

# WHAT THE # \$ \* ! DOES THAT MEAN!?

## AN INVESTIGATION OF THE SEMANTIC SWEARING IN CANADIAN LEXICON

Research by Alexander A. Becker

### Background

Modern English contains approximately 124 320 words and their derivatives

Several of these words are deemed offensive by certain groups and their use in some social settings and media are considered inappropriate

Terms that are femininely referential tend to undergo pejoration and become more offensive than masculine terms

Offensiveness changes over time; in 1930 the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code prohibited words such as *damn* from appearing in any film. Current MPAA standards allow for a single use of the *F-word* to maintain a PG-Rating

### Objectives

Determine whether the offensiveness of certain words is derived from the meaning or from the dictation of social convention

Determine whether knowledge of a word's meaning affects its offensiveness

Determine how the prevalence of a word affects its offensiveness

### Hypothesis

Individuals are offended by words they do not know the meaning of

Highly offensive words will be less prevalent

Individuals frequently use offensive words they do not know the meaning of

### Methodology

51 subjects were presented with a list of 12 potentially offensive words and asked to report on the following criteria for each:

- Level of offensiveness of the word
- The frequency at which he or she used the word
- The frequency at which he or she heard the word
- His or her knowledge of the meaning of the word

Responses for offensiveness were rated on a scale of 0-3

Responses for frequency were rated on a scale of 0-3

Knowledge of the word's meaning was assessed against meanings from the *Online Etymology Dictionary* and *Urban Dictionary* and given a score from 0-3

[Some words are presented in the graphs with atypical orthography; a key is provided to view the words as they appeared on the survey]

### Terminology

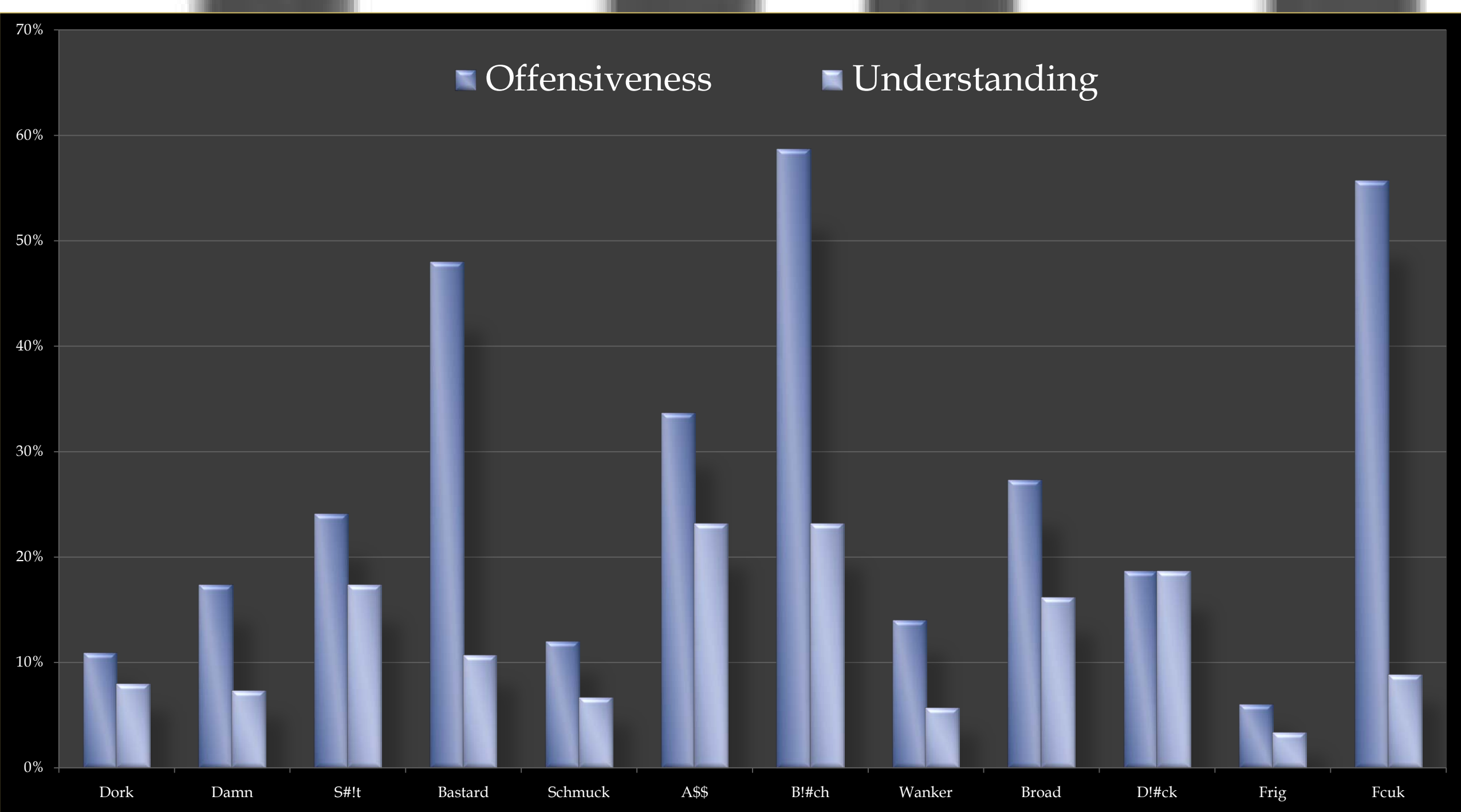
*Prevalence* is derived from the average score of reported frequencies of hearing the word and use

*Understanding* is derived from the subjects' reported knowledge of what the word means and why that meaning is offensive when the word is used

Result percentages are calculated from the average score out of 3

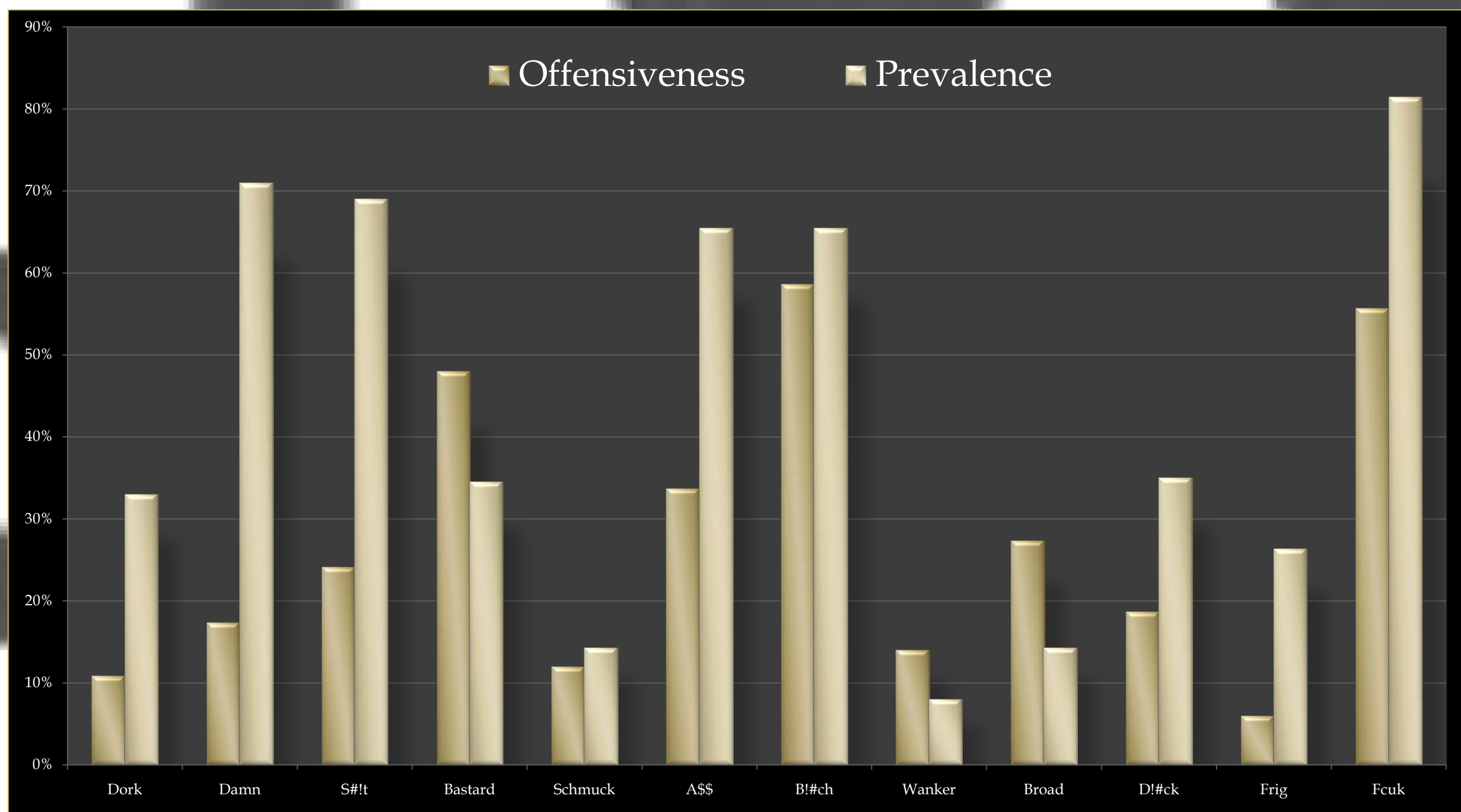
### Results: Offensiveness/Understanding

The data shows that the reported offensiveness tends to greatly exceed the reported understanding of the word



### Results: Offensiveness/Prevalence

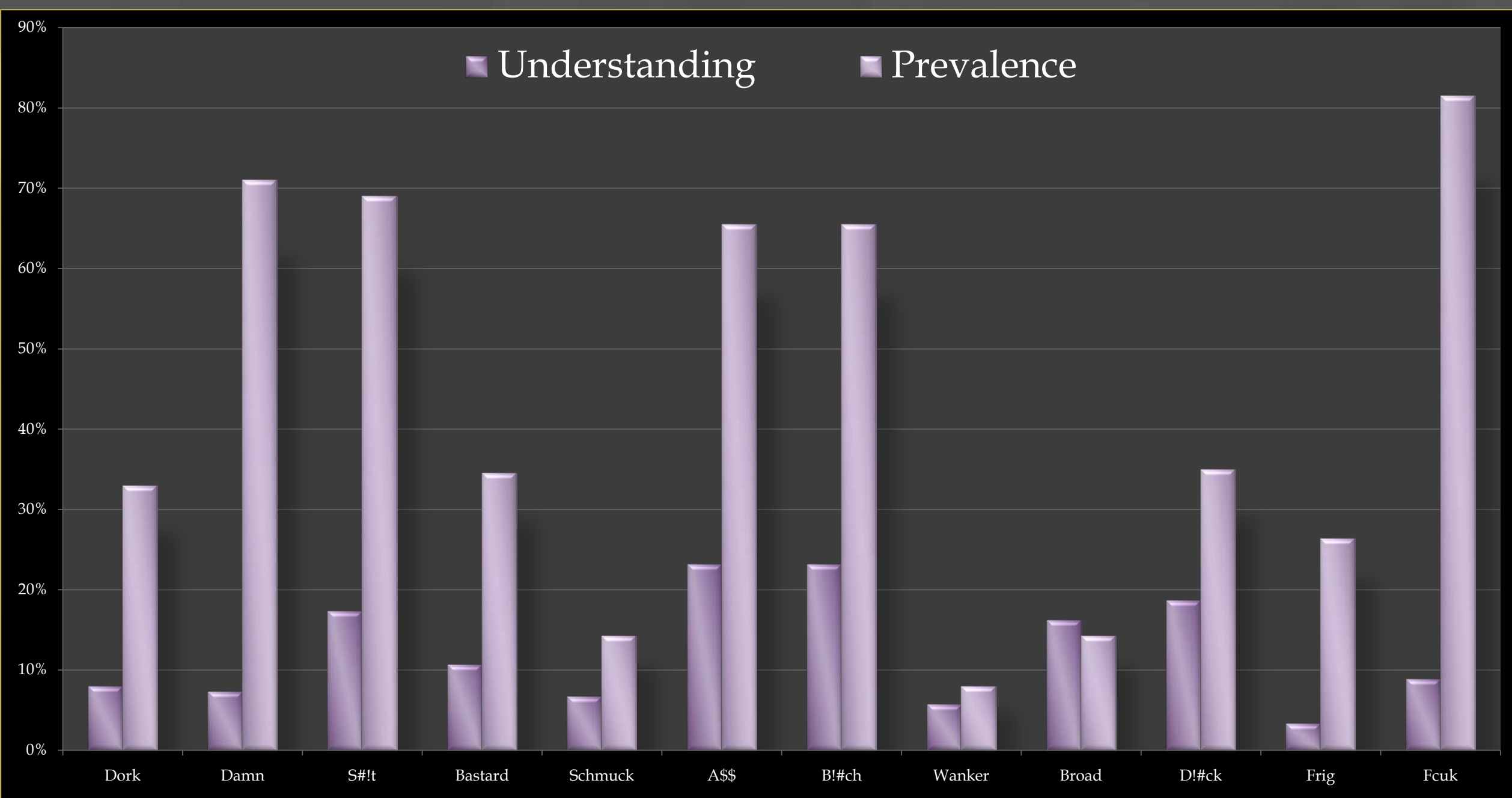
The data shows that there is not a specific correlation between a word's prevalence and its offensiveness



[S#t = Shit] [A\$\$ = Ass] [B#ch = Bitch]  
[D!#ck = Dick] [Fcuk = Fuck]

### Results: Understanding/Prevalence

The data shows overwhelmingly that offensive words are reported to be used and heard to a greater degree than they are reportedly understood



### Observations

The significant difference between the results for Frig and Fcuk are interesting to note given their virtually identical meanings:

*Fcuk*: from various Nordic and Germanic derivatives with the connotation of *phallic thrusting* and *copulation* and in modern usage (c.1535-present) as a vulgar referent to *sexual intercourse*

*Frig*: also from various Nordic and Germanic derivatives referring to the *female fertility goddess* of the same name and in modern usage (c.1670-present) referring to *yonis stimulation* and *penetration*.

While neither word's meaning is widely understood, the extensively used masculine term is considerably more offensive where as the feminine term, in contrast to *B#ch*, is rarely used and is reported as being a far more agreeable replacement for its masculine counterpart

### Conclusions

The data validates the first two hypotheses that people frequently use and are offended by words they don't understand.

Where as the most offensive words are among the most prevalent they have the least understood meanings leading to the conclusion that their offensiveness is not correlated to their meaning but to some other exterior factor(s) such as social or cultural convention

#### Selected References

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For the Queen's University Department of Linguistics  
In the Study of Canadian English