

# Advances in Swearing Research

New languages and new contexts

EDITED BY

Kristy Beers Fägersten  
Karyn Stapleton



*John Benjamins Publishing Company*



Any behavior that arouses, as swearing does, controversy, disagreement, disdain, shock, and indignation as often as it imbues passion, sincerity, intimacy, solidarity, and jocularity should be an obvious target of in-depth scholarship. Rigorous, scholarly investigation of the practice of swearing acknowledges its social and cultural significance, and allows us to discover and better understand the historical, psychological, sociological, and linguistic aspects (among others) of swearwords and swearword usage. The present volume brings together a range of themes and issues central to the existing knowledge of swearing and considers these in two key 'new' arenas, that is, in languages other than English, and/or in contexts and media other than spoken interaction. Many of the chapters analysed are based on large and robust collections of data, such as corpora or questionnaire responses, which allow for patterns of swearing to emerge. In other chapters, personally observed instances of swearing comprise the focus, allowing for a close analysis of the relationship between sociolinguistic context and pragmatic function. In each chapter, the cultural aspects of swearing are considered, ultimately affirming the importance of the study of swearing, and further establishing the legitimacy of swearing as a target of research.

ISBN 978 90 272 5687 4



John Benjamins Publishing Company



Beers Fägerssten  
& Stapleton  
Advances in Swearing Research

P&B  
ns  
282

# Advances in Swearing Research

New languages and new contexts

*Edited by*

Kristy Beers Fägersten

Södertörn University

Karyn Stapleton

Ulster University

John Benjamins Publishing Company

Amsterdam / Philadelphia



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

DOI 10.1075/pbns.282

**Cataloging-in-Publication Data available from Library of Congress:**  
**LCCN 2017027497 (PRINT) / 2017030055 (E-BOOK)**

ISBN 978 90 272 5687 4 (HB)

ISBN 978 90 272 6500 5 (E-BOOK)

© 2017 – John Benjamins B.V.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, photoprint, microfilm, or any other means, without written permission from the publisher.

John Benjamins Publishing Company · <https://benjamins.com>

## Advances in Swearing Research

## *Pragmatics & Beyond New Series (p&BNS)*

ISSN 0922-842X

*Pragmatics & Beyond New Series* is a continuation of *Pragmatics & Beyond* and its Companion Series. The New Series offers a selection of high quality work covering the full richness of Pragmatics as an interdisciplinary field, within language sciences.

For an overview of all books published in this series, please see  
<http://benjamins.com/catalog/pbns>

### **Editor**

Anita Fetzer  
University of Augsburg

### **Associate Editor**

Andreas H. Jucker  
University of Zurich

### **Founding Editors**

Jacob L. Mey  
University of Southern  
Denmark

Herman Parret  
Belgian National Science  
Foundation, Universities of  
Louvain and Antwerp

Jef Verschueren  
Belgian National Science  
Foundation,  
University of Antwerp

### **Editorial Board**

Robyn Carston  
University College London

Thorstein Fretheim  
University of Trondheim

John C. Heritage  
University of California at Los  
Angeles

Susan C. Herring  
Indiana University

Masako K. Hiraga  
St. Paul's (Rikkyo) University

Sachiko Ide  
Japan Women's University

Kuniyoshi Kataoka  
Aichi University

Miriam A. Locher  
Universität Basel

Sophia S.A. Marmaridou  
University of Athens

Srikant Sarangi  
Aalborg University

Marina Sbisà  
University of Trieste

Paul Osamu Takahara  
Kobe City University of  
Foreign Studies

Sandra A. Thompson  
University of California at  
Santa Barbara

Teun A. van Dijk  
Universitat Pompeu Fabra,  
Barcelona

Chaoqun Xie  
Fujian Normal University

Yunxia Zhu  
The University of Queensland

### **Volume 282**

Advances in Swearing Research. New languages and new contexts  
Edited by Kristy Beers Fägersten and Karyn Stapleton

# Table of contents

Introduction: Swearing research as variations on a theme <i>Kristy Beers Fägersten &amp; Karyn Stapleton</i>	1
CHAPTER 1	
Swearing in Danish children's television series <i>Marianne Rathje</i>	17
CHAPTER 2	
Swearing and instant messaging: Changing norms of social interaction in the Hong Kong workplace context <i>Bernie Chun Nam Mak &amp; Erika Darics</i>	43
CHAPTER 3	
FUCK CANCER, <i>Fucking Åmål</i> , <i>Aldrig fucka upp</i> : The standardisation of <i>fuck</i> in Swedish media <i>Kristy Beers Fägersten</i>	65
CHAPTER 4	
<i>Fuck</i> in French: Evidence of "other-language" swearing in France and Québec <i>Alexandra Jaffe</i>	87
CHAPTER 5	
The borrowability of English swearwords: An exploration of Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch tweets <i>Eline Zenner, Tom Ruetten &amp; Emma Devriendt</i>	107
CHAPTER 6	
Gender and age differences in swearing: A corpus study of Twitter <i>Michael Gauthier &amp; Adrien Guille</i>	137
CHAPTER 7	
Swearing in English and Spanish teenage talk <i>Anna-Brita Stenström</i>	157
CHAPTER 8	
Swearing in Italian: A redefinition of the notions of dysphemism and euphemism <i>Matteo Di Cristofaro &amp; Tony McEnery</i>	183



CHAPTER 9

Swearing in Persian: A new perspective on swearing as a speech act 213

*Tomoko Shimoyama, Fereidoon Shadpayam & Mary Parhizgari*

CHAPTER 10

Swearing in Finnish: Folk definitions and perceptions 231

*Minna Hjort*

CHAPTER 11

Epilogue 257

*Jean-Marc Dewaele*

Index 263

# Introduction

## Swearing research as variations on a theme

Kristy Beers Fägersten & Karyn Stapleton

Södertörn University / Ulster University

### 1. The study of swearing

Traditionally associated with aggressive behaviour and widely perceived as offensive, swearing has long been recognised as a linguistic taboo activity with a wide variety of indexical values, some of which are potentially polarising (Hughes 1991; McEnery 2004; Montagu 1967/2001). Yet swearing remains an intrinsic part of languages and cultures worldwide (Dewaele 2010; Ljung 2011), and constitutes a regular linguistic practice for many people, groups, and communities.

Any behaviour that arouses, as swearing does, controversy, disagreement, disdain, shock, and indignation as often as it imbues passion, sincerity, intimacy, solidarity, and jocularly should be an obvious target of in-depth scholarship. Rigorous, scholarly investigation of the practice of swearing acknowledges its social and cultural significance, and allows us to discover and better understand the historical, psychological, sociological, and linguistic aspects (among others) of swearwords and swearword usage. However, among scholars of swearing, it is not uncommon to lament the paucity of research in the field (Beers Fägersten 2014; Jay & Janschewitz 2013; Johnson & Fine 1985; Stone et al. 2015), blaming the taboo nature of swearwords and aggression associated with swearing for warding off serious study (Wajnryb 2005). While research on swearing remains decidedly underrepresented in comparison to research on many other aspects of language, it is growing and becoming ever more nuanced in scholarship. Not only is swearing now widely acknowledged as a legitimate and worthy target of scientific investigation (Jay & Janischewitz 2013), but the categorically taboo nature of swearing is no longer incontestable. It may be the case that these individual developments are the result of mutually influential forces at work.

This volume affirms the importance of the study of swearing, and by contributing to the growing base of studies, it also further establishes the legitimacy of

swearing as a target of research. The volume additionally aims to advance swearing research by introducing new areas of focus and paving the way for future investigations. In the next section, we present two central themes in existing research on swearing before we outline the need to explore these themes in new contexts and languages.

## 2. How much and how bad? Frequency and offensiveness in swearing research

There are two main themes that have emerged as central to swearing research, namely determining how frequently people swear and how offensive swearing is. With very few (if any) exceptions, swearing studies have addressed one or both of these themes, even if the explicit focus has been elsewhere.

High frequencies of swearword usage have been documented (see references below, or Jay (2009) for a discussion of the “ubiquity” of swearing). At the same time, the taboo status of swearing and associated offensiveness have not diminished, as swearword usage continues to shock and offend as well as to incite controversy and debate (Wajnryb 2005). On the surface, this situation of a highly frequent and wide-spread, yet simultaneously highly offensive behaviour seems irreconcilable, and is what Beers Fägersten (2007, 2012) refers to as the “swearing paradox,” whereby the offensiveness of swearing seems to be directly linked to usage frequency. For example, studies that have investigated the effect of sociolinguistic variables on swearing such as *gender* (Beers Fägersten 2012; Berger 2003; Jay 2005; Murray 2012; Stapleton 2003, 2010; Thelwall 2008), *age* (Jay 1992, 1996; Jay & Janschewitz 2008; Jay et al. 2006; Rathje 2014), or *socioeconomic status* (Hughes 1998; Hughes 1992; McEnery 2004), studies that have explored swearing in specific contexts such as at the *workplace* (Baruch & Jenkins 2007; Faulkner 2009; Johnson & Lewis 2010; Stone et al. 2015) or in the *media* (Cressman et al. 2009; Kaye & Sapolsky 2004, 2009; Sapolsky & Kaye 2005), or studies that surveyed *behaviours and attitudes* with regards to swearing (Beers Fägersten 2012; Cavazza & Guidetti 2014; Dewaele 2005; Goddard 2015) have all quantified swearing and/or evaluated swearing in terms of offensiveness. Contributing to the swearing paradox are these two essential aspects of swearing, frequency and offensiveness, as explained below.

### 2.1 Frequency

Determining the frequency of swearword usage entails determining what a swearword is. However, while many scholars have succeeded in formulating

workable definitions of *swearword*, these definitions tend to include a subjectivity that invites vulnerability. For example, Andersson and Trudgill (2007) and Ljung (2011) define swearing similarly as language use in which the expression: (a) refers to something taboo or stigmatised; (b) is not to be interpreted literally; and (c) expresses strong emotions or attitudes. With regards to the second criterion, the extent to which “non-literalness” is necessary to designate language use as swearing could be debated. Many classic uses of swearwords are non-literal and/or idiomatic (e.g. *my arse* or *fuck that* as expressions of disdain or anger). Nonetheless, if swearwords are used in a denotative sense, for example, “I’ll kick his arse” or “They were fucking”, the expression in question is still likely to be seen as taboo (and offensive) if used in an inappropriate context (illustrated in Beers Fägersten 2012: 90).

It is here that we confront the true challenge of defining a swearword, which in turn complicates frequency counts and causes the swearing paradox. That which is considered taboo, stigmatised, or inappropriate can vary from person to person, such that marginal cases such as *boob*, *retard*, or *dog* (Jay 1992, 1999, 2009) would nonetheless qualify as swearwords. The subjectivity of ‘taboo’, ‘stigmatised’, and ‘inappropriate’ thus results in a definition vulnerable to over-inclusion. In fact, Montagu (1967: 100) has previously claimed that “practically all words may serve the swearer as makeweight”, and as such the category of swearword is potentially very large. This rather indulgent approach to identifying swearing can be responsible for inflated frequency ratings (Beers Fägersten 2012: 8) and a misleading idea of how much swearing is indeed taking place.

On the other hand, Adams (2016: 10) proposes that swearwords should be categorised as slang when used in informal, conversational contexts where they would not be considered offensive by the participating interlocutors. Consequently, the situation arises such that some claims of inclusion in the swearword category may be as questionable as claims of exclusion from the same category. The distinction seems to be a matter of offensiveness.

## 2.2 Offensiveness

Because of its taboo nature, swearing has a unique linguistic potential to cause offence. It has conventionally been associated with aggression and has been seen as a form of verbal violence (Griffith 1996; Baruch and Jenkins 2007; Beers Fägersten 2007). Swearing is thus a proscribed activity in many contexts and often carries the risk of negative consequences, ranging from formal sanctions, to social censure and/or stigmatisation (Hughes 1998; Jay & Janschewitz 2008; McEnery 2004). Despite, or perhaps because of this, swearing serves important psychological functions. From the time of Freud, swearword usage has been viewed as a



form of catharsis or release of emotion (Jay 1999; LaPointe 2006). This psychological function is not only about the expression of anger, as in conventional views of swearing, but also relates to expressions of pain and fear, among others (see Crawford 1995; Hirsch 1985; Jay 1999; Rassin & Muris 2005; Vingerhoets et al. 2013). For example, experimental studies have shown that swearing can produce a pain-lesening, or hypoalgesic, effect (Dong 2010; Stephens et al. 2009; Stephens & Umland 2011). Similar effects have been shown to pertain for multilingual speakers, where, moreover, the psychological force and autonomic effects of swearing are shown to be stronger for the speakers' first language than for their second (Dewaele 2004, 2010; Harris et al. 2003).

The act of swearing to release emotion does not only apply to the experience of negative feelings such as anger, fear, pain, or even frustration, sadness, etc. Swearwords can also be used in conjunction with decidedly positive emotional experiences, such as happiness, surprise, intimacy, or humour. Swearing can also occur neutrally, neither deliberately nor strategically, and in situations that are neither saliently positive or negative. But while frequency data may reflect an overrepresentation of swearing occurrences, offensiveness studies have mostly targeted negatively-charged swearing. Montagu (1967/2001) distinguishes between "annoyance swearing" and "social swearing", the former being a mechanism for tension release and mostly negatively charged, while the latter is focused on managing aspects of social relationships and interactions, and tends to be positively charged. Annoyance swearing includes the prototypical or cliché examples of swearing, such as those expletives, invectives, and outbursts brought on by pain, anger, and aggression, or with abusive and injurious functions. It is instances of annoyance swearing that are most often featured in offensiveness studies (see Bailey and Timm (1976), Berger (2003), Driscoll (1981), and Oliver and Rubin (1975) for examples of annoyance swearing), and that are consistently rated as highly offensive (Kapoor 2016).

However, swearing research that makes use of empirical data shows that annoyance swearing is very infrequent (see Beers Fägersten 2012 for an overview). Instead, much of the swearing occurring in spontaneous, face-to-face interaction is social swearing, which involves the strategic use of swearwords to achieve particular interpersonal and rhetorical effects. Among other things, social swearing can serve to emphasise the key points of a message, express (as opposed to cathartically 'release') emotions, display or create humour, express solidarity, highlight group distinctions, increase group bonding, display trust or intimacy, and construct and manage identities (see Beers Fägersten 2012; Stapleton 2010; Nelson 2014; Norrick 2009).

The combination of high frequency counts of swearing (due to inclusive definitions) and high offensiveness ratings of swearwords (due to a focus on annoyance

swearing) creates the swearing paradox. It is resolved, however, when we understand that frequency counts may be inflated by the inclusion of marginal cases of swearwords, and that offensiveness is based on examples of annoyance swearing, which are under-represented in face-to-face communication.

Answers to the questions of 'how much' and 'how bad' are nevertheless worth pursuing, since it is the variables of frequency and offensiveness that make swearing such a meaningful activity. It is not the case that everybody swears all the time, nor is it the case that nobody swears ever. There is both inter-personal and intra-personal variation with regards to swearword usage, triggered by any number of contextual features and sociolinguistic variables. It is also not the case that everyone agrees on what is and what is not a swearword, or on the offensiveness (or inoffensiveness) of any particular swearword in use. In fact, there is substantial intra- and inter-personal variation in this regard, as well. This variability is vital for maintaining the unique status of swearwords: if their usage, force, and reception were invariable and predictable, there would be no communicative risk-taking, no social tension, and no emotional release. For this reason, it can be claimed that variability in frequency and offensiveness is implicit in the study of swearing, even if other themes are explicitly explored.

### 3. Variations on a theme in swearing research

As outlined above, swearing has been shown to be a multi-faceted interpersonal strategy, which can be used for a range of relational and social purposes, and these are often distinct from the conventionally understood psychological function of emotional or cathartic release. Of course, as a linguistic activity, swearing is not unique in terms of having multi-functional social applications; the same can be said of many, if not all, linguistic practices. However, swearing carries a particular force by virtue of its taboo nature, its potential for offence, and hence, its connotations of stigma and/or transgression. It may be assumed that the taboo and potentially offensive nature of swearing allows for the expression of specific psychological, social, and interpersonal functions (Stapleton 2010). This is a key reason behind the growth of interest in swearing within the broad field of linguistics, which has resulted in investigations of the historical, cognitive, psychological, pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of swear word usage.

Research has shown that swearing is a highly context-dependent activity, and that it is framed by robust sets of social and cultural norms, expectations, and category associations (Jay & Janschewitz 2008). Key among these is gender expectations, that is, a common perception that women swear less frequently than men and/or use swearwords that are less offensive, milder, or weaker than those used by

men (Coates 1993, 2015; Hughes 1992; de Klerk 1992). While this folk-linguistic assumption is not always borne out by empirical evidence (Beers Fägersten 2012; Berger 2003; Murphy 2009; Thelwall 2008), it is nonetheless powerful in shaping perceptions of swearing activity itself in that women's swearing is often judged more harshly and subjected to more censure than that of men (Beers Fägersten 2012; O'Neil 2002; Stapleton 2003).

A common folk-linguistic belief about swearing is that it is a sign of a speaker's poor or underdeveloped vocabulary. In their investigation of the "poverty-of-vocabulary assumption", Jay and Jay (2015) found, however, that swearing fluency correlates positively with overall fluency, measured by one's ability to produce words in particular categories. Their results support the "fluency is fluency" hypothesis, but it should be duly noted that their study population comprised predominantly female students at a small, liberal arts college. This is not the social group conventionally associated with the poverty-of-vocabulary assumption. Instead, swearing, as it is commonly linked with vernacular or non-standard speech, has traditionally been thought of as characteristic of "working-class culture" and lower socioeconomic groupings, and informal or male-dominated contexts (Baruch & Jenkins 2007; Bayard & Krishnayya 2001; Beers Fägersten 2007; Benwell 2001; Cheshire 1982; Hughes 1992; Romaine 1999). Hence, the interpersonal, rhetorical, and social outcomes of swearing can be expected to differ for different sets of speakers in different relational and cultural settings. This also creates a unique potential for identity expression and management. Discursive studies have shown how both the use and avoidance of swearing can be used to construct personal, interlocutor and group-based identities in light of prevailing norms and their transgression or maintenance (Baruch & Jenkins 2007; Beers Fägersten 2007; Coyne et al. 2012; Dutton 2007; Murphy 2011; Stapleton 2003; Stenström 2006; Thelwall 2008). Other studies have approached swearing from a relational, social status perspective, investigating the indexicality of swearing with regards to enacting power roles (Ainsworth 2016; Carroll-Garrison 2012; McNally et al. 2005).

#### **4. The present volume: New languages and new contexts**

In our discussion so far, we have highlighted a number of key themes in the study of swearing, including: taboo and censure, offensiveness, frequency, psychological vs. social functions, context, social categories, expectations and judgments, and the role of swearing in identity management. With research on swearing gaining momentum, our understanding of swearword usage is becoming more extensive and nuanced. Nevertheless, despite the growth in swearing research, much more

remains to be done in order to take full account of the dynamics of swearing in contemporary social settings.

In particular, it may be noted that the majority of research on swearing so far has been conducted on English (typically British or American varieties) and has focused on non-mediated contexts or elicited data. In response, each of the chapters of this volume examines the practice and/or perception of swearing in *languages other than English* or in a range of *mediated contexts*; many chapters accomplish both. Indeed, it is a core feature of the volume that most of the chapters address these two dimensions; that is, they investigate swearing in a language other than English in one or more mediated context(s), such as new and traditional media, including print and broadcast media, online instant messaging, and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. It should also be noted at the outset that unlike historical/diachronic approaches (such as Hughes 1998; McEnery 2004; Montagu 1967/2001) which have examined semantic categorisations and cultural shifts, or quantitative sociolinguistic studies which have measured either frequency (such as Dewaele 2016a; Jay 1980; McEnery 2004; Mehl & Pennebaker 2003; Mehl et al. 2007; Rosenberg et al. 2016; Subrahmanyam et al. 2006; Thelwall 2008), or offensiveness (Baudhuin 1973; Beers Fägersten 2007; Dewaele 2016b; Jay 1992; Janschewitz 2008; Jay 1992; Jay et al. 2008; Mabry 1975; Plaud et al. 1998; Selnow 1985), this volume is explicitly concerned with the social practice of *swearing* rather than considering only *swearwords* as isolated categories. The primary focus of the chapters is on analyses of actual examples collected from spontaneous speech, popular culture, online communication, or other (multi)media sources, with the common, over-arching goal of exploring linguistic change in process as effected by social forces, specific linguistic contexts, or language contact.

In focusing on new languages, it is acknowledged that as both a linguistic and culturally-bound activity, the functions of swearing in other languages are likely to show both similarities and differences when compared to what we already know, based on English-language studies. For example, how do the interpersonal functions of English-language swearing translate into other languages and cultural settings? To what extent do the social connotations and category-based associations pertain in other languages? And in light of these issues, how does swearing interact with issues of identity ascription, construction, and management in different linguistic communities and cultures? We are also interested here in the global spread of English, the borrowing of English into other languages, and specifically, the extent to which particular English swearwords are being adopted in other-language settings, the sociolinguistic effects of this practice, and what it can tell us both about swearing itself and about the strength of English swearwords as increasingly globalised resources.



Furthermore, in extending our study to new contexts of written, mediated, and online communication, we firstly note that swearing, traditionally a spoken, face-to-face, and often private, linguistic practice, is increasingly spreading to new domains, such as television and, in particular, social media. The advent of new media thus invites us to consider the effects of mode and medium on both swear-word usage and reception. As swearing becomes more routine both in spoken and mediated contexts, it can be expected that this will affect attitudes and particularly perceptions of offensiveness. To what extent will this affect the taboo nature of swearing *per se*? In addition, newer forms of online and social media differ from traditional mass media in that they are less regulated, with less ‘guardianship’ and gatekeeping and, of specific interest here, with fewer formal codes of censure for swearing or verbal taboo (Dynel 2012; Henry 2006). Hence, swearing may well become less marked as a sociolinguistic activity to the extent that it is no longer mostly constrained within face-to-face and/or private interpersonal settings. However, as we have shown above, the taboo and potentially offensive nature of swearing is intrinsic to its potency and force.

The present volume, then, will bring together a range of themes and issues central to our existing knowledge of swearing and will consider these in two key ‘new’ arena, that is, in languages other than English, and/or in contexts and media other than spoken interaction. Many of the chapter analyses are based on large and robust collections of data, such as corpora or questionnaire responses, which allow for patterns of swearing to emerge. In other chapters, personally observed instances of swearing comprise the focus, allowing for a close analysis of the relationship between sociolinguistic context and pragmatic function. In each chapter, the cultural aspects of swearing are considered, whether it is a workplace culture, a media culture, or a language-specific culture.

In Chapter 1, “Swearing in Danish Children’s Television Series”, Marianne Rathje explores swearing both in a ‘new’ language, Danish, and a new context, children’s television programming. Working with corpora composed of the dialogue from three children’s television series, *Pendlerkids*, *Panisk Påske*, and *Busters Verden*, Rathje analyses differences between the series with regards to changes over time in type of swearwords used, frequency of swearing, the role of swearing in identity construction, and the way swearing differently indexes protagonists and antagonists. An increased frequency of swearword usage on children’s television suggests an overall greater tolerance for swearing, effected by changes in language norms and social attitudes over time.

In Chapter 2, “Swearing and Instant Messaging: Changing Norms of Social Interaction in the Hong Kong Workplace Context”, Bernie Chun Nam Mak and Erika Darics explore swearing in instant messages between colleagues. Their analysis of a 78,000-word instant messaging corpus focuses on how the affordances