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# The role of swearing in creating an online persona: The case of YouTuber PewDiePie

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## ABSTRACT

This article is an investigation of the use of English-language swear words by Swedish, non-native speaker PewDiePie in the context of self-recorded, *Let's Play* horror videos uploaded to the video-sharing website, YouTube. Situating PewDiePie within the greater media landscape to establish both his success and notoriety, this article addresses the local interpretation of the globalization of English and the use of English swear words in Swedish media. The practice of swearing in the gaming context is discussed, and swearing instances in a selection of three of PewDiePie's horror game videos are analyzed. The article puts forth the argument that the use of English swear words contributes to the performance of PewDiePie as a specific, online persona, one that is both in line with the context of video gaming and conducive to a para-social relationship, allowing PewDiePie to achieve the overall goals of communicating with his viewers as peers and reducing the social distance between them. The article concludes that PewDiePie's practice of social swearing not only simulates casual conversation between friends, but actively reduces social distance, creates the illusion of intimacy, and contributes to his unprecedented success on YouTube.

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## 1. Introduction

Created in 2005, the social media and video-sharing website YouTube currently boasts local versions in 88 countries around the world, is available in 76 languages, and has over a billion users watching “hundreds of millions of hours” of videos every day.<sup>1</sup> Despite the vastness, volume, and extensive reach of YouTube, specific videos and individual users have managed to distinguish themselves as among the most popular on the site, setting long-standing records by garnering views or attracting followers that greatly outnumber those of other content or users. While the popularity of a single YouTube video is measured in views, that of a YouTube user is measured in subscriptions. Particularly active YouTube users, i.e. those who regularly produce and/or share videos, can create their own channels, to which other users, i.e. viewers, can subscribe. To date, the most subscribed YouTube user in the website's history is PewDiePie, the online gaming persona of Swedish user Felix Kjellberg. This article is an investigation of PewDiePie as a persona and of his discourse practices, with a particular focus on his use of English and English-language swear words.

While swearing in English has received the bulk of attention in swearing research, the case study of PewDiePie expands the field by featuring a dual focus: on English as a foreign language, and on English as an Internet language. Specifically, PewDiePie's practice of swearing is analyzed from the perspective of his YouTube channel as a public, digital, mass media product. Conventional outlets of public mass media, such as commercial broadcast television, state and national newspapers, or public radio, are examples of contexts where language use is regulated. So extensive may be the reach of such mass media that it is not possible to know about or control for audience membership, and for this reason swearing, which is widely considered taboo, is a common target of regulation or even censure. The traditional communicative goal of swearing is to abuse, insult or derogate, and the socially established quality of being offensive entails restrictions on the use of swear words, especially in public contexts. Inter- and intrapersonal variation with respect to usage of and attitudes towards swearing furthermore renders their public usage a risky social behavior (McEneary, 2006). Censure, consequently, allows swear words to retain their semantic potency as well as their status as taboo language.

On the other hand, the use of swear words is not uncommon in private, interpersonal contexts, to the extent that it is a characteristic, or even regarded as a normal, predictable aspect of interaction (Culpeper, 1996). For example, swearing is a feature of informal, spoken interaction, especially between close friends

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>.

and intimates (Adams, 2016; Author, 2012a; Jefferson et al., 1987; Stapleton, 2003, 2010). In addition to indexing established and close, personal relationships, the use of swear words in interpersonal interaction can also effect intimacy and reduce social distance (Adams, 2016; Butler and Fitzgerald, 2011; Winters and Duck, 2001). As Adams (2016:59) notes, “we use profanity to foster intimacy with those closest to us and to promote solidarity in groups to which we’re committed.”

In this article, I consider examples of English-language swearing by Swedish YouTube-user PewDiePie, whose popularity has garnered him a record-setting number of video views and channel subscribers. PewDiePie’s use of YouTube as a form of mass media allows him to communicate and engage with a massive audience. He does this, however, while using an abundance of swear words. I explore the case of PewDiePie, focusing on how his swearing behavior in his *Let’s Play* horror videos has contributed to establishing him as a YouTube-phenomenon.

In the following sections, I first introduce PewDiePie, presenting his social media background, milestones, and records, as well as situating him within the greater media and linguistic landscape to establish both his success and notoriety. I then describe the data collection methodology, focusing on a selection of videos that span the years 2010–2014. Thereafter, I present the first analysis, before moving on to address theories of the local interpretation of the globalization of English (Blommaert, 2010; Fairclough, 2007; Pennycook, 2007) against the background of the use of English in Sweden and the use of swear words in video games. I then consider the possible triggers of swearing in the gaming contexts, presenting a second set of analyses of PewDiePie videos. I argue that the use of English swear words contributes to the performance of PewDiePie as a specific, online persona, one that is both in line with the context of video gaming and representative of para-social interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956), allowing PewDiePie to achieve the overall goals of communicating with his viewers as peers and reducing the social distance between them. I conclude that PewDiePie’s practice of social swearing (Montagu, 2001) not only simulates casual conversation between friends, but actively reduces social distance, creates the illusion of intimacy, and ultimately helps to establish his unequaled status on YouTube.

## 2. PewDiePie

PewDiePie is the alias of Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, born in 1989. On April 29, 2010, Kjellberg registered his PewDiePie YouTube account; the earliest video included on his channel, “Minecraft Multiplayer Fun”,<sup>2</sup> is dated October 5, 2010. Since the making of this video, PewDiePie has distinguished himself as remarkably active, and in turn, he has seen a steady -and unprecedented- increase in his YouTube channel subscribers. On August 19, 2015, PewDiePie’s YouTube channel was identified by Guinness World Records as the all-time most subscribed channel with 38,746,465<sup>3</sup> subscribers. By April 2017, this number had increased to over 54 million subscribers<sup>4</sup> and his videos had been viewed over 14 billion times.<sup>5</sup> The second-most subscribed channel on YouTube trails behind PewDiePie by 23 million subscribers (HolaSoyGerman).

PewDiePie’s success, however, is not just measured in subscribers and video views, but can also be asserted in financial terms. The *Wall Street Journal* has estimated that Kjellberg earned

\$4 million in 2013,<sup>6</sup> while the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* claims Kjellberg’s earnings were \$7.4 million for 2014.<sup>7</sup> Due to these unprecedented income figures as a YouTube personality, Kjellberg has been profiled extensively in the media. Some example headlines are as follows:

- A. This Guy Makes Millions Playing Video Games on YouTube (*The Atlantic*, March 14, 2014)
- B. YouTube’s Biggest Draw Plays Games, Earns \$4 Million a Year (*Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014)
- C. YouTuber ‘PewDiePie’ Is Making \$4 Million A Year (*Forbes*, June 18, 2014)
- D. YouTube Star PewDiePie Earned \$12 Million Last Year (*Variety*, October 16, 2015)

While making millions of dollars from an Internet enterprise is becoming ever less newsworthy, what these headlines and their corresponding articles (and many similar articles) focus on is the fact that PewDiePie earns such a hefty income simply by uploading recordings of himself playing video games. While some media coverage of PewDiePie reflects neutral reporting of his YouTube activity and earnings, a more prominent, recurring tone is one of incredulosity bordering on ridicule or even contempt. Not only does it seem illogical that someone can earn so much money just by verbalizing while playing video games, but, significantly, it is apparently most noteworthy (if not even more incomprehensible) that much of PewDiePie’s spontaneous commentary consists of swearing. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* article listed above (B.) includes the subtitle, “Cussing, Comic Videogame Reviewer PewDiePie Has 27 Million Subscribers.” In nearly every report on PewDiePie, the fact that so much of his running commentary is populated by swear words is highlighted as a distinct feature of the videos (lower-case article quotes extracted from articles corresponding to upper-case headlines presented above; bolding added):

- a. “In his videos, PewDiePie laughs, **swears**, and goofs around as if he were hanging out with his best friend. But 23 million people subscribe to his YouTube channel.” (*The Atlantic*, March 14, 2014)<sup>8</sup>
- b. “His videos aren’t traditional game reviews. “Pewds,” as he is often called, simply plays games and allows his audience—mostly teenagers—to peer in on his experience and hear random opinions interspersed with odd behavior. He contorts, screeches, **swears**, sings and even “twerks” to portray his feelings.” (*Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014)<sup>9</sup>
- c. “PewDiePie—Felix Kjellberg—plays games while talking, screaming, and **swearing**, and it’s earned him 27 million subscribers [...]. These are not polished videos by any means. Kjellberg has a shtick that apparently appeals to many, but will leave many more equally baffled or disgusted. But what he may lack in taste, PewDiePie makes up for with a knack for this brave new world of social media and interaction with his audience.” (*Forbes*, June 18, 2014)<sup>10</sup>

The subtext of these quotes and much of other attention directed at PewDiePie is apparent: playing video games and acting silly or obnoxious, i.e., yelling, babbling, and swearing, do not represent

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/youtube-star-plays-videogames-earns-4-million-a-year-1402939896>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/youtube-jattens-stora-vinst-63-miljoner/>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/03/this-guy-makes-millions-playing-video-games-on-youtube/284402/>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/youtube-star-plays-videogames-earns-4-million-a-year-1402939896>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2014/06/18/youtuber-pewdiepie-is-making-4-million-a-year/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jeJbdVl2jl>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/most-subscribers-on-youtube>.

<sup>4</sup> 54,527,401 on 4 April 2017; <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/pewdiepie>.

<sup>5</sup> 14,977,896,328 on 4 April 2017; <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/pewdiepie>.

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