

Swear words shed light on how language shapes thought

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Why were people offended when BBC broadcaster James Naughtie mispronounced the surname of the Culture Secretary, Jeremy Hunt? Why is it much easier for bilingual speakers to swear in their second language? Why are people offended by swear words – but not euphemisms?

New research from the University of Bristol sheds light on these issues and how they might help to answer the much-debated question: does the language you speak affect the way you think?

Professor Jeffrey Bowers and Dr Christopher Pleydell-Pearce of Bristol's School of Experimental Psychology, asked trial participants to read aloud swear words, euphemisms of those swear words, and neutral words while measuring their autonomic responses by electrodermal

activity. The researchers found that autonomic responses to swear words were larger than to euphemisms and neutral words, that is, people find it more stressful to say aloud a swear word than its corresponding euphemism.

Professor Bowers said: “We argue that taboo words generate emotional reactions in part through verbal conditioning, that is through a simple form of learning, the sounds of taboo words become directly associated with emotional centres in the brain. Accordingly, taboo words can evoke strong emotions even when they are uttered without any desire to offend.

“Euphemisms (such as ‘the F-word’), clever acronyms whose meanings are clear (for example, ‘FCUK’), and taboo words learned later in life (when learning a [second language](#)) have not been associated with emotions through conditioning to the same extent, and as a result, do not trigger strong emotional responses.”

The authors relate this theory of swear words to the more general topic of ‘linguistic relativity’ – that is, how [language](#) impacts on thinking. People may avoid thinking or conversing about certain topics in order to avoid saying aloud taboo words. It is not the topic they wish to avoid but the potential need to say aloud a given word. The potential speech act discourages rather than encourages certain lines of thought and this, the researchers argue, constitutes a version of linguistic relativity.

More information: [‘Swearing, Euphemisms, and Linguistic Relativity’](#) by Jeffrey S. Bowers and Christopher W. Pleydell-Pearce in *PLoS One*.

Provided by University of Bristol

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