

# Swearing as a Verbal Behaviour among University of Cape Coast Students in Ghana

Lena Awoonor-Aziaku

University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana

Email: awooleen@gmail.com

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## Abstract

This paper examined swearing as a verbal act among undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast. It specifically explored the kind of linguistic items used as swear words by the students, the sources of the swear words and contexts in which they were used, the role gender played in swearing and why students at the university of cape Coast swear at all. A sample of data was taken using both questionnaire and interview, supplemented with participant observation. This was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. That is, the responses obtained from the interview and the questionnaire were manually transcribed into written words. It was subsequently analyzed using IBM SPSS software. The analysis of the data has revealed that students of the University of Cape Coast swear using mostly lexical items such as *damn*, *fuck*, *shit*, *motherfucker*, *bullshit*, *bitch* and *asshole*. There were a few instances of the use of sentences such as *damn it*, *fuck you*, *damn you!* And *fuck your ass*, for swearing. These words were mostly learnt from movies and friends and less frequently learned from the media and parents. It was noted that schools served as the main context of the usage of the swear words, but mostly in peer companies. The implication of this is that school instructors may have a very limited control on the students as far as the use of the swear words is concerned. Again it appears the male students are likely to swear more than the females. It is obvious that the students swear largely when they are frustrated, in pain, excited, in shock or when happy and to express emotions, and mostly because they did not see it offensive.

## Keywords

Gender, Swear, Variation, Humorously, Hinged, Social, Cohesion, Dam, Shit, Fuck

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## 1. Introduction

The use of taboo language is difficult to control, especially in this modern time.

Swearing, according to Gauthier (2017) is a taboo. For him, a taboo is a bad language that brings tensions among people similar to slang, jargon, misuse, new forms, etc. Bad language, as he notes, is a form of linguistic performance deemed unacceptable by a majority of people in a society because of its lack of conformity to the traditional linguistic rules and the culture in which it is uttered (Gauthier, 2017). This explains why many people abhor the use of swearwords. Anderson and Trudgill (1990) also believe that swearing is an act that is taboo. It is stigmatized in many cultures and should not be interpreted literally. It could be used to express strong emotions, for example, fear, joy, anger, excitement, etc., and attitudes (Dewaele, 2006; Jay et al., 2008). It implies that swearing dwells on taboo words, behavior or activities; involving the use of figurative language and is commonly employed in speech. Swear words include the use of sex references (fuck), scatological or disgusting objects (shit), animal names (pig, ass), those that are irreverent (godamn), ancestral allusions (bastard), racial, gender and ethnic slurs (fag), substandard vulgar terms and offensive slang.

According to Fägersten (2012), swearing refers to the use of words which have the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, objectionable, or unacceptable in any given social context. She however believes that it is not every use of a swear word that is swearing, nor has the definition of swearing traditionally been restricted to the use of a particular subset of swear words. What this means is that what is considered a swear word is quite subjective. In the view of Finn (2017), there are two categories of swearing: propositional and non-propositional. Propositional category includes dysphemistic, euphemistic, abusive, idiomatic, and emphatic swearing. These kinds are often used when speakers are aware of their usage and ultimately have an objective in mind (Pinker, 2007). Dysphemistic swearing, as Pinker notes, is used when a taboo word is chosen rather than a neutral term. The use of “loony bin”, for example, is to emphasize the emotions the speaker tries to convey to the listener. Another type of propositional swearing is euphemism. This is the use of indirect words to replace unpleasant ones in order to mitigate the tone of the action. A euphemism is therefore used in place of dysphemism to avoid offending the listener. It could however sound awkward to a listener when misused; hence it is important to use it appropriately. For instance; it would sound rather strange to tell someone that his/her wedding band was too small for their *digitus quartus* (i.e. ring finger).

An idiomatic swearing, e.g. pain in the ass, as Pinker (2007) observes, is used by a speaker to gain attention or appear macho, or to express dominance or strengthen a relationship. Non-propositional category, on the other hand, includes cathartic swearing, used to relieve tension, intimidate an attacker, or used to increase one’s tolerance for pain. Cathartic swearing is considered neither polite nor rude, but an abusive swearing is considered rude when it is used to intimidate or humiliate someone. Cathartic swearing could be expressed in metaphors (e.g. you dress like a slut!), as an advice (e.g. why don’t you go fuck yourself!), and as an accusation (e.g. you are being a real bitch!). It is believed that the pur-

pose of this type of speech is to bully or gain power (Pinker, 2007). Another example of non-propositional swearing is emphatic swearing; for example, “fucking cool”, is believed to be used to emphasize something. It is often used to promote social harmony, to express that someone is doing well, or it can be used to intensify a word used to describe an event or person in a negative or positive way (Jay et al., 2008).

Clearly, there are several reasons why people swear. Generally, most swear words are correlated with rudeness and negative emotions. However, they could have social values if used correctly, and could even be considered polite (Jay et al., 2008). For example, swearing helps people express their feelings, and it subsequently releases stress. Additionally, identities and status are established through its usage. Jay (2009) believes that taboo words can range from mild to extremely offensive, such that most people tend to use the mild form of euphemisms depending on the context. Many people even replace extreme obscenities with mild euphemisms especially in a mix of people or in a casual company (Kapoor, 2014).

Khalid et al. (2016) argue that people use this verbal act freely in homes or in public places, among peers or in groups where there are usually no limitations on linguistic expressions. Swear words may be employed in emotive expressions where they serve as intensifiers, abusive or expletives contextually. In relation to context, Kapoor (2014) puts swearing into two: casual and abusive. Casual swearing has little or no intention of causing harm. It usually has humorous and emphatic tone when used. Abusive swearing, however, has hostile and antagonistic tone with the aim of causing harm. Abusive swearing is therefore solely propositional while casual swearing could be propositional or non-propositional (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

Gender and swearing have caught the attention of many scholars. A notable one among these is the work of Paul (2012). He focused on the perception of the respondents in relation to gender and swearing, and the factors that influence it. He found swear language as an etiquette rather than a moral prejudice. He noted that as a stylistic etiquette, swearing is highly used by females to avert emotions. This was also noted by Pia (2014), that females used swear words to express emotions contextually. Pia found most of the swear words used by females to be related to religion, e.g. “God”, “hell”; body functions and body parts, e.g. “shit”, “fuck”, etc. Nurliyana (2014) identified swear words such as “shit”, “damn”, “hell”, “bitch”, “fuck” and “bullshit” as the most frequently used ones among Malaysian teenagers. He noted that the teenagers used the act to deal with their everyday affairs. This act, as he suggested, was used as a sign of solidarity among the teenagers. However, they were used mostly during peer conversations with same sex, but rarely and seldom in the midst of opposite sex, strangers and parents. He noted that although the act is generally deemed bad, the teenagers did not see anything wrong about their usage, and therefore perceived their use as good.

In another work, Güvendir (2015) looked at how environment, genetic and psychological factors promote the use of swear words in both genders. He dis-

covered that males were more aggressive in their desire to utter taboo words than females. His finding is a proof of the fact that orbital frontal cortex in females mitigates against their use of strong words as compared to males. To explain this further, [Shohreh \(2015\)](#) investigated the scale of using taboos by both genders. He found that just as language differs from society to society, so is the use of swear words among individuals and among both gender groups. He noted that gender, environmental and societal conventions inhibit the usage of taboo words; thus most Persians would tend to use forms of Euphemisms like proverbs, metaphors, and paraphrases to express linguistic taboos in order not to violate cultural norms. Meaning that the society frowns upon the use of taboos due to their harmful nature and as such militates against males and females' choice of words during speeches. Irrespective of the dictates of the society, the findings revealed that males tend to articulate more swear words during conversations than females.

[Khalid, Rooh and Shazia \(2016\)](#) explored the phenomenological experiences related to reasons and consequences of abusive language usage. This paper also discussed the normalization of the term in communications among university students. Their study has shown that abusive language as a whole is a normal marked feature of speech in the Islamic Culture, specifically in Pakistan, and the environment is an influential factor in its normalization. The study treated the resultant effect of the language on the addressee, the society and the world at large, reiterating the fact that abusive language is a socio-cultural issue which cannot be resolved.

### **Objective of the Study**

The aim of this paper was to explore the use of swear words by undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. It specifically examined 1) the linguistic forms of swear words, 2) sources of the swear words and contexts in which they were used, 3) the role gender played in swearing and 4) why students at the university of Cape Coast swear.

### **2. Methodology**

The data were taken through a set of questionnaire and in a face-to-face interview. The questionnaire was designed and administered to four hundred (400) students of the university. The questions comprised both closed and open ended types, which were fifteen (15) in all. This was supported by a structured interview conducted in a face-to-face interview with one hundred and fifty (150) interviewees selected randomly. An in-depth information on swear words, including questions concerning the sources, contexts of the swear word usage, as well as the factors influencing their usage were obtained from the respondents. The questionnaire was pre-tested to ensure there were no ambiguities and the needed corrections were done to fine tune the questions in order to meet the objectives of the paper. The questionnaire and the interview were supplemented with par-

participant observation. The interview was recorded with an audio recorder. In addition to the recording, short notes were taken during the interview and the participant observation. The notes enabled me to record the responses of the respondents live.

### 3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The responses obtained from the recorded interviews were transcribed manually into written words. The different swear words were first itemized in order to theme them out according to their linguistic forms. These were subsequently analyzed according to whether they were lexical or function words, or sentences etc. After the linguistic analysis, the responses obtained from the interviews were then put into two groups; those from the male respondents and those from the females'. The responses from the interviews were analyzed to get the students' knowledge on swear words, their sources, contexts of use as well as the reasons why they were used. Field notes were also used but the analysis focused mainly on the responses from the interview and the questionnaire. The responses from both groups were compared statistically using IBM SPSS software version 26.

### 4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the responses obtained from the questionnaire and the interviews. The section is in three parts: the first part treats the linguistic forms of swearing, the second takes a look at the sources and contexts of the swear words usage while the third section discusses the role gender played in swearing among the students as well as the reasons why the students swear. In all, a total of one hundred and fifty (150) respondents took part in the interview. Excerpts of the responses obtained from the interviews coupled with the responses from the questionnaire were provided to support the findings.

#### 4.1. Linguistic Forms of Swearing

The analysis of the data showed that students at the University of Cape Coast swear using the lexical items such as single words, poly-word or phrases, and also sentences.

#### 4.2. The Lexical Units

A *word* can be defined as a semantic, phonological and grammatical unit which is the second lowest unit on the rank scale. A word of a language can be defined as a single unit or the smallest element of a language that may be uttered in isolation. That is, a word could be a single unit, poly, phrase or a chain of units, idioms, etc. that form the basic elements of the language. Thus we can have a single word such as "bag", "goat", "plate", etc.; a poly word or a phrase, e.g. "mother-in-law", "the goat", "the same people", "in the room", "by all means", "cut of", etc. and idioms e.g. "better late than never", "around the clock", which

convey a single meaning. In English, words have been classified into lexical and functional words. Lexical words form an open-class system and are content and information carrying words. These include nouns, adjectives, lexical verbs and adverbs which have meaning (Yule, 1997). Function words, such as prepositions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, etc. though have grammatical meanings, they do not carry meaning on their own. In this study however, focus is placed on lexical words only that convey meaning that help achieve the communicative purpose of the swear words used.

The study has shown that students of the University of Cape Coast swear using mostly lexical words such as “damn”, “fuck”, “shit”, “bitch”, “twat”, “bastard”, “asshole”, “bullshit”, “dick”, “head” as well as phrases such as “son of a bitch”, “motherfucker” and so on... Among these, “damn”, “shit”, “fuck”, and “hell” appear to be the most frequently used ones. These were followed by *bullshit*, *bitch*, and *motherfucker*. The use of *asshole*, *my ass*, *dickhead*, and *cunt* were the least used swear words among the students. Meaning that students at the University of Cape Coast use swear words like obscenities (shit and fuck), epithets (damn and bitch) vulgarities (bullshit, asshole, cunt, and motherfucker), and profanities (hell).

### 4.3. Sentential Constructions

A sentence is a basic unit of a language which expresses a complete thought. It is a set of words that is complete in itself, typically containing a subject and a predicate, conveying a statement, question, exclamation or command (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973). Functionally, the sentence can be a declarative, an interrogative, imperative or exclamatory. Structurally, it can be simple, compound, complex or compound-complex (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973).

There were a few instances of the use of the imperative sentences such as *damn it*, *fuck you*, *bugger off*, *fuck off*, *fuck your ass*, *damn you*, *bloody hell*, *piss off*; which express displeasure of the addresser on the addressee. These expressions could be taken as insults or jokes depending on the context. That is although they have implied subjects; their communicative functions in context cannot be overlooked. The use of these words, as observed, is significantly influenced by gender. The next section discusses the use of the swear words among the two gender groups.

### 4.4. Gender and Swearing

The respondents were fractioned equally into 75 each of both genders. Out of the one hundred and fifty (150) respondents from the survey, 115 indicated that they swear while 35 declined engaging in the act. Meaning that both sexes have the tendency to swear. The result in **Table 1** shows that swearing is trendy among both gender groups.

It is clear from **Table 1** that both male and female students at the university of Cape Coast swear. However, it was noticed that the frequency of the usage differed

**Table 1.** Frequency of those that swear.

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	115	76.6	76.6
No	35	23.3	23.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

significantly by both genders. The males appear to swear more than the females. For example, out of a total of 75 males interviewed, only 5 denied the act, 70 of them said they did swear. For the females, 45 out of the 75 respondents agreed that they swear while 30 declined. This result is similar to what Braun and Kit-zinger (2001), Jay (2009) and Shohreh (2015) also found. Interestingly, however, the men believed that the females rather swear more than them (the males) while the females were of the view that the males swear more than they (females) did. Those who agreed that females swear more thought that “females engage in the act mostly because they easily get carried away”. Others think that females quest to establish rapport with individuals influence their linguistic choices. Females tend to be more polite and do not want to be offensive. They thus use mild words in expressing their feelings unlike males. Most females for example use “Oh gosh! or more polite forms especially in the human domain”. Males, on the other hand, use very offensive and provocative swear words but in jokes. See Table 2 below.

The study also looked at the reasons and what motivated the use of the swear words by the students. The table below indicates some of the reasons.

It is obvious from Table 3 that both males and females were influenced by certain factors in their use of swear words. Most of the males, for example, chose “all the above” which indicates that they like swearing mostly for two reasons; first because they like it and second because their friends also swear. Also, a lot of the male respondents indicated that swearing was normal in male utterances as they mostly engaged in the act in the same sex company. Seventeen (17) respondents claimed that they did not swear because of religious reasons; “The teachings of my religion do not permit it”, similar to the results of Shohreh (2015). He notes that students swear because of social reasons. Eighteen (18) respondents in this study indicated that they detested the act. The main reason given by one of the female respondents was that It is unethical to swear’, hence the avoidance. This assertion confirms Tannen’s (1991) where she notes that males are blunt and environmentally carefree as such they are very open with their expressions during conversations. Females, on the other hand, try to establish connectedness and are empathetic; as such they tend to be polite in their utterances.

#### 4.5. Sources and Contexts of Swear Words Usage

Apart from the gender differences, the paper also took a look at where the students normally learn or picked the words from. It was noticed that *movies*



**Table 2.** Gender and swearing.

		Yes	No	Total
Gender	Male	70	5	75
	Female	45	30	75
<b>Total</b>		<b>115</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 3.** Frequency of reasons for swearing.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
<b>I Like it, it makes me feel good, and awesome</b>	20	13.3	13.3
<b>Many of my friends use it</b>	29	19.3	19.3
<b>All the above</b>	47	31.3	31.3
<b>Other</b>	19	12.6	12.6
<b>I detest it</b>	18	12.0	12.0
<b>Religious Reasons</b>	17	11.3	11.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

serve as the major source of the swear words. For instance, 101 respondents representing about 83%, indicated that they learnt the swear words from movies and friends. This is not surprising at all with the influx of foreign movies being watched daily by Ghanaians, especially the youth. Thus movies as well as friends serve as sources where most of the students learn these swear words. Interestingly, the media and parents appear to have less influence on the use of the swear words. He observed that students learnt swear words mostly from friends and not from movies as found in this study. Some of the students mentioned that they also learnt the swear words from music, but mostly from peers.

On the issue of contexts in which students swear, it was observed that a lot of the students swear more in schools and in the company of their peers than when in their homes with their parents or relatives. For instance, 105 of them indicated that they swear more in schools than at homes, against ten (10) that indicated they did swear at home. One of the female respondents was very emphatic, "I never swear at home at all because I do not want to disrespect my parents", although she confirmed swearing at school. This implies that schools and peer group or company serve as major contexts where most of the students swear. Peer companies or age-based groups provide grounds for social cohesion, status recognition, and outmost competitions (Tannen, 1991). Most of the males indicated that they did swear more at school than at homes. Therefore, gender and context have become key components of the swearing behaviour of the students at the University of Cape Coast. The tables below show the percentage of the sources and contexts in which students swear.



**Table 4.** Sources of swear words.

	Frequency	Percentage
Parents	4	2.6
Media	15	10.0
Friends	40	26.6
Movies	71	47.3
Other	20	13.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 5.** Context of swearing.

	School	Home	Male company only	Female company only	Mixed company
Yes	105	10	38	16	61
No	12	23	22	39	14

**Table 4** shows where students learn the swear words from and **Table 5** shows the contexts in which they use them most. Some of the male student stated that they swear frequently in same gender group. Unfortunately, only few of the female students confessed they swear in same sex company only. Interestingly, majority of the students from both genders mentioned that they did not care whether they were in male company or not. This indicates that same sex contexts rarely ignite this act in the students. This contradicts Coates' (2004) where he claimed that both genders have the tendency of swearing more when they are in the company of their own gender. There are several reasons why students swear. Some of them mentioned that they did not see it offensive swearing, especially among same peer groups. Some said they swear when they were frustrated, in pain, excited, in shock or when happy. The data has shown that some of the students swear when they are angry and so express their emotions through swearing (see also Dewaele, 2006; Jay et al., 2008; Jay, 2009). Others said they swear because it is normal, and they do not mind if it is offensive or not. Some also indicated that they swear when they wanted to make "sex references". Nevertheless, most of the female students felt it was inappropriate and unladylike to swear even in their own gender group. Some of the students, particularly the female students, mentioned *politeness* as their key reason for not swearing even in the same gender group.

## 5. Conclusion

The study has shown that students of the University of Cape Coast swear using mostly lexical words such as *damn*, *fuck*, *shit*, *motherfucker*, *bullshit*, *bitch*, *asshole* among others. Among these, it was found that "damn", "shit", "fuck", and "hell" appear to be the most frequently used ones. Meaning that students at the

University of Cape Coast use swear words like obscenities (shit and fuck), epithets (damn and bitch) vulgarities (bullshit, asshole, cunt, and motherfucker), and profanities (hell). There were also a few instances of the use of sentences such as *damn it, fuck you, fuck off, bloody hell, damn you!* etc. as some of the forms, expressions which express displeasure of the addresser on the addressee. These words, as observed, were mostly learnt from movies, especially foreign movies and from friends. Interestingly, the media and parents appear to have less influence on the use of the swear words. In terms of the contexts in which these words were used, it was noticed that schools serve as the main context in which the students used these words. That is, most of the swear words were used mostly in schools and in the company of their peers. Since these words were used less at home where parents and relatives are present and among peers, parents and school instructors may not be aware of their prevalence among the students; hence, they may not have much control over the usage of the swear words.

It has also been noticed that gender significantly influenced the use of the swear words. For instance, it was observed that both male and female students at the university have the tendency to swear. However, the male students are likely to swear more than the females. There were reasons why both groups engaged in this verbal act. I found that generally the students swear because their friends also swear and also they did not see it offensive swearing, especially when among their peers. But some engaged in the act when they were frustrated, in pain, excited, in shock or when happy, or angry and so used them to express their emotions. Some also indicated that they swear when they wanted to make “sex references”. Others were of the view that swearing was normal to them, and so they did not mind whether it was offensive or not. Nevertheless, some of them, especially the female students felt it was inappropriate and unladylike to swear even in their own gender group. The results therefore show students at the University of Cape Coast swear generally at school and for different reasons.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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