

***SI ME LA DEJO MONTAR, ME JODE TOA' LA NOCHE:***  
**THE INCIDENCE OF *EL RELAJO* AND THE USE OF EXPLETIVES AMONG**  
**UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PUERTO RICO**

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**Abstract:**

This ethnographic study examines gender through the use of expletives (“bad” words) among university students in Puerto Rico. Expletives are words that are afforded a great quantity of social power and are more accepted in the dominant gender (masculine). Men use expletives to compete with each other and boost their virility (anti-femininity). However, women that use expletives are taking on masculine roles and challenging social conventions.

Keywords: gender, language, expletives, feminine and masculine roles

**Resumen:**

Estudio etnográfico que examina el género en el uso de expletivos (palabras “malas”) entre estudiantes universitarios en Puerto Rico. Los expletivos son palabras que se les ha adjudicado una gran cantidad de poder social y que son más aceptadas en el género dominante (masculino). Los hombres usan expletivos para competir entre sí y reforzar su virilidad (anti-feminidad). Por otro lado, las mujeres que utilizan expletivos están tomando roles masculinos y retando las convenciones sociales.

Palabras claves: género, lenguaje, expletivos, roles femeninos y masculinos

## Introduction

Every society has words considered bad, inappropriate or taboo. They mostly relate with bodily functions (sex and excretion) and profanity of the sacred. However, their “badness” is not intrinsic, but rather is tied to the specific social context in which they are uttered. At the same time, these expletives are not always used with the intention of offending, but rather to reinforce intimacy. (Suslak, 2013)

Vivian de Klerk (1991) noted that there have been few ethnographic studies about expletives as they are difficult to elicit in a natural context. However, this is a relevant topic among contemporary linguistic anthropology. Some ethnographic studies have been published about this subject, such as Brenes Peña (2007), LeSourd (2009), and Seizer (2011). However, what exactly does it mean when someone uses a bad word? What is it that makes it bad? Suslak (2013) states that, “...the greater the prohibition against using a particular linguistic form, the more powerful that form becomes” (p.10). It is exactly that which makes a word “bad”: social power.

Gender became a focus of linguistic interest in the first half of the 20th century, when researchers started problematizing the existence of men’s vs. women’s talk. What was missing in these early texts was the concept of *indexicality* the process by which language ‘points to’ the social and discursive context of its own production. (Bucholtz and Hall, 2006; Ochs, 1992) Certain ways of speaking associated with strength, aggressiveness and violence, index the idealized qualities of what the male should be, that is his masculinity/maleness. On the other hand, femininity is indexed with the opposite, passive and delicate language. This is why instead of male vs. female talk; we should talk about masculine (and heterosexual) vs. feminine utterances and behavior. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Hall, 2009)

Vivian de Klerk (1991) also argues that while expletives are condoned in males, their use by females is usually condemned, seen as presumptuous and inappropriate. Use of expletives by females is seen as a challenge to the status quo, in an effort to attain more power. This is related to the concept of “language crossing” by Ben Rampton (1995), which refers to the use of a language or a linguistic variety that moves across sharp social or ethnic boundaries. Male usage of expletives is especially noticeable within interactional frames (Goffman, 1974) of “male verbal sparring”, as in the game of “the Dozens” among young African-Americans, which consists of insulting someone else’s mother with the full knowledge that they will then insult yours back. As these boys are mostly raised in

a matriarchy, by voicing these insults, they rebel against all women and exert their hyper-virility (Abrahams, 1962).

A similar kind of interaction is the *relajo* phenomenon. It mostly occurs among people with certain degree of trust with each other, rarely between strangers. It consists of badmouthing another person present. This person must in turn resist and go along with it or *relajar* the other person back. El *relajo* has been noticed in many parts of Latin America, such as in Mexico (Portilla, 1966), Mexican *rancheros* in Chicago (Farr, 2006), and male Puerto Ricans (Lauria, 1964), although each has its variants.

### **Ethnographic background**

I carried out my research in Puerto Rico, an island in the Caribbean and a U.S. territory. The official languages of the island are Spanish and English. Spanish is the vernacular tongue, yet English is a prominent second language, especially among the younger generations. I concentrated my investigation in the capital city of San Juan, in the northeastern part of the island. Puerto Rico shares the mainstream Western cultural ideology that the male is the superior gender and must be strong, intelligent, independent and powerful, while the female is fragile, delicate, and sentimental, among other things. Catholicism, as in most of Latin America, has had a central role in the history and formation of the country and it influences traditional social thinking that women should be obedient to their spouses. Since the 20th century, these ideologies have been questioned and challenged. However, as we shall see from my study, they have not been totally abolished; they permeate most notably in language and every-day interactions among men and women.

### **Methodology**

The study was carried out among university students 18 to 23 years old, during October and November of 2014. In total, five males and five females participated. They were mainly chosen for being part of my personal social network, within which I already had access and trust, in order to have a higher probability to observe the usage of expletives. Others were recruited along the way as a “friend of a friend.” Ethnographic participant observation was carried out in public spaces of the likes of, a cinema parking lot, a party bus, a bar in the metro area, and a gazebo in the university’s campus. I then transcribed the most interesting and representative interactions. In order to protect the identity of the participants, the names presented here (except my own) are pseudonyms. The transcription symbol

guide is included in the Appendix (p.10). This study was approved by the *COMITÉ INSTITUCIONAL PARA LA PROTECCIÓN DE LOS SUJETOS HUMANOS EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN* (CIPSHI #1415-050) of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras (the University's Institutional Review Board on Human Subject Treatment).

## Presentation and data analysis

### *Male expletive usage*

#### #1 Motherfucker, you're really pussy, you're like really gay

This first interaction took place while two couples were leaving the movies. Each segment here transcribed consists of 38 seconds. Kyle and Arnold are male voices, and Natasha (myself) is a female voice. There was another female, but she was silent during this segment. It consists of an instance of *relajo* between two *panas* (the Puerto Rican idiom for an acquaintance who isn't necessarily a close friend, but one with whom you "hang-out"). However, in this case there is a closer relationship between the males because they are cousins. Kyle takes his place as leader of the interaction and proceeds to *relajar* or make fun of Arnold for sending him what he considered were very effeminate text messages. Arnold understands that it is all part of the joke or the *relajo* and does not get mad. He just perpetuates it. We can see that the usage of expletives is mostly to compete and reaffirm friendship ties at the same time. All conversations occurred in Spanish. In the transcripts below, the original Spanish is presented in the left column, and the English translation in the right. They were transcribed as they were said.

1	<b>Kyle:</b>	<i>No inteligible</i> [él está medio <b>pato</b> esta	<i>Unintelligible</i> [he is like a little <b>gay</b> this
2		semana]	week]
3	<b>Arnold:</b>	[este <b>ca::brón</b> ]	[this <b>motherfu::cker</b> ]
4	<b>Kyle:</b>	Me envió una foto de una de una...	He sent me a picture of ...
5	<b>Arnold:</b>	hoy te envié otra cosa con Natasha,	today I sent you another thing with Natasha,
6		¿que fue? Ah Jeffrey	what was it? Ah Jeffrey
7	<b>Kyle:</b>	Te extraño primo (( <i>con un tono</i>	I miss you cousin (( <i>with a high pitched</i>
8		<i>alto, pero volumen bajito</i> ))	<i>low volume voice</i> ))
9	<b>Arnold:</b>	lo de la pizzería-	the pizzería thing-
10	<b>Kyle:</b>	no-	no-
11	<b>Natasha:</b>	Ah-	Ah-
12	<b>Kyle:</b>	[pero mira, me envió una foto]	[but look, he sent me a picture]

13	<b>Natasha:</b>	[£ No inteligible te extraño primo£]	[£ Unintelligible I miss you cousin£]
14	<b>Kyle:</b>	de una coca cola que dice ‘Tu	of a Coke that says ‘Your
15		Hermano, <b>cabrón</b> mira’, y yo le	Brother, <b>motherfucker</b> look’, and I
16		puse	wrote him
17		“ <b>cabrón</b> pero tas’ bien <b>pussy</b> ,	“ <b>motherfucker</b> but you’re really <b>pussy</b> ,
18		tas’ como bien <b>pato</b> ” y se	you’re like really <b>gay</b> ” and he got
19		<b>encabronó</b> y me mandó como	<b>fuckin’ pissed</b> and sent me like
20		veinte párrafos “ <b>cabrón</b> , eres	twenty paragraphs “ <b>motherfucker</b> , you
21		el peo:::r: £Te o:::dio↑£”	are
22		(( <i>Risa grupal</i> ))	the wo:::rst £I hate you:::↑£”
23	<b>Kyle:</b>	£Y yo estaba al lao’ de mi mai’£	(( <i>Group laughter</i> ))
24	<b>Arnold:</b>	£Se burló de mí£	£And I was next to my ma’£
25	<b>Kyle:</b>	£Y me dijo es igual que Lillian£	£he mocked me£
26	<b>Arnold:</b>	£Se burló de mi nobleza en el	£and she told me he’s just like Lillian£
27		trabajo	£he mocked my nobility at work
28		y yo en el trabajo£	and me at work£
29	<b>Kyle:</b>	y yo mira se <b>emputó</b> de verda’	and I look he got really <b>pissed</b>
30	<b>Arnold:</b>	Me <b>emputé</b>	I got <b>pissed</b>
31	<b>Kyle:</b>	<b>Cabrón</b> , eres una <b>puta</b>	<b>Motherfucker</b> , you are a <b>whore</b>

Kyle is the one that initiates the usage of expletives that continues throughout the interaction, by referring to his *pana* as *pato*/gay. He does this with the intention of initiating the *relajo*, but also to send him a message: “that was not very manly.” It appears that Arnold had sent him some text messages previously in the week in which he told him that he missed him with a picture of a Coke with the slogan “[share a Coke with] Your Brother.” Arnold was probably trying to demonstrate affection by telling him that he not only considered him as a cousin, but as a brother; and that he missed him. When Kyle received them, he didn’t know what to do because if he responded too affectionately, it could throw doubt on his sexual preference and he could himself be identified as *pato* or homosexual. Because of this, he opted to respond as he did in lines #16-17, “*cabrón pero estas bien pussy, tas’ como bien pato* (motherfucker but you’re really pussy, you’re like really gay)”. The word “pussy” refers to the female sexual organ, and it is colloquially used in order to refer to people who possess qualities socially rejected in men, like cowardice and fragility, as these are mostly related with the female gender. Because of this, a pussy man is not seen as a real man and, in this society, men who are not heterosexual or do not follow the *macho* stereotype, are stigmatized, *relajados*, and isolated from the rest.

When Kyle imitates his cousin in line #7 with a high-pitched but low volume voice saying “*Te extraño, primo* (I miss you, cousin)”, he was trying to index a woman’s voice. He was pointing to an ideology of how a woman’s voice should sound. The sentiment expressed is likewise considered feminine, since men are not supposed to express affection and feelings, especially towards other men. In the last line, Kyle tells Arnold that he is a *puta*/whore. Again, we see him referring to his cousin with a female idiom: a woman who sleeps with many men. This is essentially an offensive word towards women in this society, because of the ideology that a woman should stay chaste until marriage. Both men and women stigmatize such portrayal as whore. By calling Arnold a whore, he is not only referring to him as a woman, but one of the “lowest” sort.

However, Kyle was not only trying to offend his cousin, but to superimpose himself as the stronger male in front of the two females present, who acted as the audience, one of them being his girlfriend. The word *cabrón*/motherfucker, the closest approximation in English I could find, was not used in any of the occasions with the intention of insulting. Rather, we can observe *cabrón* is a generic word used for reaffirming closeness. It does not follow the original meaning of the word, which is a man with a wife that has been unfaithful. As in Brenes Peña (2007), we can see that this word has mostly lost its original meaning in most contexts. At the same time, as this is a “strong” expletive, a man can use it to express affect without losing his virility.

## #2 The redhead gave him permission!

This next interaction took place in a school bus, rented for the occasion, transporting people back to the metropolitan area from an “Oktoberfest” carnival, in which the most advertised product was beer. The same bus provided alcoholic beverages for the people who paid to ride. I (Natasha) was with my boyfriend (Arnold), and two of his *panas*, Nathan and George. The bus was full of other people that we did not necessarily know.

1	<b>Nathan:</b>	Nosotros vamo’ a San Juan después de	We’re goin’ to San Juan after
2		aquí. ¿Le das permiso a Arnold?	this. Do you give Arnold permission?
3	<b>Natasha:</b>	Si:::↓	Ye:::s↓
4	<b>Nathan:</b>	¡JORGE! <b>LA</b>	¡GEORGE! <b>THE</b>
5		<b>COLORÁ LE DIO PERMISO</b>	<b>REDHEAD GAVE HIM PERMISSION</b>
6	<b>Natasha:</b>	YO NO↑ LE TENGO QUE DAR	I DON’T↑ HAVE TO GIVE HIM
7		PERMISO	PERMISSION

In this case, Nathan takes the role of the *pana* that tries to draw out his friends and, by doing this; he himself highlights his own virility. Nathan not only told George that I had given Arnold permission, but he screamed it from the other side of the bus so everyone (the audience) would hear that they were going to hang out afterwards. At the same time, he decides to use a pejorative to refer to his friend's girlfriend: *la colorá*/the redhead, alluding to my red hair. Although "the redhead" is not a traditional bad word, I interpret it an expletive because of the function it had in this particular context. By using an article ("the") in front of the adjective ("redhead"), it gets a slightly different connotation. It depersonalizes me by identifying me with one aspect of my physical characteristics (some girl with red hair). It clearly wasn't necessary for the meaning of the sentence, but it added expressive value.

I, however, was offended with Nathan's insinuation that I should give my boyfriend permission to go out because it made me seem jealous and controlling. Because of this, I tried to defend myself, but got only silence from the guys. Essentially, I had ruined the *relajo* frame by taking it "too seriously". That is, I was the object of the *relajo*, but was not permitted to participate in it (Personal communication, Evelyn Dean-Olmsted, December 6 2014, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico).

Even more curious is the fact that my boyfriend did not make any comment throughout this interaction or afterwards because he could not take any one position without compromising the other one. If he defended the point of view that it was not necessary for me to give him permission, he could receive rejection from his friends for taking it "too seriously" and ruining the *relajo* frame; he could also risk angering me (his girlfriend) for not considering me in his decisions, nor inviting me. If he invited me when his *panas* were clearly not doing so, he would receive rejection for ruining their "hang-out" time (which should be without girlfriends). On the other hand, if he said that he really did not want to go out, they would tell him that he is *charro* or a "party pooper." This is why, if he did not want to hang out in San Juan after the carnival, he could take refuge in the fact that his girlfriend did not want him to go out alone. Because, even though she might not come out looking good, at least he would not be seen as *charro* in front of his *panas*, the culprit and excuse would be the girlfriend.

In these first two interactions, we can see how the males employ expletives within a *relajo* frame to demonstrate their virility to an audience. As in Lauria (1964), this *relajo* frame must not be broken under penalty of isolation from the

rest of the group. The second interaction shows how *relajo* may possibly be broke by someone who does not follow the rules and takes the exchange too seriously.

### *Female expletive usage*

#### #3 If I let him start it, he'll be fucking with me all night

In a conversation that lasted about an hour with my female friend Jessie, expletives appear only in a short segment. We were having lunch in a university gazebo and talking about various topics, but the conversation got more heated when I received a message from my jealous boyfriend, in which he said "... [sic.] no sé si te fijaste que te llamé, pero no era nada wao so pichea (I don't know if you've noticed that I called you, but it was nothing wow so whatever)". Jessie told me to tell him "... ¿ya vas a empezar? (Are you already gonna start?)". However, I told her that I *didn't* want to because it would start a fight "like the other day." Jessie then proceeds to tell me an anecdote about a similar thing that happened to her with her boyfriend while she was studying with a friend.

1	<b>Jessie</b>	pues entonces mi (.) mi novio me escribe	well then (.) my boyfriend writes to me
2		"ah que como que ya vas todo el día allí"	"oh like you have been there all day"
3		"n:en:e, llevo (.) cuatro horas si acaso..."	"du:d:e, It has been (.) four hours at most..."
4		...deja el shou:: y:: en verda' deja, deja de	...drop the act and really stop, stop
5		ponerte celoso porque haces el <b>ridículo.</b>	getting jealous because you're being <b>ridiculous.</b>
6		O sea, no sé ni por qué se pone celoso	Like, I don't know why he even gets jealous
7		porque es una a↑mi:ga, no es un amigo"	because she is a gi↑rl, not a boy"

In line #5, she calls her boyfriend 'ridiculous' because she was not even with another guy and he still became jealous and possessive. Although ridiculous isn't really a strong word, she uses it specifically with the intention of insulting her boyfriend. Later on, she concludes with "*le tengo como que salir pa' tras' con cosa, porque si no, como que si me la dejo montar, me jode toa' la vi-, toa' la noche* (I have to talk back to him, because if not, if I let him start it, he'll be **fucking** with me all my lif-, all night)". *Si me la dejo montar* (if I let him start it)



refers to the traditional gender roles she was rejecting with her boyfriend. The word *joder/fuck*, although it has a sexual connotation, means to annoy or tick off. In this occasion, Jessie uses it for me to realize the importance of talking back to my boyfriend.

In this brief segment of the interaction, we can see how the males that appear indirectly were trying to enforce traditional gender roles of ‘dominant’ (males) vs. ‘submissive’ (females) to their girlfriends. The central female crosses this social boundary by employing expletives to entirely challenge him and this gender-based ideology, and to attain social power. (De Klerk, 1991)

## **Conclusion**

There is a scale of acceptability of words tied to the social functions of the people who utter them and the context in which they occur. This is why, to define an expletive, we cannot aspire to simply make a list of words. Since each gender has a distinct social role, the language that they use is accepted or rejected under different standards. While men, being the dominant gender, make use of expletives mainly in order to compete and to enhance who is the most *macho* (less feminine), women use them to acquire that social power that is usually reserved for men.

Boys are taught from a very young age that if they present female qualities (like crying) they will be rejected. This is why they must *demonstrate* virility by competing with other males. Since this is the purpose, the competition must occur in front of an audience. As presented by Antonio Lauria (1964), males were forced to *participate* in the *relajo* under penalty of isolation.

Women, however, have lived in a position of inferiority for a long time. This is why, by using strong language, they are *challenging* this social reality. If using expletives is considered masculine language, then women use these words to break down this ideology.

## Appendix

### Transcription Symbol Guide

<b>bold</b>	Indicates the words to which I want to draw attention specifically
[ text ]	Indicates the beginning and the end of “overlapping” between speakers
(# of seconds)	The duration, in seconds, of a pause in the speech
CAPITAL LETTERS	Indicates shouting or louder-sounding expressions than the rest
(.)	micro pause
↓	Precedes a marked decrease in intonation
↑	Precedes a marked rise in intonation
–	Indicates an abrupt finalization or interruption of a word or sound
◦	Indicates a whisper or a more silent expression than the rest
:::	Indicates the prolongation of the immediately previous sound
...	Indicates partial omission
(hhh)	Audible exhalation
(.hhh)	Audible inhalation
(( <i>italics</i> ))	Annotation of a non-verbal activity
£words£	Indicates the speaker is smiling while speaking

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