

## Profanity and Perceptions

By Elizabeth Lefrancois

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Profane language has been described as “socially offensive language,” which is also recognized by many other names, such as, “bad words,” “foul language,” “swearing,” and “cursing” (“Profanity”). It is often considered rude or disrespectful in most contexts, yet people still choose to integrate it in everyday conversations. This left me confused, as a majority of profane language is described in a negative way. Why then, do people choose to use this language? And how are these people viewed by others?

A common answer to the first question posed would be that swearing occurs as reaction to a problem or negative circumstance. It allows the user to express these “negative emotions” regarding particularly to anger and frustration. But, with more research I have found that there is more to it than just that. People tend to use profanity because it allows them to express emotions in a more understandable way. It is easy to distinguish what a person is feeling simply by the tone of their voice or the expressions they use, but, by adding swears to these reactions, such as “that’s fucking awesome,” instead of simply “that’s awesome,” it helps others to determine the extent of the speaker’s feelings towards the subject. In my own research I have found that nearly all of the interviewees use swearing to do this exact thing. One particular interviewee stated that, “[swearing] gets the point across [and] explains what I can’t,” (Robeau). I understand this as adding a shock value to the subject, which, in turn, adds emphasis, allowing for a better explanation of the speaker's feelings.

Another reason why profanity is used is because it aids in building interpersonal relationships. This specific way of communicating allows people to subtly “feel at ease” with one another and develops “relationship[s] to the extent of being able to speak to each other like [friends]” (Baruch 155). This means that this particular language helps break tension when a person is in a social circumstance. A better explanation could be a situation where you are on a packed shuttle heading to school or work. The driver suddenly stops as a car cuts off the bus, causing presumably unwanted physical contact between you and a stranger. Now, this could be an awkward situation, especially if you are face to face with this person and no other interaction has taken place. But, if the stranger states something like “wow, that guy’s an asshole,” it gives an outlet to dismiss the uncomfortable situation, because it acknowledges the predicament while also posing it as an accident. In a variety of interviews that I have conducted pertaining to this matter, I have found that most of the population tends to swear when presented with a similar social circumstance. For example, a 19 year old interviewee explained that, “[swearing] diffuses the situation... I feel more comfortable because the attention of the situation is redirected onto something else,” (Hartsgrove). This is important especially when used in the correct context. This could be a variety of things, such as to tease, joke, relieve social tension, or to emphasize important points, which essentially “breaks the ice” so to speak, when among strangers or even colleagues. Simply put, “It can be used as a tool to gain ground among peers, make tighter bonds and create a good



reputation” (Finn 23). This is key to any social situation, as it encourages easier communication between the individuals.

Along with clarity and relieving awkward situations, profanity can aid in other social gains, particularly relating to reputation. It has been found that “statements containing swear words [are] seen as more believable” which then strengthen relationships, allowing for “mutual trust and understanding” (Johnson and Lewis 107, Baruch 155). To clarify, this pretty much translates to; swearing can make a statement appear more honest, and in turn, the person who says them is perceived as honest as well. I found this very interesting, considering the common stigma around profanity. Growing up, I have always been told that swears are unacceptable and force people to see you as unintelligent and untrustworthy. My research has shown very similar beliefs. One interviewee explained, “My parents have always associated swearing with sex, drugs, and rock n roll... essentially, everything they wanted to protect me from” (Thibodeau). This shows the subconscious embedding of the negative view we tend to have towards swearing. However, research from the University of Cambridge, Maastricht University, Hong Kong University and Stanford University has found that not only is this statement true, but there is actually a consistent positive relationship between profanity and honesty. One of the researchers from the University of Cambridge explains, “If you filter your language when speaking then you’re probably also filtering what you’re saying as well. Someone who does not filter their language... is more likely to be saying what they think to be true, so are being more honest and genuine from their perspective” (Blair). So if swearing has so many benefits, why do people refrain from using them?

One reason for hesitancy would be because this language tends to be associated with masculinity, limiting the use by females. This is because it is thought that swearing “goes hand in hand with other traditionally ‘male’ pursuits... such as binge-drinking and pornography” and actually “destroy[s] the benefits of the equality [that] so many [women] have worked towards,” (Kupfermann). Even though I do not agree, this particular article states that women who choose to use profanity are working against equality by conforming to an area previously dominated by men. These ideas prevent the previously mentioned social benefits, simply because of sexist opinions. To dig deeper in this topic, I asked a variety of people what their personal opinions were when regarding first women who swear, followed by men who swear. The overall finding was a clear distinction between the opinions of older and younger people as to what is offensive and what is not. The older group tended to think of the language as “disrespectful” and “unpleasant to hear,” and also regarded younger females who swore as “unlady-like” (Lefrancois). In contrast, they regarded men or boys who swear as more acceptable. When discussing this topic with the younger group though, it was found that they regularly swore within their friend groups and were overall unfazed by the use of these words. It amazes me to still see this shaming of women associated with the use of profanity, especially from older generations who claim to have simply “not been raised to think of it as okay to do” (Tancrell). Even when presented with actual data which proves the positive effects of profanity, people tend to be set in tradition, rather than embracing different ways to communicate.

Another reason would simply be because of context or lack of understanding. For example, if a person is unable to recognize appropriate times to use profanity, they could come across as “less intelligent or attractive, or [could be] thought of as rebellious, unstable, [or] disrespectful” (Finn 23). It is important to be able to recognize when these words can be applied in order to correctly use them. Both groups of interviewees recognized that there are times that profanity must be avoided, particularly around children, respected elders, or in a church-like setting. But other times can be difficult to decipher because of varying opinions of individuals. For instance, some parents may forbid profanity in its entirety, while others may use it themselves. It is important to consider the other person’s views, and what is socially acceptable for that particular instance when choosing language for the situation.

At the start of my research, I understood the idea of swearing usually regarded as something to be avoided, as it has an overwhelmingly negative reputation. When continuing to immerse myself in the topic though, I find that this is simply not true. There are so many benefits, especially pertaining to relationship building when choosing to integrate swears in everyday settings. Although I do not swear, I find it fascinating that there are so many unseen (or maybe more accurately described as overlooked), benefits to using profane language, especially because of the largely negative view of it embedded to my understanding since I was a child. Now knowing what I do, I actually think that swearing should be encouraged, in order to get rid of the negatives addressed in the paragraphs above. Obviously, I am not saying that everyone should start cussing at anyone and everyone they come in contact with, I also think that it is really important to consider the context of where and when you should swear, if you would like to. But, I now perceive these conversations in a lighter view and have a better understanding to the appeal of profanity as a social enhancement rather than a prohibitor.

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*Lizzie is an Exercise and Health Science major from Blackstone, Massachusetts. Assigned by her Composition II instructor to research an aspect of language that interested her, Lizzie chose to research swearing, which was never allowed in her home. Lizzie’s research enabled her to “open [her] eyes and see much more than a lack of vocabulary” when she heard others using profanity. She explains, “I felt as if I was programmed to think that swearing was this terrible thing that no one should do, and, because of that, I never thought about the positive side of this language.” Lizzie’s essay explores why people use profanity and how others perceive those who swear; she analyzes the different perspectives of language through the lenses of age, relationships, and gender. Lizzie enjoys most physical activities, but especially running with her 11-year old pug Lucky (whom she will often push in a stroller while he naps).*



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