

Why do we swear?

Swearing in different cultures

THEO

Why do people swear? Where does it come from? How is it different across cultures? Can swear words be created? Can they have benefits to the human psyche?

THEO

I'm meeting Jean-Marc Dewaele, Professor of Applied Linguistics and Multilingualism at Birkbeck University of London. He's also written a book about emotions in different cultures and languages, so let's see what he has to say about how swearing changes from culture to culture.

Hey Jean-Marc.

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Ah hi how are you?

THEO

Good to see you, thanks for meeting us. Well thank you very much for coming up here and talking to us about swearing today. Let's start with a very broad question, Jean-Marc, why the f**k do we swear?

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

I think that you can express much more emotion in the very short time using a swear word. If you feel very emotional, you don't want to produce lengthy sentences, you want to get it out as short and quickly and powerfully as possible.

THEO

So what in your opinion is the worst most insulting word in the English language?

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

It took me years to find out.

THEO

Go on.

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Because in the academic world we don't use that word, and I don't go to football matches. So I approached my colleague, you know, what is the worst English swear word? And he looked at me, because he's a proper English gentleman, so I said Malcolm, we are colleagues, we are linguists, we can deal with this. And then he said well, I can spell it out for you, it is c-u-n-t. And so I said Malcolm! He jumped up and said oh!

THEO

Jean-Marc, I'm a little bit taken aback by this right now!

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

I'm not surprised. I told him how funny because that same word exists in Dutch and French, and it's not considered that terribly offensive. Since I know that this c-word is so terrible, I start recognising it around me. So the other day I was at a traffic light and for some reason a car comes next to me and I see the guy mouthing c**t. And I looked at him and I said oh I recognise that! I almost wanted to, you know, open my window and say why did you just call me c**t, you know, I'm really interested in this.

THEO

So just heard the most positive reaction to being called a c**t ever!

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Yeah, yeah, I was so interested!

THEO

What about in other cultures, what are some of the worst profanities in other cultures?

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

So in Italy and Spain, in typically very Catholic countries they enjoy using swear words linked to god: Madonna, Christ. In Germany, they like animals and s**t. I have no idea why. So there are peer cultural differences. Also in Quebecois French, their worst swear words refer to church furniture. And the worst swear word if I may say it aloud is tabernacle.

THEO

Well the seating in the church.

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Yeah that's right. It has acquired a huge degree of offensiveness. The phenomenon that I'm really interested in it's that when you swear in a foreign language it never feels as bad, because it's just a funny word that you heard. And hence English swear words are quite popular around the world. And they are considered perfectly acceptable within that culture now. I saw a beautiful picture of sales in Japan and it was 'F**king sales, minus 50%'.

THEO

These are sales at a shop, like when it's a bargain 50% off.

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Yeah, in the shop window 'F**king sales-

THEO

'F**king sales'

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

-minus 50%'. So that's unimaginable in an English speaking country. It's hard to imagine this at Harrods. So far we have talked about swear words but not about curses.

THEO

OK.

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

So curses are slightly different. In the Netherlands, for example, you can tell someone 'Get cancer!' but you cannot say 'Get AIDs!' because that is too taboo.

THEO

So you can have one deadly disease but not another. OK interesting.

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Yes some are acceptable, some are totally not acceptable. In Catalonia, you can curse the carpenter who made the cross on which Christ was crucified, which I think is absolutely wonderful.

THEO

There's just one guy getting cursed for all eternity now-

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Yes.

THEO

-in Catalan?

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Yeah, and luckily we don't have his name, so.

THEO

Oh OK. Jean-Marc, it's been an absolute pleasure, thank you so much. I'm going to b****r off now. See you later!

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

OK. Bye!