Taxonomies of Swearing

Robert Hirsch

TAXONOMIES OF SWEARING

Abstract:

A study is made of the vocabulary in Modern English related to swearing.
Based on this study of lexical material, a folk taxonomy and folk theory of
swearing is constructed for Anglo-American culture. This folk taxonomy
is compared with the more scholarly classification scheme of Ashley
Montague. The study ends with a presentation of a new proposal for a
taxonomy of swearing that will be used as a basis for a cross-cultural
comparative study of swearing.

1. Introduction:

In humanistic studies our tools of analysis are the terms and concepts
which we employ in our attempts to describe and explain the aspects of
human enterprises which we are interested in. These terms and concepts
are often common currency in the culture to which we belong or of which
we are studying. When we are studying our own culture they are both. The
fact that these terms are used within the culture under study is an in-
dication of a self-consciousness that is characteristic for human beings.

However, because these terms are common currency they tend to be rather
unsystematically organized. Therefore, although a humanistic study cannot
ignore the common sense terms and concepts that are used within a culture
to describe and explain a certain phenomenon, there remains the task of
refining and sharpening these rough-and-ready tools to make them useful
for science.

To this end we will first make an analysis of the terms that are used
in the Anglo-American world to describe and classify different aspects of
the speech behavior of 'swearing'. This analysis will aim at constructing
a folk taxonomy for swearing for Anglo-Americans. In other words, trying
to answer the question - What types of swearing are there in the Anglo-
American culture according to the terms that are to be found in the
English language for this type of speech behavior?

After this analysis of terms in the folk taxonomy we will make an
investigation of concepts that are associated with the vocabulary we find
in the taxonomy. These associations will be of a more general descriptive

and explanatory nature and will give us an overview of the different dimen-
sions - social, ethical, psychological, aesthetic, etc. of this speech
behavior. Taking the folk taxonomy together with the field of conceptual
associations will give us what could be referred to as a folk theory of
swearing for Anglo-Americans. Although this folk theory is based on Modern
English, it is hoped that English being as rich and varied as it is, will
give results that will be valid for non-English speaking cultures. In other
words, we hope to find different aspects of the folk theory of swearing based
on Modern English to be represented (if not duplicated) in folk theories
of swearing based on other language and cultural backgrounds. The folk
theory given here must not, however, be taken to represent the majority
of English speakers' conception of swearing. Rather it is something like
the sum of all speakers' conception of swearing.

Finally we will compare the terms and concepts that were found in the folk
theory with more scientific attempts - namely that of Ashley Montague - at
ordering concepts and defining terms related to swearing. We point to weak-
nesses both in the folk theory and in Montague's classification scheme and
sketch a hopefully more systematic and coherent proposal for a classi-
fication system that will be used as a guideline in our comparative
study of swearing.

2. Folk taxonomy of swearing:

In this section we will make a detailed analysis of the vocabulary in
Modern English related to swearing. We beg the reader's pardon if the
discussion at times becomes rather technical.

To help us in our effort in constructing a folk classification scheme for
'swearing' two sources were consulted - Roget's International Thesaurus
(Roget's) and Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms (Webster's). These two
sources contain the institutionalized cultural knowledge related to swear-
ing and constitute the most systematic and conscious effort on the part
of English speakers to collect and order the vocabulary and concepts
associated with this type of speech behavior.

These two sources together with our own intuitions and definitions
of the terms found there give us a taxonomy for swearing that has
roughly the following form.

The highest order categories or most general terms are -

        Bad Language and Swearing

with Swearing being more specific than Bad Language.

Under these general headings there are a number of sub-headings. The first
of these is Evil Speaking which in turn has two sub-headings-- Cursing and
Profane Language. Each of these sub- headings contain a number of terms
that can be ordered in increasing degree of preciseness.

The taxonomy then so far looks like this -

      Bad Language

        Swearing

          Evil Speaking

             Cursing - imprecation, malediction, malison,-hex,

                  damnation*

             Profane Language - profanity, profane swearing, pro--

                  fane oath, i blasphemy.

The second major sub-heading is that of Vulgar Language which could
be characterized as language that mentions things or activities offensive
to standards of decency, etiquette, or hygien. There are two further sub-
headings here- Obscene Language and Dirty Language together with a list
of similar terms which we arrange in order of increasing preciseness.

        Vulgar Language

          Obscene Language - vile/foul/filthy language, ob-

                  scenity, filth, ribaldry.

          Dirty Language - dirty talk, scatology.

Next in the list of major sub-headings we find a category that refers
more to the function or use of this speech behavior than to what the
speech refers to - Abuse. Under this heading there are a number of other
terms which we can arrange as follows in order of preciseness.

          Abuse - vituperation, invective, obloquy, scurrility,

                opprobrium, contumely, billingsgate.

These terms all refer to language used in order to insult or defame
another.

The fourth major sub-heading is Expletive which refers to the uttering
of 'Bad Language' as an exclamation. Under this heading, we can also place
Oath. Notice that Oath in the sense of 'swearing an oath' is not included
in the taxonomy because it is a legitimate and even legally sanctioned
language use.

Expletive - oath

The last three major sub-headings are as follows:

Denunciation - execration

which refers to the purpose of denouncing or expressing
hatred of something or someone

Fulmination - thundering

which refers to the purpose of threatening something
or someone violently and

Objurgation

which refers to vehement decrial or criticism of some-
thing or someone.

If we look back over this taxonomy we notice that there are basically two
types of categories - those referring to the things or activities which
the speech refers to and those referring to the use or purpose to which
the speech is put. We can call these two types of categories Content and
Function categories.

Content Categories	Function Categories
Profane language ...	Cursing ...
Obscene Language ...	Abuse ...
Dirty language ...	Expletive ...
	Denunciation ...
	Fulmination ...
	Objurgation ...

This division of the categories into Content and Function reveals the
ambiguity of the term Evil Speaking, it referring both to what is referred
to by the speech and the function of the speech - namely calling down evil
or harm upon something or someone. Cursing also shares this inherent am-
biguity between Content and Function - to make a curse one has to make
mention of some holy or demonic power and call this power down upon
something or someone.

This type of ambiguity is typical of folk taxonomies and although unpro-
blematic for most of the day-to-day requirements put on the system,
it is pernicious to an attempt at making a systematic scientific classi-
fication. There we will try to keep Content and Function separated as
strictly as possible. This will entail stipulating our terms as to whether
they refer to Content or Function.

Another interesting question that arises upon inspection of the taxonomy
is that of which Content categories (in the ambiguous sense) can be used
with which Functions. We can have hybrids like 'Foul invective' which is
a cross between Obscene Language and Abuse. We also have 'Vile expletive'
which is a cross between Obscene Language and Expletive. But it is not
clear whether there is such thing as 'Scatological Objurgation' or
'Ribald Execration'.

There is also the problem of whether a certain Function category
necessarily entails one or several Content categories. Does, for instance,
'Vituperation' necessarily entail use of Obscene, Dirty or Profane Langu-
age? Vituperation seems to be a wider term and not all vituperation must
be 'Bad Language'. This is surely the case with all Function categories
(except perhaps Cursing) so that we have a situation that can be depicted
graphically as follows:

The following quotation from Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) is clearly vituperative, but makes no use of 'Bad Language'.

> "I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most
> pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered
> to crawl upon the surface of the earth". (Gulliver's Travels)
> (N. McPhee 1978:44)

Whereas an expression such as "You mother fucking sons-of-bitches" although more concise makes use of highly obscene language.

Another question that can be directed to the taxonomy is whether there is any 'swearing' that does not fit in under the categories . Here it is obvious that all positive swearing, for instance, "Holy Shit" "Fucking-A!" in disbelief over one's good luck or humorous uses of swearing to show endearment or affection are not included in the taxonomy. It seems that what we have manifested in the folk taxonomy is a kind of prototypical conception of swearing. As a prototype it is restricted in certain respects - oversimplified and therefore not exhaustive.

We notice also that the characterization of this type of language is basically negative. This probably reflects the negative and prohibitive attitudes that have and are applied to this type of language.

In summary, we can say of the folk taxonomy as reflected by the terminology in Modern English that the categories contained in it are neither mutually exclusive (ambiguity between Content and Function) nor are they exhaustive (there is swearing which does not fit into any of the categories). Another weakness is that the categories are not systematically ordered as to their implications (does vituperation entail obscenity?). A further problem is that the terms seem to be either too general or too specific to describe the range of swearing that we find in reality.

Take for instance the expletive "Jesus-fucking-Christ!" - is this a case of blasphemy or obscenity? These two terms seem somehow too specific whereas dirty language is too general.

Noting these weaknesses and limitations of the folk taxonomy, we turn now to an investigation of a wider range of conceptual associations that are related to this swearing terminology in order to gain a deeper insight into other dimensions of this type of speech.

3. Field of conceptual associations.

To obtain an overview of the conceptual associations related to swearing,
we again consult our two sources Roget's and Webster's. In Roget's we take
all the entries that are listed under the heading CURSE:972 and look them
up in the index. Here we find a list of associated terms accompanied by a
heading number. By looking up this number in the synopsis of categories in
the beginning of the book we obtain a general heading label on a par with
CURSE. If we look up Damnation, for instance, we find:

Damnation	Index	Synopsis Category
	Condemnation	1008.1 CONDEMNATION
	Destruction	693.1 DESTRUCTION
	Disapproval	969,3 DISAPPROVAL

Not all index items are indentical with Synopsis Category labels for instance:

Imprecation	Index	Synopsis Category
	Entreaty	774,2 REQUEST

By conducting a systematic search in this manner through the entries
under the heading CURSE:972, we arrive at a field of associated concepts.

A similar search was conducted through Webster's where the terms that
were cross-referenced under Swearing and the terms that were cross-
referenced under these terms etc. until the cross-references became of a
very general or vague nature, for instance, Rude,Enmity, etc.

These concepts can be sorted into the following groups. These groupings are
tentative and suggestive, reflecting a first attempt at ordering the
conceptual associations.

A large group of concepts deal in some way with the aesthetical and hygienal associations of this language behavior.

Concepts dealing with aesthetics:

Vulgarity	Uncleannes	Ignorance	Newness
Ugliness	Excretion	Unskillfulness	Complexity
Impairment	Stench	Unpreparedness	Disarrangement
Unsavoriness	Quiesence	Unpleasantness	Difficulty
Hinderance	Closure	Adversity	Repetition
Contaminate	Earthy	Mean	Excess
Dirty	Earthly	Coarse	Carnal
Unimportance	Repugnant	Abase	Primary
Base	Debase	Primitive	Contemptible

From these associations we gather that swearing is generally considered to be unaesthetic and unhygienal. We notice also that it is associated with lack of skill and ignorance. This corresponds well with the reasons given for the use of swearwords mentioned in Lars-Gunnar Andersson's essay in this volume. 'People use swearwords because they are too lazy or they just don't know any other words'.

Another large group of concepts associated with swearing are those that have to do in some way with the intention or the social or psychological consequences of the swearing.

Concepts dealing with intention:

Condemnation	Ridicule	Disrepute	Imposition
Accusation	Disproof	Belief	Execrate
Disapproval	Demotion	Evidence, Proof	Prohibition
Deposal	Affirmation	Circumscription	Ejection
Request	Disparagement	Exclusion	Promise
Threat	Defeat	Abuse	Injure
Attack	Killing	Abusive	Violence
Arms	Intimidate	Animadversion	Criticize
Repudiate	Scold	Reprove	Object

We notice that the great majority of these concepts are of a negative nature. Swearing seems therefore to be normally associated with malintent rather than benevolence, at least, as conceived of in the folk theory.

If we examine the concepts that deal in some way with attitudes and emotions associated with swearing we find the same kind of negativeness.

Concepts dealing with emotion or attitude:

Hate	Wonder	Antipathy	Disinclined
Contempt	Dissapointment	Despise	Malign
Disrespect	Decline	Malicious	Fear, Frighteningness
Uncertainty	Enmity	Demur	Vicious

A fourth group of concepts deal in some way with the ethics and etiquette associated with swearing.

Concepts dealing with concepts of ethics and etiquette:

Unchastity	Misbehavior	Licentious	Ashamed
Unkindness	Indecency	Injustice	Abandoned
Disgrace	Malevolence	Bad Person	Indiscrimination
Abandon	Lie	Youth	Vice
Insolence	Loose	Deceive	Wrongdoing
Bad	Neglect	Rude	Immoral
Negligent	Inhospitality		

Once again we notice the tendency to stress the negative aspects of the language behavior. In fact there seem here to be no redeeming qualities at all with the possible exception of youth.

We also find a number of concepts that deal with the religious associations of swearing.

Concepts dealing with religion:

Impiety	Evil spirits	Unsanctity	Badness
Profanation	Nonreligiousness	Blasphemy	Irreligious
Hell	Profanity		

Swearing is clearly associated with the antithesis of piety and proper moral conduct.

A sixth group of concepts have to do with the association of swearing with the magical or natural religion.

Concepts dealing with magic:

Spell, Charm   Vision (evil eye)   Sorcery

Although this list is rather short, the concepts found here are crucial to a general theory of swearing. Much of the power of swearing expressions derives from their association with witchcraft and magic. (see Hirsch + Andersson 1985)

Another group of concepts are related to swearing as a type of language behavior.

Concepts dealing with types of behavior:

Language	Public speaking
Use	Nomenclature
Misuse	Maxim
Cry, Call	

We notice that swearing is associated with a misuse of language. These are followed by a group of concepts dealing with the physical manifestation of the language behavior.

Concepts dealing with physical manifestations:

Loudness	Bane
Explosive Noise	Wind
Fuel	Impulse, Impact
Resonance	Destruction

These associations all point to the connotations of power and danger that swearing expressions carry.

Last but not least, we find a group of concepts that have to do with certain synesthetic experiences associated with swearing.

Concepts dealing with synesthetic associations:

Sensation	Refrigeration	Pain
Cold	Color	

These again are mainly negative in character. Why we have such modality transfers in connection with swearing is difficult to explain. That we have them is, however, highly interesting. It might have something to say about the coding of language in the brain and the general systems of perception and sensation - whether for instance, the brain has a separate module or faculty for language or whether at some level everything is connected with everything else.

This would mean that language is only one of a number of related systems that we employ in the creation of symbols and that language is subordinate to a more general symbolic ability.

Such metaphoric transfers or associations are typical of more primitive or primal uses of language. They are a common element in all poetry and emotive language. They lend a complexity or denseness and a power to the symbol that is not found in more prosaic uses of words - e.g. to give a scientifically factual representation of the world.

Any attempt at a strict hierarchical or implicational ordering of these categories is misguided. Instead what we have is a partially ordered very loose system of conceptual associations - something similar to a network.

Certain of the dimensions of the phenomenon of swearing which are revealed in the field of associations are to be expected in relation to any type of human behavior.
1) It must have a physical-material manifestation.
2) It will have social and psychological consequences.
3) It will be more or less consciously rational behavior having 'because of' and 'in order to' motivations.
4) There will be religious and moral aspects of the behavior.

There are,however, many more types of associations to swearing than those contained in our field. There seem to be a number of principles at work in this field of associations that could constitute something like conditions for inclusion in the network. The following principles are highly speculative but rather interesting for a general theory of swearing, if they happen to be true. The reader is referred back to our lists of concepts taken from Roget's and Webster's.

1) If an expression (type of speech behavior) arouses a certain emotion or attitude in a subject then the expression can be used to express this emotion or attitude of the subject.

   For example, if one feels ashamed about swearing, than swearing can be used to express that one is ashamed.

2) There is a congruency between type of language and the use of this type of language.

   For example, swearing is considered repugnant and therefore, is used to describe something as repugnant.

3) Swearing can be used to both give expression to an attitude or emotion and to arouse or evoke this emotion.

   For example, subjects swear to express hate and swear to evoke hate in others. Subjects swear to express fear and to evoke fear in others.

4) That which is itself X can be used in reaction to an X. For example, if swearing is considered a disaster, then one can swear in reaction to a disaster.

5) There is an identification of function with essence in the case of swearwords.

   For example, because swearing is abusive, swearing is abuse.
   This is like reasoning that because my shoe sometimes functions as a hammer,that it is a hammer. The confusion in the case of language is that between the referential and evocative dimensions of the symbol.

6) There is a systematic and pervasive ambiguity between 'because of' and 'in order to' motives.

   For example, swearing because of enmity from another and swearing in order to express enmity toward another.

7) Synesthetic associations in conjunction with principle 5 are common. For example, because swearwords refer to things that are unsavory or stinking, swearwords are themselves unsavory or stinking.

Whether this indulgence in speculative folk psychology is fruitful or misguided will become clearer as our comparative research and theory formation reach a more definite form. We believe, however, that there are such associations operating on some such semantic-psychological principles which are important dimensions of swearing.

.The age-old distinction between figures of speech and figures of thought which has never been upheld strictly in practice is probably based on intuitions about speech expressions and conceptual associations that are similar to our principles above.

The next section of the study is devoted to summarizing the results of. the study in terminology and the field of associations in what can be called a folk theory of swearing.

4. Folk theory of swearing.

Based on the categories that we found connected to the concept of swearing and the concepts that were associated more remotely with this concept, we formulate the following folk theory of swearing for speakers of English.

A typical case of swearing is characterized by -
1) Mention of words or expressions that are profane, obscene, dirty,vulgar, etc. (cf. the classification terminology)
2) These words or expressions are used to offend, abuse, or otherwise to damage spiritually, socially, or psychologically. (cf. the associations dealing with attitudes and intentions)
3) The speaker is expressing a negative emotion - mostly anger. (cf. concepts dealing with emotion)
4) The tone of voice is violent and loud. (cf. concepts dealing with physical manifestations)
5) It constitutes a violation of moral, religious, and aesthetic as well as sanitary standards. (ch. concepts dealing with ethics and etiquette, religion, and aesthetics)
6) It is a misuse of language. (cf. types of behavior)
7) It is associated with low social status and places of ill repute. The speaker should be ashamed of this type of language. (ch. ethical and aesthetic associations)
8) It is a misrepresentation of the truth. (ch. ethical associations)

Much of what we find in this folk theory of swearing can be positively compared with a study by Lars-Gunnar Andersson (Andersson, 1977:37) of what attitudes Swedish speakers had toward swearing.

Swearing according to the folk theory for speakers of English is a restricted type of verbal abuse. It does not include all types of invective or insulting language. Nor does it include all cases of improper or impolite language usage. Cases of exclamatory speech which do not make use of profane, obscene, or filthy words or expressions do not seem to fall under the heading of 'swearing'. Euphemisms or sub-stitutions for the profane, obscene, or filthy are not considered cases of swearing according to the folk theory (no term Euphemistic swearing is found in alalogy with Profane swearing). There is no place in the theory for the positive use of swearing to express, for instance, happiness endearment, or for purposes of joking.

Swearing is not considered a mark of verbal skill according to the theory but rather a weakness.

5. Comparison of the folk theory and Ashley Montague's theory of swearing.

Ashley Montague (Montague, 1967:104ff.) gives the following classi-fication scheme for swearing.

> Swearing - is the most general category and is defined as 'the act of verbally expressing the feeling of aggressiveness that follows upon frustration in words possessing strong emotional associations'.

The various sub- categories in the taxonomy which are often confused or used synonymously with swearing are the following:

> Cursing defined as - a form of swearing distinguished by the fact that it invokes or calls down some evil upon its object.

> Profanity defined as - the form of swearing in which the names or attributes of the figures of religious veneration are uttered.

> Blasphemy (often identified with cursing and profanity)defined as - the act of vilifying or ridiculing the figures or objects of religious veneration.

This classification of the types of swearing is neither mutually exclu-
sive (which we see if we examine the definitions) or exhaustive (there
is no mention of positive use of swearing). It is also not clear whether
all the different categories of swearing can be used in all the functions
or purposes. Can, for example, vulgarity be used in adjurative or asseve-
rative swearing?

We notice that Montague's classification scheme follows the folk taxonomy
quite closely. His scheme also suffers from the same weaknesses. One
advantage that Montague's scheme has over the folk taxonomy is the
inclusion of the category euphemistic swearing.

If we, however, take the field of associations that were contained in
the conceptual system of the folk theory into consideration, we find
a richness and range that is captured neither in the folk taxonomy
nor in Montague's classification scheme. It is this range and
conceptual richness that a proper scientific theory and classification
scheme of swearing should encompass.

In the last section of this study we will present principles for the
construction of a taxonomy of swearing to be used in our cross-
cultural comparative study of swearing.

6. Proposal for a new taxonomy of swearing.

Utilizing the intuition that we found in the folk taxonomy which made
a distinction as to Content and Function, our taxonomy will be based
on the categories of Content, Function, and Context.

6.1 Content

The Content of the swearing expressions are derived from the areas of
taboo and stigma. These are not mutually exclusive categories but rather
a conceptual complex taht can best be thought of as a scale with some
things that are obviously taboo and others that are obviously stigma
and others that seem to be sometimes one sometimes the other depending
on our point of veiw. Examples of taboo and stigma areas which are taken
from our questionnaire on swearing are the following:

Taboo	(in between)	Stigma
Religion		Masculinity
Excrement	Sexual preference	Honor, prestige
Sex	Diseases, Handicaps	Intelligence
Hygiene	Eating habits	Ethnic background
Natural elements	Social-biological	Occupation-social
Inorganic matter	background	status
Organic matter	Animal likeness	Legal status
Non-sexual body parts		Courage
Heavenly bodies		Drug abuse
Man-made objects		
Disasters, Calamities		
Legendary men or women		
Totems		
Death and birth		

6.2 Primary functions.

The primary function categories for swearing we stipulate as follows::

> Expletive - in which the speaker gives expression to his emotions and
> attitudes in the form of an exclamtion. An expletive is basically
> reactive and not directed towards something or someone. For example,
> "Hell! or "Rats!" as an expression of disappointment. Expletive
> covers Montague's ejaculatory, exclamatory, expletive and interjec-
> tional swearing.
> Abusive - in which the speaker abuses, offends or defames something
> or someone. For example, "You bastard!", "Shithead!". This is much
> wider than Montague's abusive swearing.

These function categories are intentionally vague. They will become more
specific as they are crossed with Content and Context.This makes the
system more flexible and we avoid the problem that Montague creates for him-
self by taking, for instance, objurgatory swearing as a higher order cate-
gory, namely of becoming too specific, too fast. This can easily lead to an
explosion in the higher-order categories and make the system unwieldy.

There is one general proviso that applies to both of the function categories.
This can be called the Principle of Non-literal meaning, which states - for

an utterance to count as a case of swearing as we define the term the spea-
ker is presumed to <u>not</u> literally mean what he says.

The religious expletive -"God damn you!" uttered in an everyday context of
swearing in our sense presumes that the speaker is <u>not</u> in a position to
literally command the supreme being to damn the hearer.

Our basic definition of swearing is therefore a case of speech which makes
mention of something that is taboo and/or stigma in the culture and fulfills
one of the above functions plus the fact that the speaker can be presumed
to not literally mean what he says.

In order for the words to carry their literal force the speaker would have
to have some religious or legal authorization, but in this case it would no
longer count as a case of swearing in our sense.

Under each of the primary function categories there are possibilities for
any number of sub-categories that are produced by crossing the content
categories with the function categories. This gives us combinations such
as the following:

> Scatological Expletive - "Shit on you."
> Sexual Abusive - "You motherfucker."
> Sexual Expletive - "Fuck!","Balls!"
> Scatological Abusive - "You Shithead!"
> etc.

6.3 Context

The final level in the taxonomy consists of relating these hybrid Content-
Function categories via a specific Context to what could be called a
Speech Act. A Speech Act label or interpretation can be seen as a
specification of the basic Content-Function categories which are extrem-
ely vague. Certain of the Content-Function categories are restricted as
to which types of Speech Acts they can appear in, for instance, Religious
Expletives. Others such as Sexual Abusives have a much wider range of
Speech Acts in which they can be employed - "You motherfucker!" can be used
as a threat or an expression of anger. The Sexual Expletive "You can bet
your sweet Ass I will!" can be a promise or a threat.

Because the speaker is not to be interpreted as being empowered to literally
mean what he says when he utters swearing expressions, these expressions
can be given a wide range of interpretations depending on the situational
context after the motto - 'if he/she doesn't/can't mean what he says,
then he must mean something else'. What this 'something else' is depends
on the definition of the situation. The Speech Act label which is given to
any specific swearing expression is therefore a type of shorthand for a per-
spective on a complex relation which exists between a person, a situation
which (among other things) includes other persons, the perceived intentions
of these persons, beliefs about these intentions, and the relationship which
is believed to hold between the persons. As the perspective shifts from one
time and place to another, the Speech Act label will also change.

For example, an expression such as "Hi, Fuckface!" could be labeled a jocular
greeting given one interpretation of the speaker's intentions, i.e.   to
welcome and show endearment. However, with a different interpretation of
the speaker's intentions, i.e. to defame or show dislike, the expression
could be taken as a put-down or brush-off. In other words, instead of being
a signal of welcome and intimacy it becomes a signal 'to get lost'.

6.4. Secondary functions

The definition of the situation is also important for cases of humoristic,
euphemistic, or habitual swearing. In humoristic swearing the actual
Content-Function category is interpreted to its opposite. For instance, the
Socio-biological Abusive -"You-son-of-a-bitch" in the right circumstances
with the proper 'definition of the situation' can be taken as an expression
of admiration or endearment.

In euphemistic swearing the 'definition of the situation' is such that
words that normally do not fit into the Content-Function categories are
taken to do so. These words often bear some phonetic or semantic resemblance
to the words that are typical for the Content-Function category. They may
be near homonyms - "Fudge" instead of "Fuck" or figurative paraphrases -
"Get bumped!" instead of "Get fucked!".

In the case of habitual swearing knowledge of the participants in the
situation about each other's speech habits can alter the interpretation
of the words that would normally fall under a Content-Function category.

If a person habitually puts "fuck" or "fucking" into almost every utterance then anyone who knows this has a tendency to ignore these expressions when assigning the utterances a Speech Act interpretation.

Humoristic, euphemistic, and habitual swearing are relegated to the secondary functions because they are more a result of contextual conditions than are the primary functions.

6.5. Swearing expression labels.

The preceding discussion can be summarized perhaps most concisely in the form of a set of rules for the construction of what we might call Swearing Expression Labels (SEL). Each such label will be a hybrid term composed of terms from the three categories of Content, Function. and Context.

The first part of the SEL will consist of a term taken from the taboo/stigma Content categories, for instance, Sexual, Religious,Scatological, etc. The second part will consist of a primary Function label taken from our two function categories Abusive and Expletive. It may also contain a secondary function label such as jocular, euphemistic, or habitual.The last part consists of a Speech Act Label derived from the specific Context in which the expression is used.

The following diagram presents the rules in a more precise and technical form:

Content		Function		Context		
		Primary				Swearing
taboo/	+	Abusive	+	Speech Act $\Rightarrow$	Expression
stigma		Expletive		Label		Label
		Secondary				
		jocular				
		euphemistic				
		habitual				

As examples of the type of expression label we can produce using this scheme we could have.

Sexual habitual expletive as a description.

"They blew his fucking brains out".

Sexual jocular abusive as a greeting.

"Hi, fuckface!"

Sexual expletive as a threat.

"Fuck you!"

Sexual expletive as a promise.

"You can bet your sweet ass I will"

Religious-sexual expletive as an exclamation.

"Jesus-fucking-Christ!"

7. Conclusion:

The taxonomy that is proposed here offers us the possibility of going from very general and abstract categories which are a cross between a taboo and/or stigma Content and a Function via a situational Context to a Specific Speech Act interpretation of these categories. This is basically a refinement of an intuition that was operating in the Folk taxonomy and was also evident in Ashley Montague's attempt at classifying the different types of swearing.

The present system allows, however, for a much more detailed and systematic description of any specific instance of swearing than was possible in either the Folk taxonomy or Ashley Montague's system. This taxonomy is only part of a general theory of swearing. The richness of conceptual associations that we found in the folk theory are not covered fully by the classification system, especially those more psychological dimensions such as synesthetics. The classification scheme is therefore principally descriptive and only secondarily (if at all) explanatory.

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Richard Hirsch

Notes:

        * Ban, commination, anathema, excommunication are not included
        here because they are official and authorized forms of cursing,
        i.e. they are not considered Bad Language.

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