

The Social Functions of Cuss-Words

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ABSTRACT

Swearing words are in actuality merely a part and a factual situation of daily life. They concern everybody. They are employed by us, the makers of the social reality. They come to our attention via eavesdropping. They may even choose us as their own targets, mostly in absentia and sometimes within our very presence!

INTRODUCTION

The Tremendous Power of Words

Historical knowledge notifies us that in Ancient Greece, Aesop was once given the order by his master to prepare the best food for the coming guests. The exceptionally clever slave went ahead and cooked delicacies prepared from beef tongues. He justified his choice by giving a eulogy of nice words and their benefits, all products of the human tongue. The tongue must surely be the best thing on the surface of the earth. The fable goes that on another occasion, the master ordered Aesop to cook the worst food for the coming guests. The wise slave again resorted to dishes made of tongues. He justified his choice by giving examples of horrible incidents instigated by the utterance of a few careless, rude, insulting words. The human tongue must indeed be the most dangerous and the worst of all things. What a wonderful dialectic philosophy Swear-words are readily used by certain individuals and such persons are said to be dirty-mouthed. But on a social scale, especially in certain societies, dirty words also represent social concepts of utmost significance in the relations of various sorts of people. Swear-words may even represent a clinical picture in the case of some mental disorders: A bipolar person feels good and is constructive and productive in manic periods. He may talk for hours (logore) or indulge in writing (graphomania). He may donate property even to new acquaintances (sickly generosity). Prone to get flattery; he is intolerant of criticism. Polite and respectful a few moments ago, upon a tiny resistance, he may get in a rage and begin to swear Belli ^[1].

Social Groups Prone to Use Swearing Words

Different idiosyncrasies let aside; certain social groups are known to be more inclined to use swearing words in their speech. Such social groups are usually those consisting of one gender only. In this particular case one is spared the feelings of embarrassment caused by the presence of the opposite sex and free reign is accordingly granted to one's mouth in employment of all possible shameless words and phrases. I once worked as a translator at an international drilling company and English swearing words came to my attention in condensed form for the first time, on this special occasion. Some geological engineers were even definitely throwing in at least one dirty word, every time they came to open their mouths. Prison inmates, boarding school communities and all-male military troops constitute the other well-known examples, regarding this aspect of the issue. No doubt, some think that cursing with dirty words represents emphasizing one's macho-orientation (as well as one's higher or commanding status with respect to the others). Therefore it is regarded as a virtue, let alone a weakness or deficiency. Turkish village males, for instance, take great pleasure in using swear words within the context of the predominant male culture. The following experience

was told by an eye-witness, years ago. A passenger-bus gave a fifteen-minute rest pause at a side-road coffee-house years ago, on the way to an Aegean City, in Turkey. It was a cool day and passengers kept warming themselves with successive hot tea and coffee glasses. Nobody seemed anxious to board the bus again and drive ahead towards their destination; despite the “soon-to-depart” announcement. The driver was a humorous man. Finally he took the microphone and made his own announcement: Dear passengers of Bla bla bla Tourism. What’s wrong is so appealing in guzzling hot cupfuls of tea and coffee, one after the other? Please get up and do board the bus, right away! We’ve got long kilometers ahead of us!” In villages, even children do swear and some are specially encouraged by fathers to do so, with promises of small rewards following the “accomplishment”! Females are known to resort to swear words only when they reach elderly ages. This is the time when their social status had risen upwards. I remember British anthropologist Sterling relating in his mid-Anatolian village study, that once a guest neighbor male wants to drive the females off the room for a private talk with the house owner. The females obey but an elderly woman stands her ground, as if stressing her higher status achieved due to age. Nevertheless; swearing is mainly a manly habitude or even a manly prerogative, one might say: Nuray is a novel-character, a divorced secretary, who had written a novel to prove her literary capabilities and to stand for the liberation of the fair sex. In one episode she is lost in feministic thoughts again: “The domination of men extended outside the home, too. The people who could talk loudly and laugh, on the roads, on the sea-shores and in coffee-houses, who could crack jokes with one another without danger, who could swear freely and fight when they got angry were all men said by Özakın ^[2]. Military sociologist Moskos ^[3] mentions in a field study about a detachment of American troops in Honduras that female personnel complained a lot about the vulgar language of their male counterparts (Blankets in the middle of the tents separating the two genders would provide a visual privacy from the men but not ensure an auditory partition). Petrov ^[4] refers to the horrible swearing habitudes of the former Finnish soldiers of the old army under Swedish yolk. The reformation carried out later in independence put an end to this awful practice. In some southern regions of Turkey, swearing at God Almighty that awful blasphemy, never jama is unfortunately also in usage; although it is slightly indirect in the sense that the format mentions “your God” or “his God”. A classmate from Adana in our university while I was an undergraduate student explained it in the following context: “When a rain falls down unexpectedly it ruins the entire cotton product. This is why some farmers resent God”. A slaughterhouse-owner’s son from Istanbul, whom I met on a train trip, explained that when he was a corporal in the service, he was especially vindictive towards the men from those regions on the grounds of that blasphemous custom. He said he used to give them hell on the smallest pretext. Just a few years ago, one day in a peripheral coffee-house in a Thracian city, a hot discussion about snakes was in full blast. The group leader, Özcan, a middle-aged talkative man equivalent to the American “cracker-barrel-philosopher” type, was discussing about his former adventures with snakes back in the village, with two obviously-fascinated acquaintances, also originating from villages (**Figure 1**). He affirmed that a snake once crept past his thighs while he was sleeping in a barn. “It gives you a prickly feeling but if you don’t disturb the God-damned creature Özcan’s tongue was prone to swear often, like many villagers – he wouldn’t bite you. You should just stand still. They bite when they get afraid. After all, they carry lives in them as we do” he explained. He named a few kinds of snakes along the course of the conversation. He said some would jump quite a way, “maybe as long as the distance from that stupid motorbike up to our table here!” I was once getting prepared to cross Bagdad Avenue in Istanbul in a hurry. The traffic was heavy and I began to get impatient on the pavement. Nearby was a middle-aged elegant gentleman, who was obviously long conditioned to wait for the green light without any complaint whatsoever, as a model Istanbulite . Finally the green light flicked and the two of us began to walk. On the way I gave him a sidelong glance and couldn’t help saying, half to him and half to myself: “It will be peasant-like attitude; but I would rather crap such an avenue! Suddenly the man looked up at me with open respect and admiration. For a moment I was indeed proud of my practical formation based on my deep-rooted provincial background. It is told that a Sorbonne-graduated snob high-placed in a Ministry in the capitol once asked Anatolian sub-governors for some statistical information about the heating measures taken in their districts. From a remote district came the answer that the main energy source was waste product of animals. The snobbish bureaucrat asked for further explanation. What was dung? What was its calorific value and the annually consumed amount? The answer was cabled in rhymes at once by the sub-governor.



Figure 1. Men even at highest social status may resort to obscene jokes and dirty words among themselves as a relaxation (illustration by the author, himself - S.C.).

ENTHUSIASM ABOUT SWEARING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Usually a teen-ager on the verge of mastering a foreign language would be delighted to learn slang words and swear-words and phrases belonging to that language. It is a mischievous fun partly because a person always perceives a second language like an outsider not totally concerned with anything expressed by that language. Therefore he can not fully grasp the horror and the ugliness of the dirty words in that other language, either. This fact should definitely increase the hedonistic pleasure involved in swearing in another language. It is like reading a poverty novel without actually entering into a miserable cabin.

We had an American math teacher, reputed to be a gambler in casinos in summer time. He was obviously very eager to learn some Turkish swearing words. He once said in class “I understand Turkish is a very good language to swear in”. (He claimed to be the third generation bastard-son of Buffalo Bill and was very popular for that reason among the students). Indeed, Turkish is an “elastic” language open to suggestive insinuations and multiple interpretations. Sheer verbs like piercing, inserting, emptying out etc. are substitutes for swearing-verbs. In French or German or English, all dirty words compiled together constitute a “treasure” very limited in scope; as a contradiction to the immense possibilities of the Turkish language. This richness of swearing glossary does not come from the brisk-and-agile and malleable nature of the Turkish language alone. Rather; as Tezcan ^[5] asserts a strong sexuality seems to complete the Turkish personality profile itself and this can be seen in abundant use of sexual symbols in football matches, the tolerance towards licentious me in the society or the richness of swearing words and phrases in everyday speech. Now; sexualizing of many concepts obviously go hand in hand with cuss words (**Figure 2**). Many folk songs are improvised by the cheer leaders and repeated aloud by the spectators in a manner to convey demeaning sexual messages onto the opposing football club, which is depicted as a female entity. Especially the goal-keeper who could not prevent a score and then undergoes a remorse crisis by hitting his head against the goal posts resembles “an awkward virgin woman who could not protect her chastity” as it was described in a short story by the famous Turkish playwright Haldun and Taner ^[6]. The author, who in this short story is glorifying a Christian gentleman-player of a humble football team, also draws parallels between a football team and a group of prostitutes held under control by the ‘old mama’: Just like the mama sometimes subjects her girls to the magic smoke of a burning incense to avert the evil eyes over them and to motivate them; the club manager sometimes takes the team to visit the shrine of a famous saint in order to build up the members’ team spirit and to boost their morale with the intention of increasing the match ticket sales. We may specify that on an individual basis, that sexualizing attitude pertains to hysterical personality type: Hysteria is false understood even by some neurologists as Belli emphasized. The hysterical woman looks coquette and thus gives a lecherous impression. This must cause the wrong idea. In reality a hysterical person sexualizes everything except sexuality itself. Hysterics soften reality, tend to ignore rules and escape responsibility. They can’t delay their needs and may indulge in mitomania by Caya ^[7]. In the American independence war; a Prussian officer, Baron Steuben, recommended by Benjamin Franklin from his diplomatic post in Paris, comes to America to serve for the cause of the Americans (just like the French general Marquis de La Fayette, Polish commander Kosciusko and another German-speaking commander, General von Kalb). Steuben is especially useful in organizing and training the American forces and subjecting them onto real and harsh military discipline, for the first time in their history. Now; the man is very fond of using swearing words when he gets in a fury.



Figure 2. Many youth-gang members do employ ugly words readily, in order to Strengthen their macho self-images (illustration by the author, himself- S.C.).

For all his perspiration and enthusiasm and for all his generosity towards his invitees; he makes some enemies as well as friends, among the Americans. Certain cliques write letters to General Washington and suggest his dismissal. One thing is certain. Steuben is regarded as a precious trainer but he is not accorded a direct command of the troops in battles. Obviously the baron made his own mistakes. He was not leaning to diplomacy as frequently as it was necessary. Perhaps he swore a bit too much to Goedsche and Glaettli ^[8]. The baron would at first write down his text for the coming exercises and then verify their application through his exemplary company, to all the other troops. Then he would ride on his horse from place to place and check the results of the toil. He would criticize anything wrong, on the spot. But the soldiers were free to laugh when he cursed them in his broken English. When the soldiers made many mistakes, then began the baron to swear. First he swore in German, then in French and then he ordered his adjutant: "Now, you shall swear in English, for my sake said ^[8]."

A "PROLOGUE" LEADING TO VIOLENCE

For many aggressive adolescents; swearing in the form of a repartee may sometimes serve the latent (if not open) function of a "prologue" before engaging in an actual fight. Many physical fights between two young men or between two groups of young men start with insults or cursing words. Punches follow afterwards. Before an imminent fight, "the rivals' evilness is strongly stressed in order to build up the warrior-spirit" Strodtbeck ^[9]. Based on this point, the morality of the in-group is established. The chief of a youth group or gang "represents the courageous masculine (**Figure 1**) that imposes conformity to a code of values discussed by Ajuriaguerra ^[10]. It is a known fact that many proud men became killers due to being exposed to a swear-word. They were hot-tempered and could not help taking the life of the wrong-doer. Ironically; while serving their prison sentences they get exposed to more dirty words coming from the guards, if not from other and "tougher" inmates. On May 20-21, 1963; an unsuccessful coup was organized against the Turkish government then in power, which itself was under the influence of the very recent successful May 27, 1960 junta. In a sense, this was a more radically-oriented coup-try against fresh coup-makers themselves and thereby a very wrongly-chosen target was in question, from the very beginning. Demir ^[11] notes that one factor provoking the new military conspirators was the Nuri Beşer incident. This deputy of the Justice Party [which was an implicit continuation of the fallen Democrat Party, whose leader got hung] was known to swear at the wives of officers [at a drinking session] at the Anatolia Club in Ankara. The new political party, afraid of possible bad consequences, resorted to the repudiation of the man. His deputy-immunity abolished, Beşer received a one-year prison sentence. But; those counter-measures of the party would not suffice to appease the long-determined and long-resolute conspirators. They went on to apply their plan, using the military students of the War College as manpower. (The mainstream military forces were to crush the rebels entirely).

RITUAL INSULTS CONSTITUTE EXCEPTIONS

In Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs, from lowest to highest, we see physiological needs (hunger, sex, thirst), safety needs (absence of bodily threat), social needs (affection, friendship, affiliation), esteem needs and finally self-actualization becoming all that one chooses and is capable of becoming said by Massie ^[12]. Close friendship makes up for the third and fourth need mentioned above, in certain environments. Sometimes an interesting price one pays for affiliation is a necessary tolerance of being teased by one's associates. Over-proud individuals therefore have difficulty in establishing social attachments, including acceptance into very cohesive circles. This is because sometimes the closeness of the in-group members manifest itself by resorting to ritual insults (employing swearing words as a form of address and greeting like in the following typical dialogue:

- "How're you doing, you son of a gun? I Haven't seen you for ages!"
- "I'm O.K. Stupid! What about you?"

The child is egocentric in nature. Concepts like empathy and altruism have not yet matured in his personality. The child can, in a "transparent" manner, make his thoughts known and resort to mockery, just for the fun of it. His mockery can be directed towards another's poverty, different and thus conceivably wrong accent or physical deficiency. Children do like to embarrass one another! This does not necessarily jeopardize their friendship ties, either. Mutual mockery and ritual insults may even seal friendships as a sign or proof of sincerity and closeness. Delaney ^[13] by reference that comments about verbal dueling rhymes practiced by adolescent males: "In this verbal game the retort must rhyme with the initial provocative insult and encompass it; and the subject is the active, aggressive male, and this is the culturally important role". Delaney does not give any examples. One such common rhyming duel would go as follows (To keep the rhymes, only train is adapted to aircraft and place names are altered): The first boy says something rhyming. The second boy retorts: "It has just heavily rained and here comes the thunder. How come you also became a poet, the son of an ass as you yourself render!" The first boy has his say again: "The plane took off from here and landed in Honolulu. If I also became a poet, why would that upset a male prostitute like you? My wife, Istanbul-born and Istanbul-bred, sometimes gets fed up with my night studies and scholarly airs and resents me. Then I wisely find an excuse to exaggerate my more humble provincial aspects, to mitigate her anger. Just after the meal, for instance, turning a ritual insult towards myself I say: "So you fed the village-bastard full!" She keeps mute but I know she gets delighted, feeling elevated with respect to me. (Maybe thanks to the author Elif Şafak's novel titled *The Father and the Bastard*, the word in Turkish does not sound so obscene any more). An Air-Force major once narrated about an incident at an air base in Eskişehir. The chief-staff-officer had previously supervised the organization of votive offerings of a few sheep sacrificing, at the beginning of the flight season. The major happened

to be in his office when the phone ring bitterly. It was the general on the phone. He roared that the sheep sacrificing ritual was a mere superstition; a reactionary, archaic and ignorant practice! He chewed up the chief-staff-officer for tolerating such a shameful (!) scene. The man retorted that it was a deeply-established custom and a necessity for the pilots to fly with high morale. Then he held the receiver at arms length and in a manner to ensure the hearing of his communicator, he said to the major: Gee! See what a man this new base commander is? He crap us up, just because of a votive offering issue! Then slowly and deliberately he hung up. Normally it is the sole privilege of the superior to pronounce swear-words. It is even an indication of might and superiority. A subordinate could never dare to say a dirty word in the presence of a superior within the given rigid hierarchy. However; in this highly delicate and critical situation; if it were not for the wise tactfulness of the second man of the air base; the general could have raised hell in a more obvious and enraged manner. He could have even indulged in an official inquiry, a potential source of trouble for God knows how many men. Ever since the establishment of the republic; the founders took on a French type of stern laicism rather than an American type of mild secularism. The controversial arguments went on for decades, especially some military figures representing the unnecessarily zealous and overanxious advocates of repression of all religious ambiences. The main bulk of the society had always been deeply devout and in touch with holy relics and shrines as a source of spiritual blessing (mentally deranged persons seeking reason, disease-stricken seeking recovery, childless wives seeking conception of an embryo in their wombs, those in debt seeking financial relief etc.). To implore God-Almighty in the vicinity of those worthy and privileged beings, allegedly capable of intercession, would only enhance the acceptance of purified wishes. It is claimed that somehow some dirty words suit some mouths better! Strange as it may seem; their utterance may contribute to the charisma of the owner. Late Belli ^[1], then an associate professor of (forensic) psychiatry, used to converse with us at the chair of Legal Medicine at Cukurova University, referring to all walks of life and throwing in psychiatric interpretations, usually from a Freudian outlook. This highly-respected boss of ours would embellish his narrations with some dirty words, which were like spice adding to the delicious flavor of a cookery. For example, he was on bad terms with the dean of the faculty and to verify his courage and boost up his and our morale against the “villain”, he would say “he can not even fart onto my prick”. While at his specialist-training at Ankara Faculty of Medicine, a certain Leyla was her senior colleague. Based on Belli’s depiction, the lady was a sweet and charming character as far as personality went and a bit overweight as far as physical appearance was concerned. One morning she had been late for work. A taxi-driver tried to swindle her by taking unnecessarily long turns in the traffic. She defended her rights and the man kept contradicting her. She finally intimidated him by revealing her epithet of lunatic-doctor and rendered him silent and crestfallen. Relating her morning adventure to her dirty-mouthed colleague in her lisping speech-style, Leyla stamped her “news-bulletin” in a wording very much appropriate for his interlocutor: “My dear friend,” she said. “The cab-driver must have felt as if he got screwed!” On another occasion Belli ^[1] mentioned about getting a short-term therapy from that sympathetic shrink. The lady would primarily dwell on his being an insistent bachelor at his age. Dissipating his rationalization attempts like not being able to locate an intellectual-enough bride-candidate around; she once blurted out: My dear, why on earth don’t you ever force your imagination that a female is in possession, after all”? Following another analysis session whereby a young wife complained about her husband’s unnatural approach attempts in the bed; Leyla, in a horrified manner, said to her colleagues:

—“That awful monster wanted to smash open the ‘cashbox’ of that poor little thing! Such a spouse deserves the heaviest penalty!” Some “experts” of cursing words usually are wise enough to employ the related words but not to direct them towards their immediate interlocutors. A certain army captain would say something like “tighten up the belts of that crap rifles!” or “put all those God-damned ammunition elsewhere and be quick about it”. But he would never insult the person of a simple soldier under his command. A common formula is “I’ll crapyour trouble, difficulty”. A humorous Black Sea man in a certain neighborhood of Scutari district in Istanbul was reputed for his own invention: He would say to his acquaintances ““I’ll kill our enemies”. In one of his novels Wambaugh ^[14] depicts an interesting detective. The man has been drinking vodka intensively, in the last times (He comes from a white-Russian emigrant family. He had undergone a depressive period). In his divorcee-house he keeps a parrot and a hamster. Some mornings he is so drunk that he gives the bird’s fodder to the rodent and vice versa. The bird is not so talkative. She could capture a single word in Russian from her master so far: Gawno. In the Turkish Republic the law regarding the family names was passed in 1934. Up to that year in the young republic and in previous Ottoman times, people intensively used nicknames to differentiate various personalities with the same names. Some were ethnical nicknames, or references to birth-places. Some other nicknames could be very degrading adjectives or may simply refer to some physical deformities. Some example are: Topal (lame), Kor (blind, usually meaning “one-eyed”), Kel (bald), Pinti (miser, stingy), Deli (crazy), Alcak (low, designating shortness but also insinuating lowness of character) or even Tek Tasak (with only one testicle, one-balled). A famous Ottoman grand vizier was Öküz Mehmet Pasa (Mehmet Pasha, the Ox) (death: 1619, Aleppo). On a recent television program; Art-Historian Talha Ugurluel narrated that once during a campaign a stray-cow found its way into the ostentation military tent of the commandant. Some high officers of the Janissary corps were also present when the cow put his head into the front opening of the tent. [One wonders what the sentries were doing]. The Pasha approached the animal lovingly and talked to her in a whisper. Then he patted the animal and sent her away. Turning briskly around, he could catch a glimpse of the grinning faces of his officers. Jokingly he retaliated their enjoying themselves. He said: “The cow asked me what the hell I was doing among such a bunch of donkeys”.

CONCLUSION

Polite civilized people are supposed to avoid resorting to dirty words in their speech. There used to be primary school teachers who would order boys to go rinse their mouths if they heard them swear. There used to be harsh parents who would

threaten to smear the swearing-mouths of their children with burning-hot red pepper. Fine and eloquent speech was upheld as a social value. Nevertheless, depending on the environment and the given circumstances; the so-called dirty words do possess undeniably needed connotations and latent functions in the process of constant reconstruction of the social reality among the adults. Facts can not be denied or overlooked; if realistic considerations are in question.

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