

# DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This paper argues that the scientific study of taboo words (swearing) is essential for a complete understanding of language and emotion. Author Timothy Jay demonstrates the "ubiquity" of swearing—showing it constitutes 0.3-0.7% of daily speech—and its "utility" as a powerful tool for emotional expression, coping, and achieving social goals. By challenging the myths that swearing is rare or meaningless, the paper critiques sanitized models of language and supports an approach that recognizes the importance of a person's full, authentic, and emotionally expressive vocabulary, which can only be captured in contexts like a clinical interview, not a standardized test.

## FILENAME

Jay\_2009\_UtilityAndUbiquityOfTabooWords\_EmotionalLanguage.pdf

## METADATA

- **Primary Category:** CLINICAL
- **Document Type:** review\_article
- **Relevance:** Supporting
- **Key Topics:** swearing, taboo words, emotional language, language acquisition, personality, sociolinguistics
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## CRITICAL QUOTES FOR ENLITENS

"When scholars disregard or dismiss swearing as irrelevant to a complete understanding of language, we are left with a polite or sanitized and therefore false science of language."

"The uniquely human facility for swearing evolved and persists because taboo words can communicate emotion information (anger, frustration) more readily than nontaboo words, allowing speakers to achieve a variety of personal and social goals with them (utility)."

"The ultimate offensiveness of words is determined entirely by pragmatic variables such as speaker-listener relationship and social-physical setting, as well as the words used and tone of voice."

"Swearing is like using the horn on your car, which can be used to signify a number of emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, joy, surprise)."

"Two-thirds of our swearing data are linked to personal and interpersonal expressions of anger and frustration, which seem to be the main reason for swearing."

"

*Fuck you!* immediately conveys a level of contempt unparalleled by nontaboo words; there is no way to convey *Fuck you!* with polite speech."

"Swear words persist through parents' attempts to eliminate them as parental sanctions have virtually no effect on swearing rates when children reach adulthood."

"Media ignore situations where swearing is beneficial, such as when it is cathartic or a useful substitute for physical violence."

"Pinker (1994, p. 334) asserted that swearing is not 'genuine language' because it is the product of subcortical brain activity. Pinker's emotional versus nonemotional dichotomy is false because languages produce a wide range of emotional expressions."

## KEY STATISTICS & EVIDENCE

- **Ubiquity/Frequency:** Field studies consistently find that taboo words make up 0.3% to 0.7% of daily spoken language. Based on an average of 15,000-16,000 words spoken per day, this translates to an estimated 80-90 taboo words uttered daily per person. The frequency of taboo words (0.5%) is comparable to the frequency of first-person plural pronouns like "we," "us," and "our" (1.0%).
- **Common Lexicon:** Despite hundreds of available taboo words, most public swearing relies on a small, stable set of 10 terms which account for roughly 80% of usage. This list includes  
*fuck, shit, hell, damn, goddamn, Jesus Christ, ass, oh my god, bitch, and sucks.*
- **Personality Correlates:**
  - Swearing is **positively correlated** with extraversion and Type A hostility.
  - Swearing is **negatively correlated** with agreeableness, conscientiousness, religiosity, and sexual anxiety.
- **Gender Differences:** Men historically swear more in public than women, though the gap narrowed from 67% of swearing episodes in 1986 to 55% in 2006. Men use more offensive words like *fuck* and *shit* more frequently, while women are five times more likely than men to use the mild expletive "oh my god," which accounted for 24% of women's swearing in 2006.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### Acquisition of Taboo Status

The paper proposes that words acquire their taboo power and their ability to arouse autonomic properties through aversive classical conditioning during childhood. Children are punished by

caregivers for using certain words, which conditions an emotional response to them. This personal learning is later reinforced by an awareness of institutional standards from religion, law, and media that sanction this speech.

## Functionalist View of Language

The author advocates for a functionalist approach to language ("Why do people speak to each other?") over a purely structuralist one ("What are the rules that generate sentences?"). A functionalist view avoids the "emotion gap" of structuralism by directly addressing the emotional and social goals people achieve with speech, including rude, offensive, and impolite language. This framework recognizes that communicating emotion is a primary function of language, and taboo words are a uniquely effective tool for this purpose.

## Neuro-Psycho-Social (NPS) Model of Swearing

This comprehensive framework, proposed by the author, specifies that any act of swearing originates from an interdependent nexus of three conditions:

1. **Neurological state:** The speaker's nervous system state, including autonomic arousal or brain dysfunction (e.g., Tourette's, aphasia).
2. **Psychological status:** The speaker's personality traits (e.g., agreeableness, hostility) and emotional state (e.g., anger).
3. **Social context:** The speaker's sensitivity to social rules, the speaker-listener relationship, and the physical setting.

The model aims to predict the likelihood and form of swearing by considering all three factors simultaneously. For example, it explains why Tourette's coprolalia is culturally specific: the neurological condition manifests through the specific words and gestures deemed most taboo by the individual's social learning.

## POPULATION-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

- **Tourette's Syndrome:** The uncontrollable swearing (coprolalia) seen in some individuals with Tourette's Syndrome is culturally specific. A Japanese person with TS is more likely to yell ancestral allusions (e.g., "shit grandma!"), reflecting a high taboo in that culture, whereas an American is more likely to yell *fuck* or use the middle finger. This demonstrates the deep interplay between a neurological condition and social learning.
- **Children and Adolescents:** Children's sense of what is offensive differs from adults'; for example, young boys find words like "baby" or "wimp" more offensive than their parents do. Swearing rates tend to peak during the teenage years and decline thereafter.
- **Bilingual Speakers:** Non-native speakers may know a taboo word is offensive but often lack the nuanced, native-level folk knowledge of *when* and *where* it is appropriate to use it. Native speakers are more sensitive than bilinguals to how context (like speaker status) affects the offensiveness of taboo words.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

## Critique of Research Practices

The paper strongly criticizes the common practice in psychological research of using written-word frequency counts (like the Kucera & Francis, 1967 corpus) to estimate the frequency of taboo words. This is a major flaw because written estimates grossly underrepresent the actual frequency of swearing in everyday spoken language. This misperception leads researchers to make erroneous assumptions (e.g., that taboo words are low-frequency) which can compromise experimental designs, such as when selecting control words.

## Implications for Clinical and Social Issues

An understanding of the psychology of swearing has direct relevance to real-world problems:

- **Anger Management:** It suggests that interventions should help people, especially children, cope with the underlying anger and frustration that motivates swearing, rather than focusing solely on punishing the language itself.
- **Verbal Abuse and Harassment:** Psychological insights can help legal and workplace scholarship better define what constitutes harmful or abusive speech.
- **Parenting:** Parental sanctions have little to no effect on eventual adult swearing rates, suggesting that punishment is an ineffective strategy.