

Perceptions of Swearing in the Work Setting: An Expectancy Violations Theory Perspective

Danette Ifert Johnson & Nicole Lewis

This study investigates perceptions of swearing from an expectancy violations perspective. Degree of expectancy violation is hypothesized to depend on several communicator, relationship, contextual, and message characteristics. Results support that expectancy violations are related to the formality of the situation in which swearing occurs and the specific swearing phrase. No support is found for swearer's sex or status as predictors of expectancy violations. Hearer's degree of surprise perceived is associated with perceptions that the speaker is incompetent. These results support the usefulness of expectancy violations theory as an explanation for perceptions of swearing.

Keywords: Communication Competence; Interpersonal Communication; Swearing; Workplace Interaction

Swearing is an aspect of language studied formally since at least 1901 (Ginsburg, Ogletree, & Silakowski, 2003), attracting interest from scholars across disciplines. Interestingly, no common definition of swearing is present across academic studies. Kaye and Sapolsky (2009) noted that both the general public and language scholars use “offensive language,” “cursing,” and “dirty words” interchangeably. Rassin and Muris (2005) suggested that swearing is “the use of taboo words” (p. 1669). For purposes of this investigation, swearing will focus on taboo words containing sexual, excretory, or profane content; this content is included in classifications of swearing by Kaye and Sapolsky (2009) and others. However, current understanding of swearing

Danette Ifert Johnson is Professor of Speech Communication in the Department of Communication, Ithaca College. Nicole Lewis is a 2009 graduate of Ithaca College who is presently employed by IBM. An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the 2009 Eastern Communication Association Annual Meeting. Correspondence to: Danette Ifert Johnson, 407 Muller Center, 953 Danby Road, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA. E-mail: djohnson@ithaca.edu

is hampered by three shortcomings of scholarship. First, there is relatively limited research on effects of swearing in interpersonal contexts. Instead, studies have focused on reasons for swearing (Rassin & Muris) or descriptions of swearing in television programming (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2009). An exception is work by Rassin and van der Heijden (2005), which examined the believability of statements in hypothetical criminal interrogations and crime victim testimony. Statements containing swearwords were seen as more believable, even though respondents to a more general question (i.e., does the presence of swearwords indicate a statement is truthful, deceitful, or neither) perceived the presence of swearwords to be associated with deceit (Rassin & van der Heijden).

Second, research needs to consider the interaction context (Jay, 1981; Winters & Duck, 2001). Factors such as social status, setting, and interaction goals need to be taken into account when determining perceptions of swearing instead of relying on the common approach of asking people how offensive a word is without contextual information (Winters & Duck). It is a truism in communication that meaning is influenced by the context in which a message is uttered, so incorporating contextual factors would provide a more realistic assessment of how people perceive swearing.

Finally, although theoretical explanations, including psychoanalytical justifications focused on catharsis (e.g., Ginsburg et al., 2003), have been provided for swearing, limited empirical support exists for such frameworks. An empirically supported language-based theoretical framework would help understand why swearing differs across contexts instead of simply describing such changes.

Given these shortcomings in research, this investigation will examine perceptions of swearing and develop a test of expectancy violations and swearing that accounts for important variables within the interaction context.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Expectancy violations theory (EVT) posits that expectations of others' behavior "serve as perceptual filters, significantly influencing how social information is processed" (Burgoon, 1993, p. 32). According to Burgoon, expectancies may be particularized for an individual or general to a language community or subgroup. An example of a general expectancy is that individuals are expected to say "thank you" after receiving a gift; general expectancies are based on social norms for behavior (Burgoon). An example of a particularized expectation is that Tom always begins conversations with, "What's the 77?" Expectancy violations move attention from the conversation to the violation, often leading to social evaluations of the violator (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999). Burgoon observed that expectancies develop based on: communicator, relationship, and context characteristics. Communicator characteristics include demographics or personality traits such as verbal aggression or biological sex, while relationship characteristics include power or intimacy variables, such as position in a social hierarchy or comparisons of friendships to stranger relationships. Context characteristics address issues unique to a particular set of interactions and might include the presence of third parties or situational formality. Although EVT often focuses on preinteraction expectations, Burgoon and LePoire (1993) established that violations also result from specific messages encountered within interaction.

DeKlerk (1991) wrote that “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” (p. 157). Given the emotional charge associated with swearing and the generally taboo nature of swearing expressions, use of specific messages containing swearing potentially violates listeners’ expectations. The degree of violation, however, should depend upon the communicator, relationship, and context characteristics identified by Burgoon (1993) as well as message factors as examined by Burgoon, Walther, and Baesler (1992) and Burgoon and LePoiré (1993). There are at least three reasons (beyond their inclusion in expectancy violations theory) that these factors are likely to influence perceptions of swearing. First, these factors are associated with expectancies for other types of language. Slang, humor, or sexual words are more or less expected with some individuals (e.g., from adolescents), in some relationships (e.g., among friends), or in specific contexts (e.g., ritualistic settings such as inaugurations). Second, Jay (1981) and Winters and Duck (2001) noted the dearth of attention paid to communicator, relationship, and contextual factors in the study of swearing and advocate examining these variables to better understand how swearing is used and perceived in interaction. Indeed, Rassin and van der Heijden (2005) found that people responded differently to the *notion* of swearing expressions in general than they did to the use of the words in specific, contextualized scenarios, providing additional support for the need to consider the specifics of the interaction context. Finally, message factors are important because specific swearing messages are perceived differently by evaluators, even when context is not included in the evaluation (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Burgoon et al. (1992) found that expectancy violations associated with particular touch messages were related to evaluations of message senders.

This investigation will examine variables illustrating Burgoon’s (1993) factors associated with expectancy violations: speaker sex (a communicator factor), relative status of the speaker and hearer (a relationship factor), situational formality (a contextual factor) and swearing message (a message factor akin to those identified by Burgoon et al., 1992). The next section addresses these factors and how they are related to expectations regarding expletives.

Factors Influencing Expectancies about Swearing

Speaker Sex

Speaker sex is probably the most researched communicator factor to date with regard to swearing. Thus, including speaker sex enables comparison with published research and allows examination of how additional factors (i.e., situational formality, speaker status, and message content) may affect the relationship between speaker sex and perceptions of profanity.

Research on sex differences in the use of expletives is mixed. Studies have found that males, when asked to identify words typically used in ‘today’s swearing’, reported using obscene words at a younger age than did females (Fine & Johnson, 1984, p. 62) and that women claimed to include profanity in their speech less often

than males (Selnow, 1985). Moreover, women perceived that swearing was less appropriate in newspapers, cable television, Saturday morning television, television after 11 p.m., and in formal meetings than did men (Selnow). However, others assert that sex roles have changed over time in regard to profanity usage. Bayard and Krishnayya (2001), who recorded and coded casual and task-oriented interaction among roommates, found that females used expletives of the same strength as males. DeKlerk (1991) found that biological sex was not the dominant predictor of adolescents' swearing, but that power, including the relative social status of a hypothetical third party present, exerted influence on expletive use such that adolescents were most comfortable swearing in front of same-sex peers and least comfortable swearing in front of parents and teachers. DeKlerk noted that female usage of profanity was higher than stereotypes would predict. Given the mixed results of research on sex differences in profanity, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: To what extent will respondents' expectations be violated when encountering swearing in a work setting based on the sex of the person who swears?

Speaker Status

Speaker status is an important relationship factor to consider because it is likely to indicate speaker power. As noted above, deKlerk (1991) found that markers of speaker power converged to predict the use of expletives and that adolescents reported using expletives primarily with peers and much less so with adults. These findings are consistent with the idea that slang and its forms (including swearing) are used to rebel against social structures and are thus inappropriately used by those who are privileged by existing power structures (Moore, 2004). Indeed, adult use of slang, particularly inappropriate use, can reinforce social barriers between youth and adults, and adult ignorance of slang terms may be disregarded or disdained (Reyes, 2005). Moore argues that slang terms can even be used to mock those, including adult users of slang, who are perceived to be outdated, as is the case with use of the term "swell." Based on these findings, it may be that persons in positions of authority are expected to know less about slang and its appropriate use. If that is the case, then the following hypothesis should be supported:

H1: Respondents' expectations will be violated more when encountering swearing by a person in a position of authority than by a peer in a work setting.

Formality of the Situation

Formality of the situation influences expectations about language. For example, if an attorney and a judge are friends, the way they address each other in the formal setting of the courtroom is likely to differ from how they address each other socially; indeed, these language patterns may differ even if the two are not friends. Expectancy violations are likely to occur if the attorney, when objecting in a courtroom, says, "Aw, c'mon Skip" instead of the more formal, "Your Honor, I object". The former statement may be very much expected in a social situation where the latter would likely violate expectations.

Research suggests that swearing is perceived as inappropriate in formal settings (Selnow, 1985). Daly, Holmes, Newton, and Stubbe (2004) identified frequent use of swearing (albeit to lessen the negativity of face-threatening acts) as a factor making a particular factory work group different from other work groups. Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) found more instances of swearing in unstructured (casual) than in structured (distinctly task-focused) conversations among roommates. Given that swearing seems to occur more frequently in informal interactions (Bayard & Krishnayya) and that, when swearing occurs in formal settings, it is viewed as unusual, it follows that expletive use in formal settings would be more surprising.

H2: Respondents' expectations will be violated more when encountering swearing in a formal work setting than when encountering it in a social setting.

Message Content

Although message factors were not identified by Burgoon (1993) as a specific contributor to expectancies, Burgoon and colleagues have addressed message factors in other work on expectancy violations. Burgoon et al. (1992) examined whether non-verbal touch messages were associated with perceptions of speakers and found that touch was less expected from high-valence than low-valence communicators in stranger interactions. Research has also found that verbal messages influence evaluations of speakers (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993). While a number of studies have examined the frequency of expletives (e.g., Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004) and Selnow (1985) found that sexual words were judged more harshly than excretory or profane swearing, information is largely absent about expectations surrounding specific expletive expressions. The following research question is thus proposed:

RQ2: To what extent will respondents' expectations be violated based on the specific expressions used to swear in a work setting?

Evaluations of Speakers Who Violate Expectations

Beyond examining the degree to which the aforementioned communicator, relationship, contextual, and message factors contribute to expectancy violations, it is important to consider how the degree of surprise relates to evaluation of the message source. A key component of EVT is that the arousal resulting from an expectancy violation is labeled and, if the violation is strong enough, evaluation of the speaker occurs (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999). Research has shown that swearers are perceived as socially inept (Winters & Duck, 2001), incompetent (Hamilton, 1989), and untrustworthy (Hamilton). Outside the context of swearing, individuals who violate expected behaviors are also often evaluated more negatively than those who follow expected norms. For example, Carson and Cupach (2000) found that managers using aggressive reproaches to subordinates were perceived as less competent than those who used more direct, less aggressive reproaches. Given the negative evaluations of swearers cited above and that EVT holds that

the arousal following a violation often leads to the evaluation of a speaker, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Violated expectations at a message containing swearing will be positively associated with perceptions that the message speaker is incompetent.

Method

Sample

Participants were students solicited from introductory communication courses at a northeastern comprehensive college. These introductory courses fulfill general education requirements and serve both preprofessional and liberal arts students from across the institution. Fifty-nine males and 64 females agreed to participate ($M_{age} = 19.21$ years, age range: 18–30 years). Although data on ethnicity, race, nationality, and culture were not collected from participants, 80% of the student population from which the sample was drawn has identified itself as White, non-Hispanic (“Ithaca College,” 2007–2008).

Procedure

Participants voluntarily completed questionnaires asking them to report on how they would interact with a person at work. Participants received a questionnaire asking them to focus on a particular relationship partner: a coworker named Jack (30 participants), a supervisor named Jack (29 participants), a coworker named Linda (30 participants), or a supervisor named Linda (34 participants). These relationships manipulated the sex and status of the swearer. Participants responded to 12 situations that read, “You are at work and your coworker (supervisor) Linda (Jack) uses the phrase ‘oh, shit’ (Terry’s an ass, fuck off, that sucks, damn clients, screw you) during a formal meeting (social gathering).” Each participant responded to one level of status (coworker or supervisor), one level of swearer sex (Jack or Linda), and all possible combinations of the six expressions and two settings (formal or social). For each of the 12 situations (6 expressions \times 2 settings), respondents completed questions about their perceptions of the speaker. Following responses to all 12 situations, respondents provided their age and biological sex. Two versions of each manipulation, with a different order of situations, were used so that order effects could be evaluated; there were no significant differences by order of swearing expressions. Potential participants were solicited during class time with instructor permission and procedures were approved by the institution’s Human Subjects Review Board. At the conclusion of the questionnaire administration, students returned their questionnaires to an envelope that was passed around the room and any questions were answered.

Measures

Degree of surprise

To operationalize expectancy violations in this investigation, perception of surprise when encountering the swearing expression was used. This operationalization is

Table 1 Reliabilities for Measures of Degree of Surprise and Speaker Incompetence

Swearing expression	Surprise		Speaker incompetence	
	Formal	Social	Formal	Social
Oh, shit	.72	.75	.84	.91
Terry's an ass	.75	.77	.77	.90
Fuck off	.84	.76	.91	.86
That sucks	.74	.76	.93	.90
Damn clients	.86	.79	.92	.92
Screw you	.82	.84	.90	.90

appropriate because, as Smith and Schyns (2009) stated, surprise, by definition, is an emotion “indicating something unexpected” (p. 1207), which is what an expectancy violation is. Additionally, Shen and Bigsby (2010), in examining behavioral activation/behavioral inhibition systems and emotions, noted that surprise occurs when “novel stimuli” are present, has an open (neither positive nor negative) valence, serves an orienting function, and leads hearers to the action of allocating attention (p. 4). All of these characteristics are consistent with EVT, as violations of expectancies are likely to occur when novel stimuli are present, the valence of violations are either positive or negative, and violations are likely to orient a hearer toward the message and draw attention to the violation (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999).

Respondent degree of surprise was measured by three questions developed for this investigation, asking the degree to which the swearing phrase “is expected” (reverse coded), “is surprising,” and “is shocking.” Responses were made using 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*). Separate scales were computed for each of the 12 situations. Table 1 contains reliability measures for the scales, and Table 2 contains means and standard deviations. Confirmatory factor

Table 2 Planned Comparison Tests for Significant Formality and Swearing Expression Main Effects from Repeated Measures ANOVA

Swearing expression	Formal meeting mean	Social gathering mean	Paired T-test	Cohen's d
Oh, shit	4.69 (1.21) _a	3.39 (1.21) _e	t(115) = -10.09**	.94
Terry's an ass	5.34 (1.11) _{bc}	4.07 (1.22) _{fg}	t(112) = -11.05**	1.04
Fuck off	5.99 (1.29)	5.48 (1.30)	t(111) = -3.50**	.33
That sucks	4.63 (1.21) _a	3.14 (1.28) _e	t(105) = -12.30**	1.20
Damn clients	5.30 (1.29) _{bd}	4.03 (1.27) _{fh}	t(111) = -9.55**	.90
Screw you	5.55 (1.23) _{cd}	4.12 (1.29) _{gh}	t(109) = -11.23**	1.07

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses after each mean. Higher means indicate greater surprise. Common subscripts appear when swearing expressions do not significantly differ from one another.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3 Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Speaker Incompetence

Swearing expression	Formal meeting	Social gathering
Oh, shit	4.46 (1.33)	3.27 (1.32)
Terry's an ass	4.87 (1.22)	3.85 (1.42)
Fuck off	5.73 (1.41)	5.04 (1.36)
That sucks	5.14 (1.28)	2.99 (1.26)
Damn clients	5.14 (1.28)	3.78 (1.46)
Screw you	5.23 (1.30)	4.02 (1.36)

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Higher scores reflect perceptions of greater speaker incompetence.

analysis for the scale items indicated good fit with the data, $\chi^2(32) = 40.7$, $p > .05$, $CFI = .98$, $RMSEA = .047$ (.000–.086).

Speaker incompetence

Perceptions of speaker incompetence were measured by four questions asking the degree to which the phrase “makes her (him) look incompetent,” “is embarrassing for her (him),” “makes her (him) look dumb,” and “makes her (him) look bad.” Although these items have not been used previously as a single scale, these are modifications of items (Cai & Wilson, 2000; McCroskey & Teven, 1999) that were deemed by the authors as most relevant to the conceptualization of speaker competence here. As with the surprise measure, responses were made using 7-point Likert-type items (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*), with separate scales computed for each of the 12 situations. Reliability measures for these scales appear in Table 1, and means and standard deviations appear in Table 3. As with the surprise measure, confirmatory factor analysis indicated good fit, $\chi^2(31) = 42.1$, $p > .05$, $CFI = .97$, $RMSEA = .054$ (.000–.092).

Results

Hypotheses and research questions were tested using a mixed model repeated measures ANOVA. Swearer's sex and status (coworker or supervisor) were between-subject factors. Formality and swearing expression were within-subjects factors. A single repeated measures ANOVA, with respondent degree of surprise as the dependent variable, was used to evaluate H1, RQ1, H2, and RQ2.

Research Question 1 and Hypothesis 1

There was no significant main effect on degree of surprise by swearer sex, $F(1, 97) = .17$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 < .01$, or swearer status, $F(1, 97)$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 < .01$. Thus, there is no support for H1's prediction that swearer status would be related to degree of surprise and the response to RQ1 is that swearer sex is not associated with degree of surprise.

Research Question 2 and Hypothesis 2

Significant main effects were found for formality of the situation ($\lambda = .291$, $F(1, 97) = 236.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$) and for swearing expression ($\lambda = .199$, $F(5, 93) = 74.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$). Because of the significant main effects, follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate specific relationships identified in RQ2 and H2. Results of the paired t-tests used to assess differences by situational formality and swearing expression appear in Table 3. Results support H2 that situational formality is associated with degree of surprise, and an affirmative response to RQ2, which asked whether the specific expression was related to degree of surprise. Analyzing results of the planned comparison tests, swearing expressions were consistently more surprising in formal meetings than in social gatherings. When examining specific expressions, “fuck off” was most surprising, followed by the cluster of “screw you,” “damn clients,” and “Terry’s an ass,” and, finally, “oh, shit” and “that sucks.” An identical pattern was found for the grouping of expressions in both the formal and social settings.

Effect sizes for the six swearing expressions within the formal meeting context ranged from Cohen’s $d = .06$ (“oh, shit” and “that sucks”) to 1.04 (“fuck off” and “that sucks”); 2 of the 15 comparisons had effect sizes above .80, another 6 above .50, and 5 above .20. Johnson, Scott-Sheldon, Snyder, Noar, and Huedo-Medina (2008) reported that effect sizes above .80 are considered large, above .50 are medium, and above .20 are small. Within the social gathering context, effect sizes for pairs of expressions ranged from .09 (“damn clients” and “screw you”) to 1.61 (“that sucks” and “fuck off”). For the social context, five of the comparison pairs had effect sizes above .80 and another seven had effect sizes of above .50. Thus, more than half of the swearing expression pairs had effect sizes that are considered medium or large.

Table 4 Correlations between Degree of Surprise and Perceived Speaker Incompetence

Swearing expression	Correlation between degree of surprise and perceived speaker incompetence	
	Formal meeting	Social gathering
Oh, shit	.51** (.66**)	.74** (.90**)
Terry’s an ass	.47** (.62**)	.76** (.91**)
Fuck off	.75** (.86**)	.62** (.77**)
That sucks	.45** (.54**)	.75** (.91**)
Damn clients	.81** (.91**)	.82** (.96**)
Screw you	.70** (.81**)	.75** (.86**)

Note. Correlations in parentheses are corrected for attenuation. Speaker incompetence was coded so that higher scores indicate greater incompetence.

** $p < .01$.

Hypothesis 3

The final hypothesis predicted that, as degree of surprise increases, perceived speaker incompetence increases. Correlations between degree of surprise and speaker competence are significant in all 12 situations. Hypothesis 3 was supported (Correlations are reported in Table 4).

Discussion

This investigation addressed shortcomings in swearing research: limited attention to multiple contextual issues and lack of theoretical grounding. The most important contributions of this investigation are that it provides initial support for a theoretical explanation, expectancy violations theory, for how people respond to swearing messages and that it tests this theory within a framework of communicator, contextual, relationship, and message factors.

The results provide initial support for an expectancy violations explanation for perceptions of swearers. Results suggest that hearers view expressions of swearing in formal settings as more unexpected than swearing in social gatherings (H2). Swearing is not expected in formal settings; means for perceived surprise were all above the scale midpoint: 4.63 to 5.99 on a 7-point scale. Although less unexpected than in formal meetings, swearing also appears to be rather unexpected in social gatherings; means for perceived surprise ranged from 3.14 to 5.48. Perhaps swearing is still taboo in general but specific elements of a setting, such as formality, can make expletives more acceptable in a particular workplace interaction.

Moreover, hearers view some swearing expressions (e.g., “fuck off”) as more unexpected than others (e.g., “oh, shit,” “that sucks”) (RQ2). Given the assumption of EVT that violations exceeding a threshold influence evaluations of speakers, the relationship found between degree of surprise and perceptions that a speaker is incompetent (H3) is not surprising. This finding is consistent with Burgoon and LePoire’s (1993) conclusion that messages influence speaker evaluations, further supporting the expectancy violations explanation advanced here. The magnitude of the variance in degree of surprise explained by contextual factors and correlations between surprise and perceived speaker incompetence ($r=.45\text{--}.82$) suggest that these relationships are not just statistically significant but that these factors exert substantial influence on perceptions of speakers.

Hypothesized relationships between swearing and speaker sex (RQ1) and status (H1) were not supported. One explanation for the lack of sex differences is that social expectations based on sex have changed over time. Although research has found sex differences in swearing (Fine & Johnson, 1984; Selnnow, 1985), more recent research by Grossman and Tucker (1997) found that males and females were similar in reported expletive use and in proportion of sexual terms used. Males and females did differ in the number of slang terms listed, but Grossman and Tucker concluded that the “difference is quite modest and perhaps of little importance” (p. 108). A 2001 study by Bayard and Krishnayya drew similar conclusions.

More surprising is that the status of the speaker (peer or supervisor) did not influence perceptions of swearing. Grossman and Tucker (1997) suggested that power

drives use of slang expressions. It is possible that, for this sample, status and power are not related. It may be that college students have limited work experience, and the work experience they have involves supervisors who are low in the organizational hierarchy. Even outside of the population from which the sample was drawn, one's supervisor may not be removed enough from one's own position to perceive significant power differences between a peer and an immediate supervisor.

Limitations

One limitation to this study is that the sample used is relatively homogenous in terms of cultural and socioeconomic background. Given research suggesting socioeconomic differences in swearing (deKlerk, 1991), it is possible that lack of diversity in the sample contributed to nonsignificant findings for H1. Future research should attempt to replicate these results with different groups to define the degree to which these results may be generalized. As noted above, a second limitation is that the manipulation of status (peer or supervisor) may not have been strong enough to engage perceptions of power differences for the college students sampled. Future investigations should seek to determine whether there are no status differences, as suggested by the present investigation, or whether the present results are an artifact of measurement or culturally based perceptions of workplace supervisors and peers.

Continuing Research

Continuing research should address additional factors that contribute to expectancies of swearing. For example, swearing focusing on the hearer may be more surprising than messages lacking a specific target or directed at a third party. Rassin and van der Heijden (2005) noted that swearing targeted at the message receiver may yield different effects than that directed at third parties. The messages with the lowest mean level of surprise in social and formal settings were "oh, shit" and "that sucks." It could be that targeting a specific person (e.g., "fuck off," "screw you") is more surprising because such messages directly threaten face needs, whereas nontargeted messages do not. "Fuck off," a phrase targeted at the message receiver, was perceived as most surprising, followed by phrases targeted at the message receiver or third party ("screw you," "Terry's an ass," "damn clients"), and, finally, general phrases ("oh, shit," "that sucks"). Although respondents' differentiation between "fuck off" and "screw you" suggests that the expletive, not simply targeting, is related to perceptions, it would be worthwhile to address what role expletive targeting plays. Another issue is whether hearers attribute different purposes to targeted and nontargeted messages. Nontargeted messages might be seen as releases of emotion, consistent with deKlerk's (1991) observation that some expletives serve an expressive function, while targeted messages may be seen as attempts to demonstrate dominance or demean.

Additionally, continuing study should examine whether replacements for swearing (e.g., "fiddlesticks," "friggin'") are viewed differently than swearing. It may be that listeners are surprised by these terms, but expectancies may differ from phrases such as

“oh, shit,” “damn clients” or “fuck off,” and thus evaluations of speaker competence may differ.

Swearing effects is an important issue, so research should address variables beyond surprise. Jay (2009) observed that not all offensive words are harmful and that positive or neutral effects can accrue to offensive language users. This assertion is supported by Rassin and van den Heijden (2005), who found swearing was associated positively with credibility. Ongoing scholarship could examine positive and negative results of swearing and other relevant outcome variables such as sociability, assertiveness, or interpersonal warmth.

Conclusion

Overall, results show that the swearing message used and situational formality are strongly related to violations of hearer’s expectancies when encountering swearing messages. Further, greater surprise was associated with perceived speaker incompetence. These findings support an expectancy violations explanation of how swearing is perceived, thus addressing the lack of empirically supported theoretical explanation and a failure to consider multiple contextual factors in existing scholarship.

References

- Bayard, D., & Krishnayya, S. (2001). Gender, expletive use, and context: Male and expletive use in structured and unstructured conversation. *Women and Language*, 24, 1–15.
- Burgoon, J. K. (1993). Interpersonal expectations, expectancy violations, and emotional communication. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 12, 30–48. doi:10.1177/026192X93121003
- Burgoon, J. K., & LePoire, B. A. (1993). Effects of communication expectancies, actual communication, and expectancy disconfirmation on evaluations of communicators and their communication behavior. *Human Communication Research*, 20, 67–96. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1993.tb00316.x
- Burgoon, J. K., Walther, J. B., & Baesler, E. J. (1992). Interpretations, evaluations, and consequences of interpersonal touch. *Human Communication Research*, 19, 237–263. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1992.tb00301.x
- Cai, D., & Wilson, S. R. (2000). Identity implications of influence goals: A cross-cultural comparison of interaction goals and facework. *Communication Studies*, 51, 307–328. doi:10.1080/10510970009388529
- Carson, C. L., & Cupach, W. R. (2000). Facing corrections within the workplace: The influence of perceived face threat on the consequences of managerial reproaches. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 28, 215–234. doi:10.1080/00909880009365572
- Daly, N., Holmes, J., Newton, J., & Stubbe, M. (2004). Expletives as solidarity signals in FTAs on the factory floor. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36, 945–964. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2003.12.004
- deKlerk, V. (1991). Expletives: Men only? *Communication Monographs*, 58, 156–169. doi:10.1080/03637759109376220
- Fine, M. G., & Johnson, F. L. (1984). Female and male motives for using obscenity. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 3, 59–74. doi:10.1177/0261927X8431004
- Floyd, K., & Voloudakis, M. (1999). Affectionate behavior in adult platonic friendships: Interpreting and evaluating expectancy violations. *Human Communication Research*, 25, 341–369. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1999.tb00449.x
- Ginsburg, H. J., Ogletree, S. M., & Silakowski, T. D. (2003). Vulgar language: Review of sex differences in usage, attributions, and pathologies. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 5, 105–115.

- Grossman, A. L., & Tucker, J. S. (1997). Gender differences and sexism in the knowledge and use of slang. *Sex Roles*, 37(1/2), 101–110.
- Hamilton, M. A. (1989). Reactions to obscene language. *Communication Research Reports*, 6, 67–69. doi:10.1080/08824098909359835
- Ithaca College Facts in Brief. (2007–2008). Retrieved from http://www.Ithaca.edu/ir/facts/Ithaca_Facts_in_Brief_2007-2008.pdf
- Jay, T. B. (1981). Comprehending dirty word descriptions. *Language and Speech*, 24, 29–38.
- Jay, T. B. (2009). Do offensive words harm people? *Psychology, Public Policy, & Law*, 15, 81–101. doi:10.1037/a0015646
- Jay, T. B., & Janschewitz, K. (2008). The pragmatics of swearing. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 4, 267–288. doi:10.1515/JPLR.2008.013
- Johnson, B. T., Scott-Sheldon, L. A., Snyder, L. B., Noar, S. M., & Huedo-Medina, T. B. (2008). Contemporary approaches to meta-analysis in communication research. In A. F. Hayes, M. D. Slater & L. B. Snyder (Eds.), *The SAGE source book of advanced data analysis methods for communication research* (pp. 311–348). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kaye, B. K., & Sapolsky, B. S. (2004). Offensive language in prime-time television: Four years after television age and content ratings. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 48, 554–569. doi:10.1207/s15506878jobem4502_7
- Kaye, B. K., & Sapolsky, B. S. (2009). Taboo or not taboo? That is the question: Offensive language on prime-time broadcast and cable programming. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 53, 22–37. doi:10.1080/08838150802643522
- McCroskey, J. C., & Teven, J. J. (1999). Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement. *Communication Monographs*, 66, 90–103. doi:10.1080/03637759909376464
- Moore, R. L. (2004). We're cool, mom and dad are swell: Basic slang and generational shifts in values. *American Speech*, 79, 59–86. doi:10.1215/00031283-79-1-59
- Rassin, E., & Muris, P. (2005). Why do women swear? An exploration of reasons for and perceived efficacy of swearing in Dutch female students. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 38, 1669–1674. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2004.09.022
- Rassin, E., & van der Heijden, S. (2005). Appearing credible? Swearing helps!. *Psychology, Crime, and Law*, 11, 177–182. doi:10.1080/106831605160512331329952
- Reyes, A. (2005). Appropriation of African-American slang by Asian-American youth. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 9(4), 509–532. doi:10.1111/j.1360-6441.2005.00304.x
- Selnow, G. W. (1985). Sex differences in uses and perceptions of profanity. *Sex Roles*, 12(3/4), 303–312.
- Shen, L., & Bigsby, E. (2010). Behavioral activation/inhibition systems and emotions: A test of valence vs. action tendency hypotheses. *Communication Monographs*, 77, 1–26. doi:10.1080/03637750903514268
- Smith, F. W., & Schyns, P. G. (2009). Smile through your fears and sadness. *Psychological Science*, 20, 1202–1208. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02427.x
- Winters, A. M., & Duck, S. (2001). You ****!: Swearing as an aversive and a relational activity. In R. M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Behaving badly: Aversive behaviors in interpersonal relationships* (pp. 59–78). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Copyright of Communication Reports is the property of Western States Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.