

Swearing in the 'Tradie' Environment as a Tool for Solidarity

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Abstract

Swearing within a social interaction is often considered obscene and offensive, however swear words have many other functions within society that are rarely noted. The social meaning of swear words, such as fuck and cunt, have over time shifted from their offensive nature to having a more rapport-building function within certain contexts. This paper will analyse this meaning shift and the social motivations behind the use of the words fuck and cunt in the Australian trade workplace. It has been observed that Australian 'tradies' insult and swear at each other as a means of building and maintaining rapport amongst co-workers, as well as a means of differentiating themselves from the rest of society. In order to demonstrate this, ten conversations were recorded between five tradies on their lunchbreaks, with these interactions subsequently being analysed. It is hoped that this study will expose the need for further research in this area of linguistics and demonstrate how words may serve different functions within different cultures.

1. Introduction

For a class of words that is frequently censored within society and considered highly taboo, swear words are prevalent in social communication. It is for this reason that profanity is of such great interest to researchers in many different fields, including linguistics and psychology. Just as the phrases, *for god's sake!*, *hell no!*, and *damn it!* have lost their offensive nature over time, the functions of more obscene words such as *fuck* and *cunt* are slowly shifting within society.

It is the aim of this paper to investigate this shift and the social motivations behind the use of swear words in Australian English, more specifically in the context of the 'tradie' culture. Due to their excessive use of swear words, Australian tradespeople (the vernacular 'tradie' will be used for the purpose of this study) are often regarded as unintelligent and extremely crass. In fact Johnson & Lewis (2010:110) stated that "[r]esearch has shown that swearers are perceived as socially inept, incompetent, and untrustworthy." However, it is proposed that this extreme use of profanity in the tradie workplace is not a signal of a lack of intelligence but rather a tool used for building and maintaining positive affiliations between members of this unique culture.

The term 'culture' is used in this paper as defined by Oxford University Press (2011), namely, "the attitudes and behavior characteristic of a particular social group." With this definition in mind, the following hypotheses were formulated concerning the motivations behind swearing in the tradie culture:

1. Swearing functions as a marker of solidarity in a workplace context, contrary to the offensive nature of the words outside of this environment.
2. Trades people use swearing as a means of differentiation from the rest of society.

In order to either validate or reject the above hypotheses, authentic data was recorded from ten lunch breaks at an Australian trade workplace. This paper will focus on the swear words *fuck* and *cunt* because these two would be considered the most obscene in society and also due to the fact that they were the swear words used most frequently in the recorded data. It is proposed that evidence will be found in the data to demonstrate tradies' excessive use of the expletives *fuck* and *cunt*, as well as their use of these words not in a derogatory, offensive manner but as means of creating solidarity among the in-group.

Although previous research has been conducted concerning the social motivations behind swearing, scholars have only briefly touched on it as a means of building rapport. In fact research on social motivations and perceptions of swearing in the tradie environment is practically non-existent. It is hoped that this study will assist in furthering our knowledge of profanities and the social motivations behind their use in Australian English.

2. Literature Review

Due to the irregular nature of swear words, there has been an immense amount of research into the functions of expletives. For the purpose of this research, previous literature will be examined in relation to the functions of swear words, the use of swear words in the workplace and the use of linguistic features to assert in-group and out-group status.

2.1 The Functions of Swear Words

Within social interaction, it can be observed that expletives such as *fuck* and *cunt* can be used for many different functions. Prominent research within this area has been conducted by scholars such as Steven Pinker (2008), Alaina M. Winters and Steve Duck (2001), plus Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins (2006). From one point of view, "expletives carry a powerful emotional and psychological charge, contravening social taboos and are frequently used for shocking people, or indicating contempt or disregard for them" (DeKlerk quoted in Johnson & Lewis 2010:108). However it is the author's opinion that this is only one of the many functions of swear words. As stated by Daly, Holmes, Newton and Stubbe (2004:959), swear words, such as *fuck*

...occur frequently in certain contexts and serve a range of functions, including the role of positive politeness strategy. *Fuck* is regularly associated with expressions of solidarity, including friendly terms of address and speech acts which unambiguously serve the function of solidarity construction; notable here are whinges, which serve to offload negative affect in a safe environment, to release tension, and to maintain rapport between people.

Expletives can be used as exemplifiers, for stress-release and to create solidarity among people, not just in producing obscene insults, as most commonly received out of context. On the subject, Winters and Duck (2001:173) argued "that the pragmatics of swearing point to a bonding function of a behaviour that is otherwise perceived only as aversive because of its use of negatively charged words."

2.2 Swear Words in the Workplace

The most notable work on swearing in the workplace was produced by Daly, Holmes, Newton and Stubbe (2004). This team of researchers studied the use of *fuck* in direct complaints and refusals in a New Zealand factory and how the workers used this word to maintain close affiliations even in the context of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). Daly et al. (2004:960) found that

...team members convert the negative affect and strength associated with forms of *fuck* in standard contexts into a positive attribute in its use in interaction between members of their own community of practice. The inherent strength of the canonical expletive *fuck* thus contributes to its impact when used between friends and co-workers. It is as if they are saying "I know you so well I can be this rude to you."

Similarly, in Baruch and Jenkins's paper (2006), they revealed that even though verbal abuse and swearing is extremely detrimental to a workplace, "language may ... evolve to suit the culture and needs of particular groups of employees. Different domains, such as operational meetings or informal workplace discourse, dictate the use of different speech modes. They sometimes include the use of swearing" (2006:494).

3. Linguistic Differentiation

William Labov's study (1972) on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts and the social motivations of phonetic differentiation is still significantly influential in sociolinguistics to this day. It will be used in this research as a basis to help explain the social motivations of the tradie's use of *fuck* and *cunt* in the workplace. Labov stated that linguistic variations between cultures

...may be induced by the processes of assimilation or differentiation, by analogy, borrowing, fusion, contamination, random variation, or any number of processes in which the language system interacts with the physiological or psychological characteristics of the individual (1972:1-2).

In this study Labov related the phonetic shift towards centralised diphthongs to the social pressures on the island of Martha's Vineyard. During a time when wealthy mainlanders were buying up a majority of the land for their summer vacations, there was a shift towards a broader accent within the local community, more noticeably with the proud, Vineyard-devoted fishermen (also referred to as Chilmarkers). Labov was able to successfully link this social change to the transformation in the local accent through his recordings, tests and interviews with the locals. "Chilmarkers pride themselves on their differences from mainlanders ... At Chilmark retroflexion is at its strongest, and is steadily increasing among younger boys" (Labov 1972:29). In one of the interviews, a mother on Martha's Vineyard had actually noted about her son, "You know, E. didn't always speak that way ... It's only since he came back from college. I guess he wanted to be more like the men on the docks" (Labov 1972:31). This shows that there has been a choice, even subconsciously, towards differentiation from the mainlander accent in order to mark in-group status within the Vineyard community.

It is believed that through the use of evidence gathered in the current study, it will be demonstrated that, similarly to the Vineyard fishermen, Australian tradies use their lexical variations in order to differentiate themselves from the rest of society.

4. Methodology

The use of authentic, unprompted social conversations between tradies was essential in evaluating the validity of the stated hypotheses. The participants were notified of the recordings beforehand so as to be sure of their willingness to participate. This awareness of being recorded always poses a threat to acquiring untainted data, however it was hoped that recording over a two-week period would desensitise the participants to the presence of a recording device. Ten 25-minute recordings of the tradies' lunchbreaks were collected. Although the participants were told that they were being recorded, they were not informed as to which aspects of the conversations would be analysed. The recordings were obtained by one of the tradies as it was believed a researcher sitting in on the lunchbreaks would only draw more attention to the fact that the participants were being studied. After the data was collected, each of the participants was asked to fill out a form providing their permission for use of the recordings, as well as details concerning their age, ethnicity and educational background. (See Table 1.)

All ten recordings were then listened to three times, with the use, frequency and nature of the words *fuck* and *cunt* in conversation being analysed. The occurrence of each word was tallied twice in order to avoid inaccuracy. On the third listening, prominent conversations using both *fuck* and *cunt*, or an extremely excessive use of *fuck*, were noted.

The indicated conversations were then transcribed for data analysis purposes. In transcribing, more emphasis was put on the content of the conversations rather than on stress and intonation.

PARTICIPANT	AGE	GENDER	COUNTRY OF BIRTH	LANGUAGES SPOKEN	EDUCATION LEVEL
R	40	Male	Chile	Spanish English	Year 12
J	20	Male	Australia	English	Year 10
D	21	Male	Australia	English	Year 10
S	27	Male	Australia	English	Year 9
RD	32	Male	Australia	English	Year 12

Table 1: Background Information of Participants

5. Results

After all recordings were listened to and the frequencies of *fuck* and *cunt* were counted for each day, the results were recorded in Table 2 for ease of analysis and comparison. It can be seen that within a 25-minute period, a worker in a trade environment uses intense expletives at a far higher rate than what might be considered socially acceptable in public. Although it must be noted that these numbers were produced collectively by five Australian tradies, the production of swear words is still significantly greater than the perceived average rate.

DAY	FREQUENCY	
	<i>fuck</i>	<i>cunt</i>
Wednesday 27 April	113	20
Thursday 28 April	114	7
Friday 29 April	102	16
Tuesday 3 May	143	27
Wednesday 4 May	110	33
Thursday 5 May	121	26
Friday 6 May	103	17
Monday 9 May	147	5
Tuesday 10 May	102	16
Wednesday 11 May	133	28
TOTAL	1188	195
AVERAGE	118.8	19.5

Table 2: The frequency of occurrence over a ten-day period

Furthermore, with a closer look at the conversations, it can be seen that for the most part, these men did not use *fuck* and *cunt* in a derogatory manner or as a mechanism to preserve rapport between co-workers when in the context of FTAs such as complaints or refusals. Instead these expletives mostly occurred in general, everyday discussions as both exemplifiers and as a means of building solidarity within the group. Although widely perceived insults like “Fuck you!” were used quite often, analysis of the speaker’s intention and hearer’s reaction have shown that the phrase was used as a kind of jocular mockery. The three conversations listed in the Appendix were found to be the most evidential of this behaviour. Four short excerpts from these transcriptions illustrate this:

(1)

6 D: anyway hes fucking (.) he ne- he needed a fu-
7 the fucking oil filter=
8 J: =°yeah°=
9 D: = to get his off coz his was fucking ridi-
10 like I had- I was up in there with both my fucking
11 arms fucking hanging off this cunt (.)
12 could not get th- his oil filter (.) whoever did
13 D: it up did it up [wa:y too tight]

From the above passage, it can be observed that Speaker D has used the words *fuck* and *cunt* in his account as both exemplifiers and in a word-replacing role similar to pronouns. At no point during his utterance were the swear words directed at another person.

(2)

1 D: whatd he say
2 J: i don't know fucks me
3 R: haha
4 R: i said cranberry sauce ya cunt (.) goes on

5 fucking turkey ya silly cunt
 6 J: oh speak up alright
 7 hahahhhe
 8 J: cant fucking understand a word ya saying

In this section of a conversation Speaker R has used a commonly derogative term of address towards speaker J. However no sincere offence appears to have been intended, which is evident in Speaker R's jocular manner in producing the utterance as well as Speaker J's reaction towards being called a *cunt* (i.e. laughing and providing a jocular retort).

(3)

6 R: ye:ah I had a couple but yeah (.) cracked a stubbie
 7 J: a couple of stubbies ya rekon
 8 R: o:h you're a fucking alcoholic yourself ya cunt
 9 J: fuck off
 10 ((laughing and murmuring))
 11 hehhehe
 12 D: says you ya cunt cant even fucking remember what
 13 club you're in cunt

In this extract the joking nature of the tradies' swearing is quite obvious. A conversation which would more commonly be seen as extremely obscene shows evidence of distinct group solidarity within the tradie environment.

(4)

15 RD: making rocket fuel and shit you'll know if
 16 you like it too
 17 [hehheheh]
 18 R: [fuck yeah]
 19 hehehe
 20 RD: fuckin hell (.)fuckin bourbon distillery you're off
 21 S: your fuckin guts ya cunt
 21 hhehe

Finally, this last fragment demonstrates how excessive numbers of swear words are simply accepted as the norm and in some cases can even fuel the humour of a conversation. It is clear from the participants' continual laughter that at no point is anyone stunned or insulted by the speaker's behaviour.

The amount of evidence retrieved from the recorded conversations is immense, however it is believed that even from this small portion of data the commonplace use of swear words and their numerous functions in a tradie workplace can be identified.

6. Discussion

It is essential to have an understanding of the different behaviours of co-cultures within a community in order to avoid discrimination. A single community is comprised of various cultures, each with its own values and twists on language use. Tradies are one such culture. Australian tradies can sometimes be mistaken by the rest of the community as lacking in intelligence, based generally on their 'crass'

behaviour and excessive use of swear words. However, it is argued that for the most part, tradies communicate in this way in order to differentiate their culture from the rest of the community. The continual use of *fuck* and *cunt* in conversations works as a marker of in-group membership and at times is used to exclude out-group members. In seeking to confirm this this, the two proposed hypotheses will be evaluated in relation to the results drawn from the data.

1. Swearing functions as a marker of solidarity in a workplace context, contrary to the offensive nature of the words outside of this environment.

The sheer quantity of swear words used in tradie speak and the blasé manner in which they are received indicate that tradies perceive the use of *fuck* and *cunt* in a completely different light to perhaps most other members of society. An occurrence of these words within the tradie context can show that swear words are able to be used in rapport building amongst co-workers. The following utterances provide evidence for this statement, as both "insults" are received with laughter and because the conversation does not break down due to loss of face:

8 R: o:h you're a fucking alcoholic yourself ya cunt
 9 J: fuck off
 10 ((laughing and murmuring))

From the context (see Appendix) of these utterances it can be seen that neither of the participants relate the phrases used to negative connotations. Similarly, if any of the tradies produced a sentence like the above, in a context outside of the familiar, then offence would most likely be taken from such a statement.

2. Trades people use swearing as a means of differentiation from the rest of society.

The social motivations of swearing in the tradie workplace can be related back to Labov's study (1972) in many aspects. Similar to the Chilmarkers of Martha's Vineyard, over the years Australian tradies have created a language shift as a means of differentiation. However, unlike the phonetical shift of the locals of Martha's Vineyard, tradies have created a lexical shift towards the more commonplace use of expletives. Evidence of this can easily be observed through the frequencies of *fuck* and *cunt* in a tradie conversation as compared to a more public, socially acceptable conversation.

It is acknowledged that this current study is not without limitations. However, it is hoped that with this as a basis, future research may be conducted with a more comprehensive data collection. With greater resources, surveys could be conducted on both the general community and tradies so as to create a better comparison of the use of the words *fuck* and *cunt*. In addition, it is believed that with recordings from a much wider range of trade workplaces, a more accurate use of swear words across all trades would be acquired.

7. Conclusion

As a linguistic community grows, its lexicon is moulded with it. Every year meanings of words within the English lexicon are forgotten or modified and hundreds of new words and meanings are created. The same can be said for swear words. On the subject of shift in meaning of swear words, Pinker (2008:29) has stated that "over time, taboo words relinquish their literal meanings and retain only a coloring of emotion, and then just an ability to arouse attention". This is evident in the Australian tradies use of *fuck* and *cunt*. For the tradie culture at least, these words have begun to lose their literal or offensive meanings and instead are used throughout in-group conversations as a marker of membership and a means of differentiation.

*Author Note

Lauren McLeod graduated in December 2011 with a Bachelor of Arts in Languages and Applied Linguistics, majoring in Japanese. She has been accepted into Flinders University in Adelaide where she will be completing a Master of Speech Pathology degree.

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Appendix

Transcription 1

From Recording: Tuesday 3rd May

1 D: well coz I did the service on my car the last time
 2 like (.) the filter wasn't t- so tight that
 3 I couldn't get it off like I could just fucking
 4 do it with my hand
 5 J: °yeah°
 6 D: anway he's fucking (.) he ne- he needed a fu-
 7 the fucking oil filter=
 8 J: =°yeah°=
 9 D: = to get his off coz his was fucking ridi-
 10 like I had- I was up in there with both my fucking
 11 arms fucking hanging off this cunt (.)
 12 could not get th- his oil filter (.) whoever did
 13 D: it up did it up [wa:y too tight]
 14 R: [yeah punch a] fuckin screwdriver
 15 straight through it
 16 [hheh heh hhhhh]
 17 J: [yeah that's right]
 18 RD: (but a screwdriver-)
 19 R: straight into shoulder cunt

Transcription 2

From Recording: Wednesday 11th May

1 D: whatd he say
 2 J: i don't know fucks me
 3 R: haha
 4 R: i said cranberry sauce ya cunt(.) goes on
 5 fucking turkey ya silly cunt
 6 J: oh speak up alright
 7 hahahhhe
 8 J: cant fucking understand a word ya saying
 9 (0.8)
 10 ((murmuring))
 11 D: yeah cran- havent you ever had cranberry sauce
 12 on turkey
 13 J: nuh
 14 D: uh its alright hey (1.2) its an American thing
 15 but it tastes pretty good

Transcription 3

From Recording: Wednesday 11th May

1 ((noises coming from workshop throughout recording))
 2 D: he went home and got the piss
 3 (0.1)
 4 D: didn't ya reds (.) went home and got on the piss
 5 (o.1)
 6 R: ye:ah I had a couple but yeah (.) cracked a stubbie
 7 J: a couple of stubbies ya reckon
 8 R: o:h you're a fucking alcoholic yourself ya cunt
 9 J: fuck off
 10 ((laughing and murmuring))

11 hehhehe
12 D: says you you cunt cant even fucking remember what
13 club your in cunt
14 R: (what's that)
15 RD: making rocket fuel and shit you'll know if
16 you like it too
17 [hehheheh]
18 R: [fuck yeah]
19 hehehe
20 RD: fuckin hell (.)fuckin bourbon distillery your off
21 S: your fuckin guts ya cunt
21 hhehe