

# **SWEARING**

**A CROSS-CULTURAL  
LINGUISTIC STUDY**

**MAGNUS LJUNG**



# Swearing

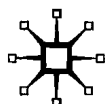
## A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study

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# Preface

This book is a study of swearing, its shape, use and manifestations in English and a number of other languages. The discussion and many of the examples in the book are in English, but there will also be more or less extensive forays into a number of other languages, viz. Arabic, Cantonese, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Turkish and Urdu. Although the data from these languages have been obtained in many different ways, my primary source of information has been interviews with native speakers based on the questionnaire presented in Appendix 2. The information obtained in this manner varied with the number of native speakers available and my account of swearing in the different languages makes no claim to completeness.

Swearing often involves the use of four-letter words like English *fuck*, *shit* and the corresponding terms in other languages, and on account of this it is regarded by many as disrespectful, vulgar and offensive. Some also regard it as blasphemous on account of its frequent unserious use of religious words. Interestingly enough, however, and despite these negative characteristics, swearing also seems fill a need for many people who find that the vulgar and offensive nature of swearing makes it an ideal tool for adding emphasis to what one says.

In addition to the above sociolinguistic characteristics, swearing also has a number of linguistic features that make it well worth studying, features involving aspects of vocabulary, grammar and meaning.

The vocabulary items used in swearing consist of a limited number of *taboo* words, viz. words whose literal meanings denote semantic areas that are – as Hughes (2006: 462) puts it – ‘too private, too vile or too sacred’ to be mentioned. In the present study, these areas are referred to as *taboo themes* and comprise for example excrement, incest and sex, on the one hand, and religious concepts on the other. However, taboo is not merely a question of word content but also of word form: the word itself must be offensive. *Penis* and *prick* denote the same theme, but only the second is offensive and hence a swear word. It is an interesting but so far unresolved question whether taboo has more to do with form or with content (cf. Hughes 2006: 462 and the discussion in Chapter 1).

Grammatically, swearing is characterized by its *formulaicity*, viz. the fact that multi-word swearing expressions are not freely formed in accordance with the grammar of the language but are more or less fixed and resist formal change.

Semantically, swearing is special not merely because of the restrictions on its vocabulary, but also by the fact that the taboo words involved are not used with their referential or denotative meanings, but function exclusively as indications of the speaker's state of mind. Consequently swearing does not have meaning in the sense that referential expressions do. Instead it has *emotive meaning*, viz. it expresses the speaker's state of mind.

Finally, swearing has a number of distinct *functions*. In some of these, swearing is an utterance of its own, such as for example exclamations of anger, surprise like *Shit!* and *Bloody hell!*, unfriendly suggestions like *Go to hell!*, or curses like *Damn you!* In other functions the swearing expressions are part of an utterance, for example *bloody*, *like hell*, and *the devil* as in *It was bloody difficult*, *We ran like hell* and *What the devil do you mean?* In combination with the swearing themes mentioned above, the functions provide a convenient method for describing individual instances of swearing.

The characteristics outlined above are shared by all swearing and serve to establish it as a linguistic category of its own, not only in English and other languages but across language boundaries. It is precisely because of these commonalities of swearing that – in a study like the present one – we are able to identify and compare swearing expressions from different languages with each other, irrespective of the particular names used for that activity.

Such comparisons make it clear that with a few exceptions the swearing 'machinery' in different languages is basically the same and that the perceived differences between languages in this respect are mostly due to different taboo word choices from the same set of swearing themes.

Admittedly the number of languages available for such comparison in this study amounts to no more than 25 and granted that there are today at least 5000 different languages in the world, the data in the present study are far from sufficient for a full-scale comparison between swearing systems. However, despite the fact that decisions about the scope of my study were affected by the availability of native speakers, the choice of languages represented do permit certain limited comparisons between language families, cultures and religions, as the statistics in Appendix 1 indicate.

# Acknowledgements

A study like the present one would have been impossible without the cooperation of a vast number of informants willing to answer the questions in the questionnaire and discuss the issues arising from that process, often offering information on the finer points of swearing in their own language about which I would otherwise have remained ignorant. I am deeply grateful to all of them. I would like to thank Kingsley Bolton for his comments on various aspects of my work and Antoinette Renouf, Andrew Kehoe and Rodopi for permission to use copyright material from *Corpus Linguistics: Refinements and Reassessments*. Finally I would like to thank my wife Kerstin for her support and assistance.

# Transliteration

Several of the languages included in this study have writing systems that require transliteration (romanization) in order to be represented in English. In most cases this does not present a problem since the examples used in the literature have already been adapted to English spelling. In the case of Russian, however, it is often the case that examples in the literature are written in the Cyrillic alphabet, for which there are several romanization systems available.

In the present study I have mainly followed the spelling suggestions in the so-called Scholarly romanization system as described under *Romanization of Russian* in the Wikipedia Encyclopedia. My only deviation from the Scholarly system is the adoption of the spelling *yo* for Russian Cyrillic *ё*. As a consequence, the well-known Russian insult meaning ‘Somebody has fucked your mother’ has been realized in the present book as *Yob tvojú mat’*.

In the representation of data from Cantonese and Mandarin the different tones have been indicated in accordance with the Yale system.

# List of Abbreviations

BNC	The British National Corpus
Cassell	<i>Cassell's Dictionary of Slang</i>
COCA	Corpus of Contemporary American English
COED	Corpus of English Dialogues
CNPD	<i>The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English</i>
ODE	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of English</i>
OED	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>

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# 1

## Defining Swearing

### 1.0 Swearing in the dictionaries

Although *swearing* is an English term denoting a particular type of linguistic behaviour, it is often used in studies of other languages to denote a linguistic resource whose functions and realizations across languages are remarkably similar and seem to emanate from a common pool of emotive utterance types. Given this basic cross-linguistic similarity and the fact that the English term is a well-established one, *swearing* will be used throughout the present book as a name for the realizations of these emotive utterances in different languages, despite the fact that most other languages use terms for this type of linguistic behaviour that do not link it explicitly to swearing qua oath-taking.

English, French and Swedish are the only languages that use the same verb both for oath-taking and swearing in the profane sense; the terms used in (European) French and Swedish are *jurer* and *svära*. Each of these two verbs is linked to a resultative noun – *juron* and *svordom*, respectively – denoting the products of profane swearing, as distinct from the product of oath-swearing, which is known as *serment* and *ed*, respectively. As we all know, the English verb *swear* has no corresponding resultative noun, a fact that complicates discussions of English swearing. Attempts are sometimes made to invent such a resultative English count noun, and certain dictionaries (for instance the second edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of English* from 2003) actually contain the count noun *a swear*, but this term seems by and large to be used only about bouts of swearing as in *have a good swear*, perhaps on an analogy with *have a good cry*.

There is also an older French term for swearing – *sacrer* – which is widely used in Canadian French (see Tassie 1961). Originally it was used

only about swearing connected with religious matters, but is now also used about profane swearing.<sup>1</sup>

Certain languages use the word for cursing to denote swearing, for instance American English *curse*, Danish *bande*, Italian *imprecare*, Norwegian *banne*, while others simply use the term 'use bad language', for instance Spanish (*decir pala brotas*), Portuguese (*palavrao*), Mandarin Chinese (*zang hua*), Turkish (*küfür etmek*). (Italian may also use the term *bestemmiare* to denote religious swearing.) Greek uses the verb *blasfimo* 'to blaspheme', but uses it not only about blasphemous swearing but for other types of swearing as well.

Many languages have verbs denoting both religious and other swearing, for example Finnish *kirota*, German *fluchen*, Dutch *vloeken*, Polish *przeklinac*, Hungarian *karom kodni*.

Russian is a special case: serious swearing in Russian almost always involves the use of expressions insulting somebody's mother, grandmother or other close female relatives by suggesting that they have had sex with somebody or that the addressee should have sex with them, to mention only some of the variants. The best known of these is the interjection *Yob tvojú'mat'* (actually 'Somebody fucked your mother!' but often inadequately rendered in English as 'Fuck your mother!') in which the final apostrophe corresponds to the Russian letter *ь* and signifies that the final consonant in the Russian word for 'mother' is what is known as 'softened'. Roughly speaking, this means that the final t-sound in the Russian word for 'mother' sounds as if it were the combination *ts*. For reasons that we need not go into, the Russian word for swearing in general is *mat* which, as the spelling indicates, does not end in a 'softened' *t*, but is just an ordinary *t*-sound.

*Yob tvojú mât'* is basically a ritual insult (cf. Chapter 6) but is used in a bewildering number of other functions, for example as an interjection expressing the speaker's emotive reactions and even as a slot-filler expletive similar to English *fucking*, *bloody* (cf. Devkin 1996, von Timroth 1986, Dreizin and Priestly 1982).

Up to now, we have been discussing the words *swear* and *swearing* without actually defining what we mean by them, apart from the fact that a distinction has been made between oath-taking on the one hand, and other types of swearing on the other. It is now time to ask the question what we mean by *swearing* when we are not using it about oath-taking. A natural place to go in search of an answer is of course the dictionaries. Somewhat surprisingly, the word *swearing* does not rate a separate entry in any of the three common contemporary desk dictionaries of English. The British *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd edn

2003 and *The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* 2002 mention the noun *swearing* as a derivative under the entry for the verb *swear*, but *the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th edn 2002), on the other hand, does not mention the noun *swearing* at all, neither as an entry of its own nor as a derivative of the verb *swear*.

In the two British dictionaries the verb *swear* has two basic senses, one connected with oath-taking and – by extension – with the making of solemn promises, the other with the use of ‘offensive language especially in anger’. The noun *swearing* is clearly only a derivative of the second of these verb senses and must accordingly be taken to mean ‘the use of offensive language, especially in anger’. However, it is a moot point whether all uses of ‘offensive language’ actually constitute swearing. The use of English taboo words for matters like excrement, the sex organs or the act of having sex is no doubt offensive to many whatever the mood of the speaker, but as we shall see presently, it is a moot point whether such referential use of offensive words should be regarded as swearing.

We are better served in our search for a definition of ‘swearing’ in the American dictionary. Although it does not even mention the noun *swearing*, it offers four different senses for the verb *swear*, one of which is ‘to use profane oaths; to curse’. Clearly the noun *swearing* as it is normally used should be regarded as a derivative of this particular sense and may accordingly be defined as ‘the use of profane oaths and cursing’, a definition that makes it clear that swearing is not simply the use of offensive language, but has to do with its use in particular types of linguistic constructions. As we shall see, this is a view that has much to recommend it. Incidentally, it is also the definition provided by the *OED*.

## 1.1 Linguistic definitions of swearing

The study of swearing – linguistic and otherwise – was for long a neglected research area. However, the 1960s saw an increased interest in swearing with publications like Sagarin (1962) and Montagu (1967), and from the beginning of the 1970s there has been a steady increase in publications in this area. Many of these studies had a psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic basis; witness publications like Jay (1977, 1980, 1992, 1999, 2009), van Lancker (1972, 1987), van Lancker et al. (1989) and van Lancker and Cummings (1999). Other writers in this area have taken a linguistic, sociolinguistic or historical view of swearing, for example Taylor (1975), Andersson (1977, 1985), Andersson and Hirsch (1985a), Ljung (1984, 2006, 2009), Rawson (1989), Stenström (1990, 1991), Hughes (1991, 2006), McEnery (2006), McEnery et al.

(2000), McEnery and Xiao (2003, 2004) and Stroh-Wollin (2008). There have also appeared a number of interesting popular accounts wholly or partly devoted to swearing, such as Burgen (1996), Wajnryb (2005) and Chapter 7 in Pinker (2007).

Many of the above studies are not intended as overall accounts of swearing but focus on particular aspects of swearing that they find interesting. As a result they take swearing for granted as a linguistic, psychological, social or neurological category in its own right. This attitude may also reflect the feeling – common enough among native speakers – that they know swearing in their own language when they hear it, a view that is not always entirely justified, since native speakers often differ in their views of what should count as swearing.

Others seem to take the view that swearing today is so complex that it cannot be accounted for in a systematic way. As we shall find in the course of the present study, this more pessimistic view is not wholly unjustified, given the recalcitrant nature of some of the data we will be considering.

Despite their different views on what swearing actually is and how it is best described, the studies above all set up certain basic criteria that in their opinion have to be met in order for an utterance to count as swearing. There is often considerable agreement concerning the majority of these criteria and many or even most of their creators would agree with most – but not all – of my own four criteria for what constitutes swearing. These criteria are:

1. Swearing is the use of utterances containing **taboo words**.
2. The taboo words are used with **non-literal** meaning.
3. Many utterances that constitute swearing are subject to severe lexical, phrasal and syntactic constraints which suggest that most swearing qualifies as **formulaic language**.
4. Swearing is **emotive language**: its main function is to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker's feelings and attitudes.

The remainder of the present chapter will be devoted to a discussion of these four criteria.

### 1.2 Swearing is the use of utterances containing taboo words

Swearing is one of the many devices that languages offer speakers as a way to give additional emphasis to their speech, often in combination

with other emphasizing techniques like stress, intonation and tone of voice, not to mention non-linguistic phenomena like gestures and facial expression. The contribution of swearing in such situations is the added strength supplied by the taboo words necessary for swearing to take place.

The word *taboo* is Tongan in origin and was used in that social framework in rather complicated ways to refer to sacred places reserved for gods, kings, priests and chiefs. The word was borrowed into English by Captain James Cook in his 1777 book *Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*. Whatever the original meaning of the term (cf. e.g. Freud 1950: 18) it rapidly became used in English to denote something forbidden. For obvious reasons, however, absolute taboos are unusual and according to Hughes (2006: 462–3) the term has now come to be used to denote ‘any social indiscretion that ought to be avoided’ and has acquired the modern meaning of ‘offensive’ or ‘grossly impolite’ rather than ‘strictly forbidden’.

I claimed above that in order to qualify as swearing, an utterance must violate certain **taboos** that are or have been regarded as in principle inviolable in the cultures concerned. In most cases the taboo violation consists in the use of **taboo words**, but there are exceptions to the rule. In certain common standardized insults involving in particular mothers and sisters there is often no actual mention of the taboo words themselves and the insult is delivered in abbreviated form like *Your mother!* *Your sister!* (cf. account of world soccer final in Chapter 7).

These insults are rare in English, but as Labov (1972) observes, they are used in certain varieties of American English. On the other hand, they are very common in the Romance and Slavic languages as well as in Arabic, Cantonese, Greek, Hindi, Mandarin, Turkish and others. However, as a result of increase in immigration, this type of swearing has made its way into societies and languages in which they were previously unknown. As shown in Ljung (2006), such expressions are now regarded as standard swearing in the Swedish spoken in immigrant areas in Stockholm.<sup>2</sup>

In most of the languages studied here, the taboos violated in swearing fall into two quite different major groups, one involving religion and the supernatural, the other bodily waste, the sexual act and the sexual organs. Several writers on swearing have commented on this polarization of taboo areas; Crystal (1997: 61), for instance, remarks that

A remarkable variety of linguistic forms can be considered as cursing and swearing. At one extreme there are the complex and sophisticated expressions that may be found in religious, legal, and other

formal contexts. At the other, there are the many daily examples of taboo speech, usually profanities or obscenities that express such emotions as hatred, antagonism, frustration and surprise.

Hughes (1991) expresses similar views, claiming that ‘swearing shows a curious convergence of the high and the low, the sacred and the profane’ (Hughes 1991: 4). He goes on to say that this convergence reflects the historical development of swearing in English and incidentally in most other European languages. In its early stages, Hughes says, ‘swearing was related to the spell, the charm and the curse, forms seeking to invoke a higher power to change the world or support the truthfulness of a claim’ (1991: 4). Such swearing ultimately derives its force from a taboo forbidding ‘improper’ use of the names for ‘higher powers’, going back to the Old Testament’s regulations concerning the use of the name of the Hebrew God. Classical Greek and Latin, on the other hand, imposed no such restrictions on their speakers.

Unlike swearing in Muslim cultures as manifested in for example Arabic, Urdu and Hindi, Christian swearing involves not only celestial swearing, viz. the invocation of ‘higher’ religious powers, but also that of ‘lower’, infernal, powers, viz. the Devil and his abode hell. While, technically speaking, both types are taboo, the taboos involved are different. As we have seen, the taboo involved in celestial swearing was – and still is – linked to the notion of the incorrect use of God’s name. The taboo against infernal swearing found in Christian cultures, on the other hand, probably has nothing to do with the improper use of the Devil’s name but is in all likelihood an instance of ‘word magic’ (cf. Hellqvist 1918: 54, Montagu 1967: 198): speakers were afraid that the mere mention of the Devil and other infernal concepts would call them forth in person. Such techniques for warding off danger have been used in many languages, not merely concerning the Devil but also with regard to dangerous and often mythical beings like the wolf in French *Quand on parle du loup on en voit la queue* (‘When you speak of the wolf, you can see its tail’) and the trolls in Swedish *När man talar om trollen står de i farstun* ‘When you speak of the trolls they are on your doorstep’.

As the discussion in Chapter 3 will show, the role of the Devil seems to have changed as a result of the Reformation: according to at least one source (Hellqvist 1918: 54), he developed a more threatening presence in certain of the countries that had turned Protestant as a result of the Reformation and this may have affected the way his name was used in swearing (cf. Chapter 3).