

SWEARING

**A CROSS-CULTURAL
LINGUISTIC STUDY**

MAGNUS LJUNG



Swearing

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Swearing

A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vi
<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Transliteration</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xii
1 Defining Swearing	1
2 A Typology of Swearing	24
3 History of Swearing	45
4 Expletive Interjections	74
5 Oaths, Emphatic Denials, Curses	97
6 Ritual Insults, Name-Calling, Unfriendly Suggestions	114
7 Degree, Dislike, Emphasis, Exasperation and Annoyance	143
8 Replacive Swearing	161
<i>Notes</i>	168
<i>Appendices</i>	175
<i>Bibliography</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	186

List of Figures

4.1	Gehweiler's classification of the expletive interjections	80
6.1	Classification of evaluative nouns	125
7.1	Classification of <i>bloody</i> , <i>damn(ed)</i> , <i>fucking</i> and similar words	153

List of Tables

2.1	Distribution of sex organ epithets in three Scandinavian languages	39
4.1	Swearing exclamations in 25 languages	75
4.2	Utterances preceding <i>he/she exclaimed</i> in the BNC	76
4.3	Combining habits of 10 common English taboo words in interjections	81
4.4	Rank list of expletive interjections in Conv1M	92
4.5	Distribution of the expletive interjections	94
6.1	Distribution of mother-theme insults	121
6.2	Swedish swearing in the Tensta study	122
6.3	The major English expletive epithets	130
6.4	Distribution of English expletive epithets across taboo themes	132
7.1	Distribution of expletive slot fillers in spoken BNC	145
7.2	Distribution of <i>bloody</i> and <i>fucking</i> across functions	155

Preface

This book is a study of swearing, its shape, use and manifestations in English and a number of other languages. The discussion and many of the examples in the book are in English, but there will also be more or less extensive forays into a number of other languages, viz. Arabic, Cantonese, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Turkish and Urdu. Although the data from these languages have been obtained in many different ways, my primary source of information has been interviews with native speakers based on the questionnaire presented in Appendix 2. The information obtained in this manner varied with the number of native speakers available and my account of swearing in the different languages makes no claim to completeness.

Swearing often involves the use of four-letter words like English *fuck*, *shit* and the corresponding terms in other languages, and on account of this it is regarded by many as disrespectful, vulgar and offensive. Some also regard it as blasphemous on account of its frequent unserious use of religious words. Interestingly enough, however, and despite these negative characteristics, swearing also seems fill a need for many people who find that the vulgar and offensive nature of swearing makes it an ideal tool for adding emphasis to what one says.

In addition to the above sociolinguistic characteristics, swearing also has a number of linguistic features that make it well worth studying, features involving aspects of vocabulary, grammar and meaning.

The vocabulary items used in swearing consist of a limited number of *taboo* words, viz. words whose literal meanings denote semantic areas that are – as Hughes (2006: 462) puts it – ‘too private, too vile or too sacred’ to be mentioned. In the present study, these areas are referred to as *taboo themes* and comprise for example excrement, incest and sex, on the one hand, and religious concepts on the other. However, taboo is not merely a question of word content but also of word form: the word itself must be offensive. *Penis* and *prick* denote the same theme, but only the second is offensive and hence a swear word. It is an interesting but so far unresolved question whether taboo has more to do with form or with content (cf. Hughes 2006: 462 and the discussion in Chapter 1).

Grammatically, swearing is characterized by its *formulaicity*, viz. the fact that multi-word swearing expressions are not freely formed in accordance with the grammar of the language but are more or less fixed and resist formal change.

Semantically, swearing is special not merely because of the restrictions on its vocabulary, but also by the fact that the taboo words involved are not used with their referential or denotative meanings, but function exclusively as indications of the speaker's state of mind. Consequently swearing does not have meaning in the sense that referential expressions do. Instead it has *emotive meaning*, viz. it expresses the speaker's state of mind.

Finally, swearing has a number of distinct *functions*. In some of these, swearing is an utterance of its own, such as for example exclamations of anger, surprise like *Shit!* and *Bloody hell!*, unfriendly suggestions like *Go to hell!*, or curses like *Damn you!* In other functions the swearing expressions are part of an utterance, for example *bloody, like hell*, and *the devil* as in *It was bloody difficult*, *We ran like hell* and *What the devil do you mean?* In combination with the swearing themes mentioned above, the functions provide a convenient method for describing individual instances of swearing.

The characteristics outlined above are shared by all swearing and serve to establish it as a linguistic category of its own, not only in English and other languages but across language boundaries. It is precisely because of these commonalities of swearing that – in a study like the present one – we are able to identify and compare swearing expressions from different languages with each other, irrespective of the particular names used for that activity.

Such comparisons make it clear that with a few exceptions the swearing 'machinery' in different languages is basically the same and that the perceived differences between languages in this respect are mostly due to different taboo word choices from the same set of swearing themes.

Admittedly the number of languages available for such comparison in this study amounts to no more than 25 and granted that there are today at least 5000 different languages in the world, the data in the present study are far from sufficient for a full-scale comparison between swearing systems. However, despite the fact that decisions about the scope of my study were affected by the availability of native speakers, the choice of languages represented do permit certain limited comparisons between language families, cultures and religions, as the statistics in Appendix 1 indicate.

Acknowledgements

A study like the present one would have been impossible without the cooperation of a vast number of informants willing to answer the questions in the questionnaire and discuss the issues arising from that process, often offering information on the finer points of swearing in their own language about which I would otherwise have remained ignorant. I am deeply grateful to all of them. I would like to thank Kingsley Bolton for his comments on various aspects of my work and Antoinette Renouf, Andrew Kehoe and Rodopi for permission to use copyright material from *Corpus Linguistics: Refinements and Reassessments*. Finally I would like to thank my wife Kerstin for her support and assistance.

Transliteration

Several of the languages included in this study have writing systems that require transliteration (romanization) in order to be represented in English. In most cases this does not present a problem since the examples used in the literature have already been adapted to English spelling. In the case of Russian, however, it is often the case that examples in the literature are written in the Cyrillic alphabet, for which there are several romanization systems available.

In the present study I have mainly followed the spelling suggestions in the so-called Scholarly romanization system as described under *Romanization of Russian* in the Wikipedia Encyclopedia. My only deviation from the Scholarly system is the adoption of the spelling *yo* for Russian Cyrillic *ë*. As a consequence, the well-known Russian insult meaning 'Somebody has fucked your mother' has been realized in the present book as *Yob tvojú mat'*.

In the representation of data from Cantonese and Mandarin the different tones have been indicated in accordance with the Yale system.

List of Abbreviations

BNC	The British National Corpus
Cassell	<i>Cassell's Dictionary of Slang</i>
COCA	Corpus of Contemporary American English
COED	Corpus of English Dialogues
CNPD	<i>The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English</i>
ODE	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of English</i>
OED	The Oxford English Dictionary

1

Defining Swearing

1.0 Swearing in the dictionaries

Although *swearing* is an English term denoting a particular type of linguistic behaviour, it is often used in studies of other languages to denote a linguistic resource whose functions and realizations across languages are remarkably similar and seem to emanate from a common pool of emotive utterance types. Given this basic cross-linguistic similarity and the fact that the English term is a well-established one, *swearing* will be used throughout the present book as a name for the realizations of these emotive utterances in different languages, despite the fact that most other languages use terms for this type of linguistic behaviour that do not link it explicitly to swearing qua oath-taking.

English, French and Swedish are the only languages that use the same verb both for oath-taking and swearing in the profane sense; the terms used in (European) French and Swedish are *jur* and *svära*. Each of these two verbs is linked to a resultative noun – *juron* and *svordom*, respectively – denoting the products of profane swearing, as distinct from the product of oath-swearing, which is known as *serment* and *ed*, respectively. As we all know, the English verb *swear* has no corresponding resultative noun, a fact that complicates discussions of English swearing. Attempts are sometimes made to invent such a resultative English count noun, and certain dictionaries (for instance the second edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of English* from 2003) actually contain the count noun *a swear*, but this term seems by and large to be used only about bouts of swearing as in *have a good swear*, perhaps on an analogy with *have a good cry*.

There is also an older French term for swearing – *sacrer* – which is widely used in Canadian French (see Tassie 1961). Originally it was used

only about swearing connected with religious matters, but is now also used about profane swearing.¹

Certain languages use the word for cursing to denote swearing, for instance American English *curse*, Danish *bande*, Italian *imprecare*, Norwegian *banne*, while others simply use the term 'use bad language', for instance Spanish (*decir pala brotas*), Portuguese (*palavrao*), Mandarin Chinese (*zang hua*), Turkish (*küfür etmek*). (Italian may also use the term *bestemmiare* to denote religious swearing.) Greek uses the verb *blasfímó* 'to blaspheme', but uses it not only about blasphemous swearing but for other types of swearing as well.

Many languages have verbs denoting both religious and other swearing, for example Finnish *kirota*, German *fluchen*, Dutch *vloeken*, Polish *przeklinec*, Hungarian *karom kodni*.

Russian is a special case: serious swearing in Russian almost always involves the use of expressions insulting somebody's mother, grandmother or other close female relatives by suggesting that they have had sex with somebody or that the addressee should have sex with them, to mention only some of the variants. The best known of these is the interjection *Yob tvojú'mat'* (actually 'Somebody fucked your mother!' but often inadequately rendered in English as 'Fuck your mother!') in which the final apostrophe corresponds to the Russian letter *ь* and signifies that the final consonant in the Russian word for 'mother' is what is known as 'softened'. Roughly speaking, this means that the final t-sound in the Russian word for 'mother' sounds as if it were the combination *ts*. For reasons that we need not go into, the Russian word for swearing in general is *mat* which, as the spelling indicates, does not end in a 'softened' *t*, but is just an ordinary *t*-sound.

Yob tvojú má't' is basically a ritual insult (cf. Chapter 6) but is used in a bewildering number of other functions, for example as an interjection expressing the speaker's emotive reactions and even as a slot-filler expletive similar to English *fucking*, *bloody* (cf. Devkin 1996, von Timroth 1986, Dreizin and Priestly 1982).

Up to now, we have been discussing the words *swear* and *swearing* without actually defining what we mean by them, apart from the fact that a distinction has been made between oath-taking on the one hand, and other types of swearing on the other. It is now time to ask the question what we mean by *swearing* when we are not using it about oath-taking. A natural place to go in search of an answer is of course the dictionaries. Somewhat surprisingly, the word *swearing* does not rate a separate entry in any of the three common contemporary desk dictionaries of English. The British *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd edn

2003 and *The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* 2002 mention the noun *swearing* as a derivative under the entry for the verb *swear*, but *the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th edn 2002), on the other hand, does not mention the noun *swearing* at all, neither as an entry of its own nor as a derivative of the verb *swear*.

In the two British dictionaries the verb *swear* has two basic senses, one connected with oath-taking and – by extension – with the making of solemn promises, the other with the use of ‘offensive language especially in anger’. The noun *swearing* is clearly only a derivative of the second of these verb senses and must accordingly be taken to mean ‘the use of offensive language, especially in anger’. However, it is a moot point whether all uses of ‘offensive language’ actually constitute swearing. The use of English taboo words for matters like excrement, the sex organs or the act of having sex is no doubt offensive to many whatever the mood of the speaker, but as we shall see presently, it is a moot point whether such referential use of offensive words should be regarded as swearing.

We are better served in our search for a definition of ‘swearing’ in the American dictionary. Although it does not even mention the noun *swearing*, it offers four different senses for the verb *swear*, one of which is ‘to use profane oaths; to curse’. Clearly the noun *swearing* as it is normally used should be regarded as a derivative of this particular sense and may accordingly be defined as ‘the use of profane oaths and cursing’, a definition that makes it clear that swearing is not simply the use of offensive language, but has to do with its use in particular types of linguistic constructions. As we shall see, this is a view that has much to recommend it. Incidentally, it is also the definition provided by the *OED*.

1.1 Linguistic definitions of swearing

The study of swearing – linguistic and otherwise – was for long a neglected research area. However, the 1960s saw an increased interest in swearing with publications like Sagarin (1962) and Montagu (1967), and from the beginning of the 1970s there has been a steady increase in publications in this area. Many of these studies had a psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic basis; witness publications like Jay (1977, 1980, 1992, 1999, 2009), van Lancker (1972, 1987), van Lancker et al. (1989) and van Lancker and Cummings (1999). Other writers in this area have taken a linguistic, sociolinguistic or historical view of swearing, for example Taylor (1975), Andersson (1977, 1985), Andersson and Hirsch (1985a), Ljung (1984, 2006, 2009), Rawson (1989), Stenström (1990, 1991), Hughes (1991, 2006), McEnery (2006), McEnery et al.

(2000), McEnery and Xiao (2003, 2004) and Stroh-Wollin (2008). There have also appeared a number of interesting popular accounts wholly or partly devoted to swearing, such as Burgen (1996), Wajnryb (2005) and Chapter 7 in Pinker (2007).

Many of the above studies are not intended as overall accounts of swearing but focus on particular aspects of swearing that they find interesting. As a result they take swearing for granted as a linguistic, psychological, social or neurological category in its own right. This attitude may also reflect the feeling – common enough among native speakers – that they know swearing in their own language when they hear it, a view that is not always entirely justified, since native speakers often differ in their views of what should count as swearing.

Others seem to take the view that swearing today is so complex that it cannot be accounted for in a systematic way. As we shall find in the course of the present study, this more pessimistic view is not wholly unjustified, given the recalcitrant nature of some of the data we will be considering.

Despite their different views on what swearing actually is and how it is best described, the studies above all set up certain basic criteria that in their opinion have to be met in order for an utterance to count as swearing. There is often considerable agreement concerning the majority of these criteria and many or even most of their creators would agree with most – but not all – of my own four criteria for what constitutes swearing. These criteria are:

1. Swearing is the use of utterances containing **taboo** words.
2. The taboo words are used with **non-literal** meaning.
3. Many utterances that constitute swearing are subject to severe lexical, phrasal and syntactic constraints which suggest that most swearing qualifies as **formulaic language**.
4. Swearing is **emotive** language: its main function is to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker's feelings and attitudes.

The remainder of the present chapter will be devoted to a discussion of these four criteria.

1.2 Swearing is the use of utterances containing taboo words

Swearing is one of the many devices that languages offer speakers as a way to give additional emphasis to their speech, often in combination

with other emphasizing techniques like stress, intonation and tone of voice, not to mention non-linguistic phenomena like gestures and facial expression. The contribution of swearing in such situations is the added strength supplied by the taboo words necessary for swearing to take place.

The word *taboo* is Tongan in origin and was used in that social framework in rather complicated ways to refer to sacred places reserved for gods, kings, priests and chiefs. The word was borrowed into English by Captain James Cook in his 1777 book *Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*. Whatever the original meaning of the term (cf. e.g. Freud 1950: 18) it rapidly became used in English to denote something forbidden. For obvious reasons, however, absolute taboos are unusual and according to Hughes (2006: 462–3) the term has now come to be used to denote ‘any social indiscretion that ought to be avoided’ and has acquired the modern meaning of ‘offensive’ or ‘grossly impolite’ rather than ‘strictly forbidden’.

I claimed above that in order to qualify as swearing, an utterance must violate certain **taboos** that are or have been regarded as in principle inviolable in the cultures concerned. In most cases the taboo violation consists in the use of **taboo words**, but there are exceptions to the rule. In certain common standardized insults involving in particular mothers and sisters there is often no actual mention of the taboo words themselves and the insult is delivered in abbreviated form like *Your mother! Your sister!* (cf. account of world soccer final in Chapter 7).

These insults are rare in English, but as Labov (1972) observes, they are used in certain varieties of American English. On the other hand, they are very common in the Romance and Slavic languages as well as in Arabic, Cantonese, Greek, Hindi, Mandarin, Turkish and others. However, as a result of increase in immigration, this type of swearing has made its way into societies and languages in which they were previously unknown. As shown in Ljung (2006), such expressions are now regarded as standard swearing in the Swedish spoken in immigrant areas in Stockholm.²

In most of the languages studied here, the taboos violated in swearing fall into two quite different major groups, one involving religion and the supernatural, the other bodily waste, the sexual act and the sexual organs. Several writers on swearing have commented on this polarization of taboo areas; Crystal (1997: 61), for instance, remarks that

A remarkable variety of linguistic forms can be considered as cursing and swearing. At one extreme there are the complex and sophisticated expressions that may be found in religious, legal, and other

formal contexts. At the other, there are the many daily examples of taboo speech, usually profanities or obscenities that express such emotions as hatred, antagonism, frustration and surprise.

Hughes (1991) expresses similar views, claiming that 'swearing shows a curious convergence of the high and the low, the sacred and the profane' (Hughes 1991: 4). He goes on to say that this convergence reflects the historical development of swearing in English and incidentally in most other European languages. In its early stages, Hughes says, 'swearing was related to the spell, the charm and the curse, forms seeking to invoke a higher power to change the world or support the truthfulness of a claim' (1991: 4). Such swearing ultimately derives its force from a taboo forbidding 'improper' use of the names for 'higher powers', going back to the Old Testament's regulations concerning the use of the name of the Hebrew God. Classical Greek and Latin, on the other hand, imposed no such restrictions on their speakers.

Unlike swearing in Muslim cultures as manifested in for example Arabic, Urdu and Hindi, Christian swearing involves not only celestial swearing, viz. the invocation of 'higher' religious powers, but also that of 'lower', infernal, powers, viz. the Devil and his abode hell. While, technically speaking, both types are taboo, the taboos involved are different. As we have seen, the taboo involved in celestial swearing was – and still is – linked to the notion of the incorrect use of God's name. The taboo against infernal swearing found in Christian cultures, on the other hand, probably has nothing to do with the improper use of the Devil's name but is in all likelihood an instance of 'word magic' (cf. Hellqvist 1918: 54, Montagu 1967: 198): speakers were afraid that the mere mention of the Devil and other infernal concepts would call them forth in person. Such techniques for warding off danger have been used in many languages, not merely concerning the Devil but also with regard to dangerous and often mythical beings like the wolf in French *Quand on parle du loup on en voit la queue* ('When you speak of the wolf, you can see its tail') and the trolls in Swedish *När man talar om trollen står de i farstun* 'When you speak of the trolls they are on your doorstep'.

As the discussion in Chapter 3 will show, the role of the Devil seems to have changed as a result of the Reformation: according to at least one source (Hellqvist 1918: 54), he developed a more threatening presence in certain of the countries that had turned Protestant as a result of the Reformation and this may have affected the way his name was used in swearing (cf. Chapter 3).

The taboos violated in non-religious swearing are completely different from those found in religious swearing. Non-religious taboo is restricted to words considered to be vulgar and/or embarrassing, typically vernacular words for excrement, sexual intercourse and various other sexual practices regarded as deviant and the sexual organs.

The emphasis on vulgarity is important: while *shit*, *fuck* and *prick* immediately qualify for swearing use, neither technical–scientific words like *excrement*, *copulate* and *penis*, nor childish terms like *poopoo* and *weewee* will pass muster as swear words. In addition, only a small subset of the taboo words for excrement, sex and the sexual organs may be used in swearing. Consider for instance the words *fuck* and *shag* which are both common English taboo words for having sex. However, only the first may be used in swearing – compare the well-formed *Fuck you, not give a fuck, fucking idiot* with the impossible **Shag you, *not give a shag* and **shagging idiot*.

Vulgarity is a social construct determined by the views of polite society concerning what can and cannot be said. These views are linked to the notion of social class, in particular the idea that speakers belonging to the lower classes also use a ‘lower’ kind of language including swearing. Many languages have sayings epitomizing that view, such as English *swear like a trooper (sailor)*, French *jurer comme un charretier* (‘swear like a carter’), German *fluchen wie ein Bierkutscher/Landsknecht/Korporal* (‘swear like a beer-carter/soldier/corporal’), Italian *imprecare come un scaricatore ubriaco* (‘swear like a drunken carter’), Swedish *svära som en borstbindare* (‘swear like a brushmaker’). Interestingly enough, Finnish sends a different and more xenophobic message, using the expression *Hän kiroilee kuin turkkilainen* (‘swear like a Turk’).

Before leaving the topic of taboo we will do well to consider certain aspects of taboo and its relation to the language of swearing that pose problems. (We will return to the different taboo themes used in swearing in Chapter 2.) One of these is the question whether the taboo of ‘bad’ words is the property of these words themselves or of the things they denote. This question is seldom addressed, but in Andersson (1985: 83) an attempt is made to describe the relations between the words used in swearing and the things they refer to.

In Andersson’s view, potential swear words are words that are ‘bad’ both with regard to their content and their form, viz. words whose literal meaning is ‘bad’ and whose form is frowned upon by most speakers. A word like *shit*, for instance, has a content generally considered unpleasant, and a form looked upon as equally unpleasant by most speakers of the language. It is not surprising, therefore, that *shit* has

also acquired swear-word status in a great many languages. A word like *faeces* on the other hand, is 'bad' only with regard to its content, but is 'neutral' in form and cannot therefore aspire to swear-word status and nor can the childish *poopoo*. *Shit I stepped in the poopoo* is a well-formed swearing string, but *Poopoo I stepped in the shit* is not.

Interesting as it is, Andersson's explanation regarding potential swear words also has its problems. It does not, for instance, apply to religious swearing involving 'good' spiritual powers like God and Christ, etc. which must be considered to have 'good' rather than 'bad' content (cf. Stroh-Wollin 2008: 26). In addition it fails to explain why words like *fuck* and *shag* discussed above are treated differently: they seem to have about the same taboo load, but only *fuck* may be used as a swear word.

In the end I think we have to conclude that both the assignment of taboo and the choice of swear words among the words considered to be taboo are to a great extent a matter of chance and that, accordingly, we can only agree with Pinker's dictum that

The dividing line between terms that are merely dysphemistic and those that cross over to taboo is mysterious. For many people, *excrement* has a far more unpleasant connotation than *shit*, because excrement is reserved for descriptions of filth and squalor whereas *shit* is used in a wider range of idioms and casual contexts. Nonetheless, *shit* is less acceptable than *excrement*. People treat an unpleasant word as taboo to the extent that everybody else treats it as taboo... (Pinker 2007: 357)

For an attempt to establish a more reasoned basis for the taboos involved in non-religious swearing the reader should turn to Leach (1964).

1.2.1 Degrees of offensiveness in taboo words

A question often raised in connection with swear words and taboo words in general is how to determine the 'strength' or degree of offensiveness both of the individual words when used with their literal meaning and of swearing constructions in which they figure. Reaching definitive decisions in this regard is extremely difficult. It is also extremely important especially for the media which as we shall see presently have nevertheless spent enormous amounts of time and money to resolve it.

Before tackling that particular issue I will briefly discuss the question to what extent taboo strength contributes to swearing status: are mild expletive interjections like for example *God!* and *Goodness!* less

clearly members of the swearing category than strong expressions like *Fuck!* and *Shit!?*

Many native speakers apparently feel that the taboo strength of an utterance used in swearing does affect its status as a member of that category³ and would argue that exclamations like *God!* and *Goodness!* should not count as swearing at all.

In my opinion, however, taboo strength should not be used to determine membership in the swearing category, mainly because the perceived taboo strength of a given word or phrase varies over time and it would be extremely difficult to say at what point a given taboo expression has ceased to be an instance of swearing (cf. also Stroh-Wollin 2008: 27). It is probably better to place swearing expressions along a taboo cline extending from mild to strong swearing.

Ranking swearing expressions – and words in general – in accordance with their offensiveness is far from easy, but is important for the media, for instance in Britain and the US, which risk heavy fines for programmes containing language considered to be offensive. In both countries the media warn contributors against the use of offensive language. The BBC has restricted broadcasting of offensive material to the period between 6 a.m. and 9 p.m. – known as the ‘watersheds’ – and has adopted a set of editorial guidelines which outline the standards the BBC expects of all BBC content on TV, radio and online. The guidelines recognize that ‘it is not possible to compile a definitive list of offensive words’ adding that ‘Language is fluid, with new words and phrases regularly entering the public vocabulary’. However the BBC guidelines do provide a rank list of the types of offensive language that cause most offence. These are:

- Sexual swear words
- Terms of racist abuse
- Terms of sexual and sexist abuse or abuse referring to sexuality
- Pejorative terms referring to illness or disabilities
- Casual or derogatory use of holy names or religious words especially in combination with other offensive language ⁴

Despite acknowledging that no definitive list of offensive words can be compiled, the BBC guidelines do mention the three words considered most offensive, viz. *cunt*, *fuck*, *motherfucker*.

In the US, regulating the language used in the media is one of the many tasks of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). This is done on a complaints-based basis. US federal law prohibits the utterance

of any obscene, indecent or profane language ‘by radio’, later extended to television and the movies. The rules for the three categories differ somewhat, however: broadcast of indecent and profane material is prohibited between the ‘watersheds’ of 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. but is admitted during the ‘safe harbor’ period that lies outside these hours. Broadcasting of obscene material is prohibited at all times. At the same time the FCC must take care not to violate the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and Section 326 of the Communications Act, which prohibit the FCC from censoring programme material, or interfering with broadcasters’ free speech rights.

The crucial point here of course is how these three areas of offensive speech are defined. According to the US Supreme Court, to be **obscene**, material must meet the following three criteria:

1. An average person, applying contemporary community standards, must find that the material, as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest (i.e. material having a tendency to excite lustful thoughts).
2. The material must depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable law.
3. The material, taken as a whole, must lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. The Supreme Court has indicated that this test is designed to cover hardcore pornography.

Indecent material contains ‘sexual or excretory material that does not rise to the level of obscenity’ but ‘depicts or describes sexual or excretory organs or activities in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium’. The expression ‘patently offensive’ covers material which (1) contains descriptions or depiction that are explicit or graphic; (2) dwells on or repeats at length descriptions or depictions of sexual or excretory organs; (3) appears to pander or is used to titillate or shock.

No single factor is determinative. The FCC weighs and balances these factors because each case presents its own mix of these, and possibly other, factors.

Profane language includes those words that are so highly offensive that their mere utterance in the context presented may, in legal terms, amount to a ‘nuisance’. As an example of such words, the FCC mentions the ‘F-word’ and ‘those words (or variants thereof) that are as highly offensive as the “F-word”’. At the same time, the commission holds that there are no words that are ‘always unlawful’ but that the unlawfulness

depends on the context and on the time of day (or night) at which the programme is aired. Accordingly 'F-words' may be both indecent and profane 'if aired between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.' (the above information comes from <http://www.fcc.gov/eb/oip/FAQ.html#TheLaw>).

1.2.2 Euphemisms

Before leaving the discussion of taboo, we also need to consider the opposite extreme: *euphemisms*, viz. milder words and phrases used to replace swearing.

Euphemistic replacements take many forms. McArthur (1992: 661) recognizes two kinds of such replacements – which he calls 'minced oaths' – viz. (1) 'creating a nonsense equivalent of a swear word' as for example in *Gosh!* for *God!* and *Gee* for *Jesus* and (2) 'substituting an everyday expression of similar sound and length' as when *bloody* becomes *ruddy*, *damn* becomes *darn*, and *fuck* turns into *flip*.

Strictly speaking, it is misleading to discuss euphemistic replacements in terms of creating an equivalent of a **swear word**. What e.g. *Gosh!* and *Gee!* replace is not the words *God* and *Jesus*, but interjectional utterances containing these words which are used in swearing. Outside of the interjectional context, *God* and *Jesus* may never be replaced by *Gosh* and *Gee*; cf. the impossible **Do you believe in Gosh?* and **Gee died on the cross*. Further evidence that euphemistic replacement swearing is not about words but about utterances comes from earlier types of euphemistic swearing replacing multi-word utterances like *Zounds!* ('God's wounds') and *S'blood* (God's blood') and the even earlier type *By cokes bones* ('By God's bones') and *Igad* ('By God'). As the following handful of examples shows, replacement is found in all languages that use swearing: French *Sangbleu!* literally 'Blue blood' to replace *Sang de Dieu!* 'God's blood' and *Diantre!* to replace *Diable!* 'Devil'. In German *Potz Donnerwetter!* may be used as a replacement for *Gottes Donnerwetter* 'God's thunderstorm'.

Naturally the argument about the utterance-replacing function of swearing replacements also applies to swearing with 'dirty words'. Consider for example English *Shoot!* for *Shit!*, Spanish *Caramba!* for *Carajo!* 'Prick!', German *Scheibenkleister!* ('window glue') for *Scheisse!* 'Shit!', Russian *Yaponski bog!* ('Japanese god') for *Yob tvojú mat!* ('Somebody fucked your mother!' often inadequately rendered into English as 'Fuck your mother!').

The replacements exemplified above are all of the sound-similar kind. However, replacements are not restricted to sound similarity. Consider for instance the 'emphatic slot' after WH-words into which swear words

or replacements may be inserted both in English and in many other languages, for example Swedish, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese. By inserting a genuine swear word into these slots we create questions like *Where the fuck/the hell/the Devil/ did you put it? Who the fuck/hell/Devil does he think he is?* etc. In such constructions the taboo words may be replaced by the prepositional phrases like *on earth, in the whole world, in God's name, in the name of God*, replacements which are neither 'nonsense equivalents of a swear word', nor 'everyday expressions of similar sound and length' as a swear word.

1.3 Taboo words used in swearing do not retain their non-literal meaning

The second characteristic of successful swearing postulated here is that the taboo words used in swearing do not retain their literal meaning and that, conversely, taboo words used with literal meaning cannot be regarded as swearing. This is a claim on which opinions are divided. My own view – that the term 'swearing' should be restricted to non-literal uses of the 'swear words' – is shared by Montagu (1967), Crystal (1997), Andersson (1985), Andersson and Hirsch (1985), Andersson and Trudgill (1990), Stroh-Wollin (2008) and Taylor (1975).

Others, like McEnery (2006) and Pinker (2007), make no distinction between literal and non-literal taboo meanings and consequently regard both *We fucked* (McEnery 2006: 32) and *Let's fuck!* (Pinker 2007: 351) as swearing. Hughes in his monumental 2006 volume is not really concerned with such distinctions but takes a broader view, including swearing, foul language, profanity and ethnic slurs.

Why is it important to exclude taboo words with literal meaning from the swearing category? So far as I can see there is one important linguistic reason for rejecting the inclusion of referentially used taboo words from what is considered to be swearing, viz. the differences in synonymy relations for one and the same word when used in swearing and in non-swearing. In McEnery's and Pinter's examples, for instance, *fuck* may be replaced by *screw, bonk, shag, frig* and all the other taboo words for having sex. However – as already noted – such synonymy does not apply when these words are used in swearing: *Fuck you!* and *Screw you!* are both well-formed curses, but **Bonk you!* and **Shag you!* are not. The same restrictions on vocabulary choice are found in swearing interjections: in order to express for example irritation or anger, *Fuck!* is perfectly normal, but **Screw!*, **Bonk!* and *Shag!* are not.

If we pursue this matter further we find that not only do the taboo terms used in swearing lack most of the synonyms that may be used to replace them in non-swearing contexts, but they also display a new kind of ‘synonymy’ – or better, interchangeability – that is impossible when they are used with their literal meaning in non-swearing contexts.

We will find, for instance, that despite the clearly different literal meanings of *fuck*, *damn* and *sod*, these words are freely interchangeable in curses like *Fuck you!*, *Damn you!* and *Sod you!* and in interjections like *Fuck!*, *Damn!* and *Sod it!* We can also compare the wildly different interjections used to express denial as in for example *Fuck we do!*, *Pig’s arse we do!*, *My arse we do!*, *The hell we do!*, *Bollocks we do!* In terms of literal meaning there is no connection between *fuck*, *arse*, *butt*, *bollocks* and *hell*, but in swearing they may all replace each other. What these expressions have in common is that they are utterances fulfilling the same function, viz. to reflect the state of mind of the speaker.

We may express this peculiar ‘meaning’ in terms of the different speech functions postulated by several scholars such as both Bühler and Jakobson in their 1909 (1934) and 1960 publications. In the second of these, Jakobson, for instance, distinguished between six speech functions, among which only two need to be brought up here, viz. the *symbol function* and the *symptom function*. Utterances which predominantly fulfil the symbol function are used *symbolically*, viz. referentially, i.e. to describe the world surrounding us and use words with literal, referential or symbolic meaning. Utterances dominated by the symptom function, on the other hand, serve to indicate the speaker’s state of mind: they are, in other words, *symptomatic*. It follows that in terms of this terminology we may say that the function of *fuck* in an utterance like *They used to fuck on the kitchen floor* is symbolic, while the same word in e.g. *Fuck!* and *Fuck they did!* is merely symptomatic.

The peculiar synonymy relations noted above for swearing constructions that are themselves utterances are also found in many instances of swearing that are merely parts of utterances. Consider for example the swearing carried out in name-calling with terms of abuse consisting of different sexual taboo words like for example *prick*. When used with its literal meaning ‘penis’, *prick* has a huge supply of synonyms: in for example *He hurt his prick*, the final word could just as well have been *cock*, *dick*, *dork*, *pecker*, *pisser*, to mention just a few of the alternatives. However, when *prick* is used in swearing as an insulting term for a stupid

person, most of these alternative terms cannot be used. Compare for instance the following example:

We told him not to touch the gun, but the *dumb prick/dumb dork* /**dumb cock*/**dumb pecker* didn't listen.

In name-calling the only literal synonym of *prick* that may be used is *dork*, while *cock*, *pecker* and *pisser* are all ruled out. On the other hand there are plenty of words that may be used instead of *prick* to express the speaker's dislike of a person – like *arsehole*, *asshole*, *bastard* and even *cunt* – words that have no literal meaning in common with *prick* but which serve perfectly well with symptomatic meaning, viz. to express the speaker's state of mind. Compare also the disregard for literal meaning found in swearing using alternately *bloody*, *fuck*, *damned*, *goddamn*, *flipping* to express negative attitude or simply emphasis as for example in *I can't open the damned/fucking/bloody/goddamn/flipping/bleeding door*.

The lack of importance of literal meaning in these expressions suggests that just like the interjections, curses, oaths and other utterance-length instances of swearing, part-of-utterance swearing is also symptomatic rather than symbolic, viz. it represents the speaker's mind. The symptomatic function seems to be part and parcel of all swearing.

1.3.1 Metaphorical meaning

There is a problem with the simple dichotomy between literal and non-literal meaning that we have been using to distinguish between swearing and non-swearing. The problem is that there are many constructions containing taboo words in which the meaning of the taboo word seems to be neither clearly literal nor non-literal, but rather somehow *metaphorical*.

Take a word like *hell*: it is clearly non-literal in exclamations like *Hell!* *Oh hell!* and on the criteria that we are using here such exclamations are obvious instances of swearing. The same word is equally clearly used with its literal meaning in for example *Those who have sinned will be sent to hell*, which according to the same criteria is obviously not an instance of swearing as it has been defined here. But consider now examples like the following:

He made her life hell.
All hell broke loose.
They cheated like hell.

Should these constructions be regarded as swearing or as non-swearing? In an attempt to answer that question I have adopted a suggestion in Stroh-Wallin (2008: 32) to the effect that taboo words used with non-literal meaning may still contain a more or less strong remnant of that meaning. If that remnant is strong enough in the construction under consideration, this may make us interpret the taboo word metaphorically, in which case the construction in question will be considered to be non-swearing. If on the other hand there seems to be nothing or very little left of the original meaning of the word in the string in which it occurs, it will be interpreted as swearing.

In the first two examples above – *He made her life hell*, *All hell broke loose* – it seems that, given the original literal meaning of *hell*, the word should be metaphorically interpreted and be assigned a meaning like ‘something very unpleasant’. The two expressions above are accordingly not instances of swearing. In the third example, on the other hand, there seems to be no metaphorical reinterpretation of the original meaning of *hell*. In addition, the construction with *like* reminds us of obviously comparative constructions like *She worked like a maniac/beaver*, etc. On the strength of these observations it seems reasonable to regard *They worked like hell* as an instance of English swearing in which *hell* somehow expresses a standard of comparison.

There is no question that the above test for swearing status involves a lot of difficult decisions and will sometimes not be possible to apply. However, as there are few alternatives to this approach, I have tested it on all senses given for *hell* in *The Oxford Dictionary of English* 2nd edn 2003. These senses are given below in the order in which they appear in the dictionary and include the three examples used in the discussion above. The contexts added are my own:

- (1) He made her life hell.
- (2) Oh hell! Hell!
- (3) Who the hell...
- (4) All hell breaks loose.
- (5) (As) guilty as hell.
- (6) The fungus is hell on grasshoppers.
- (7) Come hell or high water.
- (8) For the hell of it.
- (9) Neighbours from hell.
- (10) She got hell for being absent.
- (11) They gave her hell for being absent.
- (12) Go to hell!

- (13) The place went to hell (in a handbasket).
 (14) Hell for leather.
 (15) Hell's bells!
 (16) A/one hell of a(n)-
 (17) Get the hell out.
 (18) Hell's half acre 'a great distance'.
 (19) It hurt like hell.
 (20) Like hell (it is)!
 (21) Not a hope in hell.
 (22) The rough road played hell with the tyres.
 (23) There will be hell to pay.
 (24) Damn it to hell!
 (25) To hell with her objections!
 (26) Wait until hell freezes over.

In 13 of these examples – 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 18, 21, 22, 23, 26 – the word *hell* has retained enough of its original sense to lend itself rather clearly to the metaphorical interpretation 'something unpleasant' or 'an unpleasant place' and should accordingly count as non-swearing. Examples (8) and (14) do not really lend themselves to analysis. The following 11 examples, on the other hand, strike me as clear examples of swearing:

(2) Oh hell! Hell! (3) Who the hell ... (5) (As) guilty as hell. (12) Go to hell! (15) Hell's bells! (16) A/one hell of a(n)- (17) Get the hell out. (19) It hurt like hell. (20) Like hell (it is)! (24) Damn it to hell! (25) To hell with her objections!

Of these *Hell!/Oh hell!*, *Hell's bells!*, *Go to hell!*, *The hell it is!*, *Damn it to hell!* and *The hell it is!* are utterances in their own right. The function of *hell* in *who the hell* is clearly just emphatic and the word can be replaced with *the Devil*, *the fuck*, etc. In *guilty as hell*, *a hell of a(n)* and *it hurt like hell* there is no trace of the 'unpleasant' meaning of *hell* and the word is simply used to express high degree. Arguably, the role of *hell* in *get the hell out* is also to express emphasis or high degree with reference to the verb phrase in which is embedded.

The outcome of the test would seem to be that tests for swearing status based on the distinction between literal, metaphorical and non-literal-non-metaphorical meaning work surprisingly well and make it possible to distinguish between three different uses of the word *hell*. We may wonder, however, to what extent the outcome has been determined by

the choice of taboo word. After all a word like *hell* may be particularly easy to subdivide into three distinct semantic areas. Let us therefore apply the above test for swearing status to a number of instances of potential swearing using other kinds of taboo words.

The examples tested come from the semantic areas of bodily functions and involve the taboo words *ass/arse*, *shit* and *piss*. They are

shit happens, be in the shit/ be up shit creek (without a paddle), go through a lot of shit, be shit out of luck, be shitting somebody, have a totally shit time, kick the shit out of somebody, not give a shit

not find one's arse/ass with both hands 'be stupid', not know your arse from a hole in the ground, work one's arse/ass off 'work very hard', arse around, fart about/around, piss away (one's inheritance), piss on somebody/something 'despise', piss around, piss off

(I owe several of these examples to Pinker 2007.)

Among the *shit* examples, several are undoubtedly metaphorical expressions rather than swearing as it has been defined here and could be appropriately called *figurative idioms*, a term borrowed from Howarth (1998: 35). In such an example the word *shit* is variously metaphorically defined as 'something unpleasant' and 'something small and unimportant'. We find the first sense in *Shit happens, be in the shit/up shit creek, go through a lot of shit* and the second in *not give a shit*. The expression *have a shit time* is probably best regarded as a metaphor with the 'unpleasant' sense.

The metaphorical, non-swearing, interpretation also applies to *kick the shit out of*. However, as often happens, the phrase *the shit out of* has taken on a life of its own and now appears in constructions for which the metaphorical interpretation is doubtful, like for example *miss the shit out of somebody*. In such cases *the shit out of* is clearly used only to express a high degree of the action represented and is accordingly best regarded as an instance of swearing. The swearing interpretation also seems to be the best one for the expression *be shit out of luck* where *shit* is used as an indicator of high degree.

The expression *be shitting somebody* is probably an example of how the unpleasantness of the literal meaning leads to an unpleasant metaphorical meaning just as when *screw* and *fuck* are used metaphorically to mean 'cheat' and 'swindle'. In my opinion, all three should be assigned to the non-swearing category.

Among the examples in the *arse* group both *not find one's arse/ass with both hands* and *not know your arse from a hole in the ground* are obvious

metaphors and non-swearing. I would be inclined to assign swearing status to *work one's arse off*; however, it has lost most if not all of its original meaning and has taken on the same degree of meaning as the phrase *the shit out of*.

In the *piss* group, finally, the transitive *piss away* strikes me as a clear extension of the literal meaning of *piss* used metaphorically to mean approximately 'get rid of the way you get rid of urine'. *Piss on* is another metaphorical extension of *piss* meaning 'treat with contempt' and as such is not a member of the swearing category. However, *piss on* may also be used in curses in the same way as *fuck, sod, bugger*, producing exclamations like *Piss on her problems!, Fuck her problems!, Sod her problems!* etc. In cases like these, the entire construction belongs to the swearing category.

There now remain two intransitive uses of *piss*, viz. *piss around* (also *piss about*) and *piss off*. In these constructions, *piss* has lost all links with its literal meaning 'urinate' and may in addition be replaced by a number of semantically unrelated taboo words as in *arse around, fart around* and *bugger off, fuck off, sod off*. I suggest that the verbs in these combinations are sufficiently far away from their original literal meanings to be included in English swearing.

The examples in the discussion above represent only a fraction of all the constructions with taboo words in English. However the analyses carried out with the aid of these examples indicate that the method based on the distinction between literal, metaphorical and non-literal-non-metaphorical meaning of taboo words seems to work reasonably well. Swearing then may be defined as the use of taboo expressions which are neither literal nor predominantly metaphorical (Stroh-Wollin 2008: 32).

1.4 Swearing is formulaic

The last 30 years have seen an increased interest in formulaic language and a plethora of publications on formulas and formulaic language, for instance Bolinger (1976), Sinclair (1991), Pawley (2007), Pawley and Syder (1983), Ellis (1996), Erman and Warren (2000), Hudson (1998), Wray (2002), Schmitt (2004) and Schmitt and Carter (2004). Not all of these studies use the term 'formulaic language'; in fact formulaic language has been discussed under a number of different names, for instance chunks, clichés, collocations, fixed expressions, frozen phrases, non-compositional language, prefabricated utterances, ready-made utterances, routine formulas, stereotyped phrases. I will continue to use the term 'formulaic' and also accept the definition of formulaic language suggested in Wray (2002: 9), viz. 'a sequence, continuous or

discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar'. Formulaic sequences have been found to possess special characteristics, for example *lack of compositionality*, *fixedness* and a resistance to the insertion of pauses and hesitation forms (cf. Hudson 1998: 8ff., Jespersen 1924: 18–19).

A typical feature of non-formulaic sequences is the fact that they are *compositional*, viz. the meaning of the entire sequence may be deduced from the meanings of the words it contains and the grammatical arrangements of these words. This is no longer the case for formulaic strings: both swearing expressions like *Go to hell!*, *We got the fuck out*, *What the fuck do you mean?*, and non-swearing constructions like the idioms *go to the bathroom* and *Keep you hair on* resist semantic and syntactic analysis and have to be learnt as wholes.

Hudson mentions several varieties of fixedness, such as restrictions on syntactic and collocational variability, and anomalous syntax. The first two of these – restrictions on syntactic and collocational variability – are clearly at work in the swearing constructions *Go to hell!*, *Fuck you!* and *Screw you!* Contrary to expectation, the first of these cannot be changed into **Don't go to hell!*, **Go to hell tomorrow!* As for *Fuck you!* and *Screw you!* we have already noticed that they do not accept collocational variables like **Bonk you!* and **Shag you!*

Anomalous syntax/usage is also common in swearing; consider for example sequences like *get the fuck/hell out*, *what/where/who the devil/fuck ...*, *absofuckinglutely*, *Henry the bloody Eighth*.

Despite all the examples of irregular swearing above it is important to remember that many instances of swearing are completely well-formed and in accordance with the syntactic and semantic principles of the language. Consider for instance the use of *fucking*, *bloody*, *goddamned*, etc. as intensifiers and as adjectival attributes in constructions such as *He's so fucking/bloody/goddamned lazy* and *The fucking/bloody/goddamned postman hasn't been yet*. From a grammatical point of view, there is no difference between the two examples above and examples like *He's so very lazy* and *The useless/no-good postman hasn't been yet*.

The special characteristics of swearing noted above under the rubric of formulaic language partly overlap with *grammaticalization*, a process that brings about changes in lexis, phonology and syntax. The term has been around for a long time (cf. e.g. Meillet 1912) and as late as in Levinson (1983) where the term is used to mean 'encoded in the structure of the language' (Levinson 1983: 9).

The sense of the term used here is that formulated in Hopper and Traugott (1993) where it is used about individual content words that lose their meaning and develop into function words and even to affixes. The process of grammaticalization is said to be irreversible and to proceed along certain stages known as the 'cline of categoriality' originally containing the following way stations (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 6ff.):

Major category > Adjective or adverb > Minor category

In the original version of the grammaticalization theory, the major categories were nouns and verbs and the minor categories function words or affixes. However, the analysis was soon extended to multi-word units like *be going to* which developed to *be gonna* and finally *gonna*. One of the best-known examples of grammaticalization in the Hopper–Traugott sense is the development of *be going to* to *be gonna* and finally to *gonna*.

In her study of the development of swearing in Swedish dramas in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Stroh-Wollin (2008: 82) suggests that the 'major categories' in the description of Hopper and Traugott's cline of categoriality should also be taken to include clausal structures like *Gud ske lov* 'God be praised' which are affected by the process of decategorialization but which stop halfway after they have developed into adverbs, often in the shape of a single word *gudskelov*.

In the present study it is assumed that the major categories used as the starting point for the grammaticalization process may be forms of address like *My God*, prepositional phrases like *by God* and entire clauses like *I'll be damned*, a suggestion also found in Gehweiler 2008):

My God (address)	>	My God! (interjection)
By God! (invocation)	>	By God! (interjection)
I'll be damned if (self-curse)	>	I'll be damned! (interjection)

In a further development many of these new interjections took one further step and came to be used as pragmatic markers expressing the speaker's stance to the proposition underlying a following utterance as in: *My God how big it is!* *By God I'll do it!* *Damned if I know* from *I'll be damned if I know*.

Interjections may also be used to strengthen the force of a speech act as in

Bloody hell look at that old codger behind the wheel (BNC KB7 11226)

The process of grammaticalization is accompanied by two other processes known as *decategorialization* and *desemanticization*. As we have already noticed, desemanticization is common in all swearing, as shown by the loss of meaning in words like *hell*, *fuck*, *shit*, etc. when used in swearing. A similar loss of meaning has affected the words *God* and *Christ* in interjections like *God! Christ!, Oh God!* etc. If these words had kept their meaning – or more correctly their naming function – all such interjections would serve the function of addressing a higher being, for instance to ask for help or forgiveness. In fact such uses of *God*, etc. are fairly common in the spoken component of the BNC but are far outnumbered by the interjectional uses in which the sacred names serve the function of expressing the speaker's reaction to some sort of stimulus and the function as pragmatic markers expressing the speaker's stance to a following proposition.

These changes illustrate how the processes of decategorialization and desemanticization work in tandem in the development leading to swearing: these utterances started out as invocations but changed their category membership to interjections at the same time as the nature of the religious terms *God* and *Christ* were desemanticized.

It seems reasonable to assume that the processes described above lie behind interjections using sacred names in all languages using such interjections. It is an interesting question whether a similar decategorialization process can be shown to have also led to the creating of non-religious interjections like *Fuck!, Shit!* etc.

1.5 Swearing is emotive language

The fourth and final criterion for admission to the category of swearing was that constructions belonging to that category must be instances of emotive language, a condition based on the following well-known passage from Roman Jakobson (1960):

The so-called emotive or expressive function, focused on the addresser, aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about. It tends to produce an impression of a certain emotion whether true or feigned; therefore the term 'emotive' ... has proved to be preferable to 'emotional'. The purely emotive stratum in language is presented by the interjections.

Being defined as a 'direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about', the emotive function ranges over the

entire gamut of feelings a person may have. Since in the present study we focus on swearing, we can reduce the extent of the gamut to those emotive attitudes that are commonly expressed by means of the different swearing constructions and try to formulate in fairly general terms the meanings – in addition to emotiveness – of certain of these constructions. The following are some of the results that such an exercise might result in:

- **Interjections** generally express surprise, pain, fear, anger, disappointment and even joy as for instance in *God!*, *My God!*, *(Jesus) Christ!*, *Shit!*, *Fuck!*, *Damn!*, *Son of a bitch!*, *I'll be damned!*, *Hell!*, *Bloody hell!*

Interjections may also have more specialized meanings, for example to express emphatic disagreement and/or incredulity as in the case of *Pig's ass*, *My arse*, *My left butt* and the euphemistic *My foot* and similar expressions.

Other specialized interjections are the expressions *for God's sake*, *for Heaven's sake*, *for fuck's sake*, which may be used on their own to express surprise, pain, etc., but which are typically used in conversations to indicate that something has a deeper significance than has been realized by one's interlocutor as in: *You're having a sabbatical, for God's sake!* (Stenström 1994: 92).

The interjections may also express speaker stance to a following proposition as in *God that's clever!*, *My God how stupid!* and to strengthen speech act force as in for example *Bloody hell look at that old codger behind the wheel* (BNC KB7 11226).

- **Emphasizers** like *the hell*, *the heck*, *the devil*, *the fuck*, etc. are used as pure emphasizees after interrogative WH-words as in *What the heck is the matter? Why the devil didn't you say so?*
- **Expletive slot fillers** like *bloody*, *fucking*, *goddamn*, etc. may be used with at least three types of meaning: (1) as degree adverbs, for instance in *bloody impressive*, *goddamn quickly*; (2) as intensifying adjectives as in *bloody fool* and (3) as adjectives of dislike as in *I can't stand that bloody cashier*. A case could be made for assigning a fourth meaning to these slot fillers, viz. pure emphasis, as in *It's the screw-driver I need, not the bloody hammer!*

The list above is by no means complete, and a number of additional 'meanings' could be added to the list. The main point, however, has been made, viz. that this is as far as we get in our quest for the meanings of the expletive expressions: what we can do, more or less adequately, is to describe the range of 'meanings' that may be assigned to such

expressions, but the actual choice between, say, anger, surprise and joy can only be made in the individual speech situation and sometimes not even then. Hearers make their own interpretations on the basis of such linguistic and non-linguistic information as is available to them. And in the final analysis, even the speakers themselves may be uncertain about the exact nature of the feelings that triggered their use of swearing.

2

A Typology of Swearing

2.0 Previous typologies

The aim of Chapter 1 was to demonstrate the criteria that had to be met in order for constructions to be recognized as swearing in this study. The purpose of the present chapter is to explain and demonstrate the different subcategories of swearing used here, in other words to set up a typology of swearing.

In the past there have been many more or less explicit attempts to set up a typology that distinguishes between different types of swearing. A not uncommon typology, especially in older literature, is that found in Montagu (1967: 105) among others, which distinguishes between swearing, cursing, profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity and euphemistic swearing. In Montagu's opinion, *swearing* involves 'expressing the feeling of aggressiveness that follows upon frustration in words possessing strong emotional associations', *cursing* involves the 'calling down of evil upon its object', *profanity* is 'the form of swearing in which the names of attributes of the figures of objects of religious veneration are uttered', *blasphemy* is the 'act of vilifying or ridiculing the figures of objects of religious veneration', *obscenity* is 'a form of swearing which makes use of indecent words and phrases', *vulgarity* is 'a form of swearing that makes use of crude words such as 'bloody' and *euphemistic swearing*, finally, is 'a form of swearing in which mild, vague or corrupted expressions are substituted for the original strong ones'.

There are several problems with this type of classification. To begin with, it uses the term 'swearing' to denote both the overall activity of swearing and a particular subcategory of that activity. Another problem is the lack of a common basis of classification: *swearing*, in Montagu's sense of the term, refers both to the speaker's reasons for saying something,

i.e. to express aggressiveness, and to the words used in such utterances ('possessing strong emotional associations'); *cursing* – an act of calling down evil on somebody – is placed on the same footing as *profanity* and *blasphemy*, terms denoting two subtly different ways of 'taking religious terms in vain': in profanity the speaker accidentally misuses the name(s) for religious beings and phenomena, while in blasphemy s/he misuses such religious terms intentionally and with a view to attacking current religious beliefs.

As a consequence of the lack of a common basis of classification, the categories included under *swearing* in the general sense of the word, are not mutually exclusive: an utterance like *Jesus fucking Christ!* is simultaneously either both profane, obscene and vulgar or blasphemous, obscene and vulgar.

In addition to the classification above, Montagu (1967: 105–6) introduces a parallel classification according to which swearing can be either *abusive*, *adjurative*, *asseverative*, *ejaculatory* or *exclamatory*, *execratory*, *expletive*, *hortatory*, *interjectional* and *objurgatory* swearing. The problem here is again the lack of a mutual exclusiveness: you can be *abusive* by using an *interjectional* or *ejaculatory* or *exclamatory* type of swearing, indeed it is highly likely that you *would* choose one of these three types to be abusive.

Among more recent typologies of swearing, mention should be made of that found in Pinker (2007) and McEnery (2006). Pinker's thinking about swearing is presented in Chapter 7 ('Seven Words You Can't Say on Television') of his 2007 book *The Stuff of Thought*. In Pinker's opinion (2007: 350) 'people swear in at least five different ways', viz.:

- Descriptive swearing: *Let's fuck!*
- Idiomatic swearing: *It's fucked up.*
- Abusive swearing: *Fuck you, motherfucker!*
- Emphatic swearing: *It's fucking amazing.*
- Cathartic swearing: *Fuck!*

The first category – that of descriptive swearing – raises an issue discussed in Chapter 1, viz. whether swearing includes utterances using taboo words bearing their ordinary literal sense. In that discussion, it was found that there is at least one good linguistic reason for not including such utterances in the swearing category, viz. the fact that since they have referential meanings, such words display perfectly normal synonymy relations with other words with the same literal meanings, be they taboo or not. Pinker's first example *Let's fuck!* may accordingly be

replaced by any of *Let's screw!*, *Let's shag!*, *Let's make love!*, *Let's have sex!*, *Let's exchange body fluids!* etc.

Such synonymy relations are conspicuously missing from utterances that constitute swearing: as pointed out in Chapter 1 (p. 12), *Fuck you!* uttered as an insult may be replaced by *Screw you!*, but certainly not by *Shag you!* or *Bonk you!* Compare also *Hell!*, *Shit!*, *Fuck!*, *Son of a bitch!* which are interchangeable as swearing interjections expressing the speaker's feelings because here, literal senses are not involved. But when the same words are used with their literal *OED* meanings 'spiritual realm of evil and suffering', 'faeces' etc. they do not enter into synonymy relations with each other: cf. impossible utterances like **The toilet was full of hell* and **Sinners will go to shit*.

Another problem with Pinker's classification is the way his categories spill over into each other. *Fuck you!*, to mention just one example, is said to be abusive but is obviously simultaneously idiomatic and cathartic.

Four of Pinker's five swearing categories refer to what speakers *do* when they swear: they describe something, abuse somebody, place emphasis on something or engage in catharsis. The fifth category – 'idiomatic swearing' (*fucked up*) – is the odd man out in Pinker's classification. On the most likely interpretation of *idiomatic* in this context, swearing of this kind uses *idioms*, viz. groups of words whose meanings cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual words as for instance in *fucked up* 'destroyed'. English has a lot of such mainly two-word combinations in which the second word is a directional particle, like for example *fuck off*, *piss off*, *bugger off*, *arse around*, *fuck around*.

In all these combinations, the literal meaning of the taboo words has been lost. In some of them the particles retain their usual spatial meaning: what *fuck off*, *piss off* and *bugger off* have in common is that they refer to some sort of motion and may be translated as 'leave'. In other combinations of this kind, the final word has no particular meaning, for example in *fuck up*, *bugger up*, *screw up*, all of which simply mean 'destroy'.

If it had been the case that *fuck off*, etc. were really synonymous with *leave* and that *fuck up*, etc. were synonymous with *destroy* or *ruin*, we could have argued that the relation between *fuck off* and *leave* is the same as that between *depart* and *leave* and that the relation between *fuck up* and *ruin* is the same as that between *ruin* and *destroy*, viz. one of synonymy.

But there is one important difference between *fuck off*, etc. and *leave* and between *fuck up*, etc. and *destroy*: *fuck off* and *fuck up* incorporate a taboo ingredient that is missing from the others. As we have already

seen (Chapter 1), the effect of adding a taboo word to the speaker's message is to make it emotive or emotional or, as Pinker himself puts it, 'taboo status *itself* gives a word an emotional zing, regardless of its actual referent' (2007: 357). In Pinker's book this 'added zing' is enough to make idioms like *fuck off* and *fuck up* bona fide members of the swearing category.

Since emotiveness and taboo meaning are important swearing criteria, there are good reasons for accepting Pinker's classification and including combinations like *fuck off*, *bugger off*, *fuck up*, *bugger up* among the constructions recognized as swearing in the present study. There is a problem, however: we have already committed ourselves to the view that the use of taboo words with literal meaning does not count as swearing (cf. Chapter 1, pp. 4, 12). There is no denying that *fuck off*, *bugger off* and *fuck up*, *bugger up* have literal meanings synonymous with *leave* and *destroy*, respectively, and their inclusion among the swearing constructions would accordingly seem to be impossible. But there is an out from this dilemma: the literal meanings in question are the meanings of the **combinations** *fuck off*, etc. and the literal meaning of the word *fuck* is never involved.

The final verdict on Pinker's analysis of swearing is that the five-way classification that he adopts is unlikely to be able to account for the full complexity of swearing. However, much of this is made up for in the almost 50 pages that Pinker devotes to swearing in Chapter 7 which offer rich pickings for anyone interested in matters like the biological roots of swearing, the nature and background of taboo, the ways taboo words are used by swearers, perceived by listeners and received in the media, and the different subcategories of swearing such as curses, oaths, exclamations, etc.

Taken at face value, Pinker's five-way classification differs radically from that of McEnergy (2006). If Pinker's classification may be faulted for using categories that are too few and too broad, McEnergy's typology features 15 different categories to a great extent based on a detailed study of the spoken component of the BNC (British National Corpus).¹

The following list from McEnergy (2006: 32) shows the full range of his classification (with the exception of his category 'Unclassifiable'):

- (1) Predicative negative adjective: *The film is shit.*
- (2) Adverbial booster: *fucking marvellous, fucking awful*
- (3) Cursing expletive: *Fuck you/me/him/it.*
- (4) Destinal usage: *Fuck off! He fucked off.*
- (5) Emphatic adverb: *He fucking did it.*

- (6) Figurative extension of literal meaning: *to fuck about*
- (7) General expletive: *(Oh) Fuck!*
- (8) Idiomatic set phrase: *fuck all, give a fuck*
- (9) Literal usage denoting taboo referent: *We fucked.*
- (10) Imagery based on literal meaning: *kick the shit out of*
- (11) Premodifying intensifying negative adjective: *the fucking idiot*
- (12) Pronominal form with undefined referent: *got shit to do*
- (13) Personal insult referring to identified entity: *You fuck/That fuck*
- (14) Reclaimed usage – no negative intent: *Niggers/Niggaz* as used by African American rappers
- (15) Religious oath used for emphasis: *by God!*

Before proceeding to a comparison between the categories above and those found in Montagu, Pinker and others, we need to consider what McEnery's categories are categories of. In view of the fact that the title of McEnery's 2005 study is *Swearing in English*, we might be forgiven for assuming that the 15 categories presented above are intended as a categorization of *swearing* and for attempting a direct comparison between his categories and those found in studies of swearing like Pinker (2007), Montagu (1967) and others like Ljung (1984, 2006) and Andersson and Hirsch (1985a).

However, McEnery's study also has a subtitle, viz. *Bad Language, Purity and Power from 1586 to the Present*, and he makes it clear that, in his opinion, swearing is just a subcategory of bad language: 'Swearing is one example of bad language, yet blasphemous, homophobic, racist and sexist language may also cause offence in modern England' (2005: 2). He drives home his point by giving the list reproduced above the title 'Table 2.1 The categorisation of bad language'.

Despite this disclaimer, however, it seems to me that the majority of the examples in McEnery's Table 2.1 are in fact clear instances of English swearing, both in terms of native speaker reactions and in terms of the criteria for swearing mentioned in Chapter 1. The labelling of the constructions, on the other hand, is sometimes confusing. While many of the labels like for example Pred Neg, AdvB and Curse and others contain useful information about the linguistic functions carried out by the constructions they are attached to, the label Idiom (for 'Idiomatic set phrase') used about *fuck all* and *give a fuck* could with equal justice be applied to *kick the shit out of* – now placed in the Image category – and to *got shit to do*, now a member of the Pron category.

Eleven of McEnery's 15 examples qualify immediately as swearing on both counts mentioned above, viz. (2), (3), (4), (5), (6), (7), (8), (10),

(11), (13) and (15). I exclude example (9) from the swearing category since it goes against the ‘no literal taboo meaning’ criterion adopted in Chapter 1 (pp. 4, 12). Among the remaining examples (1) and (12) should also be denied swearing status in my opinion, but for somewhat different reasons. It is true that both involve the use of the word *shit* which is clearly a taboo term both with regard to form and content. In example (1), *shit* could be regarded as a parallel to the word *hell* in constructions like *He made her life hell* which was denied swearing status in Chapter 1 on the grounds that in that context, *hell* is used in a clearly metaphorical manner with a meaning obviously inspired by the literal meaning of *hell*, viz. ‘a place of suffering’. The word *shit* in (1) – which incidentally I regard as a noun rather than as an adjective – is presumably also a metaphorical extension of the literal meaning of *shit* and can be interpreted as ‘something with no value’.

I would also like to exclude example (12) from the swearing category, but for a different reason. What has happened in (12) is that *shit* has developed a new literal meaning defined as ‘something’, ‘anything’ in Cassell’s dictionary of slang (2005: 1267). It appears that the word *shit* in English has developed several such meanings – which are not in themselves negative – as for instance in the expression *get one’s shit together*.

Example (14) *Niggers/Niggaz* is said to represent ‘reclaimed usage’ of a basically derogatory term in the speech of African American rappers. Such reclaimed usage of bad language is common especially among male speakers in many languages but is rare in British English.

There are certain very common English bad language/swearing constructions involving the use of taboo words that could be added to McEnery’s list to make it more representative, for example the use of taboo words to add emphasis to WH-constructions such as *Who the devil ...?*, *What the fuck ...?* etc.

The typology used in the present study has much in common with the ones that we have just discussed above. It also differs from them in important respects, however, and is a development of the swearing classifications suggested in Ljung (1984) and (2006). It also has many features in common with the treatment of swearing found in Andersson and Hirsch (1985a), a study that shares the functional orientation of Ljung (1984) and (2006) and the present study.

The main feature of the classification used in the present book is the distinction between **functions** and **themes**. The functions are the uses that the swearing constructions are put to by the swearers, while the **themes** are the different taboo areas that these constructions draw on.

2.1 The functions

The functions fall into two major subgroups, viz. the **stand-alones** and the **slot fillers**. There is in addition a third smaller functional category, that of **replacive swearing**.

The stand-alones are swearing constructions that function as utterances of their own. Some of them are speech acts (illocutionary acts), for example the oaths, the curses and the unfriendly suggestions. Other stand-alone swearing expressions have a less marked illocutionary character, for example the expletive interjections expressing anger, surprise, pain and other feelings, such as *God!*, *Shit!*, *Jesus Christ!*, often claimed to be the most typical exponents of swearing (cf. Crystal 1997: 61). Other stand-alone swearing expressions are affirmations, denials, ritual insults and name-calling. A full presentation of stand-alone swearing will be found in section 2.1.1.

As their name indicates, the slot fillers are instances of swearing that serve to make up longer strings. They range from clear cases of traditional degree modification – as in *bloody cold*, *damned quickly* – to constructions that are more difficult to analyse but which nevertheless involve placing a ‘swear word’ in the right slot in a given string, as for instance in *What the hell do you mean?* and *absobloodylutely*. The slot fillers are described in section 2.1.2.

2.1.1 Stand-alone functions

Expletive interjections (cf. Chapter 4)

Interjectional swearing is very common in all the languages included in this study and usually ends up at or near the top when speakers are asked to list the most typical uses of swearing in their language. In a recent study of British English based on a 1-million-word subcorpus from the BNC (Ljung 2009), it turned out that the rate at which speakers produced such utterances was approximately one per 1000 words.

The expletive interjections are often considered to be basically cathartic, i.e. not aimed at others – at least not primarily – but serving as outlets for the speaker’s reactions to different mishaps and disappointments (cf. Jay 1977, Crystal 1997: 61). However, as will become apparent in Chapter 4, they also have many non-cathartic uses and are widely used to carry out various pragmatic functions.

Oaths (cf. Chapter 5)

The original function of the oath was to swear *by* something or somebody to back up the claims made by the speaker by taking God or some

other venerable being (or the attributes associated with such entities) as witness that the claim is true. This is still the function of formal oaths, as used in the swearing-in of presidents in the US, in giving evidence in certain courts of law, etc.

Oaths like *By God*, etc. apparently stopped being used as real oaths viz. as serious appeals to God early on and came to be used merely as one of many ways to give added emphasis to utterances, and in earlier times, speakers could choose between a wide variety of religious names to insert after *by* as in the following examples from Crawford (1913: 400–2): *By God of heuen*, *By heuven king*, *Be Cryste*, *By him that crosse kyst*, *By God and St. Denis*, *By Cokkes body*, *By our Lady*, *By Seynt Charyte* and, interestingly enough, also *Be Satan*, *By Belyalays bones*.

Modern English affords little variety in the position after *by* in oaths of this kind: in the 10,341,729 words of the spoken component of the BNC there are 44 instances of *By God* and 23 instances of *By Almighty God*. All other combinations like *By hell*, *By Christ* and *By Jove* have frequencies below ten. (These figures do not include regular passive constructions with *by* found in a number of religious texts.) Other languages, like for example Arabic, have both higher overall frequencies and greater variation in the *by*-phrase.²

Curses (cf. Chapter 5)

Although the word *cursing* is sometimes used to refer to swearing in general, in particular in American English, the technical meaning of the noun *curse* is ‘an utterance intended to invoke a supernatural power to inflict harm or punishment on someone or something’ (*OED*). Since they basically express a wish on the part of the speaker, curses tend to contain either a subjunctive verb form as in *The devil take you!* or a modal auxiliary as in *May the devil take you!* In modern English, curses usually dispense with the subject and consist of more compressed constructions like *Damn you!*, *Fuck you!*, *Sod the consequences!*, where *Damn*, *Fuck* and *Sod* are examples of optative subjunctives of the same kind as *live* in *Long live the Queen!* Among the curses we also encounter verbless constructions like the older *A pox on you!* which is rather dated in today’s English and has been replaced by more modern constructions like the following one from the spoken part of the BNC: *So she said bollocks on you for Christmas!* (BNC KBE 2219).

Since their basic function is to call down evil on somebody it is only natural that curses are typically directed at others. However, as noted in Chapter 5 (p. 112), there is also a fairly frequent form of cursing known as self-cursing, in which the speaker calls down a curse upon

him/herself in case what s/he says turns out to be false or in case s/he fails to live up to a promise. In its full form, such self-cursing is normally followed by an *if*-clause as in *I'll be damned/buggered if ...* According to Montagu (1967: 59) 'an enormous amount of swearing takes this form'.

It may be that today the most frequent use of self-curses is as expletive interjections expressing surprise as in English *Well I'll be damned!* and corresponding expressions in many other languages.

Affirmation and contradiction (cf. Chapter 5)

In dialogues in English and many other languages, contradiction and affirmation of the immediately preceding utterance may be expressed by the use of certain swearing expressions. For some reason contradiction is far more common than affirmation. In English such denials may take several forms, for instance:

A: (The lock's broken) –

B: Fuck/Sod/Bugger/My arse/The hell it is.

Unfriendly suggestions (cf. Chapter 6)

The unfriendly suggestions are used to express aggression directed at somebody and are often used in dialogue to indicate the speaker's reaction to what is said. They are not real suggestions even if their literal meanings may encourage such an interpretation. The literal meanings range from the religious *Go to hell!* to demeaning suggestions like *Kiss my ass/cock!* and various more or less impossible or at least implausible sexual acts.

Ritual insults (cf. Chapter 6)

A widespread type of aggressive swearing is what Labov (1972) has called 'ritual insults'. These contain formulaic expressions connected to the 'mother theme' (see pp. 41–2 in this chapter). Ritual insults are usually an all-male affair and the expressions used almost invariably refer to alleged sexual exploits involving somebody's mother or sister. The predictable nature of the ritual insults has prompted the development of various abbreviated versions such as *Your mother* and *Your mother's*.

Name-calling (cf. Chapter 6)

There are three types of stand-alone name-calling, viz.

1. In direct addresses insulting the addressee;
2. In referring to a third party;

3. In describing either the addressee or a third party.

The nouns used in these constructions are all evaluative: they are used to express the speaker's – negative or positive – opinion of her/his addressee or a third party. Evaluative words that express a negative opinion will be called *epithets* in accordance with the definition given for the word *epithet* in the *OED*, viz. 'offensive or derogatory expression used of a person; an abusive term; a profanity'. The number of epithets in a given language is usually very large and varies across cultures. Common members of the epithet category found in all languages are words for people who carry out illegal and/or despicable acts such as *thief*, *murderer*, *traitor* in English, for people with below-average intelligence like English *idiot*, *moron*, *fool*, and for people belonging to certain ethnic groups such as the English words *kike*, *jid*, *nigger*.

In certain studies of swearing like for example Hughes (2006) and Andersson and Hirsch (1985a) all or most such words are regarded as swear words and constructions in which they are used are considered to constitute swearing.

In the present study, however, only a minority of the epithets are accepted as swear words under the label *expletive epithet*. In order to qualify as an expletive epithet, a word must meet three criteria: it must have taboo meaning, it must have non-literal meaning which is not metaphorically linked to its literal meaning, and it must be able to appear in all three types of name-calling listed above.

2.1.2 Slot fillers (cf. Chapter 7)

Adverbial/adjectival intensifier

A very common slot-filler function is that of intensifier expressing a high degree of the following adjective or adverb as in *It's bloody marvelous* and *They drove damn fast*. Words like *bloody*, *damn(ed)*, etc. may also be used as intensifying adjectives expressing a high degree of a following gradable noun as in *It's a bloody miracle*, *She's a damn(ed) bitch*. It is frequently impossible to distinguish clearly between expletives used as intensifiers and the same expletives used as emphasers, as in for example *They must be bloody crackers!* (BNC KBI 4738).

Intensification may also be expressed by means of compounding in which an expletive is joined to a following adjective or adverb. This is not a favoured intensification method in English but there are rare examples like *pisspoor* 'very poor'. As the discussion in Chapter 7 will show, other languages are less reticent in this respect.

In addition to the preposed intensifiers discussed above, English and many other languages use postposed *as-* and *like-*phrases such as *as hell* and *like hell* to intensify preceding verbs, adverbs and adjectives, as in viz. *They ran like hell, She shut the door quickly as hell, He's fast as hell.*

Adjectives of dislike

Another slot-filler function for swear words is to indicate that the speaker dislikes the referent of the following noun. This function is sometimes hard to distinguish from other meanings and is frequently inextricably linked to the function of emphasis, for example *The bloody punters knew what they were doing, He's a bloody fool, Bloody fool!*

Emphasis

Swearing in English is often used to place emphasis on a following noun. *I need a glass of water, not a bloody bathtub. You don't have to tell me every bloody/damned time!*

A different type of emphasis is expressed by placing certain swear words immediately after an interrogative pronoun or adverb as in *Who the devil ...?, Why the fuck ...!, Where in God's name... etc.*

Emphasis may also take the form of infixation in a word as in *Absobloodylutely, Infuckingcredible, Kangabloodyroo* or in a phrase as in *Henry the fucking Eighth, Shut the fuck up.*

Modal adverbials

I use the term *expletive modal adverbial* for forms like *bloody, bloody well* and *fucking* in contexts like *No you bloody can't copy* (BNC KD8 10734), *I bloody well drank my beer* (Taylor 1975: 19), *They fucking bought one drink between them* (BNC KBD 6058). Such modal adverbials could be included in a syntactic category such as 'attitudinal disjuncts'. They could also be given a pragmatic definition and classified as pragmatic markers expressing subjectivity.

Anaphoric use of epithets (cf. Chapter 6)

Swear words that are nouns – like *asshole/arsehole, bastard, bugger, motherfucker, son of a bitch* – may be used in the same way as anaphoric pronouns, for instance the personal pronouns. Accordingly, a possible answer to the question *What am I going to tell Steve?* might be *Tell the bastard/motherfucker to mind his own business!* In English this usage seems to be limited to persons but in other languages it can also be used about things.

Noun supports (cf. Chapter 6)

It happens that epithets like *bastard*, etc. lose their negative charge and are used as a kind of ‘filler’ on which to hang an adjective. These constructions may be regarded as alternatives to straightforward Subject + BE + Adjective or Subject + Predicate + Adverbial constructions. Accordingly *John is boring* and *Philip is hardworking* may also be rendered as *John is a boring son of a bitch* and *Philip is a hard-working son of a bitch*.

2.1.3 Replacive swearing (cf. Chapter 8)

Russian – and to a much lesser degree certain other languages – possesses a very small number of *replacive* taboo words that may replace an almost infinite number of ordinary non-taboo nouns and verbs which are given new literal meanings which are interpreted in terms of the linguistic and situational settings in which they are used.

Admittedly including such replacives among the swearing constructions may seem to go counter to the criteria for swearing established in Chapter 1, in particular the requirement that swearing constructions should not contain items with literal meaning. However, as the presentation in Chapter 8 will show, the meanings established in replacive swearing are not literal ones associated once and for all with certain words, but represent the listener’s *interpretation* of the words involved, words which in another context may be assigned quite different meanings.

2.2 The themes

Each of the functions uses several taboo words representing one or several taboo *themes*. In the present study I recognize five major themes that recur in the swearing of the majority of the languages discussed and which are in all likelihood also used in most other languages featuring swearing. Other scholars also include other major themes, for example Pinker (2007), McEnery (2006) and Anderson and Hirsch (1985a). It is also clear that the choice of themes regarded as ‘major’ and ‘minor’, respectively, varies with the languages under discussion. The following are the major taboo themes used in swearing in the languages included in the present study:

- The religious/supernatural theme
- The scatological theme
- The sex organ theme
- The sexual activities theme
- The mother (family) theme

In addition to these there are also a number of lesser themes, the most important of which are prostitution, certain illnesses and death. However, there are also instances of swearing for which no clear theme can be found, for instance British English *bloody*. Finally, it is clear that the thematic classification above rests on the assumption that all swearing expressions may be linked to a single theme. As many of the examples discussed in the book will show, that is far from true. A fair amount of the swearing brought up for discussion in the present work combines different taboo themes, for example English *Fucking hell!*, *Jesus fucking Christ!* and similar expressions in other languages.

The classification also assumes that, although a given instance of swearing may be associated with several themes, one of the themes is more essential for the understanding of that particular expression than the other(s). By and large I think this correct: an epithet like *motherfucker*, for instance, obviously involves both the sexual intercourse theme and the mother theme, but it is the mother theme that is the dominant one.

A few comments on themes may be in order. The religious theme has two subdivisions, being either celestial or diabolic. The scatological theme is related to excrement and the anus. The word comes from the Greek stem *skat-* 'excrement', a word distantly related to English *shit*. Both the Greek and the English words can be traced back to a Proto-Indo-European stem meaning to 'to sever'.

The sexual activities theme contains several more specified themes about which more will be said below. The mother theme, finally, includes all swearing using words imputing laxity and loose living to somebody's mother or other close female relative, usually involving incestuous relations between mother and son as in *Fuck your mother!*, *Motherfucker*, or between speaker and mother of addressee as in e.g. French and Greek. Among the English words in this category we find nouns like *motherfucker*, adjectives like *mother-fucking* and – less obviously meaning – the noun *bastard*.

It is not always possible to assign a single theme to individual expressions used in swearing, the reason being that one and the same expression may allude to more than one theme. Obvious examples are expletive interjections like English *Fucking hell!* and *Jesus fucking Christ!*, Swedish *Herre (d)jävlar!*, Italian expressions like *Porca Madonna!*, *Ostia madonna matrona di bordello!* and Spanish *Me cago en Dios y en la Puta Virgen!* 'I shit on God and on the prostitute Virgin'.

The English and Italian expressions use the religious theme in combination with several others. *Porca Madonna!* combines the religious word *Madonna* with the word meaning 'sow'. *Ostia Madonna matrona di bordello*

begins with the religious words *the Host* and the *Madonna* and concludes on a prostitution-related theme by calling the madonna a *matrona di bordello*, viz. a *madam*. The Spanish expression uses no fewer than three different themes: the scatological theme represented by *me cago en* 'I shit on', the religious theme *Dios* 'God' and the highly blasphemous combination of *la Puta* 'the whore' which represents the prostitution theme, and *Virgin* the word for 'the Madonna'. The Swedish interjection, finally, combines celestial and diabolic religious entities, meaning 'the Lord devils'.

2.2.1 The religious theme

Swearing related to religion or the supernatural is common in many languages. In Christian cultures a distinction may be made between celestial swearing involving for example God, Jesus/Christ, the Holy Ghost and the saints, and diabolic swearing involving the Devil and hell. In Muslim cultures religious swearing involves Allah, the Prophet, holy places, etc. (cf. Abd-el Jawad 2000: 218–19), but there seems to be no diabolic swearing.

In Muslim cultures religious swearing refers to attributes associated with the religious figures, as in Arabic *Wa-'izzat Allah* 'By the honour of God' and *Wi-Hyaat Allah* 'By God's life'. The same type of 'swearing-by' oath was common in Christian countries during the Middle Ages and later. But the Christian oaths had a clearly blasphemous intent as shown by their choice of physical attributes with high symbolic value, as in English *by God's blood*, *God's wounds* and *God's eyes* and French *Par le sang de Dieu* ('By God's blood') and *Mort de Dieu* ('God's death').

In Christian but not in Muslim cultures the names of God, Christ, etc. eventually lost their taboo charge and religious swearing is now regarded as a mild type of swearing. It may also be denied swearing status all together. Celestial Christian swearing competed with and was eventually superseded by diabolic swearing invoking the Devil and hell. As the discussion in Chapter 3 will show, the diabolic swearing in its turn was challenged by swearing using four-letter words associated with scatological and sexual themes, but swearing in terms of hell and the Devil has retained much of its power, particularly in Germany and the Nordic countries. In these countries the diabolic terms share the swearing market with the scatological.

2.2.2 The scatological theme

The scatological swearing theme is a prominent one in all the languages in this study. It is represented in English swearing by words like *ass/arse*, *asshole*, *arsehole*, *crap*, *fart*, *piss*, *shit*, *turd*. Other scatological words not

normally used in English swearing are the mild *bum*, *prat* and from child language *poo*, *poopoo*, *pooh pooh*.

Certain of these words are used more often in swearing than others. *Shit* is a very useful word used as an expletive interjection in *Shit!* and as an expletive epithet in utterances like *He is a regular shit/an arrogant shit/a piece of shit*, and also in other expressions such as *I understand shit-all of what he says, I don't give a shit*. By comparison, *piss* is found only as a degree indicator as in *piss-poor* and *fart* only in *old fart* used to refer to an old man. *Arse*, *arsehole*, *ass* and *asshole* are all used as epithets to denote a silly and/or despicable person, and in American English often in combinations like *dumbass*, *shitass* also sometimes used adjectivally as in *a dumbass thing to do*.

The taboo terms for the human posterior are also widely used in other languages to refer disapprovingly to people, as for example in the case of Russian *žopa*, Polish *dupa*, French *cul*, Italian and Spanish *culo*, all literally 'arse/ass'. These words also turn up in popular negative expressions (unfriendly suggestions) like *Kiss my arse/ass*, *My arse/ass!* Certain languages also use more precise anatomical terms in their swearing, terms like English *arsehole*, *asshole*, German *Arschloch*, Polish *dupek*, Norwegian *rasshøl* (*rævhøl*), Danish *røvhul*, Icelandic *rassgat*.

2.2.3 The sex organ theme

A third common swearing theme in many languages is that involving taboo terms for the sex organs. Common English exponents of this theme are of course *cunt* and *prick*, the first of which is probably the most taboo-laden of all the English swear words.

Many languages use sex organ-related themes in their expletive interjections. While English speakers rarely use exclamations like *Cunt!* and *Prick!*, speakers of other languages make free use of the corresponding words in their interjections. Thus Italians exclaim *Cazzo!* ('prick'), Spaniards alternate *Carajo!* ('prick') with *Coño!* ('cunt'), Russians choose between *Xúj!* ('prick') and *Pizdá!* ('cunt'). Irritated Hungarians and Dutch exclaim *Picsa!* and *Kut* respectively (both mean 'cunt'), while speakers of Swedish have adopted the interjection *Fitta!* 'cunt' fairly recently.

The words for the sex organs also come in handy as epithets in descriptions of people the speaker dislikes, like English *You stupid prick! He's a real cunt!* The same message is delivered in many other languages, for instance Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Russian by means of the words *cazzo*, *caralho*, *carajo* and *xúj* – all literally meaning 'prick'. An even greater number of languages use the taboo words for the female sex

Table 2.1 Distribution of sex organ epithets in three Scandinavian languages³

	Male		Female	
	Literal	Epithet	Literal	Epithet
Danish	Kokk	–	Kusse	–
Norwegian	Kukk	–	Fitte	–
Swedish	Kuk	Kuk	Fitta	Fitta

organ as epithets, for instance Russian *pizdá*, Hungarian *picsa*, Spanish *coña/coño*, Swedish *fitta*.

Not all languages use the terms for the sex organs as derogatory epithets, however, and as Table 2.1 indicates, there are unexpected gaps in the distribution of such terms even in languages that are closely related like the Scandinavian languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. Table 2.1 compares the different uses of Danish *kokk* and *kusse*, Norwegian *kukk*, *fitte*, Swedish *kuk*, *fitta*, meaning ‘prick’ and ‘cunt’ respectively.

On occasion the testicles are also summoned to action. English *Balls* and *Bollocks*, Italian *Coglione!* and Spanish *Cojones!* are all used as expletive interjections, but words with the same meaning are also put to good use in other contexts, for instance in Dutch swearing where the nouns *Klotzaak* and *Klote* – both meaning ‘testicle’, ‘ball’ – are used in constructions like *Die klotzaak heft mij gebellt* ‘The idiot/stupid prick called me up’ and *Hij kan me den Klotten kussen!* ‘He can kiss my balls’.

2.2.4 Sexual activities

A great many languages build some of their most frequently used swearing constructions around the taboo words for sexual intercourse, for example English *fuck*, French *foutre*, Spanish *joder*, Italian *fottere*, Russian *ebát’*, to mention only a few. In their swearing usage these verbs appear in many forms, often as past participles, like for example French *foutu(e)* from the verb *foutre* ‘fuck’, Spanish *jodido/jodida* from the verb *joder*, and Italian *fottuto/fottuta* from the verb *fottere*. English is unusual in using the present participle *fucking*. A number of Germanic languages – among them German and Swedish – do not use their taboo words for sexual intercourse at all in swearing, but prefer religious and scatological terms.

A few words need to be said about *ebát’*, the most common taboo verb for having sex in Russian. The form of the verb *ebát’* changes considerably, depending on the different functions in which it is used. Thus in what is probably the best-known Russian oath (in the non-technical

sense of that word), viz. *Yob tvojú mát'* – literally 'somebody has fucked your mother' but often translated as *Fuck your mother* – *Yob* stands for the combination of a third person singular subject and an inclined form of the verb *ebát'*. *Ebát'* is also used in many other ways, for example in the exclamation *Yobyona mat*, literally 'fucked mother'.

The English swear word *fuck* has developed an extraordinarily varied number of uses such as the exclamation *Fuck!*, the curse *Fuck you!*, the extremely versatile form *fucking* which serves both as emphatic and/or derogatory adjective and as adverb of degree, the insulting epithets *fucker*, *motherfucker* and *fuck* (as in *the stupid fuck*) and a motley crew of idiomatic expressions like *I don't give a fuck*, *for fuck's sake*, *she knows fuck all about it*, *fuck off*, *fuck around*, *fuck up* and many others. There is a fair amount of anecdotal evidence of the versatility of the word *fuck* in its various forms, for instance the story about the garage-owner who passes judgement on an old car with the words *The fucking fucker's fucked*.

In the examples above, *fuck* lends itself to description in terms of regular word classes: it is a noun in *stupid fuck* and *not give a fuck*, it is a verb in *Fuck you!*, *fuck up*, *fuck off* and serves as the verbal stem in word formations like *fucking* and *fucker*. It is no secret that there are also uses of *fuck* that can no longer be accounted for in terms of traditional word classes, as when it is used 'intrusively' in for example *absofuckinglylutely*, *docufuckingmentary* and in normally impenetrable phrases like *Henry the fucking Eighth*. This intrusive use of *fucking* is often referred to as *infixing* or *infixation* (cf. e.g. Montagu 1967: 240ff.), a somewhat misleading term suggesting a kind of usage parallel with *prefixation* and *suffixation*. See also Chapter 7.

In addition to the intercourse category exemplified above there are a number of other sexual activities that have been singled out for use in swearing, in particular fellatio and sodomy. These two terms are often used in name-calling and unfriendly suggestions. Well-known English name-calling expressions exploiting these more specified themes are epithets like the fellatio-related *cocksucker* on the one hand, and the sodomy-related *bugger*, *sod* on the other. Obviously there is a difference between the two: *cocksucker* is semantically transparent for today's English speakers, while *bugger* and *sod* are semantically opaque. According to Cassell (2005), *cocksucker* is about a hundred years old and originally meant 'fellator/fellatrix', viz. a person who engages in fellatio. Apparently it soon developed the meanings 'sycophant' and 'toady' but is probably – despite its transparency – mainly used today as a general term of dislike or even with meanings like 'person' or 'object'.

In addition to being used in name-calling, the fellatio and sodomy themes are also found in unfriendly suggestions in many languages, for example in Italian *Suchiarmi il cazzo!* and Spanish *Chúpame la polla!* both 'Suck my dick!', and in Italian *Vaffanculo! Vai te fartello mettere in culo!* and in French *Va te faire enculer!* both 'Go get ass-fucked!'

The masturbation theme is used in name-calling in a number of languages. Its main use is to describe another person – normally a man – as stupid and inept. British English uses *wanker* – occasionally *tosser* – while Americans seem to prefer other terms like *asshole*. However both varieties use the nouns *jerk* or *jerk-off* with the same meaning as *wanker*. In the data used in the present study, the link between masturbation and ineptness recurs in certain European languages such as for instance German, French, Greek and Spanish which use, respectively, *Wichser*, *branleur*, *malákas* and *pajero* corresponding to English *wanker*.

2.2.5 The mother theme

The mother theme is widespread in the swearing of many languages. However, with the exception of English, the mother theme is conspicuously absent from the Germanic languages, being found neither in Danish, Dutch, German, Icelandic, Norwegian or Swedish. It is highly prominent in American English despite its Germanic origins. It is very common in the Romance languages and in Polish, Russian and the other Slavic languages, as well as in Hindi, Urdu, Cantonese and Mandarin. Among its most common realizations we find ritual insults alluding to mothers and sisters, often abbreviated to expressions like *Your mother/sister*, for example in Italian *Tua madre! Tua mamma!, Tua sorella!* and Spanish *Su madre!*

The mother theme is also exploited in name-calling in many languages, as for instance when somebody is referred to as a *son of a bitch* or a *motherfucker*, both of which manage to cast aspersion on both mother and son. Insults involving motherhood may also be expressed more indirectly as Mandarin *wáng-ba dàn* and *wàng ben*, literally 'child of a cuckolded man' and 'forgotten/unknown origin'.

2.2.6 Minor themes

In addition to the major swearing themes described above – which, if not universal, are extremely widespread – there are also other less widespread themes, of which five will be mentioned here, viz. ancestors, animals, death, disease and prostitution. These themes are 'minor' only relative to the 25 languages discussed here on a regular basis. In a wider selection of languages, some of them may well turn out to be major themes.

Ancestors

Ancestors and their names play an important role in several cultures, for instance those found among the Australian aborigines. Reference to ancestors in swearing is usually connected with the death theme and will be discussed under that heading below.

Animals

In the languages that fall within the purview of the present study, the animal theme is found in several expressions, both interjections such as the Italian exclamations *Porco Dio!*, *Porca Madonna!*, *Porca Miseria!* *Porca* and *porco* mean 'sow' and 'boar' respectively and the expressions above may be translated as 'that pig of a God', etc. They are also used in name-calling in several languages, for example in Spanish where *cerdo/cerda* and *carbon* are used in more or less the same way as English *bastard* and *son of a bitch*. Mention should also be made of German and Swedish where *Aas* and *as* which mean literally 'carrion' are used about people and of Russian *padla* 'roadkill' which may be used as a term of abuse. The swearing status of such words is problematic as is that of English *cow* when used to refer disparagingly to a woman, usually in the phrase *silly cow*.

Death

For natural reasons, death and dying are surrounded by powerful taboos in all cultures and have left their mark on the vocabulary of their languages. Most languages have an impressive number of euphemistic terms for death and dying; in English alone it is easy to find hundreds of such euphemisms, like for example *kick the bucket*, *pop one's clogs*, *push up the daisies*, *kick off*, *turn up one's toes*, *meet one's maker*, etc.

Considering this wealth of euphemisms for words related to death and dying in non-swearing, its use in swearing is surprisingly rare in the European languages under consideration here. (It is much more common in Asian languages, for instance Cantonese where it should probably be described as a major theme.) Historically the use of the death theme in European swearing was quite common and usually associated with the death of Christ – referred to as *God* – in expletive curses and interjections like English '*Sdeath!*', '*Snails!* short for (By) *God's death!* and (By) *God's nails!* (for which see e.g. Crawford 1913: 400–1), French *Mort de Dieu/Morbleu* and Swedish *Guds död!* 'God's death' and *Guds änglars död* ('God's angels' death').

In today's English the most frequent swearing allusion to death and dying is probably the sequence ... *and die* used as a filler in unfriendly suggestions like *Eat shit and die!*

As the discussion in Chapter 6, pp. 123–4 will show, the death theme has also developed independently in three widely separated cultures where it is intimately connected with taboos forbidding mention of deceased relatives.

Disease

A not uncommon swearing theme in the history of swearing is the use of words denoting diseases, like the plague, cholera, syphilis and smallpox which all represented something evil that might befall people. English formerly had the expression *A pox on ...!* used as a curse as for instance in Shakespeare's *A pox on both your houses!* from *Romeo and Juliet*. *Pox* is a reformed spelling of the original *pocks*, where the stem *pock* is identical with that in the word *pock-marked*.

Unlike English, certain other languages have retained the habit of swearing in terms of diseases. Danish and Norwegian both use the word *pokkers* in the exclamation *Pokkers!* and as an adverb of degree as in *pokkers stor* 'bloody big'. Other examples of disease-related swearing may be found in Dutch in the form of exclamations such as *Krijg nu de pest!* 'Get the pox!' and *God klere!* literally 'God cholera'.

The prostitution theme

A number of languages use the word corresponding to English *whore* in expletive interjections such as French *Putain!*, Italian *Puttana!*, Spanish *Puta!*, Russian *Bljad!* and Polish *Kurwa*. French also uses the word for *brothel* in the exclamation *Bordel!*

When used literally about people as in *She/He is a whore* 'She/He provides sexual services for money', it cannot be counted as an instance of swearing. It is an open question whether *whore* used figuratively meaning 'somebody who compromises their integrity for money' qualifies as swearing as that term has been defined here. In my opinion such figurative or metaphorical use of *whore* retains too much of the literal meaning of the word to count as swearing (cf. the discussion of the criteria for inclusion in the category of swearing in Chapter 1. Compare also the different name-calling categories in Chapter 6).

Many of the other pejorative person-denoting nouns used in name-calling pose the same problem as *whore* regarding their potential membership in the category of swear words, for instance insulting terms within the semantic areas of ideology (*commie*), ethnic background

(*nigger*), level of intelligence (*dingbat*), sexual orientation (*pervert*), etc. Such uses of these words are very different from the use of the words for 'whore' in interjectional speech acts like *Putain!*, *Puttana!*, *Putal!*, *Bljad!* and *Kurwa* and for that matter, English *Son of a bitch!* In such interjectional utterances there is no reference to either prostitutes or illegitimate sons, but the words are used merely as vehicles for the speaker's feelings.

3

History of Swearing

3.0 Swearing in Ancient Egypt

The first two recorded instances of what may be regarded as swearing come from Ancient Egypt. One of these is found on a *stela*, an upright stone slab with a commemorative inscription, dating back to the era of Ramses III, pharaoh between 1198 and 1166 BC.

The stela may be found in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. The inscription was written for a small tribe – probably named the Shamin – living in or close to the Dakhla oasis in present-day Egypt (cf. Janssen 1968: 165–72).

The inscription informs us that a certain local official named Harentbia donates a daily offering of five loaves in favour of his dead father. The offering is said to be ‘everlasting’ and promises that the official in charge of its execution will enjoy the protection of the god Amon-Re. It also describes the punishment that will be meted out to those who fail to follow the instructions: the person who fails in this respect ‘shall fall to the sword of Amon-Re’ and in addition ‘a donkey shall copulate with him, he shall copulate with a donkey, his wife shall copulate with his children’.

What makes the inscription interesting to students of swearing is the way the threat of retribution is worded. Sexual threats of the same nature involving a donkey turn up in numerous other legal documents and inscriptions from the same era. Donkey-based threats of this kind had apparently become formulaic and were used as a standardized ingredient in legal texts of the era (cf. Tyldesley 2001: 163). Amazingly, it – or something like it – is apparently still used as a standard curse in today’s Kurdish, that is more than 3000 years later than its first known appearance (cf. Demirbag-Sten 2005: 219).

The actual description of what the donkey will do to those who fail to live up to the promises in Dakhla is expressed in graphic hieroglyphic detail on the stela and may be found in Pleyte and Rossi (1869–76, plate XLII; cf. also Sottas 1913 and Elliott Smith and Dawson 1914).

The donkey-based threat in the Dakhla inscription is obviously a forerunner of what later became known as a *curse*, especially if we assume that the god Amon-Re not only wielded a sword but also had the power to visit what was no doubt regarded as unnatural sexual acts on humans.

In Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and Rome and today, the main purpose of curses is to call down evil on another person or object. However, from the beginning, curses could also be used to implicate the speaker him/herself (cf. Chapter 2). The point of such *self-cursing* is to strengthen the speaker's commitment to the truth of a claim or to emphasize her/his commitment to a certain course of action, for instance by saying something like 'May something terrible happen to me if what I say is not true.'

Like ordinary cursing, self-cursing goes back all the way to Ancient Egypt. In her 2000 book *The Judgement of the Pharaoh*, Joyce Tyldesley quotes one of the litigants involved in a legal feud concerning the ownership to a certain piece of land as saying 'If I speak falsehood, then let my nose and my ears be cut off and let me be transported to Nubia' (Tyldesley 2000: 46). Another instance of self-cursing from Tyldesley is 'If I speak untruthfully, may I be mutilated and sent to Kush/Sile/the Quarries' (2000: 81).

Although there is – so far as I know – no evidence for this in Ancient Egyptian, the self-curses in many other languages were typically subjected to several kinds of simplifying linguistic processes known as *grammaticalization*, described for example in Hopper and Traugott (1993) and originally applied to the development of content words to grammatical morphemes. Here as in many other later publications like for example Gehweiler (2008), the term is used to refer to processes of linguistic change affecting complex syntactic structures, changing their form and ultimately turning them into lexical units, some of which take on pragmatic functions.

In the case of the self-curses, grammaticalization may proceed along two different routes. On the one hand the self-curses affected lose the conditional part of the original construction and begin to be used as interjections expressing the speaker's feelings, usually of surprise as in the following example:

(1) A: 'This is the Three Tuns' said Kim.

B: 'Really? *I'll be damned!*' (BNC HTL 2262–4)

On the other hand the self-curses may keep the conditional part of the original construction but lose the *I'll be* bit as in (2):

- (2) Some of them use PCK and some of them use Smart Drive and *buggered if* I can tell the difference. (BNC H61 1702)

In the case of (2) we may arguably claim that *buggered if* has become a pragmatic particle signalling the speaker's stance regarding the clause *I can tell the difference* (cf. the discussion of pragmatic particles in e.g. Brinton 1996: 33 and Ljung 2009: 157–8).

The second example of Ancient Egyptian swearing (beside that found on the stela) occurs in a description of civil unrest from the days of Pharaoh Ramses II (approximately 1292–1225 BC) and has been described in Montagu (1967: 18), Smith and Dawson (1924: 176) and Pleyte and Rossi (1869–76: plates XLIIff.). According to these sources, the twenty-ninth year of Pharaoh Ramses the Second's reign was one characterized by serious social unrest. In the capital city Thebes there was a strike among the workers in the 'city of the dead', a part of Thebes where the burial sites of the pharaohs and other prominent Egyptians were found. The spark that ignites the strike is the fact that the food rations that were the workers' only wages have repeatedly failed to appear. Under normal circumstances, the workers and their families were not supposed to leave the city of the dead but to spend their lives within the confines of that area. Now, however, hunger makes them rebellious and they ignore the prohibition and leave the area to protest against the lack of food.

There is a papyrus that gives a lively description of the protests: feelings ran high, and oaths and curses were to be heard from all directions as the strikers claimed their due. Apparently, one of the protesters goes too far: he is carried away by his anger and strengthens his protests by saying 'By the ruler whose power is greater than death', a description reserved for the pharaoh.

For an ordinary Egyptian to use such an asseveration was probably dangerous. The pharaoh was regarded as being of divine provenance and swearing by his name was basically restricted to legal texts and to certain formal occasions on which it was used only by certain high officials. There is accordingly reason to believe that the use of the pharaoh's name outside these domains was frowned upon and maybe even prohibited (which may be the reason why that incident was singled out for particular mention). These circumstances suggest that the habit of swearing by higher powers was already established in Ancient Egypt about 1250 BC.

3.1 Swearing in the Bible

The habit of swearing by invoking the gods was not limited to the Egyptians but was also common among the Jews (cf. Montagu 1967: 19). The Old Testament sets strict rules for the use of swearing (usually but not exclusively by God) but is not totally negative. An important distinction is made between the swearing of God and that of humans. As the following examples indicate, God may swear freely by himself as in the following quote from Jeremiah:

But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation! (Jeremiah 22:5)

The same thing happens in Hebrews 6:13:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself.

When it comes to swearing by humans, things are less clear. In Deuteronomy 6:13 God's advice to humans is that if they are going to swear, they should do so by His name:

It is the LORD your God that you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.

On the other hand it is forbidden for humans to swear falsely by God's name. Cf the following quote from Leviticus 19:12:

You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

Humans should also beware of flippant and disrespectful use of God's name. That is the message of the Third Commandment given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai:

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. (Exodus 20:7)

The Third Commandment is probably one of the best known if not *the* best known of all quotes from the Bible and has been used down

the ages as the basis for innumerable accusations of profanity and blasphemy. It has also left its mark on several European languages where the expression *God's name* and its counterparts in other languages may be used to strengthen the speech act force of questions as in English *Where in God's name/in the name of God did you put it?* and Swedish *Var i Herrans namn har du lagt den?* 'Where in the name of the Lord did you put it?' Compare also the German use of *in Gottes Namen* 'in God's name' and the French interjection *Nom de Dieu!* ('God's name') and the euphemized variants *Nom de nom!* *Nom d'un chien!* and *Nom d'une pipe* literally 'Name of a name', 'Name of a dog' and 'Name of a pipe').

When we move from the Old Testament to the New, the attitude to swearing changes dramatically. In the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel according to St Matthew, Jesus makes it plain that no swearing is permitted, be it by God or by somebody or something else:

You have heard it said to those of old 'You shall not swear falsely ...'.
But I say to you Do not take an oath at all ... Let what you say be simply Yes or No. (Matthew 5:33–6)

Judging by the richness of the swearing that later developed in Christian countries – what White (1963: 358) refers to as 'the universal medieval habit of swearing' – neither the Second Commandment nor the Sermon on the Mount made a lasting impression on the population of those countries. However, there were those who took the ban on swearing – especially that in the New Testament – one step further. In the fourteenth century, for instance, the followers of John Wycliffe, known as the Lollards, held that all swearing should be avoided, even formal oath-taking. Some of them paid for their conviction with their lives: according to White (1963: 358), a woman in the French city of Pamiers was condemned to death in 1320 for refusing to take an oath. Apparently even those who spoke out against ordinary blasphemous swearing might find themselves in trouble: in the mid-fifteenth century an Englishwoman by the name of Margery Kempe relates in her autobiography how she was arrested and threatened with execution by the retinue of the Archbishop of York (cf. Montagu 1967: 125).

3.2 Swearing among the Greeks and the Romans

The habit of swearing by higher beings was firmly established in classical Greek and in Latin. The Ancient Greeks swore by all their gods, for instance by Zeus, Pollux, Apollo and Hercules. In addition they swore

by more mundane entities using expressions meaning 'By the dog!', 'By the goose!' and 'By the garlic!', 'By the leek!' and 'By the onion!' They could also swear by certain dice-throws: Pythagoras' favourite oath is claimed to have been by the number four, viz. the dice-throw resulting in four.

Roman swearing was very like that found in Ancient Greek. A particular favourite was *Hercule!* or *Mehercle!* 'By Hercules!' but they also swore by Jupiter, Leda, Castor and Pollux. There were apparently gender-based differences. Thus according to Montagu (1967: 31–2) men swore by Pollux while women swore by Castor. *Mehercule!* was the great divider, being used exclusively by men. It was also possible to use oaths involving all the gods by means of expressions like *Per dios immortales!* 'By the immortal gods!' (Montagu 1967: 37).

Like swearing in all other languages, the Latin and Greek varieties underwent considerable change with the passage of time: the classical Latin for *By Pollux!* and for *By Hercules!* ought to be *Polle!* and *Hercule!*, but frequently came out as *Pol!* or *Edepol!* and *Hercl!* Such formal changes of the swearing expressions are usually often accompanied by changes in the meaning and use of the expressions, changes amounting to the process of *grammaticalization* discussed earlier in the present chapter.

In a recent study of Latin (Janson 2002: 73) the author draws attention to a clear case of Latin grammaticalization involving the god Pollux. The example comes from a dialogue between two women in a comedy by Plautus. One of the participants says, 'I was just on my way to you' and the other responds *Et pol ego istuc ad te*, which may be translated as 'And I to you, actually.' Here the original oath *Polle* 'by Pollux' has been reduced to *pol* meaning, approximately, 'actually'. In a different theoretical framework it could be claimed that *pol* has developed into a *pragmatic particle* (cf. Brinton 1996, Aijmer 2002).

The discussion above of Greek and Latin swearing has focused almost entirely on the use of the names of gods. This is no coincidence: there is no indication that speakers of classical Greek and Latin used 'bad language' in their swearing. This should not be taken to mean that there were no 'dirty words' in Ancient Greek and Latin: in fact there were quite a number of them. We are particularly well informed concerning such words in Latin, owing to a natural disaster in Pompeii in the year AD 79. In that year, the volcano Vesuvius erupted and buried the entire city of Pompeii under flows of lava. This was obviously a tragedy for the city and its inhabitants. At the same time it was a godsend to all researchers interested in ancient history and has provided us with unique knowledge about the city, its buildings and the people who once

lived there. Among the remains preserved for us were a vast number of graffiti (for which see Varone 2002), revealing that the supply of dirty words in classical Latin was in no way inferior to what we find in the European languages of today. This indicates that the reason for the lack of Latin ‘dirty word swearing’ was not the absence of such words, but must have been due to the fact that such swearing was not part of the linguistic repertory.

3.3 Swearing after classical antiquity

The time-honoured practice of swearing by the gods or a god did not come to an end with the introduction of Christianity, but continued to be used both in Latin and in the native languages of the countries converted to the Christian faith. Obviously, there was a difference however: swearers were no longer offered a choice between many different gods but had to make do with a single one – God with a capital G who lived in Heaven. We might have expected this new monotheistic swearing to be less varied than earlier swearing, but speakers showed great inventiveness in making up for this restriction of the scope of swearing. The new religion may have offered only a single God, but a God with a whole panoply of associated religious figures, rites and objects, invested with various degrees of holiness. Thus almost on a par with God there was Jesus or Christ, his mother Mary and the Holy Ghost. In fact Jesus was often referred to as God and his mother as Mother of God. In addition there was the whole paraphernalia of sacred objects used in the new liturgy that gradually established itself, such as the sacrament, the hostia, the altar, the cassock, the chalice, the tabernacle, etc. All of these could be sworn by in a type of swearing that I will henceforth refer to as *celestial swearing*.

Another novelty was the introduction of the Manichean distinction between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The former were in principle represented by all the celestial entities mentioned above, but above all by God, Jesus, Holy Mary, the Holy Ghost and the saints, and the latter by the Devil (also known as the Fiend, Lucifer, Satan, Beelzebub) and his abode hell. Swearing in terms of the forces of evil like the Devil and hell will be called *diabolic swearing*.

3.3.1 Celestial swearing

As both White (1963: 358) and Vincent (1982: 27) point out, it did not take long for Christian swearers to hit upon the best way to achieve maximum effect in the new monotheistic swearing. The method they

used was to use swearing combining the name of God – usually in the sense of Christ – with all manner of objects, events and experiences associated with God such as his death, his body parts, the cross, the crucifixion, the nails used in the crucifixion, etc. ad infinitum. They quickly became extremely good at inventing new formulae along these lines, a type of swearing that was known under a number of different names such as ‘The Great Oaths’, ‘promiscuous swearing’ and ‘blasphemous swearing’. The following lists of celestial swearing in English, French and a few other languages have been taken from Crawford (1913), White (1963), Montagu (1967) and in a few cases from the COED (The Corpus of English Dialogue).¹

English celestial swearing

Lorde, Lorde God, My God, By Cryste, By God, By Goddis yne (‘By God’s eyes’), *By our Lady, Be God’s passion* (passion = ‘suffering’), *By Cokkis bones* (‘By God’s bones’), *By Cokis passion, By Gog’s mother* (‘By God’s mother’), *Cock’s body!* (COED 1640–79 ‘God’s body’), *By the sacrament!*, *(By) God’s nails* (the reference here is to the nails used to fasten Jesus to the cross), *(By) God’s wounds*. Other celestial oaths are: *By saynt Mary, Mary/Marry Goddys sake, God wote* (‘God knows’), *So me God helpe, So helpe me God*.

As for early French swearing, Vincent (1982) and her sources argue that it is impossible to ascertain what expressions were actually used in medieval France because uttering such expressions constituted such a terrible crime that no chronicler dared repeat them in print (Vincent 1982: 28). However, Vincent describes the different swearing categories used in medieval and post-medieval French in terms of the information found in Pichette (1980).

According to Pichette (1980: 25–6) French swearing fell into three categories of which the most offensive were blasphemous expressions referring to God, the Virgin Mary and the saints and were referred to as *Le Vilain Serment* ‘the awful oath’. A second category comprised swearing involving renouncement of God and lack of respect for his name. The third French category is identical with the English oaths involving swearing by God’s hair, head, eyes, stomach, heart, flesh, wounds, death, blood and virtues (Pichette 1980: 26).

Guiraud (1975: 102) offers the following examples of historically attested oaths favoured by different French monarchs:

- *Par la Paque-Dieu!* (Louis XI) 1423–83 Lit.: ‘By Easter God’
- *Jour de Dieu!* (Charles VIII) 1470–98 Lit.: ‘Day of God’
- *Le diable m’emporte!* (Louis XII) 1462–1515 Lit.: ‘May the devil take me’

- *Foi de gentilhomme!* (François I) 1494–1547 Lit.: ‘On (my) honour as a gentleman’
- *Ventre-Saint-Gris!* (Henri IV) 1553–1610 Lit.: ‘The stomach of Holy Christ’

Guiraud also mentions the following French examples of celestial swearing, many of which date back to medieval times:

- *Dieu* ‘God’, *Bon Dieu* ‘Good God’, *Sacré (bon) Dieu* Lit.: ‘Holy God’
- *Jarnidieu = Je renie Dieu* Lit.: ‘I denounce God’
- *Nom de Dieu* Lit.: ‘God’s name’ Euphemisms: *Nom de nom!* ‘Name of name’, *Nom d’une pipe!* ‘Name of a pipe’, *Nom d’un chien!* ‘Name of a dog’
- *Par Dieu* Lit.: ‘By God’ Euphemisms: *Pardi*
- *Par le ventre de Dieu* Lit.: ‘By God’s stomach’
- *Par le sang de Dieu!* Lit.: ‘By God’s blood’ Euphemisms: *Palsambleu, Par la sambleu*
- *Sang de Dieu* Lit.: ‘God’s blood’. Euphemism: *Sangbleu, Sang beuf* ‘Blood of a cow’
- *Sacré nom de Dieu* Lit.: ‘Holy name of God’
- *Mort de Dieu* Lit.: ‘God’s death’
- *Ventre Dieu* Lit.: ‘God’s stomach’ Euphemism: *Ventre bleu* ‘Blue stomach’

The swearing developed along these lines is surprisingly uniform and – with the exception of Russian (cf. Chapter 8) – stays the same across languages: expressions similar if not identical to those above were used in all Christian countries across Europe both before and during the Middle Ages regardless of the different linguistic affiliations of the languages involved, a fact suggesting that it was the Church itself that provided the model for the swearing so disliked by its representatives. The influence from this model for swearing also extended to languages with relatively few speakers living in countries situated on the periphery of Europe like for example Swedish.

Thus in the fifteenth century Swedish speakers used swearing identical to that in English, French, German and the other European languages, containing expressions like the following:

- *Gudz hungladö* ‘God’s angels’ death’
- *Vassärradö* ‘Our Lord’s death’
- *Vassärratré!* ‘Our Lord’s tree’, viz. the rood
- *Vassfamunder!* ‘Our Lord’s five wounds’

These expressions, taken from Hellquist (1918), represent fifteenth-century Swedish and display considerable differences from modern Swedish. *Hungla* in *hungladö* is an old genitive plural (*angels'*) and in the second and third examples, *är* stands for *här* 'lord', 'master'. In the final example, the word for *God* is missing altogether, the literal meaning *Vassfamunder* being 'whose five wounds', an expression of the same kind as English *God's wounds/Zounds* and referring to the five wounds supposedly inflicted on Jesus at the crucifixion. The five holy wounds have often been and still are used to symbolize Christianity; their use in medieval blasphemous swearing must have been highly provocative, and profane exclamations referring to them must have counted as the hardcore swearing of those times.

3.3.2 A note on 'damn'

Given the dualistic nature of the Christian universe with its stark contrast between the forces of good and of evil, the greatest fear of all Christians must have been to be *damed*, viz. to be 'doomed to eternal punishment in the world to come; to be condemned to hell' as the *OED* puts it. At the same time, given the dependence of swearing on fear and taboo, the very existence of that fear must have been a powerful incentive to create swearing constructions involving the verb *damn* and its counterparts in other languages spoken in Christian Europe.

It comes as no surprise therefore that we find swearing focusing on damnation in many European languages. The basis for these expressions is the verb *damn* and its foreign counterparts, viz. Danish *forbände*, Dutch *verdommen*, German *verdammen*, Norwegian *forbannne* and Swedish *förbanna/fördöma*.

The swearing developed on this basis shows considerable versatility: it may take the form of interjections like English *Damn!*, German *Verdammt (nochmal)!* and Norwegian *Forbanna!*, intensifiers or adjectives of dislike as in English *She is damn(ed) clever!* and *The damn(ed) car wouldn't start!*, curses like *Damn you!*, *Damn this place!* with the basic meanings 'May you/this place be damned!' Also *God damn (you/him/it)*.

The examples above have all been taken from Germanic languages. This is no coincidence: it is only in the swearing of these languages that interjections and curses connected with damnation have a central place. It is true that there are, in principle, corresponding forms in the modern Romance languages such as Italian *maledetto*, *condannato*, Portuguese *maldito*, Spanish *maldito*, *condenado* which are sometimes used as intensifiers or adjectives of dislike. However, damnation swearing is not particularly common in any of the Romance languages but

tends to be replaced by other expressions. The same goes for Russian, notwithstanding the occasional use of expressions like for example *Bud' ty proklyat(a)!* 'May you be damned!'

It is natural to assume that the ultimate arbiter in decisions about who should go to hell must be God and that in expressions like *Damn! Damn you!* and *Damn this place!*, the word *God* is understood and that the first recorded instance of *damn* 'doom to eternal punishment; condemn to hell' would be in combination with *God*.² The first instance of that combination in the *OED* is in the phrase *God damn me* from *The Comedy of Errors* (IV:iii:53–4), but the meaning of the word *damn* here is contested. In fact, we have to wait another 49 years for the first recorded instance of the combination *God damn* with the appropriate meaning to appear, and when it does – in 1640 – it is as nominalization of the curse *God damn me!* used as a byname for the Cavaliers in the English Civil War who were much given to using that curse (cf. Prynne 1643: 17).³

But even if there is no mention of *God damn* in written English texts until 1640, there is substantial evidence from another language that it was used in spoken English some 200 or even 250 years earlier. The language in question is French, and the document where the evidence may be found is the well-known account of the interrogation of Joan of Arc before she was burned at the stake in Rouen in 1431 (cf. Barante 1431). According to that account, Joan argues that whatever the number of English soldiers present in France, they will never possess it. What she actually said, according to Barante was: *Mais fussent-ils [les anglais] cent mille Goddem de plus qu'à present, ils n'auront pas ce royaume!* 'But even if they [the English] were a hundred thousand more Goddamns than there are now, they will never have this kingdom.' According to Hughes (2006: 203) she also claimed that the English used the word *goddem* 'a hundred thousand times'.⁴

If the dating in the *OED* is correct – and there is no reason to think otherwise – this means that *God damn* was used in spoken English for hundreds of years before it was recorded in written English. Such a long delay in the reporting of an obviously commonly used spoken expression is puzzling in several respects. Even if it may be argued that for a long time the expression *God damn* was felt to be so shocking that it could not possibly be written down, it was probably the case that *God damn* was no worse than many other kinds of English swearing which found their way into print much more quickly.

Another reason for feeling surprise at the long time it took *God damn* to appear in print is the number of people who, by 1640, must have used it for centuries: if the war was fought on and off between 1337

and 1453, it must have involved many generations of English soldiers, a substantial number of whom must have returned to England with their linguistic habits intact.

The linguistic conclusion to be drawn from the above account seems clear: the English soldiers who went off to fight in the Hundred Years War used the expression *God damn* so often that it was borrowed into French in the thinly disguised form *goddem*. However, as the entry for *God damn* in the *OED* shows, the borrowing process may have been helped along by the existence in the French of that time of a word *godon* and a host of other words in *god-*, all of them used as a disparaging terms for people.⁵

3.3.3 Diabolic swearing

Our examples so far of early English swearing have all focused on names for the 'good' religious forces, primarily God, Christ/Jesus, the saints, Heaven and the sacraments. Obviously, this is a somewhat lopsided description of the religious swearing that actually went on both in England and in other European countries, omitting as it does to mention the frequent use of the names for the forces of evil such as the *Devil* and *hell* and variations on these forms.

In fact, as Hughes (2006: 118) points out, it is not difficult to find relatively early English examples of such infernal or diabolic swearing which, in addition to Hughes' example from the *Friar's Tale* (*The feend ... yow fecche, body and bones*) may also be found in other texts such as the following fifteenth-century examples from Crawford (1913: 42–3):

- (3) Be Satan!, Devill/dewills!
- (4) What the dyvell!, Where the deuyll!
- (5) The deuyll motte you drawe!, To the devyll of helle!

As the examples above show, the English words for the Devil were used in a variety of functions. The examples in (3) are exclamations, those in (4) function as intensifiers of interrogative pronouns and adverbs and those in (5) are curses.

By and large, however, it would seem that the number of early English swearing constructions using the name of the Devil is lower than that of constructions invoking celestial entities. Why should that be? A number of possible answers suggest themselves, in particular that there are crucial differences between swearing involving God and swearing involving the Devil.

Swearing involving God, as we have seen, could get you into trouble with the authorities for practising blasphemy or even heresy by taking God's name in vain. Swearing by the Devil could get you into trouble of a different kind. For one thing, the use of oaths involving the Devil in medieval Europe might lead to accusations of sorcery and devil worship and was accordingly also ill-advised. For another, swearing involving the Devil brought with it the risk that He might turn up in person with dire consequences for the speaker (cf. Hughes 2006: 512–13).

It has been claimed that this fear of the Devil became more pronounced in countries like Denmark and Sweden both of which turned Protestant in the sixteenth century. Hellquist (1918: 52), for example, speaks of an increased fear of the Devil in these two countries in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a fear that in his opinion amounted to a 'devil fixation' (Hellquist 1918: 52).

Given the peculiar nature of swearing, this increased fear may have had two quite different results. On the one hand, the fear of the Devil might have resulted in a decrease in swearing by the Devil. On the other hand swearing thrives on taboos, and the heightened fear of the Devil may have acted as an impetus to increased diabolic swearing because it was felt to pack more strength into utterances than celestial swearing.

If we accept the second explanation – which in my opinion is the more convincing of the two – this may explain why it is precisely these countries that have found the greatest use for hell and the Devil in their swearing. With the exception of the invectives, traditional Swedish swearing consists almost entirely of words for the Devil and hell (in addition to the ubiquitous words for faecalia). To a large extent the same claim can be made for Danish and Norwegian swearing.⁶ The case for a link between diabolic swearing and Protestantism is further strengthened by heavy emphasis on diabolic (and faecal) swearing found in German, considering that the first converts to Protestantism in the seventeenth century were mostly native German speakers.

The Devil has a less prominent place in English and English diabolic swearing has not developed in the same way as its counterparts in other Protestant countries. Hughes (2006: 119) notes that the name of the Devil was used freely in Elizabethan times but became less frequently used during and after the Puritan era. He quotes a passage from the diary of Samuel Pepys in which Pepys mentions that he was 'vexed' when his wife used the word 'devil' and told her not to do that again.

Clearly, however, English swearing by means of the name of the Devil was not entirely abandoned between the mid-seventeenth century and

the early 1900s. Thus the Corpus of English Dialogues (COED) yields the following instances of diabolic swearing:

- (6) The Devil blind her ... (COED 1640–79)
- (7) What the devil ... (COED 1680–1719)
- (8) The Devil she has (COED 1720–60)
- (9) Hell and damnation! (COED 1680–1719)
- (10) Hell and Furies! (COED 1640–1679)

What about the other European languages? Although it is hardly the most potent of swear words, the name of the Devil may be found all the modern Romance languages, for example in interjections like French *Diable!*, Italian *Diavolo!*, Spanish *Diablos!*, Portuguese *Diabo!* and in at least some of them also as post-posed emphasers as in *Que diable ... ?* It also turns up in impolite suggestions like Portuguese *Vai ao diabo!* With a few exceptions – like Portuguese *Vai pro inferno!* – the words for *hell* are seldom used in Romance swearing, however.

Historically, swearing by the Devil in French is on record from the fifteenth century, for instance in Louis XII's favourite *Le diable m'emporte!* mentioned above.

3.4 Reactions to medieval swearing

The speed and dedication – one might almost say enthusiasm – with which Europeans took to the new swearing did not pass unnoticed by the authorities and we shall presently take a closer look at the measures taken to stem this flood of blasphemy. Before doing that, let us briefly consider what measures the swearers themselves took to avoid censure and punishment.

Besides abstaining from swearing altogether – a precaution probably taken by many but apparently not enough speakers – the obvious way to both swear and escape scot-free was to modify existing constructions, especially those involving God or some other name for the deity, in such a way that uttering them did not constitute blasphemy but at the same time left enough of the original for the intended meaning of the utterance to remain clear. A common English term for such modified swearing constructions is 'minced oaths' (cf. Hughes 2006: 316–18, McArthur 1992: 661).

In the Middle Ages – and also later – a common English technique for creating minced oaths – especially in dealing with the English word *God* – was to replace the initial and/or the last consonant in

the sensitive word by consonants with the same place of articulation: *God* became *Cock*, *Cok*, *Gog* or *Cod*, *Gad*. On occasion the vowel was changed, as in *Gad*. When more radical changes were made, the context usually supplied the information necessary for successful deciphering, for example in *Odd's blood!* and *Odd*. By means of a later and somewhat more sophisticated technique, the English oaths *By God*, *God's nails*, *God's death* and *God's wounds* were changed into *Igad!*, *'Snails!*, *'Sdeath!* and *Zounds!*, the last of which is claimed to have been the favourite oath of Queen Elizabeth I (Hughes 2006: 517, Montagu 1967: 139).

The habit of creating euphemized forms of swearing in English did not stop when what we refer to as the Middle Ages came to an end. It proved its usefulness in the seventeenth century when forms like *gadzooks* ('God's hooks') and *odsbobs* were created, in the eighteenth century when *gosh* and *golly* saw the light of day, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in connection with the invention of forms like *Corblimey/Gorblimey* 'God blind me', *Great Scott!* and *By Godfrey!* (cf. Hughes 2006: 201 for the chronology just used). Its usefulness may now have come to an end, seeing that today's English speakers have no great use for euphemisms, at least not in their swearing.

Let us return now to swearing in the Middle Ages. As mentioned earlier, the widespread use of swearing had not passed unnoticed by the authorities and there is plenty of evidence that both the Catholic Church and worldly authorities took serious and sometimes draconian measures to stop or at least to repress it.

The common basis for these measures was the Old Testament view that the name of God was sacred and must on no account be used disrespectfully. Language in which this was done was considered to be blasphemous, viz. to constitute intentional disrespect for the Christian religion.

Blasphemous language could basically be interpreted as *heresy*, viz. a 'belief or opinion contrary to Orthodox religious [especially Christian] doctrine' according to *The Oxford Dictionary of English*. Heresy was punishable by death, often by extremely painful means such as burning at the stake. Technically heresy was the term used for interpretations of the Christian faith that differed from the official doctrine of the Church, and its practitioners – the heretics – were regarded as people who worked actively to overthrow that doctrine. But the term 'heresy' was often used in a wider sense, and among those counted as heretics were also found persons who had sinned against the first three of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, in the case of swearing especially against the Third Commandment 'Do not take the name of the Lord in vain'.

The punishments for heresy varied considerably over time. When the heresy took the form of swearing, the nature of the punishment depended ultimately on whether the use of such language was interpreted as active denial of God's existence or given a more lenient interpretation. There were periods when the authorities took a very uncompromising view during which swearing often led to the death penalty. In the early Middle Ages the death penalty was often replaced with reprimands, fines and in serious cases excommunication. During the twelfth century attitudes hardened and many heretics were burned at the stake.

In order to understand the enormous power associated with swearing during the Middle Ages and later we must consider the responsibility placed on the swearers: by expressing contempt for God, they not only risked their own salvation but were also held responsible for all misfortunes – from war to crop failure – that might befall their own country and in principle humanity at large.

It has been claimed that the reason why people living in the Middle Ages accepted this heavy burden of guilt was the fact that, during that era, no clear distinction was made between what was public and what was private. As Lindberg (1992: 457–9) and others have pointed out, a crime in medieval times affected everything and everybody. It was the individual's duty to report on all kinds of crime or suspected crime and failure to report a crime or what might be a crime could have dire consequences. Both criminals and those who failed to report real or suspected crimes could cause God to unleash His wrath on the entire country. Accordingly it was in everybody's interest that criminals were exposed and punished.

Given the above background, it is not hard to understand that potential blasphemy – including swearing – was sometimes punished with great severity: as far back as the sixth century, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian decreed that all those who 'swore by the members of God' should be put to death (cf. Vincent 1982: 27, White 1963: 358). With occasional exceptions, later rulers seem to have been less draconian and to have had as their main aim to get at swearing recidivists. This was done by increasing the severity of the penalties in accordance with the frequency of the swearing. First-time offenders got off fairly lightly but relapses led to more and more severe punishment.

Thus in 1529 – according to Vincent (1982: 27) and Pichette (1980: 15) – the French king Francis I decreed that those who blasphemed by swearing by God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit would simply be liable to pay fines to atone for their offence. However, repeated swearing led to gradually more severe punishment. Those who were caught

swearing a second time were to have their lips split, third-time offenders had their tongue pierced and fourth and definitely last-time offenders were sentenced to garrotting. Alternative ways to punish swearers both in France and in Italy was to brand their faces or cut their tongues out.

The English rulers seem to have been more forgiving – or greedy – and chiefly relied on fines to discourage swearers. Henry I, the son of William the Conqueror, introduced a scale of fines for swearing within the precincts of the royal residence; the scale was made relative to the rank and wealth of the offender: dukes paid 40 shillings, lords 20 shillings and so on all the way down to pages who escaped with a whipping (Montagu 1967: 108).

Given the enormous potential for retribution vested in the Church and the worldly authorities in the Middle Ages, one would have expected the swearing to stop or at least to be reduced to a mere trickle. Surprisingly that was not the case at all, however. According to several writers on the topic, instead of being reduced or even eliminated, swearing in the European languages in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries took on a new viciousness. Several writers on the topic (Vincent 1982: 29 and Montagu 1967: 115) suggest that this increase in swearing may be regarded as a reaction to the oppression of the Church, an oppression that according to Montagu (1967: 115) made people in England begin to use oaths that ‘proclaimed open warfare with authority’. In this new type of swearing ‘Every limb and member and every wound and last drop of blood of the slain Christ was made the vehicle of the swearers’ oaths’ (Montagu 1967: 115; cf. also Hughes 2006: 517 and White 1963: 358 for similar views).

There is plenty of evidence that this more vicious type of swearing continued unabated for centuries: compare for instance the following remark made by the English friar John Waldeby who was active in the sixteenth century:

Christ’s blood these days is reckoned of little price among the greater part of the people. For if one comes into the market place or the tavern where these infernal dogs, that is the swearers, are, one will find Christ’s blood held at so small a price and in such little reverence among them that scarcely a single word will escape their lips ... without the mention by name of the blood of Christ. (from Owst 1933: 417, Montagu 1967: 110)

England was not alone in experiencing a more vicious kind of swearing. Complaints about increased blasphemous swearing were aired in many

other countries, as indicated by the following description from sixteenth-century France:

In earlier times, swearing was only heard among the most despicable soldiery, but today this vice has become so common as to be used on a regular basis not only in such and such guild, family, village, city and country but all over the world. Now, it is not just the men who swear, but also the women; not just the old, but also the young; the master and the servant; the mistress and the maid: small children who have not yet learnt to say their prayers swear so perfectly as to outdo their elders in this terrible practice ... (My translation, cf. original French version in Vincent 1982: 29)

In the same vein, Olaus Petri in Sweden found it necessary in 1539 to put together a pamphlet named *Predican emot the gruffuelige eeder* (A Sermon Against the Most Horrible Oaths) in which he protests against all those who 'swear thousands of times by our Lord's cruel and bitter death'.

Attempts were also made to reduce swearing in both England and Scotland; in fact, Scotland was far ahead of England in this respect: strict punishments were proposed in Scotland as early as in 1551 (Hughes 2006: 390) and in England in 1606 and 1623. In England – referred to at the time as the Puritan Commonwealth – the attempts to put a stop to all swearing peaked during the Puritanical reign of Cromwell, the Lord Protector. Cromwell, who was famous for the ban on swearing among his own troops during the English Civil War ('Not a man swears but pays his twelve pence') decided in 1642 to close all theatres because they encouraged the use of blasphemous language, which had long been the contention of the Puritans.⁷

The English theatres were opened again in 1660 as the result of the Restoration that marked England's return to monarchy and put Charles II on the English throne. It may be seen as a belated justification of Cromwell's views that the Restoration did in fact open the floodgates to a veritable torrent of mouth-filling oaths as the following examples from a number of restoration plays show (Montagu 1967: 172–87):

A pox o' fortune!, Death and the devil!, Death and eternal tortures!,
 Let me be hanged and quartered!, Clusters of poxes on ye!, Dam'me
 sir!, Rot me sir!, Hell and confusion!, Thou son of a thousand
 fathers!, ... you whoreson, insolent noise-maker.

Given the excesses in swearing that took place after the Restoration, it is perhaps no coincidence that the year 1700 saw the publication of a 59-page volume attacking the habit of swearing which, in the author's opinion, 'nips the Buds of Piety, Honesty and Sobriety in others' (Montagu 1967: 200). The publication in question was followed by other attacks on swearing of which the most notable was Jonathan Swift's still highly readable satirical broadside entitled *The Swearer's Bank* in which he proposes a tax on swearing, which would provide a welcome boost to public finances. There was also concern regarding swearing in more official quarters which resulted in an Act of Parliament passed in 1745 designed to curb the habit of excessive swearing by imposing a tax to be imposed on swearers.

These attempts to clamp down on swearing may have had some effect at the beginning of the eighteenth century, especially regarding the use of swearing in books and plays. However, whatever hopes there were for a swearing-free English literature were dashed by the publication of books like Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* in 1748, a novel whose characters say things like *Damn my blood!*, *Hell and the devil confound me!*, *God's curse!*, *Damn that son of a bitch!* In other books by Smollett we find for example *Odd's niggers!* ('God's nails'), *Odd's heartlikins*, *By hell and Stap my breath!*

In fact, contrary to the expectations of Sir Francis Grant and others hoping that the eighteenth century would mark the beginning of an era free from swearing, it is clear from the plays of writers like Otway, Congreve, Wycherley, Vanbrugh and Etherege that, quite on the contrary, the eighteenth century marks the high point of English swearing. According to a keen observer like White (1963: 365) 'it is in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that exclamatory expressions are recorded in their greatest variety and zest' in the plays produced by the above writers, plays producing a mix of 'new fanciful variations' like *refuse me, let me perish, strike me dumb, burn me, rat me, stap my vitals, split my windpipe, by the lord Harry* and the 'old familiar' *zounds, 'sight, 'slid, 'sblood, 'sdeath and 'snails*.

Before proceeding to a discussion of English swearing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we will stop briefly here to consider the uses of swearing as an art form.

3.5 Swearing as an art form

Generally speaking, swearing is a form of language that is held in low esteem and often associated with speakers of low social standing as

shown by the characterizations of swearing found in many languages of the type *swear like a trooper/sailor*, etc. (see Chapter 1, p. 7 for more examples). In addition by far the greatest amount of swearing encountered in many languages is repetitive, unimaginative and predictable in the extreme.

However, swearing may also contain an element of skill and wordplay – perhaps more so in certain languages than in others – and it is not unusual for good swearers to be the objects of admiration. Arguably, in such cases, swearing may be regarded as an art form. Such artistic swearing is usually associated with certain genres of swearing. One particularly well-known instance of artistic swearing is the trading of – more or less – ritual insults in the genre known as *flyting* (cf. Hughes 1991: 47–9, 118–24, Hughes 2006, Montagu 1967, Einarsson 2004).

Elements of flyting may be found in Anglo-Saxon literature, for example in the poem *The Battle of Maldon*, and in *Beowulf*, and is a well-known ingredient in the Icelandic sagas such as *Egil Skallagrimson's Saga* from c.1200. Although often defined as an exchange of insults, certain instances of flyting are basically accounts of the verbal output of a single person.

The insults involved are usually of such a nature that they would in normal circumstances have led to physical violence, involving as they usually do accusations of cowardice, adultery, incest, stupidity, avarice, betrayal and many others. The main characters in flyting contests are usually more or less heroic and socially prominent figures like Egil Skallagrimson and Beowulf, an exception being the thirteenth-century poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

The most advanced and interesting type of flyting in English was that developed in sixteenth-century Scotland, such as the famous *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* (1503), the *Flyting of King James V and David Lindsay* (1537) and *The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart* (1585). Unlike for example the Icelandic *Egil Skallagrimson's Saga*, these works are true exchanges of insults between two main characters. They were all written for sophisticated readers and contain a mixture of literary devices such as alliteration and insults involving extremely offensive words. In *Dunbar and Kennedy* we find personal insults such as *Wan fukkit fundling* 'ill-conceived foundling', *cuntbitten crawdon* 'pox-smitten coward', *a schit but wit* 'a despicable person without wit'; according to Hughes (2006: 432), this is the first instance of *shit* with reference to a person. In the second of the works above we find unfriendly suggestions like *kiss the cunt of a cow* and description like *Ay fukkand lyke ane furious Fournicatour* 'and fucking (verb) like a furious fornicator'.

Although flyting of the elevated kind described above was a uniquely Scottish affair, exchanges of insults of a more or less flyting-like kind were also found in the literature south of the border. We find plenty of exchanges of insults of a less refined nature in poems like *Ralph Roister Doister* (c.1552) and *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c.1560) which offer the reader new or almost new invectives like *that dirty bastard, the whoreson dolt, thou shitten knave, What the devil and for God's sake*, expressions that turned out to be extremely useful.

Exchanges of insults of the flyting-like kind are of course not found exclusively in English but seem to be more or less common in all parts of the world. As Crystal (1997: 60) observes, verbal duels have been studied 'in places as far afield as Africa, the Near East, Greenland and the Americas'.

It was not only in flyting that swearing was developed as an art form: the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a development of forms of swearing like the oaths and the curses that may be said to have had an artistic dimension and that reflect a desire on the part of the swearer to deliver a well-designed linguistic product, as for instance in Vanbrugh's plays *The Provoked Wife* and *The Relapse* from 1694.

At roughly the same time as flyting reached its high point in the works we have just discussed, another type of swearing as an art form was created on the other side of the Channel in the works of the remarkable French satirist François Rabelais (1494–1553), in particular the books on Pantagruel and his son Gargantua.

The abundance of swearing and offensive language in general in Rabelais' work is such that to do it justice, entire passages from his works would be needed. Here we will have to be content with a few scattered examples of his swearing skills: *By the virtue of God, The devil snatch me, By Cod's body, By the belly of Sanct James, By a recently killed fox! By a pig's death and a toad's mother!*

As White (1963: 361) explains, Rabelais' work also contains passages explaining what he apparently saw as the main reason for swearing and justifying its inclusion in this section on swearing as an art form. Thus when he is taken to task for his swearing and asked why he makes such copious use of it, one of his characters – Friar John – retorts: 'It is only to grace and adorn my speech. It is the colour of a Ciceronian Rhetoric.'

My final example of swearing as an art form comes from Ukraine, more exactly from the famous *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks* allegedly sent to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Mehmed IV.⁸

According to the legend, the Cossacks of the Zaporozhian Host (from 'beyond the rapids', *za porohamy*) had defeated Ottoman Turkish forces

in battle. This notwithstanding, the sultan is supposed to have sent a letter to the Cossacks demanding that they submit to Turkish rule. As the story goes, the Cossacks replied with a letter full of insults and profanities.

The letter goes like this in English translation:

You, Turkish devil and damned devil's brother and friend, secretary to Lucifer himself. What the devil kind of knight are you, that can't slay a hedgehog with your naked arse? The devil shits, and your army eats. You will not, you son of a bitch, make subjects of Christian sons; we've no fear of your army, by land and by sea we will battle with thee, fuck your mother.

You Babylonian scullion, Macedonian wheelwright, brewer of Jerusalem, goat-fucker of Alexandria, swineherd of Greater and Lesser Egypt, Armenian pig, Podolian villain, catamite of Tartary, hangman of Kamyanets, and fool of all the world and underworld, an idiot before God, grandson of the Serpent, and the crick in our dick. Pig's snout, mare's arse, slaughterhouse cur, unchristened brow, screw your own mother!⁹

3.6 Swearing in the nineteenth century

If – as was claimed earlier – the eighteenth century marked the high point of English swearing, the nineteenth by contrast was in many respects an age of excessive genteelness in which speakers tended to and indeed were taught to abhor all mention of matters that might be regarded as unseemly or vulgar. It was an age which, according to Montagu (1967: 224), saw 'the oppressive spread of a canting hypocritical morality ... enveloping the English-speaking world in the depressing fog of ultrarespectability which came to be known as Victorianism'.

The profound linguistic effects of this development are well known, for example the avoidance of previously unexceptional words like *leg*, *breast* and *trousers*, etc. Swearing in polite society was discontinued or changed beyond recognition; the oaths and curses of the kind cultivated during earlier stages of the language rapidly became unthinkable among respectable members of society, though apparently with the exception of soldiers and sailors (cf. Montagu 1967: 224). The interjections used in previous religious swearing like *Jesus!*, *Christ!* and *God!* were euphemized and hidden behind linguistic peculiarities like *Jiminy Cricket!*, *Jiminy Cricket!*, *Gee Whiskers!*; *Cripes!*, *Crikey!*, *Criminy!*;

Gee!, *Jerusalem!* *God!* became *Gosh!*, *Golly!* or *George!* to mention just a few of the new variants.

It is important to note that the changes described above basically only affected the upper and middle classes and those who aspired to joining them. As Montagu (1967: 237–8) remarks, they ‘left the working classes and the intermittently employed untouched’. For them, and for soldiers and sailors of whatever rank, swearing of the old school remained a much-needed safety valve that allowed them to vent the anger and exasperation resulting from oppression and/or physical danger.

3.7 The four-letter words

The previous sections have traced the development of English swearing from the eleventh and twelfth centuries to the nineteenth. How did it develop in the twentieth century and what is its present status? The story of the development of swearing in the twentieth century is largely the story of the introduction of four-letter words in that activity. This is not to say that other types of swearing have disappeared: after the hiatus created by the reticence of the nineteenth century it is obvious that present-day swearing has reclaimed large portions of earlier religious swearing, provided that such expressions are still regarded as swearing.

Thus exclamations like *Hell!* *Damn!* and *Goddamn!* and their euphemisms continue to be used and so do ‘milder’ interjections like *Christ!*, *Oh my God!* and *Blast!* The first three are almost certainly regarded as swearing by most speakers of the language. The swearing status of the last three depends on one’s definition of swearing: there are those who would deny them membership in the swearing category because they are too lacking in taboo strength. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the view taken here is that taboo strength is not a reasonable criterion for swearing status as it is impossible to indicate where, along the scale of taboo strength, a given expression stops belonging to swearing. However, there is a strong possibility that for many native speakers the taboo strength of the words used is an important factor in decisions about membership in the swearing category (cf. Chapter 1, note 3).

Some of the swearing uses of the four-letter words are not particularly novel. It seems to be a feature of all languages that vernacular words denoting excrement are among the first to be adopted as swear words (cf. Hughes 2006: 432). It does not come as a surprise therefore that the words *shit* and *turd* are the earliest instances of the new kind of swearing in English. According to Cassell, *turd* is first recorded with the literal meaning ‘piece of excrement’ in the eleventh century, and with

metaphorical meaning in the thirteenth-century poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* denoting something worthless in the expression *not give a turd*. As several quotations in the COED indicate, in the seventeenth century *turd* was also used in the antagonistic speech acts referred to in this study as ‘unfriendly suggestions’, for instance in *A turd i’ your teeth!* (COED 1600–39) and *A turd thou wilt!* (COED 1560–99).

Even earlier, however, *turd* had begun to be used as a derogatory term for an unpleasant person, a usage that Cassell places in the mid-fifteenth century. In such cases *turd* counts as a swear word of the epithet kind (cf. Chapter 2).

Shit comes from Old English *scitte* ‘diarrhoea’ and does not seem to have been regarded as particularly offensive until roughly 1500. It was used for instance in the London street name *Shitteborrowlane* in the thirteenth century (Hughes 2006: 312). *Shit* is also used in the poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* in the early metaphorical combination *shit words* (*schit worde*) ‘unfriendly words’. As has already been noted, *shit* is recorded in 1503 as a count noun meaning ‘worthless person’ in the phrase *Thou art a schit but wit* (‘You are a worthless person without wit’) in *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* (cf. p. 64).

The exclamatory use of *shit* as in *Shit!* is of a much later date: according to Cassell’s *Dictionary of Slang* this usage was first recorded as late as the 1920s, although Partridge (1961) considers the exclamatory use to be somewhat earlier.

The *shit*-related word *arse* is first recorded with the literal sense ‘buttocks, anus’ in the fourteenth century (Cassell) and seems to have survived as a neutral descriptive term for the anus well into the eighteenth century. Some time in the second half of that century it became stigmatized and fell into disgrace as being indelicate. Its indelicacy led to another change in the English vocabulary: the word *ass* – up till then the normal term for what is now called *donkey* – was felt to be uncomfortably close to *arse* and was replaced by *donkey*. In his *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* from 1785, Francis Grose explained that ‘a lady who affected to be extremely polite and modest would not say *ass* because it was indecent’. According to Cassell *arse* took on the meaning ‘unpleasant person; fool’ as late as the 1930s, while other sources like Hughes (2006) place the emergence of that meaning to the time of the First World War. The American *ass* had a similar development.

Like *turd*, *arse* turns up in unfriendly suggestions: *kiss my arse* is recorded as early as the seventeenth century: the COED contains the example *he said he would make her kiss his arse* from the period 1640–79, the same period as *a turd in your teeth*. Besides *arse* and *ass*, the

compounds *arsehole* and *asshole* are also used with non-literal meanings to denote an unpleasant and/or stupid person, a meaning they took on in the 1930s.

An account of faecal swearing would not be complete without mention of *fart*, a word first used in writing in the late thirteenth-century poem *Sumer is icumen in* with its literal meaning 'break wind' according to the *OED*. For the better part of its existence *fart* seems to have been only mildly disturbing. In modern – mainly British – English it is used with personal reference in deprecating expressions like *old fart* (which may however also be used as a term of endearment).

Its main use in swearing seems to have occurred earlier. Thus there are quite a few mentions of the noun *fart* with the meaning 'something worthless' in formulaic construction in the *COED* such as *Hee cared not a fart for my Master, I care not a fart for him, He vallued not a fart the Act of Indemnity*, all from mid-seventeenth-century texts. However, the *COED* also contains examples with *fart* in constructions close to modern unfriendly suggestions like *To hell with*, for example in *Fart for the Lacademonians and their Frugality too* and *a fart for all the wanton whores*, both from the late seventeenth century.

As could be expected, the English development of words to do with faecalia is also found in many other languages, in particular their use as interjections in relatively modern times, for example German *Scheisse!*, Swedish *Skit!*, Danish *skidt*, Norwegian *skitt*, French *Merde!*, Italian *Merda!*, Spanish *Mierda!*, Portuguese *Merda!*, and even Japanese *Kuso!* On the other hand the Slavic languages Russian and Polish do not use the words for 'shit' (*govnó/gowno*) as exclamations, preferring instead the word for 'prostitute' *Kurva!/Kurwa!*

The taboo words for the sexual organs have served as a prolific source for swearing expressions of the epithet kind. English *cock*, *dick*, *prick* are all used with the literal meaning 'penis' but at different times: *cock* and *prick* date from the mid-sixteenth century while *dick* only goes back to the nineteenth century. There is no record of *cock* with the meaning 'fool', 'disagreeable man', but as from the 1970s onwards the term *cock-head* fills that gap in American and Australian English. *Dick* may be used about an incompetent man although *dickhead* is more common. Both are chiefly American. *Prick* began to be used with the meaning 'fool' in American English in the 1920s.

The English terms *balls* and *bollocks* with the meaning 'testicles' date from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively. *Balls!* is first recorded as an exclamation of irritation in the late nineteenth century (Cassell 2005). According to the same source, *bollocks* (*bollox*, *ballocks*) was

first used as a derogatory term for people in the early twentieth century and later on also took on affectionate meaning as in *old bollocks*.

The best-known and most common female term corresponding to the male *cock*, *dick* and *prick* is *cunt* 'vagina', one of the most taboo-laden words in the English language (some English speakers would reserve that description for *motherfucker* and *cocksucker*). *Cunt* 'vagina' started out as a fairly neutral term: according to the *OED* it is first recorded around 1230 as part of the London street name *Gropecuntlane*, a name that Cassell (2005: 367) describes as 'vulgar but descriptive rather than obscene'. Its relative absence of taboo is also indicated by its occurrence in medical texts in the late fourteenth century apparently without any connotations of vulgarity; admittedly, though, its mention in the form of *queynte* in *The Miller's Tale* in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is no doubt intended to suggest vulgarity.

According to Cassell (2005), *cunt* was used about persons as early as the eighteenth century, viz. as a derogatory term for a woman. Its use as a general term of abuse meaning 'fool', 'unpleasant person' with reference to either sex, is a recent phenomenon dating from the year 2000 in the opinion of Cassell (2005). Others like *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* place it in the early twentieth century.

From 1970 on, *cunt* began to be used in American English in the unlikely combination *cunthead* 'fool'. *Twat* 'vagina' is first recorded in the mid-seventeenth century in Cassell, which also describes it as a twentieth-century derogatory term for a woman and also, from 2000 on, as 'a neutral term for a person'. According to Cassell there is also the word *twunt* from *twat* + *cunt* first recorded in the 1990s with the meaning 'despicable, unpleasant person'.

Unlike the scatological words, the words for the sexual organs are less evenly distributed across the languages in this study. Among the Nordic languages, Swedish uses the taboo terms for both female and male sex organs derogatorily about people and at least the female term as an expletive interjection, but Danish and Norwegian do not.

German uses the female term *Fotze* in swearing but not the male term *Schwanz* (although the thinly disguised *Schlappschwanz* is perfectly acceptable), Italian uses the male but not the female term in swearing chiefly as an exclamation of irritation (*Cazzo!*) and Polish and Russian use both. Dutch uses the word for 'cunt', viz. *kut* and the word for testicle – *klootzak* – in swearing, but apparently not the words corresponding to English *cock*, *dick*, *prick*. Spanish uses both female *coño* and male *carajo* as epithets.

No account of the English four-letter words would be complete without mentioning the most successful of them all, viz. *fuck*. In fact the development of *fuck* and its derivatives in the late twentieth century is a success story of almost unlikely proportions.

In comparison with many of the other English four-letter words, *fuck* is a relatively recent arrival. It turns up around 1500 with the meaning 'have sexual intercourse', supplanting the earlier terms *sard* and *swive*.¹⁰ The exact origins of *fuck* are not known, but it is generally assumed to be related to words with similar meanings in other Germanic languages such as Danish *fukke*, Middle Dutch *fokken*, German *ficken*, Norwegian *fukka* and Swedish *focka*, all connected with meanings like 'strike', 'push' and 'copulate' and by extension 'have sex'. For more information about the etymology of *fuck*, compare for instance, the *OED* and other large dictionaries, Hughes (2006: 188ff.) and Sheidlower (1999: xi–xviii) to mention just a few of the many sources of information that are available.

Basically, *fuck* has three incarnations: *fuck*, *fucker* and *fuckin*g. It also occurs in numerous compounds used as epithets like *fuckarse*, *fuckbag*, *fuckbrain*, *fuckface*, *fuckhead*, *fuckwad*, *fuckwit*, some of which are discussed in Chapter 6.

As noted above, the simple form *fuck* appears as a verb meaning 'copulate' around the year 1500. The first recorded instance of *fuck* as a swear word is in the interjection *Fuck!* in evidence as early as the seventeenth century. After that, we have to wait until the early twentieth century for the next instances of swearing with the verb *fuck* to appear. Thus in the 1920s it is used in curses like *Fuck + object* (*Oh, fuck the consequences!*) and in the 1930s in *Fuck you!*

In roughly the same period the verb *fuck* turns up with its literal meaning in ritual insults like *Fuck your mother!* in American English (cf. Chapter 6).

The noun *fuck* 'a jot', 'a goddamn' is used in negative sentences like *I don't give a fuck*. According to Sheidlower (1999: 108), an instance of this usage is recorded as early as 1790. The noun *fuck* is also used in swearing as an epithet meaning 'despicable person', a meaning first recorded in 1927.¹¹

The form *fuckin*g has a number of uses – as adjective, adverb and in infixation – which are discussed in Chapter 7. According to Sheidlower (1999: 169), there is a recorded instance of the adjective *fuckin*g from 1857 in which the word has been replaced with seven asterisks. The actual quote is 'Hush, you bloody ***** b-ch, will you take the Name of the Lord in vain on the Sabbath day?' (from *Suppressed Book about Slavery* 1857: 211).

The first recorded mention of the adverb *fucking* in writing is in fact from a dictionary, viz. Farmer and Henley's *Slang and its Analogues* III: 80 from 1890 to 1893 which has the entry 'Fucking: Adv. (common) Intensive and expletive; a more violent form of *bloody*'.

As regards infixed *fucking*, Sheidlower (1999: 172) relates an anecdote from 1921 in *Notes and Queries* (Nov. 19: 415) which does not really mention the offensive word in full. It describes the language used by English soldiers in the First World War and goes like this: 'The soldier's actual speech was absolutely impregnated with one word which (to use it as the basis of alliteration) the fastidious frown at as "filthy". Words were split up to admit it: *absolutely* became "abso-lutely" and Armentières became "Armen-teers".'

As for the other languages included in the present study, they all possess verbs with the literal meaning 'fuck'. However, the use of these verbs in swearing, as that activity has been defined here, is considerably more limited.

In the Germanic languages the 'fuck verbs' are basically not used in swearing, with the curious exception of Danish and Norwegian, where *pule* 'fuck' is used in the participial forms *forpulede/forpulet* to express speaker dislike or high degree of something as in Danish *Et forpulet perfekt liv!* 'A bloody perfect life', *Forpulet smart!* 'Damned smart', and Norwegian *Dit forpulte ludder* 'You fucking tart', *Forpult vakkert!* 'Goddamned pretty'.

The verbs corresponding to *fuck* are used in swearing in all the Romance languages. Probably the most common of use these is as interjections like French *Foutre!*, Portuguese *Fodal!*, Spanish *Joder!* all meaning 'Bloody hell!', 'Goddamn it!' etc. In addition, all the Romance languages may use the past participles of the verbs meaning 'fuck' as adjectives of dislike and intensifiers but in competition with other constructions (cf. Chapter 7). The 'fuck' verbs are also common in ritual insults such as French *Nique ta mere!*, Spanish *Joda a tu madre* both 'Fuck your mother!' and Portuguese *Comi tua mae* 'I have fucked your mother' and also in expressions meaning 'Go fuck yourself!' like Italian *Vaffanculo!* etc.

Russian is unique – not only among the Slavic languages but overall – in being able to use verbs meaning 'fuck' as a replacive verb (cf. Chapter 8) capable of taking on a more or less unlimited number of other verb meanings. To a lesser extent this is also true of Polish.

Neither Russian nor Polish seem to use their 'fuck' verbs in interjections like Romance *Foutre!*, *Joder!* etc. However, Polish and Russian both insert these verbs with their literal meaning in insults involving sex

with the addressee's mother, sister, grandmother, etc., in particular in the Russian expression *Yob tvojú mát'* 'Somebody fucked your mother'. Polish uses derived forms of the verb *pierprzyc* 'fuck' corresponding to English *bloody*, *fucking*, etc. as in *Pieprzniety idiota!* 'Fucking idiot!', while Russian prefers other constructions (cf. Chapter 7).

4

Expletive Interjections

4.0 Defining expletive interjections

In many languages there seems to be general agreement among the speakers that the most typical exponents of swearing are exclamations of irritation, pain or surprise containing *expletives*. When, for instance, speakers of British English are asked to provide typical instances of swearing, the first examples they come up with tend to be exclamations like *Fuck!*, *Shit!*, *Damn!*, *Bugger!*, *Bloody hell!*, *Fucking hell!* Given time, they may also come up with less forceful expressions like *God!*, *Gosh!* and *Crikey!*, possibly together with a few fossilized clausal structures like *I'll be damned!*, *I'll be buggered!* and *Shiver my timbers!*

When the same question is put to speakers of other languages they respond in similar fashion, providing examples of swearing like those in Table 4.1.

The examples of swearing above are usually described as 'exclamations', a term also used about such utterances in dictionaries. Dictionaries find the term 'exclamation' very useful when they need to distinguish between homophonous words with different functions, for example the noun *fuck* and the verb *fuck* on the one hand, and the same word used to give vent to the speaker's feelings of anger, contempt, surprise, etc. on the other, that is as an exclamation.

The dictionaries also offer a definition of the word *exclamation* itself: according to the *ODE* for example, it is 'a sudden cry or remark expressing surprise, strong emotion or pain'. Although it is easy to understand the usefulness of such a distinction in dictionaries, it is less easy to see in what way it can enlighten us about the characteristics of the utterances.

In Table 4.1, in fact, given the explanations that have been offered above it would seem that practically any utterance can be an exclamation.

Table 4.1 Swearing exclamations in 25 languages

Arabic: <i>Khara!</i> ('Shit'), <i>Wa-'izzat Allah!</i> ('By the honour of Allah')
Canadian French: <i>Calice!</i> ('Chalice'), <i>Criss!</i> ('Christ'), <i>Osti de criss de tabarnac!</i> ('Christ's Holy Bread in the tabernacle')
Cantonese: <i>Nēih lóuh móuh!</i> ('Fuck your mother'), <i>Pūk-gāai!</i> ('Fuck/Shit!')
Danish: <i>Fandens!</i> , <i>Satans!</i> ('devil'), <i>Pokkers!</i> ('pox')
Dutch: <i>Godverdomme!</i> ('God damn'), <i>God klere!</i> ('God cholera')
Estonian: <i>Kurat!</i> ('Devil'), <i>Kuradi munn!</i> ('Devil's prick'), <i>Mine põrgu!</i> ('Go to hell')
Finnish: <i>Saatana!</i> , <i>Perkele!</i> ('devil'), <i>Vittujen kevät!</i> ('spring of cunts')
French: <i>Foutre!</i> (fuck), <i>Putain!</i> (tart), <i>Merde alors!</i> (shit)
German: <i>Scheisse!</i> (Shit), <i>Verdammte Scheisse!</i> , <i>Verdammt!</i> (Damn)
Greek: <i>Skatá!</i> (shit), <i>Jamó ho!</i> (Fuck!), <i>Hyses!</i> (Disbelief)
Hindi: <i>Madar chod!</i> ('Motherfucker'), <i>Khuti ka bacha!</i> (Son of a dog')
Hungarian: <i>Picsa!</i> (cunt), <i>Fene!</i> (dick), <i>Kurva!</i> (tart)
Icelandic: <i>Djöfullin!</i> (devils), <i>Djöfullis anskoti!</i> (devil's devils)
Italian: <i>Cazzo!</i> (dick), <i>Puttana!</i> (tart), <i>Porca Madonna!</i> (pig of a madonna)
Japanese: ¹ <i>Kuso!</i> ('shit'), <i>Baka!</i> ('Idiot'), <i>Chiku shoo!</i> ('Beast')
Mandarin: <i>Mā-de-bī!</i> , <i>Tā-mā-de!</i> (bāda: 'Your/his mother's')
Norwegian: <i>Fan!</i> (devil), <i>Helvete!</i> (Hell), <i>Skitt!</i> (shit)
Portuguese: <i>Merda!</i> (Shit), <i>Caralho!</i> (prick), <i>Porra!</i> (sperm)
Polish: <i>Kurwa!</i> (tart), <i>Pizda!</i> (cunt), <i>Sukinsyn!</i> ('son of a bitch')
Russian: <i>Pizdá!</i> (cunt), <i>Bljad!</i> (tart), <i>Yob tvojú mát!</i> ('Somebody fucked your mother')
Spanish: <i>Coño!</i> (cunt), <i>Joder!</i> (fuck), <i>Me cago en Dios!</i> ('I crap on God')
Swahili: <i>Mungu wangu!</i> ('My God!'), <i>Mungu wangu wee!</i> ('God God')
Swedish: <i>Fan!</i> (devil), <i>Helvete!</i> (hell), <i>Skit</i> (shit)
Turkish: <i>Ananın ami!</i> (Your mother's cunt = Disbelief), <i>Dasak</i> (Bollocks)
Urdu: <i>Madar chod</i> ('Motherfucker')

I tested this hypothesis by running a search in the written component of the BNC, looking up examples of direct speech preceding *he/she exclaimed*. The search yielded the results displayed in Table 4.2.

Apart from the one common factor that the exclamations in Table 4.2 are all different ways for the speakers to express their feelings, the entries in that table are a mixed lot. Among the eight entries we find (a) a single adjective, (b) a declarative clause, (c) the name of religious being, (d) and (e) different types of questions, (f) a noun phrase, (g) a member of the word class of interjections, and (h) a declarative clause predicting a future event.

Table 4.2 Utterances preceding *he/she exclaimed* in the BNC

-
- (a) 'Splendid!' she exclaimed (ABW 2134)
 - (b) 'It isn't fair!' she exclaimed (AC2 1707)
 - (c) 'Christ Almighty!' he exclaimed (ANL 180)
 - (d) 'After that storm?' she exclaimed (FR0 1447)
 - (e) 'What?' she exclaimed (GOL 2795)
 - (f) 'Traviata' he exclaimed (HTR 3240)
 - (g) 'Ha!' he exclaimed (FEP 1136)
 - (h) 'Well I'll be jiggered' he exclaimed (AOD 449)
-

These results confirm the correctness of my hypothesis that practically any utterance may be an exclamation. What matters is obviously not the syntactic or other nature of the utterances, but merely the manner in which they are delivered, which should be one reflecting the speaker's state of mind. Their meaning can only be explained in terms of the communicative situation in which they are uttered: they are, as Quirk et al. (1985: section 2.58) put it, 'pragmatic utterances with speaker-directed communicative functions'.

Clearly such a definition of the utterances in Table 4.1 is neither satisfactory nor sufficient. It fails to observe certain common characteristics of these utterances, for instance that in addition to being emotive, most of them consist of a single taboo word and that those containing more than one word do not make up full clauses with the expected syntactic structure.

A more promising category in which to place the utterances in Table 4.1 is that of *interjections*, a type of words whose members are often described as being 'emotive' and not entering into syntactic relations (Quirk et al. 1985: 11.55).

The definitions of interjections have varied over the years, but they all have certain key features in common. They are often regarded as a word class or part of speech, for instance in Quirk et al. (1985) where they are listed among the word classes in section 2.34, albeit as a 'marginal and anomalous class', of which certain members are later on (section 2.58 Note) referred to as 'quasi-linguistic noises'. Interestingly enough, however, and despite the alleged word-class status of the interjections, Quirk et al. acknowledge in the same note that 'statements and questions, too, can occur as interjections'.²

The quasi-linguistic noises referred to are a number of phonologically deviant forms some of which exhibit peculiarities in the relation between spelling and pronunciation, for instance *tsktsk*, *tut-tut*, *sh* and *ugh*, although the class as such also includes phonologically regular

forms like *Ah!*, *Aha!*, *Mm!*, *Oh!*, *Ouch!* and *Wow!* In Quirk et al. (1985), expletives are not admitted to the class of interjections, but some of them are mentioned under 'Formulae' in section 11.54.

A few years after the publication of Quirk et al., Wilkins suggested the following definition for the interjection:

a conventional lexical form which (commonly and) conventionally constitutes an utterance of its own, (typically) does not enter into constructions with other word classes, is (usually) monomorphemic, and (generally) does not host inflectional or derivational morphemes. (Wilkins 1992: 124)

Wilkins's definition has the merit of underlining the conventional nature of interjections but may be criticized both for suggesting that interjections are single lexical forms ('a conventional lexical form') and for omitting all mention of their emotional or expressive nature. These shortcomings are made up for in the treatment of interjections in two influential grammars of English published in 2002 and 2006. The grammars in question are Huddleston and Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002) and Carter and McCarthy, *The Cambridge Grammar of English* (2006).

The first of these defines the interjections as 'a category of words that do not combine with other words in integrated syntactic constructions, and have expressive rather than propositional meaning' (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1361). The category is furthermore claimed to possess central members like *ah*, *hey*, *oops*, *ouch*, *sh*, *wow* 'which in their sole or primary meaning are used as expressive exclamations, on their own, or as supplements with clausal anchors ...'.

Huddleston and Pullum open up for the inclusion of certain types of swearing in the interjections category, saying that 'There are also a number of words such as *blast*, *bugger*, *damn*, *fuck* which are primarily verbs, but which in supplements like ... *Damn, we've missed the bus again* ... are best regarded as having been reanalysed as interjections.' It should be noted, however, that Huddleston and Pullum apparently regard the interjections as a word class ('category of words'). It follows that, in their opinion, an interjection is a single word.

I turn now to Carter and McCarthy (2006). An interesting feature of their definition of 'interjection' is that it is regarded as a category of *utterances* rather than a word class and 'normally refers to exclamative utterances consisting of single words that do not fit easily into the major word classes ...'.

Carter and McCarthy's examples of interjections include *bother*, *crikey*, *damn*, *heavens*, *hooray*, *jeez*, *ouch*, *ugh*, *wow* and *yuk*, all of which are described as expressing 'positive or negative emotional reactions to what is being or has just been said or to something in the situation' (2006: 224). As the examples above indicate, Carter and McCarthy are no strangers to the idea that swearing should be included among the interjections and further emphasize the link between interjections and swearing with the remark: 'Swearing often takes the form of interjections. This can involve single words, or short phrases or clauses that are used to express a variety of strong feelings, in particular annoyance, frustration and anger' (2006: 226), a remark that also highlights their view that interjections do not have to be single words.

A recent treatment of interjections of interest to the present study is that found in Gehweiler (2008), in which the main concern of the author is to explain the emergence of the late expletive interjections *geel*, *jeeze!*, *gosh!* and *crikey!*, which she claims evolved via the earlier interjections *Jesus!*, *God!* and *Christ!*, interjections which in their turn go back to the earlier use of the proper names *Jesus*, *Christ* and *God* in religious invocations and prayers (2008: 69).

Gehweiler (2008: 71) adopts Wilkins's (1992) definition of the interjection as a word class with certain distinct properties (see above). In addition she regards this word class as a continuum with a base made up of prototypical interjections, many of which are phonologically and sometimes graphically deviant, and which are furthermore 'lexically opaque', viz. have no homonyms in other word classes.

However, she goes on to point out that there are also interjections which do have homonyms in other word classes and suggests that the difference between these two classes of interjections can be described in terms of the distinction between primary and secondary interjections. The primary or prototypical interjections have no homonyms in other word classes while the secondary interjections do. As she points out, this homonym-based distinction between the two main subclasses of interjections has also been suggested earlier, for instance in Jespersen (1924) and Ameka (1992).

Even if both Gehweiler and Jespersen base their classifications on the absence or presence of homonymy, Jespersen does not use the labels 'primary' and 'secondary' interjections, but speaks of 'words which are never used otherwise' (viz. than as interjections) and 'words from the ordinary language', a category from which he offers examples like *Well!*, *Why!*, *Fiddlesticks!*, *Nonsense!*, *Come!*, among which *Fiddlesticks!* is a 'general expletive' from the seventeenth century according to *Cassell*.

The focus of Gehweiler's article is on expletives. She regards expletives like *Jesus!*, *oh my God!*, *Crikey!*, *gee!*, *gosh!*, *shit!* and *fuck!* as a 'subclass of the word-class interjections' (2008: 71). In her description, the first and the last two of the examples just mentioned are members of the category of secondary interjections known as *taboo expletives* and have homonyms like the proper names *Jesus*, *God*, *Christ* and the non-names *shit* and *fuck*. The homonyms are viewed as the lexical base of the taboo expletives and serve to establish a connection between them and certain taboo areas, but the meaning of the expletives 'does not include the meaning of their lexical base' (2008: 72).

Unlike the taboo expletives *Jesus!*, *oh my God!*, *shit!* and *fuck!*, the examples *Crikey!*, *gee!* and *gosh!* have no homonyms: it is for instance not possible to say for example **I believe in gosh* or **This painting represents crikey on the cross* (cf. Stroh-Wollin 2008: 27).³ In Gehweiler's opinion, the members of this group have been moderated to such a degree that they are no longer 'visibly connected with the taboo expletives they are derived from' (2008: 71) and are therefore called *moderated expletives*.

Gehweiler also recognizes a third subgroup of expletives whose members do have homonyms which, however, are not their base forms but are euphemistic words with perfectly harmless meanings whose phonological shape is close enough to a taboo word to serve as a 'substitute expletive', making it possible for a speaker to 'almost swear' without quite doing so. These expletives – named *euphemistic taboo expletives* – have homonyms chiefly among the nouns, but the homonyms are semantically unrelated to the real taboo expletives and have been chosen merely on the grounds of phonological similarity to a taboo word, as for example in English *Goodness!* and *Heck!* understood as *God!* and *Hell!*, and German *Scheibenkleister!* (literally 'windowpane paste') which is a veiled reference to the real expletive *Scheisse!* ('shit').

The phenomenon of euphemistic taboo expletives is widespread across languages. Other examples of the same phenomenon in my data are American English *Son of a gun!* for *Son of a bitch!*, English *Copulating inferno!* for *Bloody hell!*, French *Mortbleu!* ('death of blue') for *Mort Dieu!* ('God's death'), *Sangbleu!* ('blood of blue') for *Sang (de) Dieu!* ('God's blood'), *Nom de nom!* ('name of a name') and *Nom d'un chien!* ('name of a dog') for *Nom de Dieu!* ('God's name'), German *Verflucht (nochmal)!* ('forsworn') for *Verdammt (nochmal)!* ('Damn!'), Italian *Cavolo!* ('cabbage') for *Cazzo!* ('dick'), Portuguese *fogo!* ('fire') for *fodo!* ('fuck'), Russian *Yaponski bog!* ('Japanese god') for *Yob tvojú mat!* (usually translated as 'fuck your mother'), Spanish *Caramba!* for *Carajo!* ('dick'), Swedish *Gästrikland!* (name of a province) for *Jävlar!* ('devils').

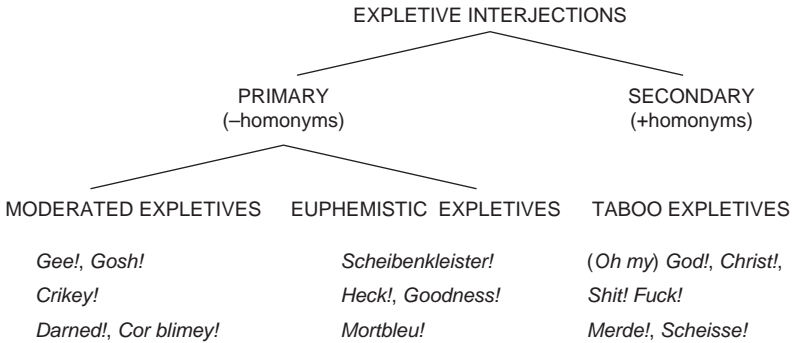


Figure 4.1 Gehweiler's classification of the expletive interjections

Gehweiler's classification of the expletive interjections can be described as in the tree diagram in Figure 4.1.

Gehweiler's approach to the categorization of expletive interjections has much to recommend it. It also has a problem, however, viz. its dependence on the notion of homonymy in distinguishing between the different subcategories of expletive interjections. Regardless of whether we define homonyms as homographs or homophones, homonymy is a concept that applies only to single words (cf. e.g. McArthur 1992: 483). This creates difficulties when we try to apply Gehweiler's analysis to expletives that are multi-word strings such as *oh my God!*, *good grief*, *goodness gracious*, *great scott*, which are her own examples, and others like for example *bloody hell!*, *Christ almighty!*, *fucking hell!*, *Jesus fucking Christ!*

It may seem that a natural way of coming to terms with this problem would be to argue that interjections may consist of more than a single word and that such multi-word interjections all contain a headword for which we may or may not find a homonym 'in other word classes'. On such an analysis, *Oh my God!*, and *Bloody hell!* would be analysed as *Oh* + possessive pronoun + Nounhead and Adjectival modifier + Nounhead, respectively. Since the headwords *God* and *hell* have homonyms in the word class Noun, it could be argued that we have proof that the entire expletive expressions *Oh my God!* and *Bloody hell!* should be regarded as secondary expletive interjections.

But such an analysis of the multi-word items among the expletive interjections goes counter to the *formulaic* nature of multi-word strings used in swearing. If a string is formulaic it is no longer possible to wrench loose single words like *God* and *hell* as suggested above, since *Oh my God!* and *Bloody hell!* are no longer compositional syntactic units

(cf. also e.g. Biber et al. 1999: 3.5.7) but are unanalysable lexical units. This means that we find ourselves back at square one, viz. we are dealing with lexical items that cannot be assigned to any of the word classes.

In my opinion, the solution to the problems we have just been discussing is to withdraw from the claim that the interjections are a word class, and to return to the approach taken in Carter and McCarthy (2006) discussed earlier in this chapter in which 'the term interjection normally refers to exclamative *utterances*'.

How common then are these multi-word expletive interjections in English? Carter and McCarthy apparently are of the opinion that they are less common than the interjections consisting of single words (cf. Carter and McCarthy 2006: 224). However this does not tally with the statistics given in Table 4.3 from a study of ten expletive interjections in a 1-million-word corpus based on the spoken component of the BNC involving the ten taboo words *bugger*, *Christ*, *cor*, *damn*, *fuck*, *God*, *gosh*, *hell*, *Jesus* and *shit*.

In Table 4.3 only the interjectional uses of the words have been included, and in the case of *God*, *Jesus* and *Christ* all utterances actually addressing or referring to God, Christ and Jesus in prayers, sermons, etc. have been omitted. The entries in the table have been organized in accordance with the proportion of single uses for each word expressed as percentages of the total number of interjectional occurrences for the word in question: the interjection *Cor!*, which tops the list, occurs as a single word in 90.2 per cent of all its occurrences, while *Hell!* – at the bottom of the list – is single in only one of its 121 occurrences, that is in 0.8 per cent of its interjectional uses.

Table 4.3 Combining habits of 10 common English taboo words in interjections⁴

<i>Taboo words</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>Combined</i>	<i>Total</i>
Cor	74 90.2%	8 9.8%	82
Gosh	20 62.5%	12 37.5%	32
Damn	2 50%	2 50%	4
Christ	14 45.2%	16 54.8%	30
Shit	8 44.4%	10 55.6%	18
Jesus	7 36.8%	12 63.2%	19
Fuck	4 33.3%	8 66.7%	12
God	109 19.36%	454 80.6%	563
Bugger	1 6.66%	14 93.3%	15
Hell	1 0.69%	144 99.3%	145
Total	240 26%	680 74%	920 100%

Now if we take a look at the total distribution of single vs combined interjectional uses of the taboo words above, it is clear that, contrary to the predictions of Carter and McCarthy, the overwhelming majority of the taboo words prefer to be in the company of other words when used as interjectional utterances. Only two of the words – *cor* and *gosh* – are more common on their own than in the company of other words.

These findings do not necessarily mean that Carter and McCarthy's suggestion is wrong. What they may mean is that the expletive interjections may be different from other English interjections in preferring representation by means of multiple word utterances. It is also possible that the data in Conv1M are too limited; after all, the spoken texts on which the statistics in Table 4.3 are based represent a mere 10 per cent of the 10-million-word corpus making up the spoken component of the BNC.

English is by no means alone in using expletive interjections consisting of several words. Other languages have their fair share of expletive multi-word constructions; compare for instance the following interjections with their literal translations: Arabic *Wa-'izzat Allah!* ('By the honour of God'), Estonian *Kuradi munn!* ('devil's dick'), Finnish *Vittujen kevät!* ('the cunts' spring'), French *Putain de bordel de merde!* ('tart of a shit brothel') [*borde* also 'mess', 'cock-up'], German *Verdammt nochmal!* ('Damned again'), Hindi *Madar chod!* ('mother-fucker'), Icelandic *Djöfullis anskotti!* ('Devil's devil'), Italian *Porco diavolo!* ('swine of a devil'), *Porca madonna!* '(that) swine of a Madonna', Mandarin *Ta ma de!* ('your mother's'), Polish *Psa krew!* ('dog's blood'), Portuguese *Putá merda!* ('shit whore'), Spanish *Qué puta mierda!* ('Shit whore'), Swedish *Jävlar i helvete!* ('Devils in hell'), Turkish *Pich oglu pich!* ('son of a bitch').

As certain of the examples above indicate, the category of expletive interjections attracts expressions from other categories of swearing whose primary function is not merely to express the speaker's feelings. Thus for instance, several of the examples above contain compound words whose literal meaning is 'son of a bitch' or even 'son of a whore', expressions that are first and foremost associated with name-calling and insulting. In this their original capacity, the words in question are always used antagonistically and involve a verbal attack on an addressee. However, once they have been attracted to the category of expletive interjections they become vehicles for the speaker's own feelings of irritation and/or surprise, as in American English *Son of a bitch!*, Hindi *Madarchod!*, Turkish *Pich uglo pich!* and Russian *Sukinsyn!*

The discussion of interjections above has, I think, added considerable weight to the notion that interjections should not be regarded as a word class. The final blow to that idea – should one be needed – is the existence of interjections taking the form of clauses, such as the well-known English examples *I'll be damned!*, *I'll be buggered!*

English is not alone in using interjectional clauses of this type. Several other languages in my data have self-curses corresponding to *I'll be damned/buggered*. In Swedish and German, for instance, both sudden surprise and a negative attitude to a following clause may be expressed by *Ta mig fan!* and *Hol mich der Teufel!*, both meaning 'The devil take me!' When these clausal constructions are used before a following clause as in (1)

(1) I'll be damned if I set up in Northallerton. (BNC K51 608)

they possess an inherent logic: presumably there is an underlying construction like 'I will rather go to hell than set up in Northallerton'. We may speculate that when used on their own as in (2)

(2) I'll be damned! (BNC H94 3263)

they were once part of a similar conditional construction, along the lines of 'I'll be damned if I ever saw anything like this'. However there is no reason to believe that this is the correct interpretation of example (2). What has happened in such cases is that what once was a clause has developed into a formula exactly parallel to single-word interjections like *Damn!*, *Fuck!* and *Shit!*, phrases like *Bloody hell!*, *God damn!*, *Son of a bitch!* The same process of interjectionalization has given us Cantonese *Puk gāai!* ('Fall down in the street'), Mandarin *Ta ma de!* ('Your mother's'), Russian *Yob tvojú mat'* ('Somebody fucked your mother').

4.1 A functional analysis of the interjections

Expletive interjections are often thought to reflect the speaker's reactions to certain situations. Perhaps the type of situation that first comes to mind is that involving speakers who are exposed to some sudden and unexpected accident involving the exterior world, like stubbing a toe, dropping a glass, breaking a window or some other situation that may elicit reactions in the form of outbursts of anger and irritation. These outbursts often take the form of interjections which will be referred to here as 'reactive (expletive) interjections'.

It is often thought that all or most interjections used in swearing are reactive. Compare for example Crystal (1997: 61), where the author sums up his views on swearing in the following way: 'The functions of swearing are complex. Most obviously, it is an outlet for frustration and pent-up emotion and a means of releasing nervous energy after a sudden shock.'

In this study I will argue that Crystal exaggerates the importance of the reactive type of expletive interjections by means of results obtained in a previous study (Ljung 2009). I will show that there is reason to believe that the reactive interjections in English are less common than those serving different types of pragmatic functions, which will be called *pragmatic (expletive) interjections*.

4.1.1 Reactive expletive interjections

A linguist interested in the use of spoken language may organize her/his research in basically two ways, viz. by participant observation and by analysis of recorded spoken data. Among the few examples of participant observation in the area of English swearing that exist, mention should be made of Ross (1960). Ross, herself a psychologist, took part in a scientific British expedition to Norway, the main purpose of which was zoological. The nature of the expedition and its location in the mountains of Arctic Norway promised to expose the participants to an unusual degree and number of hardships. Assuming that these conditions would be highly conducive to the use of swearing of different kinds, Ross availed herself of this opportunity to record the frequency and types of swearing produced by the other members of the group. Her findings were reported in an article in the British journal *Discovery*.⁵

Corpus-based studies of spoken language differ from participant observation in several ways. The obvious advantage of such an approach is the number of observations that can be made: the corpus analyst has access to a much greater range of data than what is practically possible for the participant observer. The downside of corpus studies is the lack of information about the social settings in which the speakers produce their utterances and which is often readily available to an actual observer *in situ*.

Nowhere is this difference more noticeable than in the study of interjections, in particular the reactive interjections (RIs). Although the range of stimuli that may release RIs is impossible to predict and may furthermore be situated in the mind rather than in the outside world, many of the releasing factors are observable events such as

finger-cutting, toe-stubbing, etc., readily available to the participant observer, but obviously not to those working with a corpus, who are reduced to more or less ingenious guesses about what is going on.

However, in spite of these difficulties inherent in corpus research, a case can still be made for studying interjections on the basis of corpus data. In the following paragraphs I will present the results of such a study based on a 1-million-word corpus drawn from the spoken component of the British National Corpus (BNC).

The study revealed that we sometimes do get information regarding actual speech situations in the BNC, as for instance in examples (3) and (4) below:

(3) < crash as kid falls over > *Oh my god.* (KB6347)

(4) Again, this is <knocking on the wall> it's the same as this. *Shit!*

Oh my god in (3) is a reactive expletive interjection triggered by the child falling over. *Shit* in (4) may be interpreted as signalling the speaker's disappointment when s/he finds out that the material the wall was made of did not live up to her expectations in one way or another.

However, clear indications about what is going on such as < crash as kid falls over > and <knocking on the wall> are absent most of the time and we are reduced to looking for clues in the immediate context of the utterance as for instance in the case of example (5):

(5) A: I'll have the yellow ones.

B: The yellow ones?

A: Just <pause> *Oh bloody hell!*

B: The yellow ones were thrown.

A: What do I do? (KB7 4705–9)

I suggest that in (5) A had counted on finding something in her/his cupboard. S/he discovers that whatever s/he was looking for is no longer there and expresses her/his disappointment by exclaiming *Oh bloody hell!*, a clear case of a reactive expletive interjection.

Working along these lines, I was able to estimate the number of reactive expletive interjections in my 1 million-word corpus at around 92. Since the total number of expletive interjections in the corpus was 513, it is clear that – far from being in the majority – the reactive expletive interjections make up less than one-fifth of the total number of expletive interjections in the corpus in question. This means that the remaining 421 interjections are in all probability pragmatic.

4.1.2 The pragmatic expletive interjections

In the analysis of the reactive expletive interjections no attempt was made to assign different meanings to the individual interjections. There are good reasons for that, above all the fact that reactive interjections do not have meanings in the established sense of the term. It is true that one and the same interjection may on different occasions express different feelings like irritation, protest, surprise, joy, to mention just a few. However, it is probably the case that all reactive interjections are prompted by a mixture of these feelings and there is usually no way for an outside observer to determine which of these feelings has the upper hand in each specific case. In addition it is, in most cases, not possible to draw any conclusions about the nature of the feelings expressed from the particular vocabulary that the speaker selects, since most of the individual interjections are not linked to particular feelings but may be used to express all of them.

With the non-reactive interjections matters are different. I will argue here that interjections of this kind are used as *pragmatic markers* (a category also known as *pragmatic particles*, *discourse markers* and *discourse particles*) which have attracted the interest of a great many linguists like for instance Aijmer (2002), Aijmer and Stenström (2004), Andersen (2001), Erman (2001), Erman and Warren (2000), Fraser (1996), to mention just a few. What then are the pragmatic markers? According to an influential early definition from Brinton (1996: 33) they have the following characteristics:

Pragmatic markers (1) constitute a heterogeneous set of forms which are difficult to place within a traditional word class (including items like *ah*, *actually*, *I mean*, *I think*, *you know*), (2) are predominantly a feature of spoken rather than written language, (3) are high-frequency items, (4) are stylistically stigmatized and negatively evaluated, (5) have little or no propositional meaning or are at least difficult to specify lexically, (6) occur either outside the syntactic structure or are attached to it and have no clear grammatical function, (7) are optional rather than obligatory features, (8) may be multifunctional operating on different levels (including textual and interpersonal levels).

It appears that the non-reactive expletive interjections meet all of these criteria: they are definitely a heterogeneous group whose word class membership is often impossible to establish; they are definitely a feature of the spoken language and have high frequencies of occurrence;

they are definitely stigmatized and negatively evaluated; they have little or no propositional meaning; they are optional rather than obligatory, and they tend to be multifunctional on different levels.

Brinton does not have much to say about the functions of the pragmatic markers. Later studies have been more explicit and distinguish between three main types of functions carried out by the pragmatic markers, viz. *subjectivity*, *textuality* and *interactivity*. Individual pragmatic markers are typically associated with one of these functions but are usually also connected with the others: pragmatic markers are *multifunctional*.

Before going on let us briefly define the three main functions of pragmatic markers. Subjectivity is a cover name for a number of speaker-related functions, in particular those conveying the speaker's *attitude* to (the proposition underlying) the following utterance and those expressing the speaker's *epistemic stance* towards that proposition, viz. whether s/he regards the proposition as true or not. As the criterion of multifunctionality predicts, attitude and epistemic stance seem to be intertwined in most pragmatic markers. Often one of them is dominant, however, and example (6) is an instance of such multifunctionality:

(6) *Cor* that was a proper macho man! (KBL 2438)

In my opinion, the mild interjection *Cor* in (6) may be used both to express the speaker's epistemic stance towards the correctness of the description *a proper macho man* and his attitude which may elicit surprise, disgust, admiration or some other feeling. In addition, *Cor* in (6) may be an indication of speech act force, a function also found in (7), (8) and (9):

(7) ... *bloody hell* look at that old codger behind the wheel (KB7 11226)

(8) *Bugger it* I'm gonna pay this off! (KB2 1980)

(9) *Jesus bloody Christ* how could he have missed that (KBR 1866)

The second main function usually attributed to the pragmatic markers is textuality, which according to Andersen (2001: 66) 'describes what the speaker perceives as the relation between sequentially arranged units of discourse'. We may have an instance of that function in (10) which is an instance of speaker self-repair:

(10) No I haven't ordered any curtains, *cor* ... curtain rails (KBH 3898)

Here *cor* carries out an act of repair: the speaker realizes that s/he has made a mistake that s/he wants to put right: it was not curtains that the speaker should have ordered, but curtain *rails*.

The expletive interjections may also have another textual pragmatic meaning, viz. to indicate that what follows somehow exemplifies a previous claim (cf. Aijmer's point that certain 'pragmatic markers are used to mark an elaboration or clarification of the topic' – Aijmer 2002: 86). (11) is an example of this:

- (11) A: Ange was saying she's ... she gets a bit funny, don't she?
 B: *Cor bloody hell* she give I [*sic*] <pause> three questions the other day (KB6 2186)

4.2 Expletive pragmatic markers as slot fillers

The examples of expletive pragmatic markers discussed above are all obviously slot fillers as they were defined in Chapter 2 (cf. also Stenström 1994). Slot fillers turn up in a number of different positions in the utterances over which they have scope. For expletive interjections expressing subjectivity, attitude and/or epistemic stance, the most common position is before a clause over which they have scope. (Strictly speaking, they have scope over the proposition underlying the clause.) Our old examples (6)–(9) are instances of this position:

- (6) *Cor* that was a proper macho man! (KBL 2438)
 (7) ... *bloody hell* look at that old codger behind the wheel (KB7 11226)
 (8) *Bugger it* I'm gonna pay this off! (KB2 1980)
 (9) *Jesus bloody Christ* how could he have missed that (KBR 1866)

Slot fillers may also indicate speaker subjectivity with regard to a preceding clause as in examples (12) and (13):

- (12) I'm not playing this, *bugger it!* (KB7 6582)
 (13) You don't, *oh bloody hell*. (KBE 9284)

On rare occasions a slot filler may be placed in medial utterance position, viz. inside the clause over which it has scope, as in the four examples below of which (16) is a borrowing from Stenström (1994: 46) in which *for heaven's sake* functions as a 'booster', a way for the speaker to 'assess what he himself says', as Stenström herself puts it. This type of usage is illustrated in example (16), where *for heaven's sake* emphasizes

that the speaker regards the recommendation 'Don't believe all you read in the press' as important.

- (14) I'm not *fuck* laughing am I? (KBE 1632)
 (15) I said that's *fuck* all right. (KBE 1710)
 (16) Don't, *for heaven's sake*, believe all you read in the press.
 (Stenström 1994: 46)
 (17) Right, Ann <pause> <voice quality: reading> what wine <end of
 voice quality> <pause> *oh God!* <pause> <voice quality: reading>
 is made in <pause> oh, Department of the Marne <end of voice
 quality> (KBD 7826)

There are alternative analyses for all four examples above. In (14) and (15), the interjection *fuck* may have scope over just part of the whole utterance, in the case of (14) over *laughing* and in the case of (15) over *all right*. In (16) the scope of *for heaven's sake* may be the entire proposition *Don't believe all you read in the press* or just the preceding *Don't*. In (17), finally, a case can be made for interpreting *oh God!* simply as a reactive expletive interjection reflecting, perhaps, the speaker's realization of the difficulty the addressee will have in answering the question.

The BNC also contains examples where the scope of an expletive interjection functioning as a pragmatic marker only extends over the following single word or phrase. In many of these cases the following element is *yes* or *no* as in (18) and (19), and the pragmatic marker is clearly a way to emphasize the force of a following affirmation or denial. Example (20) is somewhat different but here too the pragmatic marker seems to be used for emphasis, perhaps expressing the speaker's surprise at the location indicated:

- (18) *Fuck* yes.
 (19) *Oh god* no. (KBP 2849)
 (20) *Shit!* Down Quinnan Street. (KBD 967)

The expletive pragmatic marker sometimes has retroactive scope over a preceding word or phrase. This position is relatively unusual, but is found in cases like (21):

- (21) Damn paint and stuff, *cor strewth*. (KBR 531)

In (21) the speaker and her/his interlocutor are visiting a building that is being redecorated. The speaker coughs and then exclaims *Damn*

paint and stuff!, adding *cor strewth* to emphasize the relevance of his exclamation.

On the basis of the examples of slot fillers discussed above a distinction can be made between five different slot filler positions for the expletive pragmatic markers in the turns where they occur.⁶

1. Immediately before a clause (6)–(9)
2. Immediately after a clause (12)–(13)
3. In clause-medial position (14)–(17)
4. Immediately before a word or phrase (18)–(20)
5. Immediately after a word or phrase (21)

Statistics for the distribution of slot fillers across the five positions above will be found in Table 4.4.

4.3 Expletive pragmatic markers as gap fillers

Like *slot filler*, the notion of *gap filler* has been taken from Stenström (1994) where the distinction between slot fillers and gap fillers is a key feature. As we have seen, slot fillers operate on a linear level as part of a longer utterance. Gap fillers operate vertically or interactively: in conversations they make up entire turns of their own, viz. they are themselves complete utterances. The BNC examples (22) to (24) below contain examples of gap fillers (in italics):

- (22) A: I've got 30 in tens.
 B: *Ah Jesus!* (KBD 378)
- (23) A: I'm driving, there's this big bang, and the whole bonnet lit up.
 B: *Oh God!*
- (24) A: Double tennis court?
 B: Mhm.
 A: *Gosh!* (KBK 6402)

The three examples above all contain expletive interjections that have clearly interactive functions and are used as responses, the typical gap filler function. They serve as acknowledgements of the information given in a previous turn, but at the same time they also express a reaction to that information. Take for instance the exchange between A and B in (22) above. A study of the conversation leading up to the exchange in (22) reveals that B has asked A to lend her/him 40 pounds and when it turns out that A has only 30 pounds, B utters *Ah Jesus!* probably as an expression of disappointment.

But in addition to serving as responses, gap fillers also have a few other uses. Consider example (25):

(25) A: *Oh damn it.* [Turn 1] (KBA 46)

B: *What?* [Turn 2]

A: This one doesn't seem to want to come out. [Turn 3]

On one interpretation (25) is an utterance in which what seems to have started out as a genuine reactive interjection is overheard by others and intrigues them to such an extent that they ask the speaker what is the matter.

However, when they do that they change the entire nature of the utterance *Oh damn it!* If B had not reacted to A's saying *Oh damn it!* in (25) that exclamation would have been simply a reaction to some unknown stimulus the nature of which we would never find out.

But when B in (25) says *What?* in response to A's *Oh damn it!* s/he changes the nature of the original reactive interjection, which has now become the first turn in an exchange.

From an analytic point of view there is nothing remarkable about all this. All that has happened is that *Oh damn it!* has changed roles. Instead of being a reactive interjection which is not part of a dialogue between A and B, it has become the opening turn in a dialogue between these two people.

In an analytic model based on turn-taking, this is a non-problem: an initial utterance that is linked to a following one in the way *Oh damn it!* and *What?* are linked in (25), is by definition the first turn in an exchange involving at least two – in the case of (25) three – turns. But if we forget for a moment the exigencies of a strict turn-taking system, we realize that the key question here is what A's *intentions* were. Did s/he intend her/his utterance *Oh damn it!* to be taken as the first move in an exchange, or did s/he just let it slip out without any communicative plans? Cases like these raise other – larger – issues, like the nature of self-talk and the question whether it makes sense to talk about reactive interjections as communicative, both of them issues raised in an interesting paper by Erving Goffman from 1978.

Before we conclude this presentation of gap filler functions, mention should be made of their use as a 'go on signal', viz. as linguistic feedback interrupting the speech of another speaker as in (26):

(26) A: If you take

B: *Cor!*

A: the top off (KBP 1660)

In cases like (26) *Cor!* interrupts what is basically a single turn, viz *If you take the top off.*

4.4 Summing up the use of expletive interjections

Section 4.2 concluded with a survey of the slot filler positions open to the expletive pragmatic markers containing five different positions. A similar survey of the expletive gap filler positions would not be very enlightening since there is basically only a single function open for expletive gap fillers. There are also two other marginal uses, viz. the rare use of expletive gap fillers as conversation initiators as in (28) and their equally rare function as go-on signals interrupting an ongoing message as in (29).

Table 4.4 presents the statistics for the different uses of the expletive interjections in a 1-million-word subcorpus from the 10 million words in the spoken component of the BNC. Note that the table contains both the six pragmatic marker uses of these interjections and their (non-pragmatic) use as reactive interjections.

Table 4.4 shows that there are important frequency differences among the different uses of the expletive interjections in spoken English. The most important uses of the interjections are: as slot fillers immediately before a clause, as gap fillers and as reactive interjections. The first of these is the most important type with almost twice as many members as the gap fillers which are number two in the rank list. In third place we find the reactive interjections which are also an important category with 92 members. Further down the list there are two other expletive slot-filler positions with 40 and 30 members respectively, viz. the positions immediately after a clause and immediately before a word or a phrase. At the end of the list there are two small categories: slot fillers following a word or phrase with only seven members and, finally, the

Table 4.4 Rank list of expletive interjections in Conv1M⁷

Slot filler before clause	226
Gap filler	116
Reactive interjection	92
Slot filler after clause	40
Slot filler before word/phrase	30
Slot filler after word/phrase	7
Slot filler inside clause	2
Total	513

use of expletives as slot fillers in the middle of a clause of which there are only two instances.

4.5 The distribution of the individual interjections

In the preceding section I explored the different mostly discourse-based functions with which the expletive interjections in my data have been used. I will bring this chapter to its conclusion with a brief presentation of the distribution of the individual interjections across these functional categories with a view to establishing whether the individual expletive interjections show any marked tendencies to differ in their choice of function. I present my findings in Table 4.5. However, before we discuss the results in the table, let me remind the reader that the labels represent all uses of the words involved, whether as single words or as part of a collocation.

Table 4.5 should be read from left to right. The percentages indicate for each interjection what percentage of the total number of occurrences each interjection devotes to the seven different functions. When the total number of occurrences is very low, this information is rather uninteresting. But with interjections having high total frequencies of occurrence, this method sometimes yields interesting information about the functional preferences of individual interjections.

To begin with, there is an interesting overall statistic, viz. that almost 44 per cent of the total use of these interjections fall in the slot-filling 'before clause' category. Its closest competitors are the gap fillers and the reactive interjections with 22.6 and 17.9 per cent respectively.

With regard to the individual interjections, it turns out that in the 'before clause' category the percentages for *cor* and *gosh* surpass the 43.9 per cent in the totals row by a thumping 26.8 and 19.4 percentage points respectively. In fact *cor* has 70.7 per cent of its 82 occurrences in that position while *gosh* has 63.3 per cent of its 30 occurrences in the same slot, a distribution strongly suggesting that these two items have specialized as expletive clause-initial pragmatic markers.

Among the gap fillers, *Jesus* has 43.7 per cent in comparison with the 22.6 per cent value in the totals row. But *Jesus* is a low-frequency item with a mere 16 occurrences, and we may find it more rewarding to study the gap filler figures for real high-frequency interjections like *Oh God!* and *Hell!* Both of these have gap filler percentages clearly above the total values for the category.

A third set of items with deviant percentages are to be found in the column for reactive interjections, but as membership in this category is

Table 4.5 Distribution of the expletive interjections⁸

	<i>REACT</i>	<i>GF</i>	<i>BC</i>	<i>MC</i>	<i>AC</i>	<i>BW</i>	<i>AW</i>	<i>FREQ</i>
Bugger	1 (7.1%)	2 (14.2%)	3 (21.4 %)	–	3 (21.4%)	5 (36%)	–	14
Christ	11 (31.4%)	2 (5.7%)	15 (42.9%)	–	6 (17.1%)	–	1 (2.8%)	35
Cor	8 (9.75%)	11 (13.4%)	58 (70.7%)	–	3 (3.7%)	–	2 (2.4%)	82
Damn	–	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	–	–	1 (25%)	–	4
Fuck	–	2 (14.2%)	6 (42.9%)	–	1 (7.1%)	4 (28.6%)	1 (7.1%)	14
Oh God	34 (19%)	49 (27.3%)	67 (37.4%)	–	13 (7.3%)	15 (8.4%)	1 (0.55%)	179
Gosh	1 (3.3%)	8 (26.7%)	19 (63.3%)	–	1 (3.3%)	1 (3.3%)	–	30
Hell	25 (20.7%)	31 (25.6%)	48 (39.7%)	2 (1.7%)	10 (8.3%)	3 (2.5%)	2 (1.7%)	121
Jesus	5 (31.2%)	7 (43.7%)	2 (12.5%)	–	2 (12.5%)	–	–	16
Shit	7 (38.9%)	3 (16.7%)	6 (33.4%)	–	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	–	18
Total	92 (17.9%)	116 (22.6%)	226 (43.9%)	2 (0.4%)	40 (7.8%)	30 (5.7%)	7 (1.4%)	513

REACT: Reactive interjection, GF: gap filler, BC: before clause, MC: inside clause, AC: after clause, BW: before word/phrase, AW: after word/phrase.

more difficult to determine than for the other functions these findings should be taken with a certain amount of scepticism. For what it is worth, however, a study of the percentages in that column reveals that *Shit*, *Christ* and *Jesus* all have substantially higher percentage values than the expected 17.9 per cent found in the totals row. In the case of *shit* almost 39 per cent of its occurrences are reactive interjections; the corresponding percentages for *Christ* and *Jesus* are 31.4 and 31.2 per cent respectively.

4.6 Conclusion

The better part of the present chapter has been devoted to an exploratory study of the functions of expletive interjections in spoken British English as they are used in a 1-million-word subcorpus from the spoken component of the BNC. The study focuses on ten common expletive interjections representing the semantic areas particularly associated with English expletives, viz. bodily waste, religion and sex. As Table 4.5 shows, the majority of the expletives are religious both in terms of types and tokens.

The data were examined with a view to establishing in what ways the expletive interjections were actually used in conversation. It was found that they may be used in two distinct ways. Thus in about 20 per cent of the 513 utterances making up my data the interjections are used merely to signal often involuntary speaker reactions to stimuli of various kinds, as for example in exclamations of pain, irritation, surprise, etc. Interjections used in this way were named *reactive interjections*.

In the utterances making up the remaining 80 per cent of the data, the expletive interjections were used to carry out the communicative functions of *subjectivity*, *interactivity* and *textuality* (see the discussion of examples (1)–(8)), functions strongly associated with the category of *pragmatic markers*. In addition it turned out that all the expletive interjections in this category satisfied the criteria for membership in the pragmatic marker category listed in Brinton (1996). These findings indicate that unless they are used as reactive interjections, there is every reason to regard expletive interjections as pragmatic markers.

The expletive interjections were also exposed to a discourse-based analysis in terms of the distinction between *gap fillers* and *slot fillers* found in Stenström (1991, 1994). The analysis revealed that the majority of the pragmatic interjections were used as slot fillers, in particular

before clauses as in (7), where *bloody hell* expresses the speaker's attitude to the (proposition underlying) the following clause:

(7) ... *bloody hell* look at that old codger behind the wheel. (KB7 11226)

The second largest category was the interactive gap fillers used as responses to the immediately preceding utterance, as for instance in example (27) below, where B uses the same expletive interjection as that found in (7) in response to A's claim that somebody is 37 years old:

(27) A: She must be 37.
B: *Bloody hell!* (KB1 3983)

The final part of the study explored the distribution of the individual expletive interjections. It was found that certain of them have become highly specialized, for instance *cor* and *gosh*, both of which favour the slot filler position of 'before clause' (cf. Table 4.5).

5

Oaths, Emphatic Denials, Curses

5.0 Oaths

As we saw in the discussion of the history of swearing in Chapter 3, oaths and curses are the two oldest forms of swearing known to us. There are two main kinds of oaths (I am disregarding here the use of *oath* to refer to swearing in general). In a technical sense, an oath may be defined as ‘a solemn promise often invoking a divine witness, regarding one’s future action or behaviour’, as the *ODE* puts it.¹

5.0.1 Formal oaths

Oaths like these are highly formalized affairs and are used on formal occasions such as giving evidence in Anglo-Saxon courts of law. Typically, those giving such evidence express their commitment to telling the truth by uttering the words ‘I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help me God.’ A very similar type of formal oath is used by new members of the British Parliament who say ‘I swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth ... So help me God.’ In both types of formal oath, the references to the Almighty have in later years been made optional.

Even when retaining the mention of God, formal oaths like these cannot be considered to be swearing as defined in the present study, since they fail to meet several of the criteria mentioned in Chapter 1, for instance the stipulation in that chapter that taboo words used in swearing must not retain their literal meaning. Clearly formal oaths do not live up to this criterion since their force depends on the presupposed existence of the higher power taken as witness by the person swearing the oath.

When the reference to God is removed from the formal oaths, on the other hand, they just as clearly fail another criterion for swearing as defined here, viz. that all such swearing must contain a taboo word. However, even without the mention of a higher power, the formal oaths are still regarded as binding, which means that, in the case of evidence-giving, failure to tell the truth constitutes the criminal offence known as *perjury*.

Why are these oaths regarded as binding even when they contain no invocation of God? Part of the explanation must be the fact that they all contain the initial words *I swear that* or *I swear to*. Saying *I swear that/to* in oaths like these is a performative speech act known as a *commissive* in Searle's well-known classification of speech acts (Searle 1976). Such speech acts commit the speaker to whatever promises or assurances are contained in the rest of the utterance.

However, the mere presence of the words *I swear that/to* cannot be the whole explanation for the binding force of the formal oaths that do not mention a higher power, since constructions with *I swear* – usually without a following *that* or *to* – are also used non-commissively in non-formal speech like that found in the following examples:

(1) And *I swear*, it really hurt. (BNC KCE 565)

(2) ... she said they'll not know you're doing it, *I swear*. (BNC KDN 5112)

The speakers of (1) and (2) obviously do not run the risk of being charged with perjury because in both examples the function of *I swear* is not to serve as a commissive speech act. *I swear* in such cases expresses the speaker's wish to sound convincing to the listener and probably also to express her/his feelings about the following or preceding utterance (that something really hurt and that a third party will know nothing about whatever is denoted by *it* in example (2)). We could also say that *I swear* in these examples is a way for the speaker to do two things: to indicate her/his commitment to the truth of the utterance and to express her/his attitude to (the proposition underlying) that utterance. As the discussion of the expletive interjections in Chapter 4 showed, this is tantamount to saying that *I swear* in (1) and (2) is used as a *pragmatic particle* (also known as *discourse particle* or *discourse marker*).

The pragmatic function of *I swear* in utterances such as (1) and (2) is also indicated by its syntactic position in (2): when *I swear* has the function of a commissive speech act it cannot be moved to the middle or the end of the utterance, but when used as a pragmatic particle, *I swear* may be both utterance-initial as in (1) and utterance-final as in (2) (cf. e.g. the discussion in Aijmer 2002). The same phenomenon is found

in other languages using the pragmatic formula *I swear*, such as German *Ich kann dich schwören dass ...*, French *Je te jure (devant Dieu) que ...*, Italian *Te juro che ...*, Spanish *Te lo juro ...*, Swedish *Jag svär att ...*

But if the mere presence of the phrase *I swear* is not sufficient evidence that the oaths are commissive and if furthermore no mention of God or other higher beings is necessary, why is it that such oaths in courts of law and in Parliament are still regarded as binding?

A plausible explanation, in my view, is implied by the use of the words *solemn* and *formal* in the *OED* definition of such oaths. These words suggest a ritual in which place, participants and procedure are prescribed in minute detail and are every way as important as the words uttered. A person who utters the words *I swear that/to ...* in such circumstances is considered to have given a pledge to undertake certain tasks which cannot be retracted and which may accordingly be regarded as binding.

Before leaving this topic, we could add that there is a time-honoured linguistic test first suggested by Austin (1962) that helps us distinguish between those *I swear* utterances that are commissive speech acts and those that are not, viz. the insertion of the adverb *hereby* as in example (3):

(3) I hereby swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Let us return now to the status of the non-commissive, merely pragmatic utterances with *I swear* in examples (1) and (2). Should they be promoted to the ranks of English swearing? Probably not: the distinction between swearing and non-swearing as formulated here hangs on the presence or absence of a non-referential taboo word in the string being considered and these strings do not contain any taboo words whatever. However, given the definitions of swearing laid down in Chapter 1, it is clear that the addition of a non-referential taboo word after *I swear* in similar cases like (4) and (5) below would force us to count these utterances as bona fide instances of English swearing:

(4) *I swear to God* it was unbelievable. (BNC KE1 542)

(5) A: Do you get your homework done?

B: *I swear to God.*

Whether (4) and (5) would be regarded as swearing by native speakers of English is another matter.

5.0.2 Other oaths

Leaving now the rather special case of formal oaths, what other oaths are there in today's English swearing? Given that the basic function of an oath is to call on a higher being to support the speaker's claim to be telling the truth, the most typical oaths would seem to be those whose form indicates that this is their aim, for example constructions made up of the preposition *by* followed by the name of a higher being, as in *by God*, *by Christ*, etc. Although the preposition *by* is by far the most common one in such oaths, there are others like *on/upon*, as in the modern clearly interjectional expression *On my word!*, and the unusual use of *in* found in Cromwell's *I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken* quoted in Hughes (2006: 389).

Originally such constructions were intended as indications from the speaker that she/he was telling the truth. From the point of modern usage, however, both the oaths and the curses have been exposed to what Crawford (1913) called 'interjectionalization', a process that transforms most other types of swearing into interjections. In her (1913) article Crawford gives an account of this process in fifteenth-century English, claiming that: '... oaths can in no sense be considered other than as ejaculations' (1913: 361), where *ejaculation* has the same meanings as today's term interjection.

Such oaths turned interjections are plentiful in English texts from the fifteenth century on. Crawford (1913: 40–4) lists a great number of such oaths from that period of time, for instance *By God of Heauen*, *By the God Holy*, *By Him that crosse kyst!*, *By Jesu that slayn was with Jewes*, etc. To these we can add the following instances provided by Montagu (1967: 114–15): *By God's precious bones*, *By God's bones*, *By Goddes corps*, *By God's cross*, *By God's death*, *By God's foot*, *By God's (glorious) wounds*, *By God's guts*, *By God's side*, *By God's passion* ('suffering').

The interjectionalizing that Crawford speaks of is obviously an instance of what is known today as grammaticalization discussed at some length in Chapter 1. If Crawford is to be believed, the above examples had already been affected by that process, hence her claim that 'they can in no sense be considered as other than ejaculations'. However, one of the characteristics of grammaticalization is that it not only changes the grammatical and pragmatic uses of the expressions involved, but is also accompanied by certain formal changes which may in the long run drastically change the form of the original expression.

From that point of view it is interesting to note that besides containing a great many constructions with initial *By* such as *By God of Heauen*,

By Goddes fote, etc., her lists also include a number of *by*-less constructions, for instance *Goddy sake*, *God's grace*, *Godys pyne* ('pain'), *Cockes armes* ('arms') which contrast with *By Goddes fote*. What has happened in the case of these *by*-less constructions is clearly that they are now formally interjections which can no longer be regarded as oaths, while the expressions that have retained their initial *by* may be regarded as oaths used as interjections.

The interpretation suggested above would have received additional support if the examples of oaths above had included constructions that were identical except for the presence or absence of the preposition *by*. There are no such neatly contrasting pairs, however, and we have to content ourselves by observing construction pairs that are lexically parallel such as those involving parts of God's (Christ's) body, some of which contain an initial *by* and some of which do not. Given the similarity in this respect between *By Goddys body*, *By Cockes body*, *By Cockes bones*, *By Goddes fote*, *By Goddis yne* ('eyes') on the one hand, and the *by*-less *Goddys sande* (= hande), *Goddys blod*, *Cockys harte*, *Cockes armes* on the other, it seems a plausible hypothesis that the members of the second group once contained an initial *by* which has been lost in the process of grammaticalization.

A few words should be said about the nature of the forces invoked in the medieval oaths and interjections. Although the majority turned to God, Christ and the saints as guarantors for the truth of their statements, there were also oaths apostrophizing the forces of evil: Crawford (1913: 402) offers the following examples of fifteenth-century diabolic oaths/interjections: *Be (by) Satan!*, *In the deueles dispite!*, *By Belyalays bonys!* (Beliah's bones). Later examples may be found in the COED, such as the splendid composite oath *By heauen, by earth, by Hell, by all that a man can sweare* (d2cwilki.txt) from the early seventeenth century, and the much later *By Hell!* (d5schoad1.txt) recorded sometime between 1760 and 1820. Other oaths/interjections operate outside the celestial and diabolic spheres, for example *By my hoary beard!*, *By my snout!*, *By this hand!*, *On my honesty!*, *By my virginity!*, *By these ten bones (fingers)!* (Montagu 1967: 118).

As the above review of early English oaths/interjections will have shown, swearers in the Middle Ages were offered a much wider choice of such items than today's speakers. In today's English – and in the other European languages – the number of viable oaths has dwindled to almost nothing. Thus a search of the spoken component of the BNC yielded the following religious *by*-constructions: *By Christ* (3), *By God* (22), *By golly* (2), *By gosh* (2), *By heck* (4), *By hell* (7) and *By Jesus* (1). *By God!* is by far the most frequent *by*-construction with 22 instances.

Most of the others occur only a few times and it is significant that the highest frequencies were found for *By heck!* and *By hell!* in which the expected divine name has been replaced by the name for hell. *By Jove!* has five hits, *By all that is holy!* only one.

The same development has taken place in the other European languages. Thus although we do find for example French *Pardieu!* Swedish *Vid Gud!* and similar expressions in Russian and Polish, the few remaining *by* oaths in these languages seem to be regarded as old-fashioned or even archaic.

In modern English, the place of *By God!* and similar oaths/interjections seems by and large to have been taken over by a different type of construction consisting of the frame *for ... sake(s)* where the empty slot may be filled with a number of religious terms. A search for the *for ... sake* frame in the spoken component of the BNC yielded the following oaths/interjections (the number of hits are given in brackets after each example): *for God('s) sake(s)* (77), *(for) goodness sake(s)* (57), *(for) Christ('s) sake(s)* (31), *(for) heaven('s) sake(s)* (36), *for bloody hell sake!* (1). Mention should be made here of *(for) fuck('s) sake* (18) which represents a modern development of the religious oaths.

The *for ... sake* constructions are also found in other languages. In French *Pour l'amour de Dieu* ('For the love of God') and Spanish *Por el amor de Dios* we find a slightly different wording: 'For the love of God'. This was also the phrase used in Middle English, for instance in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* where in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, Pertelote – wife of the cockerel Chantecler – gives her husband medical advice, saying 'For Goddes love, taak some laxatyf!'

What, then, is the final verdict on today's oaths/interjections in comparison with earlier stages of the language? We have already concluded that in comparison with today's English speakers, swearers in the Middle Ages were offered a much wider choice of such items. But the difference is not simply a matter of numbers: the really important difference is one of creativity within the rather liberal framework for oaths available. No doubt swearing – then as now – consisted largely of repetition. But the rich variation in the oaths handed down to us from the Middle Ages and the next two or three centuries indicates that there was also a willingness to exploit the system to the full.

Clearly, such creativity is missing from today's oaths, which are at best the petrified remains of a glorious past. It remains to be seen whether this lack of creativity characterizes modern English swearing in general, as suggested by White (1963: 369), who held that there is a 'loss of energy ... in the language of abuse and disparagement, of contempt and disapproval'

and that today (actually in 1963) the 'language of the parsonage has replaced the mouth-filling oaths of earlier days' (1963: 369).²

5.0.3 Oaths in other languages: Arabic and Kirundi

If the use of oaths in the European languages is in decline and lacks creativity, there are several other languages in which the *by*-type of oaths is alive and well. One of them is Arabic. According to Abd el-Jawad (2000: 218), the oaths in that language have retained their 'original form and function', which presumably means that they have not undergone the same grammaticalization ('interjectionalization') processes that have been at work in the Western languages. Besides being used in formal oaths, Arabic oath constructions 'occur in a wide variety of forms' (2000: 218) and are 'used in daily conversations in the Arab communities in general and in the Jordanian community in particular' (218) to confirm claims, strengthen promises, etc. Interestingly enough, the Arabic oaths – as reported in el-Jawad – do not seem to have been reduced to mere emotive interjections like English *By God!*, *By heaven!*, *For God's sake!* and corresponding expressions in other European languages which function as utterances on their own. Instead the Arabic oaths appear to be typically followed by an utterance and to express the speaker's epistemic or emotional attitudes to these utterances, which makes them look rather like pragmatic or discourse particles (cf. Chapter 4, pp. 84ff.)

It is very common for the Arabic oaths to call on Allah to support the speaker's claims, promises, threats, etc., but they may equally well appeal to the Prophet, religious figures, famous rulers, relatives, body parts. The following are translations of a few of the many examples offered by Abd el-Jawad (p. 229):

- (6) By Allah I saw a plane from the top of our house.
- (7) By the honour of my sister I haven't studied more than one hour for this exam.
- (8) By the life of this hair I have waited for you for more than one hour.

A very particular Arabic oath used only by men is the repudiation oath (cf. Abd el-Jawad 2000: 226), in which the male speaker swears by the divorce from his wife to lend additional force to a following utterance. Like the other oaths, these ones are made up of two parts. But where the previous oaths begin with expressions like *By Allah!*, etc., the repudiation oaths begin with an utterance that may be translated as 'By the divorce from my wife' or 'I swear to divorce my wife' and then introduce the speech act that the speaker wishes to add strength to. As a result

we get oaths like (9) and (10) which have been taken from Abd el-Jawad (2000: 226):

- (9) By the divorce from my wife/I swear to divorce my wife I have not seen him.
 (10) By the divorce from my wife/I swear to divorce my wife you shall have dinner with us tonight.

Arabic is not alone in possessing a flourishing oath category. Masagara (1997) offers a fascinating account of the traditional oaths forms in Kirundi, the language of Burundi (in addition to Kinyarwanda, both Bantu languages), which constitute a creatively used swearing category used to 'enable speakers to interpret and negotiate the understanding of the relative truth value of claims' (1997: 385). In Masagara's opinion the use of the traditional oath forms in these languages – known as *indahiro* – is distinctly different from practices in European (colonial) languages (1997: 385) and are claimed to be 'potentially unlimited in content variation'. *Indahiro* oaths have the following general structure (cf. 1997: 387); the bracketed clause is often left unexpressed:

- (11) I would rather Verb NP-referent (than S)

When the NP referent used in the oaths is not the addressee, the speaker can choose between a number of 'designated oath referents' on which the oath is taken. These referents fall into several categories that may be regarded as being taboo, viz. kin referents, names of traditional rulers and/or benefactors, and non-human referents like famine, epidemic, drought, war, animals, disease and death (1997: 390).

The designated oath referents are next of kin like niece, father, mother, child, in-law, etc. and the strength of the speaker's commitment to the truth is determined by the nature of the relationship between speaker and referent: for men, the preferred referents are first-born daughters, mothers and nieces, for women it is fathers. The verbs used in the oaths denote actions that violate some taboo or other regarding the relationship between speaker and referent. The taboo violated may be sexual, as in (12), but may also involve other violations of 'close family relationships and loyalties', as in (13):

- (12) I would rather have incestuous relationships with my niece/first-born daughter. (1997: 389)
 (13) (Father to son) I would rather hate you. (1997: 390)

The *indahiro* oaths may be either other-initiated or self-initiated (1997: 397). Other-initiated oaths function as a response to a challenge to the truth of a claim. Self-initiated oaths, on the other hand, may be used to indicate how a following utterance should be interpreted (1997: 397). This makes them look very much like the pragmatic markers in English and other languages that are used to reveal the speaker's epistemic and/or attitudinal views regarding the proposition underlying a following clause, as in examples (6) and (7) in Chapter 4 repeated here as (14) and (15):

(14) *Cor* that was a proper macho man! (BNC KBL 2438)

(15) ... *bloody hell* look at that old codger behind the wheel! (BNC KB7 11226)

In view of this similarity it does not seem far-fetched to assume that just like English *Cor* and *bloody hell* the *indahiro* oaths are sometimes used as interjections and that what we have here is yet another demonstration of the multiple membership of many of the categories used in swearing. This conclusion is further strengthened by Masagara's comment on the *indahiro* expression *Ndakend'imbwa* which is an oath using a referent from the third, non-human, referent category meaning 'I would rather have sex with a dog' and which Masagara describes as being 'on its way to becoming a ritualised formula' (1997: 394). Another way of putting this would be to say that the oath in question has been reinterpreted as a secondary interjection.

5.1 Emphatic denials

Many languages have developed mechanisms for expressing emphatic utterance denial by swearing that are close to the oaths. There are several such mechanisms, but the underlying idea is one and the same, viz. to deny the truth of claims put forth in an utterance by arguing that these claims have no more value than some negative and/or worthless entity. The entity in question is often of a scatological nature, as in the following English examples: *Shit it is!*, *My arse (ass) it is!*, *My (left) butt they are!* in which the scatological terms may be replaced by the euphemistic *My foot!*

The examples above are variations on an old theme. As shown in Chapter 3, the COED offers examples of denials like (16) and (17), both from the late sixteenth century:

(16) *A turde* thou wille! (d1c.txt)

(17) *The Devil* she has! (d1f.txt)

In several varieties of English, the expression *Pig's arse/ass* may be used as an alternative to the denials above.

In addition to the scatological comparisons, the denial constructions also draw on religious taboo themes, producing constructions such as *the hell it is, the heck she did, the devil they are*. Words connected with sexual taboos are also used here, in particular *fuck, sod* and *bugger* as in *Fuck/Sod/Bugger it is (they are/we did, etc.)*.

In the examples above, the taboo word expressing the negation is in each case placed before a clause made up of a personal pronoun subject and a modal verb predicate and seems to be phonologically part of it. In a related but somewhat different construction, the taboo word is placed after the utterance. The preferred negative word in such constructions in the BNC is *heck* as in the following rather lengthy discussion about the pros and cons of wedding cakes in the spoken component of the BNC:

(18) Peggy: But I'm saying, you don't want any cake, I don't want any cake, Arthur doesn't want any cake, dad doesn't want any, Angela doesn't ...

June: I like wedding cake.

Peggy: But do you, *heck*, you don't like ... you said you don't like it.

June: I do like wedding cake. (BNC KSS 4915–21)

Emphatic denials involving swearing are found not only in English but in many other languages. The following list contains some of the taboo expressions used in denials from some of the languages included in the present study. Not all of them combine with a following or preceding clause utterance the way English denial expressions do, but make up turns of their own that function as responses/replies to a previous utterance, viz. they are gap fillers rather than slot fillers (cf. Stenström 1994: 60–2 and Chapter 4 in the present study):

- Danish: *Så fanden!* 'the devil'
- Dutch: *Aan mijn reet!* 'on my arse'
- Finnish: *Perkeleesti!* 'the devil (...), *Hevon vittu!* 'horse cunt'
- French: *Mes fesses* 'my arse/buttocks'
- German: *Scheisse* 'shit' as in *Einen Scheiss hat er!* 'Shit he has'
- Hungarian: *Loszart!* 'horseshit'
- Italian: *Cazzo* 'dick' as in *Col cazzo lo faccio!* 'The heck (lit 'with my dick') I will (do it)'

- Norwegian: *Ikke faen!* 'No the Devil', *I helvete (heller)* 'In hell', *Raeva!* 'Arse'
- Polish: *Ni chuja!* 'No dick'
- Portuguese: *Nem fodendo* from *nem* 'not' and *fodendo* from the verb *foder* 'fuck'
- Russian: *xúj* 'dick' used as a negation, as in e.g. *Xúj on pridyt!* 'The hell he will come'
- Spanish: *polla* 'dick' as in *Y una polla!* literally 'and a dick'.
- Swedish: *I helvete* 'in hell', *(Så) fan heller* 'like the devil', *I mitt arsle* 'in my arse'

5.2 Curses

5.2.1 Background

Cursing has a long and peculiarly well-documented history and we accordingly know much more about the nature and early development of serious curses than we do about oaths through the habit of inscribing curses on stone or lead tablets and depositing them in suitable places, frequently in ponds and streams. This habit started in Sicily in the sixth century BC from where it spread to Greece in the following century. Several such inscribed *defixional* (*defixive*) curses have also been found in what used to be Roman Britain, in particular in Bath, Uley and Lydney. The topics of the texts vary, but a very common topic is theft as in the following text from Uley (Uley 1):

Cenacus complains to the god Mercury about Vitalinus and Natalinus his son concerning the draught animal which has been stolen from him, and asks the god Mercury that they may have neither health before/unless they return at once to me the draught animal which they have stolen, and to the god the devotion which he has demanded from them himself. (From 'Curse Tablets from Roman Britain' at <http://www.curses.csad.ox.ac.uk>)

Although rare nowadays, serious cursing has not died out altogether: in fact, those interested in learning how to construct a curse or 'binding spell' will find instruction in this art on the Internet at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/apuleius/renberg/CURSETABLET.HTML>. There is also evidence that serious cursing was practised in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century and Montagu (1967: 45) quotes a lengthy curse that appeared in 1910 in a French daily paper beginning with the words:

Great Saint Exterminus, I conjure thee to go and torment the soul and spirit of Madame Fernande X ... who now resides in Paris, through the avenues of her five natural senses.

Serious cursing is also practised in Muslim cultures. One can pray for God (Allah) to curse somebody by means of the expression 'May X be deprived of the blessings of God' which is clearly different from the Western practice to call down evil upon others. Shias and Sunnis are divided in their views on cursing.

5.2.2 Serious and non-serious cursing

Like the oaths, curses come in two varieties – formal, or serious cursing, and informal, non-serious cursing – both of which may, in principle, involve appeals both to God and the Devil. Serious cursing is truly *mal-edictory*: it expresses the speaker's wish to bring down evil on another person. It also implies a belief that the curser is capable of bringing down evil on others with or without the assistance of either God or the Devil and accordingly involves the actual *addressing* of either. Serious cursing cannot be considered to constitute swearing for two reasons: it uses taboo words with their literal meaning and it is compositional rather than formulaic (cf. Chapter 1).

If we exclude verbless curses like for example *To hell with ...* there are four main types of expletive non-serious cursing in English. They are illustrated by examples (19)–(22):

(19) And *the devil take* the man who offers more. (BNC HWN 2058)

(20) I say *God damn America*. (COCA 2008, Spoken, Fox_Gibson)

(21) ... they're not doing a bad job, *damn them*. (BNC KGX 139)

(22) Fucking *fuck the pair of you!* (BNC KDA 5118)

As these examples show, non-serious cursing often involves God or the Devil as in (19) and (20), not as forms of address but as formulaic constructions expressing the speaker's dislike of something or somebody and meeting the requirements that neither God nor the Devil are used referentially. However, there is no need for either God or the Devil to be present in successful expletive curses: all that is needed is the appropriate predicate verb with taboo meaning³ as in (21) and (22).

5.2.3 Expletive curses

Of the four examples of expletive English cursing illustrated by examples (19)–(22), the last three are common enough in today's English,

especially if we include American English. The first – (19) *the devil take the man who offers more* – is unusual today but was common in the past and is an example of the type of ‘mouth-filling oaths’ that White found so sorely missing from today’s swearing (White 1963: 369). There are examples of this type in COED, for instance *Death, hell and Limbo be his share!* from the early seventeenth century and *The Devil take thy Foppery* from the period between 1680 and 1719 (COED).

Today expletive curses involving the Devil are a very small category – there are five examples of *the devil take* in the entire 100 million words in the BNC – and fighting a losing battle against the unfriendly suggestions like *Go to hell!* with which – from a practical point of view – they could as well be joined to form a single category.

Not surprisingly, curses of *the devil take* type are to be found in most of the other languages in Christian Europe – see the examples in section 5.2.4. However, even if these curses appear to be distributed fairly evenly across the European languages, they have become old-fashioned much faster in some of these languages than in others.

The Romance languages, for instance, all possess constructions corresponding to *the devil take*, such as for example French *le diable te/le prenne* ‘the devil take you/her/him/it’ and similar constructions in Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, but they seem to be regarded as somewhat old-fashioned. In the Germanic languages on the other hand, this type of curse is alive and well, especially in the Nordic languages (cf. section 5.2.4).

There is also a semantically closely related construction which may be used to replace *the devil take* and is common both in English and in other languages, viz. *to hell with*, which in my opinion is sufficiently close to *the devil take* to count as a curse. In comparison with *the devil take*, English *to hell with* is highly frequent, occurring 120 times in the 100 million words in the BNC. *To hell with* also has exact counterparts in many languages, for instance Danish, French, German, Hungarian, Norwegian, Polish and Swedish, and close enough counterparts in others.

What about that time-honoured curse word *damn*? The spoken component of the BNC contains no fewer than 348 instances of *damn*, but the great majority of these are adjectives or interjections and the number of unequivocal instances of *damn* as a curse is as low as 11 (including the two self-curses *Damn me!* but not the other-directed curse *Damn you!*).

There are also four English words used in cursing that draw on sexual taboos rather than religious ones, viz. *bugger*, *fuck*, *screw* and *sod*. Many of the constructions using these words are open to several interpretations,

which makes it difficult or even impossible to give an exact account of their cursing uses. The constructions that cause most problems are those in which these words are followed by *it* as in *Bugger it!*, *Fuck it!*, *Screw it!* and *Sod it!* which are in most cases idiomatic units used as interjections, but which may also be curses containing the pronouns *it* as a direct object.

The four English sex-based curses discussed above differ considerably in how often they are used in the 1-million-word corpus of spoken British English used here. It is not always possible to determine the exact number of curses since it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between curses and imperatives, for example in the case of utterances like *Fuck it!*, *Screw it!*, *Bugger it!* On a conservative estimate, however, *fuck* is the winner with between 70 and 80 cursing uses, followed by *bugger* with some 40 curse occurrences, including 16 self-curses of *Bugger me!*, *sod* with approximately 24 cursing occurrences and *screw* which turns up a mere 8 times in curses. When it comes to curses addressed to an interlocutor, *Fuck you!* reigns supreme with 44 occurrences to be compared with 5 instances of *Screw you!* There are no instances of *Bugger you!* and *Sod you!*

From the account above we may conclude that the two main contenders in contemporary (British) English cursing are *To hell with ...!* on the one hand, and *Fuck ...!* on the other. Although semantically close, they are not synonymous. There are contexts in the BNC in which only one of them appears, for instance in the position before the pronoun *you* where only *Fuck* is used. They are sufficiently similar to compete in other contexts, however, for example before animate and inanimate NPs and pronouns as in the following examples from the whole of the BNC:

(23) To hell with guests, she thinks. (AOU 533)

(24) Fuck commodity culture. (CGC 1198)

(25) To hell with them. (A18 827)

(26) Fuck them. (KDA 2240)

(27) To hell with Colonel Smith. (AKU 1341)

(28) Fuck Jane Austen. (BP4 634)

Finally we may wonder how long these two main contenders have been available to speakers. Given the religious content of *To hell with ...*, it might be thought that this expression has a much longer history than *Fuck*. However, according to Cassell – which defines *To hell with* as a dismissive exclamation meaning ‘be done with’ and *Fuck ...* as a synonym of *To hell with* – their debuts are a mere 100 years apart: *to hell with* dates back to the early nineteenth century and dismissive *fuck* to the 1920s.

5.2.4 A survey of curses in other languages

The above account of expletive curses has by and large focused on English with occasional comparisons with other languages. The following survey aims to give a fuller picture of cursing outside English but makes no claim to being complete:

- Arabic: *Yin'al mayteen ehlak* 'Your dead relative be cursed', *Yin'al yomak* 'cursed be the day on which you were born', *Allah Yela'an ...* 'God damn ...' Also *Elif air 'ab tizak* 'a thousand dicks up your arse', *Elif air 'ab deenikh* 'a thousand dicks up your religion', *Khara alaik* '(May there be) shit on you'
- Cantonese: *Hahm gāa cháan* 'may your whole family die'
- Danish: *Fanden tafandta ...* '(May) The Devil take ...'
- Dutch: *Loop naar de hel* 'Go to hell'
- French: (*Que*) *le diable l'emporte/prenne!* (rare) 'The devil take him/it'
- German: *Zum Teufel mit ...* 'to the (the devil) with', *Hol' dich etc. der Teufel* 'the devil take you (etc.)', *Den soll der Schlag treffen* 'May he have a stroke'
- Hungarian: *Az ördög vigye el* 'The devil take him', *A pokolba vele* 'to hell with him', *Lofasz a segedbe* 'a horse prick up your arse', *Baszon meg* 'may somebody fuck you'
- Icelandic: *Fjandin hafí ...* 'The devil take ...'
- Italian: *Che diavolo lo prenda!* 'The devil take him'
- Mandarin: *Qu ta ma de* 'to hell with'
- Norwegian: *Fan/Faen ta* 'The Devil take ...'
- Polish: *Do diała* 'to the devil', *Niech to diałli* 'to the devils', *Pierdol sie* 'may you be fucked'
- Portuguese (Brazilian): *Que o capeta carregue!* 'May the demon (devil) take you' *Pau no cú!* 'A prick in your arse'
- Russian: *Bud' ty proklyat/proklyata* 'May you be damned', *štob ty sdox* 'May you die', *štob yego čorti zabrali* 'May the devils take him'. Also *štoby u nego xuy na lbu vyros* 'May a prick grow from your forehead'
- Swedish: *Fan ta ...* 'the devil take', *Åt helvete med ...!* 'To hell with ...'

Estonian, Finnish, Greek, Hindi, Japanese, Spanish, Swahili, Turkish and Urdu seem to prefer unfriendly suggestions to curses. But this may simply be due to lack of information, however.

5.2.5 Self-cursing

We have had occasion at several points in the present study to comment on self-cursing. As Montagu's term 'self-adjurative swearing'

suggests, the point of self-cursing is the same as that of the oaths, viz. to strengthen the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition underlying his or her utterance by embedding it in a conditional construction of the type 'May something terrible happen to me + *if*-clause'. However, English does not normally use the modal *may* in such constructions but prefers the present tense as in (29), the future form *I'll* as in (30) and (31), or a subjunctive as in (32): (Note concerning (32): quite possibly the initial verb in such constructions may be an imperative as in *Shiver my/me timbers!*)

- (29) Well I've seen the toothbrush somewhere recently but I'm buggered if I can remember where. (BNC KC1 1067)
 (30) ... I'll be buggered if I'll ask permission of some pushy little perisher. (BNC GIS 1030)
 (31) ... buggered if I can tell the difference. (BNC H61 1702)
 (32) Damn me if she isn't right! (BNC GUG 1979)

As a result of the simplifying linguistic process of grammaticalization discussed in Chapter 1, the self-curses have often lost the conditional part of the original construction and have come to be used as interjections expressing the speaker's feelings. In this capacity they may be used as 'reactive interjections', viz. As mostly involuntary reactions to events in the surrounding world. They may also be used as responses in dialogues as for instance in examples (33) and (34) where the speakers have just received what they apparently regard as surprising information:

- (33) Well, I'll be damned! (BNC AT7 1694)
 (34) Oh bugger me. (BNC KCT 2182)

The final stage in the grammaticalization of the self-curses occurs when they do not merely serve as reactive interjections triggered by exterior events or as responses to new information as in (33) and (34), but have assumed speaker-related pragmatic functions, for instance to convey the speaker's attitude to (the proposition underlying) a following utterance or to express his/her epistemic attitude to the following utterance (cf. Chapter 4, pp. 84–5). Both seem to be present in the following examples from the BNC:

- (35) Bugger me, they've had some fun! (KCT 3286)
 (36) Bugger me there's no way I'm not doing it by the book! (KEG 9320)

In (35) *Bugger me* strengthens the speaker's commitment to the truth of the observation 'they've had some fun', while in (36) it adds extra emphasis to his/her decision not to bend the rules in some undertaking or other.

As could be expected, the grammaticalization process affecting self-curses often operates in conjunction with sometimes drastic formal changes. In Danish, for instance, the self-curse *Fand ta mig* 'The Devil take me' is now often realized as *Fandme*, literally 'Devil me'.

6

Ritual Insults, Name-Calling, Unfriendly Suggestions

6.0 Introduction

The three types of swearing mentioned in the title above all belong to the larger category of insults but are different enough to merit separate treatment. All of them basically resemble the curses discussed in Chapter 5 in directing the speaker's negative feelings at another person, usually the addressee. The standard insults, the unfriendly suggestions and name-calling express the speaker's feelings towards the addressee at the moment of speech. The curses, on the other hand, are verbal realizations of the speaker's wish that something evil should befall the addressee in the future and often contain invocations of heavenly or infernal powers.

There is no such invoking of other-worldly powers in the ritual insults, unfriendly suggestions and name-calling, and with the exception of a few unfriendly suggestions like e.g. *Go to hell!*, they operate in terms of more mundane taboo themes, chiefly – but not exclusively – the sex theme, the mother theme, the masturbation theme and the animal and disease themes.

The ritual insults, name-calling and the unfriendly suggestions differ among themselves in how they formulate their negative message and in several other respects. The stock-in-trade examples of ritual insults are the conventionalized disparaging remarks common in many different cultures involving reflections on the sexual mores of female relatives of the addressee, in particular mothers, and inviting some kind of verbal duelling. Unless it is obvious that the speaker intends his remarks to be regarded as ritual rather than personal, the use of such standard insults is apt to provoke the addressee's immediate indignation and often triggers immediate and violent response. In such cases, the insult

has turned from ritual to personal (cf. p. 118). In view of this it might be better to refer to the insults in question as 'standardized' or 'stereotypical'. For the present, however, I will keep the term 'ritual insult', which goes back to Labov's seminal (1972) paper, but the reader should keep in mind that the term as it is used here denotes a fairly limited set of standardized and formulaic insults that are often but not necessarily used in a ritual and bantering fashion. The actual wording of the insults used remains the same whether we call them ritual or something else.

In most cases, the violent reactions that may occur are probably not caused so much by the factual content of the speaker's disparaging remarks as by his (her) violating the central role assigned to mother-son – and brother-sister – relations in the male code of honour in many cultures. Sometimes, the speech act in question need not even be fully realized but merely alluded to and yet trigger immediate and violent response from the addressee. An instructive and unusually public demonstration of the forces that such allusions may unleash was provided in the televised 2006 World Cup soccer final, in which French soccer star Zinedine Zidane unexpectedly headbutted Italian defender Marco Materazzi after an altercation five minutes before the end of the game. Zidane was sent off and was disqualified from further play and from taking part in the ensuing penalty shoot-out, a self-inflicted punishment that probably contributed to Italy's 5-3 victory.

Zidane later apologized for what he had done but added that he did not regret his offence, because he felt that this would condone Materazzi's actions. The question is of course just what these actions were and how they could have prompted Zidane's ill-timed attack. Materazzi later offered his version of events, claiming that after he had grabbed Zidane's jersey, Zidane remarked, *If you want my shirt, I will give it to you afterwards*, to which Materazzi replied 'I would rather have your whore of a sister' (*Preferisco la puttana di tua sorella*). He then added 'I didn't even know he had a sister', a revealing remark that exposes the true nature of swearing (from Wikipedia).

The second type of insulting to be considered in the present chapter, name-calling, is a category of verbal abuse in which the speaker typically directs a disparaging epithet at the addressee; the epithets may also be used to refer insultingly to a third person. Most languages have an impressive stock of epithets taken from various semantic categories. There is considerable overlap between languages and cultures regarding the nature of the words that become members of these categories but we also find definite differences in that respect. However, it seems to be

the case in most languages that only a small subsection of the available epithets may be used in swearing.

The third type of insult to be considered in this chapter is that of unfriendly suggestions. The members of this category are suggestions or commands which are not interpreted literally but whose negative literal meaning determines the secondary meaning that they receive when used as swearing (Stroh-Wollin 2008: 32). Thus an utterance like *Go to hell!* is not normally interpreted as a real suggestion along the lines of *Go to Rome!*, *Go home!*, etc. In addition, *Go to hell!* conveys a negative attitude on the part of the speaker which is not as a rule present in *Go to Rome!*, etc.: telling somebody to go to Rome is not necessarily or even normally a negative act.

Finally, these differences suggest that the two seemingly parallel utterances represent different speech acts: *Go to Rome!* is a normal command and as such it is also a *compositional* string (cf. Chapter 1), viz. a string that can be interpreted in terms of our knowledge about English syntax and semantics and about the world we live in. *Go to hell!*, on the other hand, is a *formulaic* (cf. Chapter 1) string learnt as a separate speech act used in swearing to express the speaker's desire to be rid of the addressee. As we found in Chapter 1, formulaic strings do not accept formal changes, while compositional ones are more accommodating in that respect. It therefore comes as no surprise that the command *Go to Rome!* willingly accepts the addition of a time adverbial as in *Go to Rome tomorrow!* while *Go to hell!* does not, as proved by the unacceptable **Go to hell tomorrow!* For a discussion of compositionality and formulaicity cf. for example Hudson (1998: 8ff.) and Wray (2002: 9).

6.1 Insults and politeness theory

The three constructions discussed in the previous section were found to constitute separate speech acts aimed at producing different effects. However, for all their differences, all three may be subsumed under the larger speech act category of insults, a conclusion supported by the dictionary definitions of that word. According to the *OED*, the verb *insult* means 'to assail with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech or action; to treat with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect; to offer indignity to; to affront, outrage' and the corresponding noun is defined along similar lines. These definitions indicate that the larger category of insults has at least two main characteristics: insulting is treating others with a marked lack of respect and it causes those exposed to

it – the targets – to experience feelings of shame and dishonour. In terms of speech act definitions, the descriptions in the dictionary thus emphasize both the illocutionary and the perlocutionary effects of the speech act(s) of insulting (cf. Jucker and Taavitsainen 2000: 68 for a slightly different view).

The notion of respect is crucially connected with the notion of politeness, a topic that has attracted the attention of numerous linguists as far back as the 1960s. Among the well-known early treatments mention must be made of Leech (1983), Levinson (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Lakoff (1989). Although exceptions may be found, the general assumption underlying those early studies was that politeness was a ‘means of minimizing confrontation in discourse’ (Lakoff 1989: 102), also quoted in Culpeper (1996: 350), and impoliteness was simply the lack of positive politeness.

This notion has since been challenged by several scholars. Thus in Culpeper (1996) and Culpeper et al. (2003), the author announces that his goal is to investigate impoliteness and to suggest a set of impoliteness strategies. In these studies a distinction is made between five different kinds of impoliteness (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1556): bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm and the withholding of politeness.

It is clear that the type of insults that we are concerned with in the present study belongs fairly and squarely to Culpeper’s second category, viz. that of positive impoliteness, defined as ‘ignore, snub, fail to attend to hearer’s needs, avoid agreement and use taboo language, swear, be abusive’. In fact, for our present purposes only the second half of the definition is interesting, and in that second half it is only the ‘swear, be abusive’ part that refers to insults.

Other studies of politeness have taken a more direct interest in the speech act category of insults, for example Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000) which is an attempt to define and describe English insults diachronically. Although their paper is a diachronic study, it offers an analysis of insults that can be carried over to a synchronic study and I will now proceed to analyse my three insult categories in terms of (some of) Jucker and Taavitsainen’s principles.

In Jucker and Taavitsainen’s opinion, the category of insults can be reduced to three essential elements (2000: 71), viz. (a) the speaker makes a predication about the target (or about some part of his/her social identity, e.g. his/her profession); (b) the predication made is regarded as inappropriate and demeaning by the target and (c) the target experiences this predication as a face-threatening speaker intention, i.e. s/he

believes that the speaker made the predication with the intention to hurt him or her. The first two elements are obligatory if an utterance is to be regarded as an insult. The third element is usually also present but the authors allow for possible exceptions in cases where the target does not realize that s/he has been insulted.

In an interesting addition to the description of the three elements that make up an insult, Jucker and Taavitsainen discuss utterances containing a predication about a third party somehow connected to the addressee, an addition that makes it possible to define the 'ritual insults' involving close female relatives discussed in section 6.0 as insults targeting the addressee.

They also suggest that insults – and speech acts in general – should be analysed in terms of pragmatic space, a pragmatic notion corresponding to the semantic notion of semantic field (2000: 72). The pragmatic space of insults contains a number of dimensions of which four are particularly relevant for the purposes of the present discussion. The four dimensions are: the ritual vs creative dimension, the truth-conditional vs performative dimension, the conventionalized vs particular dimension, and the speaker attitude dimension.

The first of these harks back to the well-known distinction between ritual and personal insults first made in Labov (1972: 265–314) in his description of verbal play among black American adolescents known as sounding, sometimes also called playing the dozens and signifying. (It appears that a distinction is made between the three terms; sounding is used about the initial exchanges, signifying is used for personal insults, playing the dozens is used about insults on relatives. Cf. Labov (1972: 274).)

Labov's original distinction between ritual and personal insults was intended to distinguish between on the one hand insulting as a ritual in the sense of part of a verbal duel between participants familiar with the rules of the verbal play and who know how to respond in kind, and on the other insulting which is personal, i.e. which is intended to really offend the addressee. (Jucker and Taavitsainen use the term 'creative' instead of Labov's 'personal'.)

Jucker and Taavitsainen's second dimension – that opposing truth-conditional to performative insults – distinguishes between those predications about the addressee that are testable and may well be true, and those predications that are 'blatantly untrue' and merely face-threatening. They exemplify this distinction by pointing to the difference between slanders and slurs on the one hand and name-calling and what they call 'expletives', on the other.

The truth-conditional vs performative distinction is linked to the ritual versus personal distinction in dimension one. An obvious way to signal that an insult is intended to be ritual or bantering rather than personal and hence not intended to wound the addressee, is to make it clear that the initial insult is not intended as a true statement. Doing that convincingly is not always easy; a common method is to make one's claim about the addressee so bizarre as to be patently ridiculous. In his 1972 paper (1972: 270), Labov gives an example of this technique taken from a dialogue between two members of the Jets, a group of Afro-American teenage boys in south central Harlem. The speakers are Rel, the 'president' of the Jets and Stanley, another Jet member. The conversation goes like this:

- Rel: Shut up please!
 Stanley: Hey, you telling me?
 Rel: Yes. Your mother's a duck.

In the above seemingly absurd exchange, Rel uses a well-known formulaic utterance type recognized by all present as a ritual insult of the type *Your mother is ...*, but one in which the predicate complement noun is patently absurd. According to Labov (1972: 270), the reason for this move from the speaker is to make it impossible for the addressee to regard the speaker's utterance as a real, personal insult, viz. nobody says *Your mother is a duck* and actually means what he says. By saying what he says, Rel defuses a potentially explosive situation which had the potential of developing into open conflict.

Ritual insulting in Europe has a long history: as we found in Chapter 3, it is related to English and above all Scottish sixteenth-century verbal duelling known as *flyting* and also to poems like *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c.1250) and in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fools* (c.1380). Flyting can be traced back even further, viz. to the Icelandic sagas.

Similar kinds of verbal duelling are also found in other cultures. According to Crystal (1997: 60), it has been studied 'in places as far afield as Africa, the Near East, Greenland and the Americas'. There are also several relevant entries in the Linguist List, among them references to ritual insulting in Brazilian Portuguese and mutual fetish insulting among the Shawnee in the US.

In Labov's 1972 paper it was suggested that there must be consensus among all participants in such exchanges that the insults used should all be considered as untrue and taken in a non-serious way

(Labov 1972: 299): 'What is normal and automatic for a personal insult is unthinkable with sounds.' However as Culpeper et al. (2003: 1567–8) point out, verbal conflicts may take other, more varied, forms and the participants often adopt different strategies: one may choose to practise genuine impoliteness and use personal insults while the target responds by using 'ritualistic banter' (Culpeper et al.'s term, 2003: 1568), thus taking the edge off the other party's genuine impoliteness.

The third dimension in Jucker and Tavistainen's pragmatic space for insults contrasts conventionalized and particularized insults. The former are expressions that are recognized and understood as insults by all members of the speech community such as 'slandorous remarks, contemptuous remarks, name calling and demeaning expletives', all expressions whose illocutionary force 'encodes the intention to have a particular perlocutionary effect' in Jucker and Tavitsainen's opinion (2000: 74). I take this to mean that such insults are formulaic, viz. that they show little or no formal variation and that their insulting meanings stay the same. If so, this is an excellent description of the three swearing categories that I have been discussing here – the ritual insults, the unfriendly suggestions and name-calling.

6.2 Realizations of ritual insults

Probably the best way to study both the ritual insults and the abusive terms used in name-calling is to begin with their themes. Both of these categories have certain favourite taboo themes, the most popular one overall in all the languages studied here being the 'mother theme', viz. (usually sexual) allegations about the addressee's mother (or sister and other female relatives). Although the use of the mother theme in English insults was highlighted by Labov and others writing about the use of ritual insults among black Americans (cf. Labov 1972, Kochman 1983), it does not appear to be widely used in other types of American English outside these groups, at least not in the full form of the ritual verbal duels known as sounding, etc. However, mention should be made in this connection of a less offensive use of the mother theme which is widespread among American children and adolescents in the shape of taunts with beginnings like *Your momma is so fat/ugly/dumb/stupid (that) she ...* or *You Momma is like a/an ...*.

According to Labov (1972: 305) the more elaborate sounds may be simplified to 'generalized insults' in which the proposition expected to occur immediately after the obligatory initial *Your mother ...* has simply

been deleted, leaving abbreviated but still useful taunts like *Your mother!* which may lead to exchanges like the following:

A: Your mother!

B: Your father!

A: Your uncle!

In the opinion of Dalby (1972: 183) the use of the mother theme in black American English is due to the influence from the West African languages – Mandingo and Wolof – spoken in those parts of Africa from which the majority of the Africans brought to America were abducted by the slave traders. Whatever the truth of this, the use of ritual insults based on the mother theme is widespread, as indicated by the account in Table 6.1 of the distribution of mother-theme insults in languages other than English in my data.

Table 6.1 shows a clear patterning of mother-theme usage across languages/cultures. The theme in question is used in all the Romance languages (but apparently less so in French than in the others), in Chinese, the Slavic languages, Hindi and Urdu, Greek and Turkish, Arabic, Hungarian and Swahili but not – at least not on an important scale – in Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, German, Icelandic, Japanese, Norwegian or Swedish.

Table 6.1 Distribution of mother-theme insults

Arabic: <i>Kuss ummak!</i> 'Your mother's vagina'
Cantonese: <i>Néih lóuh móu!</i> 'Your mother', <i>Mahn hauh leih lóuh móu!</i> 'Regards to your mother'
French: <i>Ta mère!</i> 'Your mother', <i>Je nique ta mère!</i> 'I fuck your mother'
Greek: <i>To mouni 'tis manas sou!</i> 'Your mother's'
Hindi: <i>Ma ki chut!</i> 'Your mother's'
Hungarian: <i>Az anyad picsaja!</i> 'Your mother's vagina'
Italian: <i>Tua madre/mamma!</i> 'Your mother', <i>La fica de tua mamma!</i> 'Your mother's vagina'
Mandarin: <i>Tā- mā-de!</i> 'Your mother's', <i>Mā-de-bī!</i> 'Your mother's cunt'
Portuguese: <i>So mae é uma puta!</i> 'Your mother is a whore'
Russian: <i>Tvoju 'mat'!</i> 'Your mother', <i>Yob tvoju' māt'!</i> 'Somebody fucked your mother'
Spanish: <i>Tu madre!</i> 'Your mother', <i>Tu puta madre!</i> 'Your whore of a mother'
Swahili: <i>Kuma mamayo!</i> 'Your mother's vagina', <i>Mamako!</i> 'Your mother'
Turkish: <i>Anani!</i> 'Your mother', <i>Ananın ami!</i> 'Your mother's vagina'
Urdu: <i>Teri me ki podi!</i> 'Your mother's'

This distribution has less to do with languages than with cultures: Finnish and Hungarian both belong to the family of Finno-Ugric languages, but while the former has no instances of the mother theme, the latter makes liberal use of it. Sometimes linguistic and cultural boundaries coincide: the inhabitants of Germanic-language areas do not as a rule use the mother theme in their swearing, with the important exception of English, in particular American English.¹

However, the distribution of swearing types described above is no longer as fixed as it used to be: as a result of steadily increasing immigration from cultures in which mother-theme insults are common, at least one of the Germanic languages above – Swedish – now has sizeable groups of young speakers to whom swearing in terms of the mother theme is entirely natural. In a small but interesting questionnaire-based study of the swearing habits of schoolchildren in Tensta, a Stockholm suburb largely dominated by immigrants from mother-theme-using cultures, the children were asked to give examples of typical swearing.² The results of this study are shown in Table 6.2.

The swearing in Table 6.2 uses exclusively sexual terms and five of the ten suggestions – *Din mamma!*, *Horunge!*, *Mammaknullare!*, *Knulla din mamma!* and *Din mamma är en hora!* – use the mother theme. Such swearing differs radically from traditional Swedish swearing, which is predominantly religious (diabolic) and scatological.

I mentioned earlier that the mother theme is not restricted to what I have called the ritual insults but is also common in unfriendly suggestions and also – but to a much lesser extent – in name-calling. We shall turn our attention to these constructions presently. Before doing that, however, we should ask ourselves what taboo themes other than the mother theme are used in ritual insults.

Judging from the languages that make up my data in the present study, the answer to that question is: ‘Surprisingly few’. Greek has a

Table 6.2 Swedish swearing in the Tensta study

<i>Hora!</i> (Whore)	15
<i>Fuck you!</i>	14
<i>Din mamma!</i> (Your mother)	13
<i>Horunge!</i> (Whorebrat)	11
<i>Mammaknullare!</i> (Motherfucker)	9
<i>Knulla din mamma!</i> (Fuck your mother)	9
<i>Knulla dig!</i> (Fuck yourself)	7
<i>Fitta!</i> (Cunt)	7
<i>Kuksugare!</i> (Cocksucker)	7
<i>Din mamma är en hora!</i> (Your mother is a whore)	6

number of standard insults beginning with the word *Gamó* 'I fuck' as in *Sou gamó ti mana* 'I fuck your mother', *Gamó to stavró sou!*, literally 'I fuck you cross' and *Gamó to Cristó sou!* 'I fuck your God'. Greek also uses scatological insults like *Skatá ston táfo sou!* 'I shit on your grave'. Spanish uses a similar kind of scatological insult beginning with the words *Me cago en* 'I shit on'. However, the Spanish expressions are much more common as interjections like *Me cago en Dios!* literally 'I shit on God', with the euphemistic variants *Cagondios!* and *Caguendios!*

The above account of taboo themes used in ritual insults is by no means exhaustive. There are languages using ritual insults based on themes quite different from the ones found in the 25 languages discussed here. Thus according to Samarin (1969), in Gbeya, a language spoken in the Central African Republic, insults take the form of physical descriptions like 'You have a wide mouth', 'Your mouth is as flabby as the arse of an elephant', and 'You have a big nose'. In the same vein Swadesh (1933) describes how speakers of the now defunct American Indian language Chitimacha used bynames like 'big-mouth', 'big-foot' and 'long-ear' as insults.

Similar expressions involving the sex organs are reported from the Australian language Wik Monkan in Montagu (1967: 15). Montagu refers to these expressions as 'more serious swearing', giving among others the examples *kuntjitti* 'big penis', *untitti* 'big scrotum' addressed to a man, and *po'o kati* 'enlarged clitoris' and *po'o ka onk* 'long clitoris' (literally 'vagina nose').

In all these cases the researchers in question clearly considered the insults to constitute swearing in the respective languages and cultures. Admittedly, however, it is difficult to say whether these insults meet the criteria for swearing used in the present study, in particular since we do not know whether and to what extent the insults in question violated taboos in the respective cultures.

Let us now return to a taboo theme touched upon earlier – death. Death turned out to be a prominent swearing theme in Chinese curses like Cantonese *Hahm gaa chaan!* 'May your whole family die'. But there are also languages which use constructions referring to death in what look very much like ritual insults. I am referring to the expression 'Your dead relatives' mentioned in Chapter 2, a theme apparently capable of violating important taboos in a number of linguistic varieties that are both geographically and culturally far apart. One of these is the dialect spoken in the Italian city Varese,³ another the now defunct language Yurok spoken in north-western California and a third the language spoken by certain Australian aborigines (Montagu 1967: 11–18).

In the dialect of the Italian city Varese, the expression *Gli mortacci tua!* (*Gli mortacci tuoi*) ‘Your dead relatives’ is used as an insult and a provocation. According to Bright (1980), more or less the same insult was used in the American Indian language Yurok. Bright relates a story involving a young Yurok Indian who falls out with three other tribe members. As the argument escalates, the young man starts swearing at the others. Finally – in the words of a witness – he ‘swore the worst he could: he said “All your dead relatives”!’ (Bright 1980: 180).

A similar claim is made in Montagu (1967: 12) concerning the use of the names of dead relatives as a kind of swearing among certain Australian aborigines. Unlike Bright, Montagu takes a much less severe view of this kind of swearing, referring to Thomson (1935: 465) who describes it ‘a mild and innocuous oath’.

Bright’s opinion receives support from for example Burrige (2006) who holds that ‘In many societies, names of the dead are (or were until recently) taboo Violations of such taboos are believed to cause misfortune, sickness, and death; they may also cause offense to living descendants’ (2006: 452). If an utterance causes offensiveness, it obviously counts as an insult.

The information in Burrige is also helpful in another respect. We may have wondered whether all the insults discussed above really qualify as swearing as that term is defined in the present study (cf. Chapter 1). Now if – as Burrige claims – ‘violations of such taboos are believed to cause misfortune, sickness and death’, they obviously threaten to bring down the same punishment from ‘higher powers’ as that once associated in Christian cultures with swearing taking the Lord’s name in vain. It is hard to see what more you can ask from swearing.

6.3 Realizations of name-calling

Name-calling is a type of insulting illocutionary act that is similar to the ritual insults both with regard to the taboo themes involved and in being addressed to people who have incurred the speaker’s dislike. Name-calling differs from the ritual insults in several respects, in particular in being a larger and more varied category. In fact name-calling is probably a strong contender for the distinction of being a universal linguistic category: all languages need constructions expressing the speaker’s opinion of other people (and occasionally things).

In order to do that they need not only constructions permitting this but also a set of *evaluative nouns*, nouns expressing the speaker’s favourable or unfavourable opinion. Before we discuss the constructions we need to take a closer look at the words they use.

The evaluative nouns may be contrasted with 'ordinary' classifying or *denotative* terms for different kinds of people such as *architect*, *carpenter*, *human*, words that do not normally express the speaker's attitude to the people referred to by these terms but merely categorize them. (Note, however, that 'normally' is the keyword here: when speakers really put their minds to it, they are surprisingly often capable of loading even very factual terms with feeling.)

As we found in the discussion of name-calling in Chapter 2, there are two kinds of evaluative nouns, those expressing the speaker's positive feelings concerning others and those conveying his/her negative attitudes which are also known as *epithets*. Finally, the epithets may be either expletive or non-expletive. The members of the first category are taboo words like *arsehole*, *bastard*, *wanker*; those in the second are non-taboo words like *fool*, *idiot*, *wimp*. This classification can be illustrated by means of a tree diagram like the one shown in Figure 6.1.

This neat-looking classification is complicated by the fact that what the diagram describes is really the different *uses* of words. Words are not always or even normally members of only a single category. Certain words are more naturally members of a certain category than of others, for instance the occupational nouns *architect*, *carpenter*, *consultant*. However, if need be even those nouns may be treated as members of the evaluative category and inserted in utterances like for example *Don't be such an architect!*

The words *arsehole*, *bastard* and *wanker* have been placed in the expletive epithet slot in the diagram and that is where they fit in when

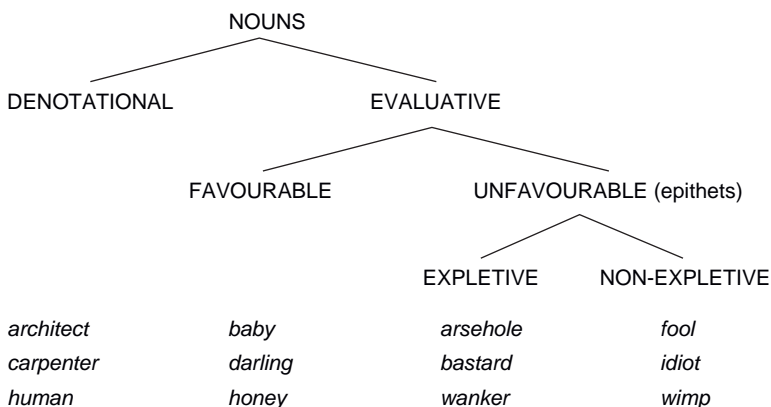


Figure 6.1 Classification of evaluative nouns

they are used as swear words. However, these words may also be said to belong to the denotational category. As denotational nouns, *bastard* and *wanker* are used with reference to human beings, the first meaning 'illegitimate son' and the second 'masturbator'. Denotational *arsehole* on the other hand is no longer a noun denoting humans but the vulgar term for the anus.

The development of the expletive meanings of these words has followed quite different routes. *Arsehole* was not originally a word denoting people at all. According to Cassell, it is first recorded as an anatomical term meaning 'anus' in the mid-sixteenth century and had to wait until the 1930s to become an expletive used about people.

The words *bastard* and *wanker* on the other hand have always denoted people but have very different backgrounds. *Bastard* was originally a denotational noun related to French *bâtard*;⁴ it was used about William the Conqueror in the eleventh century with the meaning 'illegitimate son', which in fact he was. Several hundred years later *bastard* developed the second meaning 'despicable person', first recorded in the sixteenth century according to Cassell.

In the case of *wanker*, finally, the semantic development was quite different, if development it was. According to both Cassell and CNPD the verb *wank* and the noun *wanker* were first recorded in the 1940s as a term for 'masturbate' and 'masturbator'. *Wanker* seems to have developed its expletive meaning 'lazy, incompetent person' almost at the same time as it began to be used with the literal meaning 'masturbator'.

The simultaneous or almost simultaneous development of expletive and literal meanings found in *wanker* is not unusual. According to Cassell, the noun *cocksucker* was invented or at least first recorded as a term for persons engaging in fellatio in the late nineteenth century and started being used as an abusive term for people around 1910. The same semantic simultaneity also characterized the development of many other abusive terms, for instance *motherfucker*, *fuckarse* and *tosser* to mention just a few.

6.3.1 The name-calling constructions

The presentation of name-calling in Chapter 2 (sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2) mentioned five distinct name-calling constructions. To begin with there is the archetypical kind of name-calling, viz. the direct address ('vocative') exclamations with or without an initial *You* used to express the speaker's negative attitude towards the addressee.

By testing different nouns in such utterances we can conclude that the nouns *traitor*, *idiot* and *snob*, for example, are all epithets, while for

example *teacher*, *judge* and *parent* are not, as shown by the respective success and failure of the following examples:

- (1) You traitor/idiot/snob!
- (2) Traitor/Idiot/Snob!
- (3) *You teacher/judge/parent!
- (4) *Teacher!/Judge!/Parent!

(The utterance *You teachers!* on the other hand is certainly well-formed, but does not have the same meaning (speech act force) as *You teacher!*)

Note, however, that the insertion test becomes less reliable above if we insert disparaging or negative adjectives like for example *bloody* or *stupid* in front of a noun that is not in itself an epithet as in (5):

- (5) You bloody/stupid teacher(s)!

In utterances like (5) the speaker actually creates a kind of epithet NP by including *bloody* before a normally non-epithet noun (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: section 10.53 (d)).

Secondly, there are exclamations directing the speaker's negative feelings towards a third party in exchanges like the following (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: section 5.37):

- (6) (John's bought a new car again!) – The fool/idiot!

This use of epithets can only be described in terms of discourse categories: the exclamation *The fool/idiot!* must be a *response* to information provided by an interlocutor. It could also be a response to something the speaker her/himself experiences in which a third party behaves in a way regarded as foolish or idiotic by the speaker.

A third construction type open to epithets but not to non-epithets is that exemplified by (7) in which the epithet is used predicatively to express the speaker's dislike of an addressee or a third party:

- (7) John is/You are an idiot/fool/John is/You are such a fool/an idiot.

In addition to the above three types of name-calling there are two slot-filler constructions: the anaphoric use of epithets as in (8) and the use of epithets as noun supports as in (9):

- (8) Martin borrowed my car but the idiot/fool never told me about it.
- (9) Have you met Martin? – Yes he's a clever fellow/chap/sort.

The words that were successfully inserted in the above frames were all non-expletive epithets. But obviously the epithet slots above also welcome expletive epithets such as *bastard*, *son of a bitch*, etc. – cf. (10)–(14):

- (10) You bastard/son of a bitch/dickhead!/Bastard!/Son of a bitch!
 (11) John refuses to pay for the meal. – The bastard/son of a bitch!
 (12) You are a (real) bastard/You are such a bastard /son of a bitch!
 (13) John borrowed my car but the bastard/son of a bitch/never told me about it.
 (14) Have you met Basil? – Yes he’s a clever bastard/son of a bitch.

In (14) the expletive epithets have lost their negative meaning and have become neutral words corresponding to *fellow*, *chap*, *person*, *sort*. As Table 6.3 in the next section indicates, this final ungendering has affected relatively few expletive epithets in addition to *bastard* and *son of a bitch*, mainly *bugger*, *fucker* and *sod*.

In addition to (10)–(14) above, mention should be made of yet another name-calling construction, viz. that in (15) which is a borrowing from Philip Caputo’s novel *A Rumour of War* (1977: 185):

- (15) Those mothers make a hell of a noise.

(15) is uttered when the speaker passes a gun emplacement from which heavy guns are being fired. This means that it is *deictic* – ‘pointing to’ – rather than anaphoric like *bastard*, etc. in example (13). It is also unusual in that *mothers* – short for *motherfuckers* – is used about objects rather than human beings. While it is clearly possible to replace *mothers* in (15) with other expletives like *bastards*, *sons of bitches*, etc., it is difficult to come up with non-expletive alternatives to *mothers* in that utterance. That may mean that in (15) – an example in which the epithet is used deictically with regard to an object rather than to a human – we have found that rare thing – an epithet construction accepting *only* expletive epithets.

An interesting question that arises in connection with examples (13) and (14) is whether these types of name-calling may be applied independently of the sex of the person involved. For obvious reasons we must refrain from gender-specific epithets like *motherfucker* and *son of a bitch* in examples involving women, but once that has been taken care of, is it possible to use constructions like (16) and (17)?

- (16) Sheila borrowed my car but the bastard/bugger/never told me about it.
 (17) Have you met Sheila? – Yes she’s a clever bastard/bugger.

Even after the removal of gender-specific words like *son of a bitch*, etc. there are native speakers who are hesitant regarding the use of *bastard* and *bugger* about women, an attitude which is at least partially shared by the slang dictionaries. Thus while Cassell defines *bastard* in this general sense as 'a general form for a man, person or any form of creature and thing', CNPD defines it as 'a fellow, a man'. With regard to *bugger*, Cassell takes the view that it means 'a person, usually a man' and CNPD takes a similar stand, defining *bugger* as 'a person, a regular fellow'.

6.4 The major English expletive epithets

So far, the discussion of name-calling has focused on different types of epithets and the difference between epithets and non-epithets. Mention has been made of a number of individual epithets, both expletive and non-expletive, but there has been no full presentation of the English expletive epithets. The purpose of the present section is to go some way towards filling that gap.

Table 6.3 contains some of the most common expletive epithets in (mainly) British and American English selected from *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* referred to here as Cassell. The table does not claim to be complete: for one thing it has not been possible to include all of Cassell's meanings for the entries in the Table 6.3, and for another it is obvious that many more items could have been added. However, the point of the exercise is not to account for all English expletive epithets but to highlight some of the most prominent members of the category and throw some light on their history.

Table 6.3 contains several different types of information about the words: the original literal meaning of the word, the present meaning or meanings of the word, the dates when the present and the original meanings were first recorded⁵ and where applicable, their country of origin.

Perhaps the most obvious type of information provided by the table is that for many expletive epithets there is a clear difference between the present-day uses/meanings of the words which are non-denotative and merely express the speaker's negative opinion, and the original meanings of these words which are considerably older and in certain cases go back several hundred – in some cases a thousand – years.

The majority of the epithets in Table 6.3 started out as denotative terms and developed metaphorical abusive meanings only later, in some cases much later. This seems to be the case for *arsehole*, *asshole*, *bastard*, *bitch*, *bugger*, *cunt*, *dick*, *dickhead*, *fart*, *fuck*, *fucker*, *prat*, *prick*, *shit*, *sod*, *turd*, *twat*. Of the others, a substantial number have obviously been

Table 6.3 The major English expletive epithets

<i>Word</i>	<i>Literal meaning</i>	<i>Epithet</i>
Arsehole	Anus 1379	General derogatory term 1930+UK
Asshole	Anus mid-19C US	Fool 1930s US
Bastard	Illegitimate son 11C	Contemptible person 16C+ Man, person, fellow 1910s UK
Bitch	Female dog 1000	Derogatory term for woman early 17C
Bugger	Participant in anal sex 1555 UK	Man, person, fellow early 18C
Cockhead	Cock+head	General term of abuse 1970s Aus/US
Cocksucker	Fellator/trix late 19C US	Sycophant 19C US Abusive term 1910s US Object with no pejorative implications 1980s US
Cunt	Vagina 1230 UK	Derogatory term for woman 18C UK Fool of either sex 20C+
Dick	Penis mid-19C US	Fool 1960s
Dickhead	Dick+head	Fool, incompetent 1960s
Fart	Act of breaking wind 1386	Fool, unpleasant person mid 18C; 1930s
Fuck	Act of copulation mid-17C	Despicable person 1920s
Fuckarse/ass	Fuck+arse	General term of contempt 1960s+
Fuckbrain	Fuck+brain	Fool, simpleton 1960s+
Fucker	Participant in sexual intercourse	General derogatory term 19C Man, fellow 1920s
Fuckface	Fuck+face	Fool, idiot 1960s+ US
Fuckhead	Fuck+head	Fool, idiot 1960s+ US
Fuckwit	Fuck+wit	Fool 1980s Aus
Jerk-off	Act of masturbation 1920s	Useless person 1930s
Mother	Abbr. mother fucker 1950s US	See motherfucker
Motherfucker	Mother+fucker insult 1920s US	Anything one dislikes 1940s+ Used with a variety of meanings 1950s US
Prat	Buttocks 1567	General term of abuse 1960s UK
Prick	Penis mid-16C	Idiot, fool, incompetent 1920s+ US
Shit	Diarrhoea 1000	Contemptible person late 19C
Sod	Male homosexual late 19C	Unpleasant person early 19C UK Person, fellow usually with adjective 19C UK

Table 6.3 Continued

Word	Literal meaning	Epithet
Son of a bitch	Bicce-sonne 1330	Derogatory term of abuse 17C+ US
Tosser	Masturbator 1970s UK	Person, fellow, thing 1950s+ US Despicable worthless person 1970s UK
Turd	Piece of excrement 1000	Unappealing person/object mid 15C UK
Twat	Vagina 1656 UK	Abusive epithet 1929
Wanker	Masturbator 1978 UK	Term of abuse 1970s Aus/UK

created as expletive epithets and may never have had much use for any original literal meanings, viz. *cockhead*, *cocksucker*, *dickhead*, *fuckarse*, *fuckbrain*, *fuckface*, *fuckhead*, *fuckwit*, *jerk-off*, *motherfucker*, *tosser*, *wanker*. *Mother* is just an abbreviation of *motherfucker*.

A few of the epithets above have developed neutral meanings like 'person', 'man', 'fellow', 'woman', 'thing' and may be used as noun supports for adjectives. For at least two of them – *bugger* and *sod* – this is now their only meaning. Others have also developed such meanings beside their more negative meanings, for instance *cocksucker*, *cunt*, *fucker*, *mother(fucker)*, *son of a bitch*.

Other terms seem to have begun a process of developing such neutral meanings or even to have recently completed that process. Thus according to CNPD the word *bitch* is currently used with the meaning 'woman' at least by certain speakers, for example those involved in rap music performances.

Many of the epithets above are shared between British and American English. There are certain well-known differences, however. We are more likely to find *asshole*, *cocksucker*, *dick*, *dickhead*, *dipshit*, *fuckface*, *fuckhead*, *jerk-off*, *mother/motherfucker*, *piece of shit*, *prick* and *son of a bitch* in American English. In addition, the word *bastard* with the meaning 'fellow/person' is more common in the US according to CNPD. As for the mainly British words, I have already mentioned *sod* as an exclusively British word. Other predominantly British epithets are *arsehole*, *bugger*, *prat*, *wanker*.

The epithet *fuckwit* is mostly used in Australian English, a variety whose supply of abusive terms is allegedly unique and has developed a 'distinctive array of insults and swear-words' as Hughes (1991: 176) puts it. Hughes also refers to a nineteenth-century visitor to Australia by

the name of Hayworth in whose opinion the extent to which profane swearing was used in New South Wales was ‘hardly conceivable but by those who have actually witnessed it’.

6.4.1 The taboo themes used in English expletive epithets

Like other words used in swearing, the expletive epithets use words whose meanings reflect a number of taboo themes or areas. The English expletive epithets under discussion represent nine taboo themes, viz. animal, fellatio, illegitimacy, masturbation, motherfucking, scatology, sexual intercourse, the sex organs and sodomy. As the following list in Table 6.4 indicates, these nine taboo areas differ considerably in terms of the number of epithets they are connected with. (The list does not take into account the fact that many of the epithets are connected with more than a single taboo theme.)

As the list makes very clear, the dominant taboo areas are scatology, the sex act and the sex organs with 6 instances each and which accordingly have 18 of the instances. Sodomy and masturbation have three instances each, illegitimacy and the motherfucker two instances each and animal and fellatio one each.

6.4.2 Taboo themes found in expletive epithets in other languages

How do these results from English compare with what we find for the other 24 languages in the data? In order to answer that question we need to find out what taboo areas are involved in the expletive epithets used in the other languages. Not unexpectedly, it turns out that we need to add a number of taboo areas to account for all these languages, increasing the number of taboos to the following 13: animal, disease, fellatio, filth, illegitimacy, masturbation, motherfucker, prostitution, religion, scatology, sex act, sex organs, sodomy.

Table 6.4 Distribution of English expletive epithets across taboo themes

Scatology	arsehole, asshole, fart, prat, shit, turd(6)
Sex act	fuck, fuckbrain, fucker, fuckface, fuckhead, fuckwit (6)
Sex organs	cockhead, cunt, dick, dickhead, prick, twat (6)
Sodomy	bugger, fuckass/fuckarse, sod (3)
Masturbation	jerk-off, tosser, wanker (3)
Illegitimacy	bastard, son-of-a-bitch (2)
Motherfucker	motherfucker, mother (2)
Animal	bitch (1)
Fellatio	cocksucker (1)

Animal

There are a number of animal-related epithets. Only some of these are clear instances of swear words, above all the words meaning 'carrion', 'roadkill', such as German *Aas*, Icelandic *oþokk*, Russian *padla*, Swedish *as* and Spanish *carroña* and for words corresponding to English *bitch* like Hindi *kutiya* and Turkish *kopek*. The words for dog, pig and donkey are used as epithets in many languages but have too much remaining metaphorical meaning to count as swear words as defined in Chapter 1: dogs and pigs are associated with filth and donkeys are stubborn but stupid. (As noted in the discussion of swearing in Ancient Egyptian in Chapter 3, donkeys may also be associated with strong sexual urges.)

Disease

The names of certain diseases such as the pox and the plague are not uncommon as interjections. However, there is only a single instance of this usage as an epithet in my data, viz. in Polish *cholernik*, an abusive term meaning 'trouble-maker' and derived from the word *cholera*.

Fellatio

Words corresponding to English *cocksucker* may be found as substandard merely descriptive terms in all languages. It is hard to tell how many of them have taken on the characteristics of swearing in the manner of English *cocksucker*. However, Estonian *türameja*, German *Schwanzlutscher* and Russian *xúj (e)soska* seem to be strong candidates.

Filth

The only filth-based epithets in my data are French *salaud*, female *salope*, which are derivations from the adjective *sale* 'filthy' and are used as offensive terms with a meaning roughly corresponding to English *bastard*. The swearing status of these terms is unclear.

Illegitimacy

Illegitimacy is one of the main taboo themes in swearing, and words meaning 'illegitimate son' are used as epithets in 13 of the languages studied here besides English. The following is an account of the expressions found in these languages.

Arabic uses terms like *Ibn-Al-Himar* 'son of a donkey', *Ibn-Al-Kalib* 'son of a dog', *Ibn-Al-Kalba* 'son of a bitch'. Another less transparent Arabic term is *Ya khorg* meaning 'donkey saddle', a metaphor of the same type as *bastard* originally meaning 'son of the saddle'. What is intimated in

both cases is that somebody's father was an itinerant donkey or horse rider who did not stay long in one and the same place. The implications for the mother are obvious.

The dog/bitch metaphor also turns up in Greek *skilogeniméni*, Hindi/Urdu *kuti ka bacha*, Turkish *it oglu it* and Urdu *khuti ka bacha*, all meaning 'son of a bitch'. Similar expressions are Mandarin Chinese *lú-dàn* 'donkey child' and Turkish *eshek oglu eshek* 'son of a donkey' and *hayvan oglu hayvan* 'son of a beast'.

Another popular theme is found in French *filz de pute*, German *Hurensohn*, Italian *figlio di puttana/puta*, Polish *sukinsyn* or *skurwisyn*, Portuguese *filho da puta*, Russian *sukinsyn*, Spanish *hijo de (gran) puta*, all with the literal meaning 'son of a whore'.

The themes above may also be formulated differently, for instance by claiming that somebody's father is unknown, which we find in Turkish *Onun bubun cocogu* 'child with unknown father' and the Mandarin Chinese expressions *wàng běn* 'unknown origin' and *go-niang yang da* 'raised by a dog's mother'. Finally, from the same language we have *wáng-bādàn* which rather confusingly may mean 'eggs of the turtle' but can also be interpreted as 'child of a cuckolded man'. In Mandarin, *dan* is the word for 'egg' but is also a pejorative term for 'offspring', and *wang ba* may mean either 'turtle' or 'cuckolded man'.

Masturbation

The taboo words for – apparently only male – masturbators have become epithets in a number of languages such as Finnish *runkari*, French *branleur*, German *Wichser*, Greek *malákas*, Portuguese *punheiteiro*, Spanish *pajero*.

In general these words seem to be used as derogatory terms. However, they often also retain a strong metaphorical meaning which appears to be more or less similar across languages and which suggests the possession of several negative personal characteristics, in particular incompetence, laziness and lack of energy. That said, it should be noted that in Australian English the term *wanker* is apparently semantically different: according to Stollznow (2004: 1), Australian English *wanker* is a 'socially levelling term' which 'ridicules a person who is pretentious and arrogant'. Stollznow also points out (2004: 7) that corpus analysis reveals that *wanker* attracts adjectives like *smug*, *egotistical*, *pretentious*, *arrogant*, *obnoxious*. This difference between Australian English and other Englishes is also commented on in for example Hughes (1991: 176). What Stollznow has to say about the Australian use of *wanker* ties up in interesting ways with the

personal definitions of the term *wanker* in British English advanced by Kingsley Amis (1998: 23).⁶

Motherfucker

Considering how widespread the use of mother theme and the terms *motherfucker* and *motherfucking* is in ritual insults and unfriendly suggestions, it comes as a surprise that the expletive epithet 'motherfucker', besides its obvious presence in American English, is found only in a few of the languages included in the present study. These languages are: Hindi *madar chod/machud*, Polish *matkojebco*, Turkish *anasiken/anasicici/anabecerici* and Urdu *madar chodu/machud*.

Prostitution

In all probability, all languages have vulgar words for 'prostitute'. The question we have to address here is whether these words have made it to the category of expletive epithets in addition to being simply descriptive and/or insulting. It would seem that they have obtained swearing status in eight of the languages studied, viz. Arabic *sharmuta*, French *pute/putain* (note also the recent *putain de ta race*), Hungarian *kurva*, Italian *puttana*, Polish *kurva*, Portuguese *puta*, Russian *bljád'*, Spanish *puta*. In many of these languages the words for 'prostitute' are used as interjections.

Religion

Most of the languages in Christian Europe use the word for 'devil' as a sort of mild swear word in name-calling, often merely as a support word for an accompanying adjective as in English *the poor devil*, French *le pauvre diable*, German *ein armer Teufel*, Swedish *den stackars (d)jäveln*. The word for the Devil is also sometimes used with a more clearly derogatory meaning as in Danish *Din djaevil/Den djaeveln*, Italian *Questo diavolo!*, Icelandic *Andskotin Þhin*, Norwegian *Din (d)jaevil!, Den (d)jaeveln!*, Swedish *Din (d)jävell!, Den (d)jäveln!*

Scatology

Scatology is the undisputed leader among the taboo themes used in the expletive epithets in the 24 languages that together with English make up my data. The following list contains the scatological swear words used as expletive epithets in these languages including faeces and urine:

- Cantonese: the vulgar Cantonese term for excrement is *sí* which recurs in a vast number of epithets like *sí yéung* 'shitface', *sí chùhng*

lit. 'shit bug' – a generic insult, *Sí fat gwái* lit. 'asshole ghost', viz. 'asshole', 'vulgar insult for man', *sí fat lóu* 'arsehole bloke' (all from Hutton-Bolton 2005)

- Danish: *røv, røvhul* 'arse(hole)'
- Estonian: *sitaratas* 'shithead', *kusipea* 'pisshead'
- Finnish: *paskapää* 'shithead', *paskiainen* 'shit', *kusipää* 'pisshead'
- French: *merdeux* 'arsehole' (lit. 'shitty person')
- German: *Arschloch* 'arsehole', *Scheisskerl/Mistkerl* lit. 'shit fellow'
- Greek: *kopróskilo* 'shit dog', *skatófatsa* 'pile of shit'
- Icelandic: *rass(gatt)* 'arsehole'
- Italian: *culo* 'arse', *stronzo* 'turd', *pirla* 'shit'
- Japanese: *kusottare* 'shitter'
- Mandarin: *gǒu-pì* 'dog fart'
- Norwegian: *rasshol, rasshøl, rævhø, rævhøl* all meaning 'arse(hole)', *skit(t)* 'shit'
- Polish: *dupek* 'arsehole', *gownyarz, gownyenka* 'shit' as epithet, *gownojad* 'shiteater'
- Portuguese: *cú* 'arse', *merda* 'shit', *cabeca-de-merda* 'shithead'
- Russian: *žopa* 'arse', *govno* 'shit', *govnoéd* (lit. 'shiteater'), *govnyuk* 'turd'
- Spanish: *mierda* 'shit'– *Qué (puta) mierda!* 'What a bastard/shit'
- Swahili: *mkundu* 'arsehole' as in e.g. *Mkundu wee!* 'You arsehole'
- Swedish: *arsle* 'arse'; *skit* 'shit' as in *Ditt arsle!*, *Din skit!* 'You arsehole/shit!'
- Turkish: *bok* 'shit' as in *Bok kafa!* 'Shithead!'

Note that the list above contains the entry *kusottare* 'shitter' for Japanese, a language which in the opinion of many commentators, for instance Crystal (1997: 61), lacks swear words entirely. For a different view cf. Wajnryb (2005: 223–35).

Sexual intercourse

English makes frequent use of expressions like *fucker, fuckface, stupid fuck*, etc. to address and refer to others. By and large that tendency is missing from the other languages in my data with the exception of Polish, Russian and Swahili where we find Polish *piardola* 'person who fucks up', Russian *jebaniec* 'fucker' and Swahili *kumbafa* 'fuckface'.

The sex organs

In many but far from all languages the words corresponding to English *cunt, twat, prick, dickhead, balls* are used as abusive epithets both as

terms of address and to refer to third persons. We find such usage in Cantonese: *gāu* 'prick', *chaht tàuh (pèih)* 'dickhead, fool', *daaih chaht* 'big dick', 'idiot', *bahn chaht* 'stupid prick', *gyū gāu* 'pig prick', *gyū hai* 'pig cunt'; Dutch: *klotzaak* 'balls'; *kut* 'cunt', *lul* 'prick'; Finnish: *vittupää* 'cunthead'; French: *con* 'cunt' with the derivatives *connard* 'stupid bastard', *connasse* 'silly bitch'; German: *Fotze* 'cunt'; Greek: *arhídia* 'balls'; Hindi: *chut* 'cunt'; Hungarian: *fene* 'prick', *picsa* 'cunt'; Italian: *coglione* 'testicle', *testa di cazzo* 'dickhead'; Polish: *pizdzielec* 'ignorant bullshitter' (from *pizda* 'cunt'); Portuguese: *caralho* 'prick'; Russian: *xúj* 'prick', *xuisko* 'little prick', *pizdá* 'cunt', *pizdyonka* 'little cunt'; Spanish: *coño/coña* 'cunt', *carajo* 'prick'; Swedish: *kuk* 'prick', *fitta* 'cunt'; Turkish: *sik kafa*, *arak kafa* 'dickhead'.

Sodomy

Besides English *fuckass/fuckarse* the only other sodomy-related expletive epithets in the data are Russian *govnóyob* 'shit-fucker' and French *enculé(e)* 'person fucked in the ass'. Note that here, as in the case of *putain*, French may use the extended terms *enculé(e) de ta race*. As mentioned earlier, the English word *sod* is distantly related to *sodomy* 'anal intercourse' but should probably not be counted as a sodomy-related expletive epithet.

6.5 Realizations of unfriendly suggestions

The number of potential unfriendly suggestions is in principle almost infinite, but in actual fact only a limited number of the possible combinations are used. We may speculate that this is due to the limitations of human memory: if the number of available unfriendly suggestions was too large, addressees would be unable to keep track of them and would consequently often be uncertain whether they had been insulted or not.

Even as it is however, the number of different unfriendly suggestions that speakers and addressees must store in order to be proficient communicators in their language is high enough to require some sort of organizing principle. Since the acts called for in the unfriendly suggestions obviously need to violate some sort of taboo, the best solution would seem to be to organize their description in terms of the same taboos as the ones used in the description of other types of swearing, for example for name-calling and ritual insults.

However, although taboo violation is an important aspect of the use of unfriendly suggestions, they do not always lend themselves to a

description in terms of the taboos that worked so well for the description of swearing up to now. As their name indicates, the unfriendly suggestions are sometimes better served by an analysis in terms of certain demeaning acts recommended to the addressee, like arse-kissing, arse-licking, balls-kissing, cock-sucking, going to the arse/cunt, shit-eating, shitting in your pants, etc. These acts have accordingly been added to the descriptive apparatus used for the unfriendly suggestions. When naming such acts I have resorted to hopefully transparent English expressions like EAT, GO TO, SHIT and others. Suggestions beginning with one of the verbs *kiss*, *lick*, *suck* and *bite* have been brought together under the collective label KLSB. This means that in the description of unfriendly suggestions we can drop the category FELLATIO from the inventory and that for example *Kiss my cock!* and *Kiss my arse!* will both be subsumed under KLSB.

There is also another new category, SELF-FUCKING, which includes the suggestions *Fuck yourself!* and *Go fuck yourself!* (but not *Fuck you!* which has been identified as a curse and has been discussed in Chapter 5).

Arabic

EAT+SCAT: *Kul khara!* 'Eat shit'

KLSB: *Mos zibbi!*, *Mos eri!* 'Suck my cock'

MOTHER: *Nik ummak* 'Fuck your mother'

SODOMY: *Hottaha fi tizak!* 'Up your ass!', 'Up yours!'

Cantonese

DEATH: *Pūk-gāai* 'fall down', 'Drop dead', *Heui séi laa* 'Go to hell!', *Lāan lán hōi* 'Fuck off'

MOTHER: *Díu néih lóuh móu!* 'Fuck your mother', *Díu chaht néih lóuh móu hai* 'Fuck your mother's cunt'

SELF-FUCK: *Díu néih!* 'Fuck yourself'

SEX ORGAN: *Lán hōi!* 'Leave', 'Fuck off' literally 'Prick off!'

Danish

GO TO+RELIGION: *Gaa ad helvede til!* 'Go to hell'

SODOMY: *Rend mig i røven:* 'Fuck my ass' (mostly used as an interjection)

Dutch

DISEASE: *Krieg nu de pest!* 'Get the plague', *Kanker op!* 'Get cancer'

KLSB: *Hie kan mijn den kloten kussen!* 'Kiss my balls', *Lik mijn reet!* 'Lick my arse'

English

EAT+SCAT (+DEATH): *Eat shit!, Eat shit and die!*

GO TO+RELIGION: *Go to hell!*

KLSB: *Suck/Kiss my cock/dick!, Kiss my cock/dick!, Kiss my arse/ass!, Eat me!, Bite me!*

MOTHER: *Fuck your mother!*

SELF-FUCKING: *(Go) fuck yourself!*

SEX ACT: *Get fucked! Fuck a duck.*

SODOMY: *Get fucked in the ass!, Up you/your ass!, Up yours!*

Estonian

EAT+SCAT: *Söö sitta!* 'Eat shit'

GO TO+RELIGION: *Mine põrgu!* 'Go to hell'

GO TO+SCAT: *Mine perse!* 'Go to the arse'

GO TO+SEX ORG: *Keri/Mine vittu!* 'Go to the cunt', *Mine munn!* 'Go to the cock'

KLSB: *Naksi peeru!* 'Bite a fart'

SELF-FUCKING: *Pane ennast! Pane Pihku!* '(Go) fuck yourself'

SEX ACT: *Pane hobust!* 'Go fuck a horse!'

SHIT: *Situ puksi!* 'Shit in your pants'

Finnish

GO TO+RELIGION: *Painu helvettiin!* 'Go to hell!'

SELF-FUCKING: *Vedä käteen!* 'Fuck yourself!'

SEX ORGAN: *Vedää vittu päähäs!* 'Pull a cunt over your head'

SMELL: *Haista vittu!* 'Smell a cunt', *Haista paska!* 'Smell shit'

French

GO TO+SCAT: *Va chier!* 'Go (and) shit!'

GO TO+RELIGION: *Va au diable!* 'Go to the devil'

MOTHER: *Nique ta mere!* 'Fuck your mother!'

SEX ACT: *Va te faire foutre!* '(Go and) Get fucked!'

SODOMY: *Va te faire enculer!* 'Get fucked in the arse'

German

GO TO+RELIGION: *Scher dich zum Teufel!* 'Go to the devil'

KLSB: *Leck mich (am Arsch!)* 'Lick my arse'

Greek

EAT+SCAT: *Skatá na fás!* 'Eat shit!'

GO+RELIGION: *Ai sto diávoloi!, Na pas sto diávoloi!* 'Go to the devil'

KLSB: *Fílise ton kólo mou!* 'Kiss my ass', *Rouífa ta arhída!* 'Suck my balls'

MOTHER: *To mouní tis manas sou!* 'Kiss your mother's!'

SELF FUCKING: *Ai pidíkso!* 'Go fuck yourself'

SODOMY: *Pár ta ston kólo!* 'Up your arse'

Hindi

KLSB: *Meri lunh chuso!* 'Suck my dick!'

SELF-FUCKING: *Jaa apni baaja!* 'Go fuck yourself'

Hungarian

GO TO+RELIGION: *Menj a pokolha!* 'Go to hell'

GO TO+SEX ORG: *Menj a picsaba!* 'Go to the cunt'

MOTHER: *Bazd meg a anyadat!* 'Fuck your mother'

SEX ACT: *Bazd meg!* 'Go fuck!'

Icelandic

GO TO+RELIGION: *Farði i helvitti!* 'Go to hell'

GO TO+SCAT: *Farði i rassgat!* 'Go to/up your arse'

Italian

GO TO+RELIGION: *Vai a diavolo!* 'Go to hell'

KLSB: *Suchiarmi il cazzo!* 'Suck my dick'

SELF-FUCKING: *Vai a farti chiavare!* 'Go get fucked'

SODOMY: *Vai a fare in culo!* 'Go and ass-fuck', *Vai a fartello mettere in culo, Vaffanculo!, Fanculo!, Vai in culo!* 'Go get arse-fucked'

Japanese

EAT+SCAT: *Kuso kurai!* 'Eat shit!'

SCATOLOGY+DEATH: *Kuso shite shinezo!* 'Shit till you die'

Mandarin

RELIGION: *Gun dan!* 'Go to hell'

MOTHER: *Càu-nǐ-mā* 'Fuck your mother', *'Càu-nǐ-mā-dè* 'Fuck your mother's', *Càu-nǐ-da ye!* 'Fuck your uncle'

Norwegian

GO TO+REL: *Dra till helvete!* 'Go to hell'

KLSB: *Kyss mig i raeva!* 'Kiss my ass'

Polish

GO TO+RELIGION: *Do diabła! Niech to diabli!* '(Go)to the devil('s)'

GO TO:+ SCAT A *govnó!* 'Go to the shit'

SEX ACT: *Pieprz to!* 'Fuck it', *Pierdol sie!* 'Get fucked'

SODOMY: *Xuy ci w dupe!* 'A prick in your arse'

Portuguese

EAT+SCAT+DEATH: *Coma merda e morra!* 'Eat shit and die'

GO TO+MOTHER: *Vai á puta que te pariu!* 'Go to the whore that gave birth to you'

GO TO+RELIGION: *Vai a diabo!*, *Vai pro inferno!* 'Go to the devil/to hell'

GO TO+SCAT: *Vai a merda!* 'Go to the shit', *Vai dá cú!* 'Go to the arse'

KLSB: *Chupa meu cacete/ pau!* 'Suck my cock'

SEX ACT: *Vai se foder/danar!* 'Go get fucked', *Foda!/Se fode!* 'Get fucked'

SELF-FUCKING: *Enfia no cú!* 'Stick it up your arse'

SODOMY: *Vai tomar no cú/boga!* 'Go and get fucked in the arse'

Russian

GO+REL: *Idi k čortu!* 'Go to the devil', *Idi v zadnitsu* 'Go to hell'

GO TO+SEX ORG: *Pošol v pizdú!* 'Go to the cunt', *Idi na xúj!* 'Go to the prick', *Pošosi xúj!* 'Go to my cock/dick'

Spanish

GOTO+SCATOLOGY: *Vete a la mierda!/Vaya ala mierda!* 'Go to the shit'

GOTO+SEX ORGANS: *Vete al coño/carajo!* 'Go to the cunt/prick'

KLSB: *Besa mi culo!* 'Kiss my arse', *Chupame la polla!* 'Suck my cock'

MASTURBATION: *Vete a hacer puñetas!* 'Go toss off/masturbate'

MOTHER: *Joda a tu madre!* 'Fuck your mother'

SEX ACT: *Hacete coger!* 'Get fucked'

SODOMY: *Vete a tomar par el culo!* 'Go get fucked in the ass'

Swahili

EAT+SCAT: *Kula mave!* 'Eat shit'

KLSB: *Nyonya boe!* 'Suck dick'

MOTHER: *Kuma mama yako!* 'Fuck your mother'

SELF-FUCKING: *Nenda kutomba!* 'Fuck yourself'

Swedish

GO TO+RELIGION: *Dra åt helvete!/Far åt helvete!* 'Go to hell'

KLSB: *Kyss mig i röven/arslet!* 'Kiss my arse'

SEX ORGAN: *Kyss Karlson!* 'Kiss my dick'

SODOMY: *Ta dig i arslet/röven!* 'Fuck yourself in the arse'

Turkish

KLSB: *Chukumu jala!* 'Suck my cock'

GO TO+RELIGION: *Cebennem git!* 'Go to hell!'

SELF-FUCKING: *Git kendii!* 'Fuck yourself!', *Sok gotiena!* 'Stick it up
your arse!'

SEX ACT: *Siktir tan/siktir git!* 'Get fucked'

Urdu

KLSB: *Mera lun chusol!* 'Suck my dick!'

7

Degree, Dislike, Emphasis, Exasperation and Annoyance¹

7.0 Introduction

Up to now the focus of the present study has been on instances of swearing that are independent utterances, viz. speech acts of various kinds: interjections, oaths, curses, standard insults, name-calling, unfriendly suggestions. From now on, however, the focus will be placed on swear words that are not themselves independent utterances but are used inside larger units, viz. as what earlier we have called *slot fillers*. Given that the slot fillers that are in focus here are all swear words, they may be aptly named *expletive slot fillers*.

By definition, the expletive slot fillers are all used inside larger units. Most of these units are clauses and the function of swearing found inside them may be both syntactic and concerned with the expression of speaker attitudes. In English, expletive slot fillers also turn up inside non-clausal units such as noun phrases (*Henry the bloody Eighth*) and sometimes even inside single words like *absofuckinglutely* and *kanga-bloodyroo*. In units of the second type, the main – or perhaps even the only – function of the swearing expressions is to express the speaker's attitudes and feelings.

Most of the English slot fillers are used in all varieties of English, for example *damn*, *damned*, *goddamn*, *goddamned*, *fucking*. Others are used mainly or even exclusively in certain varieties of English, for instance *bloody*, of disputed origin, which is highly frequent in British and Australian English but practically non-existent as a swear word in American English.²

There is general agreement among observers of such matters that by far the most enthusiastic users of *bloody* are the speakers of Australian English and the word *bloody* has acquired for itself the byname 'the

great Australian adjective'. As we shall soon see, however, the term 'adjective' for *bloody* is a misnomer.

Other English expletive slot fillers are originally American and tend to be mainly used in American English, for instance the words *cock-sucking* and *motherfucking*. Like the nouns *cocksucker* and *motherfucker* from which they are derived, these words probably have maximum taboo load, based as they are on the taboo themes of fellatio and incest, respectively. Speakers of British English seem to be divided in their attitudes to these American imports, as well as to the related nouns *cocksucker* and *motherfucker*. One British linguist is on record calling *motherfucker* 'a term so obscene as to be beyond the bounds of native British speech', while a colleague and compatriot of his is claimed to have called it 'a perfectly amiable expletive'.³

As usual in the case of swear words, the words above may be replaced with a number of euphemistic variants such as *blasted*, *bleeding*, *blinking*, *blithering*, *blooming*, *ruddy* for *bloody*, *darned*, *dashed*, *doggone* for *damn* or *goddamn*, *effing*, *everlasting*, *frigging* and *sodding* for *fucking*. There is also the somewhat old-fashioned term *confounded*, first recorded in 1760, which should probably be regarded as a euphemism for *darned*, itself on record as early as 1560. For reasons that are hard to understand, Partridge took a very dim view of the use of *confounded* in his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, calling it 'a mere verbal harlot serving all men's haste' (Partridge 1961).

There are great differences between the frequencies of use for the 20 British English expletive slot fillers enumerated above. Table 7.1 shows their frequencies in the spoken component of the BNC.

The statistics in Table 7.1 reveal the almost total dominance among the British expletive slot fillers of the two giants *bloody* and *fucking*: of the 6574 occurrences, *bloody* and *fucking* account for 5666, a proportion that works out to more than 86 per cent of the total number of such expletives. It might be expected that many of the uses of *bloody* and *fucking* would involve the literal meanings of these words, but such literal meanings were almost entirely missing: less than 1 per cent of the 3519 instances of *bloody* were adjectives meaning 'blood-stained' and an even smaller percentage of the instances of *fucking* were related to sex.

Among the remaining words in Table 7.1 only three reach three-figure frequencies, viz. *damn*, *blooming* and *bleeding*. Four words were not used at all, among them *cocksucking* and *motherfucking*. This was to be expected since both the nominal and non-nominal uses of these words are confined almost exclusively to American English. It may also have

Table 7.1 Distribution of expletive slot fillers in spoken BNC

Words	Expletive slot filler	Total no.
Bloody	3509	3519
Fucking	2157	2162
Damn	276	348
Blooming	219	220
Bleeding	136	217
Ruddy	78	78
Blinking	60	60
Damned	23	27
Frigging	25	25
Sodding	22	22
Blasted	18	34
Blithering	7	7
Effing	6	6
Everlasting	2	11
Goddamn	1	1
Goddamned	1	1
Motherfucking	0	0
Cocksucking	0	0
Confounded	0	0
Dashed	0	11
	6574	

to do with the feeling that at least *cocksucking* is 'vile' and 'repellent' and 'one of the most taboo adjectives of abuse' as Cassell puts it.

A number of factors should be borne in mind when we interpret the results presented in Table 7.1. One of these concerns the age of the data: the spoken data in the BNC was recorded between 1990 and 1992, and although swearing in all languages is remarkably slow to change, British swearing may well have done so in the course of the last two decades.

Another relevant factor concerns the provenance of the data. By definition, the BNC contains only instances of British usage, which means that the account above gives us no indication of the use of expletive slot fillers in American English. To be sure, we may safely make certain assumptions about the differences to be expected in the two varieties especially with regard to *bloody* and *goddamn(ed)*. It is generally assumed, for example, that *bloody* is not used at all in American English and that *goddamn(ed)* has a much more prominent position in American than in British English. But in order to find more exact information in this and other areas, we need to access a corpus of spoken American English, preferably one with the same size and organization as the BNC.

Unfortunately it is a well-known fact that the BNC has no American counterpart, and that to form an opinion of American expletive slot fillers we have to turn to American corpora that differ from the BNC in several respects. One of these is the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) which contains a spoken component of some 80 million words made up of transcripts of unscripted conversation on TV and radio programmes.⁴

A full search for *bloody* in the spoken COCA texts yielded 1138 instances of which 49 are expletive slot fillers. This is a remarkably high figure considering what has been said above about the non-use of *expletive* *bloody* in American English. However, given that the sources consist of TV and radio programmes from NPR, PBS, ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox there is a strong possibility that these expletive instances of *bloody* emanated from British-speaking visitors or from American speakers influenced by such visitors.

With regard to *fucking*, the second largest category in Table 7.1, a direct comparison between spoken British and spoken American usage is made impossible by the fact that COCA has only four instances of *fucking* in the spoken component, a figure that clearly reflects current American media policy concerning 'obscene, indecent or profane language' on radio and television (cf. Chapter 1, p. 10) and should be compared to the 6511 instances found in the written component of COCA.

Since a substantial part of the spoken component of the BNC was obtained in situations that are the very opposite of speaking on TV or on radio, a direct comparison between such taboo-loaded expletives as *fucking* in COCA and the BNC is impossible.

By contrast, the third most common item in Table 7.1 – the slot filler *damn* – is nowhere near as forbidden in American media and a comparison between the two corpora should be more realistic at least in principle. The spoken part of COCA contains a total of 1080 instances of *damn* and 293 instances of *damned*. Of the first, some 700 of the instances were expletive slot fillers, while the number of expletive instances of *damned* (including *God damned*, *goddamned*, etc.) was 123, bringing the total up to 823 in a spoken component containing roughly 80 million words, viz. 1.3 occurrences per 100,000. The combined number of occurrences of *damn* and *damned* used as slot fillers in the BNC spoken component is 299, indicating that in British English slot-filling *damn/damned* occurs 2.99 times per 100,000 words.

As for the entries below *damn* in Table 7.1, they are either exclusively British or – as in the case of *cocksucking* and *motherfucking* – lack occurrences in both corpora. This is not so surprising since both of these are still

highly potent in terms of taboo, as are their nominal relatives *cocksucker* and *motherfucker*. Compare for instance Hughes (2006: 88) whose verdict on the first of these is 'Seemingly the most powerful word in terms of its obscenity and insult-impact is *cocksucker*', adding that the term has developed almost entirely in the United States, especially in African American English. He also gives an example of early adjectival use in a letter written by e.e. cummings in 1923. Slang dictionaries like CNPD and Cassell confirm the American nationality of *cocksucking* and *motherfucking*.

7.1 What are the functions of these preposed words?

One of the problems in discussing the uses of words like *bloody*, *damn(d)*, *fucking*, etc. is deciding what to call them: we need a name that describes their common characteristics. They are sometimes called 'adjectives' or 'expletive adjectives'. As the following presentation will show, the label 'adjective' is a misnomer: while it is true that the words in question may turn up both as adverbs and as adjectives, they are sometimes also used in ways that do not lend themselves to a classification in terms of word classes.

In fact these words are used in a number of sometimes bewildering ways and the one thing that they undoubtedly have in common is that they are intended as swearing: their meanings are taboo, they are not used with their literal meanings, and they somehow express or are supposed to express the speaker's mind.

Some of their functions are clearly grammatical or syntactic, for instance when they are used as degree adverbials before adjectives or adverbs and they function in the same way as *very*, *highly* or *extremely*, with the difference that these three words lack the taboo load accompanying *bloody*, *damn(ed)*, *goddamn(ed)*, *fucking*, etc. It is easy to find examples of such adverbial use of the words in question, for instance the following four examples from BNC and COCA:

- (1) You know *damn well* a story like this wouldn't run about Hillary and Obama. (COCA 2008 ABC_Thisweek)
- (2) That is *damn sure*. (COCA 2008 ABC_primetime)
- (3) We've gotta ... become streetwise ... *bloody quickly*. (BNC FUK 650)
- (4) This is *bloody hard* work. (BNC FLB 75)

In (1) and (3) the degree adverbs *damn* and *bloody* indicate a high degree of the following adverbs *well* and *quickly*, and in (2) and (4) the same degree adverbs modify the adjectives *sure* and *hard* in the same way. We

may conclude that the adverbs *damn* and *bloody* in these examples serve as what have been called *intensifiers*, that is words that have a heightening effect on the meaning of the word they modify (cf. MacCarthy 1992: 521). Quirk et al. (1985) define intensifiers as a ‘scaling device ... which co-occurs with a gradable adjective’ and recognize two kinds of intensifiers, *amplifiers* which scale upwards from an assumed norm and *downtoners* which have a lowering effect. The adverbs considered here obviously belong to the first category, that is, they are amplifiers (Quirk et al. 1985: section 7.56). Not everybody makes such nice distinctions: Biber et al. (1999) for instance use the terms *amplifier* and *intensifier* interchangeably (cf. section 7.15.1).⁵

The intensifier function is not restricted to adverbs, but may also be found in certain adjectival modifiers combining with a following gradable noun. Quirk et al. (1985: section 7.73), for instance, consider the adjective *real* to be intensifying in the sentence *He’s a real idiot* where *idiot* is regarded as a gradable noun, which seems to be a correct assumption – you can be either a bit of an idiot or a 100 per cent idiot; the NP *real idiot* describes the second of these. Other adjective–noun combinations of the same kind are *total failure*, *complete success*, *utter disappointment*.

A strong case can be made for including *bloody*, *damn* and their equivalents among the intensifying adjectives when they are used to indicate degree with regard to a following gradable noun as in (5) and (6). Obviously there is also an element of dislike however.

(5) Bye you *damn fools*, you idiots. (COCA 1995 ABC-20/20)

(6) You *bloody idiot!* (BNC KBE 4147)

In these examples, the adjectives *bloody* and *damn* denote the degree to which somebody meets the description of the gradable nouns *fool* and *idiot*. It is clear that in the speaker’s opinion the persons addressed as *damn fools* and *bloody idiot* in (5) and (6) meet the requirements for membership in these categories to a very high degree.

It is easy to find many other examples in the spoken corpora in which *bloody*, *damn* and also *damned*, *goddam(ed)* and *fucking* are used as intensifying adjectives of the kind we have just considered, for instance (7) and (8) in which the nouns *nightmare* and *pain* must also be regarded as gradable nouns on a par with *fool* and *idiot*:

(7) I’m living with a *bloody nightmare*. (BNC GY6 129)

(8) I’ve had too much *damn pain* already. COCA 1999 ABC_20/20)

The intensifying uses of *bloody*, *damn* and other similar expletives are easy to spot for two reasons: (1) they have clearly defined meanings and (2) they are modifiers, viz. their scope is local, extending no further than the nearest element to the right.

However, only a limited number of *bloody* and *damn* constructions can be explained as cases of intensification. In fact, it is probably safe to claim that in the majority of their uses, *bloody*, *damn* and their equivalents are non-intensifying. While the intensifiers inhabit a relatively orderly world and have meanings that lend themselves to straightforward description, specifying the meanings/functions of non-intensifying constructions with *bloody*, *damn* and their equivalents is frequently difficult and at times impossible, especially when the corpus providing the data lacks phonological annotation, as is the case with the BNC.

These difficulties notwithstanding, it is still possible to distinguish certain broad semantic/pragmatic categories among the non-intensifying constructions with *bloody*, *damn* and their equivalents.

The most obvious example of these categories is what we may call the DISLIKE constructions in which *bloody*, *damn*, etc. serve to express the speaker's dislike of the referent(s) of a following noun, often one denoting a human being as in the case of (9):

(9) That *damn Paul* is looking at our homework. (BNC KCN 2866)

Dislike may also be directed at the referents of inanimate nouns as in (10)–(11):

(10) *Damn heater!* (BNC KNV 445)

(11) Where's that *bloody pencil sharpener* thing gone? (BNC JN6842)

There are also cases which undoubtedly express dislike on the part of the speaker, but whose main function seems to be to place emphasis on a certain noun, thus making it possible for the speaker to make her/his point. Utterances (12) and (13) are examples of this:

(12) ... in the *bloody book* there's no cars on the roundabout (BNC KDM 1282)

(13) Everyone that have [*sic*] problems don't have to go to a *damn doctor*. (COCA 1997 ABC_PrimeTime)

There is of course no knowing what the speakers in (12) and (13) had in mind, especially since the BNC offers no phonological annotation

for the texts in the spoken corpora: information about the assignment of stress, pausing and intonation contours, for instance, might have made the meanings of these utterances much clearer. Heavy stress on *book* and *doctor* would have supported the second interpretation.

These uncertainties notwithstanding, it is, I think, still possible to make more or less intelligent guesses about the meanings of (12) and (13), in particular if we take into account the evidence provided by the context for the expressions in question. The context for (12) is that the speaker is defending her/himself against criticisms for failing to drive a car through a roundabout about which s/he had only theoretical knowledge beforehand obtained from a book containing maps and route descriptions. These circumstances suggest that the speaker wishes to make a clear distinction between what is in her/his view a pathetically inadequate theoretical description of a real-life traffic situation, and the situation itself. The most natural way to make that distinction is to emphasize the noun *book* by placing *bloody* immediately to its left: in the book there were no cars on the roundabout but in real life they were there. This interpretation is also supported by the fronting of the prepositional phrase *in the book*.

Example (13) is more difficult to interpret. Like (12), (13) may express both dislike and emphasis. Arguably, however, it is mainly an expression of emphasis; by emphasizing *doctors* by means of a preceding *damn*, the speaker seems to be questioning the wisdom of a certain course of action – going to a doctor as soon as you feel indisposed – rather than expressing any particular dislike of doctors.

Cases like (12) and (13) where emphasis is the main function of the expletive slot filler but which also contain an element of dislike seem to be the rule rather than the exception, but on occasion we do find examples such as (14) and (15):

(14) You know Kate. The *bleeding fat girl*, he got asked out by her. (BNC KSU9)

(15) ... nonchalant like most blokes do in the *fucking* underwear department (BNC KDA 654)

The speaker's main aim in (14) is to distinguish the fat girl Kate from all other girls while in (15) the aim is to distinguish the underwear department from all other departments. In (14) there may be an additional element of dislike but not in (15).

Sometimes there appear to be other, more complex, explanations as to why a speaker chooses to emphasize a noun by means of expletives

like *bloody*, *damn*, *fucking*, etc. in their utterances. Consider for instance example (16):

(16) Nora: She was coming up behind me and <pause> her husband and kids and I ...

Mike: It's not her *bloody husband*.

Nora: Isn't it? (BNC KD8 3127)

At first glance (16) might be interpreted as an instance of a speaker using *bloody* to express his dislike of the man referred to by Nora. However, the wider context of (16) does not support such an interpretation; a more convincing analysis of (16) is to argue that the use of *bloody* is a way for Mike to emphasize the relevance of his own utterance or – to put it more bluntly – a way for Mike to point out that he has information that Nora obviously does not and perhaps also that this is self-evident. In fact Mike could have achieved the same effect by saying (17):

(17) He's not her husband, for God's sake.

The *for God's sake* construction is discussed in Stenström (1994: 46) where it is called a *booster* and defined as 'the speaker's assessment of what s/he says'. It could also be brought in under other rubrics, for instance 'subjuncts' (Quirk et al. 1985: section 8.100) and 'stance adverbials' (Biber et al. 1999: section 11.13.1). In the following discussion I will stick to Stenström's term *booster*.

What is striking about the booster use of *bloody* and its relatives is the fact that these words often occur in what looks like typical NP modifier positions and that when they are used in this position it is difficult to free oneself from the impulse to regard them as modifiers of the following noun. In fact it is frequently hard and not seldom impossible to distinguish between booster *bloody*, etc. + noun constructions and identical constructions in which *bloody*, etc. express speaker dislike.

The use of *bloody* and *fucking* (and some but not all of the other expletive slot fillers) to place emphasis on a following element is by no means restricted to the position before NPs. As (18)–(23) show, both *bloody* and *fucking* are found as emphasers before all sorts of clause constituents. Note that it is impossible to use *damn(ed)* in such a way.

(18) I wish they'd all *bloody* leave me alone. (BNC G49 30)

(19) I'll *bloody* come down and ask you. (BNC JTB 109)

(20) You *fucking* stink, you dirty cat! (BNC KPG 2805)

- (21) ... it's like *bloody* walking on ice. (BNC JTC 1118)
 (22) We're always *fucking* late. (BNC KP4 1236)
 (23) ... if you went and got *fucking* thirty of your mates I would have a problem. (BNC KDA 7085)

In (18) and (19) *bloody* and *fucking* emphasize the infinitives *leave me alone* and *come down and ask you*, in (20) the finite verb form *stink*, in (21) the gerund *walking on ice*, in (22) the adjective (or adverb) *late* and in (23) the numeral *thirty*.

But this is not all these versatile forms can do. As is made evident by (24) and (25), they may also be used as 'modal adverbials' (cf. Chapter 2) to emphasize the speech act force of imperatives:

- (24) It's just <pause> *bloody* don't think. (BNC KD8 913)
 (25) So she said don't you *fucking* worry I am. (BNC KBE 2219)

We find yet another use of *bloody* and *damn* in cases like (26)–(29) where their function is to place emphasis on superlatives and indefinite pronouns like *all* and *every* affecting a following noun phrase:

- (26) But the promises that we had when we went in the army. We got the worst *damn* place anybody could. (BNC: FYE 420)
 (27) Every *damn* call is \$5.25. (COCA 2007 ABC_Nightline)
 (28) I would not have been in business 30 *damn* years. (COCA 2008 ABC_Nightline)
 (29) She pigged off, left us with no *bloody* money. (BNC KB1 3617)

These examples contain the sequences *damn place*, *damn call*, *damn years* and *bloody money*, noun phrases made up of an expletive adjective and a following noun head. At first sight, these combinations look like expletive + noun combinations placing emphasis on the following nouns or expressing dislike with regard to these nouns. But here the emphasis is placed on the *preceding* noun: what the speaker (26) emphasizes is not the place involved, but the poor quality of the place s/he has been given. Similarly in (27) the emphasis is on the fact that all calls are just as expensive. In (28) the emphasis concerns the length of time the speaker has been in business, viz. *30 years* and in (29), finally, the focus is on the complete lack of money left for the speaker and his/her associates. By placing *damn* and *bloody* immediately after *worst*, *every*, *30* and *no*, the speaker emphasizes these elements, which are also no doubt pronounced with heavy stress.

In the examples of expletive emphasis that we have seen so far, the emphasis has operated in linear fashion, affecting elements that follow or – less commonly – precede the emphaser itself. However in the case of certain but not all the expletive emphasizers above, the emphasis may also be brought about by *insertion* of the expletive element into linguistic units normally considered to be impenetrable, viz. words and phrases as for example in (30)–(34):

(30) I just think that puts it into *bloody* perspective. (BNC K6W 338)

(31) You're needed at *bloody* home. (BNC KB1 600)

(32) I mean Abu *bleeding* Dabi. (BNC KD6 3787)

(33) *Unfuckingconscious!* (in Sheidlower 1999: 172)

(34) Mister *Fucking* Rodgers! (in Sheidlower 1999: 173)

We can sum up the classification of the different uses of expletives like *bloody*, *damned*, *godamn(ed)*, *fucking*, etc. above as in the tree diagram in Figure 7.1.

Despite the air of finality and exactness of the tree diagram in Figure 7.1 it must be borne in mind that the categories in the figure frequently overlap and that it is seldom the case that individual real-language examples can be given a single and definitive analysis. It is frequently hard if not impossible in many cases to distinguish between certain of the categories in the tree diagram, in particular those of emphasis and dislike, and we have to accept that in many cases both are present in one and the same utterance.

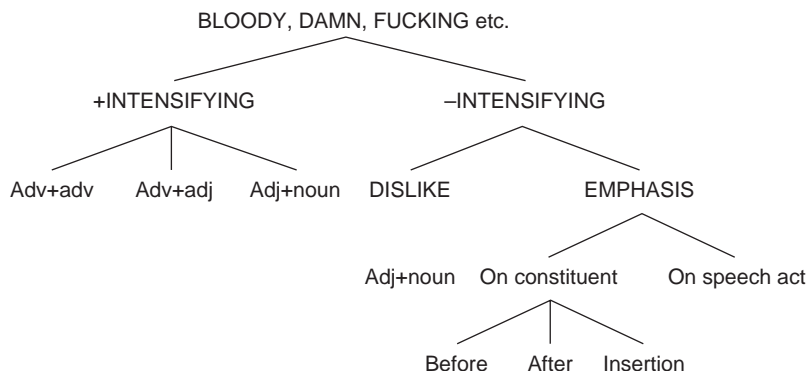


Figure 7.1 Classification of *bloody*, *damn(ed)*, *fucking* and similar words

An additional source of confusion is the linguistic habits of the individual. Regardless of their native language, humans have different attitudes to swearing. These attitudes may be founded in religious belief or in different views on what constitutes proper linguistic behaviour. They may also be a matter of linguistic habit. There is for instance a well-known story from the First World War about the British sergeant who, it is claimed, regularly inserted the word *fucking* before every noun as in the standing order *Get your fucking rifles!* When one day he suddenly changed this to *Get your rifles!* his men – correctly as it turned out – interpreted this as signalling an impending enemy attack (Brophy and Partridge 1930, Hughes 1991: 253).

7.2 Distribution of the slot fillers across categories

In the discussion of examples above it has been my aim to give instances of the most common expletive slot fillers in British and American English, viz. *bloody*, *damn* and *fucking* and occasionally also other, euphemistic, forms, like for example *bleeding*. A natural question to ask in view of the elaborate classification that has been suggested for the use of such words in English, is how the most frequent expletive slot fillers are distributed across the categories introduced in that classification. Table 7.2 gives an account of that distribution for the two giants among the expletive slot fillers, viz. *bloody* and *fucking*. The table does not account for all the instances of these words, however, but only for a random selection representing 10 per cent of the instances of each.

The reduction in numbers was carried out by means of the thinning-random procedure which is part of the BNC package, an operation that reduced the numbers from 3509 and 2157 for *bloody* and *fucking* respectively to 350 and 216. Further reductions were caused by the omission of the combinations *Bloody hell!* and *Fucking hell!* and the removal of entries in which *bloody* and *fucking* were used with their literal senses. Finally a number of entries were removed because they were incomplete and hence impossible to interpret. In the end there remained 272 instances of *bloody* and 174 of *fucking*. They were distributed across the seven construction types as shown in Table 7.2.

In Table 7.2, the percentages for *bloody* and *fucking* relate to the totals in their respective column: *bloody*, for instance, is used as an adverbial intensifier 46 times which amounts to 14.5 per cent of 318, its total number of occurrences.

Rather unsurprisingly, Table 7.2 shows that there are no great differences between *bloody* and *fucking* with regard to the functions they

Table 7.2 Distribution of *bloody* and *fucking* across functions

Functions	<i>Bloody</i>	<i>Fucking</i>	Total	% difference
Adverbial intensifier	46 (14.5%)	20 (10.5%)	66	4
Adjectival intensifier	12 (3.8%)	12 (6.3%)	24	2.5
Adjective of dislike	63 (19.8%)	24 (12.6%)	87	7.2
Emphasis on following NP	45 (14.2%)	42 (19.9%)	87	5.7
Emphasis on following non-NP	59 (18.6%)	59 (30.9%)	118	12.3
Emphasis on preceding element	21 (6.6%)	9 (4.7%)	30	1.9
Insertion emphasis	26 (8.2%)	8 (4.2%)	34	4
<i>Bloody/Fucking hell</i>	46 (14.5%)	17 (8.9%)	63	5.6
	318	191	509	

are used to fill. The most important difference concerns their use as emphasers of a following non-NP, almost all of them verbal, as in for example *She might fucking chuck me in for tonight* (KCA 2914) and ... *well if you going to fucking be like that ...* (KBE 2414). In this function, *fucking* is used 30.9 per cent of the time as compared to 18.6 per cent for *bloody*, a difference of 12.3 percentage points, which is an indication that *fucking* is much more common in such cases. On the other hand, *bloody* is apparently more common when it comes to expressing speaker dislike of a following NP, as in *Bloody Italians haven't got a clue, have they?* (KD5 1045); the gap here is 19.8 vs 12.6 per cent, viz. 7.2 percentage points.

Among the remaining differences we note that *fucking* is somewhat more common than *bloody* in constructions placing emphasis on a following NP like *You're gonna get your fucking head kicked in* (KDA 5527); here we are talking about a difference of 5.7 percentage points in *fucking's* favour. There is apparently also a difference between the use of *bloody* and of *fucking* in exclamations like *Bloody hell!, Fucking hell!*

7.3 Expletive slot fillers across languages

English is not alone in using expletive slot fillers as intensifiers, emphasers and expressions of dislike. On the contrary, these functions play an important role in all the languages in this study. A common way of realizing them – especially in the Germanic languages – is to use predominantly infernal religious terms derived from the words for the Devil and hell. English is the only Germanic language to fully realize the potential of expletive slot fillers with sexual meanings like *fucking*, although – as we shall see – Danish and Norwegian have the beginnings of a similar system.

7.3.1 The Germanic languages

The Scandinavian languages Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish all use native words corresponding to English *damned* as expletive slot fillers, for example Danish *forbanded/forbandet*, Icelandic *bölvathur*, Norwegian *forbanna*, Swedish *förbannad/förbannat* and the somewhat more formal *fördömd/fördömt*. All four also use the genitive of *devil* or *devils* with the same function: the Danes say *djævla* or *fandens*, the Icelanders *andskoti*, *djöfull(i)*, *fjandi*, the Norwegians *jævla*, the Swedes (*d*)*jävla*. The forms with *-a* endings are old plural genitives meaning ‘of devils’ and used to convey the message that whatever follows in the utterance is like some characteristic of devils: if something is *jävla stort* ‘damn big’ then it is so huge that its size can be compared to that of devils.

Once we have accepted the devil(s) as a standard of comparison it is only natural to bring in his abode, viz. *hell*. Here again it is the genitives that are used as in Danish *helvides*, Icelandic *Helvitis*, Norwegian *helvites* and Swedish *helvetes*. These preposed forms may be used both to express a high degree of something and dislike of the referent of the following noun.

In addition to their use as preposed intensifiers or expressions of dislike, the words for *hell* and the *Devil* may also be used as postposed forms expressing the degree of a preceding adjective, adverb or verb in a way corresponding to English *big as hell*, *fast as hell*.

Curiously enough and unlike Swedish and Icelandic, Danish and Norwegian may also express high degree by means of the past participle of the word *pule* ‘fuck’ with an additional prefix *for-* borrowed from forms like *Forbanna(t)*, as in *Forpulet smart!* ‘Fucking smart’ and *Forpult vakkert!* ‘Fucking pretty’. Finally, both Danish and Norwegian also allude to the disease taboo theme by using *pokkers* ‘the pox’ to express degree, dislike and emphasis.

Turning now to the two remaining Germanic languages dealt with here, viz. Dutch and German, we find that they offer no surprises. The Dutch word corresponding to English *damned* and its companions is *verdommt* as in for example *een verdommte zooi* ‘a damned/bloody mess’, and as might have been expected, the German word corresponding to *damned*, etc. is *verdammt* ‘damned’ as in for example *Verdammt gut!* ‘Bloody good!’ There is also a euphemistic variant *verflucht*.

Before we leave this discussion of expletive intensifiers and dislike adjectives in the Germanic languages, a few words should be said about an alternative method for expressing a high degree of adjectives and

adverbs, viz. the creation of *compounds* made up of an expletive noun and an adjective or adverb as in for example Danish *røvgod* literally 'arse good', Dutch *poepduur* 'shit expensive', German *Scheissgut* 'shit good' and Swedish *skitgod* 'shit good'. English⁶ is apparently not favourably disposed to the degree-by-compounding method, its only examples being *pisspoor* 'poorly financed', 'third-rate', 'incompetent', and *shitsure* 'very certain'. On the other hand, compounding of the same type is also found in non-Germanic languages as the discussion of 'other languages' later on in this chapter will show.

7.3.2 The Romance languages

Among the Romance languages, French possesses parallels to the proposed Germanic constructions expressing dislike or degree. The words used are basically three, viz. *maudit(e)* from the verb *maudire* 'curse', *foutu(e)* from *foutre* 'fuck' and *sacré(e)* from the French verb *sacrer* which was formerly used in European French with the meaning 'to swear', a meaning it has retained in Canadian French.

'Dislike' meaning with regard to (the referents of) nouns is found in examples like *Ce foutu/maudit/sacré professeur* 'The/That bloody teacher', while we find degree meaning in for example *C'est un sacré travailleur!* 'He is a hell of a worker'. High degree of adjectives or adverbs is normally expressed by means of one of the adverbs *foutrement* and *sacrément* as in *Elle est foutrement habile/douée* 'She's damn smart', *Elle chante sacrament bien* 'She sings damned well'.

French also has an alternative formulation for *Ce sacré professeur*, an alternative that can be paraphrased in English as 'that bastard of a teacher'. In this alternative French expression, the word corresponding to English *bastard* is one of the words *con* ('idiot'), *merdier* (the latter from *merde* 'shit') or more offensive words like *enculé* 'arsehole' (literally 'arse-fucked person') and *putain* 'tart'. We can choose, in other words, between *Ce con de professeur*, *Ce merdier de professeur*, *Cet enculé de professeur* and *Cette putain de professeur*.

A few words should be said about the French spoken in Quebec in Canada, which has retained a type of religious swearing known as *le sacre* and which exploits otherwise unusual religious themes such as the adverbs *calissément*, *crissément*, *mauditement* used as degree indicators before adjectives as in *C'est calissément/crissément/mauditement beau* 'It's bloody beautiful'. *Calissément* is derived from *calice* 'chalice', *crissément* ultimately comes from *Christ* pronounced *criss* in the French spoken in Montreal and neighbouring areas. *Mauditement* of course is a development of the past participle of the verb *maudire* 'curse'.

Like French, Italian possesses both preposed and postposed expressions of intensification, dislike and emphasis. In the first type Italian uses preposed adjectives like *dannato/dannata*, *maledetto/maledetta* both 'damned', and *fottuto/fottuta* 'fucked', for example in *Questa dannata/maledetta/fottuta macchina* 'This damned (bloody, fucking) car!'

Italian also possesses a construction identical to the French *Ce con de professor* but uses words like *stronzo* 'shit' or *cazzo* 'prick' to produce utterances like *Questo stronzo/cazzo di macchina* 'This bastard/shit/prick of a car', or inserts *di merda* 'of shit' after the noun in question as in *Questa macchina di merda* 'This shit car', viz. 'This bloody car'.

Portuguese has at least one preposed adjectival dislike marker, viz. *maldito/maldita* 'damned'. But like the other Romance languages they prefer the 'This bastard of a + noun' construction with output like the following:

Caralho ('prick')

Foda ('fuck')

Essa ('This') *Merda* ('shit') *de carro* ('of a car')

Porcario ('swine')

Porro ('sperm')

The Portuguese choice of the taboo theme 'sperm' is original and not found in any of the other languages discussed here.

In Spanish a common way of expressing degree, dislike and emphasis is to place one of the forms *condenada/condenado*, *jodida/jodido*, *maldita/maldito* before a noun, adjective or adverb. (The forms in question are past participles of the verbs *condenar* 'condemn', *joder* 'fuck', *maldecir* 'curse'.)

Thus we find common Spanish expressions like *El jodido televisor non funciona* 'The bloody TV is out of order', *Este maldito/condenado coche* 'This bloody/goddamned/fucking car!' Unlike what was the case in the Germanic languages, Spanish can also place the superlative form of the expletive word in predicate complement position as in *Un problema jodidissimo* 'A bloody difficult problem' (literally 'A fuckinest problem'). An additional Spanish expletive slot filler that should be mentioned is *puñetero/puñetera*, forms derived from the noun *puñetero* the literal meaning of which is 'masturbator' but which usually corresponds to the English expletive nouns *bastard*, *jerk*, *wanker*.

A common and effective way of expressing degree, dislike and emphasis in Spanish is to place the noun *puta* 'tart' or the plural *putas* before the relevant noun. *Put(a)s* works both as a non-intensifying adjective of

dislike as in *Aquí está tu puta comida!* 'Here's your bloody food'. It also expresses emphasis: *Todos los putas fines de semana!* 'Every bloody weekend'. Finally *puta* may also be used as an intensifier of the following noun: *Qué puta mierda!* 'What bloody shit!'

7.3.3 The Slavonic languages

The Polish forms corresponding to English *bloody* as an expression of the speaker's dislike are formed from the words for cholera, fuck and shit respectively. These forms are *cholerny*, *pieprzniety* and *gowniany* and are used as in

	<i>cholerny</i>	
<i>Ten</i> ('The')	<i>gowniany</i> ('bloody')	<i>idiota</i> ('fool')
	<i>pieprzniety</i>	

The Polish expression corresponding to the English degree adverbs *bloody*, *fucking*, etc. is *diabielnie*, a derivation from the Polish word for 'devil' as in *diabielnie duży* 'bloody big'.

Russian expresses degree in such cases by means of the words *ebaniy* and *ebanaty* which are derivations from the root *-eb-* 'fuck'. In addition Russian may express the speaker's dislike of the referent of a certain noun by placing the disliked noun between the words *tvojú* and *mát'* in the insult *Yob tvojú mát'* 'somebody fucked your mother' as in the following examples (representing examples (35)–(37) in Dreizin and Priestly 1982: 242). In the first example the speaker has discovered a fly in his soup, in the second he complains of a dirty plate, and in the third he has barked his shin against a table:

<i>Yob tvojú múxu mát'</i>	'Goddamned fly!'
<i>Yob tvojú tarélku mát'</i>	'Bloody plate!'
<i>Yob tvojú stól mát'</i>	'Fucking table!'

7.3.4 The Finno-Ugric languages

The Finno-Ugric languages are divided into two main groups, viz. the Finnic group containing Finnish, Estonian and Same (Lappish) and the Ugric group whose main language is Hungarian. The member languages of the two subdivisions are not mutually intelligible and are in fact quite dissimilar.

In the Finnish group, Finnish and Estonian display expressions of degree and dislike closely resembling each other, like Finnish *saatanan suuri* 'devilish big', *bloody big*', *perkeleen hullu* 'devilish fool', *saatanan*

kusipää 'devilish pisshead'. Finnish also possesses degree expressions using taboos of a different kind such as *vittumainen suuri* 'cuntish big'.

Estonian also uses the nouns for 'devil' and 'hell' and occasionally the word for *heathen* to form intensifiers, emphasers and expressions of dislike, as for instance in *Kuradi tobu* 'devilish idiot', *pagana kangele minna* 'a heathenish long way'. Hungarian – the only example of a language from the Ugric group – does not seem to use similar derived preposed forms to express dislike and intensification, but uses another method which it shares with a number of other languages which will be dealt with later in the next section.

7.3.5 Other languages

Some of the languages included in the present study are missing from the above presentation of different methods of expressing intensification and dislike. For one of them – Arabic – the reason is that it does not seem to have particular linguistic forms used for these purposes.⁸

Three among the other remaining languages signal these meanings by means of preposed forms derived from taboo verbs and nouns in a way reminiscent of the Germanic languages. These three languages are Greek, Hindi and Urdu. Greek uses a form derived from the word *póitsos* 'prick', as for instance in *Kani poutsokrýo* 'bloody cold'. Hindi and Urdu use the obviously related forms *chodu* and *chodnu* from the verb meaning 'fuck', as for instance in *chodu/chodna bhagat* 'bloody fool', 'fucking arsehole'.

The languages that remain are quite different both in terms of linguistic typology and culture but share the same method for expressing dislike and high degree of a following word: they place a non-derived taboo word – in a one case a phrase – before the word in question.

Thus Cantonese can express both dislike and degree by placing certain semantically loaded words before others, for instance *séi* 'die' in *Séi chéun* 'bloody stupid' and *chaht* 'prick' as in *chaht háah* 'bloody silly' and *séi gáu* 'bloody shit' (*gáu* actually means 'dog'). Finally, the word *gáu* can itself serve as an intensifier as in *gáu ap* 'damned nonsense'.

Japanese, Hungarian and Turkish use the preposed nouns *baka* 'idiot', *kurva* 'prostitute' and *çok* 'shit' as in, respectively, *baka todai* 'damned expensive', literally 'idiot expensive', *kurva nagy* 'bloody big', literally 'prostitute big' and *çok iyi* 'fucking expensive', literally 'shit expensive'. In addition to the degree meaning of *baka* in *baka todai* we find it with the dislike meaning as in *baka jan* 'bloody fool'.

Mandarin, finally, may express dislike by placing the ritual insult *Ta ma de* 'Your mother's' before the word for the object of dislike.

8

Replacive Swearing

8.0 Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced four more or less generally held criteria that have to be met by words and expressions said to constitute swearing, presumably not only in English but in all languages. The criteria in question were:

1. Swearing is the use of utterances containing **taboo** words.
2. The taboo words are used with **non-literal** meaning.
3. Many utterances that constitute swearing are subject to severe lexical, phrasal and syntactic constraints which suggest that most swearing qualifies as of **formulaic language**.
4. Swearing is **emotive** language: its main function is to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker's feelings and attitudes.

In the discussion of these criteria it was noted that it is sometimes hard to determine whether these criteria have been met or not, and that in particular criterion (2) may be hard to satisfy. One of the main reasons for this is that even when taboo words are clearly used with non-literal meaning, they may still have metaphorical meaning containing remnants of their old literal meaning. The membership of such words in the swearing category is determined by the relative strength of those metaphorical remnants.

There are no doubt cases where it is impossible to determine the strength of such metaphorical remnants. However, as our discussion of the word *hell* in Chapter 1 demonstrated, there are also cases in which it is in fact possible to reach such decisions. We found, for instance, that the correct interpretation of an utterance like *They made her life hell* depends crucially on the strong connection between the word *hell*

as used here and the literal meaning of *hell* provided in the *ODE*, viz. 'a place of perpetual fire where the wicked are punished after death'. For the utterance *They made her life hell* to be understood correctly, it is essential that the word *hell* be given an interpretation close to the literal meaning of that word, viz. the definition in the dictionary, and as a consequence of this the utterance *They made her life hell* cannot be regarded as an instance of English swearing. However, in expressions like *They ran like hell* and *The hell it is* on the other hand, the semantic connection with the literal meaning of *hell* is very tenuous and these expressions are consequently reckoned to be instances of swearing.

However, it may also be difficult for utterances containing taboo words to meet criterion (2) for the opposite reason, so to speak. The way criterion (2) is formulated, it is taken for granted that the taboo word used in a particular swearing construction expresses a *single* non-literal meaning. Consider an utterance like (1):

(1) Jimmie is a piece of shit.

For obvious reasons a literal reading of (1) is out of the question and we will assume that (1) is an instance of swearing in which *shit* has the meaning 'a contemptible and worthless person' as *ODE* puts it.

Under no circumstances would we interpret (1) as meaning, say, 'Jimmie is a postman', 'Jimmie is a dog', 'Jimmie is my brother', or any of the thousands of other meanings that could be invented, because we know for a fact that the only possible non-literal interpretation of the swear word *shit* when used about a person is in fact 'a contemptible or worthless person'.

However, there are languages in which a swear word may express more than one non-literal meaning and in which it is up to the addressee to supply the most suitable interpretation. The French word *foutre* 'fuck' provides an example. This verb may be used to express several meanings as in examples (2)–(5):

(2) *Qu'est-ce que tu fous ici?* 'What are you doing here?'

(3) *Fous-moi le livre* 'Give me the book'.

(4) *Elle m'a foutu un coup de pied* 'She kicked me/gave me a kick'

(5) *Où t'as foutu les clés?* 'Where did you put the keys?'

What is going on here is that the addressee uses the – linguistic and situational – context to determine that in (2) *foutre* means 'to do', in (3) and (4) it represents two different uses of *foutre* 'give', and that in (5)

the only reasonable interpretation is 'put'. French speakers know that the verb *foutre* has the literal meaning 'fuck' but may also be used as a replacive for the verbs *do*, *give* and *put*. In their choice between these different possibilities they are aided by context. Context is extremely valuable in putting us on the right interpretive track: probably no English speaker would have problems interpreting pseudo-English expressions like **What are you fucking here?*, **Fuck me the book!* and **Where did you fuck the keys?*

In cases like (2)–(5) *foutre* is on its way to becoming what has been called a PRO-verb (cf. Dreizin-Priestly 1982: 234), a verb that will take on whatever meaning the speech situation suggests. However, the number of alternative meanings that non-literal *foutre* may be used to express is limited to the three or four verbs in (2)–(5) above, and in order to find a fully fledged PRO-verb system, we must turn to another language, viz. Russian and its highly special swearing system known as *mat*.

8.0.1 Russian 'mat' and the PRO-verbs

In 1927, Trotsky wrote an article in which he argues that swearing is incompatible with socialist ideals and that the use of swearing was a sign of submission, lack of culture and lack of respect for human dignity (Trotsky 1927).

Trotsky's article also poses the question whether there are any other nations that permit themselves such 'vile obscenities' as the Russians, a question that may strike many observers as highly justified: it is not hard to get the impression that Russian swearing goes to lengths rarely found in the swearing of other languages.

However, on a different interpretation of this wealth of swearing, we may ask ourselves whether it is not also an indication that Russian is a language extraordinarily well suited for swearing. In fact, it is not unusual for speakers of Russian to claim that in swearing they have a linguistic resource lacking in other languages and cultures and that they must be regarded as the most prominent swearers in the world.¹ It comes as no surprise therefore that tournaments in swearing were once organized in Russian prisons, a phenomenon that attracted the attention of no less a person than Fyodor Dostoevsky who describes such tournaments in his *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* first published in serial form in 1861–62.²

Strangely enough, Dostoevsky has also contributed another observation regarding Russian swearing. It appears that sometime in the late nineteenth century the Russian writer went for a Sunday walk in St Petersburg and happened to overhear a conversation between six

drunken factory workers in which he gradually grew more and more interested. His interest was awakened by the fact that – as he later reported in Dostoevsky (1873–76) – the conversation consisted of a single noun repeated with six different kinds of intonation, a noun that would have been impossible to put in writing at the time, viz. *xúj* ('prick').

Von Timroth, who relates this story, suggests that the conversation actually consisted of six different repartees, each containing only the word *xúj* but with different functions in the conversation (1986: 84). Sweeping and unsubstantiated as these claims are, they receive support from several linguistic scholars in whose opinion Russian not only possesses an unusually large supply of 'dirty words', but has in addition an unusually creative set of rules permitting the creation of new swear words from old (cf. Devkin 1996, Dreizin and Priestly 1982, von Timroth 1986).

In his long and informative 1982 article about Russian swearing, S.A. Smith argues that part of the explanation for the unique status of Russian swearing stems from the fact that, in contrast to the swearing in many other European languages, Russian swearing does not rely on religion for the requisite taboo violations: 'Blasphemy is not a standard feature of Russian swearing – the name of God, Jesus or the Virgin Mary being very seldom invoked' (Smith 1998: 2). Instead of religious swearing, Smith argues, Russian has *mat*, a word related to the Russian word *mát* 'mother'. Note, however, that both the spelling and the pronunciation of the two words are different. *Mat* was originally reserved for swearing involving 'aspersions cast on somebody's mother', but is now the term used about all obscene Russian swearing.³

According to Smith and many others, there are purely linguistic reasons for the superiority and creativity of Russian swearing. As Smith has it (1998: 3):

... Russian, as a highly inflected language, has a greater capacity than many other languages to generate obscenity, particularly through its highly complex verbal system. This means that *mat* is not simply a collection of dirty words but a set of refined and complex linguistic structures which, to some extent, function as a 'shadow language' of standard Russian.

It is reckoned, for instance, that by using the two verb forms (imperfective and perfective) which exist in Russian, together with the standard verbal prefixes and reflexive forms of these verbs, it is possible to make 1596 verbs from eight standard obscene roots. And, because many such

words carry variable meanings according to context, it is claimed that the number of *mat* expressions is potentially limitless. The various forms of the verb *ebát'* 'fuck' for example, can mean anything from 'to work', 'to deceive', 'to lie', 'to be pretentious', 'to be tired', 'to be bored', 'to get', 'to go away', 'to lose', 'to beat', 'to be bothered' and so on.

But this is just the beginning. Once we have created a word from a word stem by adding a prefix, suffix or both, the time has come to determine the lexical meaning of the new word. This is where the potential of the Russian swearing system becomes truly impressive. Every time we have created a new word – noun or verb – from the dirty words, the new word may be used to replace basically any Russian noun or verb in the vocabulary. The choice of word to be replaced is up to the speaker.

Let us see how this procedure works. We begin with (6), a normal Russian sentence, containing no swearing at all:

(6) *On udáril Ivána kirpičóm po golové.*

'Han hit Ivan on the head with a brick'.

To liven up this everyday sentence we could now decide to replace the verb form *udáril* 'hit' with a new verb *zaxúj áčil* derived from the noun *xúj* 'prick' and insert the new predicate in the sentence which now reads

(7) *On zaxúj á'cil Ivána kirpičóm po golové.*

Obviously, the literal meaning of the original sentence has now changed. What it now means literally is 'He **pricked** Ivan on the head with a brick'. However, despite the new literal meaning caused by the introduction of the new verb derived from *xúj* 'prick', the way the sentence is understood remains basically the same. There is a small stylistic difference, however: the first version of the sentence is understood as a neutral account of what happened. The second version – the one with inserted *xúj* – is more expressive and introduces an amount of subjectivity or speaker involvement which makes the utterance more powerful. Much the same effect could have been obtained if the predicate verb had been replaced by obviously colloquial verbs corresponding to English *bash* or *punch*.

For pedagogical reasons the above exposition has been organized as if speakers actually first produced a sentence with a non-expletive predicate only to replace that predicate with an expletive one. This is

of course not the way it works: speakers choose expletive predicates from the beginning and leave it to the addressee to figure out their meaning in each given context. These expletive predicates are true instances of PRO-verbs (cf. Dreizin-Priestly 1982: 241).

This fairly simple method for making descriptions more colourful and gripping can in principle be used with all sorts of predicates, but is probably more common when the predicate represented by the PRO-verb denotes physical action. One condition on its use is that the addressee should be able to understand from the context what the utterance is supposed to mean. Another condition is that the word used as PRO-verb should be derived from one of a small number of sex-related taboo words. Besides *xúj* we find for instance *ebát'* 'fuck' and *pizdá* 'cunt' as in the following examples from Dreizin and Priestly (1982: 241):

(8) *Oní podošli tudá i pizdnúli po oknú*

'They went over there and hit the window' (Dreizin and Priestly 1982: 28)

(9) *On proebál Fránciju v mašine*

'He drove all over France in a car' (Dreizin and Priestly 1982: 32)

If (8) and (9) are interpreted literally they mean 'They went over there and cunted the window' and 'He fucked France in his car'.

8.0.2 PRO-nouns

Just as there are *mat* PRO-verbs so there are *mat* PRO-nouns, nouns that have both a specific literal taboo meaning like *xúj* 'penis' and a more general meaning specified by context as in *xúj* 'person'. Dreizin and Priestly (1982: 234) offer the following 13 examples of Russian *mat* PRO-nouns (their literal meanings are supplied within brackets): *xúj* ('prick'), *xer* ('prick'), *govnoéd* ('shit-eater'), *govnoyob* ('shit-fucker'), *žopa* ('arse(hole)'), *bljád'* ('whore'), *pizdá* ('cunt'), *pizdóvina* ('little cunt'), *xújovina* ('little prick'), *govnó* ('shit'), and finally the *xúj* derivatives *xúj nyá*, *xúj áčja*, *xúj yetá* to which I will return shortly.

According to Dreizin and Priestly (1982: 234) the first four of these, viz. *xúj* ('prick'), *xer* ('prick'), *govnoéd* ('shit-eater') and *govnoyob* ('shit-fucker'), are used about male persons, *žopa*, *bljád'* and *pizdá* are used about persons of both sexes, *pizdóvina* and *xújevina* are used about count nouns, *govnó* are used about males and females, mass nouns and abstract nouns, *xúj njá* about abstract nouns and mass nouns, *xúj áčija* about abstract nouns, count nouns and mass nouns and *xuetá* only about abstract nouns.

Example (10) indicates how the *mat* PRO-nouns are used in Russian:

(10) *Včera ja videl ètu bljad'*

(10) has two possible interpretations. Either *bljad'*, literally 'whore', is taken at face value and the sentence means 'I saw this whore yesterday', or *bljad'* is given its *mat* interpretation and the sentence is taken to mean 'I saw this person yesterday'.

However, if (10) is changed into (11) only the first interpretation is possible:

(11) *Včera ja videl blyád'*

There is only a slight formal difference between (10) and (11); in the former *bljad'* is preceded by the 'determinative adjective' *ètu* – roughly corresponding to English *this* – but in the latter *ètu* has been removed. This slight difference makes a world of a difference in the interpretations of these sentences: it is only when *mat* PRO-nouns like *bljad'* are preceded by such determinative forms that they may be interpreted as meaning 'person'.

As Dreizin and Priestly point out (1982: 237), something like the above condition for a PRO-noun interpretation of taboo nouns also exists in English. If we assume, as seems reasonable, that in many ways the Russian determinative adjectives correspond both to English *this* and *the*, we find a parallel to the above Russian examples in the following English ones:

(12) I've lost the bugger

(13) I've lost a bugger

For (12) there are two possible interpretations: the most likely meaning is one in which *bugger* is a PRO-noun referring to an object or person that the speaker can no longer find. It is in fact used in the type of anaphoric name-calling discussed in Chapter 2. However, example (12) may also be given the much less likely, non-anaphoric and literal interpretation 'I have lost the person who commits buggery'.

However, (13) can only be given the second of these interpretations; as Dreizin and Priestly conclude, the noun *bugger* with the indefinite article cannot have PRO-nominal (viz. anaphoric) reference and in (13) therefore 'an actual bugger is normally implied' (1982: 237). There is, then, a sort of parallel between English and Russian in this respect.

Notes

1 Defining Swearing

1. According to Vincent (1982: 36) a distinction was made between the *sacre* and blasphemy (*le blasphème*); while the second of these denotes conscious profanation of the name of God and the saints (*la profanation du nom de Dieu et des Saints*), the first term is reserved for thoughtless interjectional use of such names and of the names of sacred objects (*l'utilisation du vocabulaire religieux à des fins interjectives*). The *sacres* were originally part of the swearing repertory of European French but have developed new meanings and pronunciations in Canadian French, in particular in Montreal.
2. This study took place in 2005 at a school in Tensta, a Stockholm suburb with many immigrants. The participants who were aged between 14 and 17 were asked to give ten examples of typical swearing. Even if this approach encouraged exaggeration and produced certain unlikely answers, it indicates that the swearing of young people in Tensta differs strongly from mainstream Swedish swearing.
3. In a 1978 study 38 students at the University of Texas at Austin were asked to rank 80 constructions in accordance with how typical they were as instances of American English swearing. The results indicated that taboo strength was one of the most important factors affecting their choice but not the only one. See Appendix 3 for the rank list resulting from this experiment. (The list can also be found in Ljung 1984: 117–20.)
4. The information about the use of offensive language reported on here has been taken from www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorial_guidelines/a.../offensive_language/. See also the article 'Broadcast Rules Should Have Saved BBC' by John Plunkett in the *Guardian* on 29 October 2008.

2 A Typology of Swearing

1. McEnery's sources are not confined to the BNC. Cf. McEnery (2005: 30): 'In deciding what words I wanted to include within the corpus, I was partly guided by claims within the literature, partly by my own intuition, partly by serendipitous discovery and partly by words I encountered within the corpus which fitted the classification system developed.'
2. The literature on grammaticalization is very comprehensive. Here I will mention just a few relevant works: Traugott and Heine (1991), Hopper and Traugott (1993), Bybee (2003) and Fischer (2004). Gehweiler (2008) discusses the role of grammaticalization in the development of English swearing.
3. *kuk(k)* is the term used in the Nynorsk variety of Norwegian while *fitte* is from the Bokmål variety.

3 History of Swearing

1. The Corpus of English Dialogues (COED) is a 1.2 million-word corpus compiled at the English Department of Uppsala University. It contains dialogues from trials, dramas, witness depositions, prose fiction and handbooks from five historical periods, viz. 1560–99, 1600–39, 1640–79, 1680–1719, 1720–60.
2. Actually, the first recorded use of *damn* ‘doom to eternal punishment’ is found, not in connection with God, but with the Devil in the phrase ‘The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon’ (*Macbeth*, V.iii.11), a play first put on the stage in 1605.
3. According to Montagu, Prynne, a Puritan, launched an attack on the stage in his book *Histrionmastix* in 1633 but was cruelly punished for alleged criticisms of the king and queen.
4. There were several interrogations, the best known of which appears to be the one conducted by two Englishmen, viz. the earls of Warwick and Stafford. The language in which the interrogation was conducted was French. Cf. MS. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, *Collection Complète des Mémoires*, Vol. 8.
5. The question of the true nature of *goddem* has attracted the attention of many scholars in addition to Wartburg, for instance Steven de Ullman (1947) ‘Anglicisms in French. Notes on their Chronology, Range and Reception’, *PMLA* Vol. 62, No. 4, Dec. 1947, 1153–77. de Ullman regards *goddem* as an English loan that entered French during the Hundred Years War and refers to it as part of ‘the thin and intermittent trickle of Anglicisms prior to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes ... The words that had got through survived and one of them, at least, *Goddam*, retained much of its old flavour and pungency’ (1947: 1160).

However, de Ullman also relates *goddem* to genuinely French words, calling it ‘a variant of *Godon*’ (1947: 1156) and relates it to phonetic distortions of *Godot* such as *godo*, *jodo*, which are semantically related to fifteenth-century *gode* ‘effeminate’, *godinette* ‘prostitute’ and sixteenth-century *godant* ‘deceit’ (1947: 1169).

Wartburg (1928) also refers to the similarity between *goddem* and *godon*. He describes *godon* as ‘a nickname given to the English’ and connected with Norman *godonner* ‘swear’, ‘murmur’ and also with *godeau* ‘lout’, *goudeau* ‘imbecile’, and *godot* ‘little pig’. Wartburg rejects the suggestion that *godon* is a French loan from English *goddamn*.

6. Hellquist (1918: 52) speaks of ‘the incredibly increased importance of the belief in the devil in people’s minds’ and refers to Troels Lund’s *Danmarks og Norges Historie i Slutningen av de 16:de Aarhundrade*, according to whom the Devil dominated human life (presumably in all of Scandinavia) in all its forms in the second half of the sixteenth century.
7. It is an interesting fact that despite his resistance to all forms of swearing, Cromwell himself did not hesitate to use the expression ‘I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken’ in a letter written in 1650 (cf. Hughes 2006: 389). The reason for this may be that unlike for example *for God’s sake*, *by God’s nails*, etc. the phrase *in the bowels of Christ* had not become formulaic and hence did not count as swearing.

8. An account of the (fictitious) interchange between the Sultan and the Cossacks may be found on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reply_of_the_Zaporozhian_Cossacks where further reference is made to Dmytro I. Yavornytsky (1895: Vol. 2, pp. 517–18 and Kuropas (1961).
9. The Wikipedia.org article makes it clear that these texts cannot lay claim to historical truth and offers the following comment:

The fact that this letter is not a true document of diplomacy of those times but a literary work has been demonstrated in numerous ways. The Cossacks never sent such documents to foreign countries in such a style. This can be seen in comparing archival materials of Cossack letters from various dates and content. Secondly, had this document been true, various variants would not exist. Thirdly, the variants have different dates (1600, 1619, 1620, 1667, 1696, 1713 and others). Moreover, there are different signatures under the letter: ataman Zakharchenko, Ivan Sirko, the Nyz Cossacks etc. Finally, each of the variants are addressed to different people: Osman, Ahmet II, Ahmet IV, Mahmud IV etc. All this points to the document having a literary origin which was taken up in folk culture or rooted in nationalistic sentiment.

10. Sheidlower (1999: 117) mentions a pre-1500 instance of *fuck* 'have sexual intercourse' found in a poem written sometime between 1450 and 1475 in which the Carmelite friars of Ely are accused of having sex with the women in that city. The relevant part of the poem is in (partly coded) Latin and goes like this: *Non sunt in celi/ Quia fuccant uuiuys of heli* 'They are not in heaven/ Who fuck the wives ('women') of Ely'.
11. Sheidlower (1999: 111) also offers an example from 1788 in which the word used is French *foutre*, viz. 'Do you call me a foutre?'

4 Interjections

1. While the first example of Japanese interjections – *Kuso!* – uses the traditional scatological taboo theme, the other two – *Baka!* and *Chiku shoo!* – differ significantly from all the others and may strike the reader as surprisingly innocent. *Baka* means 'fool', 'idiot', both usually harmless enough in today's European languages. But *idiot* may also have the more clinical sense 'retarded' and that is apparently how it is interpreted in Japanese.

The term *Chiku shoo* may be translated as 'cattle life' and apparently derives its taboo load from the low esteem in which meat and meat-eating have traditionally been held in Japan. This attitude also extended to those who made a living from cattle-keeping, slaughter, etc., occupations at the bottom of the social hierarchy (cf. Constantine 1992, 1994).

2. Note that as early as 1926, the Belgian grammarian Poutsma describes interjections as 'speech-elements which do not enter into the structure of the sentence and do not, accordingly, fall into any of the categories into which words have been divided' (Poutsma, *A Grammar of Late Modern English*. Part II, Section II, p. 829).
3. Interestingly enough, we sometimes do find a form like *gosh* actually used as a noun, for instance in the BNC examples *And I got up and I was gonna tie her*

up like and by gosh I thought I'd better make for the door again (BNC HV6 85) and *By gosh!* (BNC KBK 7111).

4. The full statistics for the interjections in Table 4.3 are as follows:
 COR: *Cor!* 74, *Cor bloody hell!* 2, *Cor blimey!* 2, *Cor strewth!* 3, *Cor Jesus Christ!* 1 = 82
 GOSH: *Gosh!* 20, *Oh gosh!* 10, *By gosh!* 1, *Oh my gosh!* 1 = 32
 DAMN: *Damn it* 2, *Damn* 2 = 4
 CHRIST: *Christ!* 14, *Oh Christ!* 8, *For Christ's sake* 4, *By Christ!* 3, *Oh Jesus Christ!* 1 = 30
 SHIT: *Ah shit!* 1, *Oh shit!* 9, *Shit!* 8 = 18
 JESUS: *Jesus!* 7, *Ah Jesus!* 2, *Cor Jesus Christ!* 1, *Cor Jesus!* 1, *Oh Jesus* 2, *Oh Jesus Christ!* 1, *Ah Jesus Christ!* 1, *Jesus bloody Christ!* 1, *Ooh Jesus* 1, *Jesus wept* 1, *Jesus Christ!* 1 = 19
 FUCK: *Fuck!* 4, *Fuck me!* 2, *Fuck it!* 4, *Oh fuck!* 2 = 12
 GOD: *God!* 109, *Oh God!* 173, *By God!* 26, *My God!* 120, *Oh my God!* 99, *Good God* 22, *Dear God* 1, *Oh dear God!* 1, *Oh God Almighty* 1, *For God's sake* 9, *Ah God!* 2 = 563
 BUGGER: *Bugger!* 1, *Bugger it!* 1, *Oh bugger it!* 3, *Bugger + object* 7, *Bugger me!* 2, *Oh bugger!* 1 = 15
 HELL: *Hell!* 1, *Bloody hell!* 112, *Fucking hell!* 20, *Oh hell!* 3, *Bleeding hell!* 1, *Flipping hell!* 3, *By hell!* 2, *Cor bloody hell!* 2, *For bloody hell sake* 1 = 145
5. The title of Ross's article is 'Patterns of Swearing'. It appeared in the journal *Discovery* for November 1961, pp. 479–89. Ross noted, among other things, that there were two types of swearing, 'social swearing' and 'annoyance swearing'. As could be expected, annoyance was more common on occasions characterized by increasing stress. However, at times of really serious stress all swearing stopped, which she takes as an indication that 'swearing is a sign that a disagreeable situation is bearable'.
6. Here I have described the expletive slot filler positions in syntactic terms like 'before clause', etc. These positions could also have been described in discourse terms such as 'turn initial', 'turn final' as in for example Stenström (1994), or by referring to the slot filler positions relative to the following or preceding proposition, etc.
7. I would like to thank Antoinette Renouf, Andrew Kehoe and Rodopi for permission to reprint Table 4.4 from Ljung (2009).
8. I thank Antoinette Renouf, Andrew Kehoe and Rodopi for permission to reprint Table 4.5 from Ljung (2009).

5 Oaths, Emphatic Denials, Curses

1. Compare also the *OED* which offers the following definitions of oath (among others):
- (1) a solemn or formal declaration involving God (or a god or other object of reverence) as witness to the truth of a statement, or to the binding nature of a promise or undertaking.
 - (2) a casual or careless appeal invoking God (or something sacred) in asseveration or imprecation, without intent of reverence, made in corroboration of a statement.

2. It is clear from her reference to 'those of us who are not Cockney or Australian ...' (1963: 370) that White's sweeping rejection of English swearing applies only to the speakers of British Standard English.
3. Of course there is more to it than that: the 'simple verb form' lacks agreement with third person subjects and is in fact a subjunctive.

6 Ritual Insults, Name-Calling, Unfriendly Suggestions

1. German has at least one mother-theme expletive, viz. the epithet *HurenSohn* 'son of a whore', and up to the fifteenth century Swedish had a corresponding form *horson* as Österberg (1995: 129) points out.
2. For more information about the Tensta study cf. note 2 to Chapter 1.
3. The expression *Gli mortacci tua!* is apparently not restricted to the Varese dialect but is reported also to be used in other Italian cities, for instance Rome. However, my only evidence for the existence of the expression comes from the home page of the Varese basketball club where a member of the fan club described the expression in question and described it as 'un termine tipicamente varesino : gli mortacci tua !!!' ('a typical Varese term: Your dead relatives'). Translating this expression as 'Your dead relatives' is somewhat misleading. The phrase means literally 'Your despicable dead'. The use of the noun *mortacci* becomes all the more provocative by the use of the suffix *-acci*, which is an indication of the speaker's contempt for the referent of the noun, i.e. the dead relatives in question.
4. *Bastard* came to English via French ultimately from Latin *bastardus*, itself a derivation from Latin *bastum* 'packsaddle'. Like the Old French expression *fiils de bast* 'son of the packsaddle', it suggests that somebody's father is a mule driver 'who uses his saddle for a pillow and is gone by morning' as the *ODE* puts it. It is an etymology which lies close to similar terms in other languages, for instance Arabic and Mandarin.
5. The dates for the first occurrences of the literal meanings of the words in Table 6.4 have been taken from the *OED* since they are not always to be found in Cassell.
6. Amis's views on the word *wanker* are tucked away under the heading 'Berks and Wankers' in his book *The King's English* in which he distinguishes between two types of users of English. Berks, in Amis's opinion, are 'careless, coarse, crass, gross' and 'speak in a slipshod way'. Wankers on the other hand are 'prissy, fussy, priggish, prim' and 'speak in an over-precise way with much pedantic insistence on letters not generally sounded, especially Hs' (Amis 1998: 23). It is apparent that Amis's use of *wanker* has a good deal in common with its use in Australian English as described in Stollznow (2004).

7 Degree, Dislike, Emphasis, Exasperation and Annoyance

1. Like certain other languages, English not only has preposed intensifiers like *bloody*, *damn*, *fucking*, etc., but also possesses the postposed intensifiers *like hell* (*heck*) and *as hell*. These forms are left out of the account in the present chapter, which deals only with preposed forms.

2. It is well known that a vast number of widely different explanations for the origin of *bloody* have been advanced. In his insightful and fascinating exposé of these views, Montagu (1967: 241–7) mentions no fewer than eight more or less convincing explanations, most of which he firmly rejects. In the end he sides with those – including Partridge – who see a similarity between *bloody* and Dutch and German *bloedig* and *blutig*, French *sanglant* and Latin *cruente* and *sanguinolente*, all three of which function both as ordinary adjective meaning ‘full of blood’, ‘covered with blood’ and as intensifiers.

Before Montagu, White (1963) took a similar stand, saying among other things: ‘In thirteenth-century France, the word [*sanglant*] was already used as a term of abuse and there is little doubt that France gave us the lead in the introduction of this word into the vocabulary of swearing’ (1963: 371). She also quotes ‘a relevant thirteenth century incident’ in which an exasperated wine-grower furiously addressed rebellious southern peasants with the words *O rustici sanguinolenti, vos dabitis, velitis vel non* meaning ‘You bloody peasants, whether you will or whether you won’t, you shall pay all the same’, giving as her source Coulton (1960: 342).

3. The first of these British linguists was Norman Moss who made the remark in his *British/American Dictionary* from 1984. According to Quirk (1978), the second, more tolerant, view was held by Barbara Strang.
4. COCA – the Corpus of Contemporary American English – is a huge corpus created by Mark Davis at the Department of Linguistics at BYU which contains written and spoken material from 1990 to the present. It has grown – and is still growing – by 20 million words per year and accordingly now contains almost 400 million words, of which 80 million are spoken English as manifested in transcripts of unscripted conversation on TV and radio programmes. For more information, cf. <http://davies-linguistics.byu.edu/personal>
5. Interestingly enough, the degree adverb *bloody* seems to be much less common as an intensifier of adverbs than of adjectives, while *damn* does not show similar tendencies towards specialization.
6. Actually, English uses scatological degree compounding of a different kind in combinations like *a crap father*, *a shit painter*, meaning ‘somebody who is bad as a father/a painter’.
7. As Dreizin and Priestly point out (1982: 243), in these three examples there are slightly different versions in which the disliked phenomena are preceded by *v* as in *Yob tvoyú v múxu mát’*.
8. This claim needs qualifying in at least two ways. To begin with, my data are restricted to a single variety of Arabic, and it may well be that other varieties of the language have special forms dedicated to the expression of dislike and intensification. A second possible source of error may be the fact that I had fewer informants for Arabic than for most of the other languages that make up the database for the present study.

8 Relacive Swearing

1. Such pride in the swearing potential of one’s own language is not restricted to Russian. Unlikely as it may seem, similar claims of swearing superiority were once made for Swedish, not a language whose swearing is particularly

creative. Thus in Hellquist (1918) the author begins his discussion of Swedish swearing by saying: 'When it comes to swearing, we Swedes have attracted highly flattering attention from other nations' (Hellquist 1918: 49).

2. In his article on swearing in late imperial and early Soviet Russia, Smith (1998: 33) quotes the following extract from Dostoevsky's work: 'At first I could not understand how they could swear for enjoyment, and find in this amusement, a cherished exercise, a pastime. One must not, however, leave personal vanity out of account. The dialectician of the curse was held in great esteem. He was applauded almost like an actor.'
3. Apparently the Russian partiality for swearing involving mothers and sex goes back hundreds of years. Thus, according to Baron (1967), the German scholar Adam Olearius who first visited Russia in 1634, passed the following judgement on the Russian swearing of those days:

When their indignation flares and they use swearwords, they do not resort to imprecations involving the sacraments – as unfortunately is often the case with us – consigning to the devil, abusing as a scoundrel etc. Instead they use many vile and loathsome words, which, if the historical record did not demand it, I should not impart to chaste ears. They often have nothing more on their tongue than 'son of a whore', 'son of a bitch', 'cur', 'I fuck your mother' to which they add 'into the grave' and similar scandalous speech. Not only adults, but also little children behave thus, little children who do not yet know the name of God, father or mother, already have on their lips 'fuck you' and say it as well to their parents as their parents to them.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Characteristics of languages represented in the book

Number of speakers per language

The following figures for the estimated numbers of native speakers per language are based on Crystal's *Penguin Dictionary of Language* (2nd edn 1999). The numbers represent millions of speakers:

Arabic 200, Cantonese 70, Danish 5, Dutch 20, English 400, Estonian 1, Finnish 5, French 72, German 100, Greek 12, Hindi 180, Hungarian 15, Icelandic 0.226, Italian 57, Japanese 122, Mandarin (Putonghua) 850, Norwegian 4, Polish 44, Portuguese 175, Russian 170, Spanish 270, Swahili 5, Swedish 9, Turkish 60, Urdu 56

Total 2,902,000,000 speakers

Language families represented

Bantu: 1 (Swahili)

Finno-Ugric: 3 (Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian)

Indo-European: 16 (Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Icelandic, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Urdu)

Semitic: 1 (Arabic)

Sino-Tibetan: 2 (Cantonese and Mandarin)

Turkic: 1 (Turkish)

Unto its own: 1 (Japanese)

Religions/cultures represented

Christian: 1.5 billion

Buddism + Shintoism: 122 million

Muslim: 256 million

Hinduism: 360 million

Appendix 2 The questionnaire

The basis for the interviews with native speakers was a questionnaire with a set number of questions. The informants were interviewed one at a time. The questions were either given to the informant at the beginning of the interview or presented orally. Regardless of the procedure followed, the interviews always involved the same questions addressed in the same order. The average time for the interviews was 30–45 minutes although they could take considerably longer.

The following is a presentation of the questions asked together with the clues sometimes used to elicit the answers. (The word *taboo* was explained.)

1. Is it possible in your language to use taboo words to express your feelings in certain situations, for instance when have you dropped a brick on your toe or accidentally hit your hand with a hammer? What words would you use? Could the same or similar word(s) be used to express surprise?
2. What would you say to a person that you are very angry with? Would you for instance use taboo words to tell that person to do strange or impossible things? CLUE: cf. English *Get fucked! Go to hell!*, etc.
3. Do speakers of your language ever express their anger with somebody – or something – by saying that they hope something evil will happen to them/it? CLUE: compare English curses like *May the devil take you/her/it!* or *To hell with you/her/it!* What kind of evil may be involved?
4. Many languages have taboo words that are used when you want to tell somebody that they are like something or somebody unpleasant or disgusting. Is that possible in your language? How would you do it? CLUE 1: compare English expressions like *You ...!* or *The ...!* CLUE 2: *You (stupid) bastard, The asshole!*
5. Are certain taboo words in your language used to emphasize that what you say is true and important? CLUE 1: in English many people do that by taking God or some other important figure as witness. CLUE 2: compare also *By God!, ... for God's sake.*
6. Is it possible in your language to use taboo words to strongly contradict what somebody else has just said? What taboo words are used? CLUE 1: *The ... it is!*, ... *he did!*, CLUE 2: *The hell it is, Fuck he did.*
7. Is it possible in your language to place certain taboo words just in front of another word to indicate that the speaker does not like the person or thing that the second word refers to. Is that a possibility in your language?. CLUE: *The bloody car has broken down.* Can the same words also be used to indicate high degree?
8. Is it possible in your language to use taboo words to refer to a previously mentioned person or thing? CLUE: compare English expressions like *They told him/Jim to stop but he wouldn't listen* which can be reformulated as *They told him/Jim to stop but the bloody fool wouldn't listen.*
9. In certain languages speakers can choose between saying for instance *George is clever* and *George is a clever ...* where the empty slot is filled with a taboo word. Can that be done in your language and what taboo words would be used? CLUE: compare English *George is a clever bastard/son of a bitch/bugger.*
10. Can speakers in your language use taboo words to emphasize questions beginning with the equivalents of English word like *what, who, why, when, where* and *how*? How would they do that? What words would they use? CLUE: *What the hell ...*, *Who the devil ...*
11. In certain languages taboo words may be used with the same meanings as non-taboo words. This seems to be particularly common with words for having sex: in French, for instance, speakers can say *Fous-moi le livre!* – literally 'Fuck me the book' – meaning 'Give me the book' ... Is that possible in your own language?
12. Are there other uses of taboo words that are missing from the above questions but may be found in your own language? If so, what are they?

13. Does your language have a name for expressions with taboo words like those above? Can you say for instance *You mustn't ...* or *You shouldn't ... so much* where the three dots indicate the place in the utterance where such a term/name would fit in? CLUE: *You mustn't swear.*
14. Are there speakers of your language who feel that you shouldn't use expressions involving taboo words?

Appendix 3 Results from ranking study in Austin, Texas, in 1978

The 1978 Austin study was an attempt to find the criteria for swearing used by (a number of) students at the University of Texas at Austin. The study was devised so as to permit comparison with four well-known assumptions that underlie many if not most definitions of swearing, viz. that in order to qualify as swearing an utterance should contain a taboo word, the taboo word in question should have non-literal meaning and the utterance should be regarded as formulaic and emotive. In the study the participants were asked to rank 80 English examples as swearing and non-swearing respectively, The table below indicates the results of the ranking in terms of the number Yes votes for each example.

It deserves to be pointed out that the data in the rank list below are more of historical than of contemporary interest, being over 30 years old. What is still of interest is the question to what extent the native speakers' judgements regarding swearing criteria agree with the more 'academic' principles mentioned above and established in Chapter 1 in the present study.

The students' rankings suggest that to a great extent their definition of swearing agrees with the four principles suggested in Chapter 1. However, it is clear that the students place more emphasis on the taboo load of the words used than on the principle that the meanings of those words should not be literal/referential. Thus more than 60 per cent of the participants regarded *They were fucking on the floor* and *He kicked me on the prick* as swearing despite the plainly literal meanings involved.

			%
1	Up your asshole	38/38	100
2	Blow it out your ass	37/38	97.3
3	Stick it up your ass!	36/38	94.6
4	You're full of shit!	35/38	92.1
5	Up your ass!	35/38	92.1
6	You bastard!	35/38	92.1
7	They fucked up the whole thing	34/38	92.1
8	Stop behaving like a fucking PR agent	34/38	92.1
9	Holy shit!	34/38	89.4
10	Fuck me if I know!	34/38	86.8
11	Eat shit!	33/38	86.8
12	They fucked off	32/38	84.2

(continued)

Continued

			%
13	Hi fuckface!	32/38	84.2
14	I don't give a fuck who he is!	32/38	84.2
15	Don't tell that cunt Bob Smith!	32/38	84.2
16	I shouted to him to stop but the motherfucker went on	32/38	84.2
17	He's a real prick	31/38	81.5
18	I don't give a rat's ass who he is	29	76.3
19	Shit I forgot my books	29	76.3
20	He's an interesting motherfucker	28	73.6
21	I told John pigs might fly and the dumb prick believed me	28	73.6
22	Jesus Christ. how stupid can you get	27	71
23	Christ I'm tired	24	63.1
24	They told Bob to resign but the asshole refused	24	63.1
25	They were fucking on the floor	23	60.5
26	He kicked me on the prick	23	60.5
27	He's a small son of a bitch	23	60.5
28	God I'm tired	19	50
29	Good God look at that	17	44.7
30	By God I'll do it	17	44.7
31	I don't want anything to do with that fart	16	42
32	I hurt my ass	16	42
33	I invited John to dinner but the sucker is a vegetarian	9	23.6
34	I don't want anything to do with that sucker	9	23.6
35	Shoot!	8	21
36	Why the heck didn't he stay?	6	15.7
37	Shucks!	6	15.7
38	They worked like the devil	5	13.1
39	My goodness it's cold in here	3	7.9
40	They worked like blazes	2	5.3

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Index

- A turde thou wilt* 105
Abd el-Jawad, H. 37, 103–4
Aborigines 42, 123, 124
adjective of dislike 155
affirmation–contradiction 30, 32, 89
Allah 37, 75, 82, 103, 108, 111
amplifier 148
anaphoric epithet 14, 34, 55, 127–8, 167
ancestors theme 42
Ancient Greek and Roman
 swearing 49–51
Andersson, L.G. 3, 7–8, 12, 28, 29, 33
animal theme 41–2, 104
Arabic 5, 31, 37, 75, 82, 111, 121,
 122, 133, 138
Arabic oaths 103–4
arse 12, 13, 17, 18, 26, 32, 38, 66,
 68, 71, 105, 106, 107, 111, 123,
 131, 138, 139, 140, 141, 154, 166
arsehole 14, 34, 38, 69, 125, 130,
 131, 132, 133, 136, 160, 166
ass 17, 22, 32, 38, 68, 105, 138,
 139, 177
asshole 14, 34, 41, 58, 69, 129, 130,
 131, 132, 133, 136, 176, 177, 178
attitudinal disjunct 34
Austin, J.L. 69
- balls* 39, 69, 136, 137, 138, 140
bastard 14, 35, 36, 42, 65, 125, 126,
 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 157, 158,
 172, 176, 177
BBC 9
Bible, swearing in 48–9
bitch 35, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133,
 134, 137
blasphemous swearing 2, 25, 28, 37,
 49, 52, 54, 59, 61, 62
blasphemy 24, 25, 49, 57, 58, 60, 168
blasted 144, 145
bleeding 14, 144, 145, 150, 153,
 154, 171
blithering 144, 145
- bloody* 2, 11, 14, 19, 20, 22, 24, 30,
 33, 34, 35, 43, 71, 80, 88, 143–6,
 147–53, 154–5
bloody hell! 22, 74, 80, 83, 85, 96,
 102, 105
blooming 144–5
bollocks 13, 31, 39, 69, 75
Brinton, L.J. 47, 50, 86, 87, 95
bugger 18, 27, 32, 40, 74, 77, 81,
 87–8, 94, 109, 110, 112, 128, 131,
 167, 171
By God! 11, 20, 28, 31, 37, 42, 48,
 52, 53, 100, 101, 103, 178
- Cantonese 41, 83, 111, 121, 123,
 135, 160
celestial swearing 6, 36, 37, 51–4,
 56–7, 101
Chaucer 70, 102, 119
cline of categorality 20
cock 13, 14, 32, 59, 69, 70, 82, 130,
 138–9, 141–2
cockhead 69, 130, 131, 132
cocksucker 40, 70, 122, 126, 130,
 131, 132, 133, 144, 147
cocksucking 98–9
commissives 98–9
contradiction 32
conventionalized vs ritualized
 insults 114, 115, 120
cow 42, 53, 64
criteria for swearing 4
Cromwell, O. 62, 169
Crystal, D. 5, 12, 30, 84, 119, 136, 180
Culpeper, J. 117, 120
cunt 9, 14, 38, 39, 64, 70, 75, 106,
 121, 122, 129, 130–1, 132, 137,
 138, 139, 140–1, 166, 178
curse tablets 107
curses 2, 31–2, 40, 42, 43, 45–6, 47,
 54, 58, 63, 65, 66, 71, 83, 97, 99,
 100–3, 107–13, 114, 123, 138, 143,
 157, 158, 171, 174, 179

- damn* 11, 13, 16, 54–6, 63, 67,
74, 75, 77, 78, 79, 81, 83, 89,
91, 94, 100, 109, 112, 143, 144,
145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151,
152, 153, 154, 155, 157, 169, 171,
172, 173
- damned* 14, 20, 22, 30, 32, 34, 46,
54, 55, 66, 72, 74, 82, 83, 111, 112,
143, 144, 146, 148, 153, 160
- Danish 2, 28, 38, 39, 41, 43, 54, 57,
67, 70, 71, 72, 75, 106, 109, 111,
113, 121, 135, 136, 138, 155, 156,
157, 175
- death theme 36, 37, 41, 42, 43, 47,
59, 123, 124, 138
- definition of swearing 4–23
- defixive curses 107
- degree adverbs 22, 147, 159
- degrees of taboo offensiveness 8–11
- Devkin, D.V. 2, 164
- diabolic swearing 55–8, 77, 84–8,
150, 183
- dick* 13, 41, 69, 70, 75, 79, 82, 106,
107, 129, 130, 131, 132, 137, 139,
141, 142
- dickhead* 69, 125, 129, 131, 132,
136, 137
- disease theme 41, 43, 104, 114, 132,
133, 138, 156
- dislike adjectives 34
- distribution of English interjections 94
- Dostoyevsky, F. 163, 164, 174
- Dreizin, F. and Priestley, T. 2, 159,
163, 164, 166, 173
- Dutch 2, 39, 70, 71, 75, 104, 111,
121, 137, 138, 156, 157, 173, 175
- early Christian swearing 51
- Eat shit and die* 43, 139, 141
- Ebát'* 39, 40, 165, 166
- effing* 144–5
- Elizabeth I, favourite oath 59
- emotive meaning criterion 21–3
- emphasis 34
- emphasizers 22, 39, 58, 151, 153,
155, 160
- emphatic denials 13, 30, 32, 97, 99,
101, 103, 105–7, 109, 111, 171
- emphatic WH-questions 11
- epithets 28, 33, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40,
68, 70, 71, 115, 116, 125, 126, 127,
128, 130–1, 132, 133, 134, 135,
136, 137, 172
- Estonian 75, 82, 111, 121, 133, 136,
139, 159, 160, 175
- euphemisms 11–12, 22, 24, 42, 49,
53, 59, 66, 79, 80, 105, 123, 144,
154, 156
- evaluative nouns 33, 124–5
- exclamations 9, 14, 18, 27, 38,
40, 42, 43, 54, 56, 67, 69, 70, 74,
75, 76, 77, 90, 91, 95, 110, 126,
127, 155
- expletive adjective of dislike 147, 152
- expletive degree adjective 22, 30,
33, 35, 38, 43, 72, 147
- expletive degree adverbs 22, 30, 33,
35, 38, 43, 72, 147, 159, 173
- expletive interjections 30, 31, 32,
37, 74, 90–4
- expletive modal adverbials 34, 152
- faecal(ia) 57, 69
- fart* 17, 18, 38, 69, 129, 132, 136,
139, 178
- Federal Communications Commission
on offensiveness 9–11
- fellatio 40, 41, 126, 132, 133, 138, 144
- filth 8, 72, 132, 133
- Finnish 2, 7, 75, 82, 106, 111, 121,
122, 134, 136, 137, 139, 159–60, 175
- fixedness 19
- flyting 64–5, 119
- for God's sake* 34, 61, 78, 97, 132–3,
149, 151–2
- for ... sake* 22, 40, 52, 65, 88–9, 101,
102, 103, 151, 169, 171
- formal oaths 31, 97, 98, 100, 103
- formulaicness 18–21
- formulaic language 4, 18, 19, 161
- four-letter words 67–73
- foutre* 39, 72, 75, 139, 162, 163, 170
- French 1, 6, 7, 11, 39, 41, 42, 49,
52, 55, 56, 58, 60, 62, 65, 69, 72,
75, 79, 82, 99, 102, 106, 107, 109,
111, 115, 121, 126, 133, 134, 136,
137, 139, 157, 158, 162, 168, 169,
170, 172, 173, 175, 176

- frigging* 144, 145
fuck off 18, 26–7, 40, 138
fuck up 26, 27, 34, 40
Fuck you! 10, 19, 25, 26, 27, 31, 39–40, 61, 164–5, 183
Fuck your mother! 7, 12, 13, 19, 26, 27, 36, 40, 71, 110, 111, 122, 123, 138, 174
Fuck yourself 72, 122, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142
fuckarse 71, 126, 130, 131, 132, 137
fuckass 132, 137
fuckbrain 71, 130, 131, 132
fucker 40, 60, 71, 129, 130, 131, 132, 136, 137
fuckface 71, 130, 131, 132, 136, 178
fuckhead 71, 130, 131, 132
fuckng 40, 71, 143–55
fuckwit 71, 130, 131
 functions vs themes 29
- gap fillers 90–2
 Gbeya 123
 Gehweiler, E. 20, 46, 78–80
 German 2, 7, 11, 12, 38, 39, 41, 49, 53, 54, 57, 69, 70, 71, 75, 79, 82, 99, 106, 109, 111, 121, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 139, 156, 157, 172, 173, 174, 175
give a fuck 7, 28, 29, 40, 71, 178
Go to hell! 15, 16, 19, 32, 55, 75, 83, 109, 111, 114, 116, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142
goddamn 22, 67, 71, 72, 143–5, 147, 169
goddamned 14, 19, 72, 143, 145, 146, 158, 159
goddem 55, 56, 169
 grammaticalization 19–20, 21, 46, 50, 100, 101, 103, 112, 113, 168
 Greek 2, 5, 6, 36, 41, 49, 50, 75, 111, 121, 122, 123, 134, 136, 137, 139, 160, 175
 Grose, F. 68
- hell* 6, 14–16, 32, 34, 116
heresy/heretic 57, 59, 60
 Hindi 5, 6, 44, 75, 82, 111, 121, 133, 134, 135, 137, 160, 175
- history of swearing 45–73
Holy shit! 34
 Hughes, G. 3, 5, 6, 12, 33, 55, 57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 64, 67, 68, 71, 100, 131, 134, 147, 154, 169
 Hungarian 2, 39, 75, 109, 111, 121, 122, 135, 137, 140, 159, 160, 175
- I'll be damned/buggered* 20, 22, 32, 46, 47, 74, 76, 83, 112
 Icelandic 38, 41, 64, 75, 82, 111, 119, 121, 133, 135, 136, 140, 156, 175
 impoliteness 117
 incest 36, 64, 104–5
indahiro oaths 104–5
 infixation 34, 40, 71
 insult 114–22
 insult themes 2, 5, 28, 32, 33, 40, 41, 114, 124
 intensifier 148–9
 interjectionalization 83, 100, 103
 interjections 2, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 20, 30, 66–83
 Italian 2, 7, 12, 36–7, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 54, 58, 69, 70, 72, 75, 79, 82, 99, 106, 109, 111, 115, 121, 123, 124, 134, 135, 136, 137, 140, 155, 158, 172, 175
- Jakobson, R. 13, 21
 Japanese 11, 69, 75, 79, 111, 121, 136, 140, 160, 170, 175
 Jay, T. 3, 30
jerk 41, 158
jerk-off 41, 130, 131, 132, 158
 Jucker, A. and Taavitsainen, I. 117–18, 120
- Kirundi oaths 103–4
- Labov, W. 5, 32, 115, 118, 119, 120
- major taboo themes 35–42
 Mandarin 2, 5, 41, 75, 82, 83, 111, 121, 134, 136, 140, 172, 175
 masturbation theme 41, 114, 130, 132, 134, 141
mat 2, 163, 165, 166, 167
 McEnery, A. 3, 4, 12, 25, 27–30, 35, 68
 metaphorical meaning 14–18

- minced oath 16, 88
 minor taboo themes 41–4
 modal adverbial 34
 moderated expletives 79–80
 Montagu, A. 3, 6, 12, 24–5, 28, 32, 40, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 67, 100, 101, 107, 123, 124, 169, 173
 mother theme 32, 36, 41, 114, 120, 121, 122, 134, 172
motherfucker 9, 25, 35, 36, 40, 41, 70, 75, 82, 122, 126, 128, 130, 131, 132, 135, 144, 147, 178
motherfucking 132, 135, 144, 145, 146, 147
 multi-word interjections 81–3

 name-calling 13, 14, 30, 33, 40, 41, 42, 43, 82, 114, 115, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 133, 135, 137, 139, 141, 143, 167, 172
 names for swearing 2
 'Ndakend'imbwa' 105
 New Testament 49
 non-literal meaning criterion 14–17
 non-literal taboo meaning 12–14
 Norwegian 2, 38, 39, 41, 43, 54, 57, 69, 70, 71, 72, 75, 107, 109, 111, 121, 135, 136, 140, 155, 156, 168, 175
 noun supports 35

 oaths 1, 2, 3, 11, 14, 27, 28, 30, 31, 37, 39, 47, 49, 50, 52, 57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 65, 97–103, 104, 105, 107, 108, 109, 111, 112, 113, 124, 143, 171, 174
 Old Testament 6, 48, 49, 59

 particle verbs *in*, *about*, *around*, *off*, *up* 40–1
 Partridge, E. 68, 70, 144, 154, 173, 179
 Pinker, S. 4, 8, 12, 17, 25, 26, 27, 28, 35
 Pinker's typology of swearing 25–7
 playing the dozens 118
 Polish 2, 38, 41, 43, 69, 70, 72, 73, 75, 82, 102, 107, 109, 111, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 140, 159, 175

 politeness 117, 120
 Portuguese 2, 12, 39, 54, 58, 69, 72, 75, 79, 82, 107, 109, 111, 119, 121, 134, 135, 136, 137, 141, 158, 175
 pragmatic expletive interjections 86–8
 pragmatic markers 20, 21, 34, 86, 87, 88, 90, 92, 93, 95, 105
 pragmatic markers as slot fillers 88–90: as gap fillers 90–1
 pragmatic space 118, 120
prat 38, 129, 130, 131, 132
prick 7, 11, 13, 14, 38, 39, 69, 70, 75, 111, 130, 131, 132, 136, 137, 138, 141, 158, 160, 164, 165, 166, 177, 178
 primary expletive interjections 78, 80
 prostitution theme 36, 37, 41, 43–4, 69, 132, 135, 160, 169

 Quirk, R. et al. (1985) 76, 77, 127, 148, 151, 173

 rank list of English expletive interjections 92
 reactions to medieval swearing 63
 reactive interjection 83, 84–5, 86, 89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 112
 religious swearing 2, 7, 8, 30, 35, 56, 66, 67, 72, 161–7
 religious theme 36–7, 157
 replacive swearing 55, 161–7
 repudiation oath in Arabic 103–4
 ritual insults, definition 32–3
 Russian 2, 11, 35, 36, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 55, 69, 70, 72, 75, 79, 82, 83, 102, 107, 111, 121, 133, 134, 135, 136, 141, 159, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 173, 174, 175

 scatological theme 2, 36, 37, 38, 39, 70, 105, 106, 122, 123, 135, 170, 173
 secondary expletive interjections 78, 78, 80, 105, 116–17
 self-cursing 32, 46, 111, 112
 sex organ theme 38–9
 sexual activities theme 36, 39, 40, 41
shit 7, 8, 9, 11, 17, 18, 21, 22, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 36, 37, 38, 43, 64,

shit – continued

67, 68, 74, 75, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83,
85, 89, 94, 95, 105, 106, 111, 123,
129, 130, 131, 132, 136, 137, 138,
139, 140, 141, 157, 158, 159, 160,
162, 166, 171, 173, 177, 178

shithead 136

signifying 118

slot filler, definition 22, 30, 33–5,
88, 90, 92, 93, 95, 106, 143, 144,
145, 146, 151, 154, 155, 156

Smith, S.A. 164, 174, 178

Smith, G.E. and Dawson, W. 46

sod 13, 18, 31, 40, 106, 109, 110,
128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 137

sodding 144–5

sodomy 40, 41, 132, 137, 138, 139,
140, 141

son of a bitch 22, 26, 35, 41, 42, 44,
63, 66, 75, 79, 82, 83, 128, 129,
131, 132, 133, 134, 174, 176, 178

sounding 118, 120

Spanish 2, 11, 12, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42,
43, 54, 58, 69, 70, 72, 75, 79, 82, 99,
102, 107, 109, 111, 121, 123, 133,
134, 135, 136, 137, 141, 158, 175

sperm theme 75

stand-alone functions 30–3, 127

Stroh-Wollin, U. 4, 8, 9, 12, 15, 18,
20, 79, 116

subjectivity 34, 87, 88, 95, 165

Swahili 75, 111, 121, 136, 141, 175

swear like a(n) ... 7, 64

swearing functions 30, 31, 35, 39,
56, 74

swearing themes 30, 35, 36, 37, 38,
40, 41, 106, 114

swearing tournaments 163

Swedish 1, 5, 6, 7, 12, 20, 28, 37,
39, 41, 42, 49, 53, 54, 57, 69, 70,
71, 75, 79, 82, 83, 99, 102, 107,
109, 111, 121, 122, 133, 135, 136,
137, 141, 156, 157, 165, 172,
174, 175

symbolic meaning 16

symptomatic meaning 16

taboo 5–6, 7–8, 9, 12, 14–27, 35, 124

textuality 87, 95

The devil take 31, 52, 83, 109, 111,
113, 176

To hell with 16, 69, 108, 109, 110,
111, 176

tosser 41, 126, 131, 132

Trotsky, L. 163

Trudgill, P. 12

Turkish 2, 5, 65, 66, 75, 82, 111, 121,
133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 160, 175

twat 129, 131, 132, 136

typology of swearing 24–44, 160,
168, 179

unfriendly suggestions 30, 32, 38, 40,
41, 43, 64, 68, 69, 109, 111, 114, 116,
119, 120, 122, 135, 137, 138, 148

Urdu 6, 41, 75, 111, 121, 134, 135,
142, 160, 175

Varese insults 123, 124, 172

von Timroth, W. 2, 164

vulgar(ity) 7, 24, 25, 66, 70

wanker 41, 125, 126, 131, 132, 134,
135, 158, 172

Wik Monkan insults 123

word magic 6

Yob tvoju mat' 2, 11, 40, 73, 75, 79,
83, 121, 159, 173

Your dead relatives 123, 124, 172

Your mother ... 2, 5, 11, 32, 36, 40,
41, 66, 71, 72, 73, 75, 79, 83, 119,
120, 121, 122, 123, 128, 139, 140,
141, 159, 174

Yurok insults 123–4

Zidane, Zinedine 115

Zounds! ('God's wounds') 11, 54, 59