

The grammatical versatility of taboo terms

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Taboo terms in certain English expressions and constructions are intensifiers, which have spread as a unit over time to various syntactic positions (Hoeksema & Napoli 2008). Here we look at the pragmatic coherence that has allowed such semantically disparate terms to be grammaticalized as a unit. We examine language using taboo terms in English with comparisons to Dutch, Italian, and other languages. The terms studied here regard religion, disease, sex, and bodily excretions. They exhibit common characteristics with cross-linguistic variation.

1. Introduction

Strong language originating from taboo expressions is interesting for a variety of reasons. It flavors our speech, it shows great variation among social groups and especially social settings, and it changes all the time. While in the past, lexicographers, sociolinguists, folklorists, anthropologists and historical linguists have occasionally shown an interest in the topic (cf. e.g. Pott 1833; de Jager 1858; de Baere 1940; Cameron 1969; Ljung 1983; Enright 1985; Andersson & Trudgill 1990; Allan & Burridge 1991, 2006; Dundes 2002; Wajnryb 2005; and much of the contents of the journal *Maledicta*), in general taboo expressions are very much understudied in contemporary linguistics. Two notable exceptions are Andersson & Trudgill (1992) and McEnery (2006), both of which focus on public attitudes and perceptions of swearing and swearers, not delving into the question of what these taboo terms and their usage and distribution can tell us about linguistic theory. Even Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan (1999), which is a strongly usage-based grammar and gives special attention to lexical and syntactic patterning for four representative registers of conversation for both British and American English, has virtually nothing to say about the range of syntactic constructions that taboo terms occur in.

Relatively recently, however, a handful of theoretically-inclined linguists have begun to pay attention to this matter (e.g. Brame 1978; Pesetsky 1987; Postma

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1995, 2001; Horn 2001; Hoeksema 2001a, 2002; den Dikken & Giannakidou 2002; Merchant 2002, 2006; Postal 2004; Huang & Ochi 2004; Sprouse 2005). We think it is only apt that they should do so, for the data are not just colorful, but also quite instructive on a number of points. Indeed, Hoeksema & Napoli (2008) argue that these terms have been grammaticalized to the status of intensifiers which spread in English from *wh*-constructions (*What the hell are we talking about anyway?*) to two other distinct constructions (*This whole idea confuses the hell out of me/ Well, shut the fuck up and keep reading*) and, finally, to degree intensifier constructions (*You are in way the fuck over your head already*).

The main goal of this paper is to account for the patterns of usage presented here and demonstrate the theoretical import of that account.

In Section 2 we discuss our choice of data. Taboo terms come from a number of sources and are used in a wide variety of domains. In Section 3 we briefly list the main sources — establishing that taboo terms are semantically disparate. In Section 4, we outline some representative ways in which taboo terms are used in language, demonstrating both that they are pragmatically coherent as a group and that they occur in a wide range of syntactic constructions. In doing so, we point out cross-linguistic variation in the use of taboo terms, looking at English, Italian, and, particularly, Dutch. Given the wide range of taboos and taboo terms, it should come as no surprise that there is considerable cross-linguistic variation in the choice of particular taboo terms for particular grammatical purposes.

Finally, we argue that the pragmatic coherence of this semantically disparate set of lexical items accounts for their common syntactic collocations. That the process of grammaticalization which turns these taboo terms into intensifiers is sensitive to pragmatics means that theories of grammar must include the concept of pragmatic coherence.

2. A note on our data

Certainly a study of taboo terms could be done by looking at a particular fixed corpus, with statistical analysis of the frequency of usage of whatever syntactic constructions might be of interest. In Hoeksema and Napoli (2008) we do exactly this for two taboo constructions in English. In the present work, however, we proceed by tapping into native speakers' intuitions almost exclusively. There are two reasons for this. First, fixed typical corpora (such as books, magazines, newspapers) are often lacking in taboo terms and even when they do contain them, the range of both lexical items and syntactic constructions those lexical items occur in is more limited than the range we easily thought of ourselves. Even the Switchboard corpus (compiled and distributed for free by the Linguistic Data Consor-

tium at the University of Pennsylvania), which contains approximately 2.4 million words of telephone conversation in American English, does not exhibit a range of patterns comparable to what we offer here. Second, our aim is not to contrast particular terms or particular constructions that those terms occur in with respect to frequency (or any other factor), but, rather, to simply give an idea of the range of terms that occur, the range of constructions they occur in, and to offer an account of why that range of terms has spread as a group to varying syntactic constructions.

However, at times we make claims about the comparative frequency of various terms. In support of those claims, we access the Internet — a very un-fixed corpus — merely googling the terms and reporting the number of hits that come up. For a written source, the Internet contains many examples of informal language and, thus, turns out to offer a large and varied corpus of taboo terms. The Internet changes from moment to moment, and we suspect that the number of taboo terms in usage on the Internet will remain abundant. Accordingly, we do not give citations for the examples we pull from the Internet. A warning is in order here, however: We offer Internet data as suggestive (perhaps strongly) of tendencies, not as definitive statistical evidence, since a considerable number of the hits are undoubtedly irrelevant, while many others are repeats of a single token.

3. Taboos and taboo terms

Some lexical items are taboo terms in all their uses, a canonical example being the root *fuck*. So both the literal sense of 'fornicate' and the etiolated senses in usages such as *He's fucked up* and *What a fucking mess!* are taboo. Physicians, for example, are not likely to ask a post-operative prostate-cancer patient, "How's fucking going?" but, instead, "How's intercourse going?" And preachers might condemn premarital and extramarital sex with the word *fornication*, but not with the word *fucking*.

Other lexical items are taboo only in non-literal usages. In fact, taboo terms such as *bloody* in *bloody idiot*, or *damned* in (1a), quickly lose their meaning (cf. Postma 1995, who introduced the term *zero semantics* for this phenomenon). It is striking how (1a) and (1b) mean very much the same thing (although they vary somewhat in social acceptability), in spite of the fact that *damned* and *blessèd* are semantic antonyms:

- (1) a. Fred did not say a damned word all evening.
- b. Fred did not say a blessèd word all evening.

(Compare also to French *sacré*, conventionalized in two opposed senses, 'blessed' and 'cursed.') As we will see below, many more lexical items are taboo terms only in their etiolated usages, such as Dutch *kanker* 'cancer,' being taboo only when used as a swear word.

In this section we look at words that can be used as taboo terms, regardless of whether or not they are always considered taboo. In this way, we are able to identify many taboo terms which deal with several different topics.

3.1 The four big topics: Religion, health, sex, bodily excretions

Many taboo terms, especially older ones, stem from religious and folk beliefs, such as terms having to do with the devil, hell, God, Jesus Christ, saints, heaven, salvation and damnation. Religion-based profanities can be exceptionally strong among believers, as with the example in Quebecois French of *sacré calice* 'sacred chalice,' which often strikes outsiders as peculiar precisely because of the contrast with their own cursing practices involving sex or scatology (topics we turn to below). From folk beliefs come terms for thunder and lightning (compare e.g. the German exclamation *Donnerwetter* 'thunder weather'). Due to the strong nature of the taboo on swearing, many terms come with euphemistic variants, e.g. the French exclamation *parbleu* 'by blue' is euphemistic for *pardieu* 'by God,' etc. Examples of this kind abound (De Baere 1940; Allan and Burridge 1991, 2006; among others).

Life, death, and diseases form another source of taboos as well as taboo terms (as in the child's insult *You've got cooties*). As we will see, English uses this group of taboo-terms less extensively than the others.

Sex, reproductive organs, bodily functions, and sexual acts provide strong linguistic taboos, even today, in spite of the sexual revolution of the 1960's and 1970's. Much of what Freud (cf. e.g. Freud 1913) wrote about the topic toward the end of the Victorian era is still true today, not just on American TV-networks, where common words such as *fuck* are systematically bleeped out, or in *The New York Times*, where it is never printed, but also in the daily conversation of many people, who would not dream of discussing their sex life with strangers. Indeed, the inclusion of these terms on American cable TV and in publications such as *The New Yorker* underscores their absence in the other venues. The use of euphemisms or indirect references such as *the f-word* or the printed variant *f*ck* also clearly brings out the continued taboo status of much of our sexual terminology. Homosexuality is likewise still a taboo, and several taboo terms stem from it; witness the homophobic *fag*, which has taboo force in contrast to the more generic and less virulent insult *pervert*. Masturbation has also been the basis for insults, such as British *wanker* and American *jerk-off*. Taboo terms related to bestiality also arise, consider British English *sheep-shagger* or Dutch *geitenneuker* 'goat-fucker.' Fornication with some-

one you're not married to is a (past?) taboo, with swear words that linger related to it, such as *bastard*. In China you can insult someone by calling him the "son of a turtle", which means his mother had him with someone other than her husband. In Italy you can call someone a *pasquale*, which is equivalent to the hand gesture of a fist with the index and pinkie fingers extended, and means that the man you call that (or make that gesture at) is being cuckolded. Incest is another taboo that results in swear words, although we came across only one that is descriptively accurate: *motherfucker*. Body parts related to sexuality are frequently used as taboo terms alone or with other elements (as in the Italian compound *rompicoglioni* 'ball breaker').

Finally, bodily excretions (e.g. shit, piss, farts, vomit, sperm, snot and (menstrual) blood) constitute powerful taboo topics, particularly for children, and provide us with an additional set of taboo terms to choose from, which can be exploited in somewhat counter-culture, youth-oriented venues, such as TV shows like *Beavis & Butthead* or *South Park*. (And see Horn (2004) for an exposition of the bodily fluid imagery behind the expression *spitting image*.)

To what extent the last three sets of taboos — those dealing with death and illness, with sexual behavior, and with bodily excretions — are to be viewed as entirely separate from the initial religious and folk belief group is not clear to us. There are obvious relations between hell, heaven and death, for instance, and matters of life and death are strongly connected with religious beliefs. Indeed, in many religions we find the ancient (and sometimes persistent) idea that illness is caused by an evil spirit (or devil) or angry god. Ancient religions often had healing rituals in which demonic supernatural forces were banished from the body, including religious practices in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China, Japan (Biggs 1995; Silverberg 1967). Such rituals were carried on side-by-side with more scientific medical practices (Majno 1975). Often we find that the sick person is taken to be at fault; that is, illness was due to the victim having done something wrong and, thereby, inviting evil spirits to take up residence within the body — the illness being the result of that residence. In this way, then, we can see an insult based on saying someone has an illness or should die as being an accusation that they are a sinner or somehow religiously deviant. Ancient Judaism inherited this belief, and it wasn't until the Talmud that we find the idea that illness wasn't "necessarily a result of sinfulness" (Freeman & Abrams 1999: xxiv). Likewise, early Christianity embraced exorcism as a means of healing a sinner (and Catholicism maintains the efficacy of the practice today).

It's conceivable that even taboo terms based on sexual behavior or bodily excretions may have their roots in religion, though speakers today may be completely unaware of this and feel no religious twinges when they use these terms (as must be the case with secular speakers). Many religions have/had rules about

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3.2 Other topics

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preparation of food, sexual continence, bathing. These were religious rituals with (perhaps unintentional) health consequences: disease from rotten food was avoided; the gene pool was protected; good hygiene was insured. The idea was that you were not a good believer or practitioner of the religion if you didn't observe these rituals. In fact, the twelfth century Maimonides argued that poor hygiene led to illness (Freeman & Abrams 1999: xxv), so at that point anyone who considered illness to be caused by evil spirits could view being physically unclean as a spiritually risky act, perhaps even heretical — daring the evil spirits. In other words, cleanliness was next to godliness. So eating wrong or being sexually active (in particular ways) or being dirty — all were insults meaning you were a bad Jew (or whatever other religion you were breaking the rules of).

3.2 Other topics that offer the potential of taboo terms

Certainly some taboo topics do not appear to have anything whatsoever to do with religion, neither in their origins nor in the present. Generally, however, these other topics do not seem to have been used in strong language of the type considered here. Nevertheless, some of these other topics are strictly taboo and can incite strong emotional reactions.

The most immediate potential set of taboo terms of this type is epithets that put down racial, ethnic, and religious groups (*chink, nigger, wop, dago, mick, spic, kike, yid*, and on and on — and note that here we are distinguishing between being a member of a religious group from being a poor practitioner of a religion, which was discussed earlier). These have been a fertile source of extremely strong taboo terms in the past, and are still sometimes used today in name-calling, although now for most speakers these epithets are taken to mark the user as unenlightened, unintelligent, and/or socially or emotionally aberrant; rather than causing the target to feel insult, they might elicit disgust or pity.

Likewise, insults based on physical attributes (*cripple, lame, dwarf, fatty*) used to be common and strong, but are definitely waning (although they are more common when part of larger taboo-terms: *lame ass, fat ass*). And insults about ones lack of sexual activity or attractiveness (*impotent, ice queen, ugly thing*) can be extremely hurtful, but they are not considered taboo in the sense that we are dealing with in this paper unless they incorporate a stronger taboo term (*limp dick, cold bitch*).

Freud compared money as a topic of conversation to feces, and there are, indeed, taboos both in America and in Europe on discussing certain aspects of money. It is considered rude to ask pointblank how much money someone makes. Some people would rather discuss their sexual history than their finances. So the social taboo is there — but it has not realized itself in a linguistic taboo, the way damnation, sex, disease and bodily functions have. Thus while we can insult

people by calling them spendthrifts or misers, we are not using taboo terms to do it. Monetary terms certainly appear in emphatic language (e.g. *I'm not giving a red cent to the Salvation Army*), yet the use of these terms is never rude or taboo-like in any way.

Extreme political or social positions can be taboo among certain people, as well, and can give rise to epithets, such as the general *bigot* or *zealot*, and the more specific *Nazi*, *fascist*, *male chauvinist pig*, *redneck*, *cracker*, as well as *liberal*, *feminist*, *ivy-league elitist*, *bleeding-heart*, *tree-hugger* — it all depends on the speaker's point of view. Yet, again, these terms don't have the weight of a linguistic taboo.

We also can call people animals in some of the same kinds of situations in which we employ taboo terms (*You {vulture/turkey/weasel/pig/cow/snake}!*), but few of these terms have the force of a taboo term in our own experience (one exception being (*jack*)*ass* and a couple involving dogs: *bitch*, *cur*). We note, however, that context can make an ordinary term gain the strength of a curse or obscenity, thus the term *pig* for a policeman had great emotional impact in the anti-Viet Nam war protests of the 1960's and early 70's. In fact, porcine curses are strong in Italian even today (*porca Madonna!* 'piggy madonna' with the force 'damn it all', *porca puttana* 'piggy whore' with the force of 'damned whore'). Of course, we note that the taboo of eating pork among Jews and Muslims might offer a religious source for why these particular animal insults can carry more force. (And, as a side-note, we offer the observation that Muslims are prohibited from owning dogs by the Qu'ran on the grounds that they are unclean. So perhaps the strength of dog insults is based in religion.)

In the past name calling with respect to the infraction of some social rule was considered an extreme insult by some (*liar*); not so true today. Closely related was calling a person disloyal or a traitor, which can still be quite a strong declaration in some circles today (*fink*), particularly in Italy (*carogna* 'fink', but literally 'carrion/rotting meat' — which brings us back to our earlier discussion of health, cleanliness, and religion). Likewise, impugning someone's social class was a common and virulent insult in the past, as was disparaging one's neatness (*slob* — and, of course, this brings us back to our earlier discussion of bodily effluents, cleanliness, and religion) or intelligence (*stooge*, *mook* — although among children taunts of *idiot*, *moron*, *stupid head*, and the like are strong, as are adult taunts that include other taboo terms, such as *shit for brains*, *douche brain*), but no longer, although in the south of Italy the insult *cafone* 'bumpkin' can be taken as a severe put down which would not be used in polite company, and throughout Italy insults about intelligence are strong (*cretino* 'cretin', *imbecile* 'imbecile', *idiota* 'idiot'). In the past impugning someone's gratefulness (*ingrate*) or their mental health (*crazy*, *neurotic*) were much more forceful insults than they are today.

For some, name calling is not considered a taboo behavior but which the speaker is against an adult having a name calling between people. The first indicates an adult v. adult, the second indicates an adult v. child (typically male), the third indicates a child v. child. The distinction. Rather, the speaker might say. The speaker's sickness. In support of this, we then googled again pairs of terms are in Table 1.

Table 1. Occurrences on

	Pederasty
	230,000
+ medical	60,600
+ Catholic	61,000
+ criminal	56,800
Total	408,400

Clearly, *pedophilia* is a term more frequently than *pederasty* that *pedophilia* is the term for misbehavior and hence more frequently called than *pederasty*; a "You pedophile!" (with quotation marks). If the term is an ongoing bent toward reaching the level of taboo, pronounced [pede]), a cli-

Van Oudenhoven, Barelds, Hill, Mlacic, and function of second (including three that we assume "that terms of violations of important our study suggests that

For some, name calling with respect to crimes (*thief*) also used to be banned from polite contexts. Interesting in this regard are two terms which denote taboo behavior but which themselves are not taboo terms: with regard to the taboo against an adult having sex with a minor, we note that there is a difference in name calling between *pedophile* and *pederast*. While dictionaries will say that the first indicates an adult who is sexually attracted to prepubescent children and the second indicates an adult (typically male) who is sexually attracted to children (typically male), the native speakers we have asked are not always tuned into this distinction. Rather, they say that the first is something the police or the ordinary citizen might say. The second is said more by those who treat the behavior as a sickness. In support of this claim, on 25 June, 2007, we googled these two words, then googled again pairing each with *medical*, *Catholic*, and *criminal*. The results are in Table 1.

Table 1. Occurrences on 25 June, 2007 of *pederasty/pedophilia* in and out of context

	Pederasty	%	Pedophilia	%	total
	230,000	12	1,700,000	88	1,923,000
+ medical	60,600	85	10,700	15	71,300
+ Catholic	61,000	83	12,300	17	73,300
+ criminal	56,800	12	421,000	88	477,800
Total	408,400		2,144,000		

Clearly, *pedophilia* is the more common term, appearing more than five times more frequently than *pederasty*, and it pairs with contexts about crimes, whereas *pederasty* disproportionately pairs with medical and religious contexts. It appears that *pedophilia* is the term we (perhaps unconsciously) associate with volitional misbehavior and hence we expect that *pedophile* is more likely to be used in name calling than *pederast*; another google search on 25 June, 2007, finds 564 hits for "You pedophile!" (with quotation marks) versus 270 for "You pederast!" (with quotation marks). If the contrast in use of this pair is representative, it may reveal an ongoing bent toward seeing crime labels as strong insults. Still, they do not reach the level of taboo terms (contrast to the French homophobic slur PD (pronounced [pede]), a clipping from *pédéraste*).

Van Oudenhoven, de Raad, Askevis-Leherpeux, Boski, Brunborg, Carmona, Barelds, Hill, Mlacic, Motti, Rammstedt, Woods (2008) look at the content, form, and function of second-person insults (of the form "you are X") in eleven cultures (including three that we discuss here: the Netherlands, the USA, and Italy). They assume "that terms of abuse are effective as insults to the degree that they refer to violations of important general and normative values." If they are correct, then our study suggests that religion, health, sexuality, and bodily excretions trump all

other general and normative values in the three cultures we examine in this paper, with religion arguably holding top spot.

3.3 Semantic disparateness

The above discussion leads to a list of taboo terms that relate to several different topics, most notably religion, health, sexuality, and bodily excretions. But the terms themselves differ in their senses, even when they relate to the same topics. For example, the pairs *Jesus* and *hell* (religion), Dutch *kanker* ('cancer') and *klere* ('cholera') (health), *dick* and *boob* (sexuality), and *shit* and *blood* (bodily excretions), all have entirely separate senses. And across topics the words seem completely unrelated; consider the pairs *damn* and *fuck*, or *piss* and *whore*. Taboo terms are, without question, semantically disparate.

4. Linguistic exploitation of taboo terms

Taboo terms speckle language in many ways. We will discuss what we hope is a representative sampling, looking at typical speech acts employing taboo terms and at the range of grammatical status that taboo terms can have. We then focus on taboo terms used strictly to intensify, and we point out a few interesting distributional properties of taboo terms. We conclude what we hope will be obvious by that point: taboo terms occur in a wide range of constructions.

4.1 Speech acts

Many taboo terms can be grouped together pragmatically; they occur in certain types of rude or coarse speech acts, including exclamations, name calling, and maledictions.

4.1.1 Exclamations.

The best-known use of taboo terms is probably in exclamations, that is, cursing and swearing, where religion, sex, and bodily excretions are readily drawn upon in English, as in (2a-e), and the quasi-curses that stand for the real McCoy in (2f-h):

- (2) a. Damn! / Bloody hell! / Hell's bells!
- b. Jesus! / My Lord! / Oh my God! / Sweet mother of God!
- c. Jesus fucking Christ!
- d. Oh balls! / Fuck! / Fucking A! / Fuck it all!

- e. Shit! / Holy crap! / Oh
- f. Darn! / Dang! / Oh, h
- g. Gee whiz! / By golly!
- h. Fudge! / Shoot! / Oh

Among the many disguises are (*shit* > *shoot*), consonant change (*damn* > *darn*) (*God* > *golly*). We also find lexic (*Jove*, *Holy Moses* > *Holy cow*). In as a child used to be in a group sounds were there, in the right didn't make teachers or parents:

Dutch has a similar-looking does Italian and presumably usual religious, sexual and scat various, usually infectious, disea itself of disease terms in insults,

- (3) Kanker! / Tering! / Klere
'Cancer!' / 'Consumption'

4.1.2 Name calling

Religious, sexual, and scatolog other European languages:

- (4) a. You {devil/ evil witc
- b. You {cunt/ pussy/ di
- c. You {slut/ gutterslut
- d. You {shit/ turd/ piss
- e. You {asshole/ boob}
- f. You {asswipe/ doucl
- g. You {jerkoff/ assfue

Note that many of these can be someone gets a good grade on: *You motherfucker!* indicating h *stronzo* 'turd so hard it floats,' v to *beato te* '{blessed/ lucky}' you

In fact, we can employ tabc *schmuck/fuck*}, he couldn't help friendly usage; instead, some t

- e. Shit! / Holy crap! / Oh puke!
- f. Darn! / Dang! / Oh, heavens! / My word!
- g. Gee whiz! / By golly! / By Jove! / Holy cow! / Holy Moses!
- h. Fudge! / Shoot! / Oh rot!

Among the many disguises are phonological tamperings, such as vowel changes (*shit* > *shoot*), consonant changes (*fuck* > *fudge*), insertion of the polite "r" plus consonant change (*damn* > *darn*), addition of a diminutive plus consonant change (*God* > *golly*). We also find lexical substitutions based on another culture (*God* > *Jove*, *Holy Moses* > *Holy cow*). Individuals can get creative, too. One of the authors as a child used to be in a group of kids who would exclaim, "Fudgesickle!" All the sounds were there, in the right order, but with padding to allow a disguise that didn't make teachers or parents gasp.

Dutch has a similar-looking set of exclamations (Van Sterkenburg 2001), as does Italian and presumably most European languages, but in addition to the usual religious, sexual and scatological items, Dutch also makes use of names for various, usually infectious, diseases (among European languages, Polish also avails itself of disease terms in insults, see Van Oudenhoven et al. 2008):

- (3) Kanker! / Tering! / Klere!
'Cancer!' / 'Consumption!' / 'Cholera!'

4.1.2 Name calling

Religious, sexual, and scatological terms abound in English name calling, as in other European languages:

- (4) a. You {devil/ evil witch}
- b. You {cunt/ pussy/ dick/ prick/ dickweed/ peckerwood/ limp dick}
- c. You {slut/ gutterslut/ whore/ motherfucker}
- d. You {shit/ turd/ pisshead/ shit for brains/ fartface}
- e. You {asshole/ boob}.
- f. You {asswipe/ douchbag/ cumdumpster/ scumbag}
- g. You {jerkoff/ assfucker/ rug muncher}

Note that many of these can be used with a positive connotation. For example, if someone gets a good grade on a test and he didn't study at all for it, you might say *You motherfucker!* indicating how lucky the person is. The same is true for Italian *stronzo* 'turd so hard it floats', which, given appropriate context, can be equivalent to *beato te* '[blessed/ lucky] you.'

In fact, we can employ taboo terms to show sympathy, as in *The poor {bastard/ schmuck/fuck}, he couldn't help himself*. But not all such names lend themselves to friendly usage; instead, some taboo terms seem to be associated with voluntary

behavior that carries inalienable condemnation. So we don't say *the poor {asshole/prick/cunt/shithead}* in a compassionate way.

Further, English makes use of terms related to illnesses or bodily imperfections almost exclusively in name calling, as in examples like:

- (5) a. You pimple face! / You {dog/penis} breath! / You fat ass!
- b. You scrofulous idiot! / You scurvy turd! / You malignant bitch!
- c. You crab-infested cunt! / You syphilitic bore!

(Some speakers have told us they prefer to omit *you* on certain examples in (5).) An older example is *louse*, which no longer qualifies as a swear. Note also that *lousy* originally had the sense 'louse-infested,' but has evolved into a more general pejorative, milder even than *nasty*.

In (5) the illness word is typically coupled with a word that is already taboo; nevertheless, it appears that the illness word itself contributes to the taboo status of the insult. For example, the adjective *malignant* normally indicates a medical condition. But when it is paired with a disparaging lexical item, it takes on a taboo sense. On 5 July 2008 a quick Google search yielded *malignant* modifying taboo words with the following frequency: *bitch* (169), *bastard* (111), *cunt* (488), and *prick* (43). In contrast, *malignant* modified the mild, non-taboo word *jerk* only 36 times. (Interestingly, combinations with other non-taboo words were higher — such as *malignant dork* (76) and *malignant fool* (186). But the heavy majority of instances of the former turned out to be referring to the name of a Blog and of the latter, to a phrase in a quoted poem.)

We note that at least one recently introduced taboo term is not used in name calling to someone's face, but only behind one's back: *She's a fupa!* (A fupa is the fat upper pussy area.) Additionally, in communities with strong latino influence, as in the Miami area, we hear *(You) pubic hair!*, an exact translation from the Spanish *pendejo!* For a semantic and syntactic treatment of exclamations such as those in (4–5), see Potts & Roeper (2006). For an overview of their cultural import, see Van Oudenhoven et al. (2008).

4.1.3 Maledictions

Closely related to cursing, swearing and name calling are maledictions, which typically involve taboo terms. Often they take the form of imperatives, but third-person maledictions, such as those in (6b) (some of which are now archaic), also occur.

- (6) a. Go to hell! / Drop dead!
- b. The devil fetch that fellow! / A pox on you! / To hell with you!
- c. Go fuck yourself! / Get fucked! / Shove it up your ass!
- d. Suck a hairy rat's ass! / Suck a hairy moose cock!

- e. Ea
- f. Su

Here English nature.

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In Dutch, cluding some

- (7) Krijg 'Get {

Disease terms: lects and have (Dean 2004: 2

- (8) Che that ('May swallow

4.2 Grammatical

Taboo terms status. Some are pejorative force of a pe size the utter

4.2.1 Taboo

4.2.1.1 Pri non-literal, you fucked of strong, if loss of hope they pick u movie; a pr fucking fuc

- e. Eat shit, asshole! / Eat shit and die!
- f. Suck my dick! / Chow my box!

Here English does use terms related to disease and death, but only of a general nature.

The malediction *Fuck you!* belongs on that list, most probably with (6b), in that, unlike true imperatives, we don't find the reflexive (contrast to 6c) (Quang 1971). This example is certainly not isolated; there are a number of apparently uninflected verb maledictions that are not imperatives: *Fuck Bush's No-Child-Left-Behind! Damn you! Damn Bush's patriot act!* and so on.

In Dutch, besides the counterparts to (6), disease terms are used as well, including some that are not in medical handbooks:

- (7) Krijg de {klere/ tyfus/ schapenschurft/ vinketering/ rambam}!
'Get {cholera/ tyfus/ sheep scabiës/ finch consumption/ ???}'

Disease terms in maledictions of this sort are also common in various Italian dialects and have been for centuries. These are two medieval examples from Bolognese (Dean 2004: 224), the first of which has its counterparts in Italian dialects today:

- (8) Che te nasca el {vermocene/strangulione}!
that (to) you is born the {wormdog/strangulation}
'May you get {dog tapeworms/ a disease of the tonsils that prevents swallowing}'

4.2 Grammatical status

Taboo terms can also appear in ordinary statements with varying grammatical status. Some are primary or secondary predicates, some are direct objects, some are pejorative modifiers, some are the non-head element of a compound with the force of a pejorative. In all these functions, their effect is to strengthen or emphasize the utterance.

4.2.1 Taboo terms as predicates.

4.2.1.1 Primary predicates. Taboo terms are used as primary predicates with non-literal, etiolated meanings. Sometimes they have particular readings, as in *Are you fucked up?* meaning 'Are you high?' But more often they express a wide range of strong, if vague, feelings, such as anger (*You piss me off*), dismay (*That blows!*), loss of hope (*I'm cosmically fucked*). In fact, they can be so vague in meaning that they pick up specific meaning from context, as in this line from a World War II movie; a private stands with his rifle in his hands and screams desperately, "This fucking fucker won't fuck" (an example pointed out to us by Rich Janda, p. c.).

This happens in Dutch (*laat ze maar lullen* 'let them prick = let them talk', *je hebt alles verkloot* 'you have fucked everything = you have made a mess of everything'), Italian (*Perché nessuno mi caca?* 'Why doesn't anyone shit me?' in the sense 'Why doesn't anyone pay attention to me?'), and other European languages.

There is also a largish set of *be*-prefixed verbs with taboo roots in Dutch, all meaning 'deceive', such as *belazeren*, *besodemieteren*, *bedonderen*, and one with the prefix *ver-*: *verneuken* (from *neuken* 'fuck'). While the English *be*- prefix is no longer productive (but see the old *beshit oneself*), we can compare English *get screwed*, *get fucked (over)* for similar meanings expressed by verbs with taboo term origins. Also in Dutch there is one expression deriving from a disease term, *lazer* or *lazarus*, a term used for lepers in Middle Dutch (and in British English today: *lazar*), which later developed a great many other, usually derogatory, meanings, such as 'drunk' (and, of course, in the verb *belazeren* 'deceive, make an ass of').

4.2.1.2 *Primary predicates with P or PP.* Both English and Dutch have a set of banishing commands that are particle verbs of taboo origin. We also note here the common Italian malediction/ banishing command that involves a motion verb with a PP (and see Molé 2004 for a discussion of verbal and visual obscenity in university graduation rituals in the Italian Veneto):

- (9) a. {Piss / Bugger / Sod / Fuck} off!
b. Vaffangul! (standard Italian: *Va fare in culo!* / *Vaffanculo!*)
go make in asshole
'Go off and fuck yourself.'

- (10) {Rot / Donder / Flikker / Sodemieter / Lazer} op! [Dutch]
{rot / thunder / bugger / sodomite / leper} off
'Piss off!'

Unlike in English, the verbs in (10) may also be used as transitives in a closely related meaning (but without the particle *op*, and with the exception of *rotten*) to indicate a rough devil-may-care type of throwing:

- (11) {Donder / flikker / sodemieter / lazer} die boeken maar in de gracht.
{thunder / bugger / sodomite / leper} those books just in the canal
'Just toss these books into the canal.'

Compare to the adverbial PP in the Italian dialect of Florence *a bischero sciolto* 'with prick loose' (meaning 'with a lack of reflection' or 'wantonly').

4.2.1.3 *Secondary predicates.* Some terms associated with our four major taboo topics are used as resultative secondary predicates, often without their taboo strength in these positions:

- (12) a. I ar
b. We
c. We

While Italian h
can compare he
ing 'so beautifu
with disease ter
self the tubercu
the typhus = to
zich rotschamer

4.2.2 *Taboo t*
The same Dutcl
of expressions l
gen / geven 'get

- (13) *op zijn*
on his {
'give a f

Note that Engl
direct object pc
fuck / the shit /
construction e:
of torture, as in
Hoeksema & N
nated as a litera
devil out of her
has the gramm
verb today, but
as *the fuck* (wh
occur in it.

4.2.3 *Taboo t*
Some taboo ter
category can ve

- (14) a. Th
b. He
c. He
d. Yo

- (12) a. I am bored to {death/tears}.
 b. We got sun-burnt to buggery.
 c. We were scared shitless.

While Italian has few resultatives in comparison with English (Napoli 1992), one can compare here to the idiom *da morire* 'to die (for)', as in *bello da morire* meaning 'so beautiful you'll (want to) die'. In Dutch, one finds resultative expressions with disease terms and terms for death, such as *zich de pleuris werken* 'work oneself the tuberculosis = work one's butt off', *zich de tyfus schrikken* 'to startle oneself the typhus = to be startled to death', *zich doodschamen* 'to be ashamed to death', *zich rotschamen* 'to be ashamed rotten.'

4.2.2 Taboo terms as objects

The same Dutch taboo terms found in (11) may be used to denote 'body' in a series of expressions for physical abuse conveyed by a light-verb construction with *krijgen* / *geven* 'get / give' and the sequence *op* + *possessive pronoun* + *taboo term*.

- (13) *op zijn* {*donder* / *flikker* / *sodemieter* / *lazer*} {*krijgen* / *geven*}:
 on his {thunder / bugger / sodomite / leper} {receive / give}
 'give a good hiding / beat up'

Note that English has a slightly different construction, involving taboo terms in direct object position, for expressing physical abuse: *beat {the hell / the bejesus / the fuck / the shit / the crap / the living daylights} out of someone*. However, the English construction extends beyond the physical, and can also be used for other types of torture, as in *annoy the hell out of someone*, *frighten the shit out of people*, etc. Hoeksema & Napoli (2008) argue that the taboo term in this construction originated as a literal theme argument of the verb (as in an exorcist saying, 'I'll beat the devil out of her'), but over time the structure changed. While the taboo term still has the grammatical function of direct object, it is not the theme argument of the verb today, but, rather an intensifier of the action, which is why taboo terms such as *the fuck* (which couldn't possibly be a theme argument of a verb like *beat*) can occur in it.

4.2.3 Taboo terms as modifiers

Some taboo terms are used as pejorative modifiers (where their morpho-syntactic category can vary):

- (14) a. That's a {damned/ dead} shame.
 b. He was the professor from hell.
 c. He's a lame ass stinky-breathed good-for-nothing.
 d. You're a fuck-ass pathetic loser.

- e. That's a shitty proposal. / This is a crappy place.
- f. The guy's a piss-poor excuse for a husband.

Dutch does this as well, particularly with body parts:

- (15) Het was kloteweer. / Wat een kutkrant!
it was bollocks weather what a cunt paper!
'It was lousy weather.' / 'What a crappy rag!'

So does Italian:

- (16) Che idea del cazzo ti è venuta!
what idea of the prick (to) you has come
'What a dumb fuck idea you got!'

4.2.4 Taboo terms as the non-head element of a compound

In Dutch we find taboo terms appearing as affixoid¹ elements of pejorative compounds.

- (17) a. Wat een kankerwif.
what a cancer bitch
'What a total bitch.'
- b. Het was een teringzooi.
it was a consumption mess
'It was a bloody mess.'
- c. Da's een tyfusmerk.
that's a typhus brand
'That's a shit brand.'
- d. Cricket is een kleresport.
cricket is a cholera sport
'Cricket is a crap sport.'

English also uses taboo terms in pejorative compounds, but without the phonological weakening seen in the Dutch examples (and see examples in (4) and (5) above). One of the more productive taboo terms for such compounding is *dick* (*That's a dick thing to do/What a dick move*). Italian has less productive examples of this (*che idea figa* 'what a cunt idea' — notice that the head in this compound is on the left, in contrast to English), rare presumably to the extent that concatenative compounding is rare.

4.3 Taboo terms as intensifiers

With the force of a pure intensifier, taboo terms occur with a range of grammatical status.

In Section 4.2.2 we saw *the fuck out of Bill*, while *the* has the force of an intensifier. In press abuse, some speakers use *the hell out of you*. Likewise, a-compound uses of taboo terms are very close in force to intensifiers developed into straightforward without any pejorative sense, the usual religious, sexual, or

- (18) a. Indeed, I am fier
b. You're so {damn
c. She's spitting mad
d. These kids were
e. He was dead serious
f. That's fucking awful

Notice that the taboo terms have pejorative uses in (14).

Further, we find that some use the term other than to intensify:

- (19) Let's get the {hell/ fuck

At first glance the taboo notion of the structure of such a direct object (it can be deleted under the same truth conditions), in contrast to the taboo term as an intensifier, though without a the

Likewise taboo terms can be used in involving predicates to indicate

- (20) He was funny as hell.

Finally, we find instances of the term, though they can be viewed as involving a phraseal structure way as more clearly phrasal

- (21) a. He's hell bent on
b. You're so {damned

In this regard, it may be useful

In Section 4.2.2 we saw that the taboo term in a sentence such as *Carl punched the fuck out of Bill*, while having the grammatical function of direct object, has the force of an intensifier. In fact, while this construction is typically used to express abuse, some speakers can use it without a pejorative sense (*I'm going to kiss the hell out of you*). Likewise, the pejorative-modifier and non-head-element-of-a-compound uses of taboo terms also carry a sense of degree, which makes them very close in force to intensifiers. It's no surprise then that some taboo terms have developed into straightforward degree adverbials with the force of intensifiers but without any pejorative sense. Here we do find disease terms in English as well as the usual religious, sexual, and scatological ones:

- (18) a. Indeed, I am fiendishly clever.
 b. You're so {damned/ darn/ dang} clever!
 c. She's spitting mad. / He's rabidly insane.
 d. These kids were hella cool. / We're gonna be hecka busy later.
 e. He was dead serious.
 f. That's fucking awesome.

Notice that the taboo terms here function solely as intensifiers, in contrast to the pejorative uses in (14).

Further, we find that sometimes a taboo term that is an NP can have no function other than to intensify:

- (19) Let's get the {hell/ fuck} out of here

At first glance the taboo nominal in (19) looks like a direct object. But an examination of the structure of such utterances shows that the taboo term is not, in fact, a direct object (it can be deleted and the sentence remains grammatical and with the same truth conditions), but, rather an intensifier (Hoeksema & Napoli 2008), in contrast to the taboo term in *Carl punched the fuck out of Bill*, which is a direct object, though without a thematic role.

Likewise taboo terms can appear as the targets of comparison constructions involving predicates to indicate solely intensification:

- (20) He was funny as hell.

Finally, we find instances of taboo terms in elative compounds, which can nonetheless be viewed as involving intensification by modification in exactly the same way as more clearly phrasal cases of adverb + adjective.

- (21) a. He's hell bent on doing it.
 b. You're so {damned/ darn/ dang} clever!

In this regard, it may be useful to note that elative compounds and degree adverbial

constructions share some syntactic processes in Dutch, such as reduplicative coordination (Hoeksema 2001b):

- (22) a. Het is erg, maar dan ook erg koud.
it is very, but than also very cold
'It is very, very cold.'
- b. Het is ijs-, maar dan ook ijskoud.
it is ice-, but than also icecold
'It is ice-cold.'

Another thing that relative compounds and degree adverbs have in common is the possibility of emphatic lengthening of the vowel (cf. van Ommen, Hoeksema & Gilbers 2007), something found in English, too, and in many other languages:

- (23) a. Het is zeeeeeeeer koud.
'It is veeery cold.'
b. Het is steeeeenkoud.
'It is stooooone-cold.'

Left-hand members of ordinary compounds may not undergo such lengthening, but only left-hand members of elative compounds:

- (24) *Het is steeeenkool.
'It is stonecoal.'

(Note: The word for 'coal' in Dutch is the compound *steenkuool*.) We also note the presence in Italian of what look (at least at first glance, although Italian has little concatenative compounding) to be elative compounds that use taboo terms:

- (25) a. Era un cavallo pazzo diavolo.
was a horse crazy devil
'It was a really crazy horse.'
- b. Essere professori non significa mica essere intelligenti cazzo.
be professor not means at all be intelligent prick
'Being a professor doesn't mean being super intelligent at all.'

While Italian, like Dutch, has reduplicative coordination of degree adverbs, in:

- (26) Era molto, ma molto intelligente.
was very but very intelligent
'She was very very intelligent.'

reduplicative coordination is marginal with elative compounds like those in (25):

- (27) ??Era intelligente, ma intelligente diavolo!
'She was very very intelligent.'

The extreme marginality
pound is the right hand
(these putative) elative c
sibility of lengthening of

- (28) Era intelligente ca
'She was veeery i

In sum, we believe the el
are sensibly put in the cl

- (29) a. On myšli, že
he thinks tha
b. On myšli, že
he thinks tha
c. On myšli, že
he thinks tha

Note that in Polish, just as we have seen, taboo terms (cholera and cocks, for example)

4.4 A few syntactic and

4.4.1 *Wh-expressions*

English *wh*-questions (in
means of various taboo terms
do whatever the hell you want
expletive elements: *I will

- (30) a. {Who/ Where
b. Why the heck
c. Who the fuck

Of these, the forms with *in* are now obsolete. Many a PP introduced by *in* (*I* perhaps on analogy with

The extreme marginality is no surprise, given that the taboo term in the compound is the right hand member, rather than the left, in contrast to Dutch. Both (these putative) elative compounds and degree adverbs in Italian exhibit the possibility of lengthening of the stressed vowel for emphasis:

- (28) Era intelligente caaazzo! / Era mooolto intelligente.
'She was veeery intelligent.' / 'She was veeery intelligent.'

In sum, we believe the elative compound examples in English, Dutch, and Italian are sensibly put in the class of intensification by modification.

Like English and Italian, Dutch uses religious, sexual, and scatological taboo terms as intensifiers, but, as we might expect by this point, it also makes abundant use of disease terms (in comparison to the few in English). Dutch is not alone in doing this. The following Polish examples (Kehayov 2006: 2) may serve to illustrate this, all meaning 'He thinks that he is damned smart':

- (29) a. On myśli, że jest diabli wiedzą jak mądry
he thinks that is devils know how smart
b. On myśli, że jest chuj wie jak mądry
he thinks that is cock knows how smart
c. On myśli, że jest cholera wie jak mądry
he thinks that is cholera knows how smart

Note that in Polish, just as in many of the Dutch, Italian, and English examples we have seen, taboo terms appear where a literal interpretation makes no sense (cholera and cocks, for example, don't ordinarily know things).

4.4 A few syntactic and semantic distributional properties of taboo terms

4.4.1 *Wh-expressions*

English *wh*-questions (including rhetorical ones) may be made more emphatic by means of various taboo terms (as well as some free (headless) relative clauses: *I will do whatever the hell you do*, although not all free relatives permit the intrusion of expletive elements: **I will do what the hell you do* (Fillmore 1985: 81)):

- (30) a. {Who/ Where/ What} the {hell/ devil/ hećk/ fuck} are you?
b. Why the heck should I care?/ What the shit is going on?
c. Who the fuck gives a shit? /How the hell did he do that?

Of these, the forms with *devil* and its synonyms *dickens*, *deuce* are the oldest, and are now obsolete. Many of these have variants in which the taboo term is within a PP introduced by *in* (*How in the blue fuck did you ever come up with that one?*), perhaps on analogy with examples like *How in the world did you do that?* We note

that in older stages of English, disease names are also used to reinforce *wh*-questions; (31) is from William Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Part 1, Scene ii, which was first performed in 1597.

- (31) What a plague mean ye to colt me thus?

Examples like (30) ultimately derive from Middle French as loan translations, or *calques*, according to the OED (Simpson & Weiner 1989), and still occur in French, as in (32a). Other Romance languages, such as Italian in (32b), have similar constructions:

- (32) a. Mais qui diable êtes-vous?
but who devil are you
'But who the devil are you?'
- b. Che diavolo hai? / Ma che cazzo fai?
what devil have / but what prick do
'What on earth's the matter? / 'But what the fuck are you doing?'

Dutch had two related patterns involving *wh*-terms, one of the form *wh* + *expletive*, the other of the form *wh* + *voor de expletive* '*wh* for the *expletive*' (Hoeksema 2002), both of which are now obsolete. In German, the corresponding pattern is *wh* *zum Teufel* '*wh* to the devil'.

4.4.2 *Emphatic denial or affirmation*

Taboo terms can express emphatic rejection or denial, as well as emphatic affirmation. The denial or negative contradiction construction has no overt standard negation element, but uses a pre-posed taboo term instead:

- (33) a. The {hell/ fuck} I will.
b. The devil he is.
c. Like hell (she does).

Emphatic affirmations with taboo terms, however, are not restricted to a single construction type:

- (34) a. You bet your {(sweet) ass/booty} I am.
b. Damn {right/ straight}.
c. Sure shit.
d. Does the bear shit in the woods?
e. I'm not shitting you.

Perhaps related is the rhetorical question used as an affirmative answer to a question *Does the bear shit in the woods?* Here the taboo term is not emphatic, but rather brings us down to the level of the most coarse and basic realities — the answer is obvious even if not mentioned in polite society.

It is also possible to
Fuck no! / Shit yeah! Bo
as a response to another

- (35) a. A: - I hea
B: - (*I b
b. A: - I hea
B: - (*I b

(As expected, except for saying.) We notice, too, firm veracity: *Are you* familiar expressions w

4.4.3 *Taboo intensifi*
We find *the hell, the fu*

- (36) a. So the hell
b. Right the l
c. All the hel
d. Way the fu

The intensifier license

- (37) a. He shot the
b. Answer me
b. She drove
c. John saw the

In the above examples, such as (1) and (2), the intensifier *the hell out of* is followed by a noun phrase, as in (1), or a verb phrase, as in (2). The intensifier *the hell out of* is used in a wide range of contexts, including affirmative sentences in which the intensifier is used to emphasize the degree of the action or state, as in (3) and (4), and negative sentences in which the intensifier is used to emphasize the degree of the action or state, as in (5) and (6). The intensifier *the hell out of* can also be used in a negative sentence to assume a Jackendoff (1987) 'negative polarity' with intensifiers of an

- (38) a. AP: You v
b. VP: She s
c. NP: He's s

It is also possible to put a taboo term in front of *yes*, *no* and *yeah*: *Hell yes!* / *Fuck no!* / *Shit yeah!* Both denials and assertions of these types are appropriate only as a response to another statement, and may not be syntactically embedded:

- (35) a. A: – I hear you're going to marry a Norwegian woman.
 B: – (*I believe that) The hell I will.
 b. A: – I hear you're going to marry an Italian woman.
 B: – (*I believe that) You bet your sweet ass I am.

(As expected, exceptional behavior is observed with embedding under verbs of saying.) We notice, too, the common expression used to question, deny, or confirm veracity: *Are you shitting me?* *You're shitting me.* *I shit you not.* These play off familiar expressions with the non-taboo term *kid* in place of *shit*.

4.4.3 Taboo intensifiers licensed by other intensifiers

We find *the hell*, *the fuck* and other taboo terms following some intensifiers:

- (36) a. So the hell off the mark
 b. Right the hell {now / here}.
 c. All the hell around the world
 d. Way the fuck over in Canada

The intensifier licenses the taboo terms; its absence yields ungrammaticality:

- (37) a. He shot that gun *(so) the hell off the mark, I couldn't believe it.
 b. Answer me *(right) the hell now.
 b. She drove that beat up car *(all) the hell around Africa.
 c. John saw that bear *(way) the fuck over in Canada.

In the above examples the intensifier is inside a PP which follows the direct object. Such examples are not to be confused with intransitive sentences in which the verb is followed by a PP with an intervening taboo-term intensifier, as in *She got the hell out of town* (and see (19) above); nor are they to be confused with transitive sentences in which the taboo term is itself the direct object, as in *He scared the shit out of me*. (For discussion of those other types of sentences see Hoeksema and Napoli 2008.) The taboo terms in (36–37) can appear anywhere the appropriate intensifiers can appear. In (36–37) they go with intensifiers of PPs (where we assume a Jackendoff 1973 analysis of *now* and *here* in (36b)). But in (38) they go with intensifiers of an AP, a VP, and an NP:

- (38) a. AP: You went so the fuck wrong, I can't begin to explain.
 b. VP: She so the fuck doesn't understand.
 c. NP: He's so the fuck a liar.

Just as we saw with *wh*-expressions in Subsection 4.4.1 above, which also license taboo terms, the addition of *the hell* or *the fuck* adds force. In fact, this construction favors strong force, so much so that *the fuck* is more common than *the hell* in this usage, and degree adverbs that do not have a strong intensifier sense cannot license them:

- (39) *She's {a little / a bit / somewhat} the fuck frightened.

The most common intensifier to license taboo terms is *so*. Indeed, the frequency of taboo terms after intensifier *so* may be responsible for the appearance of them after other uses of *so*. For example, the affirmative pro-predicate *so*, which is anaphoric rather than an intensifier, can license taboo terms:

- (40) a. A. I'm tired of all this fighting.
b. B. Oh, yeah? Well, so the fuck am I!

And the idiom *so what* can be broken up by the infix of a taboo term:

- (41) So the hell what?

The licensing of taboo terms by intensifiers is a relatively new phenomenon in English. Yet it should be no surprise. We already have taboo terms functioning as intensifiers with *wh*-words and in a variety of other constructions shown earlier. It is a quick jump, then, to taboo terms glomming onto other intensifiers, to make a kind of super-intensifier, so that *so stupid* becomes *so the fuck stupid* and *too dumb* to *understand* becomes *too the fuck dumb to understand*.

4.4.3 Polarity

Certain taboo terms are used as negative polarity items (cf. Postma 2001; Horn 2001; Hoeksema 2002; Postal 2005). Subsets can be distinguished, such as minimizers with a pejorative adjectival modifier of taboo origin:

- (42) I can't see a {damned / fucking / frigging / bloody} thing.

as well as mass nouns (sometimes with an added particle *all*):

- (43) a. Ted didn't {say dick / know jack shit} about it.
b. The police didn't {say dick / do fuck / do sod} all.
c. We don't care bugger all. / We don't have diddly (squat).

Items in the latter, but not the former, set may also appear without any form of overt negation, while still carrying a negative sense (Horn 2001; Postal 2004, 2005), which means they underwent a turn of the Jespersen cycle (Jespersen 1917):

- (44) a. They did {dick / shit} about it, that's what they did
b. It means dick-all to me. / That left me with diddly.

A third set of negative polarity items is typically, but not exclusively, *the hell*, *the fuck*, *hoot (in hell)*, *tinker*, etc. These can appear without any intensifier, as in the examples in (44). They can be placed at the beginning of a sentence, as with other non-taboo terms: *So, not drink a drop, no*.

We also note that *the hell* is more common with *emphatic* forms: *Never the fuck mind what* directly adjacent to the trigger. *I'm the hell interested after* (example from the Internet — *all the [sic] get in response from the person who has them* well-known trigger for *the hell*).

In Italian it is common to use corresponding affirmative forms: *Non rompermici* (quasi taboo counterpart of *non rompermici* change of meaning, such as

- (45) a. Non mi piace
not me please
'I don't like it'
b. (Non) me ne frega
not me of it
'I don't give

Finally, some taboo expressions appear in the negative than the affirmative (in contrast to *balle/le palle/le scattole*)

- (46) Non rompermici
not break-me tell
'Don't break my

In support of our claim that *rompermici* is on 27 June 2007, we go to *rompermici X* and "non

A third set of negative polarity expressions are of the form *give an X*, where *X* is typically, but not exclusively, some taboo term: *give a {damn, crap, shit, (flying) fuck, hoot (in hell), tinker's damn, (ragged) rat's {ass / rear}, nit, shag, sod}*. Most of these can appear without the negative while still carrying the negative sense, like the examples in (44). These terms are minimizers (Bolinger 1972), that is, items that can be placed at the bottom of the relevance scale of worth or value, along with other non-taboo terms (*not change an iota, not worth {a plugged nickel/red cent, not drink a drop, not say a word, not sleep a wink}*).

We also note that negatives license taboo terms used as intensifiers, as in *She's not the fuck here*, but **She's the fuck here*. The more emphatic negative *never* is even more common with emphatic taboo terms: *I can never the fuck understand you, Never the fuck mind what she's up to*. This use does not require the negation to be directly adjacent to the taboo term, nor even in the same clause, cf. *I don't believe I'm the hell interested after all, thank you very much*. We lifted an interesting example from the Internet — a report about complaints concerning phone service: *And all the [sic] get in response is "well I'm having no issues", as if that the fuck matters to the person who has them.*² Here the negative trigger appears to be rhetorical *as if*, a well-known trigger for polarity items, cf. *As if I would ever do that!*

In Italian it is common to use *un cazzo* 'a dick' in negative sentences, where the corresponding affirmative would be ungrammatical. *Un cavolo* 'a cabbage' is the quasi taboo counterpart. Additionally, sometimes a negative is optional without change of meaning, such as (*non*) *fregarsene* '(not) give a damn'.

- (45) a. Non mi piace un {cazzo/ cavolo}.
not me please a {dick/ cabbage}
'I don't like it one bit.'
b. (Non) me ne frego.
not me of it rub
'I don't give a damn about it.'

Finally, some taboo expressions in Italian occur overwhelmingly more frequently in the negative than the affirmative, although the negative and affirmative are not synonymous (in contrast to (45b)), as in the expressions *rompere {i coglioni/le balle/le palle/le scattole}* 'break balls':

- (46) Non rompermi le palle.
not break-me the balls
'Don't break my balls!'

In support of our claim about negative frequency being higher than affirmative, on 27 June 2007, we googled the two negative informal singular imperatives "*non rompermi X*" and "*non mi rompere X*" as well as the affirmative singular imperative

"rompimi X", and we googled the negative and affirmative singular indicatives, "(non) mi rompi X" (all expressions in quotation marks). X here ranged over *i coglioni*, *le balle*, *le palle*, and *le scattole*, all being variants for 'balls'. The results are in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of negative vs. positive in a sexual taboo-term phrase of Italian

		<i>i coglioni</i>	<i>Le balle</i>	<i>le palle</i>	<i>Le scattole</i>	total
- imp.	<i>Non rompermi</i>	644	257	1480	588	2969
	<i>non mi rompere</i>	515	106	1100	378	2099
+ imp.	<i>Rompimi</i>	2	6	109	0	117
- ind.	<i>Non mi rompi</i>	107	10	640	0	757
+ ind.	<i>mi rompi</i>	128	213	357	2	700
Total		1396	592	3686	968	6642

The negative imperative (both forms together) occurs 76.3% of the time (5068 out of the total 6642), and adding the negative imperative together with the negative indicative gives 87.7% (5825 out of the total). Contexts for the positive examples are often questions ('Why are you breaking my balls?'), conditionals ('If you break my balls...') and ironic commands ('Then just go ahead and break my balls').

Similar polarity items can be found in languages such as Dutch and German. The examples below are from Dutch (cf. also Postma 1995, 2001):

- (47) a. Ik kan geen zak zien!
I can no scrotum see
'I can't see a thing.'
b. Ze deden geen reet.
they did no arse
'They didn't do a thing.'
c. Dat interesseert me geen flikker.
that interests me no faggot
'That does not interest me one bit.'

In addition to the sexual and scatological taboo terms used in English or German, Dutch also employs a variety of disease terms here, although the more colorful ones that are in use for maledictions, some of which were illustrated in (7) above, are not usually employed here:

- (48) a. Ik geloof er geen/*een pest van.
I believe there no/*a plague of
'I don't believe one word of it.'
b. Er was geen/*een tyfus te doen.
there was no/*a typhus to do
'There was not a thing to do.'

- c. Kan m
can m
'Does

Except for *pest*, the restricted to the R
amples of polarity

- (49) a. Das ka
that ca
'Nobo
b. Sie hat
she has
'She di
c. Diese I
these g
'These

4.5 Varying conte:

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The results are in Table 2.

term	phrase of Italian	
<i>lle</i>	<i>Le scattole</i>	total
	588	2969
	378	2099
	0	117
	0	757
	2	700
	968	6642

3% of the time (5068 out
gether with the negative
or the positive examples
ditionals ('If you break
nd break my balls').
as Dutch and German.
, 2001):

- c. Kan me geen/*een kanker schelen.
can me no/*a cancer matter
'Doesn't matter one bit to me.'

Except for *pest*, the Dutch disease term polarity items appear to be geographically restricted to the Rotterdam area (Hoeksema 2002). In (49) we have German examples of polarity items with taboo origins:

- (49) a. Das kann sich kein Arsch leisten.
that can himself no ass afford
'Nobody can afford that.'
b. Sie hat uns kein Sterbenswort verraten.
she has us no dying word betrayed
'She did not tell us a single word.'
c. Diese Herren sind keinen Dreck wert.
these gentleman are no shit worth
'These gentlemen aren't worth a thing.'

4.5 Varying contexts for taboo terms

One may well find additions to our lists of types of speech acts that taboo terms occur in and additions to our list of grammatical states that taboo terms may have. One may find additional types of intensifier taboo terms and one may find additional structures that intensifier taboo terms may occur in. In fact, we fully expect these lists to grow (as we will discuss in the next section). Our goal is not to be exhaustive, but only representative enough to support our conclusion: Taboo terms are pragmatically coherent as a group (adding intensity) and they are employed in a wide range of distinct syntactic, semantic, and morphological contexts.

5. Theoretical import

The taboo terms exemplified in Section 3 are semantically disparate. Likewise, the constructions exemplified in Section 4 vary widely, and have little in common syntactically, semantically, and morphologically, apart from the fact that they all have an emotionally-charged character. Yet this semantically disparate set of lexical items seems to be treated (more or less — since we noted that some constructions make use of more of these lexical items than others) as a unit by this wide range of constructions.

This fact is unusual. Normally, the enlistment of lexical items by various constructions is based on the category and features of the items in question, and these in

in English or German,
ugh the more colorful
illustrated in (7) above,

turn are in part determined by lexical semantics, and in part arbitrary. In taboo constructions, however, lexical meaning appears to play no role. What on earth could be the set of lexical features that allow us to create all of *shit head*, *dick head*, *fuck head*, *cunt head*, *butt head*, *puke head*, *puke head*, *puke head*, *puke head*, *cum dumpster head*, and so on?

So what does play a role? What do speakers of English, Dutch, Italian, and other languages need to know in order for them to correctly use the wide range of taboo terms we saw in Section 3 in the wide range of grammatical contexts we saw in Section 4?

Memorization of a list can't be the answer; taboo expressions are constantly being created and plugged into all the constructions exemplified in Section 4. In fact, presently we witness a flowering of taboo terms on the Internet, some showing impressive creativity. We give here a sampling from just two of the constructions discussed in Section 4: that in (19) and *wh*-expressions:

- (50) a. ...get the living fuck out of my house!
 b. And then I get the proverbial fuck out.
 c. You people are mother fuckers that deserve to get the everliving fuck beaten out of you for being worthless human beings
 d. He squeezed off a couple of rounds in the air and we thought that would be a good time to do a three-point turn and get the raging fuck out of there.
 e. He got into his car yelling something at her and she said "that's right your effing abuser, get the effing hell out of here."
 f. ...get the flying fuck out of my face or I'll puke on you
- (51) a. ...then where in the holy living fuck did all those cavemen and cannibals and headhunters and Mesolithic horticulturalists come from?
 b. How the fickety fuck-bums are you ma wee sex-communist?
 c. ...how in the blue fuck is that even possible???
 d. ...what the friggin hell is a 'bisexual?
 e. Who the motherfucking fuck do you think you are?

Another reason memorization can't be the answer is because the use of taboo terms spreads from one construction to another. Hoeksema & Napoli (2008)'s study of two taboo-term constructions suggests that the use of taboo terms as intensifiers initiated in *wh*-expressions and spread from there to the others listed in Section 4. We can see that this spreading is still happening by the newness of the examples in Subsection 4.4.3 (where taboo-term intensifiers are licensed by other intensifiers, such as *so*), which many older speakers simply do not use at all. Why, tomorrow taboo terms may well pop up in a construction they've never been in before.

How can such semantically disparate taboo terms spread as a unit? The answer surely has little to nothing to do with their semantics. To the contrary, the

very fact that they are so relevant. What matters is familiar — in those circles in quality about them. Indeed precisely that they are taboo speckle the language as a game be recognized by the grammar centered environments present in the relevant syntactic slot on the Internet.

- (52) a. (exclamation)
 b. (name calling)
 c. (malediction)
 d. (primary predication)
 e. (primary predication)
 f. (secondary predication) bleepless.
 g. (direct object) to.
 h. (modifier) Spoiler You bleep indicate
 i. (non-head of a noun phrase) mess I allowed
 j. (intensifier) I bleep third and a half takes me forty
 k. (*wh*-expression) Bleep
 l. (emphatic affirmation) Bleep yes!
 m. (intensifier like) Bleep
 n. (polarity item) around?

We found the insult *bleep* a variety of morphological constructions taboo terms are beautifully make this point

- (53) Hi, I would say, bleep
 bleep
 bleep! That pretty

part arbitrary. In taboo con-
role. What on earth could be
it head, dick head, fuck head,
er head, and so on?

English, Dutch, Italian, and
correctly use the wide range
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ere."

like on you

those cavemen and
horticulturalists come from?
sex-communist?
???

you are?

cause the use of taboo terms
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f taboo terms as intensifiers
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censed by other intensifiers,
t use at all. Why, tomorrow
e never been in before.
is spread as a unit? The an-
antics. To the contrary, the

very fact that they are so disparate indicates that their denotations are largely ir-
relevant. What matters is that these terms have a certain rude (or intimate or fa-
miliar — in those circles in which using such taboo terms is not rude) and intense
quality about them. Indeed, the one thing these taboo terms have in common is
precisely that they are taboo (for the general population). Hence the fact that they
speckle the language as a group means their pragmatic status as taboo terms must
be recognized by the grammar. As strong evidence for this claim, we note that in
censored environments people will even substitute nonsense words such as *bleep*
in the relevant syntactic slots. The following examples are just a sampling from the
Internet.

- (52) a. (exclamation) Oh bleep!
b. (name calling) You stupid bleep!
c. (malediction) Oh, you can go to bleep!
d. (primary predicate) Have you bleeped your produce manager this week?
e. (primary predicate with a particle) Bleep off, you're driving me mad.
f. (secondary predicate) I ran inside and locked the doors, scared
bleepless.
g. (direct object) Maybe I should beat the bleep out of you the way he used
to.
h. (modifier) Sports blog for and by those bleeping idiots.
You bleep indians are stealing all our jobs.
i. (non-head of a compound) Give me a chance to fix this little credit bleep
mess I allowed to happen.
j. (intensifier) I have twenty-odd documents to process, and between a
third and a half of them have bleeping clever MS Word formatting that
takes me forty minutes to track...
k. (*wh*-expression) What's the bleeping problem?
l. (emphatic affirmation) You bet your sweet bleep I am.
Bleep yes!
m. (intensifier licensed by another intensifier) So the bleep what?
n. (polarity item) You didn't say bleep about him. And how long he's been
around?

We found the insult *bleep head* on numerous sites; no surprise. *Bleep* (as a root in
a variety of morphological forms) can stand for any taboo term in any of the con-
structions taboo terms are found in. Indeed, a number of examples on the Internet
beautifully make this point. Here's one:

- (53) Hi, I would say, bleep bleep bleep don't ever bleep bleep bleep you stupid
bleep
bleep! That pretty much sums it up!

Yup, that pretty much sums it up.

Theories of grammar that rely on a compositional semantics (which may well be the majority) cannot adequately account for the taboo term constructions discussed in this paper. They assume a construction receives its interpretation from its constituent parts. Here, however, we have a situation where words take their interpretation from the context in which they appear, in particular from the constructions they partake in. This is most clearly the case when we interpret semantically vacuous elements like *bleep*.

At first glance, it would appear that Construction Grammar (CxG) could allow an insightful account of the type of data we've considered here. Goldberg (1995: 4) offers the following definition of *construction*: "C is a CONSTRUCTION iff_{def} C is a form-meaning pair <Fi, Si>, such that some aspect of Fi or some aspect of Si is not strictly predictable from C's component parts or from other previously established constructions." Just as an example, let's consider a taboo term such as *the {fuck /hell}* in a *wh*-expression such as *Why the {fuck /hell} start there?* Since the meaning (or content) is not componential here (that is, we aren't asking about either fucking or hell), the taboo term is a construction in the sense of CxG.

So let's try to follow up on a CxG account of the data in this paper, pursuing the analysis of *Why the {fuck /hell} start there?*

In CxG every construction is a pairing between content and form. If we consider the construction *the {fuck /hell}* within the sentence *Why the {fuck /hell} start there?*, the content at first seems to be a somewhat vague combination of pejorative and emphatic. But if we put that sentence in context, we find that the pejorative sense can disappear:

- (54) You're starting the trip from Miami? Why the fuck start there? Don't tell me, no, not really! Did you really buy tickets for my parents, too? Oh, I love you! Thank you so much!

We expect that for many speakers the use of a taboo term carries a pejorative connotation without information to the contrary. But linguistic and pragmatic context, especially tone of voice and facial expression, can remove all pejorative sense. On the other hand, saying that the content is nothing more than emphasis doesn't adequately distinguish between *why the fuck* and *why in the world* — yet the two phrases certainly differ in sociolinguistic properties.

Perhaps the best content we can assign to the construction *the {fuck /hell}* is TABOO TERM. We put the content in capitals to indicate that the content is not the meaning of the words *taboo term*, but rather all the pragmatic information that goes with use of a taboo term, where that information varies with context and with speakers.

The form for this construction is a NP.

Now let's turn to another example: *{fuck /hell} start there?* Is the meaning predicted from the content of the construction?

This is not so easy to consider, we might answer. The meaning of *why* is not predictable from the content of the construction, we have many syntactic environments for *why*, and so on. But, as well, first.

In fact, when we look at the construction *the {fuck /hell} start there?* it isn't just NPs such as *the {fuck /hell}* that we find. We also find *again and lost the money*. And the amazing thing is that the construction is logical and syntactic correct. It is a TABOO TERM — with all the baggage that comes with the use of taboo terms and constructions.

We conclude that the construction *{fuck /hell} start there?* is a construction. Nor is *way the {fuck /hell} start there?* a construction, and so on. See Section 4.

A CxG analysis of the construction *{fuck /hell} start there?* can contribute to whatever context the construction is used in. The use of these terms is so highly underspecified that just about any utterance can follow these terms to be a construction. Their use is in semantic contexts. Their use is in syntactic contexts.

Theories of grammar such as Construction Grammar, and, to some extent, also the spreading network model, such spreading might be a good idea. There are few syntactic environments for the construction. On the other hand, theories of grammar that use syntactic primitives, such as classical versions of categorial grammar, do not give a unified account of the construction. In such theories the application of the construction in different contexts is mere coincidence. The construction is in syntactic environments.

Now let's turn to an analysis of the phrase *Why the {fuck/ hell} in Why the {fuck/ hell} start there?* Is the meaning componential from the parts? That is, is the meaning predicted from the meaning of *why* plus TABOO TERM, which is the content of the construction *the {fuck/ hell}*?

This is not so easy to answer. If we had only this one syntactic form to consider, we might answer no — the meaning (which is something like 'intensified why') is not predictable, therefore the phrase is another construction. However, we have many syntactic forms that employ taboo terms — and we should consider them, as well, first.

In fact, when we look at the other examples in Sections 3 and 4, we find that it isn't just NPs such as *the {fuck/ hell}* that are constructions, but, instead, all the various taboo terms we have seen are constructions. So *fucked up* in *He fucked up again and lost the money*, and *dick* in *He's such a dick wad* are also constructions. And the amazing thing is that, while their form varies (according to their morphological and syntactic context), their content always contains at least this: TABOO TERM — with all the baggage that carries. One part of that baggage is intensity; the use of taboo terms adds intensity to an utterance.

We conclude that the meaning of the phrase *Why the {fuck/ hell} in Why the {fuck/ hell} start there?* is, in fact, predictable from its parts, so this is not a construction. Nor is *way the {fuck/ hell}* as in *way the {fuck/ hell} over in Canada* a construction, and so on with respect to the various contexts for taboo terms given in Section 4.

A CxG analysis of taboo terms provides the key to the sense that these terms contribute to whatever context they are found in. The fact that the content of these terms is so highly underdetermined and, additionally, of potential application to just about any utterance (since just about any utterance is open to emphasis), allows these terms to be useful in a wide range of morphological, syntactic, and semantic contexts. Their spread, then, should come as no surprise.

Theories of grammar that assume constructions as their basic building blocks, such as Construction Grammar (Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988; Goldberg 1995) and, to some extent, also HPSG and TAG-grammar, offer a ready account for why such spreading might occur. Indeed, given that taboo terms add intensity, there are few syntactic environments we might not expect them to be allowed in. On the other hand, theories that do not admit constructions into their repertory of syntactic primitives, such as Chomsky's Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995) or classical versions of categorial grammar (Lambek 1958), do not lend themselves to a unified account of the various syntactic environments for taboo terms. Rather, in such theories the appearance of these particular taboo terms in all these different contexts is mere coincidence, and leads to no predictions about the possible syntactic environments that new taboo terms might occur in. For example, if a

new term were coined for a sex act, we might expect it sooner or later to appear in a subset of the morphological and syntactic positions that *fuck* can occupy in theories that admit constructions as syntactic primitives, but not in theories that don't. Indeed, fictional expletives do occur in the relevant syntactic slots. The failure of the latter set of theories to make this kind of prediction is bleeping problematic.

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Notes

1. The term *affixoid* is used in morphology to denote prefix- or suffix-like elements that derive from full words by means of generalization of compounding processes. For example, English *-man* in *mailman*, *chinaman*, *hangman*, etc. is historically the same as the full word *man*, but has developed affix-like characteristics (e.g. the vowel is reduced to schwa), although the plural of nouns ending in this *-man* is irregular, just as the plural of the noun *man* is irregular (though, again, we hear a different vowel in, for example, *women* from that in *men*). Most affixes derive from full words, and affixoids represent the intermediate stage, where the item is already turning into an affix, but still transparently related to the word it derives from. Consult Ten Hacken (2000: 355 ff.) for a review of the literature on this notion.

2. Accessed 23 November 2008: <http://forums.appleinsider.com/showthread.php?t=90017>

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