Swearing
Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2020
Mar 10

1 Introduction

This handout discusses swearing from semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, and social perspectives. My goal is to confuse you about why swearing is taboo — why swears have the power they do. (And they undoubtedly have power, like explosive speech-act packages with complex perlocutionary effects.)

In a sense, I’m going to try to support the paradoxical conclusion that the conservative Parents Television Council should be advocating to remove all societal constraints on swearing, whereas “controversial” comedians should be on the side of maintaining taboos surrounding swearing. Such paradoxes are useful in that they can reveal that we’re unreflectively accepting problematic assumptions.

2 FCC v. Fox Television Stations

2.1 The road to FCC v. Fox Television Stations

1927 Radio Act of 1927: “No person within the jurisdiction of the United States shall utter any obscene, indecent, or profane language by means of radio communication”.

Responding to a complaint about a daytime broadcast of George Carlin’s ‘Filthy words’, the FCC warned Pacifica Radio that it might respond to future complaints. *Pacifica v. the FCC* went all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the FCC: broadcasting has “the most limited First Amendment protection”.

1975–2004 The FCC responds only if a broadcaster permits sustained and deliberate uses of profanity, and certain uses are permitted in news contexts or for clearly non-vulgar uses.

2002 Nicole Richie: “Have you ever tried to get cow shit out of a Prada purse? It’s not so fucking simple.” (Billboard Awards on Fox)

2003 Cher: “Fuck ‘em” (Billboard Awards on Fox)

2003 Bono: “really, really fucking brilliant” (Golden Globes on Fox)

2004 Responding to complaints about the above, the FCC begins sanctioning “the fleeting expletive”.

2006 The FCC reaffirms its new policy. Fox takes the FCC Court. The Second Circuit Court sides with Fox.

2008 The Supreme Court hears the case, ultimately deciding in favor of the FCC.

2012 FCC v. Fox Television Stations, part 2: on the question of whether the FCC’s standards for indecency on television are too vague to be constitutional. The Supremes side with Fox, waiving their fines.

So if you want to regulate some language using the Radio Act, you have to show that it’s “obscene, indecent, or profane”. That means sex.
Highlights from the 2012 initial arguments (Jan. 12, 2012):¹

- Scalia: “And if this is — these are public airwaves, the government is entitled to insist upon a certain modicum of decency.”
- Roberts: “What the government is asking for, is a few channels where you can say, ‘I’m not going to — they are not going to hear the “S” word, the “F” word.’ They’re not going to see nudity.”
- Kennedy: “But you’re saying that there’s still a value, an importance, in having a higher standard … for broadcast media. Why is that, when there are so many other options?”
- Ginzburg: There is “an appearance of arbitrariness about how the FCC is defining indecency in concrete situations.”
- Kagan: “the way this policy seems to work, it’s like nobody can use dirty words or nudity except for Steven Spielberg.”²

3 Swearing in semantics and pragmatics

3.1 Degree of integration into the compositional system

(1) Du hast kein verdammtes Wort gesagt. (German; ‘You didn’t say a damn word.’)

(2) a. Who the heck would do that?
   b. *Which student the heck would do that?
   c. Why the heck did they do that?
   d. *For what reason the heck did they do that?

(3) a. The dog is annoying.
   b. The annoying dog.

(4) a. The damn/friggin dog is on the couch.
   b. *The dog is damn/friggin.

(5) a. The bloody dog is on the couch.
   b. The dog is bloody. (literal only)
   c. I consider the dog {annoying/*bloody/*damn/*friggin}.

(6) I stubbed my damn toe.
   a. $\nrightarrow$ heightened emotion about toes
   b. $?\rightarrow$ heightened emotion about my toe
   c. $?\rightarrow$ heightened emotion about the toe-stubbing event


¹http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/01/supreme-court-hearing-on-indecency-leaves-one-justice-blushing/
²A reference to the fact that Saving Private Ryan and Schindler’s List were allowed to air with all of their swears uncensored.
³My niece is famous for saying (at 2;9) gi-really-normous, showing mastery of infixation but not the taboo requirement.
(8) 

a. Water or no water — I'm not hiking in this heat! (Pullum & Rawlins 2007; Potts et al. 2009)

b. *Water or no cold water — I'm not hiking in this heat!

c. Water or no friggin' water — I'm not hiking in this heat!

(9) Hindi correlatives  

jis aadmii-se tum bahut pyaar-se baat kar rahe the,  
REL man-with you much love-with talk do  PROG.PL be.PST.PL  
us aadmii-ne / *us Tiicar-ne / that bastard-ERG mujh-pe muqadma Thonk rakhaa hai  
that man-ERG / *that teacher / that bastard me-on court.case ‘apply’-PFV be.PRES.SG

‘The man that you were talking with so nicely, {that man/’that professor/that bastard} is suing me.’

(10) 

a. Clinton: The damn Republicans should be less partisan.

b. Bush: *Clinton says the damn Republicans should be less partisan.

(11) “I was struck by the willingness of almost everybody in the room — the senators as eagerly as the witnesses — to exchange their civil liberties for an illusory state of perfect security. They seemed to think that democracy was just a fancy word for corporate capitalism, and that the society would be a lot better off if it stopped its futile and unremunerative dithering about constitutional rights. Why humor people, especially poor people, by listening to their idiotic theories of social justice?” —Lewis Lapham, Harper’s Magazine, July 1995

3.2 Perspective dependence and speaker commitment

(12) Harris & Potts (2009a,b): Let A be an agent. A clause C with denotation p is A-oriented in utterance U if, and only if, in uttering U, the speaker expresses, with C, that A is committed to p.

(13) 

a. Ohio is the birthplace of aviation.

b. Jones says Ohio is the birthplace of aviation.

Swears and other expressive items are speaker-oriented by default but can shift to another agent if conditions are right, as in (11). Harris & Potts (2009a,b) study these conditions experimentally.

3.3 Diagnostics

What’s the final diagnosis for expressives according to the flowchart from the handout ‘Diagnosing different kinds of meaning’?

3.4 Productivity

Our most prominent curses come from soldiers in World War II and made their way into general usage in the post-war years (Nunberg 2012). New ones form, though, and nonce curses are possible as well.

(14) If I wanted a gun, I’d get a gun, you diphthong. (Jonathan Lethem, Motherless Brooklyn, p. 170.)

(15) Holy \{ cow \\
    Toledo \\
    Gemini \\
    egg shells \\
    tintinnabulations \} , Batman!4

4http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1tVuSH-lQM
3.5 Acquisition

Swearing begins as early as 1 year, though it takes longer for kids to master the proper usage conditions. From Jay (2000:93):

<p>| Table 11.1. Children’s Cursing: Top Ten Curse Words by Speaker Gender* |
|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fuck</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>bitch</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jerk</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>jerk</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shit</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>shit</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asshole</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>fag</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bum</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>fuck</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bitch</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>creep</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dink</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>pig</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goddamn</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>ass</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suck</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>bastard</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piss</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>bingo</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Total sample = 663 episodes, 496 from boys and 167 from girls. Age range of speakers is from one to ten years. (From Jay, 1992a, Chapter 2.)

3.6 Memory

Jay et al. (2008) report on experimental work showing that we remember expressives (taboo words) better, and differently, than other language, even emotive descriptive language. Relatedly, they also present evidence that expressives provoke more frequent SCRs (skin conductance responses), a measure of emotional arousal.

Orienting questions

Shallow question
Is the word uppercase?

Deep question
Does the word fit the sentence: The ____ is blue?

3.7 Relief

(16) Stephens et al. (2009):
“This study investigated whether swearing affects cold-pressor pain tolerance (the ability to withstand immersing the hand in icy water), pain perception and heart rate. In a repeated measures design, pain outcomes were assessed in participants asked to repeat a swear word versus a neutral word. In addition, sex differences and the roles of pain catastrophising, fear of pain and trait anxiety were explored. **Swearing increased pain tolerance, increased heart rate and decreased perceived pain compared with not swearing.** However, swearing did not increase pain tolerance in males with a tendency to catastrophise.”
3.8 Suggestive neurological evidence

Jay (2000:§5) summarizes the evidence concerning where the ability to curse is localized.

- Broca’s patient Leborgne had left-hemisphere damage and could say only ‘Sacre nom de Dieu!’
- Patients with right-hemisphere (RH) damage have trouble not only with cursing but also with idioms, metaphor, and jokes.
- Patients with left-hemisphere (LH) damage have trouble with language in general, but not with proper names.
- After basal ganglia surgery, swearing was impaired along with lots of rote forms of speech. “Only propositional speech, idioms, and social greetings were preserved.”
- Speakers with RH damage generally cannot curse, despite otherwise fairly normal linguistic abilities.

3.9 Connotations

Hypothesis: A word’s connotations are reflected in the words that it tends to co-occur with. What are the connotations of the F-word according to this data-driven hypothesis?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Neighbors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>speech</td>
<td>remarks, keynote, address, televised, comments, clinton, message, delivered, bush, debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>movie</td>
<td>film, hollywood, starring, comedy, sequel, remake, drama, actor, cinema, starred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>video</td>
<td>audio, dvd, footage, videotape, clips, digital, youtube, camera, recording, images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>america</td>
<td>america, europe, american, nation, states, latin, united, mexico, asia, world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tax</td>
<td>income, taxation, taxpayers, irs, revenue, spending, cuts, exempt, pay, rebates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relief</td>
<td>aid, assistance, humanitarian, disaster, rescue, emergency, reconstruction, help, charity, flood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sex</td>
<td>sexual, homosexual, prostitution, gay, pornography, child, sexuality, marriage, abuse, intercourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fucking</td>
<td>shit, fuck, damn, ’cause, gonna, bitch, freaking, asshole, ’re, kinda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Extracted from a 6B million corpus using the method of Pennington et al. 2014 (300d vectors).

See also Jay (2000) on the coherence of “Thank God, I am an atheist.”

3.10 Magic?

It’s initially puzzling that writers blot out characters in a way that fails to obscure which word is involved:

(17) a. Shit   b. S**t   c. a four letter word beginning with ‘s’ and ending with ‘t’

Geoff Nunberg attributes this to a certain magic that some expressives have when they are actually pronounced. See also Diesing & McConnell-Ginet 2012 on the performativity of spells.

(18) Scott Adams (Dilbert creator):

“Naked naughty words can destroy your brain and also society as a whole. However – and one would think this is obvious – it’s completely safe to THINK naughty words. And it’s safe to cause other people to think naughty words. But if you spell those naughty words without the asterisk loin cloth to protect your victims, you’re a danger to society. I know this to be true because I heard it from lots of people who have sh**t-for-brains.”
4 Swearing in society

4.1 Some views

(19) Steven Pinker, The Stuff of Thought (p. 339)

“Thanks to the automatic nature of speech perception, a taboo word kidnaps our attention and forces
us to consider its unpleasant connotations. That makes all of us vulnerable to a mental assault
whenever we are in earshot of other speakers, as if we are strapped to a chair and could be given a
punch or shock at any time.”

(20) Billy Connolly (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q41eoZXDb64):

*Fuck off* doesn’t mean *go away*. *Fuck off* means *FUCK OFF*. And everybody *feels* what it means.
Nobody can write it down. There is no English equivalent for *fuck off*. Because it is English, *fuck off*,
you know? And English expressions don’t have English equivalents, they fuckin’ *are*.

(21) John Gruber (tech blogger);

“Regarding that fucking headline: So I changed “Jackass” to “Fucking Jackass”, which expressed my
thoughts aptly, and then published the piece. But it didn’t sit right. My concern over using “fucking”
in the headline wasn’t squeamishness in the face of strong profanity, but rather that it might come
across as slightly unhinged.”

4.2 Swearing negativity and social bonds

Swears are stereotypically negative, but they can be used positively. It strikes me as promising to argue that
the positive uses are derived from the negative ones via emotions like solidarity and general social processes
that lead us to believe that very strong relationships can be tested and, in the testing, be made even stronger.
From this perspective, swears can be the equivalent of a “friendly punch on the arm”.

(22) “Linnea Faris, a woman from Michigan who was wearing a ‘Remember Alex’ T-shirt, shook her head
in disbelief. Faris told me, ‘My husband doesn’t really understand it. I can’t fully explain it myself.
But I’ve spent hours crying over that damn bird.”

(23) “How are ya, ya bastard?”

4.3 Taboos and social norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taboo</th>
<th>Not taboo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hell</td>
<td>heck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>damn</td>
<td>darn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asshole</td>
<td>jerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fucking</td>
<td>frigging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>:</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Our taboo words may not directly connote sexuality, but they tend to have historical connections to sexual
words. In this sense, they are tied to one of our society’s major non-linguistic taboos.
Data from the Parents Television Council, “a conservative interest group that monitors (and opposes) profanity on television”:\(^5\)

- **bitch**: on the rise
  - 1998: 431 uses on 103 prime-time episodes
  - 2007: 1,277 uses in 685 shows
- **jackass**: on the rise or stable
  - 2005: 27 uses on family-hour shows
  - 2005: 31 uses on family-hour shows
  - 2007: 34 uses on family-hour shows
- **sucks**: waxing and waning
  - 2005: 226 family-hour episodes
  - 2007: 120 uses
  - 2009: 232 uses as of November

How does the taboo nature of curses affect their usage patterns, on both individual and societal levels? Jay & Janschewitz (2008) report on experiments in which speakers’ judgments about the appropriateness of swearing depend on who they are talking to, where they are talking, what they are talking about, and other high-level contextual factors.

5 Back to Fox and the FCC

In its initial ruling against Fox, the FCC offers a specific hypothesis:

(25) The FCC’s connotations hypothesis: “given the core meaning of the ‘F-Word,’ any use of that word or a variation, in any context, inherently has a sexual connotation.”

5.1 What, if anything, is wrong with these arguments?

(26) When arguing that fleeting expletives should be banned from the public airwaves, it is a mistake to rely on the claim that they have sexual connotations. There is no evidence that they have sexual connotations and quite a bit of evidence that they lack such connotations.

(27) Suppose fleeting expletives had sexual connotations, or just turn your attention to taboo words that do have such connotations. Is there a good argument here for banning such language from the public airwaves? I say no. A lot of language that is overtly sexual, or sexual by connotation, is allowed on the airwaves.\(^6\)

(28) Suppose the argument is instead that it is not the sexual connotations per se, but rather the negativity of such connotations. I think this is getting closer to the truth, but that relying on connotations is a mistake. The connotations need not be negative. Rather, the issue is simply that these words are taboo, and breaking taboos is always transgressive, by definition.

(29) Thus, the best argument simply takes it as an axiom that these words are taboo and then builds from there: in polite society, we seek to keep transgressions to a minimum, hence the need for special restrictions.

\(^{5}\)Note: It is not clear how this counting was done, so these numbers should be treated with some skepticism.

\(^{6}\)The radio show *This American Life* warns listeners when a story will refer to “the existence of sex”, which I reckon is an example of the chilling effect that the FCC's rulings have had on broadcasters.
(30) It is worth listening to arguments that taboo language acts on us differently than other language, cognitively and physiologically, and thus that it is effectively a powerful kind of speech act that needs to be specially regulated. However, whatever the effects, they are mild, and it is counter-productive to try to protect everyone against mild discomfort all the time.

(31) Swears violate taboos only if people bother to uphold the taboos surrounding. If swears are used a lot with no sanctions, then the taboos will fade, and thus there will be fewer taboo violations.

(32) Taboo violations can be funny. We don’t even have to witness the violation. We just need to know it happened, as with a ‘bleep’ on a TV show.

(33) From this perspective, comedians looking for publicity should welcome attempts to sanction them. After all, if there were no such attempts, there would be no transgressions, and the language would lose its power. The weird thing about this is that one would then expect Andrew Dice Clay to be a big supporter of the FCC and the Parents Television Counsel to be a big supporter of Fox, which is effectively working to diminish the strength of the taboos through near-constant exposure.

(34) Surely everyone knows that there is little hope for change. Testing linguistic taboos, and occasionally breaking them, is a normal part of being human. If we got rid of our current taboo words, we would need to invent new ones to take their place. How else would you get through those terrible human-subjects experiments where they plunge your hand into ice water?

Perhaps we shouldn’t be worried by the weirdness of the above arguments because they wrongly assume that everyone will be rational about these issues. All of us (including the radicals) have a part to play.

References


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7Our taboo words are ultimately as arbitrary as any other words, so it is hard to say that one is inherently worse than another. Things are different for, e.g., violence, where desensitization has real consequences.