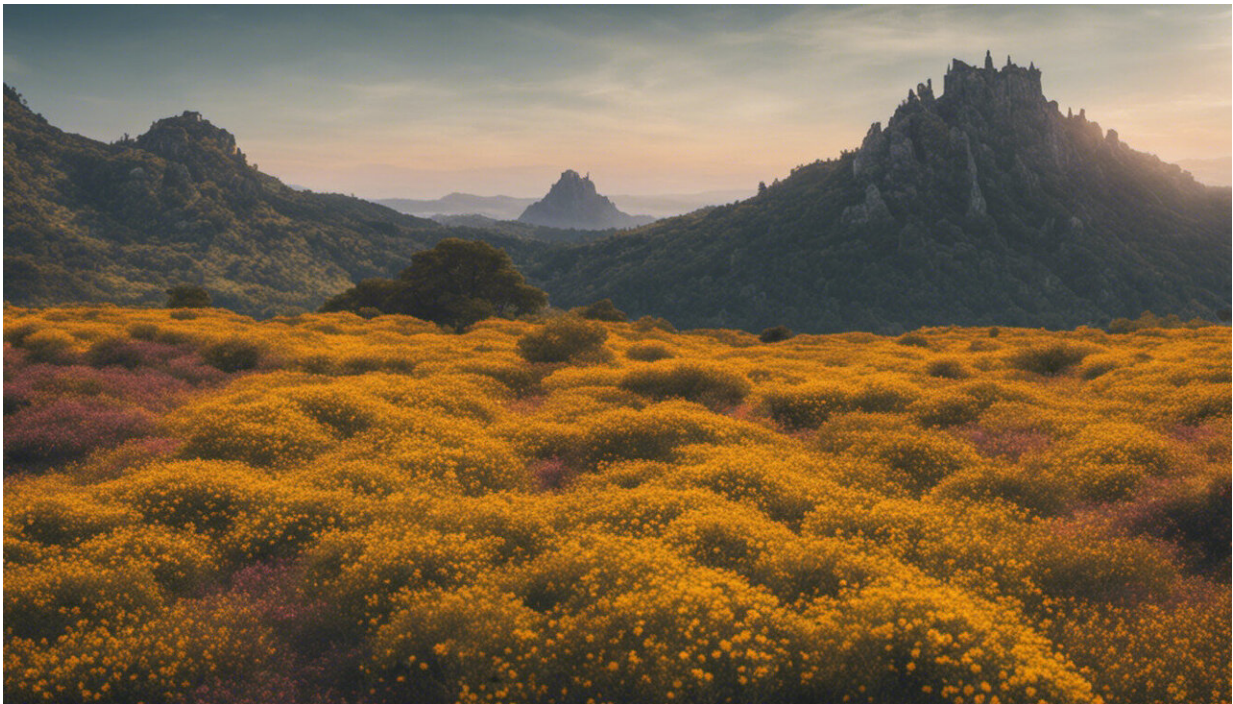


Do men and women really find different words funny? Here's what the research says

August 9 2017, by Judith Baxter



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Is the word "booty" really funnier than "ass"? And does the word "bondage" raise a laugh more than "giggle"? A [new behaviour research study](#) looks at the perceived funniness of individual English words, and finds that women and men consider different words amusing. But is this really the case?

Women and men do often laugh at some of the same words according to the study. There is the common view that slang words associated with sex and the bodily functions are hilarious. The words "booty", "tit", "booby" and "hooter" were rated as funnier than children's abuse words such as "nitwit", "twit" and "twerp".

But men found lightly pornographic words, such as "bondage" and "orgy", funnier than [women](#) – whereas women nominated words such as "giggle" and "humbug". Giggle is a word stereotypically associated with girls and women, but not in a complimentary way: it conjures up the childlike image of girls in huddles laughing nastily about others, according to the [Urban Dictionary \(UD\)](#).

Participants rated 4,997 random words on how funny they were, with Booty, Booby, Egghead & Twerp making top 12.

<https://t.co/Y3ExFDokQV>

— Smithsonian Magazine (@SmithsonianMag) [August 4, 2017](#)

But "giggle" also has wider connotations. The UD says it can mean many things, including when a girl laughs mockingly at a man's small penis and a [slang term for cannabis](#). "Humbug" may have been picked because it has a nice old-fashioned sound or because it is used by older people, rather than for its current slang usage. The slang site Slang Define suggests that the phrase "[Bah, humbug](#)" has the more abusive meaning of, broadly: "Who gives a fuck!"

His and hers humour

Past studies in [my own field of language and gender](#) certainly support some of these findings. In informal chat, men were generally found to use more swear words for effect, though not necessarily humorously. Men tend to use darker, black or abusive humour, using slang terms

connoting violence, hate, abuse and death to raise a laugh.

Booty more amusing than ass, according to first in-depth study of the funniness of... <https://t.co/nh6HCy6xTK>
[pic.twitter.com/a4KerJYWTi](https://t.co/nh6HCy6xTK)

— BPS Research Digest (@ResearchDigest) [July 26, 2017](#)

"Joshing" – the jocular and sometimes abusive teasing of one another – is associated [more with men than women](#). Men also use humorous words to compete with each other and impress women. In contrast, women tend to use humour [to build empathy and support](#) within a group of friends. Women tend to mock themselves rather than each other, because they don't want to threaten group closeness.

While the "booty" study has shown some statistical gender differences in the use of certain words, recent studies suggest that most humour doesn't spring from the use or sound of a single word. It occurs within given contexts in different registers. It varies hugely depending not just on a person's gender but also their age, class, ethnicity, education, how long they have known people, and so on.

Humour also depends on interactivity – the energy and buzz people get from talking to each other, and the tone that they use. A jocular conversation can run and run – it is rarely prompted by a single word. Humour also depends on the physical setting: whether you are at work, at home with family, down the pub with your partner, or with a group of friends. A group of female friends may banter quite differently from a group of female colleagues. And so on. Humour is infinitely rich, complex and varied.

The danger of reducing the use of humour to simple comparisons between men and women is that it can lead to binary gender

stereotyping, thus reinforcing the very folk myths about men and women's language that [recent research](#) has dispelled.

No laughing matter

To decide whether women and men find different words funny, I took a straw poll of a group of men and women in their 20s and early 30s. The women said they found complex words with a funny sounding element such as "flabbergasted" and "bamboozled" amusing. They also found the abnormal use of a word for a different context funny, such as calling someone a "doughnut" if they made a silly error. They also liked words that conveyed a feeling of nostalgia, or rude words which people used to say in childhood, such as "twit", "wally" and "pop" (for a fizzy drink), which tallies with the "booty" study.

The men agreed with this because they said such words conjured up a comical image in their heads. The women also felt they were ahead of men in coining and using new slang terms that could be funny, such as the [word "bae"](#) for "babe" – someone's boyfriend or girlfriend. This idea that women are more linguistically innovative than men does [support past research](#). Finally, the men suggested that they do tend to share a dark, macabre sense of humour that women do not always appreciate.

So in short, the researchers Tomas Englethaler and Thomas Hills call their findings "a rudimentary fruit-fly version of humour" – and I would say this is fair, they've provided a starting point from which further research can be developed. But for the authors to conclude that [humour](#) is divided by gender on the basis of a few [words](#) is certainly no laughing matter.

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