

Who's Swearing Now?
The Social Aspects
of Conversational Swearing

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By

Kristy Beers Fägersten

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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SpongeBob: But Mr. Krabs, we were only using our sentence enhancers.

Patrick: Yeah, it's fancy talk.

Mr. Krabs: There ain't nothing fancy about that word!

SpongeBob: You mean, “(*censored by dolphin chirp*)”?

Mr. Krabs: Yes, that one. Now quit saying it! It's a bad word.

SpongeBob and Patrick: Bad word?!

Mr. Krabs: Yes sirree, that's bad word number 11. In fact, there are 13 bad words you should never use.

Squidward: Don't you mean there are only 7?

Mr. Krabs: Not if you're a sailor!

SpongeBob: Wow, 13!

Patrick: That's a lot of (*censored by dolphin chirp*) bad words!

SpongeBob SquarePants, Season 2 Episode 38: Sailor Mouth

CHAPTER ONE

A SWEAR WORD BY ANY OTHER NAME

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. This long but nonetheless non-exhaustive list of descriptors gives an indication both of the wide range of alternate labels that exist, and of the kind of words or language these labels denote. Most people have at the very least a general idea of what such words or language use these descriptors refer to, if not an intimate knowledge of or even personal affinity for some particular examples. One definitive set of words encompassed by these labels is nonetheless elusive, due in part to the subjectivity of defining swearing. In very basic terms, swearing refers to the use of words which have the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, objectionable, or unacceptable in any given social context. The fact that there are so many labels for such words or language use is testimony to the variable nature of swearing. Indeed, not every use of a swear word is an instance of swearing (e.g., “If you’re looking for sympathy you’ll find it between shit and syphilis in the dictionary.” (Sedaris, 1994)), nor has the definition of swearing traditionally been restricted to the use of a particular subset of words. Swearing research could benefit, however, from a problematization of this approach and a transparency in terminology.

Language use can first be deemed vulgar, foul, bad, etc. only within a social context in which speaker, listener, setting, topic and other variables—particularly participant reactions—are taken into consideration. This inherent variability and its corresponding subjectivity are precisely what make swearing a fascinating social behavior, both amenable to and demanding of in-depth study. Within the current body of swearing research, only a few studies reflect an interest in honing in on that subjectivity, while the majority of studies limit their investigations to one or more of three main aspects of swear word usage: identifying swear words, measuring their relative frequencies of use, and ranking them in terms of offensiveness. In the following sections, the research is briefly

reviewed so as to establish a departure point for this study before introducing the aims of the research.

What counts as a swear word?

The task of identifying swear words has been assumed many times over, since it is a necessary pre-process to both calculating frequency and measuring offensiveness. Complicating swear word identification is a general tolerance among both scholars and the general public towards open category membership. Just as there are many different labels for swear words, there are apparently many different words which can be considered bad, foul, profane, vulgar, etc. Limbrick (1991) notes that “swearing resists concrete definition; exactly what constitutes a swear word is generally determined by social codes” (p. 79). There is substantial disagreement over which words subsumed by the aforementioned semantic categories are actually *swear* words (Davis, 1989; Jay, 1992). A particular set of words commonly cited in swearing research includes *hell*, *damn*, *fuck*, *shit* and *ass*. However, the category of swear words remains open-ended, due to the fact that swearing is not defined in terms of specific words, but rather as a type of language, which, in turn, must also be defined. The original problem of determining what qualifies as swear words is then confounded by the subjectivity introduced by the resulting metalinguistic terminology.

Montagu’s (1967) ground-breaking investigation of the history of swearing led him to define swear words as “all words possessing or capable of being given an emotional weight”, acknowledging that “practically all words may serve the swearer as makeweight” (p. 100). His definition of swearing is indeed broad, encompassing “foul language, oaths and profanity”, and including ten different categories: abusive, adjurative, asseverative, ejaculatory, exclamatory, execratory, expletive, hortatory, interjectional and objurgatory; as well as seven sub-categories: cursing, profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity and euphemistic swearing. By presenting a total of seventeen possible categories, clearly Montagu was including in his understanding of swear words more members than George Carlin’s canonical seven (*cocksucker*, *cunt*, *fuck*, *motherfucker*, *piss*, *shit*, and *tits*) or even the additional six words Mr. Crabs alludes to in this chapter’s opening quote.

In Jay’s (1992) seminal study *Cursing in America*, he admits that his use of the term *cursing* to refer to “all sorts of dirty word usage” might be “somewhat inexact” (p.1), and thus he, too, sees a need to specify categories of dirty word usage, including cursing, profanity, blasphemy,

taboo, obscenity, vulgarity, slang, epithets, insults, slurs, or scatology. Each of these terms has been variously employed in research publications, and even Jay himself, in later studies, has volleyed the terms *swearing* (2008), *offensive words* (2009) and *taboo words* (2009). This persistent variation of labels has come to characterize swearing research, suggesting a trend towards an interchangeability of terms. For example, Kaye and Sapolsky (2009) admit to using a variety of broad terms interchangeably for seemingly no other reason than “to avoid repetition” (p. 431) and Azzaro (2005) uses the term *cursing* as the super-ordinate term for his interchangeable use of bad/foul/taboo language. Insisting on exactitude in terminology would nevertheless allow researchers and the general public to maintain fine distinctions between particular words or types of words which a haphazard use of terms can easily compromise. It may also allow researchers to account for and acknowledge cultural, cross-linguistic, and even dialectal differences (Kidman, 1993).

Even more problematic than an interchangeability in descriptors, however, is the variation in category membership, which has in its own right the potential to compromise an accurate depiction of swearing. For example, while it can be safely assumed that many people would readily agree that *fuck*, *shit*, and *cunt* are swear words, how many would be willing to allow words like *suck*, *cow*, or *boob* into the same category? Each of these words can be judged offensive, insulting, or inappropriate in certain contexts, but it is a questionable practice at best to assign them all the label of swear word. Nevertheless, these and similar words inform the conclusions of much research on swearing, including frequency counts and offensiveness measurements.

How often do people swear?

Frequency counts contribute to a more complete understanding of swear word usage by allowing researchers to map out lexical distribution and extent of use. The most important function of frequency counts, however, is simply to establish whether swearing occurs at all. During the early-to-mid 20th century, a number of general word frequency studies suggested a very infrequent occurrence of swearing. The 1930 publication of “The words and sounds of telephone conversations” (French, Carter and Koenig), for example, served as a word frequency database and was long considered an accurate representation of conversational English. However, the data included in the study represented only 75% (80,000 words) of the data originally collected. Omissions included proper names, titles, letters, numbers, interjections and profanity. At 40% of the omitted data, swearing

accounted for a corresponding 10% of the total database (Cameron 1969).

The *Bell* study, an otherwise reliable source for naturalistic data, has since been deplored for the omission of profanity which “compromised a true picture of dirty word usage” (Jay, 1992, p. 115). Other general word frequency studies (Dewey, 1923; Fairbanks, 1944; Haggerty, 1930; Thorndike and Lorge, 1944; Uhrbrock, 1935 in Cameron, 1969) have been similarly criticized for being curiously void of profanity due to the fact that their “word samples were gathered in such pristine situations and/or in such a biased manner that they couldn’t possibly represent typical U.S. speech patterns” (Cameron 1969: 101). Subsequent word frequency studies which indicated comparatively low statistics for swear word frequency likewise earned criticism for their methodologies and motivated counter-studies (Jay, 1978, 1992; Cameron, 1969). The Thorndike-Lorge (1944) word frequency count, for example, which includes “almost no profanity” (Cameron, 1969, p. 101), is criticized for being based on written English, with samples primarily from children’s and popular adult literature (Cameron, 1969; Jay, 1978, 1992). Berger (1968), however, concluded that “printed and oral English are generally alike in word frequency,” based on the similarity of his speech data to that of the published French et al. study. His conclusion was supported by Hipskind and Nerbonne (1970), whose sample revealed profanity comprising only 0.14% of their word sample, compared to Berger’s 0.39%. Hipskind and Nerbonne’s study was based on speech samples from a general adult population, while the Berger’s study was conducted on a college campus, with samples collected from conversations between students and professors. Claiming that the presence of professors influenced students’ speech styles, Cameron (1969) recruited student “over-hearers” to record speech samples from 1) fellow students, 2) non-student adults at work and 3) non-student adults at leisure. The collected data contrasted significantly with the prior word frequency studies, revealing a considerable occurrence of profanity: 8.1% of the college data, 3.5% of the on-the-job data and 12.7% of the adult leisure data. Cameron concluded that the proportionate occurrence of profanity in his data was representative of American informal speech, and that the low occurrence of profanity in previous word frequency counts was the product of bias and subjectivity. To test the validity of Cameron’s (1969) criticisms, Nerbonne and Hipskind (1972) reproduced their 1970 study, this time covertly tape-recording speech samples from a college student population. Their results resembled Cameron’s (1969): profanity was found to be a significant feature of the speech sample, comprising 7.44% of the data. However, instead of supporting Cameron’s assumptions about the representative nature of his

data, Nerbonne and Hipskind claimed that both sets of results were a function of the populations that were sampled, and that “the vocabulary used by college students in unguarded conversations is not representative of typical informal American speech from the standpoint of proportionate occurrence of profane words” (p. 49).

Additional word-frequency studies based on the vocabulary of college students support the implication that their informal speech vocabulary is disproportionately high in the occurrence of profanity. Jay’s (1980) study calculated word frequency based on covert recordings of speech samples from conversations of college students in public buildings, including classrooms. Profanity comprised less than 1% of the data, a result which is in accord with Berger’s and Hipskind and Nerbonne’s studies. However, for his 1986 study, Jay recruited the help of 12 students who, with field note cards, covertly recorded swearing utterances from fellow college students in public and private settings. This undertaking resulted in the collection of 2,171 swearing utterances. Although this was not a frequency study, the great number of swearing utterances supported findings from Jay’s earlier (1977, 1978) relative frequency studies. In these studies, college students were asked to rate the frequency of occurrence of words from a list containing both profanity and neutral words. The frequency with which the profane words were heard used was consistently higher than the same measurement for the non-profane words. According to Jay (1992), “these data suggest that college students use taboo words very frequently in a setting that is socially relaxed” (p. 141), a claim that supports Cameron’s (1969) and Nerbonne and Hipskind’s (1972) findings of a high percentage of profanity in the informal speech of college students. More recent field studies reveal a regular and consistent occurrence of swear words, suggesting swearing as the rule and not the exception (McEnery, 2006; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, and Greenfield, 2006; Thelwall, 2008)

The contrasting results from the various word frequency studies show that the source of data and the methodology of collection greatly influence ultimate conclusions. Samples of written English, conversations among participants of different social status and careful, formal speech are typically void of profanity, compared to an abundance of profane language in the unguarded, informal speech of college students. Contributing to this conclusion, however, is a questionable aspect of Cameron’s (1969), Jay’s (1977, 1978, 1980, 1986, 1992) and Nerbonne and Hipskind’s (1972) methodology, namely, the words they counted as swear words. If, as Montagu claimed, all words “may serve the swearer as makeweight,” then the range of words which can potentially be included in frequency counts

is indeed great. In fact, the studies which present high counts of swear word usage reflect the application of a liberal definition of swearing. For example, Jay (1986) included words such as *dog*, *Jew* and *moron* in his category of “dirty words”, while Cameron (1969) and Nerbonne and Hipkind (1972) included words such as *suck*, *queer* and *boob*. While these words have the potential to be inappropriate or even offensive in certain contexts, their status as swear words is certainly disputable. Therefore, the researcher’s interpretation of swearing must be taken into consideration, as well as the possibility that this interpretation may inflate and skew frequency percentages.

How bad is swearing?

The greater the potential of a word to offend, the likelier the word is to be considered a swear word. Offensiveness is traditionally determined by evaluative and semantic differentiation rating techniques. Research shows unequivocal evidence that swear words are mildly to highly offensive, and that some words are consistently judged to be more offensive (abrasive, aggressive, impolite, profane, upsetting, etc.) than others (Janschewitz, 2008; Jay, 1992; Jay, Caldwell-Harris, & King, 2008; Mabry, 1974). Sexual terms are generally rated most offensive, followed by excretory terms which, in turn, are typically judged more offensive than sacred terms. Specifically, *fuck*, *shit*, *cunt* and *motherfucker* (in varying orders) have been rated as the most offensive (Baudhuin, 1973; Bostrom, Baseheart and Rossiter, 1973; Driscoll, 1981; Jay, 1978; Mabry, 1975). In fact, hearing the word *motherfucker* has been rated as more offensive than witnessing extreme violence, defecation or sodomy (Jay, 1978).

Offensiveness measurements are normally achieved through the use of rating tasks. For example, subjects are asked to rate words in a list, usually with a numerical value according to a Likert-type scale, such as non-offensive (1) to very offensive (10). The evaluative descriptors vary from study to study and have included, for example, *abrasive* (Mabry, 1975), *aggressive* (Driscoll, 1981), *offensive* (Baudhuin, 1973; Bostrom, Baseheart and Rossiter, 1973; Jay, 1978), *taboo* (Jay, 1986) and *upsetting* (Manning and Melchiori, 1974). When the words to be rated are presented as singular vocabulary items in a list, that is to say, devoid of any context, the subjects are free to interpret their potential usage. However, the task of rating the words according to the evaluative descriptor encourages the subjects to consider the words used in only one way, i.e., as offensive, abrasive, upsetting, etc. While the imposition of the descriptor as the only contextual clue allows the researcher to control for interpretation, it

subverts the importance of context. For example, one speaker's happy reaction to a friend's good news may be, "Shit!" This would most likely not offend. This utterance taken out of context, however, and presented for evaluation on a scale of offensiveness simply as "Shit!" may encourage the evaluator to only consider offensive contexts of use. Such a methodology reflects underlying or even overt assumptions regarding swear word usage, perpetuating the one-dimensional view of swear words as categorically offensive and socially inappropriate expressions of negative force, while ignoring the significant aspect of swear word usage as an indicator of an intricate combination of social context and interlocutor variables. Word-centered and context independent approaches shed little light on the function and interpretation of swear word use in a social context. According to Davis (1989),

Once the importance of context is realized, one is led to see that any approach of the orthodox linguistic variety has no means of coming to grips with the underlying question, 'What makes [swearing] bad?' Rather, it assumes the existence of 'bad language' as a sociological given, and endeavors to account for its use. (p. 4)

Swear word use in context

The bias evident among some researchers that swearing is both categorically offensive and tantamount to an expression of anger and/or aggression renders alternative contexts irrelevant to their focus: Jay has directed much of his research at anger-analyses of swearing, and Ljung (2011) has focused on the cross-cultural analysis of expletives, epithets, and insults. Berger (2002) considered only gender specific insult terms elicited as word lists from her study subjects; Wilson (1975) asked subjects to rate obscenities according to a scale of increasing anger at hearing them in casual conversation; Driscoll (1981) elicited ratings of swear words as used exclusively in aggressive epithets, such as *You bitch!*, as did Oliver and Rubin (1975) when they investigated their subjects' proclivity to use expletives such as *Damn!*, *Bastard!* and *Son-of-a-bitch!* in various social situations. Similar minimal references to context reveal a maintenance of a clear bias vis-à-vis the nature of swear words: Bailey and Timm (1977) designed a questionnaire to elicit swearing utterances as responses to situations such as, "You scrape your shin" or "Someone annoys you". The subjects of the Manning and Melchiori (1974) study were asked to rate how upsetting certain swear and non-swear words were, as well as to rate how embarrassing it would be to say the words in the presence of other people, such as parents and clergymen (p. 305). While

the data elicited from such studies do indeed acknowledge the significant aspect of abuse in swear word usage, Winters and Duck (2001) warn that possible, non-aversive and relational functions of swearing “are missed by studies that use only vignettes or word lists to investigate swearing and profanity and that do not study the uses in real social situations.” (p. 72)

Reference to the presence of others as addressees or over-hearers does, however, imply a social context, ushering in a sociolinguistic perspective on swearing. The influence of social context on swearing behavior became evident when word frequency studies revealed that swear words occurred highly frequently in the informal conversations of college students (Cameron, 1969; Jay, 1986; Nerbonne and Hipskind, 1972). This influence has not gone unnoticed, and the need for a sociolinguistic approach to swearing has been recognized and encouraged: “The situation as well as co-participants may influence the uses and perceptions of obscenity in a variety of ways depending on a person’s gender, age, social class, and race” (Johnson and Fine, 1985, p. 22; cf. Andersson and Trudgill, 1990, p. 66; Davis, 1989, p. 9; Jay, 1992, pp. 12-13). To date, several sociolinguistic approaches to swearing have focused on hypothetical situation, interlocutor age, and interlocutor gender.

Hypothetical situations. Several researchers have focused on investigating the motivation for swearing behavior. The shared assumption is that particular events can evoke feelings or emotions conducive to swearing responses. In an analysis of what she refers to as “Australian b-words,” Wierzbicka (1991) claims that certain words (*bloody*, *bastard*, *bugger*, *bitch* and *bullshit*) are used to express an emotion that a speaker feels, but is “unwilling to articulate” (p. 219) due to the strength of the emotion. Instead of expressing their feelings, speakers may opt to “do something else,” namely, to utter a word that some people say are “bad words” (p. 219), thereby conveying the strength of the emotion without explicitly expressing it. Wierzbicka’s analysis reflects not only her opinion that “b-words” are “bad” words, but that swearing is motivated foremost by emotion.

Also suspecting emotion as the driving force behind swearing, Staley (1978) conducted a questionnaire designed to place subjects in hypothetical situations in which they would experience the following emotions: “fear; bewilderment; panic; defensiveness; pain; surprise; embarrassment; happiness; happiness for the good fortune of another; shock and horror; and annoyance with parental advice; institutions; unfair treatment; or uncontrollable or unexpected predicaments” (p. 368). In addition to a description of an event, the hypothetical situations included information as to formality of setting (e.g., home, classroom) and eventual co-participants

(sex, social distance, social status). The subjects were aware that the questionnaire was designed to elicit expletives, and they were told to assume the situations were emotionally charged and were encouraged to use strong words. Thus, the stage was set for swearing to occur, which renders the task of identifying the main motivating variable a difficult one. The strongest expletives occurred in responses to situations in which the subject was alone or with a close friend of the same sex; the weakest expletives occurred in situations which involved positive emotions. A correlation between swearing and social context, i.e., the types and number of listeners, could therefore not be ascertained, due to the number of variables, including sex of the subject.

Bailey and Timm (1976) also administered questionnaires designed to place subjects in hypothetical situations associated with different emotions ("exasperating" or "painful", p. 439). Emotion proved to be ineffective as a single motivating factor; almost all of the subjects reported that their decision to swear in any given situation would be impacted by "the social identity of fellow conversants" (p. 444). Subject age and sex, however, did prove to be significant motivating variables.

Interlocutor age. Age of speakers and age of their addressees, as well, have proved to be significant variables in the social context of swearing. Children begin learning and using swear words of varying degrees of offensiveness from the time they start using "normal" language, and admonitions of this behavior quickly follow (Jay, 1992, p. 71). As if to practice what they preach, both men and women of various ages report refraining from swearing in the presence of children (Bailey and Timm, 1976; Jay, 1992, 2000; Foote and Woodward, 1973; Oliver and Rubin, 1975). Females between the ages of 40 and 55, however, reported using expletives -sometimes too frequently- in their children's presence (Oliver and Rubin, 1975). While it was suggested that close social distance may be the reason, the lack of inhibition could also be a function of the age of the children, who, based on the age of the parent-subjects, may be at or nearing adulthood. Berger's (2002) college-aged informants reported daily use of swear words by their mothers (30%) and their fathers (34%) in the presence of their (college-aged) children.

The presence of older people, especially parents, has also been reported to be an inhibitor to swearing behavior (Bailey and Timm, 1976; Hughes, 1992; Oliver and Rubin, 1975; Staley, 1978). Hughes (1998) claims that the vestiges of the "relationship taboo [...]" seem in recent years to have changed from *pas devant les enfants* to *pas devant les parents*" (p. 10). Older people often represent authority; the presence of authority figures

introduces formality which, in turn, inhibits the occurrence of swearing (Cameron, 1969; Nerbonne and Hipskind, 1972).

Frequency studies based on naturally occurring, informal conversations show that males and females between the ages of 18 and 23 use swear words most frequently (Cameron, 1969; Nerbonne and Hipskind, 1972). Data from self-report questionnaires show, however, that males and females in a slightly higher age range (females aged 31-34 and males aged 28-32) are more disposed to swearing than their younger counterparts. The higher age range of the females reporting the most frequent swearing behavior may be a result of the feminist movement, as discussed in the following section.

Interlocutor gender. By far, the most thoroughly investigated aspect of the sociolinguistics of swearing is the correlation between swearing and the gender of the interlocutors of social interaction. Since Jespersenⁱ first expressed his oft-cited view of women as eschewers of obscene language, the stereotype of women as “guardians of both language and propriety” (Johnson and Fine, 1985, p. 11) has been both supported and refuted. It is a matter of simple observation that certain females do indeed use swear words, but Lakoff (1975) asserts that women, as “the experts of euphemism” (p. 55), employ “weaker” expletives, while “stronger” expletives are reserved for men (p. 10). Oliver and Rubin’s (1975) findings support this assertion; their female subjectsⁱⁱ reported tendencies to use expletives such as *Damn!*, *Darn!*, *Heavens!* and *Crap!* more often than *Shit!*, *Bastard!* or *Son-of-a-bitch!* (p. 195). Similar patterns were found by Bailey and Timm (1976): in reported usage of strong and weak expletives, males accounted for 64% of the total usage of strong expletives, e.g., *damn*, *fuck* and *shit*, while females accounted for 70% of the total usage of weak expletives e.g., *darn*, *oh*, and *oops* (cf. Stenström (1991) who found similar patterning in her corpus of actual usage).

The reported female preference for using weaker expletives may be a function of their offensiveness threshold: females consistently rate obscene language as more offensive than males do. Selnow’s (1985) female subjects reported not only less frequent swearing behavior than the male subjects, but also higher sensitivity to contextual appropriateness of swear word usage. Wilson (1975) found that female students reported greater anger than their male counterparts at hearing obscenities in conversation. A second set of female subjects rated “bawdy” (Wilson, 1975, p. 1074) stories with obscenities as significantly less funny than the male subjects did, with opposite ratings reported for stories containing no obscene language. Abbott and Jay (1978) and Sewell (1984) also found that their male subjects perceived more humor in jokes and cartoons with obscene

language than the female subjects did. Moreover, Sewell (1984) found that the males' humor ratings were in direct proportion to the strength of the obscenities, while female ratings revealed an inverse relationship between strong expletives and humor. Only Jay's (1977) and Berger's (2002) offensiveness ratings show evidence contrary to these significant gender differences. In Berger's study, the female subjects' offensiveness ratings for 6 of the 12 mutually-used insult were lower than or equal to the males' scores. In Jay's study, female subjects gave only 18 of the 28 (64%) taboo words a more offensive rating than the males did, with no ratings showing considerable (greater than a 1.3 point difference on a scale of 1 to 9) differences according to sex. It should be noted, however, that in this study, the subjects were told not to rate according to *their own* standards, but rather to rate how obscene they thought the list of words would be to "a significant part of the population" (p. 249), and, as such, represent relative, not absolute, ratings.

The overall higher sensitivity to the offensiveness of swear words reported by females may result in swearing inhibitions. Frequency studies restricted to swear word occurrence and based on naturalistic, spontaneous speech show male swearing behavior to be significantly more frequent (sometimes more than double) than that of females (Anshen, 1973; Gomm, 1981; Jay, 1986; Limbrick, 1991). Despite the frequency discrepancy, these studies revealed no significant differences in quality, that is to say, in the strength of swear words used by both sexes (cf. Bailey and Timm, 1975, and Cameron, 1969, where quantity was the same but quality differed due to female 'weak' expletive use). When asked to produce swear word samples, males have out-contributed females, showing a wider range of swear word familiarity (Berger, 2002; Foote and Woodward, 1974), although no difference has been found between the sexes for the words most frequently listed as swear words (Berger, 2002; Foote and Woodward, 1974; Johnson and Fine, 1985), most frequently reported as used (Berger, 2002; Johnson and Fine, 1985; Staley, 1978) and most frequently used (Jay, 1986).

Male swearing behavior has been shown to be inhibited by the presence of females. The frequency with which males use swear words has been shown to decrease significantly in spontaneous mixed-sex conversations compared to the frequency of use in single-sex conversations (Anshen, 1973; Gomm, 1981; Jay, 1986; Limbrick, 1991). A similar inhibitive effect of the presence of the opposite sex on female swearing behavior is not as evident. Anshen (1973) found no change in female swearing behavior due to the presence of males. Gomm (1981) and Jay (1986) found a decrease in female swear word usage as a result of the presence of

male co-participants, but that this decrease was less significant than that evidenced by the males. Limbrick (1991), however, found that females *increased* their usage of swear words in mixed-sex conversations. His explanation for this phenomenon is accommodation by both sexes: males, under the impression that females do not swear, accommodate them by decreasing their own usage of swear words, while females, under the impression that males swear more often than they do, accommodate them by increasing their swearing frequency.

Studies on the respective perceptions that males and females have regarding their own and each other's swearing behavior show the persistence of the stereotypes expressed by Jespersen (1922) and Lakoff (1975). According to Coates (1986):

These writers claim to describe women's more polite use of the language, but we should ask whether what they are actually doing is attempting to prescribe how women ought to talk. Avoidance of swearing and of "coarse" words is held up to female speakers as the ideal to be aimed at.... (p. 22)

The affirmation of swearing as masculine behavior also serves the purpose of prescriptivism, that is, promoting a stylistically or grammatically standard way of using language. Berger (1970), Bergler (1936), Dooling (1996), Mencken (1936) and Montagu (1967) repeatedly make references to males as the exclusive practitioners of swearing. The implication of swearing as a male domain (Frank, 1983) can also be found in the language of swearing itself, which includes an abundance of terms for females and their body parts (Hughes, 1998; Hymes in Lakoff, 1975). Such sexism has resulted in a consciousness-raising among feminists, who see swearing as an example of language as a "male-derived system of chauvinist bias, which is, therefore, equally open to semantic engineering by chauvinists" (Hughes, 1998, p. 206).

Although no definitive link between the feminist movement and female swearing behavior has been established, Bailey and Timm (1976) and Oliver and Rubin (1975) found that awareness of the feminist argument and involvement in women's liberation was positively associated with female swearing frequency. Also linked to the feminist movement is the use of swear words by women of middle or upper-middle class (Bailey and Timm, 1976; Oliver and Rubin, 1975; Risch, 1987; Staley, 1978; Stenström, 1991), a behavior traditionally associated with lower working-class women (Hughes, 1992; Trudgill, 1972). Rieber, Wiedemann and D'Amato (1979) found that their feminist, female subjects used swear words denotatively more often and gave the provided word sample (*fuck*,

shit, and *bastard*) lower overall offensiveness ratings than the non-feminist females and males (1979). Finally, Berger (2002), de Klerk (1992) and Risch (1987) found that females were familiar with and reported using a variety of swear words to refer to men and male body parts, reflecting an equality at least in the semantic representation of the sexes.

The sociolinguistics of swearing

As the study of the relationship between language and society, sociolinguistics involves the analysis of linguistic behavior as a function of social variables. Swearing represents a unique case within sociolinguistics in that swear words themselves may have little to no semantic role, but are all the more socially meaningful. Shifting the focus of swearing research from single word or phrase to social context of utterance reflects a sociolinguistic approach.

As an example of linguistic variability, swearing is a behavior that is not practiced by every person at every moment, as evidenced by the various word frequency studies summarized above. A sociolinguistic approach to swearing seeks to reveal the social variables which are conducive to or inhibit such language use. To date, the sociolinguistic perspective within swearing research is represented primarily by studies of the effects of the participant variables age and sex. Social context, however, involves a variety of additional sociolinguistic variables, including setting and scene, participant race, interlocutor social distance and social status, goals and outcomes, tone or manner of utterance, and norms of interaction and interpretation (Hymes, 1972). All of these variables must be considered as having potential influence on swearing behavior.

From a methodological perspective, the Labovian paradigm is central to sociolinguistic investigation and the observation of speech variability. Labov (1970) distinguishes between inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation, the former caused by social factors and the latter by stylistic factors. He also acknowledges 'markers', that is, variables which are both social and stylistic. Bell (1984), on the other hand, argues that inter- and intra-speaker variation is caused by social and stylistic factors which cannot be teased apart. A sociolinguistic investigation, therefore, must address both inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation while accounting for social and stylistic influences.

Labov's axioms regarding speech variation convey the academic importance of systematic observation as well as the social significance of tapping into the vernacular style of users. To do both while at the same

time avoid influencing the course of the speech event requires employing different data collection techniques. Observation of spontaneous speech and other covert techniques of data collection engage unknowing participants in the kind of speech behavior under investigation. In contrast to this are overt techniques, such as questionnaires and interviews, which have as their focus *what* is said, as opposed to *how* it is said. These techniques allow participants to talk about their own and others' speech behavior, and opinions thereof.

Questionnaires and other elicitation techniques have typically been used in swearing research (Bailey and Timm, 1976; Baudhuin, 1973; Berger, 2002; Driscoll, 1981; Foote and Woodward, 1973; Hughes, 1992; Jay, 1977, 1978, 1986; Johnson and Fine, 1985; de Klerk, 1992; Mabry, 1975; Manning and Melchiori, 1974; Mulac, 1976; Oliver and Rubin, 1975; Rieber et al., 1979; Risch, 1987; Selnow, 1985; Sewell, 1984; Staley, 1978; Stapleton, 2010; Wilson, 1975). Observation of spontaneous speech is a less commonly employed technique (Anshen, 1973; Cameron, 1969; Jay, 1986; Johnson and Fine, 1985; Stenström, 1991) due mainly to the practical difficulties in accessing and recording naturalistic conversations. In recent years, the use of corpora has emerged as an alternative to observing swear word usage in spontaneous speech, for example McEnery (2006), Murphy (2010), and Stenström (1991, 2006).

Kasper and Dahl (1991) and Kasper (2008) distinguish between the two kinds of data collection methodology that have been discussed so far, namely, observation and elicitation. They further categorize elicitation into perception/intuition and production, while observed data is either elicited or spontaneous. As the elicitation of production is analogous to observation of elicited data, Kasper and Dahl's elicitation-observation dichotomy suffers from an unnecessary overlap. It is thus suggested that the term observation be reserved to refer to observing spontaneous speech, while elicitation be subcategorized into 'elicitation for observation' and 'elicitation for information'. Elicitation for observation includes techniques such as the sociolinguistic interview, reading tasks or completion tasks, while elicitation for information, on the other hand, includes techniques such as questionnaires and the ethnographic interview, such as used by Stapleton's (2003) analysis of swear word usage and perceived offensiveness.

Kasper and Dahl point out that a combination of methods is characteristic of successful studies, and Boxer (1993) encourages the use of ethnographic interviews as a complement to data analysis of spontaneous speech and traditional questionnaires:

[By] combining the researcher's own analysis of spontaneous speech with the information gleaned from native informants through an ethnographic interview, a more complete analysis of the specific speech behavior can be made than that which results from a reliance on more traditional interviews or questionnaires. (p. 116)

Mabry (1975) summarized the need for the incorporation of observation as well as elicitation techniques of data collection in swearing research, stating that "investigations of the relationship between actual and reported usage is [sic] essential for performing validity checks on the self-report instrument and as an end in itself." (p. 44)

Going where the swearing is

Accomplishing the goal of characterizing and ultimately understanding better the social aspects of swearing requires access to naturalistic, spontaneous swear word usage and, ideally, contact with those who use swear words or are exposed to swear word usage. Sociolinguistic research which investigates linguistic behavior by observing and consulting language users must therefore first identify who such language users are, in order to analyze the relationship between their social constructs and their language use. In other words, a sociolinguistic study population must be defined in terms of a speech community, a group of people who share "knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech" (Hymes, 1974, p. 51). A speech community which is associated with swear word usage will also, presumably, exhibit linguistic variation, such that swearing is not a categorical activity, but rather a function of variables: "the members of each community have their distinctive linguistic repertoires. In other words, in every community there is a range of varieties from which people select according to the context in which they are communicating" (Holmes 1992:10). The use of swear words can characterize such a linguistic variety, while other linguistic varieties may be characterized by a deliberate non-use of swear words. Thus, in a speech community where swear word usage can be expected, both the presence and absence of swearing can reveal significant sociolinguistic forces at work, determining social behavior.

The speech community for the present study consists of undergraduate students at the University of Florida. The choice of a college-student sample population was motivated by previous swearing research which both showed evidence of frequent swearing behavior within this type of speech community, and established baseline information for this environment. While university students are often over-represented in

academic research, in the case of swearing they represent a reliable source of observation data (Jay, 1986; Mehl and Pennebaker, 2003; Mehl, Vazire, Ramirez-Esparza, Statcher, and Pennebaker, 2007). It is precisely for this reason that swearing research should continue to include college student speech communities, while also striving to identify and investigate other, more diverse hotbeds of swearing. Ultimately, understanding swearing requires going where the swearing is.

The methodology for the present study combines observation and elicitation techniques, the latter in the form of a questionnaire and interviews. As a quantitative technique, the greatest advantage in conducting questionnaires lies in the potential to elicit a mass of information from a mass of people. The use of questionnaires also allows the investigator to tap into the explicit knowledge, intuitions and opinions of the members of a particular speech community.

The interview format allows the researcher to examine speech variation in greater depth by establishing an atmosphere conducive to eliciting the informant's perspectives on and intuitions about the speech behavior under investigation. Furthermore, through careful questioning on the interviewer's part, the interview can reveal the tacit knowledge that speakers have about why they speak differently in different social contexts. The inclusion of three different data collection methodologies allows for a triangulation of the data; that is, each data set can be compared and co-referenced with another, yielding more accurate explanations of the relationship between sociolinguistic variables and inter- and intra-speaker variation in swearing behavior.

The present study will exclusively use the terms *swearing* and *swear words*, which both allows for semantic consistency and reflects the prevailing tendency in current research towards this usage (see, for example, Jay and Janschewitz, 2008; Ljung, 2011; McEnery, 2004; Stapleton, 2010). These terms are furthermore intended to refer to the use of one or more of a set of words specifically limited to *ass*, *bastard*, *bitch*, *cunt*, *damn*, *dick*, *fuck*, *hell*, *shit* as well as their inflections or derivations, e.g., *shitty*, *motherfucking* or *Goddamn*. These words are not intended to represent an exhaustive list of swear words. Instead, they can be considered the core group of the most frequently listed words in swear word elicitation tasks (Berger, 2003; Foote and Woodward, 1973; Johnson and Fine, 1985), as well as the most frequently occurring swear words in the spontaneous speech of university student populations (Jay, 1986). In Van Lancker and Cummings' (1999) compilation of swear word usage in studies of "normal occurrences of swearing," this set of words represents the common members (with the exception of *dick*, substituted by *prick* or

cock). The restricted word sample introduces focus, which not only facilitates observation of spontaneous speech, but eliminates the subjectivity associated with the various labels and meta-linguistic terminology presented earlier in this chapter, ensuring a consistency in the observation of spontaneous speech, as well as among the questionnaire participants and ethnographic interview informants. Data collected by observation include only those utterances spoken by or to a university undergraduate student. Participants in the questionnaire and interviews were all members of the university undergraduate student speech community; interviewees were chosen from among the questionnaire participants.

Aims of the book

Swearing has not exactly been embraced as a proper subject for scholarly research, having long been ignored or judged inappropriate or unworthy of scientific investigation (Wajnryb, 2005). Although past and emerging research on swearing challenges this denial of a rightful place in scholarly tradition, the majority of existing studies tend to reflect an approach to swearing that is in line with a generally negative or abrasive characterization. Swearing is thus subjectively approached as inappropriate, offensive, taboo, illicit, etc., perpetuating the sensationalist aspect which encourages the dismissive attitudes. This reigning subjectivity is further imposed upon study subjects, introducing a bias which in turn influences results. Swear word offensiveness, for example, is not questioned from an existential perspective but rather with regards to degree. In other words, offensiveness (or inappropriateness, impropriety, etc) is not even questioned as a defining feature; it is rather the degree of offensiveness which is evaluated. There is little to no acknowledgement of the possibility of non-offensive swear words or swear word usage. Furthermore, the concept and definition of swearing have traditionally both been all too variable. From the plethora of monikers to the identification of members of these categories, swearing research suffers from a lack of strict definition. The variety of labels reflects an inter-variation not just among researchers, but also among people in general with regards to attitudes and convention. The varying category members, similarly, are testimony to such general inconsistencies or interpersonal disagreements, now in terms of what counts as a swear word, dirty word, curse word, obscenity, etc. However, while variation in the labels has little effect on results, variation in category membership has the potential to compromise an accurate depiction of swearing, particularly with regards to

frequency counts. An overly inclusive membership can inflate frequency statistics which, when juxtaposed with offensiveness ratings, can in turn suggest the overall situation of swearing as a very frequent, highly offensive behavior. “Swearing, obscene language, and profanity represent particularly challenging cases because they are ‘common’ in both senses of the word, that is, frequent and vulgar.” (Winters and Duck, 2005) Clearly, there is an inherent incongruity of the coexistence of something presumably very bad also being very common.

This book both complements and furthers existing research on swearing by rectifying some of the shortcomings of previous studies. By providing sociolinguistic analyses of spontaneous speech, questionnaires, and interviews from members of one American English speech community, this study aims to compare people’s actual swearing behavior with their individual credos about their own use or non-use of swear words and, additionally, about others’ sanctioned or ideally prohibited use of swear words. Significantly, this study acknowledges the use of swear words as a complex social practice fulfilling intricate pragmatic functions. The relatively few scholarly studies that have sought to understand and explain swear word usage have generally not addressed swearing as a socially determined behavior. This book aims to present swearing in a new light, taking the social aspects and pragmatic functions of swear words usage into consideration. By featuring analyses of an array of data sets which enable an exploration of the nature of swearing with regards to social variables, this book provides a clearer representation of the relationship between swearing and impetus, offensiveness, and context from a sociolinguistic perspective.

In Chapter 2, **Going where the swearing is**, a more detailed explanation of the data collection methodology (observations of spontaneous speech, questionnaires, and interviews) is provided. The quantitative results of the observation phase are then presented, including word frequency distributions according to sociolinguistic variables, each further broken down by gender and, to a limited extent, race.

In Chapter 3, **The Swearing Paradox**, an analysis of the relationship between offensiveness ratings and frequencies is presented, revealing that the most frequent words are often judged as the most offensive, resulting in the Swearing Paradox. This chapter thus delves into the importance of denotation vs. connotation, social context, and sociolinguistic variables to offensiveness judgments. Additionally, the chapter features a triangulation of observation, questionnaire, and interview data, cross-referencing reports on swear word usage with examples of actual swearing incidents.

Chapter 4, **Who's swearing now?**, features a qualitative analysis of specific swearing utterances and the reactions to them, analyzed by gender and race of both speakers and addressees, as well as social context, topic, and tone of delivery. In this chapter, special focus is awarded to the relationship between swearing and the interlocutor variables of social distance, gender, and race.

Chapter 5, **Swearing rules**, presents a qualitative analysis of the distribution of swear word usage according to social context, topic, and addressee compared to reports regarding the proprietary aspect of swearing. This chapter thus considers the set of unwritten rules of swearing expressed in the questionnaires and interviews, highlighting the elaborate system of judgment and interpretation that is called upon in the event of using swear words or interpreting others' swearing behavior. In this chapter, the concept of *self-divergent prescriptivism* is introduced, illustrated by examples of interview data in which informants describe modifying their own swearing behavior so as to encourage non-swearing behavior from their addressees.

Chapter 6, **Swearing in the spotlight**, offers a review of instances of public swearing which have attracted media attention, including swear word usage by rock star Bono, former Vice President Dick Cheney, a 13-year-old girl interviewed on national television, and actor Christian Bale. These instances are all considered against the background of the analyses presented in the previous chapters, illustrating how local linguistic investigation can inform analyses of general linguistic behavior.

