Many faces of swearing: Are swearwords always bad?

Swearwords are often talked about as part of 'bad' language and many people associate the use of swearwords with the intention to cause offence. However, the role of swearwords is much more complex than this. From the linguistic perspective, swearwords are usually defined as words that are used to express the speaker's emotional state and to communicate this information to the listener. While the emotion conveyed by swearwords is often negative such as anger or frustration, this is not necessarily always the case. On the contrary, swearwords can play an important role in social cohesion and building of relationships, indicating to other people that they are accepted as members of a group or as friends. This handout explores the different functions of swearwords in informal conversations in English.

Key terms swearing   politeness   informal conversation   spoken communication

Task 1

When thinking about swearwords, many people imagine sentences such as these:

1. My brother was a pain in the ass and **an asshole** and a trouble maker so they didn't want him...

2. That's what I thought's like visiting why the fuck did you say you were free then? **You fucking idiot,** he's not free at all because tomorrow S: he's at work ain't he ?

These sentences come from real conversations in the British National Corpus 2014 (BNC 2014) and express a negative emotion towards a person. However, these are not the only ways in which swearwords are used. Look at the following sentences that also came from the conversations in the BNC 2014.

3. S: yeah but I'm sure that's through connections you know ? S: yeah S: there's **no fucking way** I'd be able to do that S: yeah S: yeah lives in a just a different

4. S1: You know but it promises faithfully that there's no leakage of any nasty chemicals and that's also got a filter in it. S2: oh that's good, **bloody brilliant** so I'm just amazed

5. S: and have a kitten S: I'm not having **a fucking kitten** S: oh S: I'm having a puppy S: you have a puppy I'll have a kitten

6. S: And it's in my overall pocket, I know it is. S: A **damned good job** I got one innit? S: Yeah. Well I could still get in but I couldn't lock the door say no bugger off. S: got a system now. S: It's **bloody good** too

7. S: are, we have got that insulating lot. Oh it's she's cantankerous! She's whatever you say don't wanna know! Well I was **bloody livid**! I was really livid!

Look at the swearwords highlighted in Examples 3 to 7 above. Try to explain the function of the swearwords in these sentences. You can consider the following questions to guide the discussion:

- In what way is the use of swearwords in Examples 3-7 different from than in Examples 1-2?

- What emotions do these swearwords express? Is the emotion positive or negative?

- What do the swearwords add to the conversations? [Tip: You can think about what would change about the message if the swearwords were left out.]

Although the use of swearwords is frequently associated with the expression of negative emotions such as anger and frustration, we saw in Task 1 that people use swearwords to express not only negative emotions (as in *bloody livid*) but also positive ones such as appreciation (as in *damned good*).

However, while we saw examples of these more positive uses of swearwords, we may still wonder how typical they are in our communication. We can find this out by checking the data and measuring how frequent they are in comparison to the swearwords expressing more negative emotions. In this task, we will use one type of swearwords, intensifiers, to answer this question.

Select underlined one of these intensifiers: *fucking, bloody* or *damn.* Now search for the word in BNClab using the following format: (fucking) (ADJECTIVE) – this query will search for all uses of the word *fucking* followed by an adjective. In the results, inspect the first 50 cases (or all examples, if less than 50) and decide whether the swearword is used in a positive context (as in *fucking amazing*) or a negative context (as in *bloody livid*). You may also find examples that do not fall into these two categories and you can mark them as 'other'.

Write a short report on your findings answering the question: How frequently does the swearword you selected appear as an intensifier with a positive adjective? In your report, you should include the following information:

- The number of positive and negative examples you found (out of 50).
- Percentage of each group.
- Some examples illustrating each type of use.
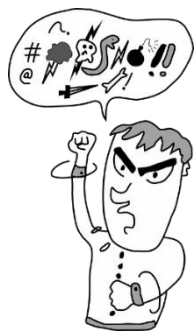
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Look at the three pairs of sentences. Each pair includes a sentence with a swearword and a sentence without such word. In what way are the sentences similar or different? Some of the factors you can consider:

- Meaning of the expression.
- Emotional intensity.
- Context in which these may be said (e.g. situation, people involved).

1. Well done!   vs,   You fucking nailed it!
2. No way!   vs.   No fucking way!
3. I can't be arsed. vs. I really don't feel like doing the job.

Swearwords serve many different purposes in the English language. Magnus Ljung, Professor of English Language at Stockholm University in Sweden, describes swearing as "one of the many devices that languages offer speakers as a way to give additional emphasis to their speech, often in combination with other emphasizing techniques like stress, intonation and tone of voice, not to mention non-linguistic phenomena like gestures and facial expression. The contribution of swearing in such situation is the added strength supplied by the taboo words." (2010, p. 4-5).

Thinking about the examples of swearing in this worksheet, do you agree with Professor Ljung that swearwords play an important role in people's language use? Or do you think language could (and should) do without them?

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Ljung, M.(2010) *Swearing: a Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study.* Palgrave Macmillan.

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