



Why are males inclined to use strong swear words more than females? An evolutionary explanation based on male intergroup aggressiveness



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ABSTRACT

The research on sex differences in terms of the use of strong swear words show that males have the inclination to utter strong swear words and to display aggressive actions more than females. Correspondingly, recent discoveries stress that females have larger volumes of orbital frontal cortex that modulates anger and aggressiveness created by the amygdala which might be related to sex differences in the use of strong swear words. Based on these findings, this study explores what kind of environmental and social pressures might have fashioned strongly swearing aggressive males during the course of human evolutionary history and examines the evolution of swearing by discussing the possible factors that might have prompted its emergence in our evolutionary background.

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1. Introduction

Differences in the ways that males and females use language have been of a major concern for researchers. One topic that has withdrawn considerable attention is *swearing*. Swearing is often described as a linguistic activity that involves *the use of taboo words* (Stapleton, 2010). “Taboos in English are placed on sexual references (blow job, cunt) and on those that are considered profane or blasphemous (goddamn, Jesus Christ). Taboos extend to scatological references and disgusting objects (shit, crap, douche bag); some animal names (bitch, pig, ass); substandard vulgar terms (fart face, on the rag); and offensive slang (cluster fuck, tit run) (Jay, 2009, p.154).” According to Hughes (1991, p.03) “swearing draws upon such powerful and incongruous resonators as religion, sex, madness, excretion and nationality, encompassing an extraordinary variety of attitudes”. The term swearing is used generally to bring up several categories of offensive speech: name calling, insulting, profanity, slang, vulgarity, obscenity, epithets, slurs, and scatology (Jay, 1996). Andersson and Trudgill (2007) define swearing as language use in which the expression: (i) refers to something taboo or stigmatized in the swearer’s culture, (ii) is not intended to be interpreted literally, (iii) can be used to express strong emotions or attitudes.

Humans are thought to have been using swear words since the emergence of language (Vingerhoets et al., 2013) and it is considered to be a fundamental and ubiquitous characteristic of human communication (Jay, 2009). Montagu (1967, p. 5) claims that swearing is “as old as man and coeval with language”. Similarly, by providing examples from the ancient hieroglyphic inscriptions dating back to 1000BC, Ljung (2011) argues that swearing was an item of communication during the

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ancient times. “Swearing has been documented in the lexica of many social groups: soldiers, police, high school and college students, drug users, athletes, laborers, juvenile delinquents, psychiatric patients, and prisoners (Jay, 2009, p. 154).” Recorded conversations show that about 80–90 spoken words each day – 0.5% to 0.7% of all words – are swear words (Jay, 2009).

Swearing includes so many disparate forms that some broad distinctions need to be made at the outset. We *swear by*, we *swear that* (something is so), we *swear to* (do something), we *swear at* (somebody or something), and sometimes we swear simply out of exasperation (Hughes, 1991). Of these broad distinctions, this paper primarily focuses on *swearing at somebody* which was considered by Hughes (1991) as the most dominant mode of swearing. Wierzbicka (1987) describes swearing at somebody as a *deliberate bad act* that is designed for expressing emotions or a particular meaning and a particular attitude towards some person, event or object. Swearing at someone is the utterance of emotionally powerful, offensive words (e.g., *fuck*) or emotionally harmful expressions (e.g., *kiss my ass*, *piss off*, *up yours*) that permits a speaker to express strong emotions or to produce an emotional impact on a listener (Jay, 2000). Jay and Janschewitz (2008) argue that the primary drive for swearing at someone strongly is to express emotions, especially anger and frustration. Word-scaling and autonomic-arousal studies have shown that swear words that human beings say to others can be mildly offensive (e.g., *damn*, *fart*) or strongly offensive (e.g., *cunt*, *nigger*, *fuck*) (Janschewitz, 2008; Jay, 1992). Although offensiveness of swear words depends on contextual variables, the primary purpose of strong swear words is to produce an undesired emotional influence on a listener while mild swear words do not intentionally aim to hurt the listener. Olweus (1994, p. 09) states that using strong swear words at someone is a *negative action* and “a negative action is when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another”. In this sense, the intentionality of swearing at someone strongly overlaps with *aggression* or *aggressive behavior* which is defined as “any behavior directed toward another individual that is carried out with the proximate (immediate) intent to cause harm (Anderson and Bushman, 2002, p.28).” Human aggression can be both verbal and physical. Thus, the intention to cause hurt someone is the main motivation for displaying aggressive behavior and using strong swear words at someone.

Despite the commonality of swearing in everyday social interaction, in most cultures and societies using strong swear words at someone is considered as an *offensive insulting act* and, thus, its use in social interaction is often despised. Even laws against swearing in public still exist in some states and, informally, fines may be incurred in social settings (Van Lancker and Cummings, 1999). Throughout human history, the use of swear words was seen as degrading and offensive and swearing was sometimes punished by custody, excising of the tongue, or even the death penalty (Pinker, 2007).

The research on sex differences in terms of the use of swear words show that males are inclined to use strong swear words more than females (Bailey and Timm, 1976; Mehl and Pennebaker, 2003; Mulac and Lundell, 1986; Jay, 1996). Correspondingly, the frequency of swearing in public is higher in males than females (McEnery, 2005; Thelwall, 2008). Men possess a larger lexicon for strong swear words than females. For example, in a study, Foote and Woodward (1972) requested undergraduate students to produce as many “dirty, vulgar, foul or generally objectionable words or phrases” as they could think of. Their study results display that men out-produced women by a factor-of 50%. Other studies show that while women use milder swearing more, men tend to use strong swear words more often than women (Bailey and Timm, 1976; McEnery, 2005). However, men usually prefer to swear in male groups and use less swear words when they are around females (Bayard and Krishnappa, 2001; Coates, 1986). Swearing is perceived as a sign of manliness (Benwell, 2001). The occupational groups in which swearing is regular, seem to be professions that are mainly occupied by men (Johnson and Lewis, 2010). Men are more likely than women to swear when frustrated or angry, while women are more likely than men to view swearing in anger as loss of control and realize that swearing might jeopardize their relationships with others (Bird and Harris, 1990). McEnery and Xiao (2003) looked at the contrast between the gendered uses of all forms of “fuck” in the British National Corpus. Their study results show that men use the word “fuck” and its derivatives twice as much as women. In a study Selnow (1985) gave a questionnaire to 135 undergraduate students. He wanted to see if there was a measurable difference in the use of swearing men and women reported. Then, he wanted to examine the contexts in which men and women believed it was appropriate to use swearing. Female respondents generally reported using swearing to a lesser degree than men. Female respondents also commonly believed that in most of the contexts stated in the questionnaire, the use of swearing was less proper than males did. De Klerk (1991, 1992) also found that males displayed a greater tolerance for the use of swear words than females. Research shows that the frequency and strength of swearing for both sexes depend on factors, such as social networks, social status, age, and education (Hughes, 1992; De Klerk, 1991, Stapleton, 2003). However, the studies in general report that males have the tendency to use strong swear words more than females (McEnery, 2005).

Since swearing at someone is considered as an aggressive behavior that is connected with the expression of emotions (Jay and Janschewitz, 2008), the male predisposition to utter strong swear words more than females underscores that males are generally more aggressive than females and male brains may have the propensity to create more aggressive behavior than female brains. Supporting this hypothesis experimental evidence suggests that compared to females, male behavior and psychology are more inclined to aggression (Tooby and Cosmides, 1988; Wrangham and Peterson, 1996; Brown, 1991; Goldstein, 2003; McDonald et al., 2012; Navarrete et al., 2010). Recent research on neuroanatomy of human brain shows male aggressiveness as an outcome of men having significantly smaller volume of orbital frontal cortex than women and women harbor a substantially larger orbitofrontal-to-amygdala ratio than men. Gur et al. (2002) performed MRI scans on 57 men and 59 women between the ages of 18 and 49. The researchers measured the volume of the amygdala, hippocampus, and other limbic areas connected with emotional stimulation, as compared to the volume of orbital frontal brain regions that apply regulation over emotional responses. Their study results show that women had significantly larger orbital frontal cortex volume than men. In another study with 117 healthy right-handed adults (58 female), age 18–40 years, Welborn et al. (2009)

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