

The Role of Swearing in Language

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Swearing may be a universal trait of human nature as people tend to swear to varying degrees in all cultures. Three important aspects of swearing are examined in this essay: the nature of taboo language, the reasons for swearing, and the relationship between swearing and the cerebral structure of humans. A better understanding of the nature of swearing may result in a greater appreciation of its power and provide a deeper awareness of the effects of its usage.

Key words: taboo language, propositional swearing, emphatic swearing, cathartic swearing, idiomatic swearing, social swearing

1. Introduction

When I was seventeen I was still just a greenhorn, but I was well-versed in the ways of swearing. In 1969, I read J. D. Salinger's book *The Catcher in the Rye* – one of four novels I had to read as homework during the summer vacation. The protagonist, Holden Caulfield, is just an average teenager who is confused about his life and hates all the phoniness of the world in which he lives. Holden rants on ad infinitum about the insincere adults he has to confront. One of his traits is that he tends to use the *F-word* and other taboo words such as *goddam*. As a result, the novel was censored in many high schools and libraries across the United States.

Even by today's standards, Salinger's novel might offend parents who are perhaps overly protective of their children. Since conservative views still permeate many levels of American society, the protagonist's prolific use of taboo language could offend the sensibilities of some readers.

According to Timothy Jay (as cited in Ardo, 2001) swearing is thought to be a fundamental and universal feature of human communication. An examination of the phenomenon of swearing can enhance our understanding of language.

This paper examines the various types of swearing, and attempts to shed light on why and when people swear, the origins of some English swear words, the relationship between swearing and the cerebral structure of humans, laws governing swearing, and the issue as to whether swearing is a universal.

2. Taboo language

Swearing, cursing, obscenity, blasphemy, vulgarity, expletives and four-letter words are all included in taboo language. (Pinker 2008:325-330) He says that words and concepts that are considered taboo seem to vary from language to language. However, he points out that in most languages taboo words are drawn from similar topics such as sex, excretion, religion, death, infirmity, and disfavored groups. Jay (2009) also notes that taboo words are

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synonymous with swear words and include the lexicon of offensive emotional language. Such broad definitions, however, do not sufficiently describe the notion of swearing. Wierzbicka (as cited in Kidman, 1993) formulates a more succinct definition. He writes that “swearing is a deliberately ‘bad act’, designed for emotional expression”, and states that swearwords “express a particular meaning and a particular attitude towards some person, event or object”. In the words of Professor Jay (as cited in Coates, 2009), “swearing is a propensity in each person just like the horn which is built into a car.” Swearing serves to express a wide variety of feelings such as happiness, frustration, anger, and excitement. As noted aptly by Markus Karjalainen (2002) not all taboo words are swearwords. Incest and cannibalism are taboos, but they are not swearwords. Likewise, as he points out, not all foul language can be considered swearing. For example, a person might utter the words, “*They were fucking like rabbits in the park*”. Although the word ‘*fuck*’ in the above sentence is considered a dirty word, it does not constitute a swearword since it is used in a technical or literal sense. On the other hand, if somebody were to say, “*He’s a shitty teacher*”, the word ‘*shitty*’ is used in a non-technical sense, and connotes the idea that the teacher is incompetent. If interpreted denotatively, the word ‘*shitty*’ could mean that the teacher is suffering from Montezuma’s revenge! In short, according to Ljung a swearword is a taboo word used in a non-technical way (as cited in Karjalainen, 2002). In other words, swearwords are interpreted connotatively, and as Jay (1981) points out, ‘connotation is generally linked to emotional expression, not denoting a specific feature of the person in question’. In the next section let us examine some of the reasons why people are apt to swear.

3. Why people swear

Wilson (2005) states that almost every language in the world has swear words. She writes that swear

words came from the belief that spoken words have power, and she reports that most researchers agree that in cultures where there is no written language, it is believed that ‘spoken words can curse or bless people’. In a similar vein, Pinker (2008:339) states that ‘the historical root of swearing in English and in many other languages is religion’. He contends that the Third Commandment is evidence of this fact as well as the utterances of common expletives such as damn, hell, and Jesus Christ. However, as Cline (n.d.) notes the meaning of this commandment is debatable as some theologians believe that it was merely a prohibition against the use of the name of God in magical or occult practices and not a ban on swearing. Another interpretation of the commandment was that it forbids one from breaking any contract sworn in the name of God. If a person promises by the name of God and then fails to do so, then this means he has taken the name of God in vain.

The term *taboo* is said to have been introduced into the English language by Captain James Cook during his visit to the Polynesian island Tongu where he observed that certain actions were considered forbidden and or that certain topics could not be spoken of because of their sacredness. Offenders could die from sickness or be severely punished. In modern parlance, a taboo is basically a prohibition or an inhibition against a particular activity based on cultural or moral beliefs. Taboo topics are matters that are considered to be coarse or inappropriate in conversation.

4. Types of swearing

Pinker (2008:342-349) breaks the content of swearing into five categories of negative emotion:

1. Religion (e.g., *What the bloody hell are you doing?*).
2. Body effluvia (i.e. *I have to take a leak*).
3. Disease (e.g., *That guy’s fucked up in the head*).
4. Sexuality (i.e. *That dickhead poked my girlfriend*).
5. Racial slurs (e.g., *Speak English, you spic*).

Swearing is thought to have evolved as a means to express emotions and to relieve stress. Jay (as cited in Coates, 2009) writes that swearing is a way of expressing anger symbolically, and is, so to speak, a substitute for violence. People swear to express a variety of emotions such as irritation, pain, anger and even grief. As is noted in (“About Students Using Profanity,” n.d.) the alarming rise in profanity among the youth in US schools can be attributed to several factors. The first is said to be rebellion against authority and emulation of celebrities. Secondly, some students try to impress others due to peer pressure, so they resort to swearing as way to gain social status and to achieve dominance over other people. Thirdly, young people sometimes want to appear popular. Fourthly, it is said that young people like to recite violent song lyrics as a way of ‘seeking shock value or acceptance’. Lastly, the use of profanity is often an indication of low self-esteem. The prevalence of swearing in one American high school in the state of Connecticut has become such a problem that administrators have adopted a policy where students who are caught swearing at a teacher or classmate will be fined \$100.00.

Pinker (2008:369) states that ‘the common denominator of taboo words is the act of forcing a disagreeable thought on someone’. He argues that people swear because they want to arouse the listener’s attention; people may unconsciously think that by swearing you can have a stronger impact on listeners. Pinker (2008) refers to such swearing as abusive swearing and Jay (2008) uses the term propositional swearing. Both types are intentional and insulting, and are perhaps a reflection of an urge to intimidate and downgrade others (e.g., *Up yours, you piece of shit*;; *You fucking asshole!* or *You stupid fuckwit*.) However, Jay explains that propositional swearing can also be “polite” when it promotes social harmony such as (*This tempura is fucking good!*). This comment might be uttered by a husband to praise his Japanese wife’s delicious cooking! A similar type

of swearing can be termed emphatic swearing (e.g., *That ‘broad’ is fucking sexy.*)

There is also ‘locker-room swearing’ or ‘social swearing’ which is similar to bantering – a boisterous way of communication where men exchange friendly insults marked by wit. Researchers say that such swearing helps to boost team spirit. On the other hand, ‘annoyance swearing’ or swearing that is used to relieve stress is not usually acceptable in offices, but in places like construction sites cussing may be more common among both men and women. Incidentally, Wilson (n.d.) claims that 58% of women in America swear in public, and writes that studies theorize that women swear to emulate other women they admire. As for men, she states that 72% of men use offensive language in public.

Another type of swearing Pinker mentions in his book is cathartic swearing. When some English speakers stub their toe against the dining room table at night, they will instinctively shout, *god damn it!*, for example. Some researchers suggest that epithets (bursts of emotional behavior) may be vestiges of a period when language was still at an early stage of evolution.

Pinker also touches upon the notion of idiomatic swearing. A few examples can provide elucidation on this matter. If you cannot find your wallet when you are about to leave home in the morning, you might mutter angrily, “*Where the fuck is my wallet?*”, or a boss might say to his employee, “*Get your shit together*” if he thinks he is slacking off or if he is annoyed by his poor performance. In the first example, the word *fuck* expresses a sense of urgency and has nothing to do with a sexual act. Likewise, in the second example, the word *shit* does not refer to excreta, but the idiom really means “Get your thoughts together”. Finally, dysphemistic swearing refers to the usage of taboo words that forces listeners to think about something disgusting or shocking, for instance, (*I have to take a dump* or *that old fart croaked*.)

5. The Origins of Swear Words

The prevalence of swear words or taboo words in the speech of everyday English speakers probably dates back to Anglo-Saxon period of England. Bryson (1991) writes that commonly used English ‘dirty’ words like *shit* probably derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *scitan*, meaning to defecate. The Old English word *scite* meant dung. In fact, the word has numerous cognates in modern Germanic languages, such as German *scheisse*, Dutch, *schijt*, Swedish *skit*, Norwegian *skitt*, and Icelandic *skitur*. Although the word *shit* is still considered a swear word, it has become much less offensive than a hundred years ago. Surprisingly, the euphemism *shucks* is used by some speakers to avoid using the word *shit*.

Written profanity began to appear in the sixteenth century. There is evidence of profane language in some Shakespearean works. Fin (2007) cites three examples of swear words which appear in his plays. They were *zounds*, *sblood*, and *gadzooks*. All these words were almost equally offensive because of their reference to the wounds or blood of Christ at the time of his crucifixion. In fact, *zounds* meant “God’s wounds; *sblood* referred to Christ’s blood; and *Gadzooks* was originally a slang word for “God’s hooks. The word *bloody* in the past was considered to be very offensive. It is thought that *bloody* is a contraction of the expression, ‘by our Lady’ or ‘by God’s blood’. Ludowyk (2001) reports that the Oxford *English Dictionary* says that the word began as a reference to the habits of loutish aristocrats or ‘bloods’ at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the 18th century. Currently, the word *bloody* is used to emphasize a comment or an angry statement in British English.

There are less offensive expressions used like *darn!*, *damn!*, and *oh my gosh!* Such euphemisms are said to have arisen as a way to avoid prosecution. By

today’s standards, they seem somewhat old-fashioned. In fact, some linguists regard them as exclamatory phrases rather than true swear words. For example, in the sentence, “*Damn, she’s beautiful!*”, the function of the word *damn* is to express enthusiasm for a woman’s beauty.

The oft-used word *fuck* is said to have come from the Latin *futuo* which became the French word *foutre*, the German word *ficken*, and the middle Dutch word *fukka*. *Arse* is derived from the old-English *oers*. According to Bryson, common words for the male organ, such as *dick*, *peter*, and *prick* are frequently used in the English-speaking world. The almost innocuous word *crap* dates back to around 1440 and comes from the old French word *crappe*, meaning siftings or grain left on the floor of a barn, and the medieval Latin *crappa*. Nowadays the word is used to refer to not only feces but nonsense as in the expressions, “*What a bunch of crap!*” or “*let’s cut the crap*” and get down to business. The most common English expletives are *bullshit*, *horseshit* and the Britishism *bollocks* all of which mean nonsense or rubbish. Some old-fashioned speakers use the euphemisms *bunkum*, *balderdash*, or *poppycock* as these words are considered more appropriate.

The A-bomb of the English language is the word *c**t* because it has such offensive and misogynistic connotations. The Australian writer Gemaine Greer attributes the abhorrence of this word to ‘the implication that female genitals are disgusting and fearsome’. In spite of this, it is used in conversations to refer to not only to female genitalia but also to a despicable or stupid person. The British journalist Jeremy Clarkson apparently referred to Gordon Brown as a *c**t* as part of a joke in front of a studio audience. Calling a president a *c**t* would most likely befuddle an American man as the word is not usually used by men to insult other men. If you referred to a man as a *bitch*, it sounds inappropriate because *bitch* is a gender-based epithet meaning a nasty and spiteful woman. A male with the similar qualities is referred

to as a *prick*. Interestingly, *c**t* is sometimes used by men to refer to other men as in the following sentence: *He's a real c**t*. The use of this word can be insulting to a man because it acts as a verbal castration (as cited in Cunt: The History of the C-Word).

There are many theories about the etymology of the word *c**t*. The first is that it dates back to Old Norse word *kunta* and *cunte* in Middle English. In fact, the word has cognates in most Germanic languages such as *kunte* in Frisian, *kut* in Dutch, and *kott* in German. There are also similar words in Latin languages such as the French term *con*, the Spanish *coño*, and the Portuguese *cona*. All of the words mentioned above are derived from the Latin *cuunus* meaning *vulva*.

A second theory suggests that the origin of the C-word may be derived from the ancient Greek words *gude gune* and *gyne* meaning *woman*. A third theory purports to show a link between the modern word *c**t* and the Anglo- Saxon *ge-cynd-lim*, meaning womb. Finally, Bryson notes that Chaucer used the C-word casually in his work *The Canterbury Tales*, using three different spellings – *queynte*, *queinte*, and *kent*.

Nobody knows exactly when the C-Word first became taboo. According to Mark Morton 2003 (as cited in *Cunt: The History of The C-Word, Censorship*), the word *c**t* was not taboo until the 15th century. The word seems to have shifted, and by the end of the 17th century it became part of the lexicon of obscenity. Nowadays, the use of the word *c**t* perhaps provokes less outrage. According to the writer Vanessa Richmond (2009), the C-word is enjoying a rebirth in North American conversation. Likewise, the words *dickhead* and *dick* are also pejorative words which connote an idiot or a contemptible person. Both imply a person who thinks with his penis rather than his brain; however, there are perhaps subtle nuances in meaning between the two words. A *dickhead* is mean and contemptible, whereas a *dick* is a highly contemptible and abrasive or

antagonistic individual. The word *c**t* likewise connotes a very unpleasant and nasty person in addition to its intense misogynistic overtones.

6. Swearing and the Brain

Research has shown that swearing holds a particular place in the brain, and that neurological damage to the brain can affect swearing along with other language abilities. Pinker argues that aphasia affects people in different ways. For example, loss of articulate language is caused by damage to parts of the brain in the left hemisphere. A patient whose left brain hemisphere was removed because of cancer lost his ability to produce sentences, but retained his ability to curse.

To understand more clearly why people swear, one needs to examine briefly how the brain processes swear words. According to Wilson (2005), studies reveal that the brain processes swearing in the lower regions of the brain known as the limbic system and the basal ganglia. She also reports that scientists theorize from (fMRI) studies that higher and lower parts of the brain struggle with one another when people swear. The limbic system is a complex system of nerves and networks which controls basic emotions and drives, and is made up of the basal ganglia (a group of nuclei located at the base of the forebrain), and the thalamus (an ovoid mass of grey matter in posterior of the forebrain). Pinker (2008:331-336) suggests that these two systems are implicated in swearing, and notes that connotations and denotations of words are stored in different parts of the brain. He explains that the connotations of words are spread across connections between the neocortex and the limbic system in the right hemisphere, and that the right hemisphere is implicated in swearing because it is 'more heavily involved in emotion, especially negative emotion.' According to Wilson (2005), studies reveal that the brain processes swear words in the lower regions.

Furthermore, she reports that scientists theorize that the brain stores swear words as whole words rather than as a series of phonemes. This may explain why we can remember swear words quite easily.

Denotations of words, on the other hand, are stored in an area of the left part of the brain known as the neocortex; that is, the outer layer of the cerebral hemispheres, and is considered to be the seat of brain functions such as sensory perception, generation of motor commands, spatial reasoning, conscious thought, and language.

To substantiate his theory about swearing, Pinker (2008:335) cites the example of patients suffering from Tourette Syndrome - a neurologic disorder associated with the exclamation of obscene words or socially inappropriate and derogatory remarks referred to as coprolalia or uncontrollable swearing. The basal ganglia serve as inhibitors of behavior, and scientists think that their disfunction is implicated in some disorders of behavior control such as Tourette Syndrome and Obsessive-compulsive disorder. The most evident symptom of (TS) is 'a vocal tic consisting of shouted obscenities, taboo ethnic terms, and verbal abuse'. Pinker argues that swearing is 'a coherent neurobiological phenomenon'. In a similar vein, Berger (2005), notes that outbursts of swearing reveal somewhat primitive behavior which appears to have been hard-wired into the human brain since the genesis of language. This is evidenced in the behavior of chimpanzees and other primates. Researchers (as cited in Angier, 2005) have also found that our senses and reflexes react to the sound or sight of obscene words. When electrodermal wires were placed on subjects' arms and fingertips to examine their skin conductance patterns, it was observed that when subjects heard obscenities spoken clearly, they were aroused, as evidenced by the fact that their skin conductance patterns spiked, the hairs on their arms rose, their pulse rose, and by the fact that their breathing became shallow.

7. Swearing in Japan

It is claimed that Japanese people do not swear. The reason for this misconception is that they do not usually display anger or frustration in public. In a nation with a homogenous population like Japan, people learn from childhood that it is imperative to be self-restrained. The Japanese, however, are not emotionless. They do express their emotions, but for the most part in moderation.

There are a number of words in Japanese which refer to both the male and female anatomy and such terms are very vulgar. In fact, some people are somewhat prudish about such matters, and one can be jokingly accused of being perverted for using such vulgarities. There is no F-word in Japanese per se, but young people know the English term, pronounced *fakku* in Japanese. Most Japanese men use the verb *yaru* which actually means *do* or *make* but in a specific context it connotes *copulation*. Everyone is familiar with the pejorative *sukebe* which means *randy*, *lustful* or *dirty-minded*. The word is often used in a joking way because, in some respects, the Japanese are quite broad-minded about sexual matters.

Terms such as *baka* or *bakatare* which mean *stupid* or *moronic* are fairly common, but they can connote something similar to *stupid asshole* if uttered with a loud voice. The term *baka* means *foolish*, and is used among friends and family in an affectionate way. Other common pejoratives are the compounds *kusobaba* and *kusojiji*. *Kuso* means *shit* and *baba* means *old woman* and *jiji* means *old man*. Such words are definitely insulting, and the English equivalents would be tantamount to *fucking old-bag* or *fucking old-fart*.

There are two Japanese words (*Eta* and *Burakumin*) which will make listeners squirm as they are taboo words and are legacies of past prejudices. These words refer to a lower class of people who used to live on the edges of towns. They worked as butchers, leather workers, grave-diggers, tanners, and

executioners (“Burakumin”, n.d). Because such occupations were considered immoral and dirty, a prejudice against them lingers in Japanese society. Nobody wants to admit that they are prejudiced, so if a foreigner unwittingly utters such taboo words, some people will literally cringe.

8. Defining offensiveness

Offensive words are related to categories of obscenity, indecency, profanity, racial slurs, taboos, and scatology. Jay (2010) states that ‘the lack of universal standards for offensiveness due to contextual variability’ makes it difficult to define what offensive or harmful speech is. Legal scholars advocate that offensive utterances are just like physical blows, but civil libertarians argue that such utterances do not cause harm because they say speech is abstract and is different from physical blows. A few examples need to be given to elucidate the two viewpoints mentioned above.

A young university student gets angry at his father for showing indecisiveness about what he wants to do in the afternoon. The young man shouts derisively at his father, “*You fucking loser*”. Harm probably arises because such words are not uttered casually, and reveal a degree of animosity. Secondly, such words may constitute hateful speech as they are probably intended to cause harm.

An utterance such as “*I hate Chinese*” is an example of casual-bias speech, and as such, cannot constitute hate speech because such words are not directed at a specific individual. However, a statement like, “ *I’ll kick your ass, you fucking Chink*” is obviously violent and addressed to an individual. According to Jay, the key factor in determining whether words are offensive has to do with whether an utterance is a general comment or directed at an individual with intention to insult or to be violent. Hate speech with the intent to intimidate is exempt from the First Amendment to the American

constitution -- the amendment that protects freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly and petition.

In regard to the historic landmark decision (Chaplinsky v. the State of New Hampshire) Justice Frank Murphy delivered the opinion of the Supreme Court on March 9th, 1942. He wrote as follows:

“No person shall address any offensive, derisive or annoying word to any other person who is lawfully in any street or other public place, nor call him by any offensive or derisive name, nor make any noise or exclamation in his presence and hearing with intent to deride, offend or annoy him, or to prevent him from pursuing his lawful business or occupation”.

Research has revealed until recently that some swear words are clearly considered more offensive than others (Fagersten, et al., 2007). However, as they aptly point out, previous frequency studies of swear words have been fundamentally flawed in that subjects are asked to rate words in lists by numerical value according to a scale from non-offensive to offensive. The problem with such a method is that swear words are presented as singular items in a list without contexts. They also level criticisms against research on offensiveness of swear words because of its faulty approach. If subjects are given a list of isolated swear words with no context, and are asked to rate their offensiveness, it is unlikely that any subject would consider a swear word from a different viewpoint. Finally, they suggested that offensiveness ratings of isolated words are unreliable because it is impossible to know how participants interpret individual words. To remedy this problem, they conducted a study at the University of Florida. Undergraduates were asked to consider the offensiveness of swear words such as *ass*, *shit*, *fuck* and their derivatives as used in social interaction. Recorded dialogues as well as information concerning settings, race, gender, and social status of participants were printed on the questionnaire. The participants in this study were asked to rate the swear words according to the same scale as the word-list ratings

task, i.e., from '1' to '10', '1' being 'Not Offensive' and '10' being 'Very Offensive'.

The results of the questionnaire yielded some significant data:

1. The context of an utterance affects the perceived offensiveness of swear words.
2. Females rated 'listed' swear words as more offensive than males did.
3. White females rated much of the dialogue swear usage as less offensive than white males did.
4. White males are aware of an inherent offensiveness of swear words, but are inattentive to contexts
5. African-American males considered contextualized cuss words less offensive than listed swear words.
6. Swear words used denotatively or injuriously were considered most offensive.
7. Participants based their evaluations of offensiveness more on how people used words rather than on who used them.

9. Concerns about freedom of speech

Freedom of speech is the essence of democracy, but should it be unlimited? Should governments play a role in controlling obscenity and the use of foul language in public? Most people who live in democratic countries consider free speech to be their right, but whether free speech should cover flag-burning, hard-core rap and heavy-metal lyrics, tobacco advertising, hate speech, pornography, nude dancing, solicitation and various forms of symbolic speech is a highly controversial issue. Throughout history, there have been numerous attempts to curtail the freedom of speech. When D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was first published, it created shock waves around the world. The book was banned in the United States from 1921 to 1973; it was not published in the UK until 1960; and his work was banned in Canada and Australia due to concerns about

its 'obscene' language. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* was censored in high schools and libraries in the United States between 1961 and 1982. While most Americans value their freedom of speech, many are mindful of their responsibility to protect their children from the potential negative effects of profanity. In fact, a number of years ago, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Federal Communications Commission (FCC) could prohibit 'indecent' language. It is a violation of federal law to air indecent programming or profane language between 6:00 AM and 10:00 PM. Finally, in 2006, President Bush signed into law the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act, which increased fines considerably for airing 'indecent' language. According to John Burkoff, law professor at the University of Pittsburg, every state in the US has laws against foul language. The Supreme Court has ruled that words used in a violent or sexually obscene context constitute grounds for arrest. He states that uttering something vulgar or profane is not, in itself, grounds for arrest ("ACLU fights Pennsylvania police", 07.10.02).

Likewise, there are similar laws in Australia. According to the Australian Parliamentary Library (2001), restrictions placed on display or sale of 'adult' publications (whether classified or not) to ensure that children did not have access to them. Also, the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) must determine standards relating to programs for children and the Australian content of programs. Codes of practice must adhere to certain criteria which stipulate that they

1. take into account community attitudes with regard to violence, sex, offensive language, drugs and the vilification of particular groups;
2. apply the film classification system administered by the Classification Board and ensure that films classified as M or MA are shown only at designated times. (Censorship and Classification in Australia, 2001)

10. Conclusions

The ability to communicate effectively by means of language is a truly remarkable attribute of humans. We use language to convey information, to express love, anger, excitement, sadness, and disappointment. However, there are moments when we abuse the gift of language; our words become daggers which can rattle nerves, hurt the feelings of those we love, and undermine self-confidence. When prime ministers and presidents commit the occasional faux pas, we take them to task for being crude and insensitive. However, the overuse of swear words by some speakers may have a debilitating effect on the rest of society.

It is said that in terms of swearing, the US and Australia are on opposite ends of the spectrum, with Britain in the middle. Australians' tendency to swear excessively is attributed to their 'laid-back' mentality. As far as some Americans are concerned, the tendency to swear profusely may be attributed to a misunderstanding of what freedom of speech really means. Thus, some people think that freedom of speech entitles them to use foul language whenever they want and wherever they want.

Swearing in work environments and public places has become widespread in many English-speaking countries such as the US, Britain, and Australia. Some company managers in the US say that swearing is harmless and argue that it may benefit work environments because swearing can help diffuse tension in the workplace. Others are of the opinion that swearing or abusive language is unacceptable and that it has a corrosive effect on the work atmosphere.

In conclusion, a few closing remarks about swearing should be made. First, as Pinker suggests in his book, it is a fact of life that most people swear to varying degrees. Secondly, swearing most likely helps people to cope with stressful situations. Thirdly, mild swear words and humorous colloquialisms can help to get the listener's attention and give spice to

conversation like the Americanism *You don't know shit from Shinola* or the Australian term *shit storm* used by former Prime Minister Rudd during a discussion on T.V. or the humorous euphemism *driving the porcelain bus*. Fourthly, some swear words which should not be used in mixed company may help to build camaraderie among male friends when they are used judiciously.

In short, we should be mindful of the fact that excessive swearing can be deeply offensive to some people. As long as we are aware of the potential harm that swearing can bring on other people, we can restrain ourselves from forcing disagreeable thoughts on others. Racial slurs and obscene language may damage relationships, and the overuse of swearing in workplaces and public places can have corrosive effects on societies. Since swearing often results in violence, further research on the negative influence it might have on people's ability to communicate effectively is necessary. Finally, a better understanding of the social ramifications of swearing would facilitate more thoughtful use of language and result in a greater appreciation of its power to affect other people. In this way, we can work towards fostering better relations in the communities where we live and work.

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