# ФИЛОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ НАУКИ

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**SELF-REPORTED FREQUENCY OF SWEARING AMONG HETEROSEXUAL AND LESBIAN WOMEN IN RUSSIA. THE EFFECT OF SITUATIONAL VARIABLES ON LANGUAGE USERS.**

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**ЧАСТОТНОСТЬ УПОТРЕБЛЕНИЯ НЕЦЕНЗУРНОЙ ЛЕКСИКИ СРЕДИ ЖЕНЩИН В РОССИИ НА ПРИМЕРЕ РАССМОТРЕНИЯ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ ГРУПП, РАЗЛИЧНЫХ ПО СЕКСУАЛЬНОЙ ОРИЕНТАЦИИ. ВЛИЯНИЕ СИТУАТИВНОГО ФАКТОРА НА РЕЧЕВОЕ ПОВЕДЕНИЕ РЕСПОНДЕНТОВ.**

**Summary.** The current study is dedicated to the question of frequency of swearing by Russian female native speakers effected by the factor of sexual orientation. The research sets a goal to provide self-reported data on the degree of swearing to determine if the socio-linguistic factor of sexual orientation can cause dissimilarities in taboo language use in the analyzed communities of practice. The scope of the research also touches upon the question of influence of diverse situational variables on language behavior in terms of swearing. In the course of the study an anonymous questionnaire was employed as an instrument of data collection. The results show higher rates of swearing among lesbian women. The author proposes an explanation of the data received assuming that by swearing excessively lesbians in Russia try to distance themselves from heterosexual and vulnerable women whose language behavior is expected to be pure and feminine in Russian patriarchal society and governed by male-imposed rules.

**Аннотация.** В данном исследовании затрагивается тема использования нецензурной лексики в речи женщинами в России в зависимости от сексуальной ориентации. Целью исследования является получение данных об частотности употребления нецензурных выражений от респондентов. Полученная информация подвергается анализу с целью выяснения, влияет ли фактор различия в сексуальной ориентации на речевое поведение носителей языка. Также в исследовании затрагивается вопрос влияния ситуативного фактора на уровень использования непечатной лексики. Для сбора данных в исследовании был использован анонимный опрос. Результаты показывают менее частотное употребление анализируемой разновидности языка гетеросексуальными женщинами. Автор, интерпретируя полученные данные, делает предположение, что высокий уровнь использования нецензурной лексики женщинами нетрадиционной ориентации может быть продиктовано их желанием дистанцироваться от женщин традиционной ориентации, речевое поведение которых регулируется культурными особенностями российского патриархального общества и в определенной степени заставляет их соблюдать требования по чистоте речи.

*Key words: frequency of swearing, sociolinguistic factors, sexual orientation, situational variables, linguistic behavior, femininity, masculinity, cultural and linguistic stereotypes, swearing as a social construct, Russian "mat".*

*Ключевые слова: частотность употребления нецензурных выражений, социолингвистические факторы, сексуальная ориентация, ситуативный фактор, языковое поведение, женственность, мужественность, культурные и лингвистические стереотипы, нецензурная лексика как социальный конструкт, понятие "мат" в русском языке.*

## Introduction

The current research is focused on frequency of swearing among heterosexual and lesbian women in Russia. Subjects of the study represent two communities of practice which are similar regarding such factors as age, social class and the level of education but differ in their sexual orientation. The question of frequency of swearing in the mentioned above communities of practice represent interest from a sociolinguistic perspective due to the fact that such a comparison has never been drawn previously. The author believes that the results of the study have a potential to contribute to the development of sociolinguistics in general and inspire further research

into the topic of influence of sexual orientation as a sociolinguistic factor on language use.

For this study the author has an intention to look deeper into the issue of swearing among the young generation of heterosexual and lesbian Russian women and provide evidence if, judging from the stereotypical characteristics of lesbian behavior, members of this community of practice will demonstrate a tendency to swear more frequently that could be caused by their desire to resort to their masculinity and deny a feminine side. To summarize, by conducting the present research the author sets a goal to find out who swears more, in what social contexts, and how the results could be explained. In order to enhance reliability and overall quality of the study the author decided to structure it as follows: before turning to the experimental part that is represented by an anonymous questionnaire with 20 participants as the subjects of the research, some theoretical issues significant for the question under discussion will be explored. They are namely: topicality of the issue under analysis, swearing as a sociolinguistic construct and its basic features, review of literature relevant to the topic analyzed, distinguishing features of swearing in the Russian language, and, finally, proposal of the hypothesis the author is going to prove or disprove by the results of the practical part of the study. The practical part includes the description of the methodology designed for the research (the instruments used and the subjects), followed by the results demonstration, and discussion. The concluding part will summarize the key points of the research and provide arguments for the correctness or incorrectness of the hypothesis proposed.

### Topicality of the issue under analysis

As can be seen from current analysis of literature in the field, sociolinguistic research on gay and lesbian language has had almost no impact whatsoever on any branch of sociolinguistics —even if we look at those scholars dealing explicitly with language and gender [1]. We may inevitably wonder if this lack of impact is somehow related to structures of discrimination in academia that, until recently, actively discouraged any research on homosexuality that did not explicitly see it as deviance [2] [3]. Another problem related to research into language and sexual orientation is that works on gay and lesbian language have often appeared in obscure publications. The reason for that could be because works on this topic have no real "disciplinary home" (it happens often to the essays on the topic, which are pretty academic but belong nowhere). These ones are usually done by phoneticians, linguists, anthropologists, speech communication specialists, researchers in women's studies, and others, many of whom seem to have little contact with the work published outside their own discipline. Another problem to be mentioned is that much of the research on gay and lesbian language consists just of lists of in-group terms, discussion of terms for "homosexual," debates about the pros and cons of words like "gay" and "queer," or possible etymologies of words like "dyke," or "closet." [4] [5]. Thus, taking into account the lack of contemporary, new and relevant research more

studies like the present one have to be conducted to fill this gap and provide reliable materials for further research in various fields of study like sociolinguistics, sociology, and women studies.

### Swearing

Swearing as a linguistic and a social construct has a number of peculiar characteristics and features. First of all, it is ubiquitous and knows no age nor social boundaries [6] In other words, everybody swears occasionally, and some do so more regularly. While swearing can lead to social disapproval, and is commonly linked to laziness, lack of education or self-control, it is in fact an integral part of human interactions [7]. As Jay [6] points out, we feel better after swearing: its cathartic effect frees us of angry emotions and limits instances of physical violence. Another interesting detail about swearing is that people who swear are not necessarily perceived negatively and frequent use of swearwords is not an indication of a limited vocabulary, it is even on the contrary [7]. According to these scholars, swearing "well" requires a strong sense of what is considered appropriate within a particular speech community. As, for instance, children start to swear, their elders may tell them off and they gradually build up "experience with a culture and its language conventions" [8, p. 267]. It means that children become aware that 'some words are taboo or "bad" words and others are non-taboo, "good" or neutral words [9, p. 460]. The authors point out that when children enter school, they already possess the rudiments of adult swearing. Swearing can thus be described as a linguistic behavior that often triggers specific, explicit feedback, which is part of the socialization process. As for its functions, swearing is described as being able to promote group bonding and solidarity, inhibit aggression, elicit humor but it can also cause emotional pain to others [10]. According to this study, swearing allows not only the expression of emotion but also the construction and display of identity

### Swearing in Russian

To begin with, Russian is known to have a highly special system of swearing, known as "mat". As stated by Ljung [11] it's not hard to get the impression that Russian swearing goes to lengths rarely found in the swearing of other languages. As for the attitude that native speakers of this language have towards swearing it's claimed that they perceive it as a linguistic resource lacking in other languages and cultures and that they must be regarded as the most prominent swearers in the world. And a great number of scholars like Devkin [12], Drezin & Priestly [13], Von Timroth [14] agree with this viewpoint and are unanimous in their opinion that Russian not only possesses an unusually large supply of dirty words but has in addition an extremely creative set of rules permitting the creation of new swear words from old. According to Smith [15] and many others, there are purely linguistic reasons for the superiority and creativity of Russian swearing. As Smith has it: "Russian as a highly inflected language has a greater capacity than many other languages to generate obscenity, particularly through its highly complex

verbal system. This means that "mat" is not simply a collection of dirty words but a set of refined and complex linguistic structures which, to some extent, function as a shadow language of standard Russian."

It is reckoned, for instance, that by using the two verb forms (imperfective and perfective) which exist in Russian, together with standard verbal prefixes and reflective forms of these verbs it is possible to make 1596 verbs from eight standard obscene roots. And, because many such words carry variable meanings according to the context, it's claimed that the number of "mat" expressions is potentially limitless. More than that, any newly created dirty word (like a noun or a verb) may be used to replace basically any Russian noun or verb in the vocabulary. As we can see, Russian swearing system is really very impressive and, what is important to understand for us and that relates to this study, is that the choice of bad words in Russian is very rich and it is left to the speaker whether or not he\she will be tempted by a possibility of such a replacement.

**Hypotheses**

As has been mentioned before since it's impossible to predict to what extent the gender based stereotype of swearing is relevant in Russia today, which is known for very conservative views on gender roles and for a powerful role of governmental propaganda of "traditional values" and the denial of the diversity concept and legacy of LGBTQ+ community and acceptance of its members as "normal" members of society, two hypotheses are proposed. The first one describes the pattern the author aspires for: if frequency of lesbians' and straight women's swearing is on the same scale it can be viewed as a result of gradual death of gender-based stereotypes and excessive swearing as a tool of rejection of hegemonic femininity, cultural and linguistic stereotypes. The second hypothesis could describe the results if almost no swearing is found in straight women's language and the difference between them and lesbians is significant: if lesbians swear more frequently, and straight women very little, it possibly can be explained by the idea that lesbian women swear a lot but not because they mimic men's language, but instead seem to be rejecting femininity and many of the cultural and linguistic stereotypes that accompany it (swearing in this way can be seen as a reaction to not willing to accept "be a lady" expectations, imposed by male-dominated world).

**Methodology. Instruments.**

Data for the practical part were collected with the help of an anonymous questionnaire that was emailed to the subjects (10 lesbians and 10 straight girls correspondingly). The questionnaire consisted of a number of questions proposing social contexts in which swearing might appear. The responses provided made use of the scale, most commonly used for sociolinguistic research. A sample question can be put here: How often do you swear? When you are (1) with friends; (2) with family; (3) with colleagues and (4) with strangers. Possible answers would include: (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 =sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = very frequently). The arguments in favor of the design include the following. First of all, the author assumes that people are sufficiently aware of the amount of swearing they use over a wide time-span in specific interactions and can readily comment on when prompted. Secondly, it's believed that the reliability of the self-reported data is strengthened by anonymity of the participants. Indeed, subjects had no reason to lie about the frequency with which they swear as it would not benefit them in any way. Third, the reduced social desirability (the tendency of participants to answer questions in a manner that they imagine will be viewed favorably by the researcher) is another crucial advantage of anonymous questionnaires (in comparison to actual production data). So, it can be stated that the instrument created by the author suits perfectly for the aim of the study and contributes to its reliability.

**Participants**

As has been mentioned earlier, the number of subjects for the research is 20:10 lesbian and 10 straight women (native speakers of Russian, monolingual) of the relatively same age, social status, and level of education. Since in the present study it was decided to focus on language usage differences brought by differences in sexual orientation of the participants, these three factors won't be considered as potential reasons for language usage variation. Since the author knows the subjects in person it can be stated that such factors as differences in age, social status and education are insufficient to alter the results and thus may be not taken into consideration.

**Results**

The placed below graphs reflect the results received. Each of them shows the context and the type of interlocutor and frequency of swearing in two groups of the participants, and the numbers 1-5 show the degree of frequency of swearing (1-very frequently, 2-frequently, 3-sometimes, 4-rarely, 5-never)
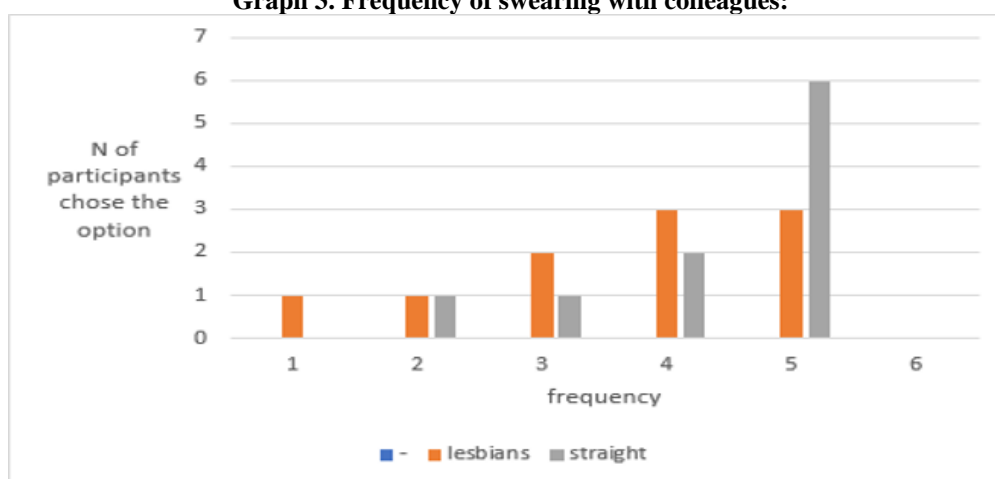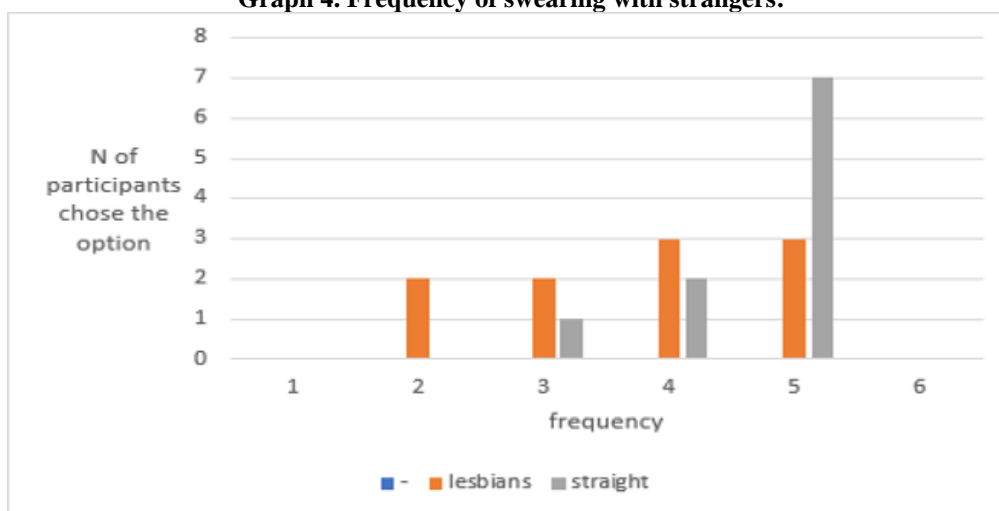
**Graph 1. Frequency of swearing with friends:**
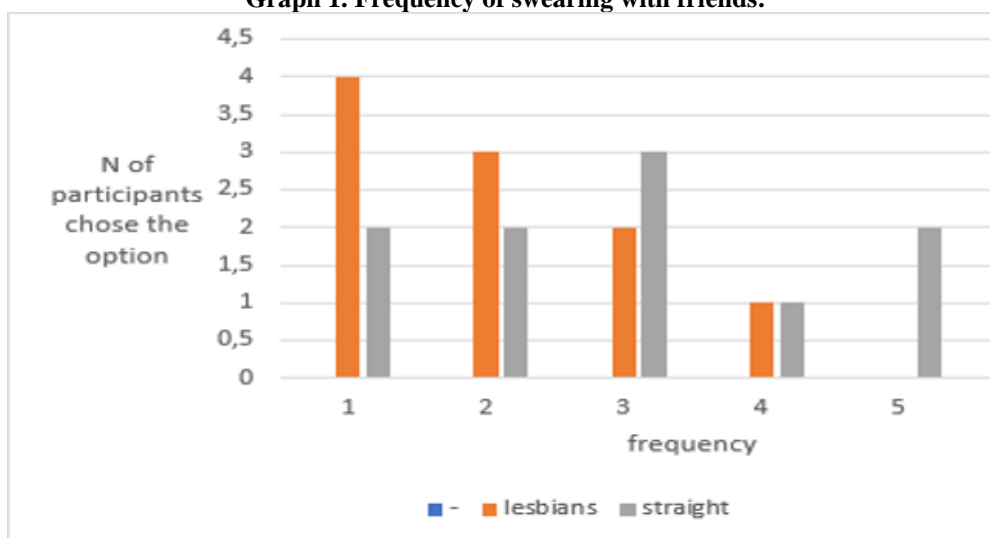


**Graph 2. Frequency of swearing with family:**
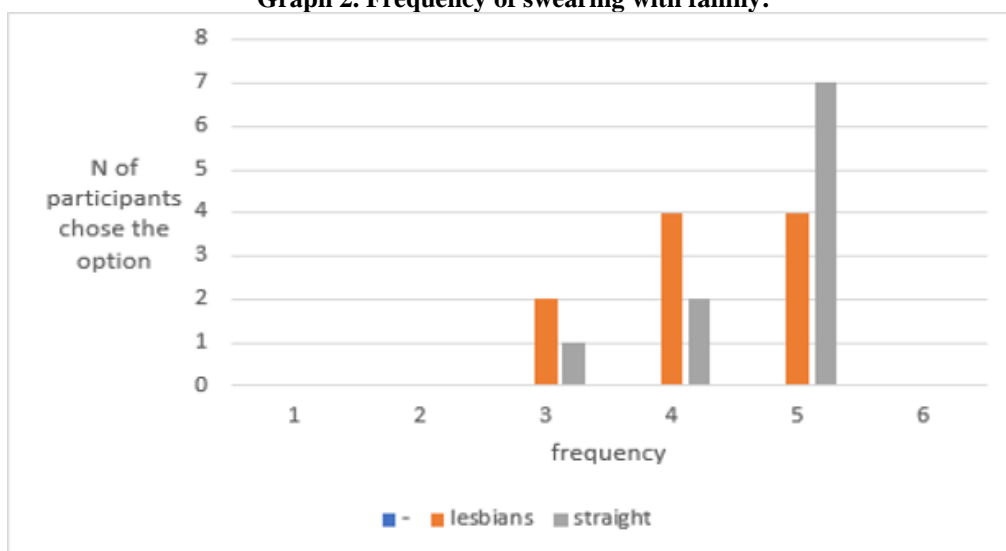


**Graph 3. Frequency of swearing with colleagues:**

**Graph 4. Frequency of swearing with strangers:**



**Conclusions**

As can be seen, the general tendency is that lesbians reported more swearing across interlocutors compared to straight girls: with any type of interlocutor lesbians demonstrated higher degree of swearing which was expected. But an interesting part of the results concerns the fact that straight girls in many situations accept and don't hide the fact of frequent use of dirty language (with friends, for example). Another point to make is that the results show that the effect of interlocutor on self-reported frequency of swearing isn't similar for lesbians and straight girls, and it is significantly weaker for the latter. It shows that both these groups adapt their swearing behavior to the type of interlocutor they are facing. Interactions with friends are most likely to elicit swearing. Swearing with colleagues, on the other hand, is less frequent (rare), while swearing with strangers and family members is very rare.

**Discussion**

The results clearly demonstrate that lesbians tend to swear more frequently. But the question about the trigger of this behavior remains open: is it caused by the desire to stress their masculine side or do they do it because they want to resemble men and that is the reason why they mimic their language? Though it can't be proved empirically, the author's idea of interpretation of this linguistic behavior is that lesbians swear more because they want to distance themselves from the world of heterosexual and vulnerable women who are expected to keep the identity of a lady and thus be under the influence of men-imposed rules of how a girl should and shouldn't behave. Since lesbians strive for independency and self-sufficiency they swear because this type of behavior represents the most straightforward way to demonstrate that a female speaker is not going to obey common rules and is not afraid of being judged or criticized by society. Another possible reason explaining a high rate of swearing may be caused by the unconscious feeling of a danger or a hostile attitude from other people (the situation with strangers (number 4) confirms that). It may be that lesbians bearing in mind that they stand out and represent a minority and thus may evoke criticism or instances of intolerant behavior from people surrounding them use swearing as a defense tool and demonstration that they are ready to stand for themselves and are not afraid to demonstrate aggression. As for other characteristics of language usage by lesbians, they turned out to be not as categorical as straight women in the answers (rarely opted for "never" answer). Besides, it seems that they care less about (potential) judgement from others probably because are more self-confident and are used to opposing disapproval from the others. Turning to the characteristics of straight women the author assumes it may be concluded that they want to look a little bit better than they actually are (judging from their answers and constant preference for "rarely" and "never" options). But basically, straight women are doing well getting rid (gradually) of the gender-based stereotype that swearing is appropriate for men (as an indicator of masculinity). But still in a number of situations they seem to be influenced by "be a lady" men-imposed rules. Therefore, none of the proposed hypotheses is either fully proved or disproved.

**Limitations**

Since this research is new in its field, it's obvious that it's not perfect and can be improved in many ways. The first aspect to be discussed here is the problem of self-reported data. The point here is that self-reported behavior, in the author's opinion, may be not 100% correct and may include some margin of error linked to social bias. So, probably, this way of data collection may be combined with recordings, for instance, of actual language production and in this case data received will be more accurate. Another weakness of the study is insufficient diversity of the sample of age, education, and social class. It can't be claimed that data collected for this study is representative of the general population, with its high proportion of highly educated participants of (relatively) the same age. Doubtless, reliability of the research would be higher if the practical part included subjects from different backgrounds, of different age and level of education.

The methodology should also be reworked because the questions designed can be interpreted in several ways since such notions as family, strangers,

and etc are very broad and may be referred in the case of family, for instance, to parents, siblings, grandparents, children, distant relatives and many other members of the family. So, in order to contextualize the questions and avoid confusion with their interpretation it could be better to make up some scenarios that would describe a particular real-life situation. And the last nuance that could make the study broader is to put into focus not only lesbians and straight women, but gay and straight men as well. It would be interesting to see if the pattern between straight and gay man is the same or not and how we can account for the results.

All in all, the presented study can be viewed as is a good starting point for further research in the field and considerable contribution to study of lesbian language in Russia.

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