Swearing: A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study.
Magnus Ljung (2011)
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This book studies the forms, uses, and actual instances of swearing in English and twenty-four other languages of the Germanic, Romance, Slavic, and Finno-Ugric language families, among others. The study mainly draws upon the results of the application of a questionnaire used to interview native speakers. From a sociolinguistic perspective, swearing is seen as a type of linguistic behaviour that society regards as disrespectful, vulgar, and even offensive. It is a sociolinguistic phenomenon worthy of investigation because of its social regulatory function.

The volume under review begins with the definition and classification of swearing. To the benefit of those interested in diachronic studies on the topic, the history of swearing is covered subsequently. The two following chapters focus on forms of swearing that can be used as independent utterances. The remaining chapters deal with swear words that, in spite of their independent character, are used as parts of larger units. In addition, this book highlights the (socio)linguistic characteristics of swearing, featuring various examples from past and contemporary researchers. The author analyses the data from his own research throughout the whole book but also uses the one million word British National Corpus (BNC).

In the first chapter, ‘Defining Swearing’, the author identifies four criteria common to all instances of swearing. First, swearing is the use of utterances that contain taboo words. The use of taboo words in swearing adds emphasis to the message the speaker wishes to convey. At the same time, swearing frequently
violates cultural rules. Second, while the literal meaning of these taboo words is indeed used in swearing, they do not carry much weight. Third, due to lexical, phrasal, and syntactic constraints, swearing is considered a type of formulaic language. Finally, swearing constitutes an instance of reflective language use that reveals the speaker’s attitudes and feelings. In addition to these criteria, the author notes in this chapter that some types of swearing have entered into societies and languages where they have never been used before as a result of an increase in immigration.

The author explains how a taboo word’s degree of offensiveness is not related to the perceived strength of the taboo—which eventually changes over time. Even materials prohibited during daytime tend to be admitted for broadcasting beyond the restricted hours. In addition, taboo terms cannot be replaced with their literal synonyms in the context of swearing in spite of the fact that they display interchangeability with other words in that specific context. For instance, we cannot say ‘Shag you!’ instead of ‘Fuck you!’. However, ‘Screw you!’ can be used to carry the same meaning. This indicates that swear words present a specific synonymy which is particular to them. Swearing is formulaic as the meaning of the entire sequence cannot be understood from the words it contains, nor from its grammatical configuration. This feature is at times considered a case of grammaticalization, which is accompanied by desemanticization. Desemanticization, the loss of meaning, is very common in swear words. As an emotive language genre, swearing is primarily used to communicate the speaker’s attitude. However, the listener will also form their own interpretation of the utterance on the basis of the available linguistic and non-linguistic information. Ultimately, the speaker cannot be certain of the exact impact any use of swearing will have. This may lead to severe consequences or penalties.

In Chapter 2, Ljung elaborates on the subcategories of swearing. He uses the distinction between function and theme as the main aspects of the taxonomy provided in his study. The term ‘function’ refers to the uses of swearing, while ‘theme’ refers to the areas of taboo language from which the swearer draws his or her swear words. The pertinent functions can be divided into the three categories of *stand-alones*, *slot fillers*, and *replacive swearing*, each of which has its own subdivisions.

This chapter also lists five major—as well as some minor—themes from which most languages draw their swearing vocabulary. The first major theme is *religion*. In Christian cultures, there is a distinction between celestial and diabolic swearing, but among Muslims, diabolic themes apparently do not occur. The second and very popular theme is *scatological*. The third one is about *sex organs*. Using taboo words for the female sex organ was the most popular among all the languages studied by Ljung. The fourth theme revolves around *sexual activities*. 
In some Germanic languages, such as German and Swedish, speakers never use their taboo words for sexual intercourse in swearing. The final theme is about the mother, which is very widespread. Indeed, it can be subsumed under the category of 'ritual insults'. Except for English, the Germanic languages do not use this theme in swearing. Moreover, the mother theme’s abbreviated format, e.g., English ‘Your mother!’, is found in many languages. Among minor themes of swearing, ancestors play a crucial role in several cultures. Animals, disease, and prostitution are not uncommon. Death plays a significant role in all cultures, and some languages prefer euphemistic terms for discussing that subject.

Chapter 3 deals with the ‘History of Swearing’. It explains the first recorded instances of swearing, and all the social, cultural, and global impacts of the use of swearing up to the twentieth century. The first two recorded cases of swearing come from Ancient Egypt. Since the very beginning, swearing shows traces of self-cursing. Swearing performed by Zeus or Hercules was totally acceptable in classical Greek and Latin. Therefore, swearing focused on the use of the names of gods and bad language was not present in their swearing. This does not mean that classical Latin had no ‘bad words’, but that ‘swearing was not part of the linguistic repertory’ (p. 51). In addition, gender-based differences were apparent among the Romans. Uttering a swear word in public in medieval times could lead to the death penalty. Swear words were hence used in oral interactions for hundreds of years before ever being recorded in written language: people did not dare to use them in writing. Despite such severe punishments and the rise of the power of the Church during the Middle Ages, the use of swearing was not eliminated nor reduced. In fact, swearing increased. It became very common among all social classes regardless of their gender or age. Moreover, the use of swearing became an art form, since it could convey a well-designed linguistic ‘product’ and be used in a very sophisticated form. In Great Britain, swearing reached a high point during the eighteenth century, but in the following century respected members of society ceased using such language.

Swearing remains the most popular way to express anger among soldiers and sailors of any rank. In the twentieth century, swearing in general and the use of four-letter words in particular almost resulted in the same mode of speaking. ‘Fuck’ has been used since the seventeenth century, and compared to other four-letter words, its use is quite recent. However, this does not mean that other types of swearing have diminished in use. Scatological swearing, which is used in all languages, showed the highest usage of all types of swearing in this study.

Chapter 4 focuses on ‘Expletive Interjections’, i.e., how swearing, in many languages, contains expletives for exclamations of pain, surprise, or annoyance. Ljung formulates the hypothesis that any utterance can be an exclamation; nevertheless, what matters is the delivery. In fact, the delivery carries the representation
of the speaker’s state of mind, while the syntax or other features of the utterance are of lesser importance. Ljung’s study of expletive interjections in the BNC shows that the majority of expletive interjections are religious in nature, such as ‘Oh God’ and ‘Hell’. Expletive interjections may be used in two different ways. First, there are reactive interjections – often thought to be the most frequent ones – which indicate the speaker’s involuntary reaction to stimuli, as in exclamations of surprise, annoyance, or pain. By contrast, pragmatic interjections fulfill the communicative functions of subjectivity, interactivity, and textuality. These three functions are strongly related to the category of pragmatic markers, and their use exceeded that of reactive interjections in Ljung’s study (2009). It is evident that the same interjection can carry different meanings on different occasions. Furthermore, the majority of pragmatic interjections were used as slot fillers, particularly before clauses.

Chapter 5 discusses ‘Oaths, Emphatic Denial, and Curses’. Informal oaths and curses are the two oldest forms of swearing. Present-day English speakers have fewer choices as far as oaths are concerned and show a lack of creativity in their oaths compared to speakers from the Middle Ages. However, there are several languages, including Arabic, in which oaths are alive and unaffected by the interjectionalization and grammaticalization that have affected oaths in the languages spoken in Western-derived cultures. In addition, emphatic denial is found in many languages. This type of swearing uses emphatic utterances to deny statements, a usage similar to oaths. It is particularly used for denying the truth of a subsequent utterance, as in the phrase ‘The hell it is!’ In emphatic denial swearing, scatological and religious themes are most common.

Chapter 6 specifically addresses three types of swearing: ritual insults, name calling, and unfriendly suggestions. With few exceptions, infernal powers, worldly powers, and summons of heaven do not appear in these types of swearing as they do in curses. Instead, the types of swearing covered in this chapter use more common taboo themes like sex, mothers, masturbation, animals, and disease. The most popular theme in ritual insults is the mother theme. This theme is less related to languages than to cultures. In other words, two languages belonging to the same language family, such as the Finno-Ugric languages Finnish and Hungarian, do not treat the mother theme in the same way. However, due to immigration, linguistic and cultural boundaries sometimes get blurred. Some swear words that were entirely absent in particular languages or cultures have begun to surface in them due to the impact of linguistic and/or cultural contacts.

In Chapter 7, ‘Degree, Dislike, Emphasis, Exasperation, and Annoyance’, Ljung introduces swear words that are used inside larger units, e.g., as slot fillers. Since the focus is on swear words only, these are called ‘expletive slot fillers’ which express the speaker’s state of mind. It is important to keep in mind that in spite of
the tendency to categorise swear words, individual opinions on swearing, religious beliefs, and appropriate behaviour differ a lot. Ljung states that all the languages in his study use expletive slot fillers to indicate emphasis and dislike. He also indicates that in certain languages, such as Arabic, some ways of expressing dislike are absent. In addition, there are languages featuring different linguistic typologies and cultures that still use the same means of expressing dislike and intensification. Cross-linguistic comparisons of swearing constitute a fertile area for research into emotive language. Therefore, for those interested in studying swear words and emotive language, it would be worthwhile to extend the comparison to other languages not covered by Ljung’s study.

Chapter 8 focuses only on ‘Replacive Swearing’. In the previous chapters the author mentioned that it can be hard to determine the category to which a specific swear word belongs, or which criteria might apply for classifying that item as a swear word. However, this issue becomes even more difficult in the case of languages that assign more than one literal meaning to a specific swear word. In fact, understanding the illocutionary force of a swear word depends on linguistic and situational factors as well as the context of the utterance. Ljung elucidates a very interesting structure for creating new vocabulary in Russian which makes the Russian swearing lexicon quite impressive. Ljung’s findings indicate that there are significant similarities between the swear word systems of languages, regardless of their cultural and linguistic differences.

The distinct chapters of this book can be used as teaching material for various courses, including courses on sociolinguistics and historical linguistics. Scholars interested in such topics as comparative linguistics or multilingualism can benefit from reading the analysis presented in this book on the languages used in Ljung’s study. At the same time, the volume is a valuable resource for graduate students and researchers. Each chapter provides readers with rich information about pertinent studies as well as sufficient examples. In addition, Ljung’s own findings provide in-depth analyses of the proposed topics of each chapter. Since the author covers twenty-five languages in his study, his findings constitute a significant resource in their own right.

Notes
1 ‘Watersheds: time period between 6am–10 pm’ (p. 9).

References