

DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This paper provides an essential cognitive psychological framework for understanding the pragmatics of swearing, making it a critical resource for Enlitens' goal of using strong language tactfully. The authors argue that the purpose of swearing is primarily emotional expression and its appropriateness is not universal but is highly dependent on context, including the speaker-listener relationship, the social setting, and the specific word used. This research offers a practical guide for how Enlitens can strategically use swearing to convey authenticity and frustration with the current system, while avoiding being perceived as merely impolite or unprofessional.

FILENAME

JAY_JANSCHWITZ_2008_PragmaticsOfSwearing_contextual_rules_for_tactical_use.pdf

METADATA

- **Primary Category:** RESEARCH
- **Document Type:** research_article
- **Relevance:** Core
- **Key Topics:** swearing, pragmatics, context, impoliteness, rudeness, emotional_expression, brand_voice, sociocultural_factors
- **Tags:** #swearing, #authenticity, #brand_voice, #pragmatics, #impoliteness, #emotional_expression, #context, #sociocultural_norms

CRITICAL QUOTES FOR ENLITENS

- "The main purpose of swearing is to express emotions, especially anger and frustration."
- "Swearing is the use of taboo language with the purpose of expressing the speaker's emotional state and communicating that information to listeners."
- "We believe that swearing is not necessarily impolite, inasmuch as offensive language is often used within the boundaries of what is considered situationally appropriate in discourse; further, some instances of swearing are neither polite nor impolite."
- "From what we have observed, we argue that swearing can be polite, impolite, or neither and it may be used with any emotional state."
- "Field studies of swearing... have demonstrated that swearing in public is not an infrequent act, and most instances of swearing are conversational; they are not highly emotional, confrontational, rude, or aggressive."
- "A common problem for impoliteness, rudeness, and swearing research is that all three phenomena are impossible to define universally because all are culturally and personally determined."

- "What is impolite cannot be universally construed, since impoliteness depends on the relationship between speaker and listener."
- "We propose that people have context-sensitive knowledge of swearing appropriateness that amounts to the rules for swearing or the etiquette of swearing."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The Function and Nature of Swearing

- **Primary Purpose:** Swearing's main purpose is to express emotions, particularly anger and frustration. It serves to communicate the speaker's emotional state to listeners.
- **Connotative Meaning:** Swear words are primarily meant to convey connotative or emotional meaning, as opposed to literal, denotative meaning.
- **Propositional vs. Nonpropositional Swearing:**
 - **Propositional Swearing:** This is consciously planned, intentional, and controlled by the speaker. It can be polite (e.g., "This pie is pretty fucking good!"), rude (e.g., "You fucking asshole!"), or neither. This is the category of swearing Enlitens would use strategically.
 - **Nonpropositional Swearing:** This is unintentional, unplanned, and uncontrollable, often occurring as an automatic emotional response (e.g., to surprise or pain) or due to brain damage. It is not considered polite or impolite, as the offense is unintentional.

Swearing and (Im)politeness

- **Not Inherently Impolite:** The authors argue against the simplistic view that swearing is always rude. Instead, its politeness is judged based on what is appropriate for a given situation.
- **Situational Appropriateness:** Generally speaking, swearing is appropriate and not impolite amongst peers in casual settings. In formal contexts and with participants of unequal status, swearing is not expected or appropriate.
- **Strategic Rudeness:** Drawing on Beebe (1995), the paper notes that people can be intentionally rude to obtain power or vent negative feelings. Swearing can be used for "strategic rudeness".
- **"Politic" Behavior:** Swearing may be considered "politic" (appropriate) in a given situation, and not merely polite or impolite.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS: A Guide to Tactful Swearing for Enlitens

This research provides a clear "etiquette of swearing" that Enlitens can use to ensure its language is perceived as authentic and powerful, rather than simply offensive.

Rule 1: Master the Contextual Variables

The appropriateness of swearing is dictated by a combination of factors. Before using a swear word, consider:

- **The Specific Word:** All taboo words are not equal. The study used three tiers:
 - **High Taboo:** cocksucker, cunt, fuck
 - **Medium Taboo:** bastard, goddamn, piss
 - **Low Taboo:** crap, hell, idiotThe choice of word dramatically impacts perceived offensiveness.
- **The Speaker-Listener Relationship:**
 - **Status:** Higher status individuals (e.g., a dean) are expected to swear less than lower status individuals. A high-status speaker swearing is rated as more offensive. For Enlitens, tactfully breaking this rule could signal a rejection of establishment norms.
 - **Gender:** Men are expected to swear more than women, and men use more offensive language, especially in the company of other men. Both genders are more likely to swear in same-sex contexts. For native English speakers, women tend to rate swearing as more offensive than men do.
 - **Friendliness & Credibility:** People are more persuaded by friends. A target person was liked less when described with a swear word by a "best friend" than by a "worst enemy". Receiving verbally aggressive messages from friends is more hurtful than from acquaintances.
Application: By establishing a friendly, peer-like rapport with its audience, Enlitens' use of strong language against the "enemy" (the testing establishment) will be more credible and persuasive.
- **The Social-Physical Setting:**
 - **Formality:** People are more likely to swear in relaxed, informal environments than in formal ones.
 - **"Turf":** Appropriateness depends on who "owns" the space. It is more appropriate for a dean to swear in their own office than elsewhere on campus. Conversely, it is highly inappropriate for a student to swear in a dean's office but entirely appropriate in a dorm room.

Rule 2: Use Swearing for Pro-Social or Strategic Purposes

- **Promote Social Harmony ("Face Building"):** Swearing can be used to build rapport and express positive emphasis, which is perceived as polite. Example: "This is pretty fucking good!". Enlitens can use this to build community and express passionate support for its mission and clients.
- **Vent Strong, Authentic Emotion:** The primary purpose of swearing is to express emotion. Using it to convey genuine frustration with a broken system can be perceived as cathartic and authentic rather than rude.
- **Employ "Strategic Rudeness":** Swearing can be used as a tool of instrumental aggression to intimidate or gain power. Enlitens can use strong language to attack the "face" of the testing industry, strategically positioning itself as a powerful and unafraid challenger.

Rule 3: Understand the Audience's Experience

- **The Learning Curve:** It takes time and cultural experience for speakers to learn the nuanced rules of swearing. Young children and non-native speakers require time to attain an adult native speaker's knowledge of what is offensive.
- **Emotional Impact Varies:** The perceived emotional force of swear words is highest in one's native language. Non-native speakers with less experience in a language show lower autonomic nervous system reactivity to taboo words and rate them as less offensive.
- **Nuance vs. Offensiveness:** The study found that non-native speakers are aware of the general offensiveness of taboo language but are less aware of how context moderates that offensiveness (sociopragmatics). Native speakers showed a wider, more variable range in their ratings, indicating a more nuanced, context-dependent understanding.