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USE OF SWEAR WORDS AMONG YOUNG DANES IN THE REALITY TV SERIES *EX ON THE BEACH*

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Abstract: The majority of research on swear words has for many years been conducted on English language data (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton 2017: 7). In Danish language research, there has been a resurgence in the study of swear words in recent years, but the study of their use in young people's spoken language has been a neglected area. In this article, the use of swear words in the reality show *Ex on the Beach*, which was broadcast in Denmark from 2018-2019 and featured young participants in their early twenties, is examined. One finding is that young people swear more than in previous Danish studies, and the young participants from *Ex on the Beach* primarily swear with modern swear words from the taboo area of "lower body functions", which confirms previous studies of Scandinavian young people's swear words yielding the same result (Rathje 2010; Stroh-Wollin 2010; Hasund 2005). The proportion of English swear words among young people also appears to be increasing, not least the omnipresent swear word "fucking". Lastly, the study of swear words in *Ex on the Beach* reveals the result that female participants swear as much as the males, contradicting numerous previous national and international research results indicating that men swear more often than women (e.g., McEnery and Xiao 2004; Jay 1992; Jay and Jay 2013; Beers Fägersten 2012; Quist 2012; Rathje 2017; Bednarek 2008, 2010; Stroh-Wollin 2014).

Keywords: swear words; Danish; *Ex on the Beach;* spoken language; gender; sociolinguistics; reality TV; youth language.

1. Introduction

One often encounters claims in Danish media that Danish youth swear frequently and their language is filled with English swear words (see, e.g., Toustrup 2017; Madsbøl Christensen 2020). However, not much is known about the reality of Danish youth language in this area, as there is a lack of studies on young people's use of both Danish and English swear words in contemporary Danish spoken language. The largest study on the topic so far is Rathje (2010a), which showed that young and older generations used an equal amount of swear words (Rathje 2010a: 148-153). The study also demonstrated that, at that time (in the early 2000s), English swear words comprised 10% of the swear words used by young people. However, the data upon which this author's thesis was founded is 20 years old (from 2002-2003). Considering the general lack of studies on the escalating use of English swear words in non-English contexts (Beers Fägersten 2017: 65; Zenner *et al.* 2017: 107), there is a need for new studies on young people's use of swear words in modern Danish spoken language.

The purpose of this article is therefore to investigate young people's use of swear words in modern Danish spoken language. Despite certain challenges associated with comparing this with previous studies, I aim to discern if young people, as per the data used in this article, swear more than they have in previous studies. In the study, I will also look at which types of swear words young people use, both in relation to traditional categories (e.g., disease and religion) and regarding borrowing of English swear words. Here too, in comparison with previous research, I will establish whether there has been a change since the time when scatological and religious swear words were the most frequently used in young people's language (Rathje 2010a). Given the influence that the English language has on Danish (see, e.g., Gottlieb 2020; Heidemann Andersen 2020), I expect that English swear words today are more frequent than before.

2. Data

The data for this article is sourced from the reality program *Ex on the Beach* Denmark (hereafter abbreviated EOTB) broadcasted on the TV channel Discovery+/Dplay. The TV program revolves around the intrigues that arise when young men and women (with free access to alcohol) are placed in a luxury villa at an exotic holiday destination. The young participants are filmed 24 hours a day, and the program consists partly of footage of the participants' lives in the villa, and partly of footage of the participants being interviewed about the things that have happened in the villa during the day. The linguistic usage within the realm of reality television typically exhibits a greater degree of informality compared to many conventional television broadcasts, as reality shows strive to depict authentic interactions among participants (e.g., Aslama and Pantti 2006). Furthermore, reality television often emphasizes emotional scenarios, resulting in participants' language being characterized as emotive and expressive, including the incorporation of swearwords (Karpenko-Seccombe 2022).

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The EOTB series premiered in Denmark in August 2018 and, as of April 2024 consists of 8 seasons. The dialogue of the first three seasons of EOTB was manually transcribed, and the transcriptions together constitute a corpus consisting of approximately 560,000 words. Each season comprises 24 episodes of approximately 45 minutes each, therefore the corpus is based on a total of approximately 54 hours of TV.

The dataset from EOTB serves as a significant resource for investigating the contemporary linguistic patterns exhibited by young individuals. However, it is critical to note that the language employed within the context of this program does not comprehensively encapsulate the communication style of all young Danes, nor does it fully represent the linguistic habits of the EOTB participants themselves. It is plausible that a particular demographic may be predisposed to volunteer for participation in EOTB, and, furthermore, that a specific subgroup may be selected to appear in the show. Participants in a reality TV program such as EOTB are often characterized by being youthful, commonly lacking formal education or possessing vocational training, and by a distinct personality type that motivates their participation in such shows, namely characteristics such as extroversion, emotional openness, and a penchant for adventure (Jensen 2013). Reality TV participants like those in EOTB represent a demographic willing to expose themselves and their personal lives on television despite potential repercussions for their future reputation. Additionally, they can be perceived as juxtaposing the upper class, deviating from norms and values typically associated with more privileged strata of society (Jensen 2013).

The analysis conducted in this study primarily revolves around the discourse of these individuals within a singular and distinctive context – casual interaction with peers and in the presence of a camera or interviewer. Therefore, drawing definitive conclusions about the participants' language use in other social situations based on the EOTB dataset alone is a precarious endeavor. In fact, it is nearly impossible to ascertain with absolute certainty the complete spectrum of language use exhibited by the young participants throughout the EOTB recordings. This uncertainty stems from the fact that extensive hours of television footage are typically condensed into broadcasts lasting approximately 45 minutes. As an audience, we are unaware of the extent of editing carried out in the production of the reality shows that are ultimately aired (Zenner *et al.* 2015: 335). However, one can assume that the more dramatic recordings take up more space than the less dramatic ones, and therefore, at least in theory, one could get a different picture of the language of young people if one had access to all recordings. Concurrently, it should be noted that EOTB, as in any other reality show, is a program where specific participant behaviors (expressive, outgoing, and sexually active) are rewarded, as participants who provide good entertainment usually avoid being forced to leave the program prematurely. Participation in EOTB can thus be compared to a performance (Goffman 1992) in which participants take on a certain role with the expectations and obligations that come with it, such as specific language use and behavior. According to Goffman, it is important to be aware that the role one takes on when "performing" should not be confused with one's underlying self (Hviid Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2002), and thus, it can be said that the language observed in

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EOTB is a certain type of language expressed in a very specific social performance. Therefore, it cannot be defined as the participants' language per se.

Finally, one can also discuss to what extent the examined language is "natural". Being recorded 24 hours a day while living in a vacation home with a group of people you have never met before is a situation that probably does not feel natural for that many people. However, it should be emphasized that the participants themselves have repeatedly stated in the media that they do not think about their language when they are recorded 24 hours a day (e.g., in DR's (Danish Broadcasting) radio program *Klog på sprog*, 31st July 2020), and that in comparable studies of language in reality shows, it is also assumed that the examined conversations are relatively natural (see, e.g., Fjeld and Kristiansen, unpublished).

The reservations made here regarding the data essentially apply to all reality shows. Nevertheless, reality TV has been the subject of several studies of especially young adults' language (Zenner *et al.* 2015; Hindriks and van Hofwegen 2014; Fjeld and Kristiansen, unpublished), primarily because the language reflected in the genre is the "ordinary people's" relaxed everyday language in a social context, collected in a form that is both easily accessible and sufficiently comprehensive for quantitative analysis.

Several researchers in recent years have insisted that it's time for TV dialogue to be taken seriously as research data and become the subject of systematic linguistic investigations (e.g., Bednarek 2010: 2), including even fictional TV, where reality data is closer to "natural language". One argument for studying TV dialogue, whether it's fictional or from a reality program, is that the dialogue, whether viewed on traditional TV or streamed, is seen by many people, at least in the Western world. Thus, the language used in TV dialogues potentially affects the language of many language users (Bednarek 2010: 10; Coupland 2007: 185; Beers Fägersten 2016: 5).

3. Definition of swear words

The definition of swear words used in this article is derived from Rathje (2014b: 350-360), and it builds on previous definitions of swear words by Andersson and Trudgill (1990), Stenström (1991), Stroh-Wollin (2008), and Ljung (2011):

> Swear words are words that refer to something taboo in the culture in which the language is used. They should not be taken literally, and they are used to express emotions and attitudes, but they are not used about other people. (Rathje 2014b: 356)

The concept of "linguistic taboo" covers a wide range, and swear words only constitute a subset of linguistic taboo:

> The study of linguistic taboo is the study of forbidden or dispreferred meanings and words […] that refer to problematic areas of reality such as sexuality, ethnicity, religion, economic status, aging, death, illness, or bodily

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> functions, among others, and the expression of these concepts through euphemism (mitigated expression), orthophemism (neutral expression) or dysphemism (offensive expression) […] swearing and insulting […] are also part of linguistic taboo. (Pizarro Pedraza 2018: 1)

The above definition of swearwords by Rathje (2014) excludes insults, i.e., words that are derogatory towards (other) people (besides oneself). The difference between swear words and insults can also be expressed as follows: "[…] swearing *at someone*, as opposed to swearing merely *in the company of someone*" (Beers Fägersten 2012: 159, my emphasis).

The aforementioned definition of swear words, which is used in this article, differs, for example, from the definition used by Ljung (2011), which also includes derogatory words. I have separated the two types of words because swear words and derogatory words presumably have different emotional effects on the recipient. Calling a girl, for example, a "whore" (derogatory word) probably affects the girl who is the target of the word more emotionally than if she had overheard someone say "for fuck's sake" (swear word) in anger. Therefore, derogatory words can be characterized as coarse/aggressive language use, even though swear words can also be perceived as offensive. To illustrate the importance of distinguishing between swear words and derogatory words, an example from an interview conducted by Beers Fägersten (2012) can be provided. Here the interviewee says:

> One thing that your survey didn't really touch on was it's one thing to swear and curse, but it's another thing to curse at people. That's one thing I hardly ever do. I hardly ever tell people "F-you", and "You're this" and call you names. (Beers Fägersten 2012: 150)

Jay (1992) points out that "not all dirty words are dirty all the time". It depends on the context whether something should be understood as a swear word:

> What is (un)mentionable for a speaker at a given moment is the result of an assessment of the communicative situation: who are the interlocutors, what is the relationship between them, what are they talking about, where are they, or how do they want to be perceived, are questions that determine what becomes a taboo. (Pizarro Pedraza 2018: 1)

Even an expression in the same language, but used in two different countries/cultures, can be crucial in determining whether an expression should be perceived as a taboo word or not, as shown by Chamizo Domínguez (2005: 15) with the example of *tortillera*: "*tortillera* (literally "female omelet maker") is a term of abuse for "lesbian" in Spain; by contrast, it means "female tortilla maker" in Mexico and is not a taboo term at all". In this study, I have in each case of a potential swear word examined the context to find out if the word is actually used as a swear word according to the above definition. To give an example of this, the word *pis* (a derogatory word for urine) can be used. The interjection *pis* can be used as a swear word in a statement like "Pis! How annoying": it is a word that should not be taken literally and is used to express feelings and attitudes. But the same word can also be used as slang for "urine"

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(*pis* as a noun) in a statement like "Mit pis er helt gult" ("My pee is completely yellow") where the word should be taken literally and does not (only) express feelings and attitudes. The frequency analyses below take into account the meaning in which each word is used in the context. By "liberating" a word from its referential function (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 53), it can be used to express feelings and attitudes, but if it is used in its literal sense, it can be called an expression of "vulgar" language use (Rathje 2014b). Such "vulgar expressions" are perceived by some as more offensive language use than swear words, as these words were rated as the most offensive in Beers Fägersten (2012: 94). The distinction between whether expressions should be understood literally (swear words) or non-literally (vulgar expressions) can also be found in Pizarro Pedraza *et al.* (2024), where a differentiation is made between referential and non-referential functions of taboo language. Here, non-referential expressions include swear words (such as the interjection "shit!") and non-referential uses encompass, for example, "words and expressions used to refer to taboo concepts, like the noun 'shit' to refer specifically to 'feces'" (Pizarro Pedraza *et al.* 2024: 1)[1].

The definition used in this article does not include whether and to what extent swear words are perceived or experienced as swear words, even though this means that the definition and thus the analyses below may include words that may not – anymore – be perceived as swear words. For example, in a survey of Danish swear words, *sgu* (a contraction of *så Gud hjælpe mig*, meaning "so help me God") was perceived as a swear word by only 58% of the respondents (Rathje 2014a). It can therefore be discussed whether *sgu* is actually a swear word and whether the experience of swear words should be included in a definition. This is also discussed by Stroh-Wollin (2008), who in her diachronic study of Swedish swear words in drama dialogue over three centuries includes expressions that are hardly perceived as swear words by any Swedes at the time of the study (Stroh-Wollin 2008: 28). However, Stroh-Wollin includes these words because the perception of the strength of swear words can vary over time. As Allan and Burridge (2006: 9) also assert: "Nothing is taboo for all people, under all circumstances, for all time". The perception of taboos, including the taboo content in swear words, varies over time, for example in relation to the culture it is used in: "taboo refers to a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 11). The perception of taboo also varies generationally within the Danish-speaking community, which likewise complicates a definition: when 69% of the elderly in the aforementioned attitude survey (Rathje 2014a) perceived *sgu* as a swear word, while only 47% of the younger generation did the same, it is difficult to determine whether *sgu* should be defined as a swear word – there are differing opinions based on the

[1] Pizarro Pedraza *et al.* (2024) find that their L2 informants understand the referential function of an expression in a foreign language, but struggle with the non-referential functions such as swear words and insults, likely because these require (more demanding) pragmatic competencies, and because swear words and insults are rarely practiced in foreign language acquisition.

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experience of it. Therefore, the perception of swear words is not part of the definition here.

4. Method

All swear words have been manually identified in the transcribed data and entered into a spreadsheet. The transcribed EOTB data takes into account whether the conversation is a dialogue or whether the participants are speaking directly to the camera. The term "swear word" is used in the article to refer to both single words (*Livet det er kraftedeme ikke fair*, e.g., "Life is fucking unfair"[2]) and entire expressions ("Oh my God"). Expressions containing more than one swear word (e.g., "shit, shit") are recorded as the actual number of occurrences (in this case, 2). Swear words that appear in purely English expressions (e.g., "DJ, spin that shit") are also included. However, swear words that appear in expressions where one participant is quoting another participant (e.g., "'fucking bad sex', he declares") are not included, since when one participant quotes another, the swear words used do not necessarily reflect the language usage of the person being quoted, but rather potentially that of the original speaker.

5. Danish swear words in the EOTB corpus

5.1. Frequency

In the data, there are a total of 5,105 instances of swear words. Given a total frequency of 558,837 words in the entire dataset, this equates to a total swear word frequency of 9.1 swear words per 1,000 words. These overall frequencies, however, is an average of the frequency distributed across the three seasons of EOTB and covers differences that are significant ($p < 0.001$[3]) (see Table 1). This significant difference in the number of swear words across the seasons (particularly Season 1 compared to the following two seasons) will be revisited in Section 6.

[2] The Danish swear word *kraftedeme* directly translates to "may the cancer eat me". However, in terms of its strength or force as an expletive in English, it is equivalent to "fucking".

[3] In all significance tests in this article, Pearson's chi-squared test has been utilized, and in certain cases, Yates' continuity correction or Fischer exact test has been applied. Moreover, each response option or word type has been checked for significant differences between the tested groups using a post-hoc test. The post-hoc test utilizes the standardized chi-squared residuals, which can provide an indication of the difference and whether the differences for each individual response option is significant upon conversion to p-value. Furthermore, the p-values in the post-hoc test have been corrected with a Bonferroni correction to avoid overestimating the difference for individual response options.

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Table 1. Number of swear words in the three seasons of EOTB.

	Occurrences of swear words in total
Season 1	2,865
Season 2	1,316
Season 3	923
In total	5,105

To ascertain whether the overall swear word frequency is high or low, it can be compared to prior studies on the use of swear words in spoken language by young people. A generational language study (Rathje 2010a), with conversations recorded in 2002-2003 between unfamiliar youths aged 16-18, found 2.1 instances of swear words per 1,000 words (Rathje 2010a: 153). The same swear word definition has been used in both studies. When compared to the swear word frequency in EOTB, the frequency in the reality program is significantly higher, more than 4 times as high, to be precise. It might be tempting to interpret the difference as a shift in language use, suggesting a trend of younger people using more swear words than in the past, as is often assumed in Danish public discourse (e.g., Toustrup 2017). However, the data types vary so significantly that it is unclear what accounts for the frequency difference. The following factors could potentially explain the higher swear word usage in EOTB:

- The participants' average age is higher in EOTB, at 22.7 years, compared to 16.8 years in the generational corpus (Rathje 2010a: 67). Nevertheless, no published study suggests that people in their twenties use more swear words than teenagers.
- Only women participated in the generational study (Rathje 2010a: 84), and other research indicates that men use more swear words than women and that swearing is associated with masculine identity (e.g., McEnery and Xiao 2004; Jay 1992; Jay and Jay 2013; Beers Fägersten 2012; Quist 2012; Rathje 2017). This may explain why fewer swear words were found in the generational study.
- Participants in EOTB hail from all over Denmark, while those in the generational study are all from Copenhagen. Yet, no studies have identified any frequency differences in swear word use based on geographical location within Denmark.
- The communication settings in the two datasets are very different: in the generational study, two young strangers meet and converse in a café for around 30 minutes, whereas the participants in EOTB, though initially strangers, quickly get to know each other well. The EOTB setting includes eating, sleeping, and relaxation situations, which are hardly comparable to a formal café visit with a stranger. This could explain the lower number of swear words in the generational study.
- Due to the nature of the communication situation, participants in EOTB are likely to be less conscious of wearing a microphone 24 hours a day,

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while café participants would probably be acutely aware of being recorded. This might account for the fewer swear words in the generational study, as individuals may censor their language when recorded by a microphone.

- EOTB features selected segments of recorded reality, and previous studies show that "emotional language", including swear words, is a defining feature of fictional TV dialogue (Bednarek 2010; Sanger 2001; Kozloff 2000; Bubel 2006; Quaglio 2008). While EOTB is not fiction, it is a constructed reality created for commercial purposes that could be linked to fiction (Booth 2004). As such, one can expect a higher frequency of swear words in EOTB than in generational conversations.

The number of swear words in the EOTB corpus has a closer resemblance in frequency to a corpus of dialogue from children's TV fiction (Rathje 2017) than to Rathje's (2010a) generational study. Rathje (2017) compared three children's TV programs targeted at the 7-12-year-old audience from the 2010s (the series *Pendlerkids/*"Commuter Kids" and *Panisk Påske/*"Panic Easter") with a 30-year-old children's TV series from the 1980s (*Busters Verden/*"Buster's World")[4]. The older TV series had 5.8 swear words per 1,000 words, while the newer series had 7.8 (*Pendlerkids*) and 9.2 (*Panisk Påske*) per 1,000 words. When comparing the number of swear words in newer children's TV fiction with the 9.1 swear words in the EOTB corpus, these numbers are approximately the same. However, it is noteworthy that EOTB is a reality TV show featuring older participants than the teens in the children's series, which are purely fictional. As for the frequency of swear words, EOTB's language usage mirrors that of a fictional TV series for children. This may suggest that the language used in EOTB is influenced by a different and more liberal attitude towards swear words than what previous generations have experienced.

5.2. Types

There are three main types of Danish swear words based on the taboo areas they reference (Rathje 2010a): religious swear words, disease-related swear words, and swear words related to lower bodily functions, i.e., sex and excretion[5]. These main categories are similar in English (Stapleton 2010) with the exception of disease-related swear words. While older English expressions also referenced diseases, such as "Pox!" or "A pox on you" (Hughes 1991: 189; Ljung 2011: 43), referring to smallpox, such swear words are not prevalent in contemporary English. Ruette (2018: 229) mentions that swear words associated with the taboo

[4] The fact that swear words are allowed on Danish national children's TV highlights the cultural and linguistic ideological differences in the censorship of swear words between Denmark and, for example, the USA. However, not all groups in Danish society condone the use of swear words in children's TV.

[5] Numerous studies differentiate between the sexual and scatological dimensions due to their distinct physiological, psychological, and anthropological characteristics. The decision not to separate these dimensions in this analysis stems from the prevailing convention within Danish profanity research to address these aspects in a unified manner, thus facilitating comparisons with preceding investigations.

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of disease are a Dutch specialty – with expressions including, for example, AIDS, typhus, and cancer (Ruette 2018: 233) – which is otherwise only attested in Yiddish and Polish and in Southern Germany during the 1300s-1400s. However, as shown below, swear words related to diseases also exist in modern Danish (although disease swear words in Danish originate from the 1700s (Rathje 2010a) and the swear word type is no longer productive in Danish as it is in Dutch).

The religious swear words can be divided into "celestial", i.e., heavenly, expressions that reflect positive religious forces like God and Heaven, such as *du godeste gud* ("my goodness") and *hvad i himlens navn* ("what in heaven's name"), while the other category comprises diabolical expressions that represent dark forces such as the Devil and Hell, for example, *for fanden* ("for the devil") and *for helvede* ("for hell") (Stroh-Wollin 2014: 181). Religious swear words are the oldest type in Danish, with some dating back to before the Reformation, i.e., the 1500s (Rathje 2010a). Previous research suggests that religious swear words are typically used by adult and elderly Danes, rather than by the younger generation (Rathje 2014b). The use of religious swear words has been generally declining in the Western world, especially in Protestant regions – also seen in Dutch, as mentioned by van Hofwegen (2016: 7), referencing van Sterkenburg (2008). Conversely, there has been an increase in another type of swear words, particularly those related to lower bodily functions, especially sex (refer to Fjeld 2002; Pinker 2007).

As previously stated, Danish swear words can also reference diseases. For instance, the term *pokker* denotes smallpox or syphilis, and *kræft* refers to cancer. These diseases feature in expressions like *for pokker*, *pokkers*, and *kraftedeme*, a contraction of the phrase meaning "may cancer devour me". Disease-related swear words in Danish are newer than religious ones, emerging around the 18th century (Rathje 2010a).

Lastly, there are swear words associated with the lower bodily functions, primarily sex and defecation. These include phrases like *lort* ("shit"), *skide* ("to defecate"), *pisse* ("to pee"), and the borrowed English terms "shit", "fuck", and "fucking". The category concerning "lower bodily functions" includes the most recent Danish swear words *lort*, *skide*, and *pisse* originated in the first half of the 20th century, while the English terms "shit", "fuck", and "fucking" came into use in the latter half of the 20th century in Danish (Rathje 2010a). Past research has indicated that swear words related to the taboo topic of lower bodily functions are predominantly used by younger people, unlike middle-aged and older Danes (Rathje 2010a).

As illustrated in Table 2, the young participants in EOTB tend to use swear words that pertain to the taboo area of lower bodily functions most frequently:

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Table 2. Used types of swear words in EOTB.

	Religious	**Disease-related**	**Lower bodily functions**
Use of swear word types in EOTB	46 % (N = 2,337)	2.9 % (N = 146)	51.1 % (N = 2,611)

As previously noted, past studies (Rathje 2010a, 2017) have demonstrated that Danish youths commonly use swear words related to lower bodily functions. In the generational study mentioned earlier (Rathje 2010a), 42.9% of the young group's swear words fell into the lower bodily function category. In contrast, this category accounted for 2.9% and 1.6% of the swear words used by middle-aged and elderly individuals, respectively. Likewise, in the aforementioned study analyzing the use of swear words in Danish children's TV series (Rathje 2017), one of the series with the highest frequency of swear words (*Panisk Påske*) consisted of 48.2% lower bodily function swear words. Thus, the analysis of data from EOTB reinforces the notion that young people frequently use swear words related to lower bodily functions, with this category making up 51.1% of swear words. The trend of increased usage of swear words from the lower bodily functions category in the present compared to the past has been corroborated in several Nordic studies – for example Rathje (2010b) for Danish, Stroh-Wollin (2010) for Swedish, and Hasund (2005) for Norwegian – indicating that young people are leading this trend, which is further confirmed in the current study.

5.3. Gender

Swear words are considered one of the linguistic features that most consistently demonstrate gender differences (Coats 2021: 23). They are often associated with masculine identity (Mills 2005: 273; Stapleton 2003: 22; Stapleton 2010: 292; de Klerk 1991; Lakoff 1975). Research has also shown that men/boys use more swear words than women/girls, both in spoken language (e.g., McEnery and Xiao 2004; Jay 1992; Jay and Jay 2013; Beers Fägersten 2012; Quist 2012) and in written language across traditional text types (Newman *et al.* 2008), social media (Bamman *et al.* 2014; Wang *et al.* 2014; Coats 2021), as well as in fictional contexts such as children's TV series (Rathje 2017), adult TV series (Bednarek 2008, 2010), and Swedish dramas from the 18th to 20th century (Stroh-Wollin 2014).

However, there appears to be no gender difference in the frequency of swear words used in EOTB:

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Table 3. Frequency of swearing in relation to gender.

	Occurrences in data	**Percentage share**
Male	2,517	49.3 %
Female	2,549	49.9 %
Gender unknown[6]	40	0.8 %
In total	5,106	100 %

As shown, men and women use an equal percentage of swear words in EOTB. This result could indicate a shift compared to previous studies on everyday language use. Regarding fiction (Rathje 2017), the absence of gender differences in the frequency of swear words used in EOTB implies that within the genre of fiction, swear words may be employed to construct a masculine identity for characters. This may not reflect how language is utilized by young people in non-fictional contexts such as EOTB. The fact that women in EOTB use as many swear words as men could also suggest that previous findings indicating that women are judged more negatively than men when they swear (Stapleton 2003; de Klerk 1992) may not hold as firmly today. A recent study examining the use of swear words in a Nordic Twitter corpus (Coats 2021) revealed that among the five countries investigated (Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark), gender differences were the second least pronounced in the Danish Twitter data (with the least pronounced differences found in Sweden). Interestingly, the Danish data was distinct from the other Nordic countries in that Danish women used certain swear words more often than men (Coats 2021: 46). Therefore, besides indicating a temporal shift, the lack of gender differences in EOTB could also be partially attributed to the fact that we are dealing with Danish data, despite traditional gender differences having been observed in Danish data in the past (see Rathje 2017 and Quist 2012).

I also investigated whether men and women in the data used different types of swear words:

Table 4. Men's and women's swear words distributed by type.

	Occurrences in data by male respondents	**Occurrences in data by female respondents**	**Percentage share male respondents**	**Percentage share female respondents**
Lower functions of the body	1,114	1,470	44.3 %	57.7 %

[6] "Gender unknown" is a term used to indicate that it has not been possible to determine which participant used the swear word, for example, because they are off screen, and therefore it is not always possible to determine the participant's gender.

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Religious	1,301	1,034	51.7 %	40.6 %
Disease-related	102	45	4.1 %	1.8 %
In total	2,517	2,549	100 %	100 %

As illustrated by Table 4, there are some highly significant gender differences in the types of swear words used: women use the lower bodily function type of swear words significantly more than men ($p < 0.001$), while men use religious and disease-related swear words significantly more than women (in both cases $p < 0.001$). Given that lower bodily function swear words are the newest type, whereas religious and disease-related swear words are very old in Danish, it can be inferred that women significantly use more modern swear words, while men significantly favor traditional swear words.

The fact that the men in EOTB use traditional swear words and women use modern swear word is not surprising given the robust sociolinguistic evidence that women are leaders of linguistic change (e.g., Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Labov 2001), a point articulated by Labov (2001: 501) as follows: "any theory of the causes of change must deal with the general finding that in the good majority of linguistic changes, women are a full generation ahead of men". This outcome is also reflected in numerous earlier findings within the research on swear words. can be supported by previous research findings: 1) Rathje (2017) demonstrated in a study of children's series that the two male villains in *Panisk Påske* were assigned more religious (diabolical) swear words in their scripted dialogue than other male characters. This was likely to shape their identities towards more stereotypically traditional personas with lower education and/or more inclination towards violence. 2) A study of Danish newspapers' use of swear words (Rathje 2010b) showed that *Ekstrabladet*, a former working-class newspaper typically read by individuals with lower education levels, had a higher frequency of (old-fashioned) religious swear words compared to newspapers traditionally read by a more educated target audience, such as *Information*, which featured more modern swear words, like lower bodily function swear words. 3) The aforementioned study of Nordic Twitter data, similar to this EOTB study, shows that men predominantly use religious swear words, while women primarily use swear words related to lower bodily functions, as well as English swear words (Coats 2021: 49). Coats (*ibid.*: 51) interprets this result as women avoiding stigmatized language variants, thus they may be quicker to adopt modern and prestigious variants associated with "the sophistication of global culture" (*ibid.*). This is consistent with previous sociolinguistic interpretations (Labov 1990; Trudgill 1974, 1998) which finds that men are more likely to use language that is associated with local identity and less prestigious variants compared to the language use of women. In sociolinguistics, "prestige" refers to the degree of respect or esteem that is attributed to certain linguistic variants, and which is closely linked to power and social status (e.g., Trudgill 1972). Women's use of swear words thus directly

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hits the Gender Paradox (Labov 2001), which is the phenomenon that women are often both conservative (using fewer colloquial forms such as swear words than men) and innovative in terms of linguistic variation and change (leaders of sociolinguistic change, e.g. modern swear words): "women conform more closely than men to sociolinguistic norms that are overtly prescribed, but conform less than men when they are not" (Labov 2001: 293). Furthermore, everyday language forms – like swear words – are linked with masculinity and "toughness" (Holmes 2001: 157-161; Stapleton 2003).

6. English swear words in the EOTB corpus

In the initial part of this article, I discussed the general occurrence of swear words in EOTB and will now shift my focus to analyze a specific type of swear word, namely those of English origin.

The data set contains a total of 1,823 English swear words, such as "fucking", "shit", and "oh my God". As previously mentioned, considering the total number of swear words is 5,105, a little over every third swear word in the EOTB corpus is English. In Rathje's (2010a) generational study, it was approximately every tenth swear word among young people that originated from English. Thus, it seems the proportion of English swear words in the language of young people is increasing – bearing in mind the reservations mentioned earlier about comparing these two data sets.

As already mentioned, and shown in Table 5, the proportion of swear words is much higher in season 1 compared to seasons 2 and 3. Similarly, the proportion of English swear words is significantly higher in season 1 compared to seasons 2 and 3. The difference is statistically significant in both cases ($p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Number of English swear words in the three seasons of EOTB.

	Occurrences of swear words in total	**Occurrences of English swear words in total**	**Percentage share of English swear words in total**
Season 1	2,865	1,134	39.6 %
Season 2	1,316	399	30.3 %
Season 3	923	290	31.4 %
In total	5,105	1,823	35.7 %

As depicted in Table 5, nearly 40% of the swear words in season 1 are of English origin, whereas the same percentage for seasons 2 and 3 is slightly lower, being 30.3% and 31.4%, respectively. The high incidence of swear words in season 1 can likely be attributed to this season being particularly characterized by the formation of groups, intrigues, and jealousy. However, it cannot be ruled out that the difference in the number of swear words between season 1 and the

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subsequent two seasons could be due to the influence of the producers, such as the implementation of stricter guidelines for language use to adapt the show to a broader audience, or it may be due to a higher degree of self-censorship among the participants, who have watched the first season and are therefore more conscious of how they appear on TV, thus being more self-censoring regarding coarse language.

6.1. English Swear Words: Types

Similarly to the categorization of the Danish swear words, I have divided the English swear words in the EOTB corpus into two categories: "religion" and "lower bodily functions".

Table 6. Overview of the total number of English swear words in EOTB.

Occurrences of English swear words in total	**Lower functions of the body**	**Religious**
1,823	96.6 % (N = 1,761)	3.4 % (N =62)

As depicted in Table 6, there are only 62 words and phrases, which equate to 3.4% of the total number of English swear words that can be categorized under "religion". Examples include phrases like "oh my god" and "damn". The remaining 96.6% fall under the "bodily functions" category, with examples such as "fucking" and "shit". Thus, it can be observed that a rather limited group of swear words are borrowed from English, specifically those related to bodily functions. On the other hand, religious swear words – which otherwise constitute a significant part of the data – are borrowed only rarely. In Stenström's (1991) study of swear words in British English, she notes that speakers in the corpus studied "preferred expletives originating in religion to other types" (*ibid.*: 241), whereas Ljung's (1986) study of swear words in American data shows that sex was the most prevalent taboo in the swear words used. This result could indicate that the Danish youth in EOTB might be more influenced by American "swearing culture" than British when it comes to the borrowed English swear words.

6.1.1. English swear words: Religion

The religious English swear words that the young individuals use in the EOTB corpus primarily include expressions such as "(oh) (my) (fucking) God/my God", followed by "damn" and "(oh) God". The category labeled "Other" encompasses words and phrases that occur only once, for instance, "thank God" and "pray the lord.[7]"

[7] Stenström (1991) provides evidence indicating that profanities associated with celestial concepts, namely those alluding to "heaven", are perceived as less severe than those invoking "hell". Additionally, within the Danish, swear words with celestial references are regarded as profane by a comparatively limited demographic (Rathje 2014a).

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Table 7. English swear words: Religion.

Words and expressions	**Occurrences in data**
"Oh my (fucking) God/my God"	75.8 % (N = 47)
"Damn"	6.5 % (N = 4)
"(Ăh) God" ("(oh) God")	3.2 % (N = 2)
Other	14.5 % (N = 9)
In total	100 % (N = 62)

What primarily characterizes the religious swear words seen in Table 7 is their frequent usage in English. According to a 2006 study cited by Mohr in 2013, "oh my God" and "damn" rank among the 10 most commonly used swear words in American English. This study highlighted that "oh my God" was especially popular among women, with this single expression accounting for 24% of all swear words used by women (Mohr 2013: 177). It also noted that women tend to use milder, celestial swear words compared to men, a finding echoed in several other studies (Stenström 1991; Precht 2006). In the EOTB data set, "oh my God" is a prevalent expression, which accounts for approximately two-thirds of all instances.

Furthermore, research on the use of English swear words in Dutch (Hindriks and van Hofwegen 2014; van Hofwegen 2016) indicates that the most commonly used English religious swear words are "oh my God", "God", and "damn" – as well as "what the hell" and "Jesus (Christ)". This aligns closely with the findings of this EOTB study, suggesting that the English swear words found in various European languages are often identical.

6.1.2. English Swear Words: Lower Bodily Functions

As previously mentioned, the majority of English swear words are related to the body's lower functions. As depicted in Table 8, the words "fucking", "fuck", and "shit" predominantly characterize this category within the EOTB corpus of English swear words:

Table 8. English Swear Words – Lower Bodily Functions.

	Season 1	**Season 2**	**Season 3**	**In total**
"Fucking"	58.8 % (N = 659)	47.9 % (N =179)	46.1 % (N =123)	54.6 % (N = 961)
"Fuck" (incl. 1 occurrence of "holy fuck")	31.8 % (N = 357)	32.6 % (N =122)	36.7 % (N = 98)	32.8 % (N = 577)
"Shit/bullshit/oh shit/holy shit/ no shit"	4.0 % (N = 45)	11.2 % (N = 42)	13.1 % (N = 35)	6.9 % (N = 122)
"As shit"	0.1 %	0 %	0 %	0.1 %

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	(N = 1)	(N = 0)	(N =0)	(N =1)
"Pissed"	0.2 % (N = 2)	0 % (N = 0)	0.7 % (N =2)	0.2 % (N = 4)
"What the fuck"	2.6 % (N =29)	4.8 % (N =18)	3.0 % (N =8)	3.1 % (N =55)
"Fucked up"	2.0 % (N =22)	2.1 % (N =8)	0 % (N =0)	1.7 % (N =30)
"Fucked"	0.3 % (N =3)	0.8 % (N =3)	0.4 % (N =1)	0.4 % (N =7)
"As fuck"	0.2 % (N =2)	0.3 % (N =1)	0 % N = (0)	0.2 % (N =3)
Other[8]	0.1 % (N =1)	0 % (N =0	0 % (N =0)	0.1 % (N =1)
In total	1,120	374	267	100 % (N =1,761)

Table 8 reveals that the swear word "fucking" comprises just under 55% of all English swear words within the "lower bodily functions" category, with "fuck" accounting for slightly less than 33%. Together, these two swear words represent almost 88% of the total number of swear words. When including "shit/oh shit/bullshit", the next listed swear word, this percentage increases to nearly 95%. Thus, the usage of English swear words within the "lower bodily functions" category in the EOTB corpus by young people is primarily centered around "fucking", "fuck", and "shit". Furthermore, there is a significant difference between Season 1 and Seasons 2 and 3.

As noted, "fucking", "fuck", and "shit" are among the most recent swear words in Danish (Rathje 2010a). They are considered among the strongest swear words in both English (Beers Fägersten 2012) and Danish (Rathje 2014b), while also being highly prevalent. "Fuck" has been labeled the most ubiquitous swear word in the USA (Kirk 2013) and ranks among the most frequently used swear words in Scandinavian languages (Fjeld *et al.* 2019) and Dutch (van Hofwegen 2016; Zenner *et al.* 2015). In Dutch, "shit" has become so prevalent that it is the most used swear word overall (van Hofwegen 2016: 19), often preferred over native Dutch swear words. A study of English swear words in a Dutch Twitter corpus confirmed that "shit", "damn", and "fuck" rank among the most popular English swear words (Zenner *et al.* 2017). In an English study on 14-16-year-olds' usage of different swear words, "fuck" (including forms such as "fucked" and "fucking") was the most commonly used, followed by "shit" (Drummond 2020). In a recent study on which swear words Danish 13-14-year-olds use the most (Jensen and Rathje 2022), "fuck" and "shit" were reported as the most frequently used of all swear words.

[8] It covers "motherfucker" used in the same way as "motherfucking" is normally used.

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Therefore, the influence of the English language is largely confined to a few highly frequent words like “fucking”, “fuck”, and “shit” (and among religious swear words, “oh my God”), while other English swear words are seldom or only very infrequently used outside English-speaking countries (van Hofwegen 2016).

7. Conclusion

This study initially supports the widespread stereotype that young individuals are prone to frequent use of profanity, as reflected in the corpus under examination. The analysis reveals a notable surge in swearing among the young participants of EOTB, amounting to four times the incidence observed in a prior study focusing on young people’s dialogues. Nonetheless, considering the inherent incongruity between the two studies, the findings must not be considered to exist in a vacuum. To generate more robust conclusions regarding contemporary youth’s propensity for swearing, further complementary research scrutinizing their linguistic behavior across varying social contexts, or comparative analyses with previous reality series, are required.

Conversely, the investigation in this article contradicts another prevailing stereotype, which postulates that young individuals predominantly employ English swear words. The EOTB data reflects that just over a third of the total swear words employed originate from English, with Danish swear words constituting the remainder. Thus, despite certain English swear words such as “fucking” occupying a significant linguistic niche among the youth in EOTB, the preponderance of their swearing lexicon remains Danish. The data further suggests a broader trend of increased incorporation of English loanwords within youth parlance, as evidenced within EOTB.

Additionally, this study reveals a discernable pattern in the categorical distribution of swear words within EOTB, with religious and lower bodily function-related categories predominating, while those related to illness are scarcely employed.

Regarding the use of English profanity, the study highlights a frequency in the use of the religious phrase “oh my God”, as well as the lower bodily function-related swear words “fucking” and “fuck”. Rather than indiscriminate usage of diverse English swear words, the participants in EOTB recurrently employ a select few.

Moreover, a significant finding of this study, which contradicts extant research, is the parity between genders in their frequency of swearing, contravening the traditionally held notion of male predominance in this aspect.

The findings of this study can be further explored in future studies by comparing these with other Danish reality TV shows, such as *Paradise Hotel*, or various other types of media featuring young Danes. This comparison could reveal whether the observed swearing patterns are specific to the context of *Ex on the Beach* or more broadly representative of young Danish speakers.

Future research may also consider performing an analysis of young people’s use of swear words in an old reality TV series like *Big Brother*, which was broadcast on Danish TV in 2001. With nearly 20 years difference between *Big*

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Brother and *Ex on the Beach*, this analysis could provide insights into the evolution of Danish youth's use of swear words and the impact of cultural shifts on language use over time.

Finally, a desirable future research project would be to compare the use of swear words in *Ex on the Beach* with the same program broadcast in several other countries. For example, this could be a Nordic study of swearing in Sweden and Norway compared to the Danish results of this article, or even comparing the Danish results with a Southern European country such as Italy, or comparing with the American version of *Ex on the Beach*. This could reveal cultural differences in language use and taboos around swearing.

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