

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

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ABSTRACT

Films use swearwords to portray scenes effectively but does the affect experienced after listening to the emphatic swear words gate keeps the evolutionary meaning attached to it irrespective of the positive context it is said. The experimental study evaluated the effects on positive affect and negative affect from short term exposure to emphatic swear words. Three independent groups were exposed to clips of emphatic swear words, feeling words and neutral words and completed self-report questionnaire called PANAS-SF. Using SPSS, A Dunnett T3 post hoc test concluded that the Positive Affect was statistically significantly lower after the exposure to emphatic swearing ($p = .022$) and from the exposure to neutral word group ($p = .022$) compared to the Feeling word group.

Keywords: *Emphatic Swear Word, Feeling Words, Positive Affect, Negative Affect*

Language has been described as “complex human behaviour” that rebels against the formal structure and function created under a language domain. Multiple fields such as psychology, archaeology, anthropology, genetics, and neuroscience have produced evidence that is diverse, and it has become difficult to reach a narrow view of language development.

Psycholinguistics is the study of the psychology of our language as it interacts with the human mind. It combines production and comprehension of the language (Gernsbacher & Kaschak, 2003a, 2003b; Wheeldon, Meyer, & Smith, 2003).

Vocabulary is defined as all the words known and used by the person. In language acquisition, vocabulary learning plays a crucial role irrespective of native or foreign language. Researchers have noted the multidimensionality and complication of word knowledge, proposing that knowing a word completely should include various types of linguistic knowledge ranging from pronunciation, spelling, morphology and knowledge of the word's syntactic and semantic relationships with other words in the language, involving knowledge of antonym, synonym, hyponym, and homonym. Vocabulary is of two types. Active vocabulary or productive vocabulary which refers to expressing meaning through

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Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

speaking or writing, retrieves and produces a spoken or written word form. Passive vocabulary is recognizing words when we hear or see them.

Emotional vocabulary

Emotional functioning is linked to natural emotion vocabulary (EVs). The majority of research which is on the benefits of identifying emotions and has focused on self-perception of emotional talents rather than emotion language itself.

Affect Labelling is a technique where emotional vocabulary is used to identify and express emotions through words. On the other hand, the language trend or evolution in language has been occurring through many generations through the use of swear words.

People express emotions using swear words, the same words have been used to be part of peer groups, to increase one's credibility. Furthermore, the same trend has led into the usage of swearwords in a casual context called emphatic swearing.

Swearing

You can't hear a word and just hear it as raw sound; it always evokes an associated meaning and emotion in the brain. (Steven Pinker.) Swearing is a linguistic activity in which taboo words are used (Stapleton, 2010). Swearing is a type of language used to express emotions such as frustration, humiliation, and aggression under the primary emotion of anger. Swear words also play other functions apart from expressing aggression.

Pinker (2007) states two functions of swear words, People engage in propositional swearing by consciously choosing the swear word with full awareness. Dysphemistic, euphemistic, abusive, idiomatic and emphatic swearing are types of propositional swearing. Dysphemistic swearing is used when a taboo word is used instead of neutral term (i.e. mental institution vs Loony bin). Euphemisms are indirect words used in the place of unpleasant word (Damn instead of Damn). Idiomatic swearing is used to express dominance or to strengthen a relationship (e.g. pain in the ass). Emphatic swearing is one of the propositional swearing types, which is used to emphasize something, promote social harmony, to build up a word that describes an event or person in a negative or positive way (Jay et al., 2008). An example of emphatic swearing is "fucking cool", "fucking pretty".

Non- propositional swearing is speaking swear words out of anger and without full awareness. Cathartic swearing alleviates tension and increases tolerance for pain. Abusive swearing is perceived to be rude as it is used to humiliate or intimidate others. It is expressed in metaphors ("e.g- you dress like a bitch!"), advice ("Why don't you fuck yourself?") and accusations ("e.g- you are a real slut!").

Research in Language have been conducted in the areas of bilingualism, linguistic relativity, Pain tolerance from Swearing and so on. Catherine L. Harris in 2004 studied the experience of stronger emotions in bilingual speakers of first language when speaking and hearing. Results state that early second language learners show increased skin conductance rate to both Spanish and English taboo words, emotion loaded terms stimulate the autonomic nervous system equally and hence early language acquisition of any language has the same effect as that of the native language. In conclusion, acquiring any language in early life performs the same purpose of the native language.

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

Jeffrey S. Bowers and Christopher W. Pleydell-Pearce in 2011 conducted an experimental study on swearing, euphemism and linguistic relativity in which participants read swear words, euphemisms of swear words and neutral words aloud and their respective autonomous activity was measured by electro dermal activity. The results stated that people become highly stressed while reading swear words compared to euphemisms. Therefore, authors provide an advanced hypothesis that word forms create stronger emotions irrespective of their semantic meaning.

Swear words and emotions

Speaking obscene words is not always related to catharsis, this effect of swearing reduces if it is being used for a long-period of time. Crystal (2003) states that swearing can be used to express powerful feelings, but it does not have to be “emotional”. Swearing serves essential societal roles that appear to be equally vital as the aggressive one, such as being an identification marker and indicating social distance or social cohesion. Swearwords are used across genders and different age groups to express their feelings such as Joy, sorrow, anger, humour, and surprise (Fanny, 2014).

Languages learned early in life seem to have a stronger emotional resonance than languages learned later, which seem to have a weaker emotional hold on the individual (Amati-Mehler et al., 1993; Javier, 1989; Santiago-Rivera & Altarriba, 2002). Javier and Marcos (1989) show that bilinguals may code-switch to their second language to distance themselves from what they say. The studies on emotion vocabulary in the first and second languages of bilinguals who learned their second language beyond early childhood showed a greater emotional resonance in the native/first learned language (Gonzalez-Reigosa, 1976; Javier, 1989)

Rassin and Muris in 2005 made seventy-two female undergraduate students fill up questions about profanity, violence, and life satisfaction. It was discovered that respondents swore rather frequently, that the expression of unpleasant emotions was the most common cause for swearing, and that respondents recognised that swearing is not a very beneficial reaction. Though using swear words to express positivity were the least critical reason to swear. The differences between the various reasons to swear were statistically significant, and all five reasons were connected with swear word frequency. Additionally, swearing was linked to other types of aggressiveness, it was not linked lack of life satisfaction.

Media using swear words

Mass media are the means of mass communication, such as broadcasting, publishing, and the internet, are considered collectively. The shows telecasted on media platforms such as Netflix, Prime Video and so on have shows in which characters use swear words of both propositional and Non-propositional swearing. Films use swear words, especially the F word which is used 428 times in a movie called Nil by mouth(heath). Writers acclaim that using swear words in movies weaves the reality of the world into the scenes. Steven Pinker from

one of his experimental study concludes that “once a word is seen or heard, we are incapable of treating it as a squiggle or noise; we reflexively look it up in memory and respond to its meaning, including its connotation,” and “... taboo words are especially effective at snatching a reader’s attention” (Pinker).

Exposure to swearwords through shows has either positive influence or negative influence on the viewers. Characters represented in the movies use three types of swear words such as

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

interjection, emphasizer and expletive slot filler. Interjections are swearwords of utterances such as surprise, pain, fear, anger, disappointment, joy and incredulity (Ljung, 2011). Secondly, Emphasizer is used to place emphasis on noun (Ljung, 2011) 3. Expletive slot fillers are expressions that use swear words to describe a speaker's attitude towards something (Ljung, 2011). Moving onto reasons for the usage of swearwords in movies is psychological and social motives. Psychological factors contribute to the frequency of swearwords, hence people who are classified under "labile" which means "easily changed" tends to swear more rather than those who are classified under "stable" condition. The labile and stable psychology condition is tied up to another factor called age that determines the usage of swearwords.

Affect

Affect is a feeling state that is a fundamental ingredient of the human mind. (Wundt, W. M., & Judd, C. H, 1902). It is a psychological construct that refers to mental states involving evaluative feelings such as feeling good-bad, Liking- Disliking a situation. Affect generally has two types of experience namely positive affect and negative affect. The positive affect states the degree to which an individual feels enthusiastic, active and alert. Negative affect is the various aversive mood states such as anger, guilt and fear.

Language and Affect

A state of mind shifts from internal and external demands. Perception, cognition and attention are components of State of Mind. Conscious regulation of SOM aids in self -help and psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is a method to change ones SOM through the use of language and a corrective therapeutic relationship, apparently key aspect of the human experience are our emotions, as they affect our attention, perception, decision making, judgement, memory retrieval and Behaviour regulation (Rathner et al., 2018)

Rathner et.al (2018) studied on personal narratives of people and its effect on an individuals state of mind, the narratives either positive or negative is predicted through groundwork. Many uses are derived from analysing these narratives. Therefore, this brings to a conclusion that Language and affect are indeed associated, whether it is the usage of feeling words or emotion words or swear words, they will be increasing the emotional arousal of a person. However, in this study the association of exposure to emphatic swearing and impacts of positive and negative affect is investigated.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

The experimental study employs a completely randomised group design as participants are separated into three independent groups. The experimental study helps to understand the causal effect of exposure to emphatic swearing on affect in young female adults.

Participants

The sample consists of participants aged between 18 to 25 who are young female adults from Shri Shankarlal Sundarbai Shasun Jain College pursuing undergraduate degree. The sample size of the study was 56 and the sampling method is non-probability sampling in which convenience sampling type is used. In the emphatic swear words group 17 participants participated, the Feeling word group possessed 21 participants and the neutral word group had 25 participants. The inclusion criteria are participants must be between the ages of 18 to 25. They should have English as a second language. The exclusion criteria are

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

participants should not be diagnosed with Mood disorders so the affect that is measured is not influenced by the symptoms of a condition.

Materials

Positive and Negative affect schedule: Positive and Negative Affect Schedule is a self-report questionnaire to assess positive and negative affect. This tool was developed by David Watson, Lee Anna Clark and Auke Tellegen. Positive Affect is the extent to which a person feels active, enthusiastic, and alert. High PA is a state of high energy, concentration and experiencing pleasure and Low PA consists of sadness and lethargy. Negative affect is a state of general distress and unpleasurable engagement with low NA reflecting calmness and serenity.

PANAS-SF is a 20-item questionnaire. Participants rate their feelings on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Very slightly or not at all*, *A little*, *Moderately*, *Quite a bit* and *Extremely*. When short term instructions are given, it measures for state and When instructions are given for long term it measures trait. Scores range from 10- 50 for positive affect and negative affect. Affect with lower scores states lower levels of positive affect / Negative affect. Internal consistency of the scale Cronbach's alpha is 0.84(NA) to 0.90 (PA) The magnitude of the relationship between PA and NA could also depend on the time frame: Diener and Emmons (1984) showed that measures of momentary affect suggest higher correlations between PA and NA than measures of affect that capture longer time periods.

Operational Definition

- **Emphatic swearing:** Emphatic swearing is defined as swearing which is to emphasize something or to show that is quite surprising. (Pinker and Magnus, 2007)
- **Affect:** Affect is a feeling state that is a fundamental ingredient of the human mind. (Wundt, W. M., & Judd, C. H, 1902)

Hypothesis

- **H1** Exposure to emphatic swearing significantly increases positive affect
- **H2** Exposure to emphatic swearing significantly decreases negative affect
- **H3** Exposure to feeling words significantly increases positive affect
- **H4** Exposure to feeling words significantly decreases Negative affect
- **H5** Exposure to neutral stimuli words significantly increases positive affect
- **H6** Exposure to neutral stimuli words significantly decreases Negative affect

Procedure

The experiment was conducted at Shasun Jain College after prior permission. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental groups or control group. The experimental setup is common for all three groups and the experiment was conducted in a room that is well-lit with sufficient air ventilation. Noises and other sounds were eliminated from the room. The video was displayed via projector onto to 120-inch screen with an audio system, Selection criteria of the video is that the video clip shown under emphatic swear word protocol will not have an emotional content, the video was selected based on the types of the words present and cut for three minutes exactly. After watching the video participants will take up the PANAS questionnaire. Participants in the feeling word protocol will watch a 3-minute video clip from a series or movie where characters have used feeling words followed by complete the PANAS questionnaire. The participants in the control group will watch a 3-

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

minute video where the characters have used neutral stimulus words, after which PANAS questionnaire will be distributed.

Emphatic swear word video protocol

A total of 17 Participants were seated in a closed room with lighting and air ventilation. They were seated separately to control the group effects to the maximum. After filling the consents form, the following instruction was given “Make sure you are seated comfortably. you will be played a video clip. Watch and listen to the video and Audio. After watching the video, you will be given a set of questions to complete. You can Ask doubts to the experimenter. If you feel uncomfortable at any point of the experiment you are allowed to leave”.

Participants watched the video clips taken from two English media, euphoria and Hangover. After watching the video, Participants were asked to filled PANAS questionnaire. “The questionnaire has 20 words related to feelings. Rate how you feel now”. After filling the questionnaire, Participants were shown Positive emotion clip to counteract the potential negative effect from the exposure. The experimenter debriefed about the experiment.

Feeling Word video Protocol

A total of 21 participants were seated in a closed room with similar environmental conditions as before. A consent form was distributed followed by exposing them to a 3-minute feeling word video that is taken from the English media “modern love”. Participants filled PANAS questionnaire and they were debriefed about the experiment.

Neutral Word video Protocol

A total of 25 participants participated, two participants failed to fill the questionnaire properly, therefore their data has been removed, leaving with twenty-three data. Participants followed the same protocol except they were exposed to a neutral word video that was played for 3 minutes from LaLaLand.

Ethical consideration

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to the study. Participants were given a disclaimer about the exposure to swear words. Since exposure to the swear words might cause psychological harm, after the experiment participants were shown videos that elicit positive emotions. Participants were also debriefed about the purpose of the study. The data collected was placed in encoded files with the initials of the participants mentioned. The data of participants can be accessed by the supervisor and researcher.

RESULTS

The data collected from the sample was accustomed through tests of Normality to observe the normal distribution of data. The independent groups of emphatic swear words, feeling word and neutral word did not assume normality. Therefore, Kruskal Wallis H test of mean ranks was implied followed by Dunnett T3 post hoc test for the groups.

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

Table 1 Mean Ranks in Positive affect and Negative affect

Measure	Emphatic Swear Word	Feeling word	Neutral word	η^2
	Mean Rank			
Positive Affect	21.53	27.05	36.78	0.019*
Negative Affect	32.76	24.57	29.06	0.300

*** $p < 0.05$.

From Table 1 we observe A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in Positive affect between the different word groups, $\chi^2(2) = 7.950$, $p = 0.019$, with a mean rank positive affect of 21.53 for Group A/ Emphatic swear word group, 27.05 for feeling word group/ group B and 36.78 for neutral word group/ group C.

A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in Negative affect between the different word groups, $\chi^2(2) = 2.406$, $p = 0.300$, with a mean rank negative affect of 32.76 for Group A/ Emphatic swear word group, 24.57 for feeling word group/ group B and 29.06 for neutral word group/ group c.

Table 2 Multiple comparisons of Emphatic swear word group, Feeling word group and Neutral word group.

MULTIPLE COMPARISONS

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: Positive Affect

(I)Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Emphatic swearword Group	Feeling word group	-3.594	2.639	.449	-10.28	3.09
	Control group	-7.451*	2.565	0.22	-13.99	-0.91
Feeling word group	Emphatic swear group	-3.857	2.639	0.499	-3.09	10.28
	Control group	-7.451*	1.879	0.133	-8.55	0.83
Control group	Emphatic swear word group	7.451*	2.565	0.022	0.91	13.99
	Feeling word group	3.857	1.879	0.133	-0.83	8.55

There was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by Kruskal Wallis H test ($p = 0.019$). A DunnettT3 post hoc test revealed that the Positive Affect was statistically significantly lower after the exposure to emphatic swearing ($p = .022$) and from the exposure to neutral word group ($p = .022$) compared to the Feeling word group.

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

There was no statistically significant difference between the Feeling word group and Emphatic swear word group ($p = .499$). There was no statistically significant difference between the Feeling word group and Control group ($p = .133$).

DISCUSSION

Language influences our thought and emotion (Lindquist, Satpute, et al., 2015). The kind of words we use to describe ourselves, a friend, a day, during a conversation plays a role in defining whether we have a positive experience or negative experience. The present study investigates exposure to a type of language called emphatic swearing and its effect on Positive and Negative affect. The results of the study states that exposure to videos of emphatic swearing, feeling words and neutral words produces a significant difference in positive affect. Since all of the three groups have significant difference in positive affect, comparing to previous literature language do play a role in emotion.

The role of language in emotions is critical than researchers previously thought (Lindquist et al., 2015). Constructionist theories portray emotions as psychological compounds, i.e. anger, disgust emerge when representation of the body, exteroceptive sensation (visual sensation and auditory sensation) and conceptual knowledge about emotion combine. Conceptual act theory predicts that conceptual knowledge of emotions is acquired from language (Lindquist, MacCormack, et al., 2015b). Therefore, accessing to the conceptual knowledge of emotions by using words apart from the physiological arousal and sensation experienced maybe has an effect on affect. Hence, this could be a potential cause for all the three word groups to have effect on affect.

When people's access to the meaning of the emotion is impaired, their ability to perceive emotions on faces is impaired (Lindquist et al., 2006, 2014; Gendron et al., 2012). This implies the significance of words that we use to describe our emotional states. Likewise, exposure to feeling words produces significant difference in positive affect. Xu(2002) states emotion such as anger, fear are abstract representations of conceptual information than concrete concepts.

These words are called “essence placeholder” that binds these emotions to emotion category. Therefore, words also become a gateway to experience emotion. On the other hand, exposure to videos of emphatic swearing, feeling words and neutral does not produce a significant difference in the negative affect. There are potential causes for no statistical significance between three groups on negative affect. The length of the video used for the exposure was for 3 minutes. Since participants watched the video together, the group effect could also have been a potential cause.

Literature in bilingualism and multilingualism states that emotional arousal is greater in native language compared to second language (Harris, 2004). Apparently, all of the participants have English as the second language which could also have contributed. There was no statistical significance in negative affect among the three groups.

The second independent group in the study was exposed to feeling words. Previous studies on affect labelling states that putting feelings into words is an implicit emotional regulation task. However, they do not statistically increase or decrease positive affect.

Excerpts from introspective report, Participant CA in emphatic swear word group stated “I was feeling irritated while watching the video. While closely observing CAs score, their

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

total score in Positive affect was 38. Though participant has consciously reported they felt irritated, their Positive affect is higher. This could be because of affect labelling having implicit regulation effect on an individual (Lieberman;Torre, 2018)

Narrowing down further, Post hoc results as seen from Table 2, concludes exposure to emphatic swear words and neutral words significantly decreases positive affect.

Dynel states “no words manifest inherent tabooess, being socio-cultural constructs emerging as a result of societal prohibition”. The previous line explains that aversiveness towards swearword is not inherent rather conditioned from societal norms and prohibition, hence when the positive affect decreases from exposure to emphatic swearing, aversive conditioning to swear words maybe a potential cause. The phonological form of the word that is paired with affective response overplays the meaning of a swearword’ (Bowers et al., 2011). This implies that the participants of the study could also have had incidents of punishment for swearing. Previous experimental studies on swearing have concluded that speaking swear words decreases emotional arousal in the short-term duration (Stephens & Umland, 2011) and does not decrease emotional arousal if it used for long term from habituation ((Stephens & Umland, 2011c).

The results acquired takes a shift from previous studies on stating short term exposure to emphatic swear word decreases positive affect. The results also posit that exposure to emphatic swear words does not produce similar effects to speaking abusive or cathartic swear words from habituation. Furthermore, Future studies shall investigate about the effect on affect in an individual from long term exposure to emphatic swearwords and feeling words.

Implications

The results produce a significant difference in Positive affect across the group of exposure to emphatic swear words, feeling words and neutral words. Therefore, watching videos in which characters use emphatic swearing changes our positive affect for a short duration of time. Hence, the language used by the characters in series clips should be taken into consideration as they directly influence an individual’s positive affect irrespective of the context in the scene. The power that words possess is great, the words we speak everyday form our thoughts and eventually thoughts become our reality (Newberg & Waldman, 2012) Moreover, negative words, whether spoken, heard, or thought, not only produce situational stress, but also lead to long-term anxiety and swearing on the other hand.

Swearing refers to the use of specific, negatively charged and often emotionally loaded terms (Stapleton et.al., 2022g) Therefore Swearing is also part of negative words.

Negative words increase implicit processing within the subgenual anterior cingulate cortex, that is they release stress and anxiety-inducing hormones. Ultimately, negative words whether heard, or thought, not only cause situational stress but also contribute to long-term anxiety.

Newburg and Waldman from previous research studies states that holding a positive word in your mind, thereby considering feeling word as positive word, you stimulate frontal lobe activity and which increases activation in the specific language centers that connects the motor cortex responsible for moving into action. The research concludes that other areas of the brain get largely activated and affected when an individual focuses on positive words for

Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

longer time periods. In conclusion, the emphatic swear words we hear from a media has an effect on Affect irrespective of the context of the scene.

Limitation

The study has some limitations that have to be mentioned, the sampling types being convenience sampling reduced the diversity of participants. The sample consists of only young female adults. The experiment was conducted as a group and Participants were exposed to the video as a group and this would have had group bias during observation and filling the questionnaire. The videos were selected based on the dialogues used by the characters since a standardization video for emphatic swear words is yet to be given.

Future Study

In this experimental study, the exposure to emphatic swearing was short-term, future research can study on effect on affect from long term exposure to emphatic swearwords.

Studies can focus on effect on affect from speaking emphatic swear words for short duration and long duration. This topic shall be studied along with State of mind, to understand usage of emphatic swear words produces a shift in state of mind via personal narratives. Emphatic swearing can be studied in other languages as well.

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Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

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Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

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Exposure to Emphatic Swearing and The Effect on Affect: An Experimental Study

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Conflict of Interest

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