“Put your ass in the chair” —

Exploring the use of profanities in *The Wire* with conversation analysis

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1 Introduction

This bachelor’s thesis examines how swearing is used in the television series The Wire by utilising conversation analysis. It answers the questions how and why profanities are used by the characters, does the harsh language have an effect on the conversations themselves or does it have a noticeable effect on the eventual outcome of the exchanges. While there are studies into the various cultural differences regarding the use of profanities, and studies that compare and contrast content of network television and cable shows (see, for example, Kaye & Sapolsky, 2009), swearing in popular culture is not a widely studied subject. This paper tries to shed some light on the matter. The data and methodology for this research was selected mainly due to personal preference. The Wire happens to be an extremely intricate television series, and I wanted to explore it further than just simply watching and enjoying it. Conversation analysis is also something I have an interest in as it is a rather intricate field in language studies.

Conversation analysis (often abbreviated as CA) is used in this study to gain an understanding into the use of profanities. Although conversation analysis is usually used to studying naturally occurring talk-in-interaction, it is actually well suited to analysing any kind of interaction. In the case of this study, the material is scripted and then acted scenes from a television series. As I am using conversation analysis, the focus of this thesis is not to examine how profanities are placed within a sentence as, for example, grammatical elements, but to focus on how and why they are used, and whether or not uttering them in conversations affects the course of it.

Swearing is an intriguing linguistic phenomenon, so it is necessary to define swearing, or what is counted as profanities. For this study, the basis of swearing is the list of seven words by the Federal Communications Commission of the United States of America, these being shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits. While the focus is on “harsh” swearing, I will also examine the use of milder expressions and other linguistic phenomenon that can be said to be somewhat politically incorrect, such as racial slurs, and how they are used as profanities.

This paper is divided into five sections, the first one being this introductory chapter. The second section is split into two subheadings and it introduces the theoretical framework of this study, that is, conversation analysis and defining swearing in the context of this study. The third part gives a
brief description of the research material being used, with a short summary of both the episodes of the series and the scenes themselves. The fourth chapter explains and analyses the results after applying the theoretical framework to the research material. Finally, the fifth section is the conclusion and summary of this paper with some discussion points and suggestions for further research.
2 Theoretical framework

This section introduces theoretical framework of conversation analysis. It will also define swearing in terms of this research paper. As the focus is on conversation analysis as the methodology of this research paper, the psychology behind the use of swearwords is not discussed here. Also, embodied action is only mentioned if it is essential to or changes the conversation in a meaningful manner.

2.1 Conversation analysis

According to Hutchby and Wooffit (1998), conversation analysis aims to explicate the procedures on which speakers rely to produce utterances and by which they make sense of other speakers' talk. At its core, conversation analysis is simply the study of social interaction. Almost all of conversation analysis is done via transcribed tape-recordings. The object of conversation analysis is the interactional organization of social activities, and unlike many other forms of linguistic analysis, it examines utterances “first and foremost as practical social accomplishment” (ibid., p. 14).

In conversation analysis, the presumption is that talk is highly organized and ordered phenomenon. Even more so in a television series, where most of the action is always scripted (apart from improvisation by the actors). Sequences are one of the key concepts in conversation analysis. Sequences display the speaker's ability to understand what takes place in a conversation by selecting their responses according to what has been previously said. Hutchby and Wooffit (1998) also describe next-turn proof procedure, or the turn-by-turn unfolding of interaction. This is essential when trying to give context to utterances in a conversation. Without examining the surrounding utterances of each segment being analysed in a conversation, one would not obtain a complete picture of what takes place.

Turn-taking occurs in most conversations, and a key notion of conversation analysis is the sequential order of talk. The turns are linked in a sequence, and conversation analysis can reveal this sequence. A simple example of these kind of conversational sequences are adjacency pairs, such as question/answer, greeting/returning a greeting, and invitation/acceptance or declination. One important part of conversation analysis is analysing what interactional business is being mediated
or accomplished through the use of sequential pattern or device, and if it is used by participants to demonstrate their orientation to this business (Hutchby & Wooffit, 1998). An example of this is a basic request, i.e. an adjacency pair of a request and a compliance/non-compliance: by requesting something, a person expects either a positive or a negative answer.

Especially of interest in this research is the effect the first part of an adjacency pair can have on the second position. This influence is called preference, and these usually occur in offers, assessments, or requests. The initial action of an adjacency pair can be arranged so that it invites the preferred response. According to Hutchby and Wooffit (1998, p. 44), ‘isn’t it?’ is one of these phrases that invites agreement rather than disagreement. If the response is not the preferred one, the turn can be started with utterances such as ‘well’ or ‘um’.

Conversation analysis can also reveal the participant’s orientation towards a conversational device. As Hutchby and Wooffit (1998, p. 104) state, it is important to look what kind of response an utterance receives in the next turn. For example, scepticism can be displayed by juxtaposing a claim (‘you say X’) with a new version (‘what about Y’). Of, if one is telling a story, the recipient of it can display support for the storyteller’s stance by affiliation, mirroring the original stance by timely and carefully placed affective displays (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012).

The main research procedure of CA occurs in three stages (Hutchby & Wooffit, 1998). The first one is to locate potentially interesting phenomenon in the data, simply by going through it. The second step is to describe a selected occurrence formally (in the case of this study, swearing), concentrating on its sequential context, i.e. the type of turns that precede and follow it. The third stage is to return to the data and to see if other instances of the phenomenon can be described in terms of the account.

Essential for this research is how emotion or affect can be displayed in conversation. As Peräkylä and Sorjonen (2012) summarise, displaying emotion is a contextualized, multiparty and multimodal procedure. While this can be achieved by verbal, prosodic, and nonvocal means, only verbal methods are explored here.

According to Peräkylä & Sorjonen (2012), there is not yet a “satisfactory understanding between action and emotion” (p. 9). Emotion can be seen as something complementary to the primary action
of the turn; on the other hand, actions such as complaints are inherently emotional in nature. While actions also can be just a single turn of talk, displaying both affect and emotion usually are more complex and last longer, possibly changing as the interaction between participants in a conversation unfolds further.

2.2 Defining swearing

According to Beck (2009), swearing remains a mystery to psychological science, mainly because profanities tend to cluster around bodily functions. Profanities can be used to evoke disgust and contamination or other negative feelings. Cursing is considered a type of verbal aggression, which involves “attacking the self-concept,” or opinion of another person with the intent of “hurting the person psychologically” (Kaye & Sapolsky 2009). As Kotilainen (2007) summarises, swearing expands the original concept in which the word is initially used. For example, saying fuck does not mean “to have intercourse”, nor does saying cunt mean simply a vagina, but both these words have a much larger scale when used as swearwords.

As a basis for what utterances are considered swearing, this paper utilises Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) list of “seven dirty words which are never to be said on television”. These include shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits (Kaye & Sapolsky 2009). FCC also defines indecent language as something that “describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs” (FCC v. Pacifica Foundation, 1978, p. 733).

Offensive words can be classified further into five different groups: the aforementioned seven dirty words, words that are sexual in nature, excretory words, mild-other words, and strong-other words (Kaye & Sapolsky 2004, 2009). The category of sexual words contains words that either describe a sexual body part (boobs, pussy) or a sexual behaviour (jackoff, hummer). Excretory words contain bodily functions or body parts, such as asshole. The mild words include words like hell, slut and damn. Religious references, such as “for Christ’s sake”, can also be seen as swearing depending on the context; i.e. if the phrase is uttered in anger or in vain. And finally, the group of other strong words includes utterances such as bastard, bitch and bullshit. However, this paper utilises a simpler
categorisation, and classifies offensive words as simply either mild or strong (Kaye & Sapolsky 2009).

Furthermore, racial slurs, such as *nigger*, can be considered as swearing. In this study, each occurrence is analysed individually to see whether it is used as a profanity, or if it is mentioned and simply used as a regular expression in the characters’ everyday speech.

The use of swearwords in a conversation can be seen as a slip or a gaffe. As Butler and Fitzgerald (2011) state, “fleeting expletives are slips — accidental and isolated cases that occur through a momentary lack of self-monitoring.” While the content of a television series is more often than not scripted, it is still useful to analyse whether or not a character used a certain word accidentally or actually meant to say it all along. Kotilainen (2007) agrees with this view: according to him, swearing can be categorized as either accidental slips or as innovations; a new grammatical construct that has not been previously established.

There have been quite a few previous studies into swearing in television. However, this research paper does not try to analyse the characters further by their speech patterns, unlike Sapolsky and Kaye (2005), who compare the context in which swearing occurs. Sapolsky and Kaye (2005) have found out that, for example, “[s]wearing occurred most often in man-to-man interactions, followed by women-to-men” and that “[m]en and women tended to use mild curse words more when talking to the opposite sex.”

Notice that in order to avoid repetition in this paper, the word swearing can be altered to profanities, cursing, dirty language, or other such synonyms.

Finally, combining conversation analysis with swearing aims to analyse the patterns in which swearing is used and the ways in which these relate to social and cultural patterns. It touches upon pragmatics as well, i.e. how meaning is conveyed in communication.
3 Description of the research material

*The Wire* is a critically acclaimed American television series that originally aired on the cable channel HBO (Home Box Office) from 2002 to 2008. The series is created by David Simon, an author and a former police reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*. *The Wire* contains a total of 60 episodes spanning five season. It deals with American society, with each season concentrating on a particular phenomenon in the city of Baltimore, Maryland. The first season, from which all the data in this research is gathered, focuses on illegal drug trade in the city, mainly placing focus on a police detail that is tasked with bringing down the Barksdale organization.

The transcribed data is gathered from two different episodes from the first season: the pilot episode and the ninth episode, titled “The Target” and “Game Day”, respectively. The scenes or parts of them were selected somewhat randomly, but also in order to compare and highlight the multitude of language used in the series; and how it varies from police detectives to the street-level drug dealers, and from politicians to police command.

Note that all the character names used in this paper are the ones used most frequently in the series. Therefore, for example, Detective Bunk Moreland is referred to simply as Bunk instead of Moreland, and Detective Thomas “Herc” Hauk is referred to as Herc, and so on.

The first episode introduces the viewers to the city of Baltimore and most of the main characters of the series. By the ninth episode of the series the investigation into the Barksdale organisation is well underway. The first scene (extracts titled 1x1 The Target) analysed takes place in Murphy’s Irish Pub. Homicide detectives Jimmy McNulty (played by Dominic West) and Bunk Moreland (played by Wendell Pierce), two of the main characters of the first season, are discussing how this new case might not progress so well, as especially McNulty feels that their supervisors are unable to do “proper police work.” While the overall tone of the conversation is rather negative, it still retains a feeling of a friendly banter, and their discussion flows freely.

In the second scene from the pilot episode, Major Rawls (played by John Doman), commanding officer of the Homicide unit, calls detective McNulty to his office to scold him for his actions. As McNulty previously talked directly to Judge Phelan after visiting the court house, he bypassed the
chain of command, and the police command came under pressure from the court house. No one apart from McNulty has heard of Barksdale's drug organisation, and Rawls is both amazed and angry how a single detective could have knowledge of an organisation that controls such a large part of the drug trade in the area. Most of all, he is discontent how the recent court case ended with the prosecution losing a seemingly clear case of murder.

The third scene (from the episode “Game Day”, extracts titled 1x9 Game Day) takes place between D'Angelo Barksdale and Wallace (played by Larry Gilliard Jr. and Michael B. Jordan, respectively), two street-level drug dealers in Avon Barksdale’s and Stringer Bell’s drug organisation. They discuss how Wallace wants to leave the low-rise housing projects known as “The Pit” and perhaps go back to school. Wallace is unsettled by the violence in the organisation. The organisation is in feud with Omar Little, a notorious gangster who earns his living by robbing dealers. As a revenge for Omar stealing their drugs and money, Barksdale’s crew track down and kill Omar’s boyfriend Brandon in an extremely brutal way, and additionally display his body among the low-rises as a warning to anyone who might support Omar. However, Omar retaliates later by killing Stinkum, a member of Barksdale’s organisation. Wallace feels guilty for both these brutalities, as he was the one who originally recognized Brandon in a restaurant and his information led to Brandon being murdered.

In the fourth scene (also from the episode “Game Day”), detectives Herc and Carver (played by Domenick Lombardozzi and Seth Gilliam, respectively) have stopped Roland “Wee-Bey” Brice (played by Hassan Johnson) and Savino’s (played by Christ Clanton) vehicle after seeing a bag of drug-related money handed into it. Both Wee-Bey and Savino are middle-level “players” and trusted enforcers or soldiers in the Barksdale organisation. To their irritation, the police detectives fail to find anything illegal or incriminating from the vehicle, only confiscating the large sum of cash they find instead of narcotics or firearms.

List of symbols used in the transcriptions can be found in the appendix.
4 Analysis

In this section of this study conversation analysis will be used to examine swearing in a variety of scenes. After firstly carefully analysing the material (the first step in the research procedure of conversation analysis as described by Hutchby & Wooffit (1998)), two major social actions became predominantly clear: complaints and directives. It would appear that both these social actions can be enhanced by using additional swearwords. I will take a close look at the context in which swearing takes place.

4.1 Complaints

This section displays how swearing is linked with showing discontent in a conversation, i.e. being unhappy with something.

This short extract displays McNulty’s discontent with his new supervisor, as he thinks a more thorough police investigation is necessary in order to destroy the Barksdale organisation.

(1) 1x1: The Target. 51:29

01 MCNULTY: %wel%l he’s gonna fuck this Barksdale thingup.%
02 bunk %takes a swag from his drink, swallows before responding%
03 BUNK: how’s that.
04 MCNULTY: <buy-bust>
05 (0.5)
06 he’s pissin in the win.

In this exchange, McNulty mentions Lieutenant Cedric Daniels and how he is unhappy with the way Daniels is running a new detail. McNulty is complaining how he thinks Daniels is going to destroy the operation against Stringer Bell and Avon Barksdale by not using enough resources to conduct a thorough research. Instead of devoting an extensive period of time for the research, the detail unit is supposed to stop the drug organisation by arresting street-level drug dealers – a method that McNulty thinks is ineffective against the Barksdale one. “Fuck this thing up” is clearly showing his frustration, and also drawing attention to the fact that he thinks the operation against Barksdale will be a complete disaster, instead of just, for example, “messing things up”.

This exchange is a good example of a complaint story that involves stance and affect related to indignation and anger brought about by a third party’s behaviour toward the storyteller, as outlined
by Couper-Kuhlen (in Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012). McNulty’s stance is clearly visible through his swearing. According to OED, the colloquial expression of “pissin' in the wind” means “to act ineffectually, to waste one's time, to attempt something futile.”

In this next extract, Bunk seems to hold the opinion that by initiating the investigative process itself, McNulty has already caused it to fail. McNulty then offers a somewhat obscure reference to a film which Bunk does not recognize.

(2) 1x1: The Target. 51:37

01 BUNK: You alrEADY fucked it up Jim
02 (0.6)
03 you mADE it ↑happen
04 hh
05 MCNULTY: hhh feel like that motherfucker at the end of Bridge on the
06 river KWai you know
07 (0.5)
08 what the F:UCK did I do?
09 BUNK: the bridge of what?
10 MCNULTY: you aint SEEN that movie?
11 BUNK: m-mm?

Bunk’s response to McNulty utilises the same phrase, “to fuck something up”. However, at the same time Bunk draws attention to the fact that McNulty’s own behaviour (circumventing the chain of command) has already destroyed the case. As the case was not built in a traditional way, Bunk seems to think that the detail is doomed from the start. At the same time, Bunk is showing affiliation (Couper-Kuhlen in Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012) to McNulty’s stance: they are both in an agreement that McNulty is the faulty person in this case. Bunk is also using the same kind of language as McNulty.

The word motherfucker is used instead of any number of alternatives describing a person, such as man, or even “that guy.” McNulty refers to the 1957 film The Bridge on the River Kwai (directed by David Lean), possibly referring to the line said by Alec Guinness’s character Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson before his death “What have I done?” McNulty is possibly contrasting his own compromised situation in the police force to that of Nicholson’s at the end of the film.

Interestingly, Bunk only reacts to the name of the film that is unfamiliar to him, instead of offering solace or some kind of solution to his friend; he somewhat misses his turn in this part of the conversation. While McNulty’s question (line 8) could be interpreted as a rhetorical one, the
emphasis on the word *fuck* demonstrates that he would prefer some kind of response from his colleague.

Having reached this point in the conversation, McNulty seems to understand the futility of his situation and then turns to alcohol for guidance.

(3) 1x1: The Target. 51:53

01 MCNULTY:  hhh I am fucked
02 mcnulty  drinks a shot, bangs the glass on the counter
03           (4.2)
04 MCNULTY:  fucked is ME
05 mcnulty  looks at BUNK, asking if he would like more to drink
06 BUNK:    Goddammit you gonna make me go another roun.
07 bunk    indicates with his fingers to the bartender
08 BUNK:   ↓two more hhh

In the final part of the conversation, McNulty continues to display discontent towards the situation as a whole. Although McNulty also displays the versatility of the word *fuck*, his line gains no response from Bunk. McNulty’s utterance does not seem to be a part of an adjacency pair; it is more like a summary of the conversation so far, or a prelude before ordering some more drinks.

The less severe swearword *goddammit* uttered by Bunk shows his resignation, as once again he is out drinking with McNulty, and once again they are going to drink more than they had originally intended. It also changes the meaning of his utterance: without initiating the sentence with goddammit, Bunk’s utterance could be interpreted as a question.

The next extract is from an exchange between D’Angelo and Wallace. D’Angelo plays a more active role in their conversation as they discuss Wallace’s future and possible options.

(4) 1x9: Game Day. 4:22

01 D’ANGELO:  So what you do for money? ts can’t live without it right?
02           (0.5)
03 you still fucked up behind that stick-up main?
04           (1.4)
05 shit aint ON: you
06           (0.8)
07 it aint on me <NEITHER>
08           (0.8)
09 motherfucker who robbed the stash shot Sterling hh he gonna
10 get GOT no matter what <YOU> or me do

Unseen by the audience, Wallace has apparently told D’Angelo that he is “out of the game”, i.e. he no longer wants to be involved in the distribution of illegal substances. D’Angelo is therefore
wondering what Wallace might do for a living if he is no longer involved in their line of business. Once again, the phrase “fucked up” is used to describe a situation or a person’s negative feelings towards the matter being discussed.

The word shit is used instead of, for example, simply saying it or this. This clearly places emphasis on the nature of “the game”; people are going to be killed and there is nothing a low-level drug dealer can do about it, as D’Angelo explains. However, at the same moment he is very much in understanding of Wallace’s position in this matter. Like in the scene between McNulty and Bunk, the word motherfucker is used to describe a person down on their luck due to circumstances beyond their control.

While D’Angelo is clearly in a higher position in the Barksdale organisation than Wallace is (as D’Angelo is Avon Barksdale’s nephew), the tone of the talk is much more among two peers than, for example, the exchange between McNulty and Rawls (see the next section 4.2 Directives). At the same time, swearing is still used rather often.

D’Angelo then proceeds to praise Wallace. He tries to make Wallace understand that at least D’Angelo sees a lot of good qualities in Wallace, even though he has grown up in a poor neighbourhood.

(5) 1x9: Game Day. 5:30

01 D’ANGELO: look here ma:n you a smart little mothafucka
02 [...]  
03 D’ANGELO: believe bee
04 (1.3)  
05 and you
06 (1.9)  
07 you g$ot a good hear$t in there too
08 d’angelo Staps Wallace to the chest$  
09 not like the rest of these niggas

Unlike the previous use of the word motherfucker, this time it is used to show empathy and to praise Wallace and his qualities. D’Angelo’s complaint seems to be that Wallace does not recognise his own potential, and should hold himself in higher esteem. D’Angelo also changes the word motherfucker slightly, by altering both the suffixes of the word from –er to –a, and also adding the endearing word little in front of the profanity, thus making sure that his expression is understood as friendly instead of a one meaning harm. It is also interesting to contrast the use of the word nigger to the scene with...
McNulty and Rawls (again, see the next section). Here, while D’Angelo uses the exact same racial slur to refer to his African-American peers, it is done mostly in a friendly way. However, by using this term, there seems to be some kind of understanding that the people living or working in the projects are seen as inferior to people living in the better neighbourhoods of Baltimore.

The following extract is after detectives Herc and Carver have stopped the car driven by Wee-Bey, and they have found a large bag of money in the car.

(6) 1x9: Game Day, 14:10

01 carver finds a bag full of cash in the car
02 CARVER this money right here I DIDN’T just pull this out of your
03 truck
04 (0.7)
05 WEE-BEY: what money?
06 (2.4)
07 HERC: >damn be countin this limpdick cash all day<
08 CARVER: where you guys goin with all this:?

As the detectives finally find the poorly hidden bag of money underneath the front seat of the car, instead of being jubilant on finding possibly criminating evidence, especially Herc is somewhat disappointed. He calls the money “limpdick cash”, comparing the large amount of small random bills to a flaccid penis. He knows he will be forced to actually count the money, and most likely was hoping to find some other type of evidence in the car, for example, drugs or illegal firearms.

Wee-Bey is also a prime example of talking what is usually called African American Vernacular English (AAVE). He makes grammatical mistakes in almost all of his sentences. However, apart from using the word shit he does not swear in any of his utterances, displaying submission even though he is clearly agitated being pulled over.

The final extract in this part of the paper is from the scene between Rawls and McNulty. Rawls is furious with McNulty but seems to take him seriously.

(7) 1x1: The Target. 22:23

01 RAWLS: I’m upstairs answering questions about some project nigger I
02 never even heard of who supposed to have beat my unit out of
03 ten murders
04 MCNULTY: three
05 (1.1)
06 they only beat three in court
07 RAWLS: I got the deputy asking about ten
08 MCNULTY: NO they DID ten we only charged them with three
09 (1.6)
Rawls' use of the derogatory word *nigger* here could be seen as swearing. He is not using any kind of politically correct term, but instead is reinforcing the fact that his unit was beaten by some unknown African-American person from a housing project. However, as he previously already called Judge Phelan a *shitbag*, he seems to be angry at everyone regardless of their status or position in society, and does not really care about being politically correct in the presence of his subordinate.

There is quite the contrast between McNulty's behaviour in this scene, and in the previous one where he was chatting with Bunk at the bar. By abstaining from swearing in this conversation, he is clearly displaying submissive behaviour and recognizes that he is in an inferior position to his supervisor.

### 4.2 Directives

This section examines how harsh language can be used in giving directives or orders to other people. In these examples, the directives range from high-ranking police officers giving orders to subordinates and from police officers stopping a vehicle and commanding the suspects.

In this first extract, Detective McNulty has been ordered to appear at Major Rawls' office. As McNulty enters the office, Rawls is instantly ordering him to sit down.

(8) 1x1: The Target. 21.28

```
01 mcnulty knocks on the doorframe
02 RAWLS: Sit the fuck down detective.
03 (1.5)
04 MCNULTY: Somethin wrong?
05 (2.7)
06 RAWLS: Put your ass in the chair.
07 mcnulty sits down
```

As in the previous extract(s), a person is once again using swearwords to show his discontent. However, this time Rawls also utilises them to give direct orders to his subordinate McNulty, who complies. This is a good example of failed regulation of emotion in an institutional setting (Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012), where affective neutrality is usually preferred. However, by clearly displaying his displeasure right at the beginning of the conversation, Rawls changes the social setting of the
exchange from a formal one to a more unformal, familiar one.

Rawls is angry at McNulty, as he has failed to adhere to the chain of command by talking to Judge Daniel Phelan about the Barksdale organisation, which, until now, has been a completely unknown entity to the police command. Rawls clearly uses the word *fuck* to emphasise the severity of the situation, and McNulty seems to recognise this instantly as he enquires what is wrong, instead of routinely simply complying with Rawls’s request and sitting down.

For further emphasis, Rawls also makes the rude gesture of showing McNulty his middle finger. It is also interesting to note that Rawls opens the conversation with arguably the strongest swearword *fuck*, and as McNulty does not instantly comply (i.e. he does not sit down), Rawls uses the word *ass*, which could be said is not that strong a swearword.

While McNulty displays ignorance at why he was summoned to the office, Rawls unleashes his fury over what McNulty has done.

(9) 1x1: The Target. 21:58

01 MCNULTY: Major w[hat di-
02 RAWLS: [.hh ]NO no don’t major me you BACkstabbing smart-ass
03 PIEce of sh:it
04 (1.2)
05 WHAT the FUCK you doin over at the courthouse anyway? why the
06 FUck you talkin to some shitbag judge.
07 mcnulty opens his mouth, but does not say anything
08 rawls holds up his fingers again
09 RAWLS: these are for you mcnulty.
10 (3.2)
11 $this one up here is going up your narrow fucking irish ass$
12 rawls shakes his left hand slightly
13 and this bad boy is in your fuckin eye
14 rawls shakes his right hand slightly

Rawls continues to use expletives in order to demonstrate that he is in command in this conversation. While he orders McNulty not to call him by his rank, he is at the same time actually reprimanding him for bypassing the chain of command. Rawls is stating that the chain of command should be adhered to at all times, and not just when it is convenient for McNulty’s interests. Rawls further emphasises his point by not calling McNulty by his rank nor his name but addressing him as a “backstabbing smart-ass piece of shit”. Interestingly, he also refers to Judge Phelan as “some shitbag judge”, instead of being respectful of someone who is in a higher judicial and political position that Rawls himself is. Clearly, as the judge is not present in the situation, Rawls feels he can use this
derogative term. He is also quite clearly disgusted with the friendly relationship McNulty has with Judge Phelan, and he is trying to undermine the judge’s authority.

Apart from using expletives such as “sit the fuck down” and “put your ass in the chair”, Rawls also talks rather slowly in this scene. He has clear pauses between sentences and articulates almost all of his words meticulously. It is also evident that Rawls fears that McNulty might actually be correct and that Barksdale’s organisation exists, bringing into question the efficiency and usefulness of the police force in the city.

Rawls also makes the rude gesture of displaying his both middle fingers to McNulty, and describing in detail what he is going to do with them. While this thread is most likely not to be taken literally, Rawls is trying to scare McNulty by threatening him with physical violence.

The following extract is from the beginning of the scene with detectives Herc and Carver stopping Wee-Bey’s vehicle as the police officers begin to search the car.

(10) 1x9: Game Day. 13:54

01 HERC: Sir, is there anything in the VEHICLE we should know about.?
02 carver %pushes wee-bey to his knees after cuffing him%
03 WEE-BEY: no
04 (0.7)
05 HERC: no guns no drugs.
06 carver searches the vehicle while herc talks to wee-bey
07 WEE-BEY: me aint got <SHIT>

The scene begins with detectives Herc and Carver stopping the SUV driven by Wee-Bey. The police officers are very formal and utilise clear directives for both the driver and the passenger (Savino) of the vehicle, as they should in case the stopping of the car should lead to an official court hearing. Instead of calling the suspects “project niggers” as Rawls did, Herc addresses Wee-Bey as “sir”.

Interestingly, while the police officers are clearly being more physically aggressive here (cuffing Wee-Bey and Savino rather forcefully, while the suspects seem to just accept the interruption in their business in a stoic manner, most likely having been stopped before and knowing that being calm and complying is the best way to handle the situation), the first instance of swearing is done by Wee-Bey. However, he uses the word shit to refer to guns, drugs or other possibly illegal items. Even though
Wee-Bey seems rather calm, at the same time he displays irritation about getting caught. *Shit* here seems to emphasise that the car is clean of all illegal substances; that no matter how much the police officers look they would not find anything. Wee-Bey also seems to be saying that guns and drugs are bad, equalling them to excrement. Wee-Bey’s irritation might also be partly due to his injured leg, as he is forced to use a cane in order to walk better (Carver orders him to toss his cane away before approaching him).

After questioning the suspects shortly on the found bag of money, Carver and Herc have to condescend to the idea that their traffic stop was actually for nothing.

(11) 1x9: Game Day. 14:39

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 01 | CARVER: | *y’know I know how that shit is. The other day I took up the* |
| 02 | sofa cushions on my couch |
| 03 | (0.8) |
| 04 | found a <buck fourty> I didn’t even know was there. |
| 05 | (3.6) |
| 06 | WEE-BEY: | *y’all aint got no charge right?* |
| 07 | carver, herc | *look at each other* |
| 08 | HERC: | *no fucko we do not have a charge* |

Having not found what they actually wanted, both Herc and Carver seem to use swearwords more freely than in the beginning of the exchange. As it becomes clear that they cannot arrest anyone this time, they can change their conduct to a more unofficial style, as probably no lengthy reports or official documents will be made. Herc even goes so far as to call a suspect a *fucko*, adding a colloquial suffix to the word *fuck* (compare with *kid-kiddo*).

Wee-Bey’s question of the detectives not having a charge is a good example of preference in conversation (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). Since no guns nor drugs were seized from the car, all the participants in the conversation know that the police officers do not have a charge (as driving around with cash is not illegal). Wee-Bey seeks confirmation to this claim by ending his turn with *right*.

It is also interesting to note that Herc and Carver do most of the talking. It is quite clear that the unwritten rule in the streets is that you do not talk to police officers. Wee-Bey and Savino adhere to this, producing mostly just monosyllabic answers to the detectives’ enquiries.

The following extract shows D’Angelo handing over some cash to Wallace to help him if he is no longer employed by the Barksdale organisation.
In this extract, Wallace insists on not wanting to take D’Angelo’s money, as he thinks taking the money he will be forced to do something illegal in return, and he quite clearly states that he is or wants to be “out of the game”. It is interesting to note the lack of swearing in this instance. Only after D’Angelo has managed to make Wallace comply with his request, does he use swearwords. His approach to giving directives is completely different to the previous instances; whereas Rawls kept swearing at McNulty, D’Angelo makes Wallace accept the money by a few kind words. He emphasises that the money does not require any kind of action on Wallace’s part, and he should simply take it. He even makes a slight joke at the situation, as money is quite openly handed back and forth in the low-rise projects and no one would pay much notice to an exchange of a few dollar bills. D’Angelo’s final “take it” line serves as a further encouragement, even though it is already evident that Wallace is accepting the money.

Both nigga and mothafucka (derived from motherfucker) are used as a display of affection and friendship, not as any kind of derogatory terms. It would appear they are uttered as a part of what constitutes as everyday speech for the characters, the same way as one would use words like friend or the colloquial bro.
5 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how and why profanities are used and does the harsh language have an effect on the exchanges. Based on the research, we can conclude that the use of profanities does not seem to have much of an effect on the conversations themselves or on their outcomes: i.e. profanities do not seem to alter the sequences in speech in any way. Also, the profanities are clearly not slips; they are purposefully included in the conversations simply as a part of everyday speech for the characters. However, they do serve quite a multitude of purposes and swearing reveals other intriguing and important aspects in the conversations.

It would appear that swearing is used to display one's disposition towards a particular situation; i.e. if one is angry, one is more likely to use profanities. When complaining about something, swearing is used to emphasize the speaker’s attitude. The speakers are so clearly able to recognize this use of swearing, and possibly alter their own way of talking accordingly. Situational awareness seems to be of importance: using swearwords sometimes appears to make a directive more powerful, but vice versa also the lack of profanities can emphasize the message the speaker is trying to convey to others.

Also, it seems that among equal partners, swearing is not used as a tool to influence the other parties involved in conversations, but simply as a part of everyday speech, especially when complaining about something. However, refraining from the use of profanities does seem to indicate recognition of some kind of hierarchy between the speakers, indicating submissive behaviour. Conversely, swearing is then also used to indicate dominance over the other parties in a conversation (see the extracts with Rawls with McNulty and Herc with Wee-Bey). Interestingly swearing can also be used to sympathise and take an affirmative stance with a person; calling someone a *nigga* can be used to convey affection instead of it being used as a racial slur.

Worth noting is the rather small scope of this study. In order to fully understand the phenomenon of swearing, and how it might change the course of a conversation, a larger data set should be analysed and possibly more time devoted to the research. For further research, it might be helpful to compare different characters in different settings, and examine questions such as how much do their behaviour change according to the participants in the conversation.
In the future, this study could be expanded to include much more than just examining the basic use of swearwords. For example, the prosodic and phonetic qualities of speech could be looked into in the context of swearing. Nonvocal resources and facial expressions would also be an intriguing direction to take this study towards. Embodied action is one huge field of study, and it would be interesting to see how it is connected to use of profanities in conversations. For example, is it common to utter “fuck you” while showing someone the middle finger, or is simply the gesture enough? It might be worth researching if the phenomena noticed in this research also hold true to other television series. Also, it could be useful to compare popular culture in general to naturally occurring talk, and see if profanities are used differently.
6 List of references


7 Appendices

Appendix A: Symbols used in transcription

This is a list of all the symbols used in the transcriptions, as outlined by Jefferson (2004).

- \texttt{word}: onset of overlapping talk or action
- \texttt{word}: numbers inside brackets index overlaps, if more than one occur during a line
- \texttt{(0.8)}: silence in tenth of seconds
- \texttt{.} (.) : micropause; silence less than 0.2 seconds
- \texttt{wor-}: cut-off word
- \texttt{hh}: outbreath
- \texttt{.hh}: inbreath
- \texttt{>word<}: talk quicker in tempo than surrounding talk
- \texttt{<word>}: talk slower in tempo than surrounding talk
- \texttt{WORD}: talk louder than surrounding talk
- \texttt{*word*}: talk softer than surrounding talk
- \texttt{wo::rd}: extension of a sound
- \texttt{//w(h)ord}: word produced through laughter
- \texttt{word.}: downwards intonation
- \texttt{word?}: upwards intonation
- \texttt{word,}: continuing intonation
- \texttt{!word}: shift to talk high in pitch
- \texttt{!word}: shift to talk low in pitch
- \texttt{$word$}: important embodied action taking place while talking
- \texttt{£word£}: smiley voice
- \texttt{(word)}: word in doubt
- \texttt{()} ( ): unclear words
- \texttt{((words))}: transcriber’s comments

Appendix B: Transcriptions

The full transcriptions of the scenes are in this section.
BUNK: If she’s fuckin’ you on visitation TAKE her ass to court.

MCNULTY: Not that simple Bunk

(0.6)
judge gives me three weekends out of four I still need her to co-operate.

(0.8)
you know movin aroun

(1.6)
so when I have to work through a weekend she switches with me

(1.3)
the judge gives me three weekends but no flex

(0.3)
I still lose.

BUNK: You two can’t talk this through?

MCNULTY: na:h

BUNK: hhh

(0.6)
how is it you always got the whole world pissed off atcha

MCNULTY: you know Daniels?

(0.7)
narcotics?

BUNK: mhh hmm (.,) what about him.

MCNULTY: he’s runnin this detail

BUNK: Watch your ass then.

MCNULTY: why he a snake?

BUNK: nah, he ain’t that, but hhh he’s a company man

(0.9)
you know, a-a prospect

(0.8)
grapevine says the next district to open up is his.

MCNULTY: shortlist for major

bunk nods

BUNK: He’s black (.,) still young

(0.4)
he hasn’t pissed anybody off

(0.9)
shit, even has a law degree[e]

MCNULTY: [hh n]o shit

BUNK: university of Baltimore but still you kno[w mmm]

MCNULTY: %[wel]l he’s gonna fuck this Barksdale thingup.%

bunk $takes a swag from his drink, swallows before responding$

BUNK: how’s that.

MCNULTY: <buy-bust>

(0.5)
he’s pissin in the win.(does not pronounce the last d in “wind))

BUNK: You alrEADY fucked it up Jim

(0.6)
you mADE it ↑happen

hh

MCNULTY: hhh feel like that motherfucker at the end of Bridge on the river

KWai you know

(0.5)
what the F:UCK did I do?

BUNK: the bridge of what?

MCNULTY: you aint SEEN that movie?
mcnulty knocks on the doorframe

RAWLS: Sit the fuck down detective.
(1.5)

MCNULTY: Somethin wrong?
(2.7)

RAWLS: Put your ass in the chair.

mcnulty sits down

RAWLS: $You see these McNulty? you see em? these are for you. these are for you for as long as it takes me to get even$

rawls holds up the middle finger on both his hands$
(1.5)

MCNULTY: Major [hat dash-]

RAWLS: [.hh ]NO no don’t major me you BACKstabbing smart-ass PIEce of shiit
(1.2)

WHAT the FUCK you doin over at the courthouse anyway? why the FUck you talkin to some shitbag judge.

mcnulty opens his mouth, but does not say anything

rawls holds up his fingers again

RAWLS: these are for you mcnulty.
(3.2)

$this one up here is going up your narrow fucking irish ass$

rawls shakes his left hand slightly

and this bad boy is in your fuckin eye

rawls shakes his right hand slightly
(0.6)

I’m upstairs answering questions about some project nigger I never even heard of who supposed to have beat my unit out of ten murders

MCNULTY: three
(1.1)

they only beat three in court

RAWLS: I got the deputy asking about ten

MCNULTY: NO they DID ten we only charged them with three
(1.6)

RAWLS: °You’re full of shit.°
D’ANGELO: So what you do for money? ts can’t live without it right? 
(0.5)
you still fucked up behind that stick-up ma:n? 
(1.4)
shit aint ON: you 
(0.8)
it aint on me <NEITHer> 
(0.8)
motherfucker who robbed the stash shot Sterling hh he gonna get GOT 
no matter what <YOU> or me do 
(1.0)
WALLACE: I jus I just don wanna Play I JUs don wanna play anymo:re 
(0.5)
alrigh? 
(0.8)
I was thinkin about going to school 
(0.7)
over EDmonson, ask they’ll let me back in at the end of the semester 
D’ANGELO: What grade? 
(0.9)
WALLACE: Ninth. 
D’ANGELO: Ninth? 
(0.4)
shit you how OLd? 
WALLACE: Sixteen. 
D’ANGELO: sixtee:n da:mn man you suppose to be a ju:nior by now 
WALLACE: I heard Stinkum got kill. 
(1.3)
D’ANGELO: °yeah.° 
(3.2)
WALLACE: damn. 
d’angelo takes out a few dollar bills from his pocket and starts counting them 
WALLACE: >yo I said I DON WANNA play< 
D’ANGELO: I hear[d you] 
heard you 
(0.7)
take it 
(0.9)
hurry up nigga PEOPle LOOKin. 

D’ANGELO: look here ma:n you a smart little mothafucka 
(1.4)
you start back up at Edmundson: you likely to finish up at HARwa:rd 
or some shit li[ke] that 
WALLACE: [ts hh] 

D’ANGELO: believe bee 
(1.3)
and you 
(1.9)
you g$ot a good hear$h in there too 
d’angelo $taps Wallace to the chest$ 
not like the rest of these niggas
HERC: Sir, is there anything in the VEHICLE we should know about.

WEE-BEY: no

HERC: no guns no drugs.

WEE-BEY: me aint got <shit>

CARVER: this money right here I DIDN’T just pull this out of your truck

WEE-BEY: what money?

HERC: >damn be countin this limpdick cash all day<

CARVER: where you guys goin with all this?:

SAVINO: like the man said (.) it aint ours

HERC: it aint yours HUH?

so you don’t mind if we just take it off your ha:nds

WEE-BEY: do what you FEEL. You pretend to take money about this truck I didn even know was THE:RE

CARVER: y’know I know how that shit is. The other day I took up the sofa cushions on my couch

found a <buck forty> I didn’t even know was there.

WEE-BEY: y’all aint got no cha:rges right?

HERC: no fucko we do not have a charge

we just got your money.