

The Use Of Swearing Expression In A Scottish Movie Entitled Sweet Sixteen
(A Sociopragmatics Study)

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Abstract

This article examines the types of swearing expressed by the characters in the movie “Sweet Sixteen” to study how the contextual situation affects the use and the meaning of swearing and how the sociocultural background of the characters influences the level of swearing offensiveness. This research is a descriptive qualitative research under the framework of Sociopragmatics. The relationship between social phenomena and the swearing expression produced become the focus of this research. The findings identify six types of swearing expression expressed by the characters in the Sweet Sixteen movie: Descriptive Swearing, Idiomatic Swearing, Abusive Swearing, Emphatic Swearing, Cathartic Swearing and Name-calling Swearing. Additionally, this research also identifies fourteen types of swearing function used by the characters: predicative negative adjective, adverbial booster, cursing expletive, destinational usage, emphatic adverb, figurative extension of literal meaning, general expletive, idiomatic set phrase, imagery based on literal meaning, pre-modifying intensifying negative adjective, pronominal form with undefined referent, personal insult referring to identified entity, reclaimed usage, and religious oath used for emphasis. It is also found out that the contextual situation of the conversation which consists of the situations, the participants, the ends, the acts sequence, the key, the instrumentalities, the norms and the genres, affects the use and the meaning of swearing expression in the movie. The results also show that the sociocultural background of the characters such as the speaker – hearer relationship, social-physical context, and the particular word used, influences the level of swearing offensiveness in the Sweet Sixteen movie.

Keywords: swearing, offensiveness level, Scottish movie, Sweet Sixteen

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Swearing, also known as cursing is a linguistic activity involving the use of taboo words (Stapleton, 2010). Swearing and cursing words have been used by humans since the emergence of language to convey the expression of strong emotions. Swearing can also be defined as to use words that are rude or offensive as a way of emphasizing what you mean or as a way of insulting something or someone. According to Andersson and Trudgill (2007) swearing can also be defined as language use in which the expression refers to something taboo or stigmatized in the individual's culture which is not intended to be interpreted literally and can be used to express strong emotions or attitudes. Since swearing typically includes taboo words, these words can be more powerful than non-swear words and often considered as not appropriate and too vulgar to be used in linguistic activity.

However, Fagersten (2012) claims that swearing is the expression which has potential to be deemed offensive, inappropriate, objectionable or unacceptable in any given social context; as a consequence, only the recipient can decide whether a given lexeme is derogatory, based on his or her own sensitivity. As an example, "nigger" and "queer" could be extremely offensive in an abusive context, but inoffensive in a reclaimed context. Similarly, "Jew" and "gay" could be used as an insult or as a neutral self-destruction (Thelwall, 2008:18). In addition, the contribution of social surroundings has been also stressed by Limbrick (1991), who asserts that the existence of swear words is contingent entirely on the varying social codes.

According to Ljung (2012) the greater the potential of a word to offend, the likelier the word is to be considered a swear word. Ljung has also stated that offensiveness is traditionally determined by evaluative and semantic differentiation rating techniques. Research shows

unequivocal evidence that swear words are mildly to highly offensive, and aggressive, impolite, profane, upsetting, etc. than others (Janschewitz, 2008; Jay, 1992; Mabry, 1974). Swearing is rated as the most offensive is sexual terms, followed by excretory terms which, in turn, are typically judged more offensive than sacred terms. Specifically, “fuck”, “shit”, “cunt” and “motherfucker” (in varying orders) have been rated as the most offensive (Baudhuin, 1973; Mabry, 1975).

Jay (2009) has stated that the ultimate offensiveness of words is determined entirely by pragmatic variables such as speaker – hearer relationship and the words used and tone of voice, as well as social-physical setting that it takes time for speakers to learn where, when, and with, when swearing is considered appropriate (Allan and Burrige, 2006; Dewaele, 2010).

Based on the previous research conducted by Janschewitz (2008), it is stated that women are more prone to feel offended by swearing words than men. According to the said research, women use offensive language less frequently than men, but when they do use offensive language, they use less offensive words and vice versa. The research excludes the sociocultural background in observing the offensiveness level which made the result seems as if it is gender biased. Meanwhile, it is important to include the sociocultural background in the research, such as contextual situation, speaker – hearer relationship, social-physical context, and particular word used.

Sociocultural influences on swearing vary from culture to culture and take some time and experience within a culture to be fully appreciated (Eckert, 2012). Swearing is influenced by pragmatic (contextual) variables such as the conversational topic, the speaker – hearer relationship, including gender, occupation, and status, and the social-physical setting of the communication with respect to whether the swearing takes place in a public or private location, one’s jurisdiction over the location, and the level of formality of the occasion. These variables allow us to determine when swearing is likely or unlikely, when it is an affront to appropriateness.

Another powerful influence on the likelihood of swearing is the social and physical location of the dialogue (Christie, 2013) and people are more likely to swear in relaxed environments than in formal environments (Johnson, 2012). In order to get better senses of how people evaluate swearing as a function of context, a research has been conducted by asking a group of college students to estimate the likelihood of hearing swearing in various college campus locations (Jay 1992). Locations populated by students, especially the dorms and pub, are the most likely places to hear swearing, while academic offices and campus service locations are rated the least likely to hear swearing. Speaker – hearer relationship, in terms of status (e.g., education, income, occupation), is another critical determinant of swearing likelihood and appropriateness (Stone et al., 2010; Rogerson-Revel, 2007; McEnery, 2006). One simple means of objectifying status is through job title, for example, a doctor has higher status than a nurse, and a sophomore has higher status than a freshman. One’s relationship with the speaker can have a significant impact on what is considered impolite or rude (Locher and Watts 2005; Cole, 2010; Snel, 2010; Squires, 2010).

This research attempts to investigate the correlation between the offensiveness rate of swearing words and the sociocultural background of the characters in *Sweet Sixteen* (2002). It especially focuses on the sociocultural background of the individuals in the film which shows that contextual situation, speaker – hearer relationship, social-physical context, and particular words used by a particular person highly affect the offensiveness rate of swearing. Still continuing the findings of the previous studies, this research continues to study how someone’s sociocultural background can affect the level of offensiveness of swearing, but in the different movie which means in a different social context of situation. Thus, practically, the discussion is still on the gender, contextual situation, speaker – hearer relationship, social-physical context, and particular word used represented in the movie.

Method

This research is conducted under the Sociopragmatics study. The data are collected from the script of “Sweet Sixteen” dialogues which contain swearing. The object of this research is the use of swearing expression by the characters of Sweet Sixteen movie, how the contextual situation and the sociocultural background affect the meaning, use, and the level of offensiveness of the swearing expression.

In order to make the analysis easier, a code was given to each datum. The coding was based on the order of datum and the exact time when swearing words occur in the movie. The following is the example of coding:

200/01:08:12

This code means that the datum is number 200 and it occurs in the scene of hour 01, minute 08, second 12 of the movie. Then, the data were analyzed to see the type, the use and the function based on the contextual situation and the final rate of offensiveness level of swearing expressions.

Result

This section shows the type, how swearing expression is employed, and the meaning of the swearing expression employed by the characters of Sweet Sixteen movie. The result focuses on the correlation of the swearing expression with the contextual situation of the conversation and the sociocultural background of the characters.

1. Types of Swearing

There are five types of swearing based on Steven Pinker’s (2007) typology, i.e. Descriptive Swearing, Idiomatic Swearing, Abusive Swearing, Emphatic Swearing and Cathartic Swearing. There is an additional type of swearing typology classified as Name-calling Swearing which is found in the data of the movie. All of the six types appear in the conversations spoken by the characters in the Sweet Sixteen movie. From the analysis stage, the total data collected in this research are 322 data out of 300 utterances. The result shows that the most dominant type of Pinker’s swearing typology employed by the characters is and the least swearing typology to occur is Abusive Swearing.

Table 1
Pinker’s typology of swearing as found in the movie

No	Pinker’s swearing typology	Frequency of occurrence
1	Emphatic Swearing	166
2	Idiomatic Swearing	47
3	Cathartic Swearing	40
4	Name-calling Swearing	36
5	Descriptive Swearing	20
6	Abusive Swearing	7

The identification process employing McEnery’s typology also shows 14 out of 15 specific types of function of swearing. However, each of them has a different frequency of repetition in the entire Sweet Sixteen movie. Below is the fifteen specified types of the function of swearing:

Table 2
McEnery's typology of swearing as found in the movie

No	McEnery's swearing typology	Frequentness of use
1	Predicative negative adjective	3 times
2	Adverbial booster	119 times
3	Cursing expletive	14 times
4	Destinational usage	13 times
5	Emphatic adverb	62 times
6	Figurative extension of literal meaning	3 times
7	General expletive	13 times
8	Idiomatic set phrase	20 times
9	Literal usage denoting taboo referent	26 times
10	Imagery based on literal meaning	-
11	Premodifying intensifying negative adjective	23 times
12	Pronominal form with undefined referent	19 times
13	Personal insult referring to identified entity	67 times
14	Reclaimed usage	12 times
15	Religious oath used for emphasis	5 times

In line previous research conducted by Janschewitz (2008), women are more prone to feel offended by swearing words than men. Women also tend to use offensive language less frequently than men. However, when they do use offensive language, they use less offensive words and vice versa. This research also finds out that women use offensive language less frequently and use less offensive words than men; however, the research argues that both men and women are equally prone to feel offended by swearing words. In the Sweet Sixteen movie, the female characters such as Jean and Chantelle use offensive language less frequently and use less offensive words than Stan or Liam. However, unlike Janschewitz's argument that women are more prone to feel offended by swearing words than men, this research identifies different reaction of the characters to diverse swearing expressions that shows that even the mild-level of swearing expressions such as "Christ" and "cow" can trigger the characters from mixed genders to feel strongly offended, if the

contextual situation and the socio-cultural background support the swearing expressions to be offensive.

2. The Use and the Meaning of Swearing Based on the Contextual Situation

Allan and Burridge and Dewaele are surely right about their theory that says it takes time for speakers to learn where, when, and with, when swearing is considered appropriate (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Dewaele, 2010). Moreover, in her article, Christie (2013) argues that the social and physical locations of the dialogue have the powerful influence on the likelihood of swearing and people are more likely to swear in relaxed environments than in formal environments (Johnson, 2012). However, recent studies have shown that some people inside very limited social context such as people from Northern England tend to be nonchalant about employing swearing expression in their daily conversation. For example, Liam casually employs the word “fuck” and “bastard” to his mom when he is visiting her in prison visitation’s room.

Fagersten (2012) has argued that swearing is the expression which has potential to be deemed offensive, inappropriate, objectionable or unacceptable in any given social context; as a consequence, only the recipient can decide whether a given lexeme is derogatory, based on his or her own sensitivity. Fagersten’s argument is valid because the findings of the study also show that the swearing expressions such as “fucking dickhead” or “fucking idiot” executed by the characters of the movie could be extremely offensive in an abusive context but inoffensive in a reclaimed context. Other studies to different context of situation also contend that the contextual situation of the conversation does affect the use and the meaning of swearing of the characters in “Sweet Sixteen” movie. An example is the use of name-calling swearing expression of ‘you stupid wee fucking arsehole!’ with the adverbial booster as its type of function found in the data number 215 from the scene 01:08:03 of the “Sweet Sixteen” movie.

Liam's grandfather uses the swearing expression 'you stupid wee fucking arsehole!' to express his anger emotion and his attitude holds a grudge to Liam. Liam teases him by throwing a rock to break his window glass and leaves a mess in his apartment room. In the utterance, "you stupid wee fucking arsehole," Liam's grandfather uses abusive names such as stupid and arsehole in an argument as a mean to belittle or humiliate Liam's personal image as the hearer. He utters it using an angry tone in serious and informal manner. Liam's grandfather's intention in using the name-calling swearing expression of 'you stupid wee fucking arsehole!' is to use it as a means of personal insult and to verbally abuse Liam. However, Liam does not take his grandfather's insult and verbal abuse as offensive because he enjoys teasing his grandpa. He likes seeing his grandfather being mad at him and is even entertained by it. He just casually runs away from his grandfather's apartment complex in laughter and continues mocking his granddad using body language.

3. The Influence of Socio-cultural Background in the Level of Offensiveness Rate of Swearing

Socio-cultural background influences on swearing vary from culture to culture and take some time and experience within a culture to be fully appreciated (Eckert, 2012). Furthermore, Eckert claims that swearing is influenced by pragmatic (contextual) variables such as the conversational topic, the speaker – hearer relationship, including gender, occupation, and status, and the social-physical setting of the communication with respect to whether the swearing takes place in a public or private location, one's jurisdiction over the location, and the level of formality of the occasion. In line with Eckert's statement, Jay (2009) has stated that the ultimate offensiveness of words is determined entirely by pragmatic variables such as speaker – hearer relationship and the words used and tone of voice, as well as social-physical setting. Similarly, this research also identifies the socio-cultural background of the characters, such as the speaker –

hearer relationship, social-physical context, and the particular word used, influence the level of swearing offensiveness in “Sweet Sixteen” movie. For example, the use of the highly offensive swearing term “cunt” found in the data number 50 from the scene 00:21:27 of the movie Sweet Sixteen.

The term “cunt” in the data number 50 is classified as descriptive swearing and specified as pronominal form with undefined referent as its type of function. The term “cunt” is a highly offensive swearing term commonly used to express contempt to someone. It is also a term that refers to any unpleasant or contemptible person, specifically women. In the United States, the term is commonly used as a derogatory term for women. Yet in Scotland it can be used to refer either man or woman. This vulgar term is still considered as not acceptable by majority of people outside very limited social context. In English-speaking countries, it is regarded as unsuitable for general public discourse. However, In Northern England as in Scotland, the place where the movie of “Sweet Sixteen” takes as the setting of the story, the use of the term “cunt” is not only limited to as a means of derogatory. In the Northern England, specifically within working class level people from Scotland, it is quite common to use “cunt” as a term of endearment or a mild rebuke among close friends.

The relationship status of Liam and Pinball is intimate and high in solidarity because they are best friends for a long time and get along with each other very well. They are at the same age and both of them are school dropout teenagers who come from a working class in Scotland, so their social status is equal to each other. Pinball’s tone when employing the term “cunt” in the utterance, “No cunt telling you what to do,” is standard tone and in informal with casual manner. The word “cunt” is supposed to be a very offensive slang to employ because British National Corpus classifies the offensiveness level of term “cunt” as “very strong” in its scale of the offence of swearing words. Yet, the term “no cunt” in this contextual situation is interchangeable with the

term dude or a person as in “no dude” or “no person”. It is used as a means to describe a person other than Pinball himself, which could refer to Liam or someone else close with Pinball, but he means no harm in employing it. Because the close person who is with Pinball at the moment Pinball is uttering the term is Liam, the “cunt” person that Pinball means undeniably is Liam.

When Pinball as the speaker employs the swearing term “cunt” which is directed to Liam, the reaction of Liam as the hearer is just casually moving on to another topic and continuously talking about other things. In short, it can be concluded that Liam does not feel offended by Pinball’s C-word which directed to him; since they both are Scottish who are close to each other and Liam knows that Pinball just uses it as a mild rebuke between close friends.

Conclusion

Based on the data analysis, the conclusion related to the swearing expressions used by the characters in Sweet Sixteen movie is as follows:

Although this study observes different particular socio-cultural contexts as constructed as the setting background of the movie, this research has still found out that the socio-cultural background of the characters, such as the speaker – hearer relationship, social-physical context, and the particular word used, influences the level of swearing’ offensiveness in “Sweet Sixteen” movie. Based on the data analysis, different reactions of the characters to diverse swearing expressions reveal that even the mild-level of swearing expression can trigger the characters from mixed genders to feel strongly offended by the words, if the contextual situation and the socio-cultural background support the swearing expression to be offensive. Data analysis shows that some people inside very limited social context such as working class people from Scotland tend to be nonchalant about employing swearing expression in their daily conversation.

The sociocultural background of the characters consists of several factors which are: the speaker – hearer relationship, social-physical context, and the particular word used. ‘The speaker – hearer relationship’ aspect shows that the characters’ relationship is either intimate and high in solidarity or distant and low in solidarity. ‘The social-physical context’ aspect shows that the character status is either superior and high in status or subordinate and low in status. This aspect also shows how the speaker and the hearer interact with each other, either direct or indirect and verbal or nonverbal. ‘The particular word used’ aspect shows that a certain swearing word such as “fucking”, “bastard”, or “cunt” is used as an adverbial booster or the rest of the other types. Those socio-cultural background of the characters affects the scale of the offense of swearing words such as from very strong level to strong, moderate, mild, very mild, and vice versa.

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