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## WHY DOES SWEARING MAKE US LAUGH? A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

### KÜFÜR NEDEN GÜLDÜRÜR? PSİKOLOJİK BİR YAKLAŞIM

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#### ABSTRACT

Swearing is considered as an unwelcome act since it is deemed impolite to society. However, it is seen that the behaviour swearing has become prevalent in human life. What functions do the taboo words serve in an individual's life? If swearing is merely an expression of aggression, how and why can it make people laugh? This study aims to understand why the act of swearing produced from taboo words is perceived as amusing by focusing on the relationship between profanity and humor. In this context, it is aimed to determine the role of swearing in human behavior by trying to answer the question of how taboo words are acquired during the developmental process. In addition, the study addresses the functions of swearing in an individual's life and interactions with others aiming to understand the motivations behind the use of words prohibited by society. Finally, the question of why some swear words are perceived as humorous has been explored through the common denominators between swearing and humor. It was found that swear words serve various functions in human life, one which is generating absurdity and thus opening the door to humor. Subsequently, the study explains the conditions and mechanisms under which an aggressive act such as swearing serves the purpose of entertainment.

#### ÖZ

Küfretme, toplum içinde kaba ve nezaketsiz bulunduğu için hoş karşılanmayan bir eylem olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Buna karşın küfretme davranışının yaygın olarak insan hayatında yer edindiği görülmektedir. Bireyin yaşamında yasaklı kelimelerin ne gibi işlevleri vardır? Küfretme davranışı salt bir saldırganlık ifadesiyse nasıl ve neden güldürebilmektedir? İşte bu çalışma küfür ve mizah arasındaki ilişkiyi konu edinerek tabu kelimelerden üretilen küfretme eyleminin komik olarak algılanma nedenini anlamak istemektedir. Bu doğrultuda öncelikle yasaklı kelimelerin gelişimsel süreçte nasıl edinildiği sorusu cevaplanmaya çalışılarak küfretmenin insan davranışlarının yeri belirlenmek istenmiştir. Ayrıca küfretmenin bireyin hayatındaki ve diğer insanlarla etkileşimindeki işlevlerine temas edilmiş, toplum tarafından yasaklanan kelimelerin kullanılma motivasyonları anlaşılmaya çalışılmıştır. Küfür sözlerin bazılarının neden komik olarak algılandığı sorusu küfür ile mizah arasındaki ortak paydalar üzerinden yanıt aranmıştır. Bu süreçte küfür kelimelerinin insan hayatında çeşitli işlevler üstlendiği, bu işlevlerden birinin de tuhaflık üretilip mizaha kapı aralamak olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Devamında küfür gibi saldırgan bir eylemin eğlenme amaçlı hangi şartlarda ve nasıl hizmet ettiği açıklanmıştır.

#### Keywords:

Psychology,  
Taboo Words,  
Swearing,  
Humor,  
Funny

#### Anahtar Kelimeler:

Psikoloji,  
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## INTRODUCTION

Profanity, a term encompassing taboo words specific to a culture, is fascinating due to its diverse manifestations. These taboos, which can pertain to religion, race, gender, body parts, bodily secretions, and bodily functions, are universally recognized as taboo categories (Pinker, 2007; Stapleton, 2010). The intricate interplay of cultural and social norms gives profanity its variable and complex nature, making it a captivating study area.

Expanding on the definition, it becomes evident that socio-cultural contexts wield significant influence over the understanding of profanity. The very definition of a swear word is malleable, shaped by these contexts that dictate what is deemed inappropriate or offensive. Each culture, in its unique way, establishes criteria for what words are considered profane, and the context in which these words are used is pivotal in determining their perceived offensiveness. This intricate interplay between language and society offers a fascinating linguistic and cultural analysis area.

The initial researchers in the field, recognizing the linguistic significance of profanity, posited that the study of swear words could elucidate various linguistic issues (Montagu, 1942; Patrick, 1901). Even the behavior of a non-verbal newborn—who, when in pain or discomfort, resorts to the most impactful action available, vehement crying—illustrates the foundational role of expression in human communication. As development progresses and the child acquires vocabulary, these cries are often replaced by swear words or similar expressions (Montagu, 1942, p. 192). This evolution from cries to words reflects the adaptive nature of language in expressing human experience and emotion.

In his article “On the Physiology and Psychology of Profanity”, Montagu (1942, p. 190) further explores the origins and functions of profanity, suggesting that its history can be traced back to the very beginnings of language. According to Graves (1927, p. 32), swearing serves a function similar to expressing physical pain. While infants express distress through crying, moaning, and tears, adults may perceive these as signs of helplessness. Nevertheless, the need to vocalize pain remains, and in

such instances, our nervous system seeks an outlet to manage the crisis—swearing provides a unique method for such expression.

The connection between taboo words and swearing also brings it close to humor. Taboo words can functionally produce the absurdity required by humor. Similar to swearing, creating humor emerges as a natural outcome of being human. Humor involves the playful manipulation of words by a mind seeking amusement (Rothbart, 2007). The ability to produce, perceive, and enjoy humor, which may involve techniques like exaggeration, double entendres and metaphors—including direct or indirect references to taboo words—manifests human traits (Martin, 2007). Such techniques must be capable of generating absurdity that is perceived as entertaining (Morreall, 1997). This exploration of absurdity underscores that not all our actions are governed by rational decision-making and reveals our innate capacity for producing humor, which is an effective outlet for entertainment-seeking minds.

### The Developmental Process of Swearing

The developmental trajectory of language and emotional expression begins early in infants. Babies show frustration from a very young age, usually due to discomfort. A vulnerable, non-verbal newborn does what they can best under such circumstances—cry vehemently. This reaction typically results in either the return of the object causing the upset, the disappearance of the distressing element, or exhaustion from crying. As they grow, infants learn to express themselves in less vocal ways, transitioning from crying and childlike tantrums to using words, including swear words, as they develop language skills (Montagu, 1942, p. 192).

From the onset, the closest action to speaking for infants is crying, which they use to vent their frustration and anger. As babies begin to speak, they can use words to soothe their anger, transitioning from mere cries to verbal expressions. This shift illustrates the foundational role that verbal ability plays in expressing emotions (Montagu, 1942, pp. 197-198).

As children’s cognitive abilities become more

sophisticated, their use of language evolves to accommodate higher mental functions. The use of swear words happens reflexively at first, akin to crying and using descriptive adjectives. Over time, children acquire semantic and syntactic rules for swearing, allowing them to use profanity appropriately (T. Jay, 1992). Initially used to express emotions, these words gradually take on references to the broader world (T. Jay, 1999, p. 83). Researchers interested in profanity suggest that the first signs of swearing start in infancy as a form of emotional expression (T. Jay, 1992; Montagu, 1942; Patrick, 1901).

In the developmental process, children try all available means to express themselves initially; this includes crying, physical aggression, and name-calling (e.g., “dirty girl”, “bad boy”). Words like “dirty” and “bad” are some of the heaviest emotional terms at a child’s disposal. The acquisition of various swear words and the breadth of a swearing vocabulary are matters of experience. Swearing literature is typically learned later (during university or working life) among well-educated youths kept away from potentially harmful environments. Youths hear swears from their surroundings or create their own, yet no one can completely isolate themselves from profane words (Montagu, 1942, pp. 197-198).

Children learn that swear words are associated with emotional states through classical conditioning. When a three-year-old accidentally bumps their head against a table and starts crying or complaining, an adult nearby might hit the table while saying, “Take that, bad table, poop table, stupid table,” thereby soothing the child’s feelings. In this way, the child learns to associate repeated words (e.g., “dumb”, “crazy”, “poop”) with emotional events (Goodenough, 1931). Similarly, when adults hurt themselves on a door, sidewalk, nail, or person, they might verbally lash out as if the object could be affected by such insults or swearing (Montagu, 1942, p. 195).

As children reach adolescence, the nature of swearing becomes more abstract and socially based, reaching its peak. Like many aspects of adolescence, gender differences in swearing emerge during this period. Boys tend to swear more and have a more developed repertoire of swear words than girls, and the swear words used by boys tend

to contain more aggression (Jay, 1999, p. 82; Byrne, 2018, p. 16). Although the use of profanity peaks during adolescence, it continues into old age. Dementia in old age does not prevent swearing. Montagu (1942) considers swearing in adults to serve the same function as crying or expressions of frustration in small children. Montagu also suggests that laughing, crying, and swearing are interrelated because all these primitive emotional outbursts can create a cathartic effect.

### **The Psychological and Physiological Foundations of Swearing**

Research shows swearing has physiological and psychological foundations (Byrne, 2018). Patrick (1901, p. 119) addresses the relationship between swearing and aggression in his definition, also considering its function

Swearing is an instinctual and primitive response that stands alongside actual fighting as a reaction to situations threatening individual well-being. Like all instinctual responses, it does not guarantee emotion but soothes it. When the reaction is delayed or suppressed, the emotion emerges. In this context, we can consider swearing as a form of catharsis. It appears to act as an expression that leads to the externalization of emotion and relief. It serves as an outlet that ends the unbearable internal conflict, repression, and adaptation to new conditions, allowing a customary behavior as a means of self-assertion. (Patrick, 1901, p. 119)

Swearing, laughing, and crying typically discharge emotions during sudden surges of energy where immediate expression is required. Although these actions may appear distinct, their primary function is to restore a psycho-physical balance in the individual. Swearing is particularly interesting as it often occurs in response to sudden physical and emotional shocks standard in everyday life, such as bumping an elbow or knee, a hammer suddenly falling on a foot or accidentally hitting a part of the body against the corner of a table. In such instances, we may curse at the object, causing pain, and sometimes react with physical aggression. This combination of verbal and physical violence directed at an object or person provides a sense of relief as if the “guilty” party has been cursed and physically attacked (Montagu, 1942, p. 194; Stephen et al., 2009).

Following these reactions, Montagu (1942, p. 198) argues that swearing, like crying and laughing, is instinctual. While the impulses to cry and laugh are readily apparent in infants, the impulse to swear is not visible due to the developmental stage of their speech abilities. From Patrick's perspective, swearing is among the primary impulses in our nature that require at least a rudimentary speaking ability to manifest. However, whether swearing is merely an instinct or represents one of many possible responses to a fundamental impulse of anger or aggression remains a topic for debate (Patrick, 1901).

Continuing this discussion, the choice to laugh, cry, or swear fundamentally depends on an individual's attitude toward the stimuli they encounter. These attitudes can vary under different circumstances and over time, influencing what makes us laugh, cry, or swear. Depending on the situation, a person might naturally laugh or cry; conversely, after enough crying or laughing, one might swear or suppress all urges and neither laugh, cry, nor swear. These responses can also manifest hysterically, with individuals simultaneously laughing and crying or cursing and crying (Montagu, 1942).

It is difficult to imagine someone who has never wanted to swear, just as it is to imagine someone who has never sworn. Though possibly repressed in some individuals, the impulses to cry, laugh, and swear are undeniable and

persistent features of human nature.

Swearing, crying, and laughing are all characterized by specific and well-defined physical and psychological changes. For instance, laughter involves distinct movements of the diaphragm, vocal cord, and facial muscles, along with increased blood flow, changes in breathing, and a general psycho-physical elevation. Crying involves similar muscle contractions but is associated with decreased blood flow and respiration, excessive secretion by tear glands, and a general psycho-physical decline. In swearing, while there are no specific diaphragm movements, there is generally an increase in neuromuscular tension, blood pressure, blood flow, blood sugar levels, and breathing. As swearing continues, the general sense of tension decreases, culminating in a feeling of relief (Montagu, 1942, p. 199).

### The Function of Swearing: Why Do People Swear?

Swearing consists of taboo words used to inflict emotional impact and potentially harm the other party. The onset of swearing is believed to coincide with the development of speaking abilities. This study explores why people choose to swear, including the reasons and functions behind this behavior. In this context, Vingerhoets and colleagues' (2013) work on the functions of swearing has been foundational. They categorize the functions of swearing into two types: personal and interpersonal.

**Table 1. Effects of Swearing**

Effects of Swearing	Positive	Negative
<b>Personal</b>	- Relieve stress	- Individual effects
	- Reducing pain	
	- Preventing aggression	
	- Self-confidence	
<b>Interpersonal</b>	- Humor	- Dishonor
	- Preventing unwanted behaviors	- Fear
	- Pointing function	- Hostility
	- Reliability	- Decreased social support
	- Persuasion skill	- Loss of status
	- Group loyalty	
	- Identity creation	

(Source: Vingerhoets vd., 2013, p. 296)

### Personal Functions

Among the individual functions of swearing, the expression of emotions such as anger and frustration emerges prominently. Additionally, the personal functions of swearing include reducing tension and stress, experiencing cathartic effects, and avoiding physical and social pain. Research by Rassin and Muris (2005) with 72 students revealed that the cathartic effect is the most frequently mentioned reason for swearing. Another study found that 16% of over 200 students reported reduced stress after swearing (T. Jay et al., 2006). Individuals may use swearing to unload their anger or other intense emotions onto another person. The expression of these negative emotions not only reduces psychological tension but also diminishes aggressive impulses.

The cathartic effect of swearing can also elucidate why swearing can be an alternative to physical aggression. By swearing, individuals “discharge” their anger, thus reducing the impulse for physical aggression. In this way, swearing is a preventive tool against physical aggression, potentially averting more severe consequences (Jay, 2009; Montagu, 1942). However, another study has indicated that expressing anger might not reduce aggressive tendencies but could instead reinforce the propensity for future aggression (Bushman et al., 1999).

In addition to the personal functions of swearing described in the literature, studies on the cathartic effect of swearing are particularly notable (T. Jay, 2009; Johnson & Lewis, 2010). Two experimental studies on the catharsis hypothesis are presented to systematically evaluate the cathartic effect of swearing and provide information about the underlying mechanisms of possible relief.

One experimental study with 62 university students noted that physical and social pain function similarly. Students who had experienced social exclusion were allowed to swear for two minutes in one group, while the other group was instructed to use non-swearing words during this time. The data collected from the participants indicated that swearing reduced social pain decreased sensitivity to physical pain, and lessened hyperalgesia caused by social exclusion (Philipp & Lombardo, 2017).

In another unique experiment, researchers exposed 67 students to a cold pressor test to investigate the effects of swearing on pain tolerance and perception. Specifically, participants had to immerse their hands in icy water for as long as possible while repeatedly saying a chosen swear word or a neutral word. It was observed that participants could withstand the painful stimulus for a longer duration when swearing compared to when they used a neutral word (Stephens et al., 2009).

### Interpersonal Functions

Swearing serves personal functions and plays a significant role in interpersonal interactions. Research has shown that swearing facilitates communication, establishes trust, creates intimacy, and generates a humorous atmosphere. These functions are directly related to the context in which the swearing occurs and the individuals involved.

Swearing's interpersonal functions are particularly evident in group settings. For example, an analysis of conversation within a team at a soap factory in New Zealand revealed frequent use of profanity, mostly expressing frustration or dissatisfaction with their work. This swearing strengthened the social bonds among group members. Newcomers to the group needed to adopt this norm to integrate and demonstrate solidarity through swearing (Daly et al., 2000). Similarly, among adolescents, swearing is often perceived as a sign of solidarity (Stapleton, 2010).

The use of profanity also creates a relaxed and intimate atmosphere, as seen in stand-up comedy, discussions about sexuality, or storytelling (Jay, 2009). When used in a stand-up show, profanity can convey a sense of losing control and “letting go”, enabling a highly humorous environment to be established (Vingerhoets et al., 2013, p. 296).

Another interpersonal function of swearing is its ability to increase perceived trustworthiness. Researchers have found that swearing at the beginning or end of a conversation can convey greater intensity and a more positive perspective than non-profane speech (Scherer & Sagarin, 2006). Previous research suggested that swearing might make a speaker seem less trustworthy and persuasive (T. Jay, 1992). Building on this, Vingerhoets and colleagues (2013, p. 295) noted that the effect of swearing depends

on the context; in the right setting, swearing can enhance a speaker's credibility and persuasiveness. This is because swearing can be seen as a way of expressing emotions, making it appear more genuine and honest to some listeners.

However, the communicative function of swearing implies that it can also signal a person's difficulty in managing emotions. Due to the taboo nature of swearing, people primarily focus on the taboo words used, which can intimidate others and potentially lead to social isolation. This, in turn, may lead to feelings of rejection and depression (Robbins et al., 2011). Although a swearer might instill fear and hostility in others, potentially at the cost of their reputation, there is also a possibility that swearing could elicit positive reactions from others.

The interpersonal function of swearing also raises important questions about why others do not universally accept profanity. Despite not causing concrete harm to the swearer, the listeners, or society, swearing often elicits adverse reactions from people (Jay, 2009). Swearing is based on the taboo categories within a culture. Since taboo words are considered shocking, surprising, and sometimes frightening, people who swear are often perceived as anti-social and aggressive. Consequently, swearing can negatively affect the swearer's social status and how others perceive them (Stapleton, 2010).

### **Swearing and Taboo**

The most distinctive feature that puts a word in the category of profanity is that word is banned. Swearing is characterized by violating taboos in a society (Hughes, 2006). For example, in different cultures, people insult some animal names, diseases, organ names, or functions of these organs (Byrne, 2020). Playing with some societal taboos is often enough to achieve the desired emotional effect.

Taboo, a Polish word, means a kind of prohibition. The meaning in question is divided into two opposing domains: Words or actions that are indescribably sacred and those that are too dirty and dangerous to speak of because they are hazardous (Freud, 2016, p. 79; Hughes, 2006, p. 15). In this case, there are two taboo words: sacred and dirty.

The sacred contents of taboo words often include praising God's name, swearing or cursing. Secondly, dirty taboo words consist of content that is not tolerated in society, such as argots, slang expressions of reproductive organs and excretory actions. Especially since human sexuality is one of the most taboo aspects of human existence in almost every society, swear words are among the most commonly used subjects (Jay, 1999, p. 85).

The euphemism is one of them. For example, as a matter of courtesy, the rope is not mentioned in the house of a person who has committed suicide by hanging himself. Instead, the deceased is called "deceased". The function of the euphemism here is to prevent the connotation of any taboo or disturbing event, action, or concept, such as death. To achieve this goal, methods such as changing meaning, scientific explanation, indirection, or generating irrelevant concepts can be used (Jay, 1992). The words used for the toilet can be an example of this situation. Numerous euphemisms are used, such as a washbasin, number one, footpath, W.C., toilet, and ablution room. All these words can be characterized as a product of efforts not to use tabooed actions and concepts and not to have connotations.

When we look at the origin of taboos, it is seen that the name is identified with the object, unlike euphemisms. From this point of view, the devil's name is considered the devil himself. This situation gives an idea about the belief that holy and dangerous things are not even mentioned; otherwise, the belief that harm might occur and the reason for the prohibition. Based on pre-logical ways of thinking, such prohibitions have left many traces in the languages we use. For example, the fox's name is not mentioned in many regions of France. Instead, expressions such as "animal", "he", and "that" are used (Guiraud, 1999, p. 72). In Anatolian culture, "three letter word" instead of "gin"; "bogyman", "dirty animal", or "named basic" instead of "pig" are used. Similarly, the word snake is taboo in parts of West Africa. Another reason why the names of dangerous animals are not used is the fear that the animal may hear its name and attack. For example, some fishermen in Papua New Guinea avoid talking about sharks and stingrays for fear of being attacked. There is a Ukrainian proverb, "Tell about the wolf and let it come into your house". and the English proverb, "Let the devil



come running”, expressions reflect the same kind of taboos (Fairman, 2009, pp. 29-30).

Abusive expressions are more potent than many shouts as they refer to taboo objects and actions. Words have the power to affect and change human relations as well as to describe the world (Hirsch, 1985, p. 78). When approached from a different angle, profanity emerges as a social phenomenon that shows taboos. It is possible to understand society's taboos by looking at the curses in a culture. However, things that society accepts as taboo can change over time. This change might cause the effectiveness of profanity, hence the differentiation of the words determined as profanity (Byrne, 2020, p. 24).

In sum, dirty words are fed by the existence of rules and prohibitions. The more restrictions, prohibitions, and oppression in a society, the more material there is for an individual to take revenge when angered. Every prohibition or taboo produced in a community can be considered a reason for swearing by those who want to take revenge on them. Prohibitions can also mean the enrichment of swearing, as swearing finds strength through the violation of prohibitions.

### **Profanity and Humor**

Swearing, at first glance, does not seem closely related to humor, as it involves meanings such as insult, degradation, and reactions of anger, which are not directly connected to humor. However, neither humor nor swearing is a one-dimensional phenomenon. It is possible to state that there are similar aspects, and even common denominators, between these seemingly unrelated fields. At this juncture, if we need to restate our problem statement, focusing on the areas that make the question “Why does swearing make people laugh?” meaningful would be functional.

#### **1. Context**

In its simplest form, swearing comprises words that express emotional response and aggression (Jay, 1999). From this perspective, the purpose of attack associated with swearing comes to the forefront. However, when considering the functions of swearing, it also relieves stress, reduces pain, prevents undesirable behaviors, and enhances credibility, persuasion, group identity, and identity formation

(Vingerhoets et al., 2013, p. 296). One of the functions of swearing is also to provoke laughter. What, then, are the differences that lead a swear word to evoke vastly different reactions, such as laughter or anger? To understand this, it is necessary to consider the literal meaning of the swear word and the context in which it is used in communication. A single word can have very different meanings depending on its context and provoke similar reactions.

When approaching swear words in terms of their function, it can be said that each use of such words carries a different intent and function for both the speaker and the listener. This perspective highlights the diverse applications of swear words. Furthermore, there is no semantically and linguistically distinct use of swear words. Instead, the intent or behavior in a particular type of conversation makes the profane word meaningful. Nevertheless, coarse words imply many different actions, such as insults, humor, swearing, or ethnic defamation, without necessarily referring to a specific act (Jay, 1992, p. 1).

In an interaction, whether swear words provoke laughter can vary according to the appropriate tone. The way words are voiced indicates the speaker's intent. On the other hand, the meaning of some words can also be influenced by the gender, closeness, age group, and other conditions of the people involved in the interaction. For example, using a swear word considered taboo in a casual setting among peers of the same sex might be acceptable and even enjoyable, while using the same word in the presence of people of a different gender may be found uncomfortable.

Swearing at someone you do not know or are not close to can be problematic, while the same expression, when said to a close friend, may be perceived as a sign of intimacy. It is a well-known rule that taboo words should not be used in severe meetings like professional or religious gatherings and most written communications. However, taboo words in a comedy show or during a casual conversation with friends are often chosen to add closeness and fun to the dialogue (Cameron, 1969, p. 101). Therefore, whether a word is deemed appropriate in communication is not fixed but variable. This variability is influenced by the speaker-listener relationship and various elements within the context. Formal institutions, meetings, environments with

men and women together, the presence of small children or elderly, religious activities, in the presence of strangers, or within a community, etc., are some contexts that inhibit foul language; conversely, close friends, same-sex groups, intimate conversations, stand-up shows encourage its use.

## **2. Types of Swearing and Perception of Humor**

Numerous types of swear words exist, and many do not facilitate laughter. Various forms of swearing include cursing, casting spells, abusing, insulting, and complaining (Mohr, 2015). Swearing is often explicitly understood in the context of abuse, yet its boundaries are broader.

Swear words can differ in function. Swearing is not solely for insult. As mentioned above, the speaker's intent and the context's influence can give swear words different meanings. Swear words can support coping with physical pain, obstruction, or disappointment (Byrne, 2020), signify intimacy in close friendships, attract attention in specific conversations (Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014), and produce humor in stand-up shows. Thus, it can be said that swear words possess multiple meanings and functions in verbal communication.

### **2.1. Why is swearing perceived as funny?**

When asked what makes people laugh, the first response could often be incongruity. According to the theory of incongruity, one of the fundamental theories of humor, the perception of something as humorous stems from recognizing incongruity. Humans generally do not react with laughter to what is ordinary, customary, and considered normal. Instead, laughter typically arises from surprise, astonishment, and the incongruity that can induce such states (Schopenhauer, 1909). However, not all instances of incongruity are humorous. For example, an individual's involvement in an accident also constitutes an incongruous and surprising event but is not perceived as funny. Here, a second condition becomes relevant: safety. An individual does not regard an experience as humorous if it results in harm, injury, or suffering. Incongruity coupled with safety is often sufficient to elicit a perception of humor. In this context, the humor perceived in swearing may be due to the ability of swear words to generate incongruity. When a forbidden word is

uttered unexpectedly and does not provoke anger, it can be perceived as humorous. It is no coincidence that many comedy programs use swear words for comedic purposes. The facilitative role of taboo words in generating humor brings swearing and humor closer together.

### **2.2. Why does swearing make us laugh?**

In addition to the explanations given above on why swearing is perceived as humorous, the relief theory of humor can explain why swearing can provoke laughter. According to Freud (2003), an individual living in society is constrained in many ways. Constantly suppressing desires and wishes leads to tension and excessive nervous energy. When someone violates this through humor by uttering swear words that society has forbidden, they know they will not be harmed (Incongruity and safety). The release of suppressed words and thoughts brings relief, and the individual celebrates this relief by laughing. The relaxing function of swearing serves as a trigger for laughter. This is also a form of catharsis (Patrick, 1901, p. 126). Based on this function, quietly swearing instead of engaging in seriously injurious aggression in any argument becomes a preferable option (Cohen, 1961). Swearing, which expresses anger and alleviates tensions and frustrations, is the primary reason for many people's habit of swearing due to the psychological relief it provides (Fennell & Johnson, 1984).

Looking closely at the connection between swearing and laughter, the implication of superiority emerges. According to the Superiority theory of humor, one significant motivator that drives people to laugh is the desire to feel superior (Morreall, 1997). When people want to see themselves as more important, superior, or in a better condition than others, and when this context is realized, they celebrate by laughing (Feinberg, 2004). Conversely, the expectation of superiority can manifest as a desire to demean others. Accordingly, mockery and derision become the embodied purpose of this desire. The desire to demean someone, especially one who is envied, is more pronounced. Feelings of jealousy arise against individuals perceived as superior in various aspects. Demeaning certain aspects of these individuals makes balancing possible, which is gratifying and elicits a laughter response. In

such a scenario, swearing is functional in demeaning and thereby balancing.

### 3. Tolerance

Humor provides individuals a safe context for expressing potentially problematic statements (Freud, 2003; Schutz, 1977). Therefore, instead of directly uttering criticisms, insults, swear words, etc., people often express these indirectly through jokes or suggestive humor (Kane et al., 1977). A direct statement of an insult or swear word can expose an individual to social pressure, legal sanctions, and penalties. However, the intended emotion can be safely expressed if swear words are conveyed through the humor channel. According to Freud (2003, p. 131), potentially problematic words can only be tolerated if they carry a jesting quality. This situation can also be articulated inversely. For swear words to be perceived as humorous, the recipient of these “dirty” words must approach them with tolerance. Although the intention might be jestful, elements of attack are apparent in humor and swearing. Mutual enjoyment is possible when the playful context of the attack is understood, and the recipient of the swear words can approach them with tolerance (Öngören, 1998). Outside this context, swear words are likely to be perceived as offensive.

## CONCLUSION

Swearing appears to be an action unique to the human species. From a developmental perspective, while the initial sign of swearing is crying, over time, the ability to use language permits the expression of anger through “bad, forbidden” words. This positions the ability to swear as a behavior potentially inherent from infancy, experienced increasingly as linguistic capabilities develop. As individuals age, becoming more socialized, and more aware of societal prohibitions, they possess the potential for more creative swearing.

Although swear words in an individual’s life are primarily thought of as a form of expressing anger, a closer look reveals they have a variety of functions. In other words, people do not use forbidden words solely to cause pain. Sometimes, they swear to alleviate physical or psychological pain, create an intimate atmosphere, enhance

credibility, produce humor, and relax. The diverse functions of forbidden words are mainly related to the context in which they are used. If taboo words are used recklessly without regard to any criteria, the individual faces sanctions. Therefore, the positive potential of swearing is only possible when considering the context.

Considering that swearing feeds on forbidden words, the existence of prohibitions and taboo words in society provides material for swearing. In other words, although swearing may be considered an undesirable behavior, as long as society continues to produce prohibitions, motivation and content for swearing emerge.

Another notable topic is why swear words are perceived as humorous and the relationship between swearing and humor. It seems unlikely to generate humor with swear words intended for attack and insult. It should be noted that swearing can only be considered humorous under certain conditions. Firstly, a positive humor context is essential for a swear word to induce laughter mutually. Notably, the rich potential of taboo words to create absurdity provides insight into why swearing is sometimes considered humorous. Additionally, the laughter induced by taboo words can also provide individuals with a cathartic experience. On the other hand, if a person is directly or indirectly subjected to swearing, another critical threshold is that this person can tolerate the situation with forbearance. Attention to these boundaries and creating an appropriate context can make many taboo expressions conducive to producing humor.

Both swearing and humor emerge as multifaceted phenomena. This presents challenges in defining and delineating their boundaries. Moreover, the fact that both phenomena carry vastly different meanings depending on the context of each environment makes them dynamic, variable, and uncertain. This complexity makes it extremely difficult to generalize assessments when discussing either phenomenon.

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#### Author Contributions

All the authors have equal contributions.