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**Teenagers' use of taboo slang:  
London and Madrid compared**

*Les mots tabous jouent un rôle très marqué dans le langage argotique des jeunes. La comparaison, dans leur utilisation, d'éléments argotiques tabous par les jeunes gens de Londres et de Madrid rapportée ci-dessous montre que les usages se ressemblent beaucoup dans les deux groupes, non seulement en ce qui concerne la fréquence et les fonctions, mais aussi parce que les mots tabous les plus communs appartiennent aux mêmes domaines (sexualité et scatologie). Cependant loin d'être offensifs, ils expriment souvent un désir de créer une atmosphère de camaraderie à l'intérieur d'un groupe. Il est évident que les mots tabous ont une valeur phatique en facilitant la communication.*

**1 Introduction**

What distinguishes slang from colloquial speech in general is an intriguing question. One reason is that the term 'slang' is no longer limited to the special language used, for instance, by criminals or by certain subcultural groups (cf. ALLEN 1998, p. 878). The difficulty of defining slang is emphasized by Andersson & Trudgill (1990), who describe slang in terms of what it is NOT rather than what it IS.

In this paper, I will touch briefly on what slang is according to some recent sources before going on to my own very broad view of slangy language in terms of 'slanguage', which includes taboo words. I will then compare the ten most common 'taboo' and 'non-taboo' slang words used by teenagers in London and Madrid before concentrating on their use of taboo slang. The comparison is based on The *Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language* (COLT) and *Corpus de Lenguaje Adolescente de Madrid* (COLAm).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> COLT was collected in 1993 and COLAm in 2002–2003. The speakers, who come from various social backgrounds, are between 13 and 17 years. The recordings were made by volunteer students by means of a walkman/minidisk.

## 2 What slang is

In the introduction to *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* (1998), Green makes a special point of the fact that 'the isolation of slang from its linguistic 'neighbours', and especially from colloquialism, is never cut and dried. As a consequence, the dictionary contains a lot of words that some people might categorize as colloquial rather than slang. Sanmartín, the author of *Diccionario de Argot* (2003), regards 'argot común', which she distinguishes from 'argots específicos', as a 'register' that can be used by any speaker, regardless of sociocultural belonging. She emphasizes the difficulty of drawing a borderline both between slang and colloquial language and between 'argot común' and 'argots específicos' and sees 'argot común' as integrated in colloquial language 'in order to achieve greater expressivity, intensify the discourse' (2003, p. viii). But there must be something, she says, that makes us look upon certain words as slang, and she mentions three important mechanisms that operate in the lexical formation of slang words: figurative use, shortening and borrowing. In *A Dictionary of Slang online*, finally, slang is ranked third behind standard and colloquial language and before cant ([www.answers.com/topic/slang](http://www.answers.com/topic/slang)). But no real distinction is made between slang and colloquial language. By and large, however, there seems to be a general consensus among linguists and dictionary makers that the most important aspect of slang is that it represents 'language use below the level of stylistically neutral language usage' (eg ANDERSSON & TRUDGILL 1990, p. 69), and that it consists of 'very informal language that includes new and sometimes not polite words and meanings' (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1987, p. 987), including figuratively used taboo words.

## 3 Slanguage

When studying the teenage conversations in COLT, I realized that it was impossible to distinguish slang from colloquial language, including vulgar and taboo language, so I settled for the all-encompassing concept of 'slanguage'. Example [1] gives an idea:

[1]

Sandy: ... I like Jenny I mean, but I never *really* say anything bad about [Jenny]

Paula: [unclear] say anything about you ... **like** it's only if I ... <laughing> got nothing else to say *really*</>

Sandy: Yeah.

Paula: <unclear> about me don't you when I'm not there, **yeah?**

Sandy: No I don't, I don't ... but I mean anyway I dunno I *just* get **really pissed off** with Angela.

Paula: Yeah but I get **really pissed off** as well *cos* I ... well I, I won't **like** when I talk about Jenny and then I feel **sort of like really** two faced when I **like** start talking to Jenny **and stuff** ...

Sandy: Yeah I know, but I mean

Paula: *Cos* I mean like do you do that as well, you know when you're with Catherine **like** you talk about people like Rosie or anybody [unclear]

Sandy: [Yeah yeah I d= do] I mean I do that, yeah. I dunno who, who do I m= ... I don't know, I d= do that to s= er see there is somebody that I do that quite a bit to but I can't remember who it is ... or a few people maybe ...

Paula: *cos* Jenny didn't even know that you could **bloody** put on weight by drinking.

Sandy: <laughing> Yeah well it's a bit</> that's the truth though I mean that is a bit silly isn't it?

Paula: Yeah.

Sandy: I mean I, I mean I dunno I mean I *just*, I *just* ha=, I *just* had to tell you because I mean it *really* is **pissing me off** the way **fucking** Angela treats me, she was alright before ... **like** and when I'm on my own, no COLT 33903

This extract contains a plethora of colloquialisms, some of which are regular slang words and expressions (eg *pissed-off*, *yeah*, *sort of like really*), while some taboo (*bloody*, *fucking*) non-taboo expressions (*I mean like... you know*) definitely belong to slang (for a model, see Stenström 1999). Similar types of words are used in Spanish teenage conversation:

[2]

A: pero qué le has dicho exactamente

B: le he dicho vale muy bien hijo adios = es que me dice vengo eh vengo a recogeros está lloviendo y digo digo bueno venga da igual you me voy andando con Ana y me dice ah vale *hija* como soy así no **tronca** ('friend') pero es que **me jode** ('annoys me') porque como está así el día entero **cabreado** ('irritated') o sea porque lleva una época **superbien** ('perfect') conmigo no

A: sí me lo contaste

B: y ahora de repente está está fatal no sé por qué porque llegan las notas mañana y está **mazo cabreado** (extremely irritated') y **en plan torta** ('powerless as it were') diciéndome borderías porque se pasa **mazo en plan** ('a lot as it were') que llega tú que pasa no puedes no puedes poner la mesa tienes que estar ahí viendo la tele o qué pero **en plan** ('as it were') así es como a ver **tío** ('friend') qué dices a mí háblame bien sabes y y luego que sabes yo qué sé como pasándose un montón de repente llega haciéndose el bueno y viene a buscar pues mira **tío** ('friend') no a mí me hablas bien y te dejas **de pelotas** ('fantastic') COLA 32

#### 4 The top ten slang words

The ten most common taboo words in relation to the ten most common non-taboo words used by the English and Spanish teenagers are listed in Tables 1 and 2:

Table 1: The top ten taboo and non-taboo words in COLT (total 431,528 words).

<b>Taboo</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Non-taboo</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>fucking</i>	448	1.04	<i>like</i>	1,340	3.11
<i>shit</i>	397	.91	<i>man</i>	676	1.57
<i>fuck(ed)</i>	384	.89	<i>sad</i>	169	.39
<i>bloody</i>	291	.67	<i>wicked</i>	138	.32
<i>crap</i>	150	.35	<i>bloke</i>	87	.20
<i>bastard</i>	118	.27	<i>cool</i>	83	.19
<i>dick</i>	98	.23	<i>guy</i>	73	.17
<i>arse</i>	68	.16	<i>rough</i>	69	.16
<i>cunt</i>	55	.13	<i>mate</i>	65	.15
<i>wanker</i>	39	.09	<i>massive</i>	60	.14
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,048</b>	<b>4.75</b>		<b>2,760</b>	<b>6.40</b>

Table 2: The top ten taboo and non-taboo words in COLAm (total 114,806 words)

<b>Taboo</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Non-taboo</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>joder</i> 'fuck'	203	1.77	<i>tío/a</i> 'friend'	752:162/625	6.55
<i>puto/a</i> 'fucking/whore'	158:18/140	1.38	<i>tronco/a</i> 'friend'	193:97/97	1.72
<i>coño</i> 'cunt'	98	.85	<i>en plan</i> 'like'	185	1.61
<i>culo</i> 'arse'	65	.57	<i>chaval</i> 'boy'	98	.85
<i>mierda</i> 'shit' N	63	.55	<i>mazo</i> 'a lot/very'	92	80
<i>gilipollas</i> 'nitwit'	57	.50	<i>molar</i> 'attract'	52	.45
<i>cagar</i> 'shit' V	56	.49	<i>super</i> 'very good'	37	.32
<i>polla</i> 'cock'	46	.40	<i>guay</i> 'excellent'	29	.25
<i>cabrón</i> 'bastard'	41	.36	<i>rollo</i> 'hash cig'	21	.18
<i>cojones</i> 'testicles'	25	.22	<i>pedo</i> 'booze'	21	.18
<b>Total</b>	<b>777</b>	<b>6.77</b>		<b>1,480</b>	<b>12.89</b>

Religious words used as expletives have not been included.

### Similarities and differences

The taboo words belong to the same domains in both corpora, notably sex and scatology, while the non-taboo words constitute more mixed categories. The total figures show that the non-taboo words are used more often than the taboo words overall, but that the dominance is greatest in COLAm, where they are almost twice as common as the taboo words. In COLT, the difference between the two categories is marginal. Another interesting finding is that the taboo words that can be used as expletives have a different distribution in the corpora: English *fucking*, *shit*, *bloody* and *crap* make up roughly two thirds of the top ten, while Spanish *joder* and *mierda* make up only one third.

### The non-taboo top ten

*Like* is the most common non-taboo word in COLT, making up nearly half of the total. The other half is dominated by words referring to males (*man*, *mate*, *bloke*, *guy*). Of the remaining words, all adjectives, *sad* and *rough* are examples of 'reversed value'. *Sad* was originally a positive word meaning 'satisfied' but is now used as a term of abuse (*you're so sad*), and the originally negative meaning of *rough* ('unfair') turned positive ('excellent') before going back to negative (*I hate my body it's rough*). The dominance of address terms is overwhelming in COLAm, where *tío/tía* and *tronco/tronca* make up three fourths of the top ten words. What is particularly interesting is that English *like* has a Spanish equivalent, *en plan*, which is used as a hedge and even as a quotative (*el taxista en plan claro* 'the taxi driver **was like** of course'). Another recent usage is realized by *mazo*, originally a noun meaning 'packet', 'bunch', which is used as an adjective meaning 'very'. Notice also that words referring to drug and drink occur only among the top ten in COLAm, and that *super* is one of the Spanish teenagers' favourite intensifiers.

### The taboo top ten

Spanish has been characterized as one of the rudest and most explicit languages in the world. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that words with sexual reference (which predominate in both corpora) are most common among Spanish teenagers, where sexual words are almost four times as frequent as the remaining top ten taboo words, compared to less than half of the sexual words

in COLT. The scatology domain, with two words in either language, is more richly represented in COLT, where *shit* and *crap* make up nearly one third of the top ten, while Spanish *mierda* and *cagar* make up only one fifth of the top ten.

### 5 How taboo words are used

Judging by many of the conversations in both COLT and COLAm, it is obvious that the teenagers use taboo words not only to give vent to their feelings or as a token of a friendly atmosphere but often in order show off. Since the students who recorded the conversations were not able to hide the recording equipment, their friends knew very well what was going on and did not hesitate to make the most of it:

[3] Tommy: you're allowed to swear as much as you like  
 Regina: are you?  
 Tommy: yeah  
 Regina: (shouting) **fuck fuck fuck fuck!**

None of the students knew why they were being recorded, but they obviously thought that their bad language was what it was all about.

### Functions illustrated

Besides as intensifiers, insults and expletives, and as part of various figurative expressions, taboo words serve as phatic devices, which facilitate the communication, while creating a friendly atmosphere by strengthening the rapport between the speakers.

#### *Intensifying*

As 'intensifiers' taboo words are part of the syntactic structure of the clause and give particular emphasis to adjectives and adverbs as well as nouns. As Figure 4 shows, English and Spanish taboo words behave somewhat differently:

	<b>premodifying</b>	<b>postmodifying</b>
<b>COLT</b>	<i> fucking amazing</i> (Adj)	
	<i> you fucking bitch</i> (N)	
	<i> a shit lighter</i> (N)	
	<i> a crap conversation</i> (N)	
	<i> bloody annoying</i> (Adj)	

	<i>the bloody teachers</i> (N)	
	<i>the sad bastard queue</i> (N)	
	<i>coming bloody close to it</i> (Adv)	
<b>COLAm</b>	<i>todo el puto día</i> (N) 'all bloody day'	<i>una célula coño</i> (N) 'a bad group'
		<i>una tía de polla</i> (N) 'a wretched girl'
		<i>profesor de mierda</i> (N) 'worthless teacher'

Figure 4: Intensifying

The English intensifiers are all represented by a single word, while the Spanish ones are represented by single words as well as prepositional phrases. Postposed intensifiers are typical in Spanish, so *puto día* is rather an exception. On the other hand, Rodríguez (2002, p. 49), who discusses trends in teenage language in terms of 'antilinguaje', found that taboo words are *typically* used as preposed intensifiers, such as *los jodidos escritores* ('the fucking writers'), but this does not agree with findings in this material. Adjective intensification is realized by *bloody* and *fucking* in COLT but by none of the taboo words in COLAm. *Bloody* is the only item that is found to intensify an adverbial. *Crap*, *shit* and *bastard*, which are all nouns, are used as noun intensifiers, but with no corresponding constructions among the Spanish items.

### *Insulting*

Insulting involves speaking rudely to someone, addressing someone directly or saying something about a third person, by using abusive language. Such behaviour is common in both corpora. What is interesting, however, is that what to all appearances are insults are usually not meant to be offensive nor taken as such. On the contrary, they are often signs of camaraderie (Fig 5).

COLT		COL Am	
Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect
<i>you sad bastard</i>	<i>he's a lazy bastard</i>	<i>eres un cabrón</i> 'you're a bastard'	<i>qué cabrón</i> 'what a bastard'
<i>you stupid dick</i>	<i>she's a dick</i>	<i>eres tú una polla</i> 'you're a dickhead'	
<i>silly arse</i>	<i>Barry's an arse</i>	(culo)	
<i>fuck off you cunt</i>	<i>Nick's a cunt</i>	<i>que te calles coño</i> 'shut up you cunt'	<i>es un coño ese pibe</i> 'this guy's a cunt'
<i>you little wanker</i>	<i>he's a fat wanker</i>	<i>eres un gilipollas</i> 'you're a nitwit'	<i>Juan es un gilipollas</i> 'Juan is a nitwit'

Figure 5: Insulting

Mateo & Yus (2000) point out that cultural constraints may operate on insults: English *bastard* is characterized as a grave insult, while Spanish *bastardo* has a very weak insulting effect. The boys in COLT do not seem to mind being called *bastard*, however, judging by the laughters that follow. Unlike English *arse*, the corresponding Spanish word *culo* is never used as an insult. Notice that the masculine word *dick* is sometimes said about a girl, although not as a direct address, while the feminine form *polla* ('dick'), like *cunt* (originally 'vagina') and Spanish *coño* ('cunt'), is only addressed to boys.

### Swearing

People often swear when they are excited, shocked, angry, or fed up. Mateo & Yus (2000) mention two main reasons: to 'release a high emotional strain', in which case the word is either self- or zero-directed (eg *shit! bloody hell!*), and to communicate emotions vis à vis an addressee. In teenage talk swearwords are often signs of group belonging:

COLT

*Shit! I ain't got no money*

*Oh fuck! He's been stabbed*

*Fucking/Bloody hell!*

COLAm

*¡Joder! tócate el culo* ('Fuck! Touch your bottom!')

*¡Pero coño! ¿Qué digo?* ('But shit! What am I saying?')

- ¡ *Qué asco. Mierda!* ('How disgusting! Shit!')
- ¡ *Cojones! no es lo mismo* ('Shit! It's not the same')
- ¡ *Me cago en tu puta madre!* ('I shit on your fucking mother')

According to an anonymous source on the internet, Spanish is 'probably one of the most complete languages with regard to swearing and cursing', and 'one of the rudest and most explicit ones'. *Me cago en...* ('I shit on...') is mentioned as 'probably the most popular of all Spanish swearing expressions'. Judging by the present material, English is not far behind. But it is worth pointing out that swearing does not always have a negative effect. *De puta madre*, for instance, is often used in a positive sense meaning 'Great!', 'Well done!'. Admittedly, the borderline between intensifying and swearing is often rather fuzzy.

*Swearing as a phatic strategy*

The term 'phatic' refers to the exchange of words that do not communicate ideas (cf. MALINOWSKI 1977), but which help to keep the conversation going. 'Loose' talk at the beginning and end of a conversation is one type of phatic talk (cf. eg STENSTRÖM 1994). Going beyond the traditional definitions, Mateo & Yus (2000) suggest that taboo words that are not intended as insults serve as 'communicative devices', ie words that facilitate the communication and reinforce the social bonds between the interlocutors. When serving as phatic devices, the taboo words are not integrated in the syntactic structure of the utterance, as illustrated in Figure 7:

COLT	COLAm
I <b>fucking</b> hate him	Se oye <b>que te cagas</b> todo 'everything is heard perfectly'
The microphone keeps <b>fucking</b> falling off	Tienes que bajar sigue <b>que te cagas</b> tienes que bajar el volumen 'you have to, go on, you have to reduce the volume for god's sake'
They <b>bloody</b> put on rave music	Estaba <b>de puta madre</b> ahí 'he WAS here'
Look you <b>bloody</b> nicked her fifteen P	Está <b>de puta madre</b> super glú 'it's really super glue'

Figure 7: Taboo words as phatic devices

A previous study of taboo words in COLT and COLAm showed that the 'Not integrated' taboo words were more than six times as common in COLAm (cf. STENSTRÖM forthcoming; STENSTRÖM & JÖRGENSEN forthcoming), which seems to indicate that the phatic use of taboo words is far more common in the Spanish teenagers' conversation than in the London teenagers' talk.

### **6 Conclusion**

Instead of trying to answer the question what slang is, I have taken an easy way out by looking upon slang as slanguage, which includes not only what is generally looked upon as slang – or even colloquialisms – but also taboo words. The comparison of the top ten taboo and non-taboo slang words used by the English and Spanish teenagers in COLT and COLAm showed that the taboo words are less common than the non-taboo words. The top ten taboo words belong to the domains of sex and scatology in both corpora, with the sexual words dominating. One difference is that English *fucking*, *shit*, *bloody* and *crap*, ie words that are often used for swearing, are much more common than Spanish *joder* and *mierda*. A second difference is that *fuck* is often used in its regular sense in COLT, whereas the Spanish teenagers avoid *joder* in this sense and replace it by *follar*. But all in all, the differences between the corpora are marginal. The functions of the taboo words – intensifying, insulting and swearing – were easily identified in both corpora, not to forget the phatic use. Judging by the COLT and COLAm conversations, slang is not gender-specific. This refers to non-taboo slang as well as taboo slang. It is very likely that the girls as well as the boys use taboo slang words on purpose, sometimes for the sake of showing off in view of a potential future adult audience but generally as a token of group solidarity. To the outsider, the insulting slang words would probably be perceived as rude, but in the actual situation, they seem to have no negative effect whatsoever. This agrees with Rodríguez (2002, p. 48), who found that teenagers often use offensive and insulting words such as *cabrón* ('asshole') and *gilipollas* ('blockhead') as 'vocativos cariñosos' ('affectionate address terms'), a view that is shared by Zimmermann (2002, p. 150).

Finally, my answer to the question whether slang is a linguistic universal: I believe that it is, though it is difficult to distinguish from certain features of colloquial language.

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