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ABSTRACT

Disciplines interested in communication have failed to describe adequately the comprehension or production of taboo or dirty words with the result that little is known about the phenomenon. A review of research leads to the assumption that taboo word comprehension and production are the result of some or all of the following elements of the communication context: (1) social and physical setting; (2) speaker-listener relation; (3) topic of discussion; (4) intended meaning of the message; and (5) any grammatical constraints on the message. The model presented here is used to interpret research in which college students rated the likelihood and the offensiveness of particular combinations of speakers, locations and words. Data are presented indicating that dirty word comprehension and production, or degree of offensiveness and frequency of usage as defined here, are dependent on the contextual factors specified above. (Author/AMH)

Are You Confused About Dirty Words?

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ABSTRACT

Disciplines interested in communication (e.g., psychology, sociology, medicine, law, or mass media) have failed to describe adequately the comprehension or production of taboo or dirty words. The result is that little is known about the phenomenon. The present paper presents a model of communication based on contextual variables. It is assumed that taboo word comprehension and production are the result of an evaluation of: (a) social and physical setting, (b) speaker-listener relation, (c) topic of discussion, (d) intended meaning of the message, and (e) any grammatical constraints on the message. The model is used to interpret past research and design new research on the phenomenon. Data are presented indicating that dirty word comprehension and production, or degree of offensiveness and frequency of usage as used here, are dependent on the contextual factors specified above.

One of the most frequently occurring but least understood linguistic phenomena is the use of dirty words. By dirty words I mean those that are typically regarded by the general public as taboo, obscene, or just generally offensive. These words usually refer to body parts, body products, body processes, animal names, social deviations, ethnic-racial slurs, or religion. The topic of dirty words is a concern for any discipline that examines language and communication (e.g.,linguistics, psychology, sociology, law, medicine, or mass media). Why has research with dirty words been ignored by these disciplines? Speculatively, there are many reasons, inhibitions on the part of scientists to conduct research, inhibitions on the part of editors to publish what research has been conducted, and lack of interdisciplinary discussion are but a few. The strongest deterrent to research with dirty words for any discipline, however, is the confusing nature of the words themselves. This confusion stems from the lack of a coherent framework with which to plan, conduct, and interpret research. The result of this confusion is that research is conducted nonprogramatically, in piecemeal fashion. Few understand why the research was conducted or what the results mean.

What I would like to do is propose a model for conducting and interpreting dirty word research. First I will present the basic ideas of this model. Second, I will interpret some of the past work with dirty words. Finally, I will present some of my own research conducted specifically on this model.

My first premise is that a dirty word by nature is a multidimensional concept, varying along such dimensions as: frequency of usage, degree of social-physical constraint, degree of offensiveness, and idiosyncratic variables applied to each word, depending on each individual's experience with the word.

Knowing that dirty words fluctuate along a number of dimensions is not enough, however. The model must also account for the source of the interword

and intraword variation, which brings me to my second proposition. My second proposition is that communication context is responsible for dirty word variation. The communication context refers to the relevant, perhaps tangible, conditions under which speech takes place. Among the most salient factors are: (a) The social and physical setting, (b) the relationship between the speaker and listener, (c) the topic of discussion, (d) the intended and perceived meaning of the message, and (e) any grammatical constraints on the message. These are the major factors which influence dirty word production, comprehension, and reaction.

Context is not a new idea to those interested in language. The idea is prominent in some of the work of social psychologists, psycholinguists, sociologists, sociolinguists, and in mass media programming and law. Context provides the "big picture" for the dirty word researcher that will ultimately provide many answers about the use of dirty words.

My third and final proposition describes how speakers and listeners make use of contextual information. More specifically, I would like to demonstrate that the use of dirty words is dealt with as a decision made within the communication context. That is, appropriateness, interpretation, and offensiveness of dirty word usage are decisions made about the words based on the situation or context. Whether in the lab setting or natural situations, these decisions are the result of the combination of relevant factors in the context. The decision is an information processing act: the evidence is weighed and the decision is made to produce, interpret, or react. The use of dirty words or any type of response to them is an act of information integration.

Previous Research

At this point I would like to look at previous and current research on the topic of dirty word usage and discuss this research with regard to contextual variables. Due to the time constraint, I will concentrate on two of

the more prominent contextual variables, the social-physical setting and speaker and listener variables.

Social-Physical Setting

The factors of social and physical settings are difficult to separate for discussion, the reason being that in many cases it is impossible to separate the influence of social climate of a discussion from the physical setting in which it occurs. This point should be kept in mind. Furthermore, I would like to point out that while some messages have the same interpretation for almost any type of setting for example, your father died of cancer today, dirty words are very sensitive to setting. Jesus Christ means one thing in a church and quite another when exclaimed in a locker room.

Social climate refers to the dimension of relaxation or formality of the occasion. The climate is determined by the rules of conduct necessary to fit the occasion. Some of these rules may be explicit, like rules of order for a meeting, or may be inferred by watching how others act in a setting. The physical setting refers to the specific location in which the communication is conducted, for example buildings, rooms, or larger spaces like towns or shopping malls. Each of these places has rules of conduct specific to that particular location. Again these rules may be inferred or explicit.

Research on dirty words with respect to the factor of social-physical setting can be found in the areas of psychology, sociology, law, and mass communications. I will present a small sample of some of that research.

One article I am interested in is Cameron's (1969) paper. Cameron sampled conversations in a variety of settings and supported his main hypothesis that traditional word frequency counts like the Thorndike and Lorge (1944) underestimate the frequency of dirty words. He found that dirty words accounted for some 8% of college student conversations at leisure, 3% of adult conversation on the job and 13% of adult leisure conversation.

Besides supporting his notions about word frequency, he has also demonstrated the influence of setting. The difference in frequency between work, 3%, and leisure, 13%, is apparent.

Setting also influences the appropriateness of word usage. Some situations demand that dirty words be used, for example, a conversation where a male must demonstrate that he is one of the guys. Situations may also inhibit the use of dirty words. It is hard for most of us to imagine swearing at a funeral, wedding, or White House press conference.

The factor of setting is important for many legal decisions concerning obscenity (and pornography for that matter). Words that lead to a disturbance of the peace, incite violence or libel a bystander are often judged on the basis of social climate. A similar interest is present in the decisions of media programmers in judging the appropriateness of material for viewers.

I have recently collected some data concerning the effect of various physical locations on the likelihood of hearing dirty words. These data are presented in Table 1. In this experiment college students were asked to answer the question, "What is the likelihood of hearing a dirty word in these locations on campus?" They responded with a number from 0 to 100, where 0 meant not likely at all and 100 meant most likely possible. These locations were derived from the campus phone book. What are presented in the table are the mean likelihood values. The differences in these means are obvious and need little explanation. Locations that are used almost exclusively by students appear to be the most likely and these that are used less frequently appear to be the least likely.

Speaker-Listener Variable

Another compelling factor in the communication context is the relationship between the speaker and listener. Previous research has focused on the comprehension aspect of this factor, while less attention has been paid to

TABLE 1

Mean Likelihood of Hearing a Dirty Word in Various Campus Locations

Taconic Dorm male	90.32	Mail Room	35.31
Pub	89.25	Student Senate Office	35.31
Berkshire Dorm coed	88.75	Radio Station	34.69
Athletic Field	88.37	Student Affairs Office	34.38
Townhouse Apartments	86.25	Bookstore	33.44
Hoosac Dorm female	83.32	Veteran's Affairs Office	32.50
Greylock Dorm female	82.19	Swimming Pool	31.56
Game Room	79.63	Media Center	29.69
Gymnasium	78.94	Supply Room	28.75
Training Room	63.25	Piano Lab	23.44
Athletic Office	62.12	Copy Center	20.94
Maintenance Room	57.13	Payroll Office	19.38
Newspaper Office	55.31	Campus School	18.75
Parking Lot	54.06	Registrar's Office	16.62
Sidewalk	53.13	Health Center	15.31
Security Office	44.37	President's Office	14.50
Library	43.44	Financial Aid Office	12.06
Biology Lab	40.94	Career Planning Office	11.69
Theater	40.31	Placement Office	10.63
Resourceful Living	39.69	Admissions Office	7.25
Computer Center	37.81	Dean's Office	7.25
Chemistry Lab	37.81	Day Care Center	1.44
Faculty Lounge	35.88		

Note- Scale values are: 0= not likely at all, 100= most likely possible.

production aspects. Some of the dimensions that have received attention include: sex, intimacy, age, status, and likability.

Most information about production and comprehension with regard to the speaker-listener relation deals with the dimension of sex role. Sex differences have been demonstrated in both production and reaction to dirty words. Lakoff (1973) reports that women use expletives that are different from men; women are more likely to use non-referent particles like oh dear, goodness, or fudge, while men use stronger expletives like shit or damn. Other production differences as a function of sex of speaker have been demonstrated for degree of restraint in usage (This has been a reliable finding over the past 40 to 50 years, where females are more restrained in usage than males. See Hunter & Gains, 1938), the use of sex related slang (Kutner & Brogan, 1974), the use of terms for menstruation (Ernster, 1975), the use of terms for sexual intercourse (Walsh & Leonard, 1974), and recall memory for dirty words (Grosser & Walsh, 1966).

As for sex differences in reaction to dirty words, the finding that females react with more inhibition to, or are more offended by the perception of dirty words, as compared to males, has been repeatedly demonstrated since the beginning of research in the area known as perceptual defense in the late 1940's (Eldelyi, 1974; or McGinnies, 1949).

Other speaker-listener variables have included, in the therapeutic setting, the significance of dirty words during intimate sexual relations (Crest, 1974; Viewpoints, August, 1969) and the use of obscene words in the therapeutic relationship (i.e., with the "shrink." See Feldman, 1955).

When age becomes a factor in the speaker-listener relation, the attention switches to the use of dirty words by children. Here the concern is about the childrens' use of dirty words and the possible relationship to normal growth and development. Reports typically focus on the relationship

between the child and parents or peers (Hartmann, 1973; 1975). It is interesting to note that psychiatrists treat this phenomenon as a contextual problem; although they never make that explicit in their reports. They discuss setting, the listeners present, and so on.

The use of language by children or adults can characterize certain qualities about the user, for example: profession, intelligence, education, status, or abstractness of thought. The discipline of sociolinguistics has made this point clearly. To this point the use of dirty words provides information about speaker-listener dimensions such as sex, values, attitudes, and social group. Sociologists use the production of dirty words to indicate the degree of socialization, or degree of in group behavior for youth subculture (Gibson, 1963; Kulik, Sarbin, Stein, 1971; and Lerman, 1967). The speaker has at his disposal the ability to disclose as much of this information as necessary by the words chosen and given the listener present.

If we express the relationship between speaker and in listener in broader terms, i.e., source of information and audience, then the interest of media programmers and law is present. Demographics is another form of specifying audience characteristics and viewing habits. Programmers try to present material that is not inappropriate for a particular audience. Similarly in legal decisions the relationship between a speaker and listener is considered in judgments about verbal abuse, libel, and the doctrine of fighting words (Haiman, 1972).

At this point I would like to mention some of the research I have done on the speaker-listener relation. Previously (Jay, 1976), I demonstrated that with regard to the dimension of friendliness or likability, when a third person is described by your enemy you will like that person more than when the third person is described by your friend. Briefly, subjects were given descriptions of a third person. The source of the description was the subject's "best friend" or "worst enemy." The subjects merely rated how much they

would like the third person based on the friend's or enemies' description. The interpretation of the results is based on the subjects' putting more weight on the friend's message or less weight on the enemies'.

Table 2 presents data collected more recently regarding speaker occupation. Here we see the likelihood of using a dirty word as a function of various campus occupations. These occupations were derived from rankings of occupational prestige in sociological research. The occupations which were represented on our campus were selected for inclusion in this study. Again the differences in perceived likelihood of using dirty words as a function of occupation is obvious from the mean ratings in the table.

I would also like to mention some of the research I have done with regard to sex differences. Remember, the general effect is that females are more restrained, or males are less restrained in production of dirty words. Similarly females are more emotional or males are less emotional in reaction to dirty words. Looking at Table 1, we can see that sex is an important variable in these likelihood ratings, especially in the dorm room locations. The most likely place to hear a dirty word is in a male's room, followed by a coed dorm, and finally the least likely place is the female's room (and interestingly the upperclass dorm for females is a more likely place than the freshmen women's dorm). Looking at the ratings as a function of occupation in Table 2, we can see a significant difference in likelihood as a function of sex for those occupations using both males and females, for example athletic coach, cook, teacher, dean admissions officer, bookstore employee, or business office clerk, all have higher ratings for males.

Finally, with regard to sex differences, in Table 3, I present data from an experiment where male and female listeners (subjects) rate offensiveness of dirty words, as a function of the sex of the speaker and how I tell them to interpret the information. Some are told to interpret the words as a member

TABLE 2

Mean Likelihood of Using Dirty Words for Various Campus Occupations

MALE OCCUPATION	RATING	FEMALE OCCUPATION	RATING
Athletic Coach	82.50	Athletic Coach	49.37
Janitor	62.81	Cook	36.88
Policeman	62.50	Maid	33.44
Groundkeeper	58.13	Secretary	31.87
Building Superintendent	57.50	Bookstore Employee	28.44
Cook	51.88	Business Office Clerk	27.56
Teacher	44.50	Cashier	26.25
Mail Carrier	37.50	Teacher	24.69
Bookstore Employee	36.87	Admissions Officer	20.62
Business Office Clerk	32.81	Receptionist	20.06
Dean	28.75	Guidance Counselor	20.00
President	26.56	Nurse	19.37
Admissions Officer	25.00	Dean	14.38
Registrar	23.44	Librarian	7.87

Note - Scale values are: 0= not likely at all, 100= most likely possible.

of the opposite sex would, some are told to interpret the words as a member of the appropriate sex would, and some are given no explicit instructions as to interpretation; the last group is "on its own." The listeners or subjects get a list of words and are asked to rate the offensiveness of the individual words if a male said them, then another list from a female speaker. Table 3 presents the mean offensiveness ratings depending on the sex of the speaker, interpretation (acting as a member of the same sex, opposite sex, or no explicit interpretation), and actual sex of the subject-listener. Results in the middle of the table, where listeners were given no explicit interpretational instructions, indicate that both male and female listeners are more offended by the female's use of dirty words. The male is offended very little by another male's use of dirty words. I call this the "macho" effect. The top of the table, where listeners are responding as the appropriate sex, indicates that for male listeners it makes little difference who the speaker is. For the female listener, however, she is much more offended by the opposite sex and less offended by a female speaker (This effect is similar to the male listener in the middle of the table). The bottom of the table indicates what happens when males are responding as females and females are responding as males. The ratings indicate that males are sensitive to the fact that females are more offended by the opposite sex. So are females sensitive to the males' reactions, although overestimating the "macho" effect of hearing another male use a dirty word.

These sex differences are interesting and important, too. They indicate that speakers and listeners probably edit or adjust their messages to suit the sex of the others present.

Research on the Model

Finally, I will get back to the model of production and comprehension as

TABLE 3

Mean Offensiveness Ratings as a Function of
Speaker Sex, Listener Sex, and Listener Interpretation

Interpretation: Respond as APPROPRIATE Sex

Sex of Speaker		Sex of Subject
MALE	FEMALE	
3.90	4.07	MALE (as male)
4.43	3.59	FEMALE (as female)

Interpretation: NO EXPLICIT Instruction to Listener

Sex of Speaker		Sex of Subject
MALE	FEMALE	
4.23	5.27	MALE (not explicit)
5.15	5.87	FEMALE (not explicit)

Interpretation: Respond as OPPOSITE Sex

Sex of Speaker		Sex of Subject
MALE	FEMALE	
5.38	4.72	MALE (as female)
3.11	4.95	FEMALE (as male)

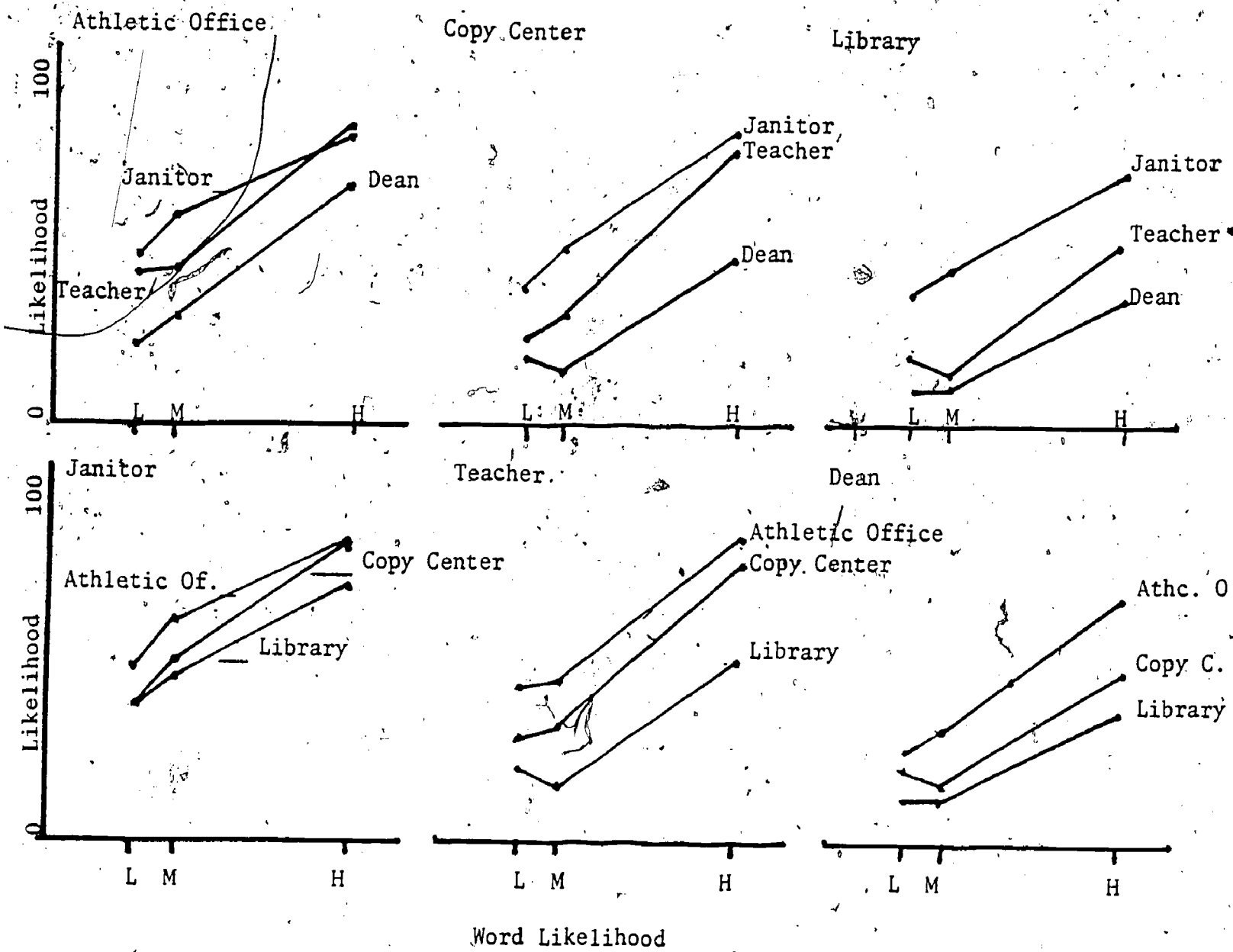
Note - Scale values are: 1= not offensive at all, 9= most offensive imaginable.

What I have done in these final experiments that I will report is to make a combination of various speakers, various locations, and various words and to ask college student subjects to rate: (a) the likelihood of occurrence (b) the offensiveness of a particular combination of people, places and words. For example, a possible item would be, "the janitor says hell in the library." The student rates the likelihood and later the offensiveness of this particular combination. The subjects received all combinations of three people, three places and three words. I assume that the combination of these pieces of information is similar to what happens in context in the real world; that is, people pay attention to factors like these when producing, interpreting, or reacting to any type of word.

The results are plotted in the next four figures. Figure 1 represents the mean likelihood responses, ranging from 0 to 100, for the various combinations. The top of the figure represents the same data as the bottom, the difference is that likelihood ratings are plotted as a function of location at the top and as a function of speaker at the bottom. These data indicate significant differences in: (a) type of speaker, (b) type of location, and (c) type of word used. There is no (statistical) interaction of speaker, location, and word. Figure 2 represents the offensiveness ratings for the same set of speakers, locations, and words. These ratings are the opposite of those for likelihood in the sense that high offensiveness indicates low likelihood and low offensiveness indicates high likelihood, when data from Figure 1 are compared with those from Figure 2. In other words a highly likely word like hell is very low in offensiveness; a highly likely person is low in offensiveness; and a highly likely location is low in offensiveness. The correlation was quite high between likelihood and offensiveness ($r = -.97$) supporting the previous interpretation.

FIGURE 1

Mean Likelihood Ratings as a Function of Speaker, Location, and Word

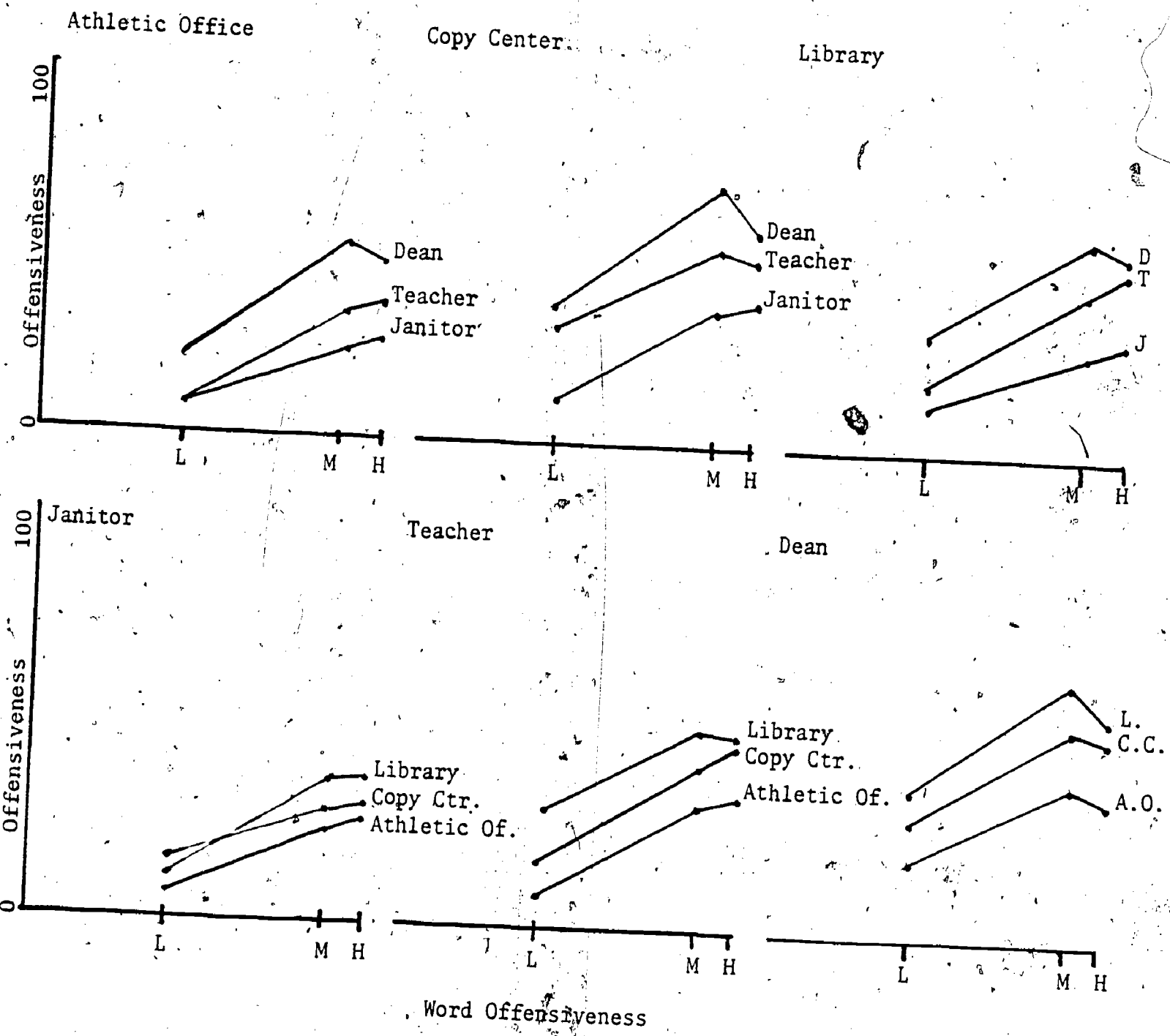


Note - Scale values are: 0= not likely at all, 100= most likely possible. Likelihood ratings are plotted vertically. The horizontal plot is word likelihood: L=low, M=medium, H=high.

The bottom of the figure represents the same data as the top. However, data at the bottom are plotted as a function of speaker, while data are

FIGURE 2

Mean Offensiveness Ratings as a Function of Speaker, Location, and Word



Note - Scale values are 0= not offensive at all, 100= most offensive possible. Offensiveness ratings are plotted vertically. The horizontal plot is word offensiveness: L= low, M=medium, H=high.

The bottom of the figure represents the same data as the top. Data at the bottom are plotted as a function

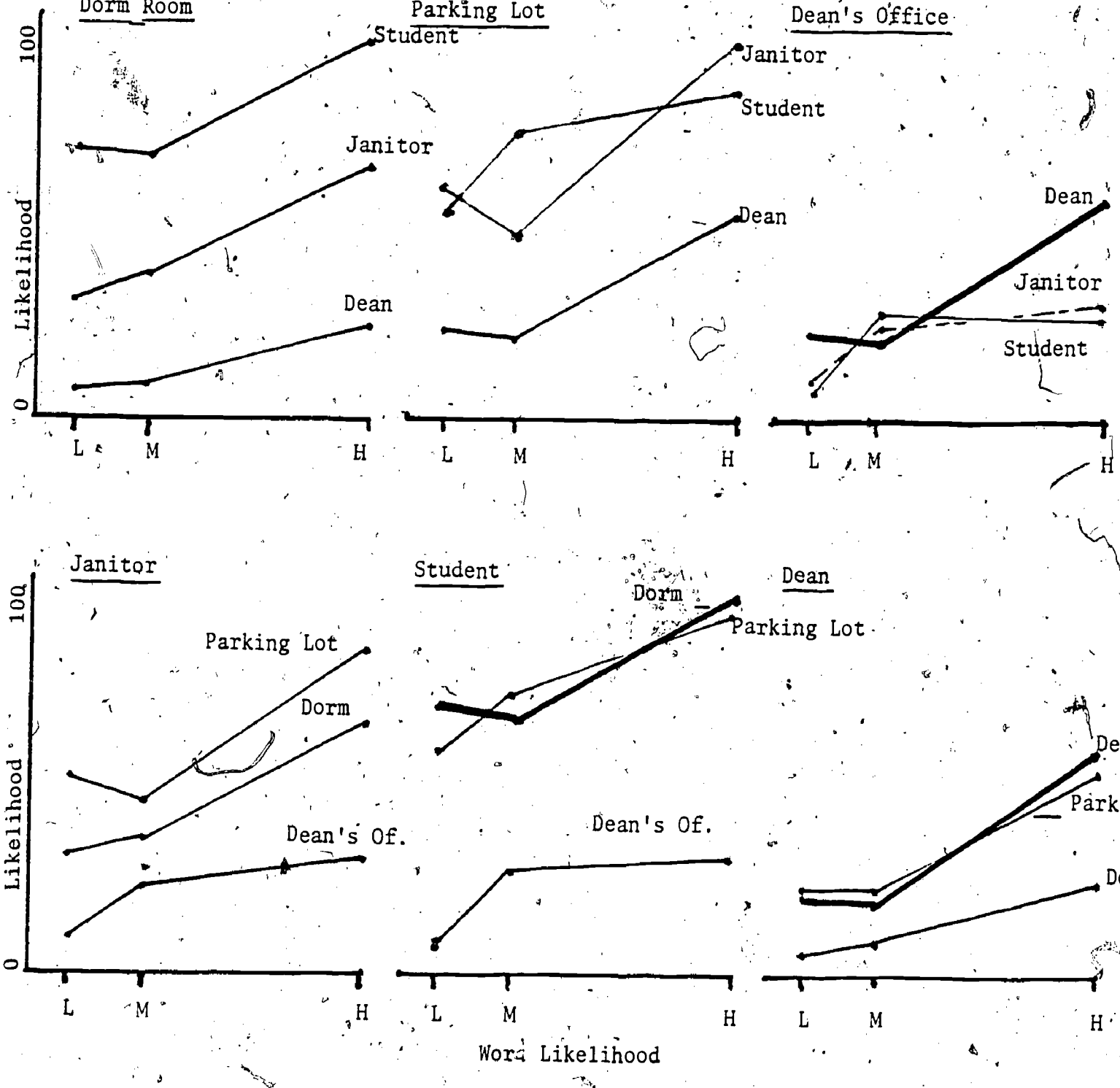
Although the results of the first experiment on the model were quite clear, there were some puzzling findings. Originally the library was rated as a moderately likely place to hear dirty words. These data were from students (See Table 1) but look what kind of people were in the library in this experiment, especially the teacher and the dean. The students in this experiment were probably indicating that it was all right for students to use dirty words in the library but not for the higher status teacher and dean. The teacher and the dean were out of place. In other words some places are all right to use dirty words. These may be places like your home, office, dorm room, in other words your own place, your "turf." However, when you are out of place or on another's turf, it is not all right to use dirty words uncritically. Now we have the rationale for the second experiment. In the second experiment people are placed in their own environment and in others' environments. To be more specific, I am predicting a (statistical) interaction between speakers, locations, and words in this experiment.

The results from the second experiment are presented in Figures 3 and 4. The interaction was obtained indicating that it is all right, for example, for the student to say a dirty word in his dorm room but not in the dean's office. Similarly it is more likely and less offensive for the dean to use dirty words in his office than in the student's dorm room. Again the high correlation ($r=-.96$) between likelihood and offensiveness was obtained.

Although the results here appear trivial to some ("We all know what would happen!"), they indicate mathematically, that people carry around an information integration device that makes decisions about when, where, and how to produce or comprehend dirty words. In these studies the decisions were limited to likelihood and offensiveness but in my estimation these are much similar to other production and comprehension decisions used in the real world. What

FIGURE 3

Mean Likelihood Ratings as a Function of Speaker, Location, and Word

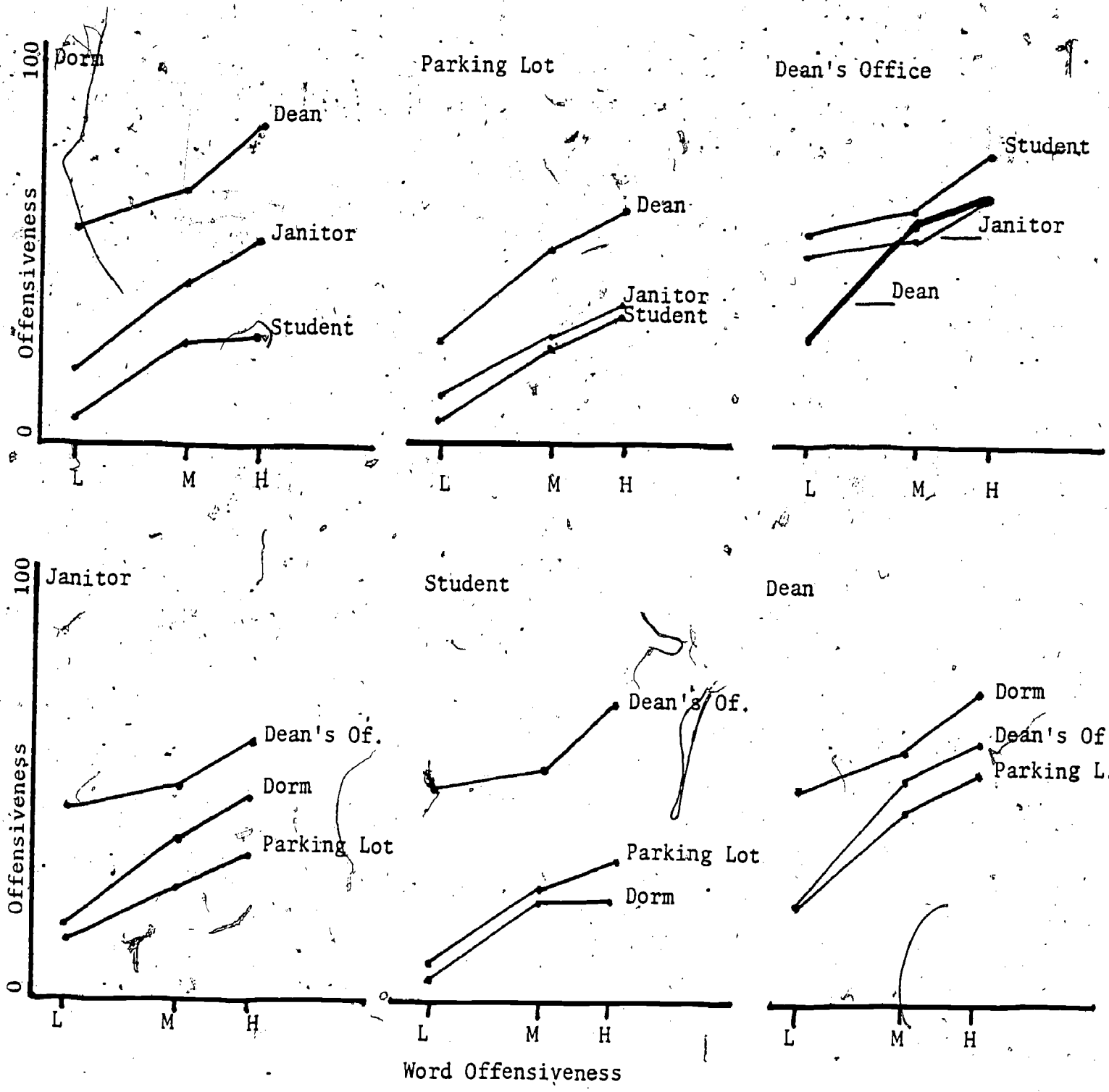


Note - Scale values are: 0= not likely at all, 100= most likely possible. Likelihood ratings are plotted vertically. The horizontal plot is word likelihood: L=low, M=medium, H=high.

The bottom of the figure represents the same data as the top. However, data at the bottom are plotted as a function of speaker, while data are plotted as a function of location at the top of the figure.

FIGURE 4

Mean Offensiveness Ratings as a Function of Speaker, Location, and Word



Note - Scale values are 0= not offensive at all, 100= most offensive possible. Offensiveness ratings are plotted vertically. The horizontal plot is word offensiveness: L=low, M=medium, H=high.

The bottom of the figure represents the same data as the top. Data at the bottom are plotted as a function of speaker, while location is at the top.

find out if speakers are actually constrained by these communication context factors in the production and comprehension of dirty words. Future research must also indicate how the more intricate factors of topic and syntax constrain the use of dirty words. When these projects are complete there will be less confusion about the use of dirty words.

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