Chapter 14

Taboo Language and Swearing in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century English: A Diachronic Study Based on the Old Bailey Corpus

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Abstract

Most studies of the history of taboo language and swearing in English provide only a general historical sketch and tend to focus on written language. By contrast, our study takes a qualitative and quantitative look at spoken language. It is based on the 14-million-word Old Bailey Corpus 1720–1913, a corpus of court proceedings with detailed sociolinguistic mark-up. Our findings show that swearing occurred mostly in reported speech. Overall, bad language declined over the two centuries and its concealment in print increased. This was most likely caused by the growing social pressure on both the genre of trial proceedings and the individual speaker. Also, the functions of swearing changed drastically: while curses (e.g. Damn you!) declined sharply, slot fillers (e.g. bloody) increased noticeably. Surprisingly, female speakers used taboo language more frequently than males, possibly because women were more often the target of curses and name-calling than men. In addition, bad language of both higher-class and female speakers was less often obscured in print, perhaps because editors wanted to expose speakers who, according to the discourse of purity, were least associated with swearing, and at the same time hoping to increase sales through the shock-value of offensive language, especially when used by these groups.

Keywords

Defining Swearing and Linguistic Taboo

This chapter investigates the forms, functions, frequency, and social distribution of taboo and swearwords in eighteenth and nineteenth century English, as well as editorial interference in their representation in print. So-called ‘bad language’ can take many forms, which are often difficult to categorize. For our purposes, we adopt the definition of swearing proposed in Ljung (2011). It has the major advantage of covering diverse expressions used to swear while at the same time clearly delimiting the category of swearing. According to Ljung (2011, 4), any utterance must fulfil four criteria to count as swearing:

(a) Swearing is the use of utterances containing taboo words.
(b) The taboo words are used with non-literal meaning.
(c) Many utterances that constitute swearing are subject to severe lexical, phrasal, and syntactic constraints, which suggests that most swearing qualifies as formulaic language.
(d) Swearing is emotive language: its main function is to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker’s feelings and attitudes.

Taboo words are socially unacceptable expressions (cf. Hughes 2006, 262–263). They can be used for swearing but the mere presence of a taboo word does not on its own constitute a case of swearing, as the following examples illustrate:

(1) Fuck you!
(2) They’re not just friends—they’re obviously fucking.

Example (1) meets all four criteria of swearing. Most importantly, the taboo word *fuck* is used, but not in its literal sense (criteria (a) and (b)). In addition, the construction is formulaic (criterion (c)): it is not possible to substitute any word with a similar meaning for *fuck*, like *Shag you!* or *Have sex with you!* Finally, the example is a case of emotive language use (criterion (d)), i.e. it is easy to imagine that someone might be venting their anger by using the expression.

In example (2) a taboo word is present (*fucking*), but the utterance as a whole does not meet criteria (b) to (d) for swearing. To begin with, the verb *fuck* is used in its literal sense here (≠ criterion (b)). In addition, this is not a case of formulaic language: it would be entirely possible to substitute, for example, *They’re obviously having sex (with each other)* for *They’re obviously fucking* (≠ criterion (c)). Lastly, this utterance does not function as a vehicle to reflect feelings and attitudes in the way that in (1) does (≠ criterion (d)).