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Anne-Marie Macloughlin

Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1097610ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1097610ar>

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Publisher(s)

New Explorations Association

ISSN

2563-3198 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Macloughlin, A.-M. (2023). Profanity as a Medium – The Science/Art of Swearing. *New Explorations*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1097610ar>

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Profanity as a Medium – The Science/Art of Swearing

Anne-Marie Macloughlin

University of Toronto

Probe: Is swearing offensive or does its linguistic significance lie outside of its ability to shock? How does it vary culturally, generationally and with regards to religious viewpoints? Is swearing used as a weapon? Is it used by the swearer cathartically to relieve stress or anger?

“Our work so far suggests that most uses of swear words are not problematic (<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/the-science-of-swearing>).”

As a native of the British Isles, I have always interpreted using profanity in daily language as a cultural phenomenon and not necessarily offensive. As opposed to using curse words to communicate displeasure, oppression or other forms of negative discourse they are multi-purpose and, in some cases, regionally specific. To address the first point, the f-word can be used as a transitive or intransitive verb, adjective, adverb or noun and in the English language can serve as an exclamation of delight, horror, fear or admiration as these examples illustrate:

“F-word, that was an amazing meal!”

“Oh f-word, Covid-19 cases are rising!”

“F-word, I think we’re all getting fired today!”

“David Beckham is talented as f-word!”

Note that none of the above examples are used to insult, offend or express anger. Regionally swears vary from place to place. The following are incomprehensible to an Englishman but

widely used in Scotland: Dobber/Fud/Walloper/Tadger. These examples are interchangeable; referring to genitals, they are usually used to describe people who are annoying. Here is one example: "I canny be arsed with him just now, he's being a wee tadger."

(<https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/scotland-now/25-best-scottish-insults-eejit-25295470>)

As a form of communication profanity enhances language. Some Anglo-Saxon words are hundreds of years old which suggests that the birth of profanity did not solely result from an urge to shock. Initially I titled this probe The Science of Swearing because as a medium it is subject to "Laws of Media: The New Science" by Marshall McLuhan. A colleague questioned why science not art and why not - The Art of Swearing as in, wielding profanity in a situationally appropriate fashion can be as linguistically cunning as spoken word performance or a poetic recital.

The more recent war on profanity (especially in North America) is another victim of "woke" media. They are ostensibly narratives to shut down oppressive constructs, tropes and promote inclusivity/diversity with the flip side of creating cancel culture. They seek and take offence in all corners and are a form of censorship.

Whether profanity creates offense is highly dependent on context and intention. North American culture also has a vastly different take on certain words regardless of context if they can be attached to a particular cause (feminism, sexism, religion or other). "Oh my God!" would be highly offensive to the devout who may not feel as strongly about other less blasphemous statements and vice versa.

Regarding blasphemy, namely speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things for must be avoided at all costs so as to avoid eternal damnation. Speaking disrespectfully about Him is unforgivable, a transgression that we may not come back from. "Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift" (Ephesians 4:29, MSG). Thus, spoke the apostle, Paul.

Profanity in Christianity was directly attached to one's devoutness or lack thereof and not via specific curse words. In modern day Quebec certain mild forms of profanity have their roots in religion. Examples include the words Tabarnak (tabernacle), Maudit (damn), and Ciboire ("!", the container for the communion wafer). These words are far from offensive except to the most devout. In English the following words are used as substitutes so as not to use God's name in vain with gosh for God, geez for Jesus, darn for damn and gor blimey! for God blind me.

Is swearing a way to push the envelope within polite society, a linguistic addition when speaking emphatically or passionately about something, a dare to the Holy Spirit or just common vulgarity? To circle back to cancel culture I recently received a finger wag for the use of a word that in this culture is still considered the final frontier of swearing. Much like the f-word, the c-word can be used in a number of contexts, none of which are an attack on women or feminine parts. In fact, in the UK, it can even be used affectionately or humorously – “You jammy (lucky) c-word, you got the last ticket to the cup final!” Same goes for Australia and New Zealand. As much as the actual meaning refers to female anatomy it is also used as a gender neutral swear in the UK and Antipodes although in North American culture there is less awareness of this; here the consensus is that the c-word is mostly to offend or insult women.

When one considers that there are many slang words for male genitalia that have been utilized more so than that one word (dick, prick, bollocks, etc.) as have other gender-neutral terms such as a-hole, and douchebag, it would suggest that in spite of its ancient origins and usage in various cultures it has been appropriated as proof of misogyny by radical feminists in the 20th and 21st centuries. No one seems to know why the c-word is to many the most offensive in the lexicon of profanity but like many aspects of cancel culture context of intention is everything. The feminist Germaine Greer championed the use of the word in the 1970s as an alternative to vagina, the etymology of the word dating back to ‘sword-sheath’ which she found more offensive with its connotations of a women's private parts serving as a receptacle for a weapon. Greer subsequently backtracked to define the c-word as "sacred", and "a word of immense power, to be used sparingly" (Balderdash and Piffle. Series 1. 2006-01-30). Present

day opinion would take the latter viewpoint in the sense that it is one of those swears that is more or less guaranteed to offend.

Environment plays a supporting role to the user of profanity; the ground is the stage and the figure the performer. The ground provides context to the usage and has equal significance to the figure. The medium is both the speaker and the “stage”, the message varying considerably according to the location/ground. For example, swearing in school, places of worship, at work or in front of children is considered inappropriate versus other less restrictive environments. Profanity is an affront to religion and I would suggest even non blasphemous swears would be equally offensive when uttered in a church or synagogue.

Culture dictates what constitutes profanity, as previously discussed, depending on upbringing and attitudes to religion within the family environment “Oh my God!” would have minimal power to shock or the reverse whether in the home or the place of worship. The use of profanity in the young must be discouraged; societal norms are such that a child swearing provokes a stronger reaction than if it were an adult speaking. It is seen as lower class, a sign of aggression or a precursor to violence. If the medium of profanity is a child the message is more problematic – is the child angry, undisciplined at home or hateful towards the object the swearing is aimed at? Or is it merely exhibiting frustration, pain or fear or is it trying to shock when in the classroom or get attention from its peers to be seen as anti-authority? I’d suggest all of the above.

The medium and message of swearing is fluid. The ground has significant impact on the reception of the word/words utilized and the intention of the user varies as would the response depending on the attitudes around profanity of those hearing it. One could find offence even if it were not aimed directly at them and the recipient may or may not themselves be offended depending on the following:

How well do the swearer and the recipient of the profanity know each other; what is the existing relationship? Who else is present?

Where is it occurring?

Has there been an incident that provoked the language or is it part of the swearer's vernacular? Have they been injured, chastised, are they frustrated with, for example, a workplace task failing to go as planned?

Is it to provoke a humorous response?

Swearing when alone with no audience has a different connotation as one hopes one is not intending to offend oneself but to express an emotion. A driver stuck in traffic may swear to themselves as an expression of frustration as would someone just missing a bus or transit vehicle. Watching, reading or listening to the news and being shocked at something heinous could also evoke the urge to swear as a result of horror and disgust. The media of television, radio, print or digital would receive an equal response regardless of which senses were utilized to receive the information although images accompanying bad news may also contribute to the recipient's usage of profanity.

Swearing in public can elicit many responses and can be received in several ways. I recently witnessed an impatient driver utilizing their horn in an attempt to move traffic and the profanity that accompanied it was provided by a pedestrian clearly frustrated at the other's frustration and not the driver (although in fairness I was not privy to anything said inside the vehicle, if anything). I found it amusing as I don't generally encounter people articulating frustration in this fashion and calling someone out on what they deemed uncalled for behavior. Others in the environment had different responses; no one else found it funny or at least not visibly so and most turned their focus to the pedestrian not the driver.

In conclusion, spoken profanity is a message imparted through the human medium, the message we seek to deliver motivated by emotion and the desire to elicit a response, relieve stress or just blow off steam. As a linguistic component it has great versatility with written swears (literature or graffiti) used for their own purpose depending on context and intention. Every environment has its own set of rules; to accept or decline when deciding whether or not

to swear is an individual's choice as is taking into consideration the possible ramifications based on location and audience present. And given that we cannot possibly know what anyone will be offended by, to remove profanity from communication "just in case" would represent a slippery slope towards censorship and cancel culture.