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The Role of Images in the Production of Curses

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ABSTRACT. The mainstay of the paper is formed by an analysis of the RH lateralization of cursing, propositional forms of cursing, the differentiation between *cursing* and *swearing*, and learners' (in)appropriate use of swear words as part of the acquisition of communicative competence. My analysis complements the growing literature on ways in which the self is a curse, the stigmatization of swearing, cursing and swearing as a morally and socially unacceptable form of behavior, and gender differences in cursing.

Keywords: curse words, swearing, taboo language, knowledge

Introduction

The theory that I shall seek to elaborate here puts considerable emphasis on the notion that the self is a “curse,” the “curse-of-knowledge” effect, the subcortical brain areas implicated in cursing, contemporary attitudes to swearing, and the nexus of gender, cursing and religion. I am specifically interested in how previous research investigated the magnitude of the curse of knowledge, the emotional intensification that curse words produce in language, propositional-sentence production with curse words, and the linguistic and semantic analysis of a curse word’s use.

Ways in Which the Self Is a Curse

Leary focuses on the personal and social problems that result from self-reflection, egocentrism, and egotism: *self-reflection is much more a mixed blessing than an unmitigated curse, part of the curse of having a self is that we create a great deal of misery in our own minds without realizing that we are reacting to our self-generated thoughts, the self can curse people by conjuring up visions about what they might become in the future, many of the processes that make the self an occasional curse are not amenable to conscious and deliberate change, whereas the self of the nonegoic individual is no longer a curse to the same degree as the self of the egoic individual.* Leary insists that the ability to self-reflect is an essential feature of the human psyche and a curse. Too much inner dialogue is unnecessary and can be detrimental, contributing to the curse of the self. Holding excessively positive views of oneself and the important people in one’s life is not a curse.

This is why we can significantly say that the self can curse people's interpersonal relationships. The self's ongoing chatter lies at the heart of its curse. As the curse chronically intrudes into our experience of life, the self makes it difficult for us to discern reality from self-made fiction. Leary reasons that the kinds of efforts to take charge of our lives will feed the self and strengthen its curse. Practices for reforming the self have existed since someone first realized that the self is sometimes a curse.

“Had the human self been installed with a mute button or off switch, the self would not be the curse to happiness that it often is. [...] Although meditation sprang up in the context of various spiritual practices, it has taken on a secular life of its own as people have come to see meditation as a remedy for many of the self's curses.”¹

When Conant speaks of the Curse of the Father, he means the recurring moments in which the father appears to curse his son and the recurring ways in which he proves to be a curse of a father. When Conant speaks of the Triumph of the Gift over the Curse, he means the performance of that existential task and the performance of the literary task we see performed before our eyes in the struggle.² Bhandari and Barth note that *the curse-of-knowledge effect is more than a simple case of childhood egocentrism*. The use of a well-informed speaker contributes to Bhandari and Barth's finding of a testimony-based curse of knowledge effect.³ Chilton states that Abraham's curse insinuates itself through the development of Judaism and Christianity, is living and influential within Islam and in conflicts throughout the world, and is encoded in our cultural constitution: *the clarity and power of Abraham's blessing is designed to reverse his curse, and no period of Christian history has been exempt from the attractions of Abraham's curse*.⁴

The Linguistic and Semantic Analysis of a Curse Word's Use

Birch and Bloom hold that children's problems may be due to both an exaggerated curse-of-knowledge bias and conceptual limitations. The curse of knowledge will be stronger for adults if they can conceive of a plausible rationale for their biased response, and can interfere with false-belief reasoning even in adults. For adults, knowledge becomes a more potent curse when it can be combined with a rationale for inflating one's estimates of what others know. As Birch and Bloom put it, knowledge is a curse unless the outcome seems sufficiently implausible, subjects may fall prey to the tandem effects of the curse of knowledge and the presence of an excuse to support their bias, and *one's own knowledge can be a curse when reasoning about beliefs that differ from one's own.*⁵

Jay notes that people who curse use offensive language primarily to express anger or frustration. Religious women are doubly restricted from cursing, first for their gender and second for their religious beliefs. Cursing is part of a woman's psychological make up. Women who curse tend to represent "bad" characters. Cursing in public depends on both gender identity and power, and has not undergone dramatic changes. Gender identity provides a basis for insulting words. *One's offendedness is a product of personality development and social awareness* (the depth of religious belief is a good predictor of one's offendedness). People who are highly religious are often offended by sexual language.⁶

Jay remarks that *curse words remain accessible as implicit knowledge when other avenues for communication become unavailable*, can be differentiated from noncurse words through a social-historical analysis, are part of our identities, intensify emotions in a manner that noncurse words cannot achieve, and function to make references about the world: *each person's use of curse words is determined by his or her psychological development within a given linguistic, familial, and cultural environment, and an act of cursing is the product of LH decision-making abilities and semantic-syntactic processing along with emotional processing in the RH*. Cursing may take the form of an automatic reflex or a more complex, strategic, controlled response, frequently occurs automatically, with minimal conscious monitoring, operates at different levels of control, is located at the nonpropositional end along with automatic or conventionalized speech like idioms and clichés, is present after damage to the dominant left hemisphere of the brain (LBD), and alters the way we view ourselves and others.

It is of first-rate importance to notice that an act of cursing cannot be understood without considering simultaneously neurological control, psychological restraints, and socio-cultural restrictions. Jay contends that the neurological level is where we have the most to learn about cursing. One's personality is associated with cursing in productive and reactive ways. Human sexuality is a critical aspect of cursing. Different cultures and different languages present different sets of linguistic and semantic constraints on dirty word use. A person's style of cursing will be the product of both shared and private experiences. The child's knowledge of cursing becomes a part of his or her larger linguistic and cultural intelligence. Children learn the utility of cursing through operant conditioning.

It follows from this that the facility for cursing remains intact in the RH and related substrata. A cursing module resides in the RH. Damage to the LH commonly results in involuntary cursing during recovery. Jay maintains that automatic nonstrategic cursing is a function of the right hemisphere. The evidence supporting LH cursing is mainly negative evidence (when the LH is severely damaged, propositional cursing disappears). A brain in a person develops in a cultural context that defines and proscribes acts of cursing. The way in which the brain moderates behavior shows how the cortical and subcortical areas represent curse words and produce cursing in emotional expressions. Some types of brain dysfunctions are associated with propositional cursing. Nonpropositional cursing is characterized by overlearned, automatic, conventional expressions. Jay argues that propositional cursing must draw heavily on the abilities of the left hemisphere, whereas automatic cursing draws more heavily on the processes in the right hemisphere. People are able to curse because the right hemisphere and subcortical areas control and monitor emotional speech.⁷

Swearing as a Socially Constructed Linguistic Practice

Horan holds that swearing is a central component of a speaker's communicative repertoire, being a common feature of everyday language. Swearing is both a social and a linguistic act – a transgressive speech act and a sign of an incompetent communicator. The swearing dictionary fulfils a range of functions. The swearing lexicon of a particular individual is shaped by national, regional or dialectal factors. The dialect swearing dictionaries emphasize the uniqueness of a particular dialect in possessing the fitting

swear word in a particular context. Some languages or dialects may favor religious swear words. The existence of a prestige variety of language creates the linguistic environment in which non-standard manifestations of the language enjoy covert prestige amongst particular social groups.

As has been shown, swearing as linguistic rebellion has potentially powerful consequences, and the act of swearing is subject to contradictory attitudes. Horan points out that the rebellious act of swearing has to be controlled by the state through legislation. The expression “swearing” refers to a range of communicative activities and draws on a variety of lexical resources. The choice of expression may depend on the directionality of the swearing. We swear to express our feelings and relieve inner tensions. Cursing represents the invocation of a divinity, having for the most part lost its divine, supernatural associations. The impact and reception of swearing depends on the taboo nature of the utterance and on the status of the speaker. The speech community can differentiate between *appropriate*, *status-enhancing* and *inappropriate manifestations of swearing*.⁸

According to Cressman et al., profanity has lost much of its status as a taboo linguistic practice, exposure to profanity may carry negative effects, and repeated exposure to profanity can desensitize children. In the realm of teen-oriented movies, the use of profanity on television has been downward. Words and phrases gain either legitimacy or taboo status through society’s reaction to them. The film industry’s relationship with taboo language has evolved. Language, as a social construction, changes over time. Swearing is on the decline in teen oriented movies. Objections are made to the socially

constructed meaning of words. Objectionable words can be precisely defined and categorized.⁹

Jay et al. focus on emotionality and memory for taboo words (their primary meaning is connotative): taboo words may be encoded more effectively than nontaboo words, attract a deeper level of processing than nontaboo words, produce strong memories regardless of level of attention or encoding directed to them, and more frequently elicit skin conductance responses than the other words. Cueing nontaboo words will inhibit recall of taboo words. Emotionally arousing words are remembered better than nonarousing words.

That is to say, the emotional arousal attached to taboo words makes them memorable. Word arousal is the degree to which a word is calming or arousing. Many taboo words have both negative valence and arousal. Jay et al. write that taboo word encoding and arousal affect recall: manipulating levels of encoding influences recall of taboo words, the recall of taboo words and emotional words is based on emotionality, whereas taboo word recall exhibits the emotionality effect regardless of encoding strategy. Superior memories for taboo and emotional words are formed on the basis of their arousal levels and processing in the amygdalar–hippocampal pathway (taboo and emotional words may also benefit more during retrieval).¹⁰

Conclusions

The current study has extended past research by elucidating the psychological aspects of cursing, the motivation to use curse words, the desensitizing effects of profanity, and the existing mores concerning the use of taboo language. Although researchers have discovered some important findings regarding the relationship between psychological motives and restraints for cursing, swearing as a socially constructed linguistic practice, the nature and use of profanity, and the emotional arousal associated with taboo words, there is still a great deal that is unknown and that requires further empirical inquiry.

¹ Mark R. Leary, *The Curse of the Self: Self-Awareness, Egotism, and the Quality of Human Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 46–47.

² James Conant, “The Triumph of the Gift over the Curse in Stanley Cavell’s *Little Did I Know*,” *Modern Language Notes* 126 (2011): 1004–1013. See also Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks*. New York (Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ Keera Bhandari and Hilary Barth, “Show or Tell: Testimony is Sufficient to Induce the Curse of Knowledge in Three- and Four-year-olds,” *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 63(2) (2010): 209–215.

⁴ Bruce Chilton, *Abraham’s Curse: Child Sacrifice in the Legacies of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

⁵ Susan A. J. Birch and Paul Bloom, “The Curse of Knowledge in Reasoning about False Beliefs,” *Psychological Science* 18(5) (2007): 382–386. See also Susan A.J. Birch, “When Knowledge Is a Curse: Children’s and Adults’ Reasoning about Mental States,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14 (2005): 25–29; and Susan A.J. Birch and Paul Bloom, “Children Are Cursed: An Asymmetric Bias in Mental-state Attribution,” *Psychological Science* 14 (2003): 283–286.

⁶ Timothy Jay, “American Women: Their Cursing Habits and Religiosity,” in Allyson Jule (ed.), *Gender and the Language of Religion* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 63–84.

⁷ Timothy Jay, *Why We Curse: A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech* (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2000).

⁸ Geraldine Horan, “Aapkatt, Ramfotzn, Zierlabbe. What Does the *Schimpfwörterbuch* Tell Us about the Role of Swearing in Modern German?” *gfl-journal* 1 (2011): 13–39.

⁹ Dale L. Cressman, Mark Callister, Tom Robinson, and Chris Near, “Swearing in the Cinema: An Analysis of Profanity in US Teen-oriented Movies, 1980–2006,” *Journal of Children and Media* 3(2) (2009): 117–135.

¹⁰ Timothy Jay, Catherine Caldwell-Harris, and Krista King, “Recalling Taboo and Nontaboo Words,” *American Journal of Psychology* 121(1) (2008): 83–103.