The influence of social relations on the use of expletives in speech

Abstract:
A seldom studied area of pragmatics has been the use of expletives in relation to one’s social standing with the hearer of an utterance, and the way that these relations affect the speech acts in which the expletives are used. These utterances, which work to convey information regarding the speaker’s perspective in terms of emotional state, are found cross-linguistically, and are generally used when the speaker would be dissatisfied expressing their ideas through conventionally descriptive means (Potts, 2008). One broad goal of my research is to identify how different social relationships between participants in a discourse affect the frequency of these items. How do interactions between close friends, co-workers, parents and children, etc. affect the likelihood and frequency of their use? Using transcripts from The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), I plan to search for utterances that use expletives (such as “damn”, “bloody”, and “frigging”), and to find examples that occur in a variety of contexts/that are used in particular speech acts. After locating examples within the database, I plan to evaluate the social relationship of both participants in the discourse. Later, I will evaluate the frequency of expletives across different types of social interaction. I expect to see that the use of expletives also carries out an indexical function that is directly related to the relationship between the speaker and hearer participating in a discourse. An example of an expletive used in a speech act between two close friends:

“And why, good God, did you have to go and title the thing "Tale of Two Summers"? I mean, you make it sound like some friggin' Judy Blume novel!” (via http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/)