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Thirty shades of offensiveness: L1 and LX English users' understanding, perception and self-reported use of negative emotion-laden words

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Abstract

Previous research on multilinguals' emotion-laden words has shown that these have more emotional weight in the first language(s) than in languages acquired later in life (Dewaele, 2013). The present study investigates this further with a list of 30 emotion-laden words extracted from the British National Corpus that range in emotional valence from mildly negative to extremely negative. An analysis of data collected via an online questionnaire from 1159 native English (L1) users and 1165 English foreign language (LX) users revealed, surprisingly, that LX users overestimated the offensiveness of most words, with the exception of the most offensive one in the list. It is suggested that when coming across these words in a classroom, learners are warned about them and they attach a red flag to them reminding them of their power. As a result they generally overestimate the power they fail to perceive accurately themselves. LX users were significantly less sure about the exact meaning of most words compared to the L1 users and reported more frequent use of relatively less offensive words while the L1 users reported higher use of more taboo words. Variation among LX users was linked to having (or not) lived in English-speaking environments, to context of acquisition and to self-perceived level of proficiency in English LX.

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1. Introduction

Timothy Jay, a cognitive psychologist who has devoted his career to the study of cursing and swearwords, wondered 15 years ago why ''curse words have been only of brief and passing interest to psychologists and linguists'' (2000:18). Because of this, ''the absence of research on emotional speech has produced theories of language that are polite but inaccurate'' (p. 18). He wonders, rhetorically, whether the topic is too taboo for academicians. He has consistently combated the marginalisation of emotional speech in theories of language, pointing to the richness and complexity of swearing: ''The articulation of a curse word thus has incorporated into it social rules about gender identity, race, power, formality, prohibition, etc.'' (p. 18). Using these words in a foreign language, or in another variety of the first language, adds another layer of complex interactions between multiple sociobiographical, psychological and linguistic variables (Caldwell-Harris, 2015; Dewaele, 2013, 2015, 2016; Harris, 2004; Howard et al., 2013).

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A question that is probably as humanity itself is why people swear and use taboo words. Jay (2009) points out that: ‘‘Swearing is like using the horn on your car, which can be used to signify a number of emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, joy, surprise)’’ (Jay, 2009).

The metaphor of the car horn is nice, but it is far from perfect. A tourist wherever in the world will recognise a car horn when crossing the street. However, the same tourist is unlikely to recognise the swearwords in the speech of the irate driver. In other words, the metaphor works best within a community of people sharing a language. Even within that community there will be differences, with first language users (L1 users) having a clear advantage over foreign language users (LX users) in terms of pragmatic competence, defined by Fraser (2010:15) as ‘‘the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended.’’ LX **learners** who become LX **users** will have gaps in their pragmatic competence; they ‘‘may produce grammatically flawless speech that nonetheless fails to achieve its communicative aims’’ (Fraser, 2010:15). Telling and understanding jokes in the LX, or being appropriately polite are also more challenging for LX than for L1 users. However the social consequences for not getting the joke, or not being as polite as expected are less severe than the inappropriate use of offensive words. Their use are part of ‘‘a complex social practice fulfilling intricate pragmatic functions’’ (Beers-Fägersten, 2012:20) and getting it wrong could cause serious embarrassment to the LX users and their interlocutors (Dewaele, 2012).

Swearing may carry social stigma, but it plays a crucial part in social interactions in speech communities. It can have positive social consequences for the speaker: ‘‘it influences the perceived credibility, intensity, and persuasiveness of the swearer’’ (Vingerhoets et al., 2013:287). It fulfils a number of interpersonal functions: ‘‘Expressing emotion; humour and verbal emphasis; social bonding and solidarity; and constructing and displaying identity’’ (Stapleton, 2010:289). It can also, inhibit aggression and cause emotional pain to others (Vingerhoets et al., 2013:287). The question is whether these functions can be equally fulfilled in the L1 or in the LX of multilinguals. The incomplete or inaccurate conceptual representation of offensive words and the different set of standards that apply to LX users compared to those applying to the L1 users, who are perceived as members of the ‘‘in-group’’, means that LX users swearing in an LX might have a very different illocutionary effect compared to the same words used by L1 speakers in an identical situation (Dewaele, 2010, 2013).

Because swearwords and obscene expressions attract people’s attention, they have been exploited by advertisers who come up with clever slogans that mimic taboo expressions. One example is ‘‘go fun yourself’’ in a recent publicity campaign for the Toyota Aygo (http://www.toyota.co.uk/new-cars/aygo/index.json). Did the creators of this publicity campaign check how L1 and LX users of English reacted to this slogan that is ungrammatical in standard English? Did they realise that word play is greatly appreciated by L1 users but may be harder to grasp by LX users? These questions arise from earlier research on multilingual swearing that showed systematic differences in the perception of the emotional force of swearwords in the L1 and the LX, and in differences in self-reported use of these words in the L1 and LX (Dewaele, 2004a,b, 2010, 2013).

Emotion research has developed since Jay’s (2000) lament about its absence. However, many unanswered questions remain on the use of emotion-laden words by LX users, defined by Pavlenko (2008) as words that ‘‘do not refer to emotions directly but instead express (‘‘jerk’’, ‘‘loser’’) or elicit emotions from the interlocutors (. . .)’’ (p. 148). This area of research is important, not just for our understanding of the development of the mental lexicon of multilinguals, but also for the LX learners and teachers who face the scary prospect of having to grasp or to teach the meaning and the use of taboo words. Those working in service industries, media or in marketing also need to understand how to deal, or how to exploit the dark side of language and communication (Caldwell-Harris, 2015).

The present study will focus be on differences between LX users and English L1 speakers in semantic representation – operationalised as the self-perceived understanding of meaning – and conceptual representation (operationalised as the self-perceived offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of 30 English words with a mild to an extreme negative emotional valence).

This paper starts with a short overview of the literature that underlies the present investigation, considering firstly some of the literature on sociolinguistic variation in swearing from a monolingual perspective, and secondly, the research on individual variation among multilinguals dealing with emotion words. After that, the six research questions will be presented, followed by a section on the methodology. The results section will present the statistical analyses. The findings will then be discussed and some tentative conclusions will be presented.

2. Literature review

2.1. Swearing in L1 contexts

Swearing has been defined as language use that: (i) refers to something taboo or stigmatised in the swearer’s culture, (ii) is not intended to be interpreted literally, (iii) can be used to express strong emotions or attitudes (Andersson and Trudgill, 2007).

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