

Curses, Blasphemies, and Obscenities: An Analysis of Strong Language

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Abstract

There are substantial differences between cursing; cussing, swearing, blaspheming, muttering false oaths, using profane language; and using obscene, scatological, bad, or dirty words. Some of the theoretical models for this behavior include lower brain structure control over strong language, speech automaticity, and a bottom-up model of information processing. Understanding these differences will affect professional writing and interpreting professional literature.

1. Introduction

According to VanLanckerSidtis(2004), nonpropositional language in typical and disordered communication consists of formulaic expressions, idioms, serial and memorized speech, slang, sayings, clichés, and expletives. LaPointe (2006) found profanity, which he defined as taboo words, swearing, and obscenity, to be present across cultures and periods, and retained even after severe lexical impoverishment in aphasia. Coprolalia, the involuntary, brief, stereotyped vocal tics associated with irresistible urges in Tourette syndrome, is characterized by obsessive use of obscene or scatological language. Vocal tics may be present in about 4 out of 10 British adults with Tourette syndrome (Lees, Robertson, Trimble, & Murray, 1984); Other incidences report coprolalia in Tourette syndrome range from 4 to 60%. Coprolalia may not always be associated with vocal tics, as it has also appeared as inappropriate language tics in a prelingually deaf man with Tourette syndrome (Morris, Thacker, Newman, & Lees, 2000). (One wonders if the authors washed the participant's hands out with soap.)

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Brain activity associated with coprolalia has been found in prerolandic and postrolandic language regions of the brain, as well as in the insula, caudate, thalamus, and cerebellum (Stern, Silbersweig, Chee, et al., 2000). A case study of a young woman with traumatic brain injury (Pena-Casanova, Bertran-Serra, Serra, & Bori, 2002) reported that expletives were the only expressions used propositionally in the initial stage of recovery. The authors postulated that the pathophysiological feature of the case was the combination of bilateral anterior and posterior hemispheric lesions, which led to the release of overlearned language controlled by lower brain structures. Speech automaticity is shown not only by release of expletives, but also by continuing to count (following the prompt "1, 2 . . ."), to recite the alphabet (following the prompt, "a, b, c . . ."), and to say days of the week or months of the year. Automatic language and production of expletives are typically preserved in aphasia where anomia (impaired naming and word retrieval) is present (Goldfarb & Halpern, 1989).

Medications that reduce coprolalia are usually of the neuroleptic (antipsychotic) class. Behavioral interventions focus on increasing cortical control or reducing subcortical influences on language production (Lebrun, 1997).

2. "Curses, Foiled Again"

When Snidely Whiplash was defeated anew by Dudley Do-Right of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, what did he mean by curses?

The author's grand mother came from Russia, where there was a culture with a long history of colorful curses. English was her third language, after Yiddish and Russian, and the following gentle curse, which she affectionately applied to her disrespectful and children, combines languages. The sound transcribed as "ch" should be read as a voiceless sibilant fricative, written in phonetic notation as /x/. Zultatrolley cargevac hstin in boich. Zultapish in nickelsund kachin transfers.

Roughly translated, this means Letatrolley cargrow in your stomach. Let it be that you urinate nickels and defecate transfers."

The rich cultural influence of curses may be seen as a branch of sociolinguistics, and curses appear in classic novels (see the writings of the Nobel laureate, Gabriel Garcia Marquez) as examples of magical realism. Accordingly, they have a place in professional literature, as well as in reports of diagnostic evaluation and clinical intervention.

Professional writing that addresses coprolalia may legitimately include verbatim lists of words used or general references to expletives. There are many examples of journal articles using both strategies. We have recommended that clinical and diagnostic reports indicate a general category of obscenity or profanity, with or without specific examples (Goldfarb & Serpanos, 2014). With regard to obscene and profane language, as well as racial and ethnic slurs, words that are repressed by society have greater emotional power. Acceptance of this concept may lead to rejection of the current use of some racial and ethnic slurs by the same groups the slurs apply to, who claim these terms as some sort of badge of honor. If the terms are not repressed, then they lose their power to shock and offend.

3. The Third Commandment

If cursing has its own poetry, cussing is often characterized by terms coined to avoid violating the third of the 10 Commandments, the one about not taking the Almighty's name in vain. The offense has been seen as deadly serious, as in the strong negative reaction to the use of Allah to denote the Christian God in the Malay language, or the bloody reaction to visual representations of the Muslim God in Danish cartoons. Reaction to attempts to circumvent the Third Commandment in American cusses are far more benign. Some of these euphemistic constructions include gosh darn, god dang, golly, forms of gee (e.g., gee whiz), and the W. C. Fields version, Godfrey Daniels. In general, the word "profane" that means "outside the temple," refers to stronger versions of the above, and would include wearing, blaspheming, and muttering oaths.

Hemmingway's use of, "obscenity in the milk of your mother," in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, shows an interesting way the author uses the word *obscenity* to substitute for an obscene word.

Although some members of the Federal Communications Commission and the U. S. Supreme Court claim to know obscenity when they see or hear it, there is no official list of seven words you can't say on television (sorry, George Carlin). During the Watergate trials of the 1970s, the printed version of the audio tapes recorded in the Nixon White House had black stripes over what was termed "expletive deleted" when obscene words were spoken.

4. Lady Mondegreen

In 1954, Sylvia Wright wrote an article for *Harper's* magazine in which she coined the term "mondegreen," which refers to misheard song lyrics. The example she used was the frequent mishearing of a lyric from "The Bonny Earl O'Maray" that changed the true lyric, "laid him on the green" to "Lady Mondegreen." A mondegreen now indicates a similar mishearing, such as the 1960s rock and roll song, "Peppermint Twist" by Joey Dee & the Starlites that was banned for a time from the radio when the chorus was deemed to be a combination of an obscenity and an ethnic slur (actually, "Bopshoobaboppaboppashooba."). The misheard Jimi Hendrix lyric, "'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky," became "'Scuse Me While I Kiss this Guy," which is also the title of a book of collected mondegreens by Gavin Edwards (1995), as well as a Website called kissthiscguy.com.

We can extend the concept of the mondegreen to other frequently misheard experiences, such as those of children who inadvertently blaspheme by determining that the name of the Almighty is Harold: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, Harold be thy name." Most of us who are parents can recall incidents where we had to stifle laughter when our children proudly recited similar embarrassing phonetic similarities.

Mondegreens offer a way to consider auditory comprehension of language as a bottom-up system of phonemic → syntactic → semantic → pragmatic processing. That is, mondegreens are evidence of processing the sounds of words (phonemic processing) before word order (syntactic processing), word meaning (semantic processing), and context (pragmatic processing). If we analyze patterns of errors in speech reception tests, we can determine classes of sounds (often high frequency voiceless consonants) that are misheard in individuals who are hard of hearing. We also need to be cognizant of certain linguistic factors, such as frequency of occurrence of words in English language usage, where selection of the option of the more frequently used word may stop consideration of phonetically-related alternatives.

For example, “fink” and “think” sound very much alike, especially without visual cues, but “think” occurs much more frequently in English usage, and would more likely be selected as the word that was heard, assuming contextual control. We can also see variations of a mondegreen in the phonemic or literal paraphasias produced by some adults with fluent aphasia. One such individual, for example, produced the response of “corned beef and garbage” (Halpern & Goldfarb, 2013). Phonemic ambiguity may also lead to errors in lexical, semantic, and syntactic comprehension and production. An example appears below, under malapropisms, where a student wrote that clinicians have a tendency to illicit responses.

The classical criteria for evaluating auditory comprehension focus on the communication partner’s *intelligibility*, a measure of the degree to which an acoustic signal produced in an utterance is understood by a listener. Another appropriate measure is *comprehensibility* that considers physical and social contexts as factors affecting adequacy of communication. The difference in approach is characterized as “bottom-up” for intelligibility that involves the listener’s attempt to understand an acoustic signal, and “top-down” for comprehensibility that involves using whatever contextual information is available (Vogel & Miller, 1991.)

Finally, we note that the likelihood of a mondegreen decreases with repeated exposure to song lyrics. We learn to decipher the particular articulation and intonation patterns of the singer. Similarly, speech-language pathologists may conclude that a client is speaking more clearly when the purported improvement is the result of our repeated exposure. That is, Johnny isn’t speaking better, but we have learned to interpret “Johnny” better.

5. Malapropisms

In his 1775 play, *The Rivals*, Richard Sheridan created a character he called “Mrs. Malaprop,” who was famous for skewering the English language by substituting a word that was phonetically similar to the intended one, but excruciatingly different in meaning. Consider the following, from Act 1, Scene ii of *The Rivals*: Mrs. Malaprop. “You thought, miss! I don’t know any business you have to think at all—thought does not become a young woman. But the point we would request of you is, that you will promise to forget this fellow—to illiterate him, I say, quite from your memory.”

The modern avatar of Mrs. Malaprop was Archie Bunker of the television show, *All in the Family*, who would often refer to the problems he had with his "prostrate" gland. Continuing the TV theme, the old *Sinfeld* show brought many new lexical forms, such as "yadda, yadda, yadda" to common usage. Elaine, from that program, may have considered the following examples, gleaned from students' writing, to be "blush-worthy":

1. Clinicians have a tendency to illicit responses.
2. The rectus abdominis muscle inserts into the pubic symphysis.

6. Conclusion

The variety of what we consider to be "dirty words" leads to a taxonomy that includes cursing, violating the Third Commandment, and speaking obscenities. These words are used by neurotypical speakers to shock and disturb, because of societal pressure to repress them. Auditory comprehension of supposed "dirty" words may be phonetically similar to the intended word, but are deemed to be the one heard because of frequency of occurrence and the rejection of possible alternatives that are infrequent. This bottom-up model requires auditory processing on the phonemic level before considering syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Finally, adults who have had brain damage may resort to the lower-level or automatic language of expletives when confronted with impaired naming and word retrieval.

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