	49
Twat	28	Slag	31
Cock	20	Cow	28
Motherfucker	18	Whore	26
Bastard	18	Slut	25
Bitch	17	Ho	22
Arsehole	17	Tart	20
Prick	15	Stupid <sup>6</sup>	15
Dick	15	Minger	15
Wanker	14	Hag	14

Table 3: Top ten terms of abuse towards males and females in Britain (shaded words are not found in the top5 for van Oudenhoven et al (2008) or Sinar (2015)).

These results suggest the continuation and strengthening of the most frequent ToA established in 2008 and 2015. ToA towards males continue to be dominated by the male and female genitals (*cunt*, *twat*, *cock*, *prick* and *dick*). *Motherfucker*, *bastard* and *bitch* are all new to the popular ToA towards men, and according to the OED (2022) they are all used to reference undesirable behaviour (despite being from different semantic fields). *Wanker* and *arsehole* are similarly used to describe undesirable behaviours.

*Bitch* continues to dominate the ToA towards females, with almost double the frequency of the next strongest results for either ToA towards males or females, and half of all participants recording the term (49%). Different meanings of *bitch* found in the OED (2022) cover the other two predominant themes: animals and appearance (seen also with *cow*) and sexual promiscuity (seen also with *slag*, *whore*, *slut*, *ho* and *tart*). The sexual promiscuity reading of *bitch* is not usually seen in references towards males, suggesting a desexualisation of the term. *Hag* and *minger* are two of the new core ToA used towards females, both pointing to age and

<sup>6</sup> *Stupid* is different to most of the other words in that it is most often used as a modifier rather than the nominal. The recorded use is as a nominal found in informal English: *You are stupid*. There is no doubt that *stupid* is often used as a modifier in insults: *stupid cow*, *stupid bitch*, *stupid bastard*, *stupid prick* etc.

unattractiveness, with *stupid* taking the last slot, and maintaining a reference to mental capabilities previously recorded with *idiot*.

#### 4.2. Norway

The ten most frequent words towards males and females are provided in Table 4:

Males		Females	
Kuk ‘cock’	36	Kjerring ‘hag/bitch’	39
Hastkuk ‘horse’s cock’	25	Hore ‘whore’	31
Fitte ‘cunt’	24	Fitte ‘cunt’	31
Idiot ‘idiot’	22	Ku ‘cow’	26
Hore ‘whore’	22	Heks ‘witch’	25
Drittsekk ‘shitbag’	22	Ludder ‘slut’	22
Homo ‘homosexual’	20	Hoe ‘ho/whore’	20
Bitch ‘bitch’	20	Lesbe ‘lesbian’	18
Jaevil ‘Devil’	16	Bitch ‘bitch’	18
=Rasshøl ‘arsehole/asshole’	15	Megge ‘bitch’	17
=Mannehore ‘male whore’	15		

Table 4: Top ten terms of abuse towards males and females in Norway (shaded words are not found in the top5 for van Oudenhoven et al (2008) or Sinar (2015)).

For ToA towards men the religious term *jaevil* ‘devil’ falls outside the top 5 suggesting it is following the decline observed in ToA towards females in Sinar (2015).<sup>7</sup> There is a continuation of the use of the male genitalia (*kukk* ‘cock’), which is strengthened by *hastkuk* ‘horse cock’ in second place. This relates to the size of the cock, and apparently is a term which originated in northern Norway – the swearing ‘capital’ of Norway - as a mild and frequently used ToA. *Fitte* ‘cunt’ is recorded in 3<sup>rd</sup> place, providing evidence of new popular use of female genitalia.<sup>8</sup> Other new ToA towards males are *hore/mannehore* and *bitch* - both of which are used towards females - *homo* and *rasshøl*.

*Kjerring* dominates the ToA towards women as it did in Sinar (2015). The popularity of *kjerring* as a ToA is increased by its use in compounds amounting to an additional 38 examples: *drittkjerring* ‘shit hag’ (4), *horekjerring* ‘whore hag’ (8), and *fittekjerring* ‘cunt hag’ (16) and *fettkjerring* ‘fat hag’ (10). This is a relatively new ToA in some areas of Norway, where it retains its original meaning as a term of endearment. Etymologically the word derives from

<sup>7</sup> Whilst terms about the devil such as *jaevil*, *satan* and *faen*, and relating to hell such as *helvete*, are well attested across the Nordic region (Ljung 2011; Coats 2021), frequency of use varies depending on the pragmatic function. It appears that these terms are mostly avoided as terms of abuse, and used instead for emphasis or to express emotion not directed towards others.

<sup>8</sup> *Fitte* ‘cunt’ is popular in a number of compound words: *fitteTryne* ‘cunt face/fuckface’ (12), *fittefaen* ‘cunt devil’ (4), *fitteslikker* ‘cunt licker’ (2 are recorded towards men and *fitteTryne* ‘cunt face/fuckface’ (16), *fittekjerring* ‘cunt hag, cunt bitch’ (16), *fittefaen* ‘cunt devil’ (12) and *fittesatan* ‘cunt satan’ (2) are used towards women. Compounds point to a stronger use towards women than men contra the findings in Britain where there is a stronger use towards males than females.

*karl* ‘man’ and meant ‘married woman’ (Bokmålsordboka, 2022; Nynorskordboka, 2022). In rural contexts and in particular Norwegian dialects, the expression *kjerring* still has a favourable connotation (Klepp & Storm-Mathisen, 2005: 340), but for most it appears to have undergone semantic pejoration.

Whilst *bitch* has seemingly dropped in popularity, it is supported by *megge*, also often translated as *bitch*, but with a lack sexual connotations (Bokmålsordboka, 2022; NAOB, 2022; Nynorskordboka, 2022) and other words which do suggest sexual promiscuity: *whore*, *ho*, and *ludder*. *Fitte* ‘cunt’ remains as in Sinar (2015), with new words *ku* and *lesbe* completing the core terms.

Table 4 shows that in Norway terms relating to sexuality, *homo* and *lesbe*, are popularly used as ToA which is not a theme shown in Table 3 for British English. Consideration of ToA and themes found outside the top ten show that this is a recurrent theme in the British data but that there is less consensus with word choice. There are 19 different recorded terms for males which directly reference sexuality and several others which list homosexuality amongst other definitions (cf. *cock*, *dick*), including: *Homo* (7), *queer* (6), *faggot* (5), *poofter* (4) *gayboy/gayboi* (3), *gay* (3), and *bender* (3). Recorded terms for females show less diversity with only 9 different terms and a lower total frequency: including *lesbian* (10), *lezza* (6), *dyke* (5), and *carpetmuncher* (3). Dictionaries of terms relating to the LGBTQ+ suggest that this is a pattern replicated across cultures where there are fewer terms to describe lesbianism, and more to describe being gay (see Moscas de Colores, 2022). This might be in part because male terms are often used as the ‘neutral term’ for all genders (cf. *gay*) but it might also be due to the ways in which western cultures view sexuality and sexual behaviours (see section 5.5).

#### 4.3. Overview of the results

These findings suggest that Norway and Britain continue to make use of the themes of sexual organs, sexual behaviour and sexuality, animals, appearance and behaviour, intellectual capabilities and, in the case of Norway, religion, but they do so differently depending on whether the target is male or female. Overall, it appears that the core set of abuse terms is changing more dramatically in Norway than it is in Britain, most notably with a decline in the use of religious terms and conversely a rise in the use of body parts and, to a lesser extent, an increase in the use of terms relating to sexuality which is also found in Britain. In both cultures whilst there appears to be ongoing change in the set of abuse terms used towards women, there appears to be more stability in the terms used towards men. This suggests that women might be the innovators or that values and beliefs regarding woman have changed more in the last 15 years than with men.

### 5. Discussion

Building on Sinar (2015), in this section I argue that the results from section 4 provide evidence for English influence on Norwegian ToA in a number of ways:

- 1) Declining use of terms relating to religion and an increased use of body parts, mirroring English patterns in a form of indirect borrowing (section 5.1)
- 2) Support for and from cognate forms, with possible extensions of meanings, leading to increased use of certain ToA (section 5.2)
- 3) Limited evidence of direct borrowing and translation loans can be found in the extended data for less frequently used terms (section 5.3)

These points are summarised in section 5.4.



The results also suggest that there are some interesting differences in ToA in the two cultures which relate to attitudes, views and values around gender and sexuality. These are briefly explored in section 5.5.

### 5.1. Declining use of religion and increased use of sexual organs.

Van Oudenhoven et al (2008) suggested that religious swearing was found in Norway due to its relative isolation. Today Norway is not as isolated as it once was due to globalisation and also the global spread and influence of English. As English does not make use of religious terms in its core set of ToA, we might expect a decline in such terms in Norway, coupled with a rise in themes which English does use. This appears to be the case. Religious themes are outside the top 10 for females and there is evidence of decline towards males in Norway. Conversely there is a rise in the use of ToA using both male and female sexual organs towards males and a rise in ToA relating to sexual promiscuity towards women in Norway which matches British use. The rise in the use of *fitte* ‘cunt’ towards women in Norway, however, is seemingly the opposite to the case in Britain, where *cunt/twat* appears to be in decline, becoming a term used more towards males than females. The Norwegian use of *fitte* ‘cunt’ might therefore be based on earlier British use, or more likely US English usage where *cunt* is more often used towards a woman.

Religious terms such as *jaevel*, *satan* and *faen*, and those relating to hell such as *helvete*, were shown by Coats (2021) to still be prevalent in broader Norwegian swearing, with *faen* the most frequently used swearword in his corpus. However, Coats (2021) does not consider the pragmatic function. It appears that the devil is typically used for venting emotion *Faen!* or intensification *jaevla ku* (similar to *fuck!* or *fucking cow*) and not targeted abuse/insult (see also Ljung 2011: ch 6; Sinar, 2015). It appears that the religious theme is not declining more generally within Norwegian swearing, but within this subset of swearing for a specific purpose.

### 5.2. Cognate forms

English and Norwegian are both Germanic languages, and as such they share a number of similarities including cognate words which both potentially make borrowing more straightforward, but which also complicates the picture as subtle differences in meaning between cognates can sometimes be difficult to establish or trace. This section briefly looks at the cognate forms found in tables 3 and 4 above.

*Whore* and *hore/hora* are common Germanic stock with the meaning ‘prostitute’. Sexual promiscuity appears to be a major theme in both cultures, particularly towards women. The popularity of *whore* and related *ho* in English is likely to have reinforced the use of *hore/hora* in Norway.

*Cow* and *ku* are also cognate forms, originally relating to a female bovine. The apparent rise of *ku* as a general ToA indicating a hostile personality may be a fairly recent transfer from English as there is no evidence of this meaning in the Norwegian dictionaries (Bokmålsordboka, 2022; NAOB, 2022; Nynorskordboka, 2022). There is earlier evidence of *ku* indicating a lack of intelligence or elegance or of general clumsiness, but the apparent rise in frequency and use suggests strengthening (Kjetil Myskja, Personal Communication).

*Idiot* exists in both languages both meaning a person of low intelligence. The etymological information in the OED (2022) suggests that there may have been some influence of English for the sense “stupid, intellectually subnormal person” in both German and Swedish in the 16<sup>th</sup>

or 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is interesting to note the decline of the theme of mental capability in English towards males and its decline in Norwegian towards females. One explanation for the decline of overt ToA relating to mental capabilities towards males might be that whilst many of the core terms used towards men come from different semantic fields, they are used to comment on the target's mental capabilities. Searches within the OED (2022) for the top ten words reveal "stupid" as part of definitions for *twat*, *wanker*, *cock*, *arsehole*, *prick*, *dick* when used as a term of abuse. In comparison for the top ten words towards females, only the word *stupid* includes reference to intelligence (or lack of it) in the definitions provided by OED (2022). The Norwegian decline may again show English influence: whilst some direct references to mental capabilities remain in English, more commonly terms relate to sexual promiscuity and it is this latter pattern which is being emulated.

Of the possible cognate forms, *bitch* is the most popular/frequently used and the most complicated. Nowadays *bitch* has many meanings and it is clear that it has undergone a number of significant changes in its history (Gross 1994; Lee 1998; Kleinman, Ezzell and Corey Frost 2009; Vinter 2017; Vartinnen, 2013). The etymology of *bitch* is unclear, but cognates do exist in the Nordic languages as shown in the OED (2022):

**Etymology:** Cognate with Old Icelandic *bikkja*, Faroese *bikkja*, Old Swedish *bikia* (Swedish (regional) *bicka*, *bickja*), Old Danish *bikke*, all in the sense 'bitch'; of unknown origin.

Compare BICK *n.*

It has variously been suggested that the word is cognate with Old Icelandic *-baka* (e.g. in *greybaka* bitch: see GREYBITCH *n.* and GREYHOUND *n.*), or with Middle High German *bicken* pick, peck (see BEAK *v.*), or with Sanskrit *bhaga* female genitals, but none of these is likely.

The word *bikkje* is used in Norway but according to the dictionaries only with the original meaning of 'a female dog' (Bokmålsordboka, 2022; NAOB, 2022; Nynorskordboka, 2022). However, Coats (2021) records *bikkje* as 'dog/bitch' as the 19<sup>th</sup> most common swearword, with no reference to *bitch* elsewhere. A similar term is not recorded in his data for the other Nordic countries. *Bitch* in the sense of sexually promiscuous female is usually translated as *tispe*, which is recorded 14 times in my data.

Recently there has been a huge increase in the use of the term *bitch* in popular culture (see Wang et al 2014; Gauthier & Guille 2017: 143; Vinter 2017: 31). Ngram searches for British English (Figure 1) suggest that this might now be declining, possibly as people try to reclaim the term or avoid it because of its popularity.

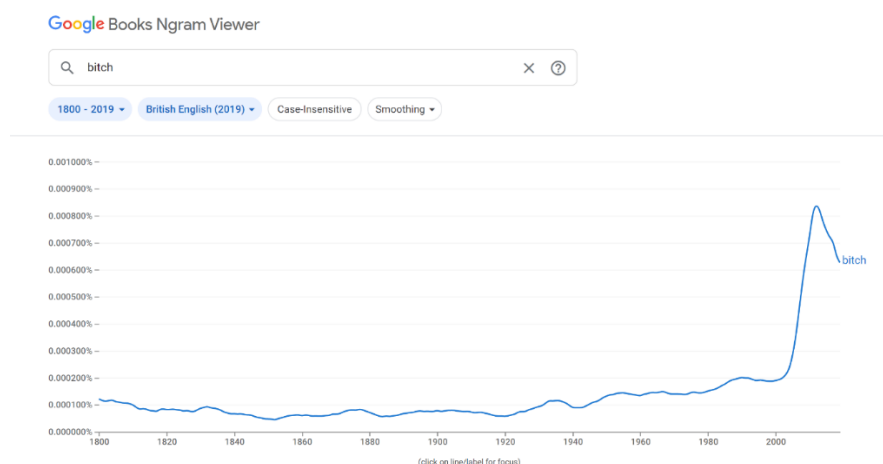


Figure 1: N-gram search for the term *bitch* in British English.

Traditionally *bitch* was a ToA was used towards women. Van Oudenhoven et al (2008) and Sinar (2015) both confirmed this for Norway and Britain. Increasingly *bitch* also seems to be being used towards men in both cultures, although a strong statistical preference towards women is retained in both cultures. This is supported by definitions of *bitch* on Urban Dictionary (2022) where in 100 randomly viewed definitions, 83% specifically referenced women, 12% only referenced males, and 5% assumed gender neutrality. Interestingly, whilst in my data *bitch* remains popular in Norway, it was no longer the most popular term due in part to the rise of *kjerring* as a ToA. The newer and latest definition of *kjerring* as bitch might point to efforts to use a Norwegian term in a similar way to *bitch*, but to avoid a term with strong English associations.

### 5.3. Borrowings & Translation loans

Occasional English words/spellings were found in my data, but these were rare and amount to just 18 examples in total: *cunt* (4), *fuckface* (4), *twat* (3), *motherfucker* (3), *slag* (2), *tart* (1) and *cock* (1). This suggests that whilst the situation is conducive to influence that it is about adaptation of Norwegian rather than killing Norwegian or trying to be English.

Tryti (2008) lists *moraknuller* as a translation loan from English ‘motherfucker’. There are several competitors for the spelling in my data, *morraknuller*, *morapuler*, *mammapuler*, with *morapuler* most common (see also discussion in Drange et al., 2014: 35, 40). Ljung (2011) and Drange et al (2014) provide evidence that the mother theme has traditionally not been a significant part of ToA in the Nordic countries, but that under influence of immigration and language contact its frequency of use has started to develop and increase.<sup>9</sup> This appears to be confirmed by my data.

### 5.4. Summary of possible English influences

Studies of multilinguals have shown that typically people prefer to swear in their L1, which they also find more offensive (Dewaele, 2010). Isolated instances of English words, increased and extended uses of cognate forms, the use of translation loans such as *moraknuller* ‘motherfucker’, and a move towards similar patterns of abuse (using body parts towards males, sexual promiscuity towards females), point to an influence of English in the development of Norwegian abuse terms. It is possible that English swearwords are used more frequently in Norway because they are less offensive to Norwegians (being from another language) and hence perhaps in these contexts they are becoming de-profanitised. Future research into the offensiveness of different ToA might help to establish whether or not this is the case.

### 5.5. Gender and Sexuality

Despite progress in Norway, Britain and across the globe with respect to the equality, diversity and inclusion, ToA continue to reveal inequalities, particularly with respect to gender and sexuality.<sup>10</sup> Gender differences in both countries appear to be governed by ‘traditional views’ of masculinity and femininity (Hughes, 1991; Kremin, 2017). Historically both cultures have

<sup>9</sup> Note that the mother theme might also be seen with *megge* ‘bitch’, originally from mother and daughter (Bokmålsordboka, 2022; NAOB, 2022; Nynorskordboka, 2022)

<sup>10</sup> Racial slurs were almost absent from my data with 2 instances of *nigger* recorded towards males in Norway and none towards women or in any of British data. Despite the anonymity of the survey, it is likely that participants were unwilling to admit that they use such terms or that they are considered too offensive and hence are avoided.

been patriarchal with hegemonic heterosexual masculinity compared against femininity and homosexuality. Masculinity is associated with strength, courage, leadership and assertiveness, whereas femininity is associated with gentleness, empathy and humility. Homosexuality is typically seen as opposite: gay males are feminine and gay females are masculine (often described as butch). Hence, insults towards males make use of terms which suggest undesirable behaviour, mental incapability (akin to weakness and inability to lead) and which suggest un-masculine traits. This explains why a number of popular ToA used towards women i.e. *bitch* and *whore/hore/hora* or about women i.e. *cunt/fitte/twat* are increasingly being used towards men in both cultures: the suggestion is that they are feminine, or not masculine. Equally when a heterosexual male is called a *homo* (7<sup>th</sup> most popular towards males in Norway, Table 4) this is not really about their sexuality but rather that they do not meet the traditional masculine roles.

ToA suggest that despite being sexualised, women should not be sexual beings; there is an issue here of agency/power. They should be attractive (hence ToA which suggest the opposite: *hag, witch, cow/ku*) and they should not behave ‘inappropriately’ particularly around sexual relations. For women in both cultures this is firstly based around the idea of sexual promiscuity (*whore/hore/hora, slag, bitch* etc.) and secondly around the idea of lesbianism (=not wanting a man/being masculine). It is interesting to note that many of the terms based around sexual promiscuity when used towards women i.e. *whore/hore/hora, slag, bitch* are desexualised when used towards men (see OED, 2022). It is also interesting to note that some of the ToA used towards men can be used positively: *jaevel, bastard, motherfucker*, but with, possibly the exception of *bitch*, there are no such terms on the female side.

That the female ToA are the ones most prone to change and toward less diversity (fewer unique terms and stronger responses to the key terms) is interesting. Coats (2021) shows in his corpus that women appear to be more open to use of bad language from other and new semantic fields, where men stick to more traditional and well-trodden paths. This suggests that women are the linguistic innovators in ToA.

## 6. Conclusion

Terms of abuse in Norway appear to be converging towards English usage due to globalisation and increased contact with and the popularity of English, particularly in the media. Whilst historically Norwegian terms of abuse have been dominated by religious themes, this study suggests a decline in their use coupled with an increase in using male and female body parts towards men, and terms relating to sexual behaviour for women. This parallels the patterns found in British terms of abuse and represents indirect borrowing.

Both cultures show a difference in abuse terms towards men and women, which seemingly reflect ‘traditional views’ of masculinity and femininity, where women are sexualised but not sexual and men should not be feminine or homosexual. Future research into lesser used terms of abuse and the offensiveness ratings of different ToA and actual use are likely to add further nuance to these initial observations.

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