

Fuck Yes: The Culture of Cursing

Cursing is universal. Every language, patois, or dialect ever studied has its own forbidden words and, as it precedes even the ability to write, nobody knows what the first swear word ever used was. Evolutionary linguist Guy Deutscher suspects swearing dates from the rise of the human larynx, if not earlier.¹ Interestingly, research shows that humans are also not the only ones to swear – Project Washoe in the 1960s found chimpanzees learned how to swear too!²

In English, there are many different types of swear words. The most commonly used curse words typically fall under one of three categories. Firstly, there are deistic swear words such as Jesus Christ, Oh My God, Goddamnit etc. Next, there are swear words related to the body and its functions such as Fuck, Cunt, Twat, Shit, Dickhead etc. Finally, there are familial swear words including Son of a Bitch, Motherfucker, and Bastard.³

Why people swear is an interesting question. Psychologists initially hypothesised that swearing was the result of a 'poverty of vocabulary'; people swore because they simply couldn't think of another word. Subscribing to this perspective led to the belief that swearing was the domain of the lower classes, the lazy, and the poorly educated.⁴ However, as linguistic studies progressed, it became evident this was not the case – the ability to generate taboo language is not an index of overall language poverty.⁵

Instead, alternative theories explored why we curse. One particularly convincing theory holds that cursing is the result of three interdependent systems: neurological reasons (e.g. Tourette Syndrome, frontal lobe damage, emotional arousal etc.), psychological reasons (e.g. coping skills, religiosity, impulsivity, deviance etc.), and social-cultural reasons (e.g. intimacy, taboo, privacy, gender roles etc.). As such, cursing is never random, meaningless or chaotic, it is purposeful and rule-governed and as you learn a language, you learn the rules around cursing with it.⁶

When it comes to using swearing as an emotional expression, studies have shown that swearing allows you to release your frustration and built-up pressure just like crying allows. Swearwords act as a "quick verbal hand grenade".⁷ If you stub your toe, instead of crying, you may swear and exert that pain in a different way. Further, swearing even allows you to withstand pain for longer and even exert more pressure when lifting for example.⁸ Swearing can also help add humour to a situation or hide your insecurities/ fears.

Social-cultural reasons for swearing are multifaceted and complex too. Socially, swear words can be used to express trust and intimacy with another person or establish membership in a group or community. Linguist Robin Lakoff, for example, studied the gendering of language and our expectations. It turns out women tend to use more 'minced oafs' (e.g. fiddlesticks,

¹ Deutscher, G (2005). *The Unfolding of Language: An Evolutionary Tour of Mankind's Greatest Invention*. New York: Henry Holt.

² Byrne, E (2017). *Swearing Is Good for You: The Amazing Science of Bad Language*. London: Profile Books.

³ Jay, T. (2009). The Utility and Ubiquity of Taboo Words. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 4 (2). 153-161.

⁴ Dumas, B & Lighter, J (1978). 'Is Slang a Word for Linguists?'. *American Speech*. 53 (1). 5-17.

⁵ Jay, K & Jay, T (2015). 'Taboo word fluency and knowledge of slurs and general pejoratives deconstructing the poverty-of-vocabulary myth'. *Language Sciences*. 52. 251-259.

⁶ Jay, T (1999). *Why We Curse: A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech*. Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company.

⁷ Jay, T (1999). *Why We Curse: A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech*. Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company.

⁸ Byrne, E (2017). *Swearing Is Good for You: The Amazing Science of Bad Language*. London: Profile Books.

fudge, crickey crumbs etc.) rather than explicit swearwords as women are taught from a young age to be polite and avoid taboo.⁹ However, new research shows that when women swear in a male-dominated workplace, they can transgress gender expectations. Such vulgar lexicon helps fuel intimacy and bonding, making you more likeable, closer, and even more productive.¹⁰ This is because swearing also gives off social cues that help you to know what sort of person someone is, and what you can expect.

Of course, swear words can also be used with the intention of offending. What causes words to be offensive most often depends on the social traditions and power structures within a society – every culture consequently has its own unique swearwords. Looking at what words are seen as taboo in society teaches us much about the cultural environment of an area too.

As mentioned, swearing can revolve around family-relations. This too changes based on what sort of society and culture you live in. In China, owing to Confucianism, ancestor worship is an important aspect of society and there is more emphasis on one's extended-family rather than their nuclear-family. As such, insulting one's ancestors is a sensitive issue and cursing in Mandarin extends to 'your ancestors to the 18th generation' (*cáo nǐ zǔzōng shíbā dài*).¹¹

Meanwhile, in the Mediterranean, where a classic relationship exists between a son and a mother, David Beckhams use of "Hijo de Pute" (Son of a Whore) during a Real Madrid soccer game was enough to receive an instant red card. He later claimed he didn't realise it was so offensive in Spain as he'd heard his teammates use the term.¹²

Among more historically religious societies, swear words are more likely to be religious in origin too. In French Quebec, a historically Catholic society, swear words are often associated with mass – tabernacle, for example, is a swear word; you're bringing the sacred into disrepute when using it negatively.¹³ Even ways to avoid swearing are based on culture too - in Canada, for example, where ice hockey is a national sport, to avoid using the word *hell*, you can hear kids and adults alike mutter: 'h-e-double-hockey-sticks'.

Swearing can also tell us about the overall societal expectations. In the Netherlands, where there is an emphasis on individuals not to be a burden, to contribute to society, and to take care of yourself, wishing illness on another undermines these aspects and is a common way of swearing. While most swear words are to do with rare or old diseases (e.g. cholera, tuberculous, smallpox etc.) some are more modern, highly controversial, and used by different classes (e.g. "Sterg aan kanker" = Die of cancer).¹⁴

Ultimately, the same words that are considered taboo in English today are unlikely to be the same words considered taboo in 100 years. Some may fade into obscurity ("What in thunderation?!") others will gain notoriety and fall out of favour ("Retard"), and new ones will be developed as our culture changes ("douchebag"). Who knows, in 10 years it may be

⁹ Lakoff, R (1973). 'Language and Woman's Place. *Language in Society*. 2 (1). 45-80.

¹⁰ Byrne, E (2017). *Swearing Is Good for You: The Amazing Science of Bad Language*. London: Profile Books.

¹¹ Harbeck, J. (2015). *Mind Your Language! Swearing Around the World*. Available: <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150306-how-to-swear-around-the-world>. Last accessed 1st Oct 2019.

¹² Jeffries, S. (2006). *The Mother of All Insults*. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2006/jul/12/worldcup2006.sport>. Last accessed 1st Oct 2019.

¹³ Sanders, C (1993). *French today: Language in its Social Context*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). 245.

¹⁴ Van Sterkenburg, P.J.G. (2001). Vloeken: Een cultuurbepaalde reactie op woede, irritatie en frustratie [Swearing: A culturally determined reaction to anger, irritation, and frustration]. The Netherlands: SDU.

acceptable to tell your boss to stop being a motherfucking asshole! With that said, I hope you learnt something. But if you didn't... go fuck yourself!