

The moral panic about bad language in England, 1691–1745

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In this paper I use a corpus of the writings of the Society for the Reformation of Manners to look at the discursive construction of attitudes to bad language in English. Using this corpus of texts as an example of a moral panic about language I use keywords to explore moral panic rhetoric, the formation of spirals of signification and the impact of both on attitudes to bad language in English in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Keywords: bad language, convergence, keywords, moral panics, moral reform, spirals of signification

1. Introduction

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a moral reform movement developed in England which, amongst other things, problematised the use of bad language. Through pamphleteering, prosecution and schooling bad language was associated with a wide range of sins and sinful acts. Take the following example from a book used in the schooling of the children of the poor in charity schools of the time:

- (1) How common it is to hear men use the horridest Execrations and Cursings upon ... the slightest cause of displeasure? Nay, perhaps without cause at all ... This is a kind of saying our prayers backward indeed, which is said to be part of the ceremony the Devil uses at the making of a witch: And we have in this case also reason to look at it, as a means of bringing us into acquaintance and league with that accursed spirit here, and to a perpetual abiding with him hereafter. 'Tis the language of Hell, which can never fit us to be citizens of the new Jerusalem, but marks us out for inhabitants of that land of darkness. (Allestree 1731: 270–271)

This language was not merely bad in name only — it imperilled the immortal soul. In order to suppress such language societies were formed — so-called Societies for the Reformation of Manners — with the express intention of pursuing such sinners and bringing them to court. So popular were these Societies and their methods that prosecuting sinners became a “kind of popular sport” (Krutch 1961: 162). These educators and reformers made the use of bad language a public issue in a way that had not been witnessed before in the English speaking world.

In this paper I use a corpus of the writings of the Society for the Reformation of Manners to explore the discursive construction of bad language by the Society. In doing so, I will claim that the Society made use of spirals of signification, linguistic devices key to moral panics, in order to establish a series of associations between bad language and a number of other, not necessarily related, sources of moral offence to the Society. In generating these spirals of signification the Society initiated a public discourse relating to bad language which persists to the present day.

2. The Society for the Reformation of Manners

The Society for the Reformation of Manners was established in 1691 by Edward Stephens on the Strand, London. The Society proved to be popular and further Societies for the Reformation of Manners were rapidly established across the English-speaking world. The group was formed to alter the morals of Britain by actively seeking to prosecute any person that members of the society thought were guilty of immorality. Using laws which had lain largely dormant on the British statute books, the Society brought prosecutions for a range of misdemeanours, most notably Sabbath breaking and swearing. In its lifetime (the Society for the Reformation of Manners lasted from 1691–1738) it brought 101,683 prosecutions. Of these, it is estimated that 14,192 were for swearing and cursing (McEnery 2005). In addition to bringing about prosecutions for swearing and cursing, the Society for the Reformation of Manners further expressed its disapproval of such language by distributing literature intended to encourage moral reform and, through an associated organisation, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge which provided free moral education for the children of the poor. Both were major operations — in its lifetime the Society for the Reformation of Manners published and distributed for free 444,750 books. The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge

educated up to 100,000 children a year.¹ There can be little doubt that together the Societies ignited one of the major moral panics of the early eighteenth century, using prosecution, publishing and education to promote their panic and communicate their views about such things as bad language. In doing so, it is claimed that they helped to form modern attitudes to bad language (McEnery 2005). While not pursuing this claim in this paper, the moral panic that the group established was key to this process, as it was through the moral panic that the views of the group were spread. However, before discussing exactly what those views were and what linguistic mechanisms were used to construct attitudes to bad language, a brief review of the corpora and techniques used in this paper is needed.

3. The corpora and techniques used

In this paper I use two corpora — one built specifically for this study, the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus, and a second publicly available corpus, the Lampeter Corpus (Schmied 1994). Given that the Lampeter corpus is widely used and readily available I will not discuss it at length here, but would, rather, simply note firstly that it is a diachronic corpus of English, covering the period 1640–1740 and secondly that for the purposes of this paper I will only use materials from the corpus covering the period 1690–1750, as it is in this period that I want to contrast the language of the SRM with what one might term English in general (i.e. all of the genres of the Lampeter at once). There are 544,894 words in the Lampeter corpus in the period 1690–1750.

The Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus contains four key texts from the Society for the Reformation of Manners, Yates (1699), Walker (1711), Anon. (1740) and Penn (1745), amounting to 120,709 words.² While ideally one would have liked to have gathered a much larger set of texts together, the longevity of the Yates and Walker texts in particular, and their wide distribution during the lifetime of the Society for the Reformation of Manners, makes them in essence texts which are representative of the society and its aims.

Word frequency forms the backbone of the analyses undertaken in this paper. The reason for my focus on word frequency is related to an observation made by Cameron (1995: 82); the discourses surrounding moral panics are obsessive, moralistic and alarmist. Each of these factors should, in principle, significantly influence the lexis of the moral panic. Moralistic and alarmist language should be signified by words with an alarmist or moralistic tone such

as evil, *threat* or *danger*. My hypothesis is that these words will be used more frequently by purveyors of moral panic, and that the obsessive nature of their discourse should lead to the use of these words becoming not merely frequent, but so frequent that these words can be viewed as salient, in the sense that they distinguish texts relaying moral panics from general English, or even texts written in a similar register/genre but not conveying a moral panic. Similarly, the obsessive focus of the text on particular problems, solutions and scapegoats should mean that words denoting these elements of the moral panic will also become salient in the text. In order to explore moral panics in this way, I used the Keywords function of a computer program called WordSmith (Scott 1999) in order to find those words which occurred in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus significantly more frequently than in Lampeter.³ Keywords are determined by WordSmith using a test for significance, yielding a so-called p-value,⁴ which is calculated in this paper on the basis of the log-likelihood score.⁵ Words become keywords if they are used with a difference in frequency between corpora A and B in such a way that their frequency in A is significantly higher than B (positive keywords) or significantly lower than B (negative keywords). In addition, the keywords themselves are ranked by the WordSmith program and given a keyness score to denote the strongest to weakest negative and positive keywords. Keywords have an affinity with the multi-feature/multi-dimension approach to corpus analysis of Biber (1988) and, indeed, may be used to replicate such an analysis closely (see Xiao and McEnergy 2005). While I will not explore this observation further in this paper, this affinity with the multi-feature/multi-dimension technique means that there are parallels in some of the analyses undertaken in this paper and those which could be derived by Biber's technique.

Before exploring the intersection between keywords and moral panics further, however, a brief review of moral panic theory is appropriate.

4. Moral panic theory

The sociologist Stanley Cohen developed moral panic theory in the late 1960s to account for episodes where the media and society at large fasten upon a particular problem and generate an alarmist debate around it that in turn leads to action being taken against the perceived problem. The response to the problem is typically disproportionate to the threat posed. Cohen (2002: 1) introduces the idea of a moral panic by saying that:

Societies appear to be prone, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions.

Claims of moral decline leading to moral panics have rung out down the ages. In short, moral panics are not solely a twentieth or twenty-first century phenomenon. One should be able to see moral panics in earlier periods of history and one should be able to fit Cohen's model to them. By applying Cohen's model to the writings of the Society for the Reformation of Manners, this paper both tests whether Cohen's model can be applied to an earlier period and, should this prove successful, posits a characterisation of the discourse of the Society for the Reformation of Manners — it was a moral panic discourse. As well as seeking this sociological account of the discourse, I also want to explore the linguistic mechanisms used to realise panic in the Society's texts — how are moral panics propagated linguistically? Consider a major cause of offence to the Society for the Reformation of Manners, swearing in public. How did they represent swearing in their texts? What mechanisms did they use to construct attitudes to swearing and cursing? A major means of both escalating panic and discursively constructing an object in moral panic theory that has been proposed are spirals of signification. It is my claim that not only did the Society for the Reformation of Manners use such spirals, but that by using corpus techniques one is able to identify and characterise the linguistic strategies used to form such spirals. However, before returning to that issue later in the paper, I would like to consider firstly what a keyword analysis of the language of the Society for the Reformation of Manners shows us in order to establish the distinctiveness of its texts.

5. Keywords — Lampeter vs. the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus

Initially I compared the whole of the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus with the whole of the relevant section of the Lampeter corpus. This yielded 99 positive and 20 negative keywords. However, this produced keywords for the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus which included a number of words that appeared to be specific to the register of religious

writings such as archaic pronouns (e.g. *ye, thy*) and mentions of religious personages (e.g. *Christ*). To test this hypothesis I subdivided the Lampeter data into non-religious data (Lampeter A, 452,684 words) and religious data (Lampeter B, 92,210 words). This confirmed my hypothesis — the number of keywords diminished when Lampeter B and the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus were compared (from 99 positive and 20 negative keywords to 20 positive and nine negative keywords), and all of the apparent religious register words disappeared from the list. The reverse was true when Lampeter A and the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus were compared (where the keyword count increased from 90 positive and 20 negative keywords to 109 positive and 22 negative keywords). The keyword list generated when Lampeter A and Lampeter B were compared was also strikingly similar to that produced by comparing the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus and Lampeter A (e.g. 21 per cent of the positive keywords derived from comparing Lampeter A and B are also keywords produced by a comparison of the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus and Lampeter A). This unexpected finding firmly established the quasi-religious nature of the writings of the Society — they were written in a religious register. In order to examine the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus further I decided to proceed with a comparison of its data with the Lampeter A data as this would retain and to some extent amplify its register-specific features. Table 1 below shows the keywords resulting from this contrast. Keywords which are also keywords when Lampeter B and the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus are

Table 1. A comparison of the Society for the Reformation of Manners (SRMC) with Lampeter A, yielding keywords for the SRMC

Positive Keywords

god, and, sin, vice, magistrates, profaneness, reformation, drunkenness, religion, public, thou, men, christian, our, ye, sins, evil, swearing, we, ourselves, etc, thy, holy, christians, offences, judgement, christ, virtue, guilt, unto, us, heaven, world, excess, soul, profane, saviour, debauchery, swear, penalties, wicked, examples, judgements, divine, vices, worship, souls, laws, fear, societies, man, lord, day, manners, vain, wickedness, worldly, religious, reproof, apostle, intemperance, contempt, wrath, sabbath, s-day, magistrate, vicious, thee, persons, lust, offenders, shall, shame, honour, righteous, duty, zeal, love, sinful, shalt, though, virtuous, hearts, punishment, piety, execution, dishonour, neglect, heart, endeavours, let, suppressing, example, lusts, chastity, good, spiritual, are, conversation, hath, repentance, behold, almighty, jesus, salvation, mind, is, their, glory

Negative Keywords

france, two, english, money, said, french, lords, could, were, she, at, my, parliament, small, sir, i, the, england, trade, her, had, was

contrasted are underlined; these words in effect may safely be viewed as register-specific words. The keywords are listed in the table in descending order of keyness.

Of particular interest in this table is the first non-register positive keyword — *and*. This, I will argue, is closely associated with a spiral of signification in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus texts. Before exploring that hypothesis, however, I need to return to the question of spirals of signification.

6. Spirals of signification

Researchers in moral panic theory have claimed that *spirals of signification* (or *signification spirals*), are used in moral panics so that the language of the panic “increases the perceived potential threat of an issue through the way it becomes signified” (Hall and Jefferson 1976: 77). Importantly, signification spirals draw links between activities in order to amplify a threat through a process of convergence: “Convergence occurs when two or more activities are linked in a process of signification as to implicitly or explicitly draw parallels between them” (Hall et al. 1978: 223).

Moral panics can occur in clusters, or have concepts clustered within them.⁶ I hypothesise that *and* is a keyword in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus because it is intimately associated with forcing convergence in the text — bringing together objects of offence in a grammatical structure, a noun phrase exhibiting coordination, for example. This process of convergence at the grammatical level is mirrored by a convergence at the level of the collocational network, I will argue. This in turn contributes to a signification spiral within the discourse of the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus.

7. Coordination and convergence

For the moment, let me focus upon the use of phrasal coordination to achieve convergence. Table 2 shows how often, as a proportion of the total number of occurrences of each keyword, an object-of-offence keyword occurs as part of a coordinated phrase in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus and Lampeter B.⁷ A comparison with Lampeter B allows us to see whether any convergence we find in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus is typical of religious texts in particular or of the latter specifically.

Table 2. Coordination of objects of offence in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus (SRMC)

Word	SRMC		Lampeter B		Sig. (Log Likelihood) of coordinated occurrences
	Freq.	Coordinated occurrences	Freq.	Coordinated occurrences	
<i>drunkenness</i>	92	20	1	0	22.7
<i>offences</i>	79	0	2	0	0.00
<i>profaneness</i>	94	81	11	5	62.16
<i>sin</i>	164	23	18	5	8.20
<i>swear</i>	58	5	1	0	5.68
<i>swearing</i>	77	16	6	4	4.84
<i>vice</i>	122	34	10	4	19.71
<i>oath</i>	54	1	0	0	1.14
Total	740	180	49	18	

What is clear from Table 2 is that there is a relationship between most of the objects of offence and coordination in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus which is not typical of religious texts written in English at the time. With the exception of *offences* and *oath*, all of the object-of-offence words coordinate together much more frequently here than they do in Lampeter B. This is evidence of a process of convergence in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus focused around *and*.

Given that there is evidence for a process of convergence in the text, governed by *and*, which should properly be called a colligation (Hoey 1997), what is converging in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus? Table 3 gives, for each keyword which is coordinated in the corpus, a list of the words with which it is coordinated. Figures in brackets following words give the frequency of words coordinated with a keyword where that word coordinates more than once.

Table 3 picks up at least one feature which is also apparent if collocation is considered — the strong mutual link between *vice* and *profaneness*, shown in Table 4 below. In this table, as in the rest of this paper, a mutual information score of 3 is taken as the heuristic cut-off below which collocation between two words is deemed not to occur.

There is clearly a powerful convergence of *vice* and *profaneness* in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus. Yet what of the other keywords? There are examples in Table 3 of words colligating strongly with negatively marked words, i.e. exhibiting negative semantic prosody (Louw 2000). But what is truly remarkable is the ragtag of negatively loaded words associ-

Table 3. Words coordinated with keywords in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus

Word	Coordinated with
<i>drunkenness</i>	<i>backbiting, chambering, contention, cursing</i> (6), <i>excess, fornication, gluttony, injustice, intemperance, lewdness</i> (5), <i>lying, murders, perjury, practices, profanation</i> (6), <i>rapines, rioting</i> (5), <i>sabbath-breaking, slandering, surfeiting</i> (2), <i>swearing</i> (8), <i>tipling, treachery, vices, wantonness, whoredoms</i> (2)
<i>profaneness</i>	<i>blasphemy</i> (3), <i>debauchery</i> (31), <i>immoralities</i> (4), <i>immorality</i> (19), <i>impiety</i> (3), <i>irreligion, oaths, religion, ribaldry, vice</i> (25)
<i>sin</i>	<i>danger, excess, fear, filthiness, folly</i> (4), <i>guilt</i> (2), <i>helplessness, horror, illness, inhumanity, luxury, mischief, misery, nature, odiousness, punishment, sense, shame, sight, vanity, wickedness</i>
<i>swear</i>	<i>blaspheme, curse</i> (4), <i>damn, game, hector, rant</i>
<i>swearing</i>	<i>backbiting, blaspheming, blasphemy</i> (2), <i>chambering, contention, cursing</i> (16), <i>damning</i> (2), <i>dancing, drinking</i> (4), <i>drunkenness</i> (5), <i>fiddling, gaming, injustice, intemperance, lewdness</i> (4), <i>lying, perjury, profanation</i> (5), <i>rioting, sabbath-breaking, slandering, thieving, wantonness, whoring</i>
<i>vice</i>	<i>debauchery, immorality</i> (2), <i>irreligion</i> (3), <i>profaneness</i> (25), <i>ruin, virtue</i> (3), <i>wickedness</i> (3)
<i>oath</i>	Words

Table 4. Collocates of *profaneness* in three corpora

Word	Freq	Collocates in SRMC	Collocates in Lampeter B	Collocates in Lampeter A
<i>profaneness</i>	88	<i>immorality, debauchery, immoralities, suppressing, blasphemy, vigorous, vice, impiety, statutes, execution, increase</i>	<i>english, view, short, stage, much</i>	No collocates of <i>profaneness</i> with a mutual information score greater than 3

ated with the object of offence keywords with low frequency. To take *swearing* as an example, this has a strong link to a number of negatively loaded collocates through Mutual Information (MI score, see Oakes 1998: 63–65); *cursing, lewdness, damning, profanation, common*, and *blasphemy* are all collocates of *swearing* that appear coordinated with it also. Yet the words coordinated with *swearing* which do not collocate with it according to the Mutual Information measure I have used make sense if they are allocated to one of four semantic fields, grouping the words under the broad categories of *malefaction, merriment, sex*⁸ and *verbal acts*. The category of malefaction covers *injustice, intemperance, lying, perjury, rioting, sabbath-breaking, slandering* and *thieving*.

Merriment covers *dancing, drinking, drunkenness, fiddling* and *gaming*, while sex covers *chambering*,⁹ *lewdness, wantonness* and *whoring*. The verbal acts are: *backbiting, blaspheming, blasphemy, contention*,¹⁰ *cursing, damning* and *profanation*. While I concede that these categories are broad, impressionistic and susceptible to subdivision, they do at least allow us to begin to make sense of the process of convergence that occurs in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus. For example, the word *swearing* is being systematically associated with other disapproved of verbal acts, lawlessness, frivolous pursuits and sexual activity. Swearing on its own may be objectionable, but with such convergence in the text between swearing and other sins, a signification spiral is established in the text in which single offences converge, a strong negative semantic prosody is generated and a moral panic is amplified.

These categories can also be applied to the other objects of offence, with the notable exception of the word *sin*. *Sin* contains two further converging semantic fields which I will term *opprobrium* and *peril*. Table 4 lists which word forms in which semantic fields are associated with which objects of offence. In the third column of the table I have listed the convergent semantic fields for the keywords representing objects of offence for the Society for the Reformation of Manners. I have used a rough rule of thumb cut-off to determine convergence, with a field being convergent if at least five examples of the word forms in that field are found in the coordinated phrases represented in Table 5.

Given that convergence exists, it is clear that convergence is not linked straightforwardly to objects of offence. Across this set, convergence is not homogenous. Two categories — *opprobrium* and *peril* — are associated with *sin* alone. The number of semantic fields converging around a given keyword varies between one to four. There is no one semantic field on which all of the keywords converge. The rank order of the semantic fields, based on the number of object-of-offence words converging on them, are malefaction (5), verbal (5), sex (4), merriment (3), *opprobrium* (1), *peril* (1). So, if the fields upon which each of the objects of offence converge is taken to be indicative of the basis of the signification spiral, then malefaction, verbal acts, sex and merriment combine together in the discourse of the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus in order to generate associations between objects and actions.

Table 5. Convergence in the moral panic

Word	Distribution across categories	Word convergent with
<i>drunkenness</i>	<p>Malefaction: <i>injustice, intemperance, lying, murders, perjury, rapines, rioting (5), sabbath-breaking, treachery, vices</i></p> <p>Merriment: <i>excess, gluttony, surfeiting (2), tipling</i></p> <p>Sex: <i>chambering, fornication, lewdness (5), wantonness, whoredoms (2)</i></p> <p>Verbal: <i>backbiting, contention, cursing (6), profanation (6), slandering, swearing (8),</i></p> <p>Other: <i>practices</i></p>	Malefaction, merriment, sex, verbal
<i>profaneness</i>	<p>Malefaction: <i>immoralities (4), immorality (19), impiety (3), irreligion, vice (25)</i></p> <p>Merriment: <i>ribaldry</i></p> <p>Sex: <i>debauchery (31)</i></p> <p>Verbal: <i>blasphemy (3), oaths</i></p> <p>Other: <i>religion</i></p>	Malefaction, sex, verbal
<i>sin</i>	<p>Malefaction: <i>inhumanity, mischief, punishment, wickedness</i></p> <p>Merriment: <i>excess, luxury</i></p> <p>Opprobrium: <i>folly (4), guilt (2), horror, misery, odiousness, shame</i></p> <p>Peril: <i>danger, fear, helplessness</i></p> <p>Other: <i>filthiness, illness, nature, sense, sight, vanity</i></p>	Malefaction, merriment, opprobrium, peril
<i>swear</i>	<p>Merriment: <i>game</i></p> <p>Verbal: <i>blaspheme, curse (4), damn, hector, rant</i></p>	Verbal
<i>swearing</i>	<p>Malefaction: <i>injustice, intemperance, lying, perjury, rioting, sabbath-breaking, slandering, thieving</i></p> <p>Merriment: <i>dancing, drinking, drunkenness, fiddling, gaming</i></p> <p>Sex: <i>chambering, lewdness, wantonness, whoring</i></p> <p>Verbal: <i>backbiting, blaspheming, blasphemy, contention, cursing, damning, profanation</i></p>	Malefaction, merriment, sex, verbal
<i>vice</i>	<p>Malefaction: <i>immorality (2), irreligion (3), wickedness (3)</i></p> <p>Merriment:</p> <p>Sex: <i>debauchery</i></p> <p>Verbal: <i>profaneness (25)</i></p> <p>Other: <i>ruin, virtue (3)</i></p>	Malefaction, sex, verbal

8. Collocation and convergence

While fruitful, so far my search for patterns of association has been limited to coordination focused upon colligations around *and*. What of the collocates of the words? Do they provide further evidence of convergence and a signification spiral? In order to explore this point, I would like to establish a collocational network from the collocates of the two nodes *swearing* and *drunkenness*, largely because these words converge in a very similar way, and one would hope that this convergence would be mirrored in the collocational networks around the nodes.

In order to explore these collocational networks, I will first construct two directional collocational networks, one for *swearing* and one for *drunkenness*. The networks are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

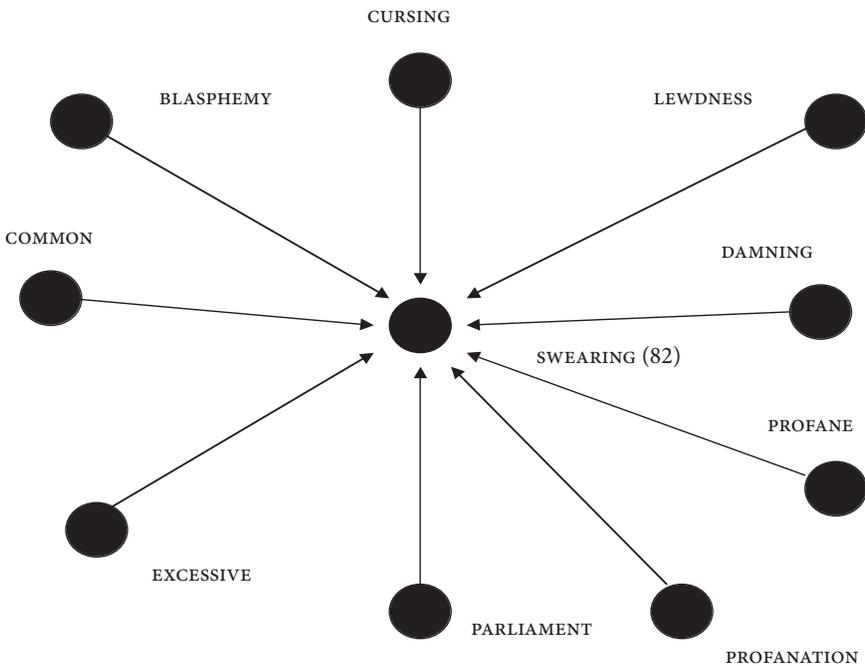


Figure 1. A directional graph of the collocates of *swearing*

In constructing the network, I am simply linking the collocates and nodes. Nodes for the purposes of this paper are selected keywords. The direction of the link depends upon whether the node or the collocate has the higher proportion of all cases of its occurrence accounted for by the collocation. In the

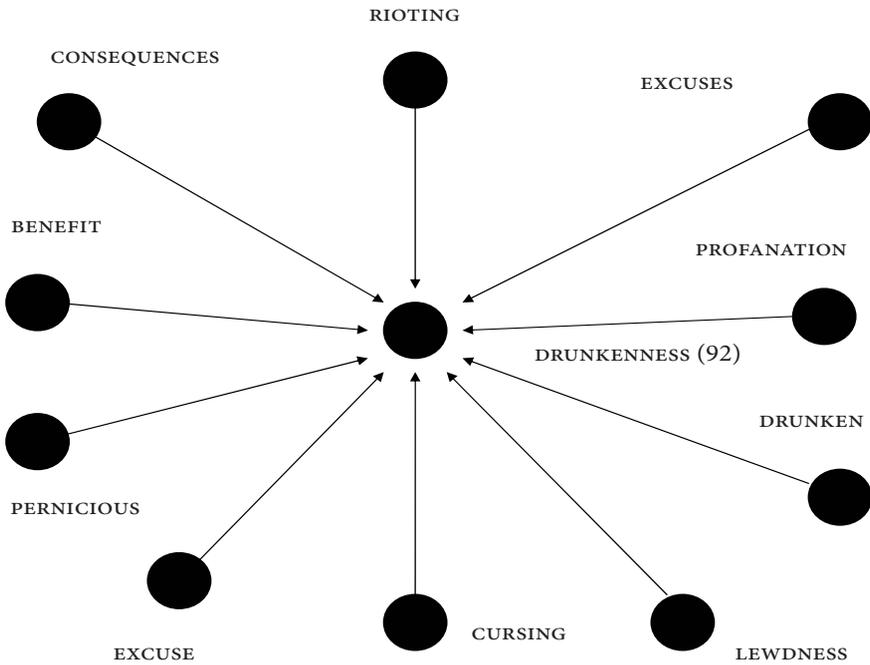


Figure 2. A directional graph of the collocates of *drunkenness*

graph, to the right of each node, I will give its total number of occurrences in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus.

The graphs are interesting in that they partly reflect the way in which convergence occurs in the corpus. For *swearing*, it is possible to place 6 collocates in the convergence semantic fields by placing *excessive* in merriment, *lewdness* in sex, and *cursing*, *damning*, *profanation*, and *blasphemy* in verbal acts. Note that in each of these cases a process of collocation is reinforcing what is in essence a process of colligation driven by *and*, which, in turn, is bringing about convergence for some of these words through coordination anyway. For *drunkenness*, it is possible to place *drunken* in merriment, *rioting* in malefaction, *lewdness* in sex, and *cursing* and *profanation* in verbal acts. This leaves a sub-set of collocates which are not associated with the convergent semantic fields: *profane*, *parliament* and *common* for *swearing* and *benefit*, *consequences*, *excuse*, *excuses* and *pernicious* for *drunkenness*.

The fact that there is some commonality between the colligation and collocation is reassuring — association is being used to both colligationally and collocationally associate the objects of offence with negatively loaded words. Yet, at the collocational level at least, something else is happening. In the case

of *swearing*, there are three unclassified words, two of which do not readily map to an existing convergent semantic field. *Profane*, of course, could. It does not coordinate with *swearing* as the parts of speech of the two words differ, one being an adjective and the other a gerund or verb in the coordinated structures examined in the corpus. However, with the addition of an appropriate suffix, *profanation* quite felicitously coordinates with *swearing*. *Parliament* is as easily explained as *profane* — in each of its collocations with *swearing* it is in the phrase “Act of Parliament against Swearing and Cursing”, i.e. it is part of a fixed phrase. The most interesting example here is *common*, though in part the reason for its failure to coordinate with *swearing* is just the same as for *profane* — part of speech. I shall set aside the discussion of this collocate for the moment, and focus on it further in the next section when I consider bad language alone. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that claims that the Society for the Reformation of Manners attempted to force a distinction between the middle and lower orders in society, in part by a focus on the use of bad language by the lower orders, seems to provide a compelling explanation for this collocate (McEnergy 2005).

Drunkness has a higher number of collocates unaccounted for by the semantic fields identified with the coordinated structures surrounding the objects of offence.

Pernicious can be dealt with immediately by noting that in collocation, but not in colligation, the node *drunkness* is associated with the semantic field of peril. The words *benefit*, *excuse* and *excuses* can be accounted for by a fixed phrase “The [nth] Excuse for Drunkness upon the Account of Benefit, is to ...” used repeatedly in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus. This device accounts for all of the associations of these three words with *drunkness*.

Before discussing the representation of bad language in this corpus, I would like to consider the links between the collocation graphs. As well as coordination bringing about convergence, I wish to argue that collocational networks do also. Words share collocates. In sharing collocates, some degree of convergence, I would argue, must be forced. I have connected together the graphs in Figures 1 and 2, minus frequency information, in Figure 3 to illustrate this point, with links formed by joint collocates. Nuclear nodes for this purpose are nodes with one or more inward arcs, i.e. the direction of collocation is towards them. These nuclear nodes are emboldened.

Collocational networks, as well as coordination, specify a set of properties that objects of offence share. Both *drunkness* and *swearing* are linked, by

collocation, to *cursing*, *lewdness* and *prophanation*. I will call collocates such as these, which link two nodes, “linking collocates”. Each of these linking collocates are also linked to *drunkenness* and *swearing* by colligation. Further words are shared between the two by dint of common colligation only: *backbiting*, *chambering*, *contention*, *injustice*, *intemperance*, *lying*, *rioting*, *sabbath-breaking*,

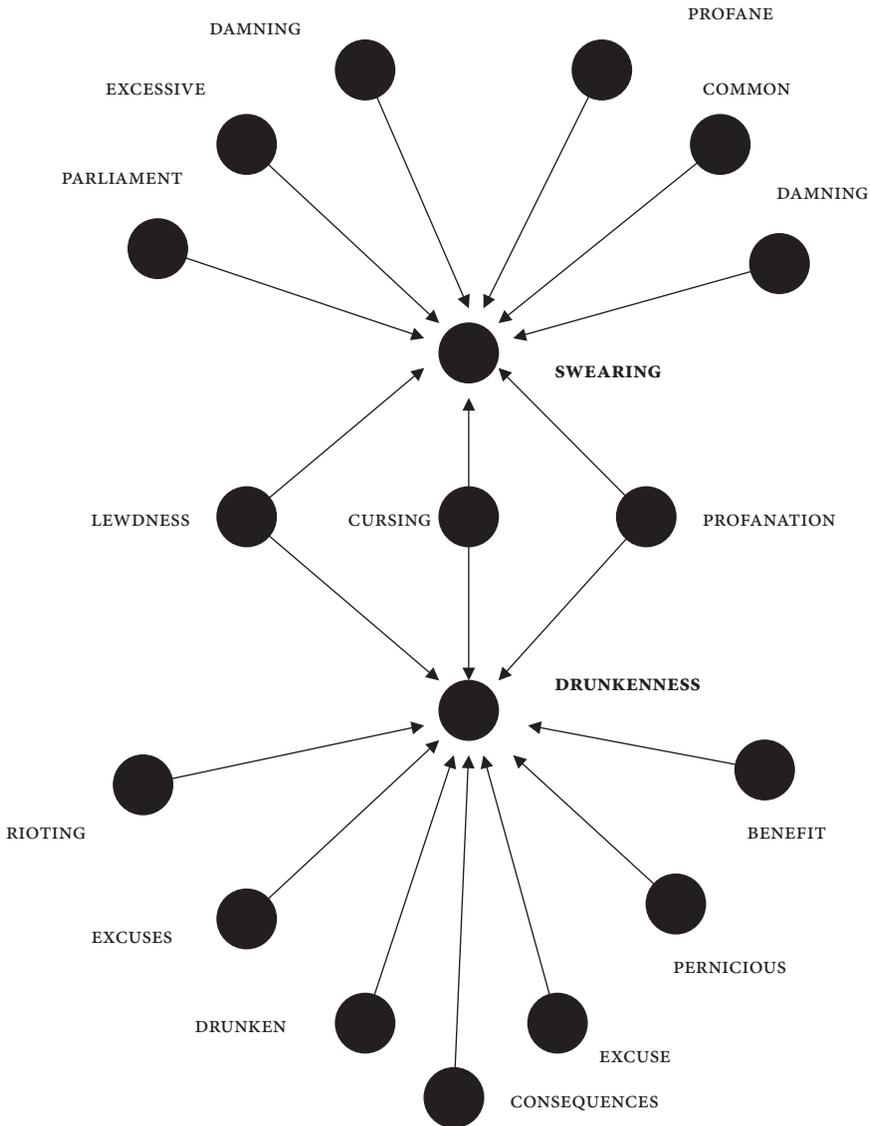


Figure 3. Two graphs joined to form a network

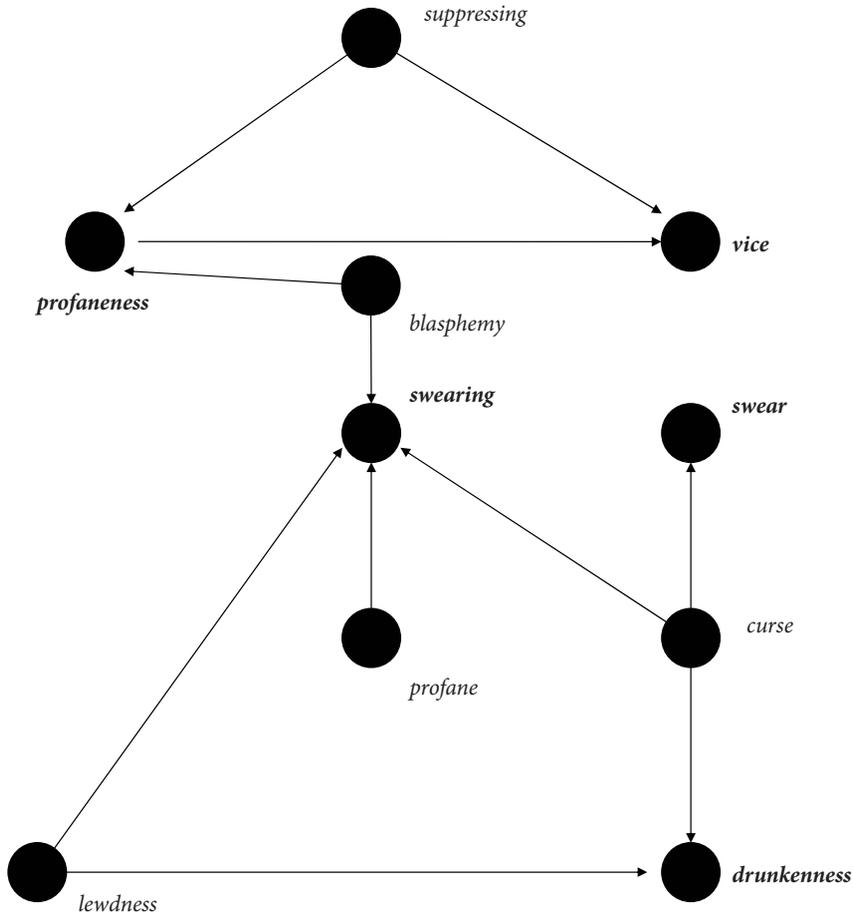


Figure 4. Objects of offence and their linking collocates

slandering, *wantonness* and *whoring*. Concepts are busily brushed together in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus in just the way that sociologists have claimed happens in a moral panic, resulting in a spiral of signification: swearing is not simply the uttering of an offensive word. It associates the speaker of that word with a host of negative acts which have been connected to that act by the discourse of the Society for the Reformation of Manners.

Associations are occurring in the moral panic at a number of levels, and convergence is clearly observable. Figure 3 gives a pared-down view of the whole network, focusing solely on the object-of-offence keywords and collocates shared by two or more nodes.

It is no mistake that I placed *swearing* at the centre of Figure 4 — in terms of convergence through collocation, I would argue that *swearing* does very much sit at the centre of this collocational network. It is linked directly via one linking collocate to three of the four other nuclear nodes in this diagram. As connectivity in this case can be said to translate to convergence, one may also say that no other nuclear node in this diagram is as prone to the process of convergence. Even if the nuclear node *swear* is dismissed, as *swearing* is merely a variant form of that word, there are no other nuclear nodes better connected than *swearing*. If there is a process of convergence at work in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus, as I would argue there is, then *swearing* is a focal point for the convergence — it has the single largest number of words coordinated with it via colligation¹¹ and is the focus, I would argue, of the collocational network in which the objects of offence in this corpus may be placed. Given this, it is now time to consider the representation of bad language in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus in a little more detail.

9. Very bad language

It should be apparent from the preceding section that bad language — profanation, swearing, cursing, damning, blasphemy — is presented in a very negative light in the writings of the Society for the Reformation of Manners. Indeed, it is a focal point of convergence in this moral panic discourse. As such, it is linked to malefaction, licentious merriment and sex. Yet there is a key collocate of bad language in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus which I have, so far, only considered very briefly: *common*. This word must now be examined in detail. Figure 5 shows the collocational network in the immediate vicinity of *common*.¹²

Common is an important collocate, second only to *swearing* — the direction of collocation is towards *common* in all other cases where it collocates with a word. It is possible to group the collocates of *common* into four semantic fields, two semantic fields previously used in this chapter (opprobrium and verbal acts) and two new semantic fields, distinction (words used to denote a group in society on secular grounds) and religion (discussion of religion which may include the possibility of defining a group in society on religious grounds). The words collocating with *common* group as follows:

Distinction: *civility, genteel, ordinary*

Opprobrium: *heinous*

Religion: *christianity*

Verbal acts: *discourse, opinion,*¹³ *swearing, swearer, conversation*

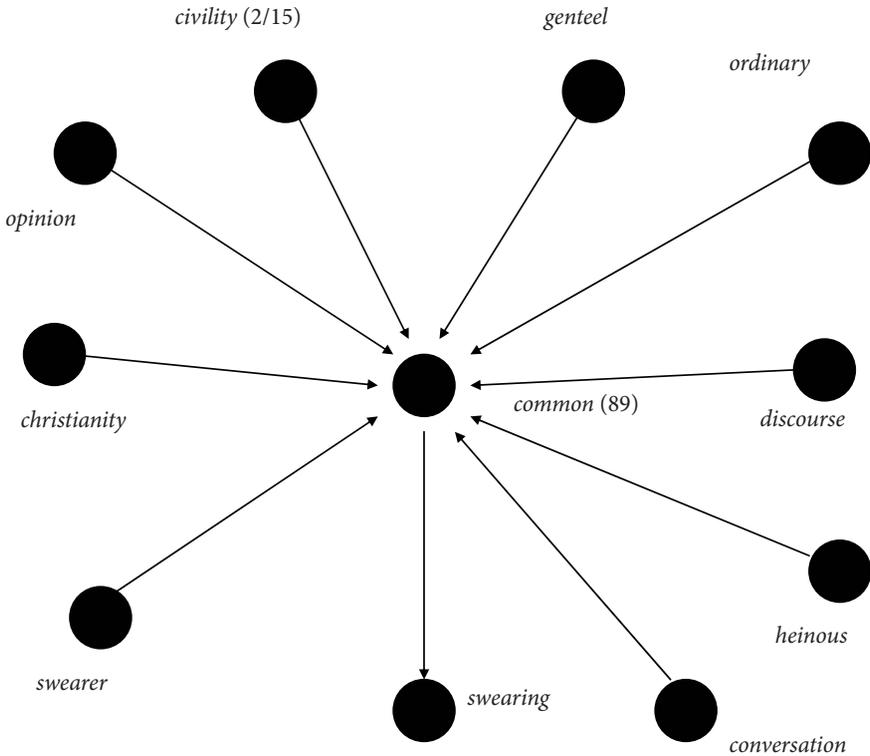


Figure 5. Collocates of *common*

The semantic fields, more so in this case than in previous cases considered in this paper, are associated with specific meanings of the word *common*.¹⁴ *Common* is used with two specific senses in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus: (1) something shared by all; (2) something that is usual.

The first meaning of *common* covers all of the collocations of *christianity* and *common*. In total, the word *common* appears with this sense 24 times in the corpus. The word is used to create an “in-group” and an “out-group”; the in-group is typified by common goals that are identifiably good by the standards of the Society for the Reformation of Manners — *body of Christians, cause,*¹⁵ *cause of christianity* (twice), *cause of religion, duties and virtues, duty, friend and protector, good and reason of mankind*”. The out-group, on the other hand, is referred to in terms of how the in-group identifies them: *enemy, enemies* (twice), *nuisance*, and the consequences of the actions of the out-group

for the in-group if it does not act; *guilt* means that those failing to act against the out-group will become tainted by the actions of the out-group and will become, in essence, a member of the out-group.

While the word *common* in its first sense is largely concerned with establishing the universality of the concerns of the in-group and contrasting them with the out-group, the second sense of *common* is reserved for the out-group. The usual, the ordinary, the typical are loci of sin. It is in this sense that *swearing* collocates with *common*. With it are a host of other negatively charged words, all converging on this meaning of *common*. This is the most frequent sense of *common* in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus, occurring 65 times. It is powerfully associated with bad language in everyday speech, modifying *conversation* (7), *discourse* (4), *profanation*, *returns* (cursing), *swearer* (2), *swearing* (20) and *to hear* (bad language) (2). No less than 36 of the 65 uses of *common* in the sense of everyday/ordinary are associated with bad language. I will return to discuss this point shortly.

The remaining uses of *common* are related to the out-group (*disturbers*, *profane Play Houses*, *whore-masters*, *soldier*, *seaman*), its actions (*covetousness*, *vice*, *practice* (3))¹⁶ and the consequences of its action (*effect*, *error*, *consequences*, *fate*). Set against this group are a number of words typical of the in-group such as *christians*, *civility* and *honesty*. However, these words are negated in the examples — they are being used to distinguish the out-group as not possessing these qualities. For example, consider the following example where the Devil is being discussed:

- (2) Nay, so far is he from entertaining his Stranger or Friend in a Friendly Manner, that he does not shew him common Civility.

Lined up with the Devil as the negation of the common good promoted by the Society for the Reformation of Manners are sinners, who burden the good with public guilt, negating the shared nature of such features as honesty in the nation:

- (3) I do not easily conceive how wife and good Men should either take much Pleasure in Living otherwise than in Obedience to the Will, and for the Glory of God, and the working out their own Salvation, or in the Thoughts of leaving a Posterity behind them in a Nation where there is no more Religion, or even common Honesty; I intended, I say, having done this, in the next place to offer some Arguments against those Vices that are most reigning among us, as Lewdness, Profane Swearing and Cursing, Drunkenness, etc. in hopes that the Representation of the Baseness, the Folly and Beastiality of those Sins, together with the various and great Mischiefs they bring upon the Public ...

The out-group is the negation of the values of the in-group, as can be seen in the following example:

- (4) So that common Swearing is a very Uncivil, as well as dangerous, Vice; an Offence to the Religious, as well as a Temptation to the Unwary.

What is happening around *common* is a process of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) — the in-group is being identified with a set of positive values, while the lack of those values is being used in part to identify the out-group. The out-group is in turn being identified with a set of negative actions, which themselves are the negation of the in-group. The identity of the in-group is, at least in part, obvious from the words associated with them — they are those Christians who agree with the Society for the Reformation of Manners. Yet the in-group is something a little more than that. They do not identify themselves with the mass of society, in that their actions/values are common in the sense of universal rather than typical/ordinary. Similarly, they do not identify themselves with the upper echelons of society. They exhort their followers to approach this group and chide such figures as magistrates for not prosecuting sinners. The references to members of the establishment are not in the first or second person. The texts are not addressed to the upper tier of society. Following is a typical third-person reference to the upper classes:

- (5) if Men of a Superior Rank have Money enough to maintain their Families, and discharge their other Obligations, and to spare, and they have no better Inclinations than to carry it to those Houses, they have time enough to spend it in them on the other six days of the Week, without doing it upon the Lord's-Day, to the Neglect of their Duty to their Families, and the manifest Danger of the Ruin of their own Souls.

The lower classes are certainly part of the out-group — they are the source of the common behaviour that the Society for the Reformation of Manners is fighting against. To be from the lower ranks is such a sure sign of being in the out-group, that on the only occasion in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus that the lower classes join the Society for the Reformation of Manners in its crusade, in this case in Ireland, it is a point worthy of note:

- (6) I may satisfy my self, at present, with saying in general, of my own Knowledge, That the Transactions of Reformation here having been near Two Years since laid before some few Persons in Ireland, and most of those (I must again observe) private Persons, and of the lower Rank of Men, with proper Consideration to move them to unite in the same Design, and Methods to pursue it with Advantage.

More typically, the lower class was identified with all of the common acts that the Society for the Reformation of Manners objected to, and hence by association the lower class was pushed into the out-group:

- (7) Persons of a lower Rank ... submitted to be reckoned Disturbers of the public Peace, Imprudent and Hypocritical Persons ...

Indeed the identification of the lower classes with the out-group, to a much higher degree than the upper classes, is made explicit in the following statement which comes after a discussion of the need to enforce the law against immorality:

- (8) If these were duly executed upon proper Objects (and it is an Injury to our God, to our Country, and to the Poor, when they are not) a heavy Burthen would probably be felt, especially by those of an inferior Rank, who by this means might be brought under the happy Necessity, either of forsaking the Sin, or of losing their Substance.

The upper classes are targeted by the Society for the Reformation of Manners in their efforts to ensure the laws against immorality will be imposed. The lower classes are the intended object of those laws; those sitting between the lower and the upper classes are those calling for the laws to be enforced. Chief amongst the crimes of the lower classes that are identified is swearing and other forms of bad language. It is in the use of *common* in the sense in which it is used by the Society for the Reformation of Manners of swearing that a final convergence takes place around bad language in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus — the convergence between low social class and bad language.

10. Conclusion — Distinction and moral panic theory

In using a moral panic to generate distinctions in speech, the Society for the Reformation of Manners generated an out-group, so that the in-group that they also generated could be clearly defined. As is typical of such events, this Society largely defines the in-group by implication, being much more specific about the out-group and implying, therefore, that the in-group were the polar opposites of the out-group.¹⁷ If the out-group swear, are of low social class and endanger the nation, then the in-group are defined by implication as those who do not swear, are of higher social class and who defend the nation. The process of forging these distinctions is aided by a key component of a moral

panic discourse — spirals of signification. Embedded within the moral panic discourse, these spirals work to generate a process of convergence, binding offence to offender and generating associations in their discourse which, while they are present in modern English, had little presence in the English of the time. It was this discourse, introduced by the Society for the Reformation of Manners and propagated through the schools by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge which, I argue, generated the set of distinctions around bad language in English which persist to this day. While individuals undoubtedly shared those attitudes prior to the advent of the Society for the Reformation of Manners, it was its widely publicised discourse, spread through the villages, towns and cities of the English-speaking world as well as the equally widespread schooling provided over a much longer period by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge which naturalised these distinctions within English.

Notes

1. See Lowther Clarke (1959: 25). Contemporary reports state that “about two thousand children are actually put to school” in London and Westminster alone (Anon. 1704: 1). The writer is also clear about the effect of the schooling on the language of the children: “the design of the schools has been successful, so the effect of it, on the morals of the poor hath been still more happy” (Anon. 1704: 2) and “there is an outward appearance at least of a more sober and regular conversation” amongst the poor.
2. I am indebted to the Faculty of Social Sciences, Lancaster University, for a small grant which enabled me to construct this corpus. I wish to thank Matthew Davies, who built this corpus under my supervision.
3. I will not, however, discuss the calculation of keyness. This is done by using the log-likelihood measure (see Dunning 1993) to determine when the frequency of a word between two corpora differs significantly. Readers interested in a critical overview of keywords should see Baker (2004).
4. For the study in this chapter, I set the p-value threshold to 99.99999999999999 per cent, i.e. a very high significance threshold was used, well beyond the 99.9 per cent level of significance used in many studies as a threshold for significance.
5. Readers interested in the use of the log-likelihood test in this book in preference to the chi-squared test are referred to Dunning (1993).
6. See Jenkins (1992: 12) for a further discussion of the inter-relatedness and independence of moral panics.

7. In looking at coordination, I have considered cases where whole phrases are coordinated, e.g. “the Heavens and the Earth” or heads are coordinated within a phrase, e.g. “the Swearing and Cursing”. I did not consider the coordination of modifiers in this case study, as I was interested in the coordination of keywords which tend to be heads rather than their modifiers. However, the coordinated modifiers themselves are typically negative, e.g. “thy vain and rash Swearing”. There are two further points to make here. Firstly, I consider lists as cases of multiple coordination, e.g. in “Impiety, Profaneness and Immorality to full abound in our Kingdom” I take *Impiety*, *Profaneness* and *Immorality* to be coordinated. Finally, there is a further distinction between positive and negative coordination which I do not mention in the main text, as I have yet to discern a clear explanation for it. All of the object-of-offence keywords shun full phrasal coordination, preferring instead head coordination. One might argue that this promotes convergence further, but I feel that a much larger study, possibly with some form of psycholinguistic experiment as part of it, would be needed to substantiate this view.

8. I accept that the categories I have created here are not inherently negative — one could imagine words with a positive connotation being placed in each category. However, the words under consideration here, for the Society for the Reformation of Manners, had negative connotations, and hence the categories are populated here solely with words which have a negative loading.

9. The word in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus means to retire to a room for the purpose of having sex.

10. Used in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus with the meaning of fractious argument.

11. While *drunkenness* appears in a greater number of coordinated phrases, whenever *swearing* appears in coordinated phrases it typically coordinates with a larger number of words. Hence while *swearing* appears in 16 coordinated phrases and *drunkenness* occurs in 20, this results in *swearing* being coordinated with 55 other heads while *drunkenness* is coordinated with only 53.

12. Note in this case that while *common* links to *swearing*, it is in turn linked to by a number of collocates of its own. To this extent, this diagram could be viewed as focused upon the node *swearing* and its relationship with *common* and the collocates of *common*.

13. I place this word in verbal acts here, as the word is typically used to refer to the expression of an opinion in the Society for the Reformation of Manners Corpus.

14. I will remain neutral on the point of whether the collocations select the meaning, or the meaning attracts the collocates. For readers interested in pursuing this debate, Stubbs (1996, 2001) is recommended. What I would say is that in the cases here, I am arguing that the collocates are being forced into company with words in order to generate new associations, and hence by extension meanings for those words. With reference to this specific example, I lean towards Stubbs’ view.

15. I have included the word *cause* in this list as the original example discusses men making common cause against sin.
16. The practices are bad ones, e.g. “lewd discourse”.
17. In the discourse of the Society for the Reformation of Manners the qualities of the out-group are often implied by the contrast created with the in-group (and vice versa). This mechanism should come as no surprise as it is a well acknowledged device used to emphasise and define otherness, in this case the otherness of the out-group. See Hall (1997: 234–236).

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