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The linguistic sophistication of swearing

Rob Drummond

Warning!

This focus paper contains … swearing. If you find swear words offensive, please **do** read this.

'Swearing' is actually quite hard to define. As a concept, it is vague, subjective and utterly context-dependent. What is perceived as swearing by one person in one context will be perceived as slang, informal language or simply normal language for another person (or even the same person) in another context. Even the very strongest words can be used in a friendly, innocuous way among the right people at the right time.[1]

It is perhaps this fluidity which helps make swearing so linguistically interesting, both in terms of form and in terms of function. Structurally, swearing is incredibly versatile. Just think of all the various parts of speech that can be filled by *fuck* for example (*fuck off*, *she fucked him*, *you fucker*, *fucking amazing*, *I'm fucked*), not to mention its role in expletive infixation (*fan-fucking-tastic*).

Why the fuck?

Functionally, swearing performs various social roles. The linguist Karyn Stapleton[2] suggests four major categories of the interpersonal functions of swearing:

1. Expressing emotion and/or aggression.
2. Humour and verbal emphasis.
3. Social bonding and solidarity.
4. Constructing and displaying identity.

If you are someone who swears, you will likely relate to all of these functions, able to recall actual instances from your own use of language that could serve as examples for each of them. From the unintentional outburst when you stub your toe, to the punchline to a rambling anecdote, to the discussions of work at the annual conference, to the eloquent yet obscene message on a group chat.

Swearing, however you define it, is incredibly useful. Of course, we don't *have* to use it, just as we don't *have* to learn other languages. But when we do, it opens up so many linguistic and communicative opportunities.

About the author

Rob Drummond is a Reader in Sociolinguistics at Manchester Metropolitan University. He researches, teaches and writes about the relationship between language and identity, particularly in relation to language diversity, and the language of young people. With his research partner, Erin Carrie, he leads the Manchester Voices project and the Accentism Project. The first explores the accents, dialects and identities of people within Greater Manchester, and the second explores instances of language-based prejudice and discrimination. Rob is an active public-facing linguist, especially on Twitter: **@RobDrummond**.

Because swearing, despite what some people may try to tell you, is, or at least can be, highly communicatively sophisticated. Far from being an indication of a poor vocabulary, as is so often claimed, its use actually often hints at a good rather than poor grasp of language. As Stephen Fry puts it 'The sort of twee person who thinks swearing is in any way a sign of a lack of education or a lack of verbal interest is just a fucking lunatic.'[3]

Earlier I mentioned the flexibility of the word *fuck*, an especially interesting obscenity. *Fuck* has been studied quite a lot by linguists, probably most thoroughly by Tony McEnery and Zhonghua Xiao.[4] They used the British National Corpus[5] to investigate the use of *fuck* in both written and spoken English in relation to various social factors. In the course of their research they identified eight functions of *fuck*, from the frequent emphatic intensifier (*fucking marvellous*) to the infrequent personal insult (*you fuck*). When I recently carried out my own research into the language of a group of teenagers in Manchester,[6] I found examples of all eight of these functions, plus an additional one. The examples I use to illustrate each function below are all authentic bits of speech from recorded conversations with the young people. They are listed in order of frequency, from most to least.

Emphatic intensifier	*Look at your fucking hair!*
Idiomatic phrase	*Shut the fuck up.*
Cursing expletive	*You know what – fuck yous all!*
Destinational usage	*Fuck off, prick.*
Discourse marker	*At the time I was like, fucking, seven, right.*
General expletive	*Fucking hell!*
Literal usage	*Man wanna fuck my wife.*
Personal insult	*Oh shit, that fucker.*
Similative intensifier[7]	*He looks scary as fuck mate.*

The 'new' function I identified is the discourse marker. It soon became clear that among this group at least, *fuck* was quite commonly used in a very similar way to the discourse marker *like*, in sentences such as *I bought, fucking, I bought twenty cigs yesterday*. Whether this is a frequent use outside this age group, or whether, as is often the case, this age group are ultimately responsible for yet another linguistic innovation soon to spread into the wider population, remains to be seen.

What swearing does

Although *fuck* (and its variants) was by far the most frequent item in my teenage swearing data with a normalised frequency of 41.4 per 10,000 words, it might be useful, especially for those of you who work with 'youth' language, to quickly mention some of the other words I investigated in the speech of these teenagers. I focused on 13 words in all: *arse, bastard, bitch, bloody, cunt, dick, fuck, knob, piss, prick, shit, twat, wank*. Some of the more interesting or possibly unusual uses were:

*Don't chat **shit**.*	Don't lie; don't talk rubbish.
*Marcus **shit** it.*	Marcus was scared (from 'he shit himself').
*I went absolutely **shit**.*	I went mad (angry).
*You're just **arse-talking**.*	You're lying, talking rubbish.
*Turn up at **dickhead** time.*	Turn up at a stupid time.
*That was **knobshite**.*	That was rubbish; of no value.
*I'll **twat** her.*	I'll hit her.
*They're being **wank**.*	They're being rubbish/bad.

When we discuss the functional aspects of language, we think of language as 'doing' something. In sociolinguistics we talk of certain features 'doing identity work' for example, in the sense that their use is part of the enactment of particular identities. Swearing, as I mentioned earlier, has several identifiable functions, so it is often *doing* something within interaction. However, within this particular context and with this particular group of young people, swearing was very frequent. So much so that swearing was essentially the default mode of communication. Does this mean it is doing even more work? Or, more interestingly, could we view instances of non-swearing as actually doing the work here? In other words, is the absence of something just as powerful as its presence? In a novel, when the sweary character stops swearing, is that when we should take notice?

Exploring offensiveness

Questions of frequency are also related to perceptions of offensiveness. Over-exposure must surely result in a certain degree of immunity. I said right at the beginning that even defining swearing is context-dependent, and determining its offensiveness is even more so. However, I still believe it is possible to think about the offensiveness of words in relation to one another, which is something I tried to explore in an online survey which ran in April 2020.
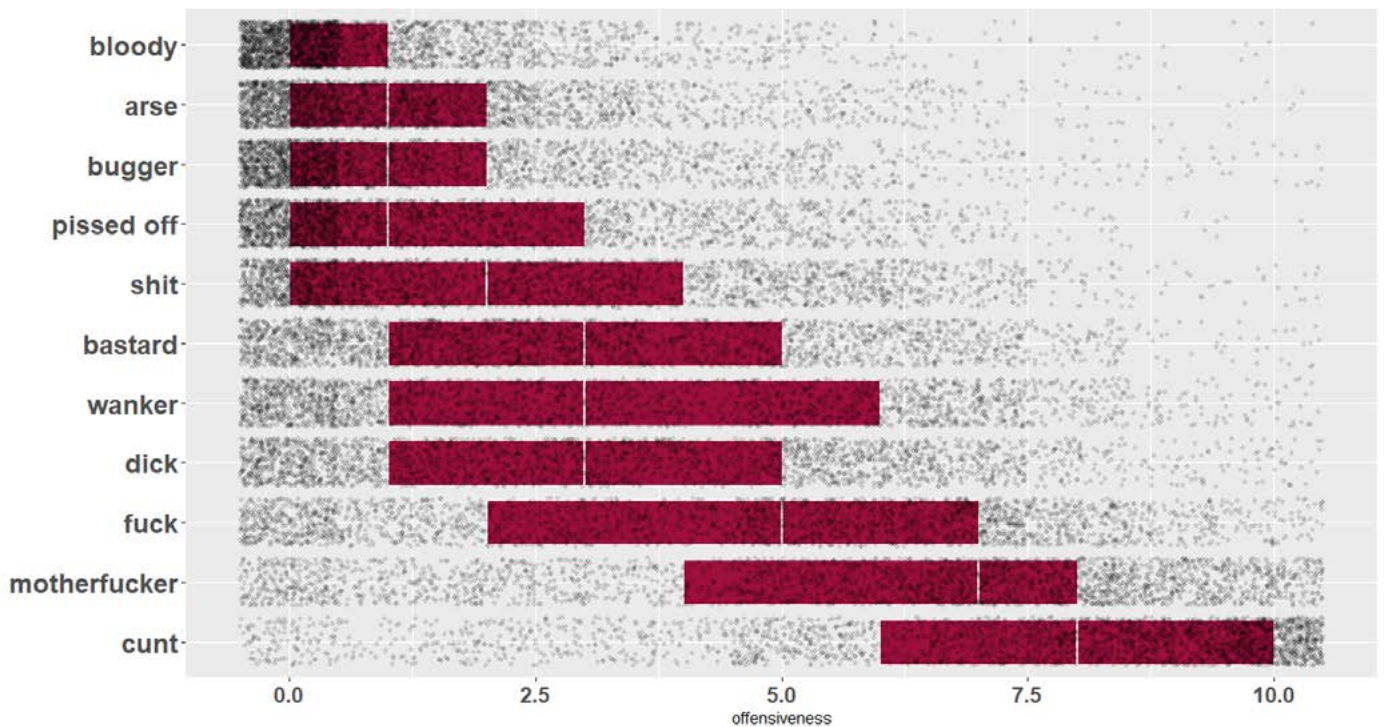
Figure 1: A boxplot showing the interquartile range and overall spread of responses for each word on a measure of offensiveness.

2,788 people took part in the survey. They represented a range of ages and nationalities, although the typical respondent would be an English woman in her 30s or 40s. The central question people were asked was simply 'How offensive do you find these words on a scale from 0 (not offensive) to 10 (very offensive)?'

Figure 1 shows the middle 50% of ratings for each word, ordered from least to most offensive. Every grey dot is a response, so you can see the wide range of views for each word.

No real surprises for the most offensive words perhaps. Indeed, in a later question in which people were asked to choose their top three offensive words from the list, *cunt* appeared in the top three 2,723 times, *motherfucker* 2,349 times and *fuck* 1,520 times.

But as you can see from the grey dots, some people rated even *cunt* as not at all offensive. Now, I find it hard to believe that these people would never find *cunt* offensive or, at the very least, inappropriate (think of family mealtimes, church teas or school parents' evenings). So again, we are back to context.

When a gentleman is disposed to swear, it is not for any standers-by to curtail his oaths.[8]

Context rules

So how does all this relate to editing, proofreading and publishing? Well, in terms of the editor's role with regard to acceptability, context surely is absolutely everything. What you decide to leave in, take out or disguise with asterisks must completely depend on awareness of the topic, of the genre, of the audience, of the publisher's guidance and of the author's wishes. And as with anything language-related, the guidance, and

your own perspective, will undoubtedly change along with the fashions and sensibilities of the times. Even if that occasionally leaves some inconsistencies. I was once asked to take part in a Radio 3 programme which was discussing swearing, and prior to the recording, the guests and host were assembled to be told by the producer that they'd 'checked upstairs' and the decision had been made that not only could we not use the word *cunt* (to be expected), we couldn't even use the phrase '*the c-word*'! We could say *fuck*, *dick*, *wanker*, and pretty much anything else, but *the c-word* was simply too evocative, having found itself on the euphemistic merry-go-round[9] and potentially offensive in its own right.

I'm an outsider when it comes to editing and proofreading. But I'm an insider when it comes to working with language. As such, I think that all we can ever do, swearing-related or otherwise, is be flexible, keep learning and continue to marvel at how the sophistication of our subject matter continues to make all of our jobs so fucking interesting.

Notes

1   Braier, R (2016). In praise of the C-word. *Guardian*, 11 July. **theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2016/jul/11/in-praise-of-the-c-word**

2   Stapleton, K (2010). Swearing. In MA Locher and SL Graham (eds), *Interpersonal Pragmatics*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 289–306.

3   Wollaston, S (2007). The weekend's TV: Stephen Fry: Guilty. *Guardian*, 20 August. **theguardian.com/culture/tvandradioblog/2007/aug/20/theweekendstvstephenfrygu**

4   McEnery, A and Xiao, Z (2004). Swearing in modern British English: The case of fuck in the BNC. *Language and Literature*, 13, 235–68.

5   The BNC is a 100-million-word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a cross-section of British English, both spoken and written, from the late 20th century. **natcorp.ox.ac.uk**

6   Drummond, R (2020). Teenage swearing in the UK. *English Worldwide*, 41(1), 59–88.

7   McEnery and Xiao (2004) refer to this function as a 'pronominal form', giving the examples like *fuck* and *fat as fuck*, but with no explanation as to why. I think 'similative intensifier' is a more accurate description, so I use it here.

8   Shakespeare, W (1611). *Cymbeline*, Act II, scene 1, line 11.

9   Coker, A (2019). How filthy was Cleopatra? Looking for dysphemistic words in ancient Greek. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 20(2), 186–203.

Resources

A very sweary dictionary. Thoughts on editorial styling of swear words. Hyphen, two words or closed up? **kiathomasediting.com/2018/05/16/a-very-sweary-dictionary**

Strong Language: A sweary blog about swearing. Described as 'a place for professional language geeks to talk about things they can't talk about in more polite contexts'. **stronglang.wordpress.com**

Susie Dent's Guide to Swearing. Short films in which Susie explores the origins of swear words. Have a look at the one on *bollocks* to find out that word's connection to publishing. **channel4.com/programmes/susie-dents-guide-to-swearing** (sign-in to All4 required)

Written by Rob Drummond

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