



Swearing Beyond Insult: A Semiotic Analysis of Swear Words as Emotional Communication

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ABSTRACT: Swearing has been associated to offensive words, hostility, and insults. Yet, today's, instead of being just offensive, swear words regularly use as emotional and relational resources in daily conversations. This article looks at swearing words that use as signs for emotional communication in everyday communications of people who has similar and intense situation. This study observes how swear words serve as indicators of annoyance, empathy, humor, and solidarity by analyzing naturally occurring conversational data using a semiotic approach. The results show, the changing of taboo language in daily interaction in intense situations, functions as a communication technique that strengthens interpersonal ties and shared emotional experiences.

KEYWORDS: Content analysis, Emotional communication, Interpersonal interaction, Swearing, Social semiotics.

INTRODUCTION

Swearing has been a taboo language for very long time and it is often connected to hostility, insults, or breaking social rules. Swear words' negative or offensive features have been the key stress of old-style interpretations on them, which have emphasized their use as tools of animosity or indicators of social deviance. However, in modern time, researchers show that swearing satisfies emotional and communication purposes, especially in social situations where people have stress, dissatisfaction, or mutual difficulties. Nowadays swear words are commonly used in societies to express feelings, deal with challenges, or build relationships instead of offend others. For example, a group of colleges may use swearword to express their collective annoyance about a project setback, or friends may use swearword for the purpose of social connection and emotional release when discussing an unexpected personal issue.

From semiotic approach, swear words serve as indicators that convey meaning beyond their literal substance. They serve as communicative signs that allow people to express intensity, unity, or mutual understanding in the context of emotional states, social attitudes, and cultural values. As a result, the meaning of swearword diverges greatly depending on the situational context. As a result, swearing should be examined as a semiotic phenomenon and not just a lexical taboo. Since social semiotics, especially the frameworks created by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, stress that language is a tool for creating meaning in social contexts. This study looks at daily conversation among individuals who are dealing with common issues such as stress at work, issues at school, or group conflicts. The study analyzes how swearing serves as a resource of sign for emotional communication by focusing on naturally occurring encounters through expressing emotions such as impatience, surprise, empathy, or humor with strengthening interpersonal relationships and understanding. In order to provide an understanding of how language functions as an instrument for emotional expression and social connection daily life, this research uses a content analysis based on semiotic approach to expose the patterns, functions, and cultural meanings of swearing in these situational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, swearing has been understood of as taboo language that is used to insult societal norms. The negative meanings and connotations of swearword and its connection to offensiveness and aggression were the main subjects of early research in this field (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Nevertheless, by analyzing the complex interpersonal and communicative roles of swearing, new research is increasingly challenging this narrow perspective. A recent article expressed that the significance of analyzing swearword from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics, emphasizing how it shapes relationships and conveys emotional intensity beyond simple insult (Stapleton & Beers Führsten, 2023). However, studies on sociolinguistic outlines shows that swearing is used differently in different social groups and situations and serves as a means of expressing feelings like displeasure, impatience, or solidarity (Setyaningtias et al., 2023; IJLECR, 2025).



The interpersonal effects of swearing in group communication are also emphasized by some research. According to research on interpersonal pragmatics by Stapleton and Beers Führsten (2023), swearing is a discursively unique and psychologically strong tactic that can make strong relationships and show emotional investment in communication. Further research on young generation people showed that swearing makes intimacy and social cohesiveness among peers, particularly in casual conversational where profanity might signify mutual trust and solidarity (IJLECR, 2025).

The interpretation of swearing words supported by disciplines beyond sociolinguistics. Swearword might help people who are dealing with physical and mental stress, based on psychological studies on the hypoalgesia effect of swearing, showing a stress-regulation effect of prohibited language (Stephens et al., 2011). However, this data conducted a decade ago, researchers still frequently use these results to backing the claim that swearing has a practical purpose in dealing with emotional expression.

This research tries to emphasizes on the need to go beyond the idea that cursing is just offensive in light of these developments and it tries to presents swearword as a multipurpose communication tool that reflects shifting societal norms in daily interactions, expresses emotion, and creates interpersonal communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories of social semiotics by van Leeuwen (2005) and Kress (2010) are the foundation of this research which places meaning-making at the core of social interaction and emphasizes language's role as a means for interpersonal connections, communication, and emotion. Since, social semiotics perceives language context-based, dynamic, and formed by communicative aim.

Social Semiotics: Language as a Meaning-Making Resource

In social semiotics, linguistic signs are tools that senders of the messages deliberately use in order to create message in specific social circumstances and not in a fixed entity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). According to this approach, swearing is a sign system that people use to create mutual experiences, deals with social relationships, and communicate emotions rather than just a list of taboo words.

Gunther Kress shows how speakers of a language engage in expressive language to shape interactional dynamics, emphasizing that meaning emerges through choices among sign systems (e.g., lexical items, prosody, gesture) (Kress, 2010). Also, Theo van Leeuwen backup this idea that semiotic decisions are socially placed and reflect stance, identity, and relational placement within discourse, (van Leeuwen, 2005).

In this research, swearing is viewed as a discursive tool that helps interlocutors who face similar challenges co-create shared understanding, control interpersonal alignment, and convey emotional intensity.

Multimodality and Emotional Expression

Multimodality is the concept that the meaning is formed not just by linguistics signs but also by many other communicative modes such as gesture and interactional timing which is included into current works in social semiotics (Jewitt, 2014; O'Halloran, 2018). Swearing usually co-occurs with nonverbal signs that increase emotional significance, like sighs, laughter, and facial expressions, in daily conversations. The idea that swears words are signs that contribute in larger sign systems and not just operating independently is supported by this multimodal viewpoint.

Emotion and Interactional Stance

Du Bois (2007) and Stivers and Sidnell (2016) believed that the emotion in language is mutually an interactional reality and a psychological state that speakers exchange in conversation. Based on this explanation, swear words function as situational context and swear words are linguistic signs that transfer emotive orientation toward situations, people, or events. New sociolinguistic research demonstrating that swearword formed by interpersonal agreements rather than distinct lexical features and is used to show emotions such as annoyance, solidarity, or humor (Stapleton & Beers Führsten, 2023).

Integrating Social Semiotics with Discourse Pragmatics

In this research, interactional pragmatics used in order to explain how speakers anticipate and transfer meaning during conversation, although social semiotics explained the general framework. Interactional pragmatics explains the interlocutors' expectations, common background, and context effect an utterance's pragmatic power, or communicative effect (Tannen, 2007; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018). Based on this explanation, swearing is not just a lexical item but rather a contextualized expressive act whose meaning is co-constructed and negotiated within conversation.



Semiotic Functions of Swearing in Shared Difficulty

As a result, this research views swearword as a semiotic approach that:

Affective alignment to emphasize emotional states, like tension, surprise, and irritation.

Shows unity and empathy among people who are dealing with similar problems.

Controls how people interact, exchanging intimacy, sympathy, or comfort in a relationship.

Combines linguistics and non-linguistics clues to make rich emotional meaning in a multimodal manner.

Based on this explanation, swear words are not taboo or irrational signs of language; rather, they are meaningful communicative signs deployed in daily conversations to exchange emotion, alignment, and mutual experience.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative content analysis method based on semiotics approach in order to investigate the purposes of swearword in daily conversation between the people that are going through similar issues. By taking the social and emotional aspects of swearword in the context, content analysis allows the interpretation of language as a source for meaning-making (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; van Leeuwen, 2005). The research design focuses on occurring normal conversational data to confirm ecological validity and to observe swearing in its social and emotional contexts.

Data Sources

For the purpose of this research, the information was gathered from a variety of settings where people talked about shared challenges, such as:

1. Social media (WhatsApp) conversations in groups where participants discuss unpleasant situations or complaints.
2. Recorded daily conversation between peers about common issues, like strain from work or school assignments.
3. Online discussion boards or comment sections in reaction to similar stressful situations (such as, work disasters, exam failures). Researcher used only the talks that participants freely expressed their emotions, including cursing.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling technique used in this research to choose conversations that reflected common challenge or difficulties. The use of swearword as a means of expression, Impulsive, naturalistic interaction. And to have diversity in gender, age group, and conversational environment. Based on this, fifty conversational samples were chosen for in-depth study.

Data Coding and Analysis

The data analysis of this research followed social semiotic principles combined with interactional pragmatics. The coding focused on three key dimensions:

1. Type of Swearing:

Taboo lexical items (traditional expletives)

Mild profanity used expressively (e.g., “damn,” “hell”)

Intensifiers and interjections

2. Emotional Function:

Frustration/anger

Stress/relief

Humor/light-heartedness

Empathy/solidarity

3. Communicative Function

Emotional release/catharsis

Emphasis/intensification

Social bonding/solidarity

Relational positioning/stance-taking



Analytical Procedure

Finding cases of swearword: all swearword and interjections in the chosen conversations were underlined.

Contextual analysis: emotional and social signs were acknowledged by analyzing each in light of the whole conversation.

Profanity was observed as a sign that indexes emotion and relational attitude by the use of social semiotics, incorporating linguistic and non-linguistic indicators where available.

FINDINGS

For the purpose of this research, fifty conversations were analyzed, and the results showed clear trends in how people use swearword in daily discussions when they have similar problems. Instead of being primarily intended as an insult, swearing was used as a multipurpose sign used to express emotional intensity, control interpersonal alignment, and strengthen interlocutors' unity.

Emotional Functions of Swearing

Swearing was a reliable indicator of emotional states in reaction to mutual issue:

Anger and Frustration: Participants often used swearword to express their irritation with daily difficulties, such as difficult academic project or technical failures. For example, sentences like "This exam is f**ing impossible!"* or "I can't believe the system crashed again, damn it!" shows common understanding between peers and provided direct emotional relief.

Reduce Stress and Emotional Release: Swearing served as a technique for reducing stress among the people in a way that was acceptable in society. In the situation of a mutual struggle, many participants stated that using swearword to communicate emotion was "relieving" and "natural."

Humor and Lightheartedness: In a lot of exchanges, swearword was together with a little exaggeration or laughing, which reduce the severity of annoyance and promoted a sense of unity. For example, "We totally f**ed up again, haha!"* exchange humor, peer connection, and failure all at once.

Empathy and Solidarity: Swear words infrequently used to show empathy and relational alignment by recognizing shared experiences. For example, "Oh f**, I feel you!"* used as both social and emotional support when a colleague explains a failure at work.

Communicative Functions of Swearing

Elsewhere emotional expression, swearing also fulfilled social and interactional functions:

Intensification and Emphasis: The communicator's reply turns to be more vivid and considerable when they used swearword to increase the perceived intensity of emotional statements.

Social Bonding: By generating common ideals of expression, swearing raised in-group friendships, especially when communicators encountered comparable challenges. Relationship and group identity were supported by mutual profanity use.

Relational Positioning/Stance-Taking: The use of swearword exposed the speaker's attitude toward the interlocutor (aligned, sympathetic, or supporting) and the situation (frustrated, amused, resigned). In the context of negotiation of sentiment and social meaning was reflected in these small changes in tone and vocabulary use.

Semiotic Patterns Observed

Using social semiotics approach:

Swear words served as indexical indicators of peer alignment and emotional states.

They were multimodal; to express intensity, they frequently co-occurred with sighs, laughter, or exclamatory motions.

The meaning of swear words are very much depends on the context, circumstance, speaker relationship, and timing, the same phrase may convey humor, annoyance, or solidarity.

Swearing is hence a dynamic semiotic tool that combines relational signaling, communicative force, and emotional expression in shared stressful situations. Swearword does not serve as an insult; but it allows speakers to negotiate social alignment, build unity, and manage emotional intensity in daily conversations.



Table 1: The Summary of Data Collection

Swear Word Expression	Emotional Function	Communicative Function	Example Context
F***	Frustration, Stress Relief	Intensification, Emotional Release	"I can't believe we messed up the presentation, f***!"
Damn	Surprise, Frustration	Emphasis, Solidarity	"Damn, the deadline got moved up again!"
Shit	Frustration, Humor	Emotional Release, Social Support	"Oh shit, we're all in the same boat, haha!"
Hell	Shock, Frustration	Intensification, Relational Alignment	"This project is going to hell if we don't finish today."
Bloody (mild)	Annoyance, Frustration	Emphasis, Humor	"Bloody computer crashed again!"
Crap	Frustration, Humor	Emotional Release, Social Bonding	"Crap, I forgot my notes again."
Goddamn	Anger, Stress Relief	Emotional Release, Intensification	"Goddamn it, why isn't this working?"
F***ing hell	Frustration, Surprise	Emotional Release, Humor	"F***ing hell, we have another last-minute change!"

DISCUSSION

The results of this research show that, swear words assists as a rich resource of signs in normal talks between people having mutual issue and it's not just a foul language. This is consistent with social semiotics approach that see language as an instrument for creating meaning that is influenced by social context and interactional goals (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; van Leeuwen, 2005).

Emotional Communication and Catharsis

Based on the data conducted for this research, swearing is regularly used as a way to communicate emotions, especially humor, stress reduction, and irritation. In reaction to mutual difficulties, people often used swearword as a psychological relief. This corroborates other psychological research findings that show swearing has hypoalgesia and stress-regulating effects (Stephens et al., 2011; Hay et al., 2024). Significantly, the semiotic study demonstrates that swearword serves as indexical cues, indicating the speaker's affective attitude and emotional condition.

Swearing as Social and Relational Resource

Swearing use as a communication tool for relational balance in mutual difficult situations, going beyond personal emotional expression. Co-using swearword is a symbol of camaraderie, understanding, and belonging to the same group. This is consistent with sociolinguistic research showing that swearing can strengthen intimacy and social cohesiveness, especially among peers going through comparable difficulties (Stapleton & Beers Führsten, 2023). Verbal profanity's multimodal character is highlighted when it coexists with laughing, sighs, or exclamatory gestures, enhancing its relational and emotional meaning (Jewitt, 2014; O'Halloran, 2018).

Contextual Dependence and Meaning Negotiation

The finding of this research shows that swear words vary depending on the situation. Depending on the circumstance, interlocutor relationship, and timing, the same lexical word might express empathy, humor, or annoyance. This result is consistent with interactional pragmatics, which emphasizes that meaning does not only exist in words but also develops dynamically in social interaction (Tannen, 2007; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018). As a result, swearing becomes a negotiated semiotic practice in which speakers modify their words to express feelings and uphold social conformity.

Implications for Semiotics and Sociolinguistics



By showing that taboo language is a useful, communicative tool that integrates emotion, posture, and relational meaning, the study advances social semiotic theory. Additionally, it offers empirical proof of the multimodal and socially placed character of semiotic practices, demonstrating how swearing is an essential part of daily meaning-making in difficult social situations.

Furthermore, by emphasizing swearing's adaptive function in emotional regulation, interpersonal bonding, and shared experience, these findings contradict conventional views of swearing as exclusively bad. This emphasizes the importance of studying profanity as a component of interactional, cultural, and affective semiotic systems rather than in isolation for sociolinguistics.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is constrained by sample size and cultural context, but offering valuable insights. Digital and recorded talks in particular social groups are the main source of the data, which may not apply to all situations. Future studies should go more into the integration of multimodal indicators including gestures, facial expressions, and prosody, as well as cross-cultural differences and the influence of age or gender in swearing behaviors.

Because of this, swearing serves as a multifaceted semiotic tool in shared challenging situations, allowing speakers to manage relational dynamics, communicate emotion, and strengthen social bonds. This study shows that profanity is a significant communicative technique that reflects the intricate interactions between emotion, context, and social interaction in modern daily life, rather than just a language taboo.

CONCLUSION

In casual interactions amongst individuals going through similar struggles, swearing serves as a multifaceted semiotic instrument that combines social alignment, emotional expressiveness, and communication force. This study shows that profanity is used to express dissatisfaction, control stress, strengthen solidarity, and negotiate relational posture in addition to being a linguistic taboo or tool of insult. This study demonstrates the context-dependent and multimodal character of swearing through semiotic content analysis, demonstrating how the same lexical words can express relational alignment, humour, empathy, or frustration depending on the circumstance and social environment.

By presenting swearing as a useful, socially significant practice, the study advances social semiotics and sociolinguistics. Additionally, it offers empirical support for the emotional and communicative functions of taboo language in shared challenges, highlighting the need of studying naturally occurring conversations. Cross-cultural variances, gender and age disparities, and multimodal semiotic interactions, such as gesture and prosody, should all be investigated in future studies.

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