



## Swearing in class: Institutional morality in dispute

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how swearing in classrooms is variably construed and managed as a moral problem, and how classroom settings can demand higher standards than broader society. We review sociolinguistic understandings of Anglophone settings regarding what constitutes 'bad' language, the pragmatics of swearing across society, and trends over time, to trace a growing tolerance in public settings and media, particularly in Australia. We then review literature regarding swearing in schools. Using Douglas' (1966) theory of purity, hygiene, taboos and moral boundaries, we conceptualise schools as strongly demarcated 'purified' sites that undertake the moral work of imbuing social standards in the future citizen. Students' choices to swear in class despite teachers' repeated corrections can thus be understood as more than inappropriate lexis. The paper then draws from an ethnographic study of prevocational classes catering for 16 to 17 year olds created under Australia's 'earning or learning till 17' policy. Illustrative episodes where students swear in class are analysed to exemplify differently pitched responses. The conclusion reflects on the tension between an increasingly secular society more tolerant of swearing, and teachers' work to purify the moral climate in schools, to consider what the practice of swearing in class and its regulation achieves.

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### 1. Introduction

Classroom interaction has been shown to be a uniquely structured and variegated form of spoken discourse, which is contextually constrained, legitimated and shaped by institutional roles, shifting conventions, vectors of difference, and curricular goals (Cazden & Beck, 2003). However, it cannot be hermetically sealed from language practices in broader society. Classroom discourse analysis has contributed much around questions of how classroom talk achieves curricular learning, but it has paid less attention to how the same talk necessarily performs and manages classroom behaviours. Bernstein's (2000) concept of pedagogic discourse would highlight the essential interweaving of both an instructional discourse (the curricular 'what') and its underpinning regulative discourse (the moral 'how') which governs the social order in terms of what is (not) acceptable in terms of 'character, manner, and conduct'. In this paper, we pay particular attention to this moral dimension of the regulative discourse and how some language can be deemed unsuitable for classrooms.

Our interest is sparked by repeated observations of swearing by students, and teachers' constant work to curtail such language, in secondary classrooms created under Australia's recent extension to compulsory education (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Prior to this national policy, the school-leaving age was typically 16 years across Australian state jurisdictions, at which age students without further academic aspirations could leave school to seek work, apprenticeships, or be eligible for unemployment benefits. The 2009 'Compact with Young Australians' delayed eligibility for any welfare entitlements, and demanded that students be 'earning or learning till 17'. The policy allows the extended phase of compulsory education to be undertaken in 'prevocational' programmes in either secondary schools or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. Under this policy, non-academically inclined students tend to aggregate in disadvantaged schools that service communities with poor youth employment prospects, thereby pooling both economic and educational disadvantage. These 'prevocational' classes for 16 to 17 year olds, in such communities, serve disengaged students on behalf of other classes, others schools and other communities (Thomson, 2002). te Riele and Crump (2002) describe such school populations as 'reluctant stayers' for whom 'school has become a shelter from unemployment' (p. 253).

Our observations in these classrooms resonated strongly with Willis's (1977) study of the 'oppositional working class cultural

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forms' (p. vii) that played out in classrooms following the UK's Raising of the School Leaving Age in 1972. Willis's ethnography offered numerous verbatim quotes of florid language used by the study's focal 'lads' inside and outside the classroom, yet limited analysis thereof beyond commenting on its misogyny, and its part in the 'subjective preparation' (p. 89) for surviving the shop floor version of adulthood. Cognate studies in different national settings report similar data of students swearing, for example: Walker's (1988) ethnography of young inner city males making the transition from school to work in Australia; Nolan's (2011) ethnography of oppositional behaviours, language and 'attitude' as 'movements of liberty' (p. 118) in a heavily policed US school; and Barnes' (2012) analysis of the irreverent, ribald yet defensive masculinities performed in schoolboy humour amongst a group of white working-class Irish boys. The similarities across these diverse empirical windows suggest that while swearing may serve as an everyday part of students' lifeworlds, it pushes the boundaries of acceptable language/behaviour in the circumscribed interactions of classrooms.

We are interested in how swearing in class is construed and managed as a moral problem, and why classroom settings demand higher standards in this regard than broader society might. By swearing, we are referring to lexical choices that are conventionally designated as 'offensive', 'rude', or 'bad' language despite their common usage and their historical persistence. Focussing on Anglophone sources and settings, our first section reviews sociolinguistic literature regarding what constitutes swearing or 'bad' language, different types of swearing, the distribution of swearing across social groups, trends over time, and some of the pragmatics behind why, when, and with/to whom people swear. We then consider the treatment and regulation of swearing and offensive language in contemporary Australian society over time to trace a growing tolerance of swearing in public spaces and media content. Next we review the limited research literature regarding the treatment of swearing in schools. We then develop a theoretical frame from Douglas' (1966/2003) theory of purity, pollution, and moral boundaries to understand schools as strongly demarcated, 'purified' sites constructed for the moral work of imbuing socially valued standards in the future citizen. We argue that students' choices to continue swearing in class despite teachers' repeated corrections can be understood as more than a linguistic phenomenon.

The paper then presents transcribed moments drawn from an empirical study of the moral order in prevocational classes catering for 16–17 year olds in schools and TAFE settings, created under Australia's 'earning or learning till 17' policy. In contrast to classrooms offering more academically ambitious programmes to students of the same age, in the same government system, observed by the first author in another project (Doherty, 2012), these sites of extended compulsory schooling were marked by students' frequent swearing in class and teachers' repeated efforts to curb this behaviour. Episodes where students swear in class are analysed to exemplify different responses to, and accommodations of, swearing in class. The conclusion reflects on the tension between a society that is increasingly tolerant of swearing, and the work to purify the moral climate in schools, to consider how the disruptive practice of flagrant and persistent swearing in class might be interpreted.

## 2. A brief sociolinguistics of swearing

Certain language in certain circumstances can be considered rude and offensive. Although there may be a broad public consensus around what constitutes swearing or 'bad' language, sociolinguistics paints a more complex and refracted picture. Swearing shares characteristics with the language of taboo, and the language of offence (Crystal, 2003). The swearing that we are interested in here pertains to lexical choices that are conventionally designated as

morally 'bad' language, and treated as such in classrooms, despite the 'swearing paradox' (Fägersten, 2012) of their widespread usage and historical persistence.

There have been various attempts to define and categorise what constitutes swearing. For Wajnryb (2004), swearing is a type of dysphemistic language involving 'the substitution of an offensive or disparaging term for an inoffensive one' (p. 12), thus the opposite of euphemistic language. While the etymology of 'swear' refers to the act 'to take an oath' (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 76), Ljung claims there are two basic ways that contemporary swear words utilise taboo proscriptions: 'one involving religion and the supernatural, the other bodily waste, the sexual act and the sexual organs' (Ljung, 2011, p. 5). Religious swearing can be either blasphemous or profane. Blasphemous swearing was considered heresy, an attack on the Church, therefore a sin. Profanity, on the other hand, expressed an indifference to the church and its teachings. According to Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 76), profane swearing 'uses dysphemisms taken from the pool of dirty words as well as blasphemous and profane (i.e. irreligious) language.' Swearing through vulgarity or 'dirty' words entails tabooed words describing sexual actions and deviancy, certain body parts and effluvia (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Ljung, 2011; Wajnryb, 2004). Importantly, it is social convention and historical context which dictate whether these terms be considered taboo: 'The dysphemism *shit* is no more dirty than the word *faeces* nor the euphemism *poo*' (Allan & Burridge, 2006, pp. 40–41).

There have similarly been various attempts by researchers to create lists of functional criteria that define a word as a swear word, and typologies of how swearing is used pragmatically. In this vein, Andersson and Trudgill (1990, p. 53) define swearing as an expression that:

- a) refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatised in the culture;
- b) should not be interpreted literally;
- c) can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes.

Ljung adds that most swearing also qualifies as 'formulaic' and 'emotive' language, its main function 'to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker's feelings and attitudes' (2011, p. 4). In this vein, a corpus-based study of the word '*fuck*' and its derivatives in the British National Corpus (McEnery & Xiao, 2004) distinguished nine pragmatic uses of the word. Pinker (2007) later distills five types of swearing: descriptive swearing (*Let's fuck!*); Idiomatic swearing (*It's fucked up.*); abusive swearing: (*Fuck you, motherfucker!*); emphatic swearing (*It's fucking amazing.*); and cathartic swearing (*Fuck!*). Burridge argues that taboo words are 'more arousing, more shocking, more memorable and more evocative than all other language stimuli' (2010, p. 10). This capacity to intensify affect and the multiple pragmatic functions may explain why these choices historically persist despite social disapproval. These arguments however do not account for the ubiquitous sprinkling of swearwords in contemporary schoolyard talk, to the point that there is little shock value associated with or intended by these choices.

Histories of swearing in Anglophone societies (Hughes, 1991; McEnery, 2006) point to watershed moments such as performances of Bernard Shaw's 'Pygmalion' in 1914, the publication of D. H. Lawrence's 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' in 1928, moral crusades by Mary Whitehouse in the 1960s, and the trial of the editors of *Oz* magazine in 1971. These moments and their newsworthiness trace the erosion of Victorian censure over time and the emergence of permissive society's growing tolerance of profanity in media and theatre representations. Global youth culture such as rap music continues to push these boundaries.

Linguists have highlighted differences in broad patterns of swearing and offensive language between Anglophone nations (for

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