

OpenLearn Podcast Episode #5:

Dr Philip Seargeant

Ben Wood and Dr Phillip Seargeant:

BEN WOOD: Hello and welcome back to the OpenLearn Podcast. Welcome to "It's Not All Academic," the free learning podcast from OpenLearn, part of the Open University. Really excited with today's episode, we're going to be talking to Philip Seargeant. And Philip is a lecturer in the applied linguistics department here at the OU. And he's got a load of fantastic content that you'll find across OpenLearn, covering a number of different subjects. He's written about fake news, he's written about the elvish language.

And we're going to be focusing today talking about swearing and profanity. And yeah, really interested to find out more about this and learn more about the articles and the documentary that you will find on OpenLearn. So yeah, without any further ado, let's invite Philip onto the podcast. Let's learn more about swearing and let's get started.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Philip, thank you very much for joining us today.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Thanks for inviting me. Very interested to be part of this conversation.

BEN WOOD: Well, yeah, I think this should be a really good fun one. And we will try our best to not say any of the words perhaps that we're going to be talking about here, and we're talking swearing and profanity, but I'm reliably assured that we can bleep out should we need to. So that's absolutely fine. If you could start though, just set the scene. Tell us a little about your work. So we know you're a lecturer in applied linguistics. What are your areas of expertise? What's your interest? What kind of work do you do? Tell us tell us a bit about yourself?

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Sure, yeah. So I've been working at the University for 20-ish years now. And in that time, I've covered quite a lot of different subjects all around language and communication, specifically how we use language in society for various different reasons. My particular interests of late-- and well, when I say late, last decade or so-- has been political language. Language in politics, but also the way that-- so language in Politics with a big P, as it were, in institutions, with politicians, but also the political aspects of everyday language.

And I suppose swearing fits in with this. As you say, there are words that the institution would prefer us not to say. That's a political decision. It has political ramifications and so forth. And so that's how swearing fits in with my general interests as I've explored them over the years.

BEN WOOD: Excellent. Well, I think we'll start with the first question, and I think it's the question that sort of leads the article that's on the OpenLearn site. And it's really about our attitudes to swearing. And I'm going to ask you, our starting off then, are we less bothered by swearing today than we used to be? Is it more common places? Is it more acceptable? How have our attitudes changed? And do we really care about swearing anymore?

PHILIP SEARGEANT: I think the simple answer is that yes we do. The complexity is that language always changes. Every type of language is always changing, and swearing is no exception. And so over the years, different types of language have been used as swear words and then have become more commonplace. People are less worried about them. But it's constantly evolving.

So some of the words that were swear words were considered particularly toxic or reprehensible to use in the past are probably more common now, but I think the underlying nature of swearing hasn't really changed. It's just the words have changed, attitudes have

changed, and partly the way we communicate has changed. So one of the things about swearing is that it's basically an informal part of language.

It's not usually something you do in a formal setting, writing a formal letter, giving a speech, anything in a business meeting, any of those things, swearing isn't usually a part of that. It's a part of the private sphere. It's part of what you do in informal times.

The thing about communication generally over the last few years, is that divide between the formal and the informal has got very blurred, mainly because of digital technologies and social media. And I think for that reason, our attitudes to swearing are changing in the same way that our attitudes to all sorts of language used is changing.

BEN WOOD: So is it media then that's really changed that? Do you think this all the proliferation of media channels that we have now the greater acceptance, maybe a slightly more relaxed approach or swearing on TV, but certainly social media it. Has that been the real main driver for that change?

PHILIP SEARGEANT: That's one of the big changes, yeah. I suppose there are two aspects to this. Firstly, what we consider to be taboo language has shifted. So swearing would to my mind come under this slightly larger category of taboo language. And traditionally, you've had three different areas of taboo language. One's around religion. So swearing like blimey and God and all that sort of stuff.

One's about around bodily functions, around sex and defecation and all that sort of thing. And then the third one is slurs, racial slurs, sexist slurs. We don't usually consider that to be swearing. But it's in the same category, in the same overall category. It's a taboo. And if you use it, it has a certain power, a derogatory power in that sense.

And I think things have shifted. Well, they've definitely shifted over the past few decades and indeed longer. So at one stage, religious related swear words were the most powerful and the most taboo. In what's generally a secular society, I realize it's not entirely secular, and there are different religions who have different feelings, and different groups have different feelings about that. But that sort of language, it doesn't have the potency in British society that it once did.

Sexual swearing, again, that overtook us religious based swearing as the most potent in the 20th century, early 21st century. Again, that's a little bit less powerful than it was once. And that, I think, has a lot to do with social media. But taboo language around slurs and things is justifiably seen as much more powerful, much more hurtful and so forth than it was previously. And so those are the words that you won't hear on TV anymore, whereas you will hear the sexual and indeed the religious ones. So that's a particular shift that we've seen, I think. And it's a social shift and there's all sorts of reasons behind it, but that's one of the particular reasons for the changes in attitudes.

BEN WOOD: I mean, I think everyone would probably recognize now that just in everyday conversation that the profanities swear words are dropped in and are really meaningless. We're used to saying, oh, my God, did you watch that program last night? It was great. And now if we watch that program last night and we think it's great, we might say, oh, it was F-ing great, or it was bloody great or whatever it, whatever it might be.

I mean, how does that change happen? That has just become like nothing. It's just dropped in. It's in conversations with friends, with family, and no one bats an eyelid at its use there. But like I said, it would be considered the strongest profanity that we could use at one point. So how does that change? This literally becomes something that we just drop in. It's unnecessary in our everyday use these days.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Yeah. I think part of that does come back to your previous point about social media and the diversity of channels and so forth because-- if you go back to the 1960s and 1970s when in the UK there were just a two or three, three I suppose at that stage, TV

channels, radio, there was a very limited number of radio channels and so forth, we didn't have international media, or didn't have access to international media.

And so when those media had a much more control over that aspect of culture, and so when someone used a profanity like the ones you're mentioning it, became a national scandal. There are at least two or three episodes of where someone using the F word becomes front page news. Of course, that doesn't happen anymore. But then that's because we've got thousands of more types of media.

And as I say, that breakdown between the formal and the informal has changed the way we think about how we communicate. So social media, which starts as, in theory, a conversational way to talk to people, but then is also a very public way, and so that type of language that you use on social media then gets blended with what's considered public language, and thus you've got key figures like Trump, who it's almost impossible not to mention when discussing these sorts of things, he will use that sort of profanity in a social media post.

And that just wouldn't have happened before because that would have been seen as more of a private sphere or the language of the private sphere rather than the public sphere. So I think that that's definitely an influence. It's that breakdown between public and private, proliferation, excuse me, of channels, and because of that, the fact that they're not controlled in the same way as part of the culture.

BEN WOOD: Yeah. I mean, for me, you so mentioned about something like the most famous incidents, perhaps the things happening. For me, the one that is probably the most famous of all will be in the Sex Pistols and then their moment of infamy, perhaps is the right word. I mean, it is that sort of thing. You think about that at the time, they are absolutely shocking that that was broadcasted, that it happened.

And think about that, maybe this isn't the right term for it, but was there a golden age perhaps where it started to change, perhaps where swearing became more acceptable? Was there a spot a point after that or yeah, '80s/'90s? Can we put our finger on when that kind of change happened from being something as shocking as happened in that particular episode to where we are today, or has it just been a gradual shift?

PHILIP SEARGEANT: I think it's been a gradual shift. I think there are lots of different things that introduced it. As you say, with the Sex Pistols incident, with Kenneth Tynan before that using the F-word on television, these sorts of things caused mass debate. I mean, they were discussed in the House of Commons and things. But that's because it didn't happen. And then once it starts happening a little more, it doesn't-- and so when Channel 4 started broadcasting, it was seen as a place which everyone-- it was all sex and swearing, which wasn't quite the case.

I think you're right in that you can probably see symbolic incidents which you could use to tell the story of how these things have changed. But as I say, the way we look language, it's always gradually changing. Attitudes are always changing. And the thing with swearing is, it's a type of forceful language which gets a response from people. If you use it too much, that power disappears. You find something use something else instead.

And as I say, attitudes to sex have changed over the last century or so. Attitudes to religion have definitely changed. So all these things don't become-- the tabooess altars. And once the underlying taboo issues alter, then the language becomes more part of everyday because it doesn't have the same effect, basically, that it did have previously.

BEN WOOD: Yes, is that leading to really the evolution of words, the introduction of new words into the language that perhaps we might hear someone saying, and those of us of a certain generation, of a certain age would hear it and have no idea what it means, whether it is something that means it's great, something that means that it's awful, that it is a profanity, whatever it might be? I mean, how does that happen?

How do new words come into being? I was thinking, oh, yeah, slang or what the kids are saying now, making myself sound terribly uncool and old in using [AUDIO OUT]. I mean, where does it come from? How does a new profanity, a new swear word come into being?

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Yeah. So, well the basic underlying principle here is that this is that type of language is all to do with people's identity, and it's all to do with people's identity in distinguishing themselves from a different group. So it's all to do with group identity and differentiation. And because of that, slang is very ephemeral. So it changes constantly, as you say, if we try to-- well, certainly if we try to use slang terms that are being used by Gen alpha or whatever, it would sound ridiculous.

Even discussing them sounds can be a little bit awkward. I mean, that's very much the point. So where the words come from, well, that depends entirely on trends and what's going on in the world and if they're instigated by particular people who have some sort of cultural influence and so forth. So there are all sorts of different ways in which that happens.

But the reason that it happens is because it's to do with the group identity and differentiating yourself from a previous group identity, often generational or to do with culture, particular background, geographical background, ethnic background, all these sorts of things. And that's one of the reasons that language is constantly evolving because people remake it themselves. Language isn't just about communication. Language is about identity. It's about where you come from, who you are, how you present yourself, all these things.

So it's both at the same time, a universal faculty we have, but also a highly individualistic one. We all speak in slightly different ways. And yeah, we fashion the way we speak depending on what we're trying to do at in terms of our identity. And swearing to an extent is part of that. But it also has that core because it-- I think the reason that swearing isn't quite as open to trends as-- it does change, as I say, and attitudes change, but it's not quite so open to trends as other types of slang are, is because it's to do with society wide taboos.

It's to do with what within the broader society is deemed particularly sacred or particularly vulgar or whatever. And so that transcends smaller group identities. But it does mean that what are swear words in the UK will be very different-- not different, but have a different sense than in Australia or in the US, as is the case with some of the standard ones. And different places, as I say, will have more religious ones. Different places will have more sexually related ones and so forth.

BEN WOOD: Is language still traveling in that sense? You said, different things mean different in America or Australia. I mean, are we still seeing words travel across the world? I mean, does it happen quickly now because it can be picked up so much quicker, I say, through and through the various media channels?

Or do we still see it really quite entrenched in our own countries and our own cultures, that these are the words that we use and that's what we're going to use, and it doesn't really break out? Have we adopted any words from other places sort of always—

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Yeah, not so much the words. So words definitely still travel. We're in the age of globalization as with us. Well, depends how exactly characterize it. But definitely the last three or four decades, everything-- we have access and very close familiarity with the way people are speaking in, well, South California particularly, but other parts of the world, New York, wherever. And so words do travel a lot still.

But I think that the distinction is that although the words do travel, sometimes the cultural nuance doesn't. So that's why a word like blimey, for example, still feels very British. You hear it picked up occasionally in American sitcoms or something as a Britishism. So I mean, there's was a knowledge of it. There's knowledge of what it means, there's knowledge of how it's used, but the cultural nuance is still very slightly old fashioned British.

I mean, it certainly isn't a swear word in the same sense as it was sort of in the 1920s or something. But it still is a swear word. And still people use it in that sense. But it has a particular

culture. And then some of the more traditionally taboo swear words do definitely have a different power according to the culture in which they used.

But it's the same word, but it's every word has a sort of history and a background of a culture to it which when you use it as part of the culture you've been brought up in or the part in which you live, yeah imbue it with that sense. That makes sense?

BEN WOOD: Yes, yeah, yeah. One of the things I'm really interested to get your thoughts on as well is the non swearers. And by the non swearers, I mean, not necessarily the people who don't utter any profanity, don't make an exclamation, but the ones who don't say the words. They'll find a substitute. We all know what everyone means when someone stubs a toe and chats sugar. We know the word they're thinking of. And even to the point when someone will actually go as far as to say-- I did it even earlier on when, I think, I said F-ing instead of saying the actual word.

And we all do this. We'll all put a substitute in. Yet we know exactly what it is we mean, and everyone else knows exactly what it is that we mean. So why is it acceptable to say, like I said diva, that was F-ing great. I'm not saying the swear word, but we all know I am. Why is that acceptable? Why could I get away with saying that perhaps in the workplace or in school or college, at a family gathering where whereas I wouldn't get away with the actual full term? How does that work? How is our acceptance of the substitute word—

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Yeah, I mean, that's ultimately a paradox. But I think it's to do with-- and as you say, it's in spoken language and it's also in written language. Some newspapers will type the whole word. Others will put asterisks in selective places and things. It is one of the absurdities of language that-- if you go back to the idea of it being taboo language, it has an almost mystical aspect to its pronouncing that word itself, which is a problem.

And you see it in other contexts. Some religions won't pronounce the name of God, but they'll have some sort of substitute. As I say with racist language or sexist language, if we want to talk about it, we'll talk about it by using something which represents the word rather than the word itself, despite the fact that we're not using that word as a racial slur, were just talking about that word. But you still wouldn't-- you wouldn't even say the word because it has a sort of totemic value.

It has a sort of symbolism which is to do with the taboo. And so it is. I mean, it's a paradox, and it makes no sense other than as there's a ritualistic aspect to how we think about how we're using language. So the actual use is, as you say, everyone knows what it means.

If you see a headline with ffx and something it's no different from another newspaper which will print out other than it's part of what newspaper thinks is acceptable. And it has this-- as I say, it's almost a ritualistic aspect of language, but it's not so much the use of language, but the attitudes towards our understanding of language, if that makes sense.

BEN WOOD: Yeah. I want to ask you about why we use these words as well. And I don't know whether this is from a linguistic question or perhaps more-- I don't know where it fits in in those areas. When we hurt ourselves, for example, and the inclination is to yell something out. Quite often a profanity, quite often an awful swear word. We feel for some reason, maybe yeah, it could be an annoyance at ourselves, but somehow it feels like it helps to shout that out. So that might be one side of it.

Is it still used to shock? So we've already said it's not a shocking. It's attitudes have changed. So maybe not quite like it used to be. Is it the betrayal of ourselves, how we want people to see us? I'm tough because I swear. I'm a big, strong man and I'm not afraid to utter a few profanities when it matters. Why do we use these words? Is there any reasons that we can-- what's your take on it? Why do we do that?

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Yeah. There are two main reasons, plus there's that one. The business of why when we stub our toe we swear it's a slightly different one, but supposedly, according

to cognitive linguists and people who study how we work physically and cognitively, it does help, supposedly. I'm not an expert in that at all.

As far as the other reasons go, so language, although it's non-physical-- is that the right way of looking at it? Language does have an effect in the world. Language is an active thing. If I insult you in a sort of strident and particular way, you will feel it. You might not feel it physically, but you'll feel it psychologically and it'll have an effect on you. And swearing is that sort of thing. It's a sort of attack language.

And although it's just words, it does have, especially if shouted or barked across the road or whatever, it does have a sort of a tangible effect on people. So that's one it's a way of venting anger and targeting anger at people. And it's because of this taboo nature, because of the symbolism it has within society. It's a type of violence, I suppose. It's a type of linguistic violence. So there's that aspect.

And then, yes, absolutely identity. I mean, if you want to be a rule breaker, if you want to create a sense of shock or rebel against the norms of society, you break taboos, and that's part of your personality. I mean, the Sex Pistols incident you were talking about before it was partly manufactured because the media wanted to present them as a certain type of people, but also they were presenting themselves and their management was presenting themselves as a certain type of person.

So that's very much to do with performing a particular identity. As you say, it can be a macho identity. It can be rule breaking identity. be. And it's all to do with the idea of breaking norms.

BEN WOOD: Excellent. Well, thank you very much for all that insight. I think there's some more that I could definitely ask you, but I think we've kept you here for a good 25, 30 minutes talking about that for now. So yeah, that's been really insightful. And what I'm going to do, I'm going to ask a quick question to people who are listening here. I'm not going to ask anyone to put anything in the comments or anything like that. We're not going to run the risk. So yeah, please don't. We don't want to know any words, don't need to appear in the comments.

But giving you a few seconds here and I'm going to leave a little pause. I'm going to say, those of you who've been listening, Philip is obviously an expert in the linguistics side of swearing. I'm about to ask him if he considers himself to be a swearer. So I'm going to give it, 3, 4, 5 seconds pause so you get a chance to pop in the comments whether you think he is or isn't. Let's say thumbs up or thumbs down to say. All right, that's giving you plenty of chance. Philip, as a man of words, as a man of linguistics, do you consider yourself to be a swearer?

PHILIP SEARGEANT: No, I would probably say. And I think the answer is because I'm not very vocal in the way I express myself generally, and I think it's part of that. So again, all to do with identity and expression.

BEN WOOD: Yeah, you don't strike me as an angry man. When you said about-- I could say something to you that would hurt you earlier on and I thought, no, I don't think you would-- I'm sorry, well, he's too nice. He's too nice.

I will wrap it up at that point. Yeah, thank you so much for joining us. Please do go on to OpenLearn and check out Philip's content. Yeah, we've got some fantastic articles. There's a really interesting documentary that goes with Philip's article about attitudes to swearing. So please do check that out. As I said at the start, we've got some brilliant stuff. He's written about the elvish language. He's written about the language of emojis. So much interesting stuff. So please do visit.

All of those will be linked in the program notes for this episode. So yeah, I will sign off and say, Philip, thank you very much for joining us. That's been a really enjoyable chat with you, really insightful to say. Thank you very much.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Thank you very much, Ben.

BEN WOOD: And finally, please do remember if you've enjoyed this, like us, follow us Spotify, on YouTube, leave us a review. And yeah, get involved in the comments. Let us know what you thought. Let us know if you've got any questions as well. Then we'd love to do some follow up episodes to these that we've recorded.

So if this has provoked any ideas, has left you with anything that you're still wondering about that we could ask Philip again for a future episode, then yeah, pop the questions in the chat, and I'm sure we'll get him back on again in the future. But in the meantime, thanks for joining us and look out for the next episode coming up. Get those notifications on, and we'll see you again soon. Thank you very much. Bye.