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An inquiry into the influence of age, gender and education on the perception of the offensiveness of swear words in Polish and English

### **Summary**

In the broadest – and very simplified – sense, swearing can be defined as the use of swear words. Swearing has been present in language since time immemorial and for many language users it plays a crucial role in communication, yet the phenomenon is still shrouded in secrecy. This is undoubtedly due to its controversial nature, which has deterred numerous scholars. Consequently, there is no single universal definition of swearing, whereas classifying swear words is a challenging task. This is especially surprising when one recognizes that swearing is a feature of human communication that is present in all stages of our lives, from early childhood to old age. When we examine swearing closely, it becomes apparent that it is an indispensable part of almost every language, including constructed languages. Swearing is common in private conversations, but it also occurs on television, in movies, in print, and on the Internet. Surprisingly, swearing may also be a beneficial practice – under certain conditions, uttering swear words can reduce both physical pain and social discomfort. Moreover, contrary to popular beliefs, frequent use of swear words is a sign of linguistic competence, not lack thereof. Nevertheless, swearing is customarily perceived as a reprehensible practice by both language users and linguists. This tendency is especially noticeable in Polish literature, where research on offensive language is usually set in the broader context of verbal aggression, in which swear words are seen as symbolic, verbal manifestations of anger. And while the abusive aspect of swearing is also often discussed in the English-language literature, there has been a marked shift in perception in recent years, with a growing number of studies focusing on the use of swearing in positively oriented situations, such as sex talk and jokes. Swearing is inextricably linked with the concept of offensiveness, a term that remains elusive in the eyes of many. However, what we do understand about it is that its perception can vary greatly depending on a person's preference, the context of the utterance, the language used (native or foreign), and even the prosody of the particular statement. Having defined the

theoretical framework of swearing, we come to the puzzle of its origin. From what we managed to establish, swearing is related to various, more or less specific social and cultural phenomena. Nevertheless, if we look at this issue from a broad perspective, the origins of swearing can be found in taboo, or, more precisely, in linguistic taboo, the range of which – as we prove in this work – overlaps to a large extent with the semantic fields of swear words.

In general, the vast majority of studies on swearing focus on its frequency. In contrast, we have decided to focus on the problem of the offensiveness of swear words in Polish and English, which renders our work a contrastive study. Comparing two languages is a complicated undertaking for many formal reasons, such as terminological discrepancies and the problem of identifying appropriate inter-linguistic equivalents. Nevertheless, having established a clear theoretical framework, we come to the fundamental question that guides our study, namely: what factors influence the perception of the offensiveness of swear words? Out of the many variables that could potentially influence this assessment, we chose to focus on three, namely, gender, age, and level of education. In light of the theoretical considerations presented in the first three chapters of this dissertation, we formulated three hypotheses, which we then sought to verify: 1) men perceive swear words as less offensive than women; 2) younger people perceive swear words as less offensive than older people; 3) less educated people perceive swear words as less offensive than well-educated people. Considering the investigated phenomenon from a contrastive point of view, our secondary goal was to identify potential differences in the perception of selected swear words in English and Polish, with regard to their different uses and functionalities. Having presented the research questions and hypotheses, let us proceed to discuss their validity. The first question stems from the lack of clear findings from previous research or, in some cases, from the absence of any studies on the issue at hand. The aim behind the second question is to capture how (and to what extent) Polish and English swear words can transform from vicious verbal strikes to innocent expressions, depending on the meanings and functions used. Looking at the problem from a broader perspective, we intend to uncover the intricacies of taboos embedded in Polish and English.

As already mentioned, the first three chapters of this dissertation constitute the theoretical background. The purpose of the first chapter is to present, discuss, and synthesize the existing knowledge about swearing and swear words. This chapter examines key issues related to swearing including terminology, typologies, functions

and offensiveness. Chapter Two explores the etymology of taboo, its relatively broad scope, its potential sources, and the repercussions that may occur upon its violation. But more importantly, the chapter discusses and analyzes the phenomenon of linguistic taboo and whether its most prevalent themes overlap with the semantic fields commonly used to create swear words. The main aim of the third chapter was to investigate sociolinguistic aspects of swearing in English and Polish. Here, we managed to place swearing within the overarching categories of slang (in English) and colloquial language (in Polish). After presenting a wide range of attitudes towards swear words throughout the course of time, we made an attempt to capture and describe the mutual relations between swearing and the media, as well as to estimate the frequency of swearing in English and Polish. These considerations were all carried out in order to highlight how different, seemingly random factors may influence the perception of swear words. In the last section of the chapter, we summarized the current state of research on gender, age, and social status (mainly level of education level) in relation to swearing. The practical investigation consists of two chapters. The aim of the fourth chapter was to present the lexical characteristics of selected English and Polish swear words, which were examined in the empirical part of this study (i.e. *Jesus/Jezu*, *damn/cholera*, *ass/dupa*, *dick/chuj*, *shit/gówno*, *bitch/suka*, *nigger/czarnuch*, *whore/kurwa*, *fuck/pierdolić*, *motherfucker/skurwysyn*, *cunt/pizda*). Each of them has been analyzed in terms of their etymology, meaning spectrum, offensiveness, thematic affiliation and actual usage. This semantically oriented analysis is based on the data collected from various lexicographical sources and on findings made by other researchers working within the aforementioned field. Subsequently, considering the sheer volume of research material and given the contrastive nature of this study, we have collated information about the investigated equivalents. This allowed us not only to create our own hierarchy of swear words based on their offensiveness, but also to assign them to specific functional categories that will be used in the final part of this study. While keeping in mind the existence of some subtle differences, we have concluded that the English and Polish counterparts in question share a vast number of features. Chapter Five represents the empirical part of this dissertation, motivated by the overarching research question, i.e. how do variables (i.e. gender, age, level of education) affect the perception of the offensiveness of swear words in Polish and English? Moreover, to what extent do different functions and meanings of swear words influence the perception of their offensiveness in Polish and English? For the sake of

clarity, the following chapter has been divided into three parts. The first part contains a detailed discussion about the research design and methodology; here we revisit the major theoretical assumptions, present the research questions and hypotheses, and describe the research tools, procedures, and participants. This is followed by a section on the results of the study, in which we present the overall outcomes and then proceed to an extensive presentation of the relevant data, limited to the variables studied. The above section closes with the presentation of contrastive results for English and Polish equivalents, which will serve to shed light on cross-linguistic differences. Finally, in the Discussion section, we not only summarize the most interesting findings, but also try to rationalize the obtained results and verify the hypotheses.

In order to confirm or refute our theories, we developed a convenient research instrument, i.e., two anonymous online questionnaires for English- and Polish-speaking respondents, made available to potential participants for a period of several months. The adopted research procedure was relatively straightforward: respondents were asked to rate the offensiveness of words (presented on a scale from 1 to 10), in two tasks, the first of which consisted of individual swear words, and the second of which used the same lexical items (and their derivatives) embedded in sentences that provided contextual information. Additionally, respondents were asked to answer several follow-up questions regarding the frequency of swearing and the contexts in which they use such vocabulary. This was done to further contextualize the data obtained in the first two tasks. The results obtained were then sorted according to the aforementioned variables, subjected to statistical analysis and compared between the two language samples. Ultimately, the research material comprised responses collected from 689 questionnaires, 401 of which came from Polish-speaking respondents and 288 from English speakers.

Turning to the discussion of the results, let us first address the issue of the influence of gender on the perception of swearing. Based on the results obtained through the questionnaires, it can be concluded that gender has an impact on the perception of the offensiveness of swearing; females in both language samples are inclined to perceive swear words as more offensive. However, it should be mentioned that the observed differences are more pronounced and statistically significant only in the case of the Polish-language sample; in the case of its English-language counterpart, the differences, though noticeable and consistent with general trends, are somewhat blurred. Given the totality of circumstances, one might speculate that such results are the reflections of

gender roles and expectations in a given society. The answers obtained in the open-ended part of our questionnaire show that Polish women have a more conservative attitude towards swearing and associate this linguistic practice mainly with unpleasant situations and negative feelings. On the other hand, the attitude of English-speaking women can be described as more casual, as they declare swearing in response to neutral or positive stimuli more often. It should also be noted that although of all the variables examined in this study, gender seems to have the greatest influence on the perception of swearing, sex-based disparities are slowly fading among English speakers. Still, regardless of their nationality, women are more sensitive to female-oriented swear words find them particularly offensive, whereas men do not automatically classify male-oriented swear words as highly derogatory. Furthermore, men are generally more accepting towards the use of swear words as identity markers, since they are better acquainted with this form. In the case of women, certain lexical items seem to retain most of their offensiveness, regardless of the specific application, and this is especially true for words such as *bitch/suka* and *nigger/czarnuch*. In accordance with the findings from the questions included in the final section of the survey, males in both language samples swear more than females, and are more likely to use swear words in response to positive and neutral stimuli. Overall, English- and Polish-speaking men and women are most offended by swear words used in name-calling, which is not surprising given its abusive overtones. Both genders are remarkably unanimous in the evaluation of the least offensive swear words, which fall into the category of cathartic swearing, denotative uses of less loaded lexical units intended to describe reality, and adjectival/adverbial uses, typically classified as instances of social swearing.

The relationship between age and the perception of offensiveness of swear words proved to be highly baffling. In short, the results confined to this variable emerged contrary to our expectations, as in both language samples the scores of perceived offensiveness were surprisingly low for the oldest participants, while remaining at a significantly higher, comparable level for those aged 15-29 and 30-44. This contradicts our hypothesis according to which, sensitivity to the negative load of swear words increases with age. According to our initial assumptions, 15-29 year olds swear most often, thus they should be desensitized to the negative charge of swear words, whereas 30-44 year olds are usually in the process of settling down and starting their own families, thus they habitually limit swearing and often condemn it in order to set an example for their offspring. The mean scores discussed here, however, gain more

significance when juxtaposed with the frequency of swearing recorded in our study, rather than the values reported in the earlier works; here, the reported frequency of swearing does not decrease significantly with age. This, combined with the fact that the majority of respondents in the oldest samples were male, may at least partially explain the observed inconsistency. As far as other age-related complexities of swearing are concerned, it is worth noting the dichotomous understanding of swear words among the youngest respondents; for them these terms are either completely devoid of negative overtones, or very offensive. This may be related to the fact that many such words are a part of their everyday language (slang), and therefore they use them mindlessly and with no malicious intent. At the same time, respondents aged 15-29 show a strong aversion to terms that are inherently meant to abuse someone. It is also interesting to note that the perception of the offensiveness of racial slurs decreases with age, hence for the oldest participants, racial slurs are ranked in the same category as obscenities. The reason for this discrepancy in assessment may lie in the fact that nowadays, young people are sensitized to the problems of racial inequality and the importance of using non-discriminatory language, while older respondents have more traditional views on taboo topics/words, and adhere to an established hierarchy, in which expressions pertaining to sexuality are given prominence. In view of the above, it is worth noting that, according to the qualitative data, swearing triggered by neutral or positive stimuli becomes less frequent as people get older – this usage was repeatedly mentioned by the youngest respondents, while it was completely omitted in samples composed of older participants. This confirms the idea that in many cases swear words used by teenagers and young adults are devoid of negative charge.

At first glance, there seems that there is a positive correlation between the level of education and the perceived offensiveness of swear words. As expected, the average offensiveness scores increase for more educated people, which can be observed especially in the Polish sample. In the English-speaking sample, the results are not so clear-cut, perhaps due to the flattening of the social hierarchy. However, in light of statistical tests, the differences we observed are too small to be considered significant, and therefore we reject the hypothesis that less educated respondents are also less sensitive to the offensiveness of swear words. With this in mind, it is worth proceeding with the discussion about specific differences in the aforementioned groups. Firstly, the respondents with elementary education feel hardly offended by the denotative use of obscenities, which stands in stark contrast to the attitudes of those who received higher

education. And while it is difficult to interpret these results solely in the context of quantitative data, this may be due to the fact that respondents use these terms on a purely descriptive basis, unaware of their negative charge. Looking from a broader perspective, the lexicon on sexuality is full of technical terms or highly obscene phrases, while there are hardly any neutral terms; hence, when describing these issues, the speakers have very little room for maneuver and, consequently, many opt for the latter. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that as much as 7% of the well-educated Poles claim that they never use swear words; needless to say, this value is exceptionally high considering the answers collected in other samples, where the values oscillate between 1-3%.

Our further observations are of a more general nature and thus they are not limited to the variables, although they still revolve mainly around the topic of the offensiveness. To begin with, it is symptomatic that for most swear words, their offensiveness measured free of context was lower than what was predicted in Chapter 4. This is largely due to the widespread process of devulgarization. Contrary to our expectations, we found that connotative uses are virtually always perceived as more offensive than denotative uses. This finding challenges the common belief that with each new, derived meaning, the taboo associated with the original term diminishes. From a functional point of view, abusive swearing, exemplified in this study by name-calling and unfriendly suggestions, was found to possess the greatest negative charge. What may be surprising, however, is the equivocal status of social swearing, which consist of adjectival intensifiers, adverbial intensifiers, fillers, and identity markers; while the first three applications were generally classified as mildly offensive, the use of swearing-based identity markers is a controversial practice, as evidenced by their relatively high means and standard deviation values. The cautious treatment of identity markers is particularly noticeable in the Polish-language sample and is more pronounced among women than men. This is hardly surprising given the fact that men's speech is, by definition, more aggressive and confrontational, and therefore such expressions are quickly adopted into their individual vocabularies and tailored to suit their conversational needs.

Moving on to taboo and swearing, based on the results of our analysis, we have arrived at the conclusion that in the Polish sample, sexual taboos, assuming the form of obscenities, are still considered to be the most offensive, while taboos motivated by political correctness (represented by racial slurs) are currently accumulating a

considerable negative load. The opposite situation can be observed in the English-speaking sample: here racial taboos have unquestionable primacy over sexual taboos. Apart from the aforementioned minor discrepancies, which are likely to disappear in the future, both language samples adhere to an established hierarchy of swear words, in which obscenities and racial slurs are followed by scatological terms, (which are expressions of taboos concerning bodily secretions and related body parts), curse words (in this study, represented by taboo against diseases), and profanities (associated with religious taboos), in that particular order.

In addition, it should be emphasized that further similarities between the two languages occur on a more individual level, namely in the case of specific inter-linguistic equivalents, which customarily receive comparable offensiveness ratings, regardless of their forms and functions. One difference that cannot be overlooked concerns the *dick/chuj* pair – here, the negative charge of the former is clearly lower than the one recorded for the latter. This seems particularly intriguing in comparison with the results obtained for the *cunt/cipa* pair, in which both terms are equal in terms of (high) offensiveness. In view of the above, one could make the assumption that in the Polish language the taboo associated with female and male sexual organs is still very strong, while in Anglo-Saxon contexts the notion of phallus is no longer as shocking as it used to be. However, we are far from formulating conclusive judgments on this matter, as the topic requires further research.

Although our aim was never to conduct a study that would focus on analyzing the frequency of swearing, we must nevertheless comment on the results we obtained in the last part of our questionnaire. Clearly, for many language users, the use of swear words no longer amounts to a violation of linguistic norms or social rules, and this attitude is reflected in the prevalence of swearing. For example, when asked about self-assessed frequency of swearing, an overwhelming majority of respondents admit that they use this type of vocabulary "often"; in fact, the only groups in which this answer was not selected as the dominant one are English-speaking women, English-speaking and Polish respondents with secondary education, and English speakers aged 30-44, who habitually chose the answer "sometimes". As we have already mentioned, very few respondents say that they completely refrain from swearing; apart from the already discussed sample consisting of well-educated Poles, respondents who abstain from swearing represent 1-3% of the total population surveyed. In conclusion, based on the data obtained through the questionnaire, it can be concluded that swearing is a ubiquitous practice in both

Polish and English. The reasons for this situation are, of course, manifold, but one should not ignore the fact that the proliferation of swear words in the media leads both to their increased occurrence in everyday conversation and to their devulgarization, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Finally, let us briefly summarize the responses provided in the open-ended questions. Here, we shall confine ourselves to presenting general trends, as a detailed qualitative analysis describing the circumstances that trigger the use of swear words will be the subject of our future research inquiries. In simplistic terms, according to the respondents, swearing in both languages is primarily associated with negative feelings and situations. This is hardly surprising, given how swearing has always been conceptualized as a negative phenomenon. With this fact in mind, one should not underestimate the social dimension of swearing, which occurs in friendly settings and is often triggered by positive emotions. Obviously, the above usage was reported far less frequently, but it still accounts for a significant portion of the responses obtained in virtually all samples. Usually the application of swear words in response to positive stimuli boils down to using them as emphatic devices, yet the above-mentioned lexical items are also listed in the context of storytelling and joking. It should be noted that positively tinted swearing was reported more frequently in the English-speaking sample, which leads us to believe that English speakers have a more relaxed attitude towards such language than their Polish counterparts. Moreover, while swearing in positive and neutral contexts was instinctively categorized as the social variety, the negatively-charged uses recorded in our questionnaire cannot be easily assigned to either the cathartic or abusive functions. This is due to the fact that while respondents admitted to using swear words because of their frustration or anger, they failed to mention whether such applications were targeted or just an emotional release, devoid of any victim. Responses in which respondents explicitly mentioned using swear words to offend someone were extremely rare, but it would be highly inappropriate to assume that the participants never resort to the abusive function of swear words. Thus, once again, the issue at hand deserves closer examination.

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