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Swearing

A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study

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Preface

This book is a study of swearing, its shape, use and manifestations in English and a number of other languages. The discussion and many of the examples in the book are in English, but there will also be more or less extensive forays into a number of other languages, viz. Arabic, Cantonese, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Turkish and Urdu. Although the data from these languages have been obtained in many different ways, my primary source of information has been interviews with native speakers based on the questionnaire presented in Appendix 2. The information obtained in this manner varied with the number of native speakers available and my account of swearing in the different languages makes no claim to completeness.

Swearing often involves the use of four-letter words like English *fuck*, *shit* and the corresponding terms in other languages, and on account of this it is regarded by many as disrespectful, vulgar and offensive. Some also regard it as blasphemous on account of its frequent unserious use of religious words. Interestingly enough, however, and despite these negative characteristics, swearing also seems fill a need for many people who find that the vulgar and offensive nature of swearing makes it an ideal tool for adding emphasis to what one says.

In addition to the above sociolinguistic characteristics, swearing also has a number of linguistic features that make it well worth studying, features involving aspects of vocabulary, grammar and meaning.

The vocabulary items used in swearing consist of a limited number of *taboo* words, viz. words whose literal meanings denote semantic areas that are – as Hughes (2006: 462) puts it – ‘too private, too vile or too sacred’ to be mentioned. In the present study, these areas are referred to as *taboo themes* and comprise for example excrement, incest and sex, on the one hand, and religious concepts on the other. However, taboo is not merely a question of word content but also of word form: the word itself must be offensive. *Penis* and *prick* denote the same theme, but only the second is offensive and hence a swear word. It is an interesting but so far unresolved question whether taboo has more to do with form or with content (cf. Hughes 2006: 462 and the discussion in Chapter 1).

Grammatically, swearing is characterized by its *formulaicity*, viz. the fact that multi-word swearing expressions are not freely formed in accordance with the grammar of the language but are more or less fixed and resist formal change.

Semantically, swearing is special not merely because of the restrictions on its vocabulary, but also by the fact that the taboo words involved are not used with their referential or denotative meanings, but function exclusively as indications of the speaker's state of mind. Consequently swearing does not have meaning in the sense that referential expressions do. Instead it has *emotive meaning*, viz. it expresses the speaker's state of mind.

Finally, swearing has a number of distinct *functions*. In some of these, swearing is an utterance of its own, such as for example exclamations of anger, surprise like *Shit!* and *Bloody hell!*, unfriendly suggestions like *Go to hell!*, or curses like *Damn you!* In other functions the swearing expressions are part of an utterance, for example *bloody*, *like hell*, and *the devil* as in *It was bloody difficult*, *We ran like hell* and *What the devil do you mean?* In combination with the swearing themes mentioned above, the functions provide a convenient method for describing individual instances of swearing.

The characteristics outlined above are shared by all swearing and serve to establish it as a linguistic category of its own, not only in English and other languages but across language boundaries. It is precisely because of these commonalities of swearing that – in a study like the present one – we are able to identify and compare swearing expressions from different languages with each other, irrespective of the particular names used for that activity.

Such comparisons make it clear that with a few exceptions the swearing 'machinery' in different languages is basically the same and that the perceived differences between languages in this respect are mostly due to different taboo word choices from the same set of swearing themes.

Admittedly the number of languages available for such comparison in this study amounts to no more than 25 and granted that there are today at least 5000 different languages in the world, the data in the present study are far from sufficient for a full-scale comparison between swearing systems. However, despite the fact that decisions about the scope of my study were affected by the availability of native speakers, the choice of languages represented do permit certain limited comparisons between language families, cultures and religions, as the statistics in Appendix 1 indicate.

Acknowledgements

A study like the present one would have been impossible without the cooperation of a vast number of informants willing to answer the questions in the questionnaire and discuss the issues arising from that process, often offering information on the finer points of swearing in their own language about which I would otherwise have remained ignorant. I am deeply grateful to all of them. I would like to thank Kingsley Bolton for his comments on various aspects of my work and Antoinette Renouf, Andrew Kehoe and Rodopi for permission to use copyright material from *Corpus Linguistics: Refinements and Reassessments*. Finally I would like to thank my wife Kerstin for her support and assistance.

Transliteration

Several of the languages included in this study have writing systems that require transliteration (romanization) in order to be represented in English. In most cases this does not present a problem since the examples used in the literature have already been adapted to English spelling. In the case of Russian, however, it is often the case that examples in the literature are written in the Cyrillic alphabet, for which there are several romanization systems available.

In the present study I have mainly followed the spelling suggestions in the so-called Scholarly romanization system as described under *Romanization of Russian* in the Wikipedia Encyclopedia. My only deviation from the Scholarly system is the adoption of the spelling *yo* for Russian Cyrillic *ё*. As a consequence, the well-known Russian insult meaning ‘Somebody has fucked your mother’ has been realized in the present book as *Yob tvojú mat’*.

In the representation of data from Cantonese and Mandarin the different tones have been indicated in accordance with the Yale system.

List of Abbreviations

BNC	The British National Corpus
Cassell	<i>Cassell's Dictionary of Slang</i>
COCA	Corpus of Contemporary American English
COED	Corpus of English Dialogues
CNPD	<i>The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English</i>
ODE	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of English</i>
OED	The Oxford English Dictionary