

Swearing

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2025

Mar 13

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 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”. |
| 1975 | 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. <i>Pacifica v. the FCC</i> went all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the FCC in 1978: broadcasting has “the most limited First Amendment protection”. |
| 1978–
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, 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. |
| 2009 | The Supreme Court hears the case, ultimately deciding in favor of the FCC, but only on the matter of whether the rules were applied consistently. The remanded the First Amendment issues back to the Second Circuit, which again sided with Fox. |
| 2012 | <i>FCC v. Fox Television Stations</i> , 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, but they again avoid the First Amendment issues. |
| 2012– | It seems like interest in the fleeting expletive on the public airwaves is falling, due to changes in how people consume media and changes in the political and cultural landscape. |
-

Summary: in the U.S., if you want to regulate some language, you have to show that it's “obscene, indecent, or profane”. That means sex.

The FCC's Hypotheses:¹

- (F) 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."

3 Swearing in semantics and pragmatics

3.1 Degree of integration into the compositional system

- (1)
 - a. the annoying/former spy
 - b. The spy is annoying/*former.
- (2)
 - a. The damn/friggin dog is on the couch.
 - b. *The dog is damn/friggin.
- (3)
 - a. The bloody dog is on the couch.
 - b. The dog is bloody. (literal only)
 - c. I consider the dog {annoying/*bloody/*damn/*friggin}.
- (4)
 - 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?
- (5) I stubbed my damn toe.
 - a. \Rightarrow heightened emotion about toes
 - b. $\overset{?}{\Rightarrow}$ heightened emotion about my toe
 - c. $\overset{?}{\Rightarrow}$ heightened emotion about the toe-stubbing event
- (6) Small sample from the Urban Dictionary: a-freaking-dorable, abso-motherfucking-lutely, Ala-fuckin-bama, astro-fucking-nomical, Cali-fuckin-fornia, Cinder-fuckin-rella, fan-friggin-tastic, fan-damn-tastic, gi-friggin-ormous,² Okla-fucking-homa, out-fucking-standing, pa-fucking-thetic, pa-fuckin-lease, Taber-fucking-nac, Tues-fuckin-day, unbe-bloody-lievable, Uni-fucking-code

3.2 Productivity

Nonce curses are yours for the coining!

- (7) If I wanted a gun, I'd get a gun, you diphthong. (Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn*, p. 170.)
- (8) Popular sticker (among linguists):³



¹<https://transition.fcc.gov/eb/Orders/2004/FCC-04-43A1.html>

²My niece is famous for saying (at 2;9) *gi-really-normous*, showing mastery of infixation but not the taboo requirement.

³<https://www.teepublic.com/sticker/1628882-what-the-fricative>

(9) Holy $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{cow} \\ \text{Toledo} \\ \text{Gemini} \\ \text{egg shells} \\ \text{tintinnabulations} \end{array} \right\}, \text{Batman!}$



(10) Create your own!

- Holy _____, Chris!
- What the _____!
- abso-_____-lutely

3.3 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?

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

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

Conclusion: according to this distributional analysis, the F-word's connotations are not sexual. Rather, the F-word just associates with other swears and some things that might indicate an informal context. (See also Jay (2000) on the coherence of "Thank God, I am an atheist".)

3.4 Swears and presupposition projection

(11) We need to do the damn laundry over the weekend.

Meaning of interest: *the speaker is in a heightened emotional state*

- We need to do the damn laundry over the weekend, but I'm not in a heightened emotional state.
(Cancellable? Hard to say, because *damn* is so flexible in its contribution)
- We don't need to do the damn laundry over the weekend.
(No sense in which *damn* is targeted by the negation \Rightarrow Not at-issue)
- Do we need to do the damn laundry over the weekend?
(No sense in which *damn* is questioned \Rightarrow Not at-issue)
- Oh, damn. We need to do the damn laundry over the damn weekend.
(Repeated uses look like backgrounding, but *damn* can be used out of the blue as well.)

Summary: our standard tests indicate that the swear's contribution is not at-issue and may point to a presupposition diagnosis.

However, swears' contributions have even more impressive projection behavior than standard presuppositions. For standard presuppositions, it is possible to confine the entire presupposition to an attitude context:

- (12) a. Jesse said that Sam quit smoking. However, Jesse is deeply mistaken, since Sam was never a smoker at all.
- b. Jesse said that Sam used to smoke but quit.

For swears, there is no such possibility of displacement. In the following, the speaker of the sentence is the one who swears and conveys heightened emotion (whether or not Jesse did too):

- (13) Jesse said that we need to do the damn laundry over the weekend.

A proposal for reconciling the backgrounding data in (11d) with a conventional implicature (or at least non-presuppositional) account: each instance of a swear is an expressive speech act indicating heightened emotion at the moment of the act, and so repeated use is repeated performance of the speech act.

3.5 The importance of actually performing the swearing act

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

- (14) 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. Swears are not the only language with this property that exactly pronouncing them is highly significant. Other cases:

- (15) Official groups often require that certain statements be read aloud at specific points during their meetings, even though everyone knows that statements and is required to abide by them whether they are read aloud or not.
- (16) In 2009, as part of the swearing in of Barack Obama, John Roberts asked Obama to say, "I will execute the office of president to the United States faithfully" instead of "I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States." They redid the ceremony in private to make sure that they had actually sworn him in.⁴
- (17) In 2020, an Arizona priest was found to have been saying "We baptize you ..." instead of "I baptize you ..." during baptisms. This difference was seen by the Church as reflecting an incorrect intention and also a violation of the sacramental *form*. The baptisms were deemed to be invalid by the Church, a very serious finding for the people involved.⁵

⁴<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/us/politics/22oath.html>

⁵<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/02/16/catholic-priest-baptism-sacrament-invalid-vatican/>

4 Swears in language acquisition and processing

4.1 Acquisition

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

Table 11.1. Children's Cursing: Top Ten Curse Words by Speaker Gender*			
Males		Females	
Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
fuck	73	bitch	15
jerk	47	jerk	15
shit	39	shit	11
asshole	32	fag	9
bum	17	fuck	8
bitch	16	creep	7
dink	16	pig	7
goddamn	12	ass	6
suck	12	bastard	6
piiss	12	bingo	6

* 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).

4.2 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.

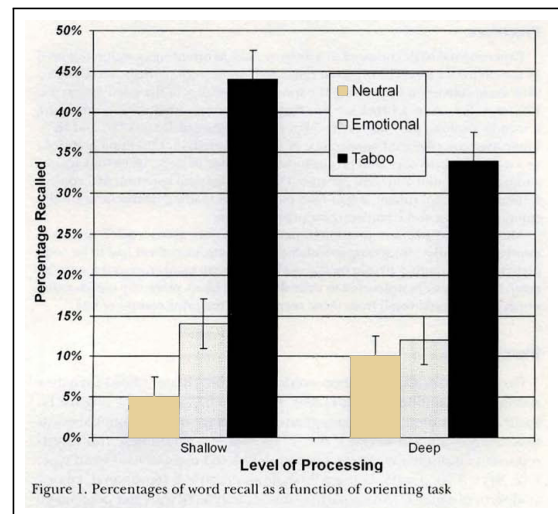
Orienting questions

Shallow question

Is the word uppercase?

Deep question

Does the word fit the sentence: *The _____ is blue?*



Related finding: Jay et al. (2008) present evidence that expressives provoke more frequent skin conductance responses (a measure of emotional arousal) than do other words, even emotional ones.

4.3 Relief

(18) 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.”

4.4 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.

5 Swearing in society

5.1 Taboos and social norms

The taboos surrounding swears are constantly changing along with the rest of our language. The most prominent curses of our age come from soldiers in World War II and made their way into general usage in the post-war years (Nunberg 2012).

Discussing the show *Deadwood*, set in the 1870s, Nunberg (2004) notes that the powerful swears of the time would have been those that referred to religious concepts, whereas the F-word and its peers would have had only literal uses. The show’s creators adopted modern swearing patterns to achieve their desired emotional effect on modern viewers.

Taboo	Not taboo
Jesus	gee-whiz
hell	heck
damn	darn
goddamn	goldarn
asshole	jerk
fucking	frigging
⋮	⋮

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’s report *Habitat for Profanity: Broadcast TV’s Sharp Increase in Foul Language*.⁶ The PTC is “a conservative interest group that monitors (and opposes) profanity on television”.

⁶https://www.parentstv.org/resources/2010_HabitatforProfanity_200224_174840.pdf

	8:00 pm			9:00 pm			10:00 pm			Total		
	2005	2010	%Δ	2005	2010	%Δ	2005	2010	%Δ	2005	2010	%Δ
CRAP	23	29	26.09	13	29	123.08	8	11	37.50	44	69	56.82
DAMN	55	37	-32.73	64	66	3.12	30	38	26.67	149	141	-5.37
HELL	74	62	-16.22	95	119	25.26	24	63	162.50	193	244	26.42
ASS	52	64	23.08	53	59	11.32	14	25	78.57	119	148	24.37
BITCH	33	23	-30.30	45	52	15.56	17	36	111.76	95	111	16.84
BASTARD	12	2	-83.33	12	11	-8.33	3	4	33.33	27	17	-37.04
BOOBS	5	19	280.00	5	2	-60.00	1	0	-100.00	11	21	90.91
OTHER BREASTS	6	15	150.00	14	8	-42.86	5	3	-40.00	25	26	4.00
BALLS	0	5		1	1	0.00	2	3	50.00	3	9	200.00
OTHER GENITALS	22	28	27.27	26	26	0.00	3	18	500.00	51	72	41.18
BLEEPED FUCK	10	111	1010.00	1	156	15500.00	0	9		11	276	2409.09
EUPH. FUCK	5	13	160.00	10	11	10.00	5	17	240.00	20	41	105.00
BLEEPED SHIT	11	42	281.82	0	45		0	8		11	95	763.64
EUPH. SHIT	3	1	-66.67	2	3	50.00	0	3		5	7	40.00
DOUCHE	1	0	-100.00	2	1	-50.00	0	2		3	3	0.00
PISS	4	20	400.00	10	17	70.00	11	7	-36.36	25	44	76.00
SCREW	16	27	68.75	7	17	142.86	5	18	260.00	28	62	121.43
SUCK	15	25	66.67	11	14	27.27	3	13	333.33	29	52	79.31

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.

5.2 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".

- (19) "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.'"
- (20) "How are ya, ya bastard?"

6 Back to Fox and the FCC

Recall that, in its initial ruling against Fox, the FCC offers a specific hypothesis:

- (F) 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."

What, if anything, is wrong with the following arguments?

- (21) 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.
- (22) 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.
- (23) 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.
- (24) 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.
- (25) 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.
- (26) 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.
- (27) 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.
- (28) 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 raunchy comedians to be a big supporter of the FCC and the Parents Television Counsel to be a big supporter of Fox in the context of the Supreme Court cases, since Fox is effectively working to diminish the strength of the taboos through near-constant exposure.
- (29) 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.⁷ 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.

⁷Our taboos 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.

References

- Diesing, Molly & Sally McConnell-Ginet. 2012. How to do things with wands and words: The pragmatics of magic. Ms., Cornell University.
- Jay, Timothy. 2000. *Why we curse: A neuro-psycho-social theory of speech*. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Jay, Timothy, Catherine Caldwell-Harris & Krista King. 2008. Recalling taboo and nontaboo words. *American Journal of Psychology* 121(1). 83–103.
- Jay, Timothy & Kristin Janschewitz. 2008. The pragmatics of swearing. *Journal of Politeness Research* 4(2). 267–288.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey. 2004. Obscenity rap. Commentary was broadcast on *Fresh Air*, June 20, 2004. <https://archive.ischool.berkeley.edu/nunberg/deadwood.html>.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey. 2012. *Ascent of the a-word*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Pennington, Jeffrey, Richard Socher & Christopher D. Manning. 2014. GloVe: Global vectors for word representation. In *Proceedings of the 2014 conference on empirical methods in natural language processing (emnlp)*, 1532–1543. Doha, Qatar: Association for Computational Linguistics. <http://www.aclweb.org/anthology/D14-1162>.
- Stephens, Richard, John Atkins & Andrew Kingston. 2009. Swearing as a response to pain. *NeuroReport* 20(12). 1056–1060.