



A Dataset of Self-Reported Attitudes to Afrikaans Swearwords

DATA PAPER

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ABSTRACT

Until recently, no research has ever been done on user attitudes to Afrikaans taboo language. To address this shortcoming, a multidisciplinary research project was initiated to investigate, among others, user attitudes to swearwords. Online single-word surveys (SWSs) for individual swearwords have been posted periodically on the project website.¹ Volunteer respondents are recruited through respondent-driven opportunistic sampling and snow-ball sampling via social media. Respondents firstly give their informed consent, and then once-off provide some sociodemographic information. Thereafter, each swearword is judged on at least seven attitudinal dimensions. All data are stored in a relational database, and then extracted to create a single UTF-8 encoded CSV file. The dataset holds great potential for perusal in numerous language-specific (i.e., Afrikaans) sociopragmatic and/or sociolinguistic investigations and applications, as well as for comparative linguistic research and general statistical modelling.

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(1) OVERVIEW

REPOSITORY LOCATION

DaYta Ya Rona²: <https://doi.org/10.25388/nwu.23708229>.

CONTEXT

Research on swearing, offensive and taboo language has been an active area of research for many years in a variety of scientific contexts, including computational linguistics, psychology, sociology, and various subdisciplines of linguistics – see Stapleton et al. (2022) for a recent overview. While the majority of scientific literature focuses on English, various studies have also been undertaken for other languages, including Cantonese, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, Italian, Japanese, Latin, and Russian. In the South African context, and specifically for Afrikaans, relatively little research has been done in this research area, bar some research focussing on the lexicographic handling of swearwords (Dekker, 1991; Van Huyssteen, 1998), language acquisition (Coetzee, 2018), language change (Lubbe, 1971), lexicology and onomastics (Lubbe, 1969, 1970, 1973; Pienaar, 1945; Smuts, 1958), sociolinguistics (De Klerk, 2008; De Klerk & Antrobus, 2004; Van der Walt, 2019), and grammatical aspects of swearing (Calitz, 1979; Feinauer, 1981; Trollip, 2022; Van Huyssteen, 1996, 2022). Until recently, no research has ever been done on user attitudes to Afrikaans taboo language.

To address this shortcoming, a multidisciplinary research project – *What the Swearword!* – was initiated to investigate various aspects of taboo language in Afrikaans and other languages in its ecosystem (Van Huyssteen, 2021). An important part of the project is the collection of empirical data related to, among others, the prototypicality of swearwords (Van der Merwe, 2022; Van der Merwe et al., 2022), attitudes to parental control (Van Huyssteen et al., 2023a, 2023b), and user attitudes to swearwords (Van Huyssteen & Eiselen, 2021). The methodology and resultant dataset of the latter is the focus of this article.

(2) METHOD

STEPS

To collect data on self-reported attitudes to swearwords, short online surveys for individual words have been posted periodically on the project website and advertised via social media platforms. All respondents must firstly register for free as users on the project website. During the registration process, respondents firstly give their informed consent, and must then once-off provide some sociodemographic information, translated and summarised in Table 1.³ These sociodemographic factors and their values have been informed by the above-mentioned previous studies, as well as other sociopragmatic studies of offensive words, where one or more of these factors have been statistically correlated with usage of and attitudes to such words (see Jay 1992, 2000, 2020), and Beers Fägersten (2012); Beers Fägersten and Stapleton (2022); Beers Fägersten and Stapleton (2017) especially). A summary of the sociodemographic responses of the survey participants is available in the data repository as part of the dataset.⁴

To gather responses on participants' attitudes towards different words, an online single-word survey (SWS) template was designed. In each SWS, only one swearword is presented to respondents, in an attempt to prevent so-called “respondent fatigue” – a well-documented phenomenon that occurs when survey participants become tired of the survey task, and the quality of the data they provide begins to deteriorate (Lavrakas, 2008). The assumption is that one would cover more words over a period of time, than if one were to present the same number of words to participants in a single session (Van Huyssteen, 2021).

1 <https://vloek.co.za> (last accessed: 19 September 2023).

2 <https://dayta.nwu.ac.za/> (last accessed: 19 September 2023).

3 All these questions have two additional options not counted and listed in the table, viz. (a) “I don’t want to answer this question”; and (b) “Other / Something else” (not applicable to Age group; Length; Period in country of residence).

4 These values are in accordance with terminology in South African legislation dealing with population groups.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS	DATA TYPE	OPTIONS
Age group	Ordinal (3)	18–39; 40–59; 60+
Sex	Nominal (2)	Male; Female
Population group	Nominal (4)	Black; Coloured; Indian; White1
Length	Ordinal (7)	>199; 190–199; 180–189; 170–179; 160–169; 150–159; <150
Mother’s primary language	Nominal (12)	List of South Africa’s eleven official languages, plus Dutch
Father’s primary language	Nominal (12)	List of South Africa’s eleven official languages, plus Dutch
Language used primarily with family	Nominal (13)	List of South Africa’s eleven official languages, plus Dutch, as well as a bilingual (Afrikaans and English) option
Language used primarily with friends	Nominal (13)	List of South Africa’s eleven official languages, plus Dutch, as well as a bilingual (Afrikaans and English) option
Language primarily used for work	Nominal (13)	List of South Africa’s eleven official languages, plus Dutch, as well as a bilingual (Afrikaans and English) option
Languages proficient in	Nominal (12)	List of South Africa’s eleven official languages, plus Dutch
Identification with a geoelect	Nominal (2)	Yes; No. If “yes”, then the respondent gets a list of typical Afrikaans geoelects to choose from, or to specify their own geoelect.
Country of residence	Nominal (12)	South Africa, with a specification for one of the nine provinces; Namibia; Belgium; The Netherlands
Period in country of residence	Ordinal (4)	>6 years; 4–6years; 1–3years; <1 year
Country of childhood	Nominal (12)	South Africa, with a specification per one of the nine provinces; Namibia; Belgium; The Netherlands
Highest qualification	Nominal (10)	List of typical kinds of qualification in South Africa
Income group	Ordinal (7)	List of typical categories
Identification with a gender group	Nominal (2)	Yes; No. If “yes”, then the respondent can specify their own gender group.
Religiousness as a child/teenager	Nominal (5)	Very religious; Religious; Somewhat religious; Not really; Not at all
Religiousness currently	Nominal (5)	Very religious; Religious; Somewhat religious; Not really; Not at all
Political views	Nominal (5)	Very conservative; Conservative; Moderate; Liberal; Very liberal
World view (pertaining to moral and social issues)	Nominal (5)	Very conservative; Conservative; Moderate; Liberal; Very liberal

Table 1 Summary of sociodemographic factors.

One very significant challenge of this SWS approach is that the responses for the different words are not being collected during a single session by the same respondents. For example, the SWS for word X could have been completed by 200 respondents of the more than 2,000 registered users, while the SWS for word Y a week later by only 120 respondents – with only some (if any) overlap between these two SWSs.

Table 2 provides a summary of the words in the data set along with the number of respondents who completed the survey for each word.

Each word is judged on at least seven dimensions relating to a respondent’s attitude to the word; an eighth dimension only pertains to some words where the sex of the referent might be relevant (e.g., whether a word like *soutie* ‘English person’ can be used to refer to men and women alike). These dimensions and their corresponding questions are translated and listed in Table 3. For each dimension, a respondent must assign a value between 1 and 9, where only the two extreme values of the scale are labelled.

WORD	TOTAL RESPONSES	RESPONSES WITH COMPLETE METADATA	WORD	TOTAL RESPONSES	RESPONSES WITH COMPLETE METADATA
asshole	8	7	jirre	13	10
ballas	12	10	jissis	184	152
bebliksemd	189	155	kak	197	167
bedonderd	147	123	kerriekop	25	19
befok	13	9	kont	48	38
bekak	11	8	kots	163	135
blerrie	31	18	magtig	12	12
bliksem	19	16	ma-se-poes	15	11
bliksems	104	88	moer	20	16
boudservette	194	155	moerskont	12	9
demmit	12	11	moffie	222	180
donder	12	11	naai	23	20
doos	34	24	naaier	18	15
drol	14	11	piel	29	18
eiers	7	6	piele	208	167
etter	22	13	pis	9	9
feeks	184	147	poep	10	9
flerrie	77	67	poephol	39	30
flippen	133	114	poes	26	19
fok	21	16	rooikop	125	104
fokken	208	174	shit	21	16
fokker	55	44	skyt	130	109
fokkit	45	31	slet	18	14
fokkof	9	5	slymkonyn	169	138
fokkol	16	13	stront	9	8
foktog	18	15	swerkater	20	17
frieken	158	126	swernoot	178	147
fuck	16	12	teef	10	7
gat	5	3	tos	159	126
god	26	22	tril	5	4
gots	154	125	voëlverklikker	150	120
hel	16	15	wetter	6	6
helleveeg	130	108	wolgordyn	129	110
hoer	29	19	wortelkop	222	176
hol	10	9			

Table 2 Summary of swearwords and number of respondents for each word.

DIMENSION	QUESTION	END-POINT LABELS
Production frequency	How often do you <i>say</i> or <i>write</i> the word?	Never ... Very often
Perception frequency	How often do you <i>hear</i> or <i>read</i> the word? (E.g., in conversations, on the radio or TV, in magazines or books, on the internet, etc.)	Never ... Very often
Offensiveness (self)	How <i>offensive</i> do you find the word personally?	Not at all ... Very
Tabooness (others)	How <i>taboo</i> or socially unacceptable is the word for people in general? (E.g., in a workspace, classroom, at a party with friends, family, and colleagues)	Not at all ... Very
Emotionality	What emotional charge does the word have for you?	Very negative ... Very positive
Conspicuousness	How conspicuous is the word? (To what degree does it grab your attention?)	Not at all ... Very
Familiarity	How well do you know what the word means?	Not at all ... Very well
Sex of referent	Can the word be used to refer only to men, to men and women, or only to women?	Women only ... Men only

Table 3 Response dimensions.

All data are stored in a relational database, and then extracted to create a single UTF-8 encoded CSV file. Each line in the file has 54 columns consisting of the swearword, the respondent's unique identifier, the responses of the respondent to the word, and the sociodemographic information of the respondent in both ordinal and text format.

SAMPLING STRATEGY

Given the fact that the aim of the project is not to collect data specifically for decision making, but rather sociopragmatic description of swearwords, it is not as important to target fully stratified respondent samples. Consequently, non-probability sampling of respondents is a valid approach where volunteer respondents are recruited through respondent-driven opportunistic sampling, as formalised by Heckathorn (1997), and snow-ball sampling via social media (Van Huyssteen, 2021). These techniques have the potential advantage of including so-called "hidden populations", or respondents that would not otherwise participate in research projects dealing with taboo topics and swearwords.

(3) DATASET DESCRIPTION

Object name – Afrikaans swearword scores

Format names and versions – UTF-8 encoded CSV version 1.0

Creation dates – 2019/07/01 – 2023/05/31

DATASET CREATORS

Gerhard B. van Huyssteen (Organisation, Design, Collection, Quality Control), North-West University

Cornelius van der Walt (Website development, Data processing), BlueTek Computers

Jaco du Toit (Data processing), North-West University

Roald Eiselen (Data processing), North-West University

Nico Oosthuizen (Data processing), Independent

Language – Afrikaans (af)

License – Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International

Repository name – DaYta ya Rona

Publication date – 2023-07-19.

(4) REUSE POTENTIAL

Since this is the first empirical dataset ever on user perceptions of Afrikaans swearwords, the dataset holds great potential for perusal in numerous language-specific (i.e., Afrikaans) sociopragmatic and/or sociolinguistic investigations. For example, the data can be used to compare specific words within the same domain, like what Van Huyssteen and Eiselen (2021) have done for the words *feeks* ("shrew") and *helleveeg* ("harridan"), or across semantic domains (e.g., a comparison of words from the sex domain with words from the religious domain, etc.). On the other hand, the dataset could be used fruitfully in investigating sociodemographic predictors of taboo, offensiveness, and the like.

Given that the sociodemographic factors and their values are based on well-known international research, the dataset could also be used in comparative linguistic research. While specific words could not necessarily be compared across languages, semantic domains or taboo types (like blasphemies, slurs, or epithets) could be compared. It would, of course, be easier to do such comparisons with Germanic languages, e.g., with the data of Van Sterkenburg (2019) for Dutch, or Beers Fägersten (2007) for Danish.

From a statistical point of view, the data could be used in the modelling of problematic or challenging data. For example, one of the shortcomings of the dataset is the large variation in number of respondents per swearword, ranging from *moffie* ("gay man") with 188 responses

with complete metadata, to *gat* (“buttocks”) with only 3 comparable responses (see Table 2). The validity and reliability of data collected over a period of time by means of SWSs, should also be compared to data collected in a single, longer survey.

Lastly, the dataset could also be utilised for practical, applied purposes. For example, it is currently being used in the so-called *Vloekmeter* (‘swearing meter’; see vloek.co.za/vloekmeter). The *Vloekmeter* is purely data-driven: Based on this dataset, statistics are presented on an interactive dashboard on the website (see Figure 1). Such an application can be of practical use not only for content creators (like authors, and film makers), but especially also for publishers, broadcasting companies (like Netflix), or the South African Film and Publication Board that might want to provide age and content advisories for books, television series, films, and computer games.

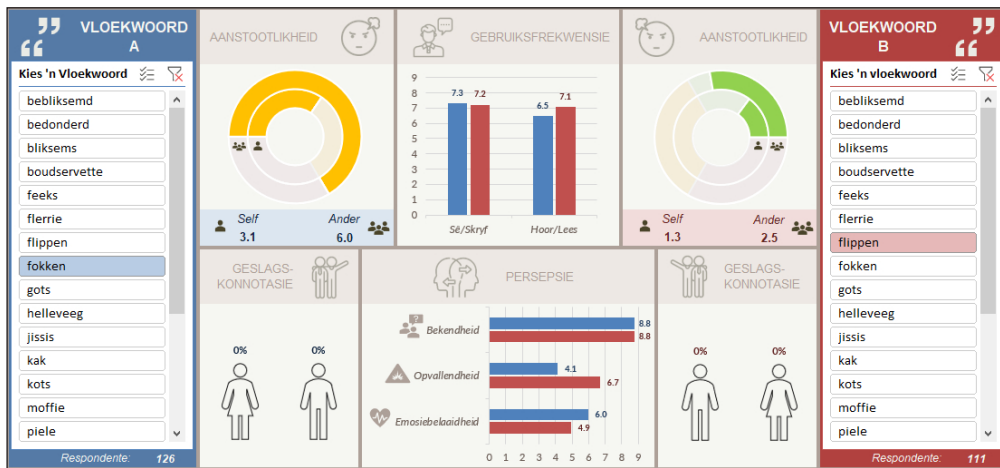


Figure 1 Vloekmeter showing results for *fokken* (“fucking”) and *flippen* (“fricking”).

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical clearance for the research project was obtained through the Language Matters Ethics Committee of the NWU (ethics number: NWU-00632-19-A7).

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None of the results and/or opinions in this paper can be ascribed to any of the people or organisations mentioned above.

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COMPETING INTERESTS


The first author is a director of the not-for-profit company Viridevert NPC (CIPC registration number: 2016/411799/08), who owns and manages the website vloek.co.za. This website was developed specifically for this project, and this conflict of interest has been approved by the NWU.


Gerhard B. van Huyssteen: Conceptualisation (lead); Data curation (support); Funding acquisition; Investigation (equal); Methodology (lead); Project administration; Writing – original draft (support); Writing – review and editing (lead).

Roald Eiselen: Conceptualisation (support); Data curation (lead); Formal analysis; Investigation (equal); Methodology (support); Software (lead); Visualisation; Writing – original draft (lead); Writing – review and editing (support).

Jaco du Toit: Software (support); Data curation (support); Writing – review and editing (support).

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