

THE POWER DYNAMICS OF SWEARING

Dr. Emelia Noronha, Ms. Akshata Pawar

Associate Professor, Prahladrai Dalmia Lions College of Commerce & Economics
Mumbai, India.

emelian@dalmialionscollege.ac.in

Assistant Professor, Prahladrai Dalmia Lions College of Commerce & Economics,
Mumbai, India

akshata12pawar@gmail.com

Abstract

This study focuses on the use of swear words by college youth from suburban Mumbai and their attitudes to using swear words. The notion that gender plays a very important role in the manner in which language is used is the basis of the research. The study posits a challenge to earlier research wherein swearing was largely a masculine domain. The power dynamics that swearing brings along with it has always influenced the manner in which profanity is used by different genders. This study challenges the traditional assumptions that suggest that men swear more frequently and freely than women, but recent research indicates a more nuanced picture shaped by context, culture, age, and evolving social norms. The study indicates that today the youth is not wary of gender differences when it comes to usage of language. The fact that swear-words are used as forms of endearment to sustain friendship and create bonding emerges from this study.

Keywords: swearing, gender, power, friendship

INTRODUCTION

Swearing is one of the most paradoxical aspects of language. While it is often censured, it persists across cultures and languages, serving complex social and psychological functions. From a linguistic and pragmatic perspective one can say that swearing, refers to the use of taboo, offensive, or vulgar language that typically evokes strong emotional reactions. It often involves the intentional or incidental use of words or phrases considered socially inappropriate, offensive, or impolite in certain contexts. "Swear words have many an alias: bad words, curse words, cuss words, dirty words, four-letter words, expletives, epithets, obscenities, profanity, blasphemy, bawdy language, foul language, rude language, vulgar language, or taboo language" explains Fägersten in *Who's Swearing Now? Swear words are power laden as they have the potential to be "offensive, inappropriate, objectionable, or unacceptable in any given social context" (3, Fägersten). Research in the field of objectionable language usage often employs terms interchangeably, such as cursing, taboo words, profanity, vulgarity, abusive language, and foul language.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between language and gender has been a central focus of linguistic and sociolinguistic inquiry. In her seminal 1973 essay, "Language and Woman's Place," Robin Lakoff argued that "Language uses us as much as we use language . . ." and speaking about the way women experience language she states, "women experience linguistic determination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language and, in the way, general language use treats them (39, Lakoff). She further elaborates how both relegate them to "certain subservient functions: that of sex objects, or servants" (39, Lakoff). Lakoff stresses upon the marginality and powerlessness of women and its relation to language, she asserts that it is reflected in the way women are expected to speak and the ways in which women are spoken of. Lakoff (1975) argues that girls are socialized to speak and behave like "little ladies," encouraging them to be passive, polite, and refrain from swearing in order to be perceived as "respectable."

Research has reported that women use more prestige speech forms than men, and style-shift more dramatically than men. In "Sex, Speech, and Stereotypes: Why Women Use Prestige Speech Forms More than Men" Elizabeth Gordon puts forward the view that this behavior of women is not a matter of self-promotion, but of avoidance (47). Trudgill 1972, 1974 refers to women's greater consciousness of social status to account for the results of his sociolinguistic study of Norwich speakers, and suggests that women are very sensitive to linguistic norms because of their insecure social position. The traditional forms of female labor, such as housework and bringing up children, lack status and prestige; hence women try to compensate for this in other ways, one of which is the use of more prestigious speech patterns. By contrast, men are able to use non-standard variants with impunity because these possess the covert prestige associated with masculinity, with being "mates," and with the working-class culture in general. Although Trudgill has since modified his position (1983), accepting the possibility of other explanations, his interpretation is still widely discussed. Gordon

argues that “women act in certain ways not because they want to appear “better” than they really are, but because they want to avoid the negative stereotype attached to the lower class, and the moral judgments that people make about members of that class on the basis of their speech and other class-related factors” (48). Usage of strong language that is a taboo often is a cathartic process and a lot of research has analysed this aspect. Research into usage of abusive language as a self-defense mechanism relating to emotional catharsis, releasing psychological distress is also widely studied. Dr Emma Byrne a research scientist at *10x Future Technology* and author of *Swearing Is Good For You*, asserts that “Swearing is often misread as simple vulgarity, but scientific research is revealing more profound reasons for using taboo words” (24). She strongly puts forth the idea that “Swearing is also an excellent painkiller, although we are still trying to unpick exactly how it works” (26), she further elaborates “swearing is so often the sign that someone is in distress (27).

THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS RESEARCH ARE:

- To find out gender wise who engage more in the act of swearing
- Attitude to swearing gender wise
- Reasons of engaging in swearing
- Impact of media on swearing habits

The current study operates under the following hypotheses; which guide the data collection and analysis procedures:

- Young Indian women tend to refrain from using swear words.
- Young Indian men are more likely to use swear words in their communication.
- The use of profanity influences how a speaker is perceived, both on a personal and professional level.
- Men and women evaluate each other differently when exposed to the use of profanity.

METHODOLOGY

This study conducted a survey to gain insights into the attitudes of the young people towards swearing. About 185 youngsters in the age group of 13 to 25 responded to the survey and 8 youngsters were personally interviewed. The identity of all respondents is kept anonymous.

DISCUSSION

The fact that the name of the participant was not asked in the questionnaire that was circulated helped in getting frank feedback from the youth.

The survey gathered responses on the following topics:

- Frequency of swear word usage in daily conversations
- Primary reasons for using swear words
- Perceptions about whether the use of swear words is problematic
- Social contexts or people around whom respondents feel comfortable using swear words
- Instances where respondents consciously avoid using swear words
- Views on the use of swear words by girls in everyday language specifically their opinion regarding whether it is acceptable for girls to use the ‘F’-word
- Experience with using the ‘F’-word
- Aspects of media that strongly influence young people to incorporate swear words into their daily vocabulary

THE RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS WERE AS FOLLOWS

The survey included a total of 185 respondents, comprising 83 males and 100 females 1 preferred not to reveal gender 1 non-binary. Age-wise, 51.9 percent respondents were in the 19 to 21 age group, 36.8 percent in the age group of 16 to 18, 9.7 percent in the age group 22 to 25 while the remaining 1.6 percent fell into the 13 to 15 age group.

FREQUENCY OF SWEAR WORD USAGE IN DAILY CONVERSATIONS

Out of the total 185 respondents, 75.9 percent reported of having used swear words, while 24.3 percent of respondents reported to have never used swear words. The data gathered, surprisingly, indicated that 50 percent of these respondents using swear words were male and an equal percent were female. Thus, one comes to the conclusion that gender wise there is equality in relation to use of swear words, a revelation that is distinctly different from the earlier studies that indicated that men used profanity more than women.

Out of 24.3 percent of respondents who reported to have never used swear words, 26.67 percent were males and 73.33 percent were females. This response corroborated with the response given by the respondents to the question “What are your main reasons for using swear words?” wherein 23.2 percent reiterated that they do not use swear words which means 1.1 percent of respondents did not tell the truth. And this further corroborates with the next survey question, “Who are you most comfortable using swear words around?”

wherein 25.4 percent of the respondents asserted that they are not comfortable using swear words around anyone. But when probed further and asked, “Do you ever avoid using swear words on purpose” the response was not consistent as seen in earlier probes. Only around 15.7 percent stated that they do not use swear words on purpose. If the earlier statements of these respondents who said that they never use swear words is to be taken on face value then it was expected that they would answer this question too in the negative. That indicates that though these respondents do not like to use swear words yet 8.6 out of the 24.3 percent would opt for using them when the situation demands. Or it can be deduced that there is a disparity between the respondents self-reporting. So, one can take an average of the respondents who claim that they do not use swear words is 24.3 percent.

Primary reasons for using swear words: When probed on the question of the rationale behind the use of swear words 62.2 percent asserted that they used them to “express their anger”, 44.8 percent said that they use it to “express their negative feelings” while only 20.9 percent said that they used it “to sound ‘cool’”.

Perceptions about whether the use of swear words is problematic: In response to the question regarding whether the respondents found the use of swear words as problematic, only 24.3 percent answered in the affirmative; 54.6 percent of the respondents said that it depended on the situation; and 15.7 percent said that swearing is not problematic. The overall respondents’ perception towards swearing is therefore not negative.

Social contexts or people around whom respondents feel comfortable using swear words and instances where respondents consciously avoid using swear words: Close friends were the people around whom the youth were most comfortable using swear words. As per above calculation therefore, 24.9 percent reported that they did not use swear words at all then out of the remaining 75.1 percent that did use swear words, 60 percent said that they used among their close friends while only 4.3 percent said that used it when parents were around, 3.8 percent when strangers were around and only a miniscule 2.2 percent said that they used it when teachers were around. This also indicates that when elders are around, they consciously do not use swear words and if ever they use it is they ensure that they do not do it in their obvious presence.

Experience with using the ‘F’-word: The use of the ‘F’ word in the Indian context is a complex phenomenon. Traditionally the conservative Indian society frowns upon the use of profanity yet in local languages its use is rampant. The usage of profanities in English is largely associated with the elite English-speaking world and thus its usage can be largely seen amongst people who speak English or are bilinguals, and speak English fluently, or those that engage in ‘Hinglish’, that is popular amongst urban and semi-urban areas, especially among the youth; wherein Hinglish seamlessly fuses English words and phrases into Hindi sentences (and vice versa). Also, Bollywood films, stand-up comedy, music, and social media increasingly feature more casual uses of the ‘F’ word, sometimes in a rebellious, and often in a humorous tone.

Of the 185 respondents, 36.8 percent said that they did not use the ‘F’-Word. If 24.3 percent is the reported average that do not use swear words at all then only 12.5 percent of respondents reported not having used the ‘F’-Word. The rest of the respondents, 63.2 percent, thus, reported to have used the ‘F’-word. 38.4 percent of the respondents have asserted of having used the ‘F’ word, while 24.9 percent reported to have used the word “sometimes”. Out of the total respondents who use the ‘F’ word it was found that 52 percent of females reported of having used the word, while only 46 percent of the males have reported to have used the word. This finding is definitely pathbreaking as it differs considerably from earlier research that indicates that women do not prefer using foul language. The study “The Use of ‘F’-Word among High School Students” by Chetan S.V., Atiya Fathima found 6.5% of high school students did not use the F-Word and the percentage of girls who did not use the F-Word was higher than the boys.

When discussed in detail regarding the usage of this word, the respondents that were interviewed reported that the word was not related at all as a swear word as it was used to express emotional bonding rather than being used as a “cuss word” that would express strong negative emotions. It was used to denote “being accepted” as close friend and therefore one could afford to use rude language without being offensive. This finding is similar to the study by Daly, Nicola, et al. who examined the interactions and use of the term “fuck” by a team of workers at a soap factory in New Zealand, observed that the expletive “fuck” was frequently used among team members as a means of expressing solidarity. Rather than being offensive, its use functioned to strengthen team bonds, alleviate tension, and level hierarchical differences. This usage conveyed a sense of familiarity and mutual trust. The study “Swearing: A Biopsychosocial Perspective” by Vingerhoets is in a similar vein; wherein it focuses upon the manner in which swearing can have a variety of interpersonal consequences – promoting group bonding and solidarity, inhibiting aggression, and eliciting humour.

English-language usage in India—especially Hinglish—has helped normalize occasional profanity in informal conversation among peers, though its acceptance still varies greatly depending on region, generation, and social context. Still, it remains a loaded word. In essence, the ‘F’ word in India stands at a cultural crossroads: a symbol of youthful defiance and modern expression for some, and a marker of disrespect and vulgarity for others. The respondents of this study belong to Mumbai suburbs, when the respondents were personally interviewed and asked the rationale of using this expletive in English; six of the eight interviewees asserted that its usage made them appear “cool” and that they used it more often when they mingled with youth of their age group. This corroborates with Yogita Rao’s *Times of India* report regarding the increasing use of “F’s and B’s” on college campuses in Mumbai as teens find it “cool”.

Gender and swearing: A lot of research centered on gender has found that men swear more than women – Jay, T. 1980 in “Sex differences and dirty word usage: A review of the literature and reply to Haas”; McEnery in *Swearing in English*; Mehl & Pennebaker in “The sounds of social life: A psychometric analysis of student’s daily social environments and natural conversations” and Thelwall, M in “Fk yea I swear: Cursing and gender in a corpus of MySpace pages”.

In the present survey, in response to the question whether girls should use swear words in their daily language 50.8 percent of the respondents said ‘No’. It is noteworthy to note that 59.5 percent of these respondents who said “No” are females. We live, no doubt, in a patriarchal world. It is this patriarchal society that decides who should speak what. These rules are not outrightly displayed for all to follow but in a Foucauldian sense, the patriarchal power operates indirectly on individual bodies and shapes behavior through surveillance, normalization, and the production of “docile bodies”. The bodies of women are disciplined indirectly through education – they are not to use words that can give them power. Swear words are empowering and thus its use is not for “docile bodies”. Socially one is thus educated to understand that rude behaviour is not for the gentle civilised minds of women and therefore “ladies” should not use such language. The patriarchal world uses language as a mechanism that regulates individuals’ behavior by controlling speech patterns, disallowing patterns that could empower them. This behaviour is internalised through cultural indoctrination.

Views on the use of swear words by girls in everyday language specifically their opinion regarding whether it is acceptable for girls to use the ‘F’-word: In the section wherein the respondents’ views on the use of the ‘F’ word by girls were elicited, 45.9 percent asserted that they do not feel that girls should use the words. 27.5 percent said yes to the question, “do you feel it is alright for girls to use the ‘F’ word, while 26.5 percent answered “maybe”, thereby indicating that, if need be, it would be okay to use it. Thus, one can deduce that 54.1 percent of respondents do not agree that girls should not use the ‘F’ word. That indicates that gender does not really play an important role about the usage of the swear word. And that youngsters today do not really curb the youth to swear on the basis of their gender. Those who were not in favour of girls’ usage of swear words; it can be noted that these 50.5 percent of these respondents were female while 49.4 percent of them were male. Out of the total respondents who said it is alright for females to use swear words 57 percent of them were females. During the interview when the same question was asked to the respondents, all of them asserted that swearing is not related to the gender of the person as they felt that it was the situation and the intensity of the emotional response that dictated the use of the swear word. Thus, there is a major shift from the earlier studies that indicate women to be “docile bodies” who would shun the use of “rude” language and use more polite forms.

Media influence on youth on using swear words: Various studies have reported that media plays a great role in language use. Coyne, Sarah M., et al. indicate that swearing in TV, movies and video games is related to adolescents adopting coarse language and aggressive behavior. Wright and Mokbel’s study: “The media scapegoat and mom’s mouth: Influences on swearing” examines the role of media and familial influences on acceptable attitudes toward swearing and Jones’, “Are rap videos more violent? Style differences and the prevalence of sex and violence in the age of MTV” found that participants reported exposure to swear words more from song lyrics than from movies.

In the current study 63.2 percent of respondents asserted that the web series on OTT platforms are a significant influence on youth using swear words. While the influence of television and movies was not reported to be considerable, shows like the Roadies (44.9 percent) and the Big Boss (47 percent) were reported to have had a major influence on the usage of swear words.

Interview discussion: Eight respondents were interviewed on a one-to-one basis and the following questions were put to them:

- 1) Is swearing a sign of intelligence
- 2) Is Swearing a sign of honesty
- 3) Is it Better to swear than to get violent
- 4) Should Girls not swear. Why?
- 5) Which context they do not swear and why?
- 6) Why do they not swear when teachers are around?
- 7) Media influence on youth on using swear words:
 - 8) Which web series on OTT influences use of profanity?
 - 9) What aspects of shows like Big Boss and Roadies encourage profanity?
 - 10) Which English/Bollywood movies/Television content encouraged swear words?

All the respondents unanimously felt that swearing and intelligence are not related. Only one respondent asserted that honesty is a factor that is crucial to swearing, in the sense that a free and candid feedback is the crux upon which swearing depends and so accordingly the respondent stated that swearing happens straight from the heart and not the head and thus emotional overflow or candid feedback is what swearing is all about. All of the respondents agreed that it would be better to swear and release one’s emotions and frustrations verbally rather than through violent physical means.

All respondents stated that gender has no role to play in use of swear words. They all agreed that it is human to feel emotions and that using swear words is a result of feeling those emotions and that there should be no restrictions upon who should or should not swear, especially with regards to gender.

All respondents agreed upon the fact that a place of worship is not the place where one would use swear words as it was a holy place and one is required to be your best self in these places. When asked if they would use swear words when teachers were around, all respondents except one agreed that out of respect they would not use swear words. They all agree that teachers were their “gurus” and thus they needed to be accorded that respect, only one respondent felt that if she does not feel the due respect for a particular teacher she might use swear words when the teacher is around, except that it would not be very loud.

Media influence was indeed understood as a very strong factor that influenced the use of swear words. But in addition, respondents also felt that other factors such as family influence was also strongly responsible for the usage of swear words. Two of the respondents stated that since they come from a cultural situation wherein using swear words is a very normal feature amongst adults, though they don't use the words in front of their elders they are habituated to the usage of these words since childhood and thus using them comes naturally, albeit that they decide consciously when not to use them. Four respondents stated that for the youth it was necessary to connect to each other on a personal level and that in order to express genuine and 'personal' emotions use of swear words was the only way out. This corroborates with the survey findings regarding the reasons for using swear words: 34.6 percent said that they used swear words to “express strong emotions”; 14.6 percent felt that this is the only way as it “feels more expressive”; 14.6 percent also said that they use swear words for “humor”; while 15.1 percent of them use swear words “to fit in with friends”. 20 percent respondents stated that swear words are used out of “habit”.

All respondents strongly asserted that the situation decided the use of swear words and all respondents interviewed said that they used swear words exclusively in the company of close friends. Of the total respondents who, in the survey, have admitted to having used swear words (75.8 percent), 60 percent of them reported to be using them in the company of close friends, and when asked if they avoid using swear words on purpose, 60 percent of the respondents agreed to this as they felt that certain situations demanded that they keep control over their emotions and thus they consciously controlled themselves from using them.

Six of the respondents, in the interview, said that using swear words was considered “cool” among friends and thus was used to forge greater bonding amongst friends. One of the respondents strongly asserted that swear words amongst friends was used as a form of endearment and the tone and the body language expressed the friendly meaning intended in its usage. The respondent also asserted that the youth were very open to its usage in daily conversations but could deduce the unfriendliness and rage in its usage through the tone and body language of the user. One of the respondents said that swear words was the only language that could connect like-minded youngsters and thus its usage is a strong indicator of the youthful bonding that groups share with each other. They also asserted that they were more comfortable using swear words with like-minded friends, more often when in the company of friends of same gender or with friends when the “gender was not considered and only friendship mattered”. This study differs with studies such as that of Melanie and Kahlbaugh whose study finds that men are more likely to view profanity as helpful to create social dominance and facilitate social acceptance, and that swearing can be therefore be used to express a social hierarchy, to highlight an issue, for confrontation purposes, or even as a common bond. In fact, they note that when gender is unknown, swearing speakers are more likely to be assumed to be men. In this study undertaken we find that the youth value their friendship more than the gender of the friends and treat them on the same level.

CONCLUSION

This study comes to the conclusion that there is gender wise equality when it comes to usage of profanity in practice. However, the attitude toward swearing is the subject that needs more focus. 59.5 percent of the respondents who stated that women shouldn't use profanity are female, accounting for 50.8 percent of the total respondents. This demonstrates how our patriarchal culture manipulates the feminine mentality. Who should say what, is decided by society. Although these guidelines are not explicitly stated for everyone to go by, the patriarchal power functions in a Foucauldian manner. The study very explicitly revealed that the youth feel that the context dictated the usage of profanity, and every respondent stated that they only used profanity when they were around close friends. Using profanity was seen as “cool” by friends and was therefore utilized to strengthen friendships, using profanity with friends was a sign of affection. When it comes to using profanity, gender is irrelevant. This study concludes that the youth of today believe that people should not be restricted in their ability to use profanity, particularly when it comes to gender, because it is human nature to experience emotions and that using profanity is a reaction to those emotions.

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