

Poetic Expressions: A Safer and Saner Alternative to Foul Language

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ABSTRACT

People have always used profanity to vent emotions and socially connect with close friends. However, today, with constant digital surveillance and records that are almost eternal, the downsides of use of such language is huge. This study examines why people use abusive language, its short-term benefits and its long-term harm to relationships, jobs, and even legal consequences. It suggests metaphorical and poetic expressions as strong alternatives to express feelings. Using research on language, psychology and politeness, the paper suggests that swearing may give immediate satisfaction, but dents reputation and brings trouble, especially on online platforms where everything is recorded. Instead, poetic tools like metaphors and sarcasm let people share emotions without permanently denting relations. English has plenty of ways to be critical yet kind to avoid backlash. The paper ends with ideas for teaching these skills in schools and offices.

Keywords: profanity, poetic expression, euphemism, politeness theory, surveillance, professional communication.

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1. Introduction

The use of abusive language and curses is as old as human communication itself. Across cultures and historical periods, people have expressed anger, frustration, and discomfort through swearing and abusive speech (Jay, 2000). These linguistic outbursts often function as spontaneous reactions to heightened emotional states, offering momentary relief but frequently at a social or psychological cost. While abusive language may seem to provide an outlet for strong emotions, research shows that it can carry lasting interpersonal, professional, and even legal consequences (Baruch and Jenkins, 2007).

In an age of heightened surveillance, where CCTV cameras, smartphones, and social media platforms can record and circulate speech and/or written messages instantly, the repercussions of abusive language have grown more severe. Public utterances or written remarks, once fleeting, now become permanent digital records with real-world consequences (Trottier, 2012). Empirical studies on publicly visible communication supports this concern. Studies of profanity in social media brand mentions show that such language provokes vicarious shame and social disengagement among audiences, often resulting in unfollowing and distancing behaviours. This suggests that in surveilled and platform-mediated environments, emotionally impulsive language increasingly produces reputational and relational costs (Villanova, 2024). Against this backdrop, poetic expression emerges as a safer and more constructive

alternative. This paper explores the nature of abusive language, its consequences, and the potential of poetic expression to serve as a more productive and saner method of communication.

2. Literature Review

The research of profanity and abusive language has gained attention in many fields including psycholinguistics, communication studies, and sociolinguistics. Research in this domain can be organized into 3 major domains: the psychological reasons for swearing, its social and professional consequences, and theoretical frameworks for understanding alternative communication strategies.

Psycholinguistics research has proved that profanity has multiple functions in communication. Jay's (2000) neuropsychosocial theory gives a framework for understanding why people swear, identifying emotional catharsis, emphasis, and social bonding, as primary motivations. Empirical researches support these claims. Stephens, Atkins, and Kingston (2009) said that swearing increases pain tolerance, suggesting an adaptive physiological response. Research by Freniere et al. (2022) shows that swear words elicit stronger autonomic arousal than neutral alternatives, explaining profanity's emotional power. These works prove that using abusive language is not merely dysfunctional, but also serves real communication purposes in certain scenarios.

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Research on profanity's consequences reveals significant social and professional issues. Baruch and Jenkins(2007) found that workplace profanity is linked with permissive leadership styles and reduced organizational output. Cameron(2001) proved that profanity may serve the purpose of group bonding among close friends, but it could have serious consequences in social and professional settings. Trottier's(2012) analysis of social media's surveilling nature tells how these websites turn ephemeral communication into permanent and publicly available proofs. Recent studies support these claims. Patton et. al (2017) found that police use of swearing in body camera footage dents their image. Villanova(2024) shows that brand related abusive language on social media causes shame and noticeable audience disengagement. These studies show that surveillance radically changes how people converse in today's world.

Theoretical frameworks from pragmatics and psycholinguistics give methods for examining how alternatives to profanity might achieve similar functions with less-severe consequences. Their framework suggests many ways for making serious profanity-related scenarios less serious. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) cognitive metaphor theory shows how metaphorical and poetical expressions create understanding by putting abstract concepts into concrete domains to enable healthy and profanity-free criticism. Dadamirzayeva(2020) uses these frameworks to prove how metaphorical and euphemistic communication serve as better alternatives in institutional communication.. Recent studies on behavioral regulation provides additional context: studies linking circadian misalignment to impulsive behavior (Beauvalet et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2022) suggest that emotionally driven language use reflects broader self-regulation challenges.

2.1 The Art and Science of Abuses and Swear Words

2.1.1 Why Do We Abuse?

Swearing and abusive language are deeply ingrained in human culture, cutting across linguistic, social, and geographical boundaries. Studies in psycholinguistics and social psychology suggest that people swear for several reasons: to express frustration, emphasize emotional intensity, assert dominance, or cope with stress (Jay 14–18). According to psychologist Timothy Jay, swearing functions as an emotional regulator, allowing speakers to release anger or pain in moments of distress (Jay,2000). Experimental studies further show that swearing can increase pain tolerance, reinforcing its role as an instinctive coping mechanism (Stephens et.al,2009). Psychophysiological research further demonstrates that swear words elicit stronger autonomic arousal than euphemistic or neutral alternatives, helping to explain why profanity is often experienced as emotionally powerful and cathartic. Other studies of online communication suggest that swearing can

intensify evaluations and increase perceived impact or authenticity of messages. These findings complicate any simple view of swearing as merely dysfunctional, showing that it can serve real emotional and communicative purposes in certain contexts (Lafreniere et al., 2022).

Psychological research shows that impulsive and externalizing behaviors stem from broader issues in biological and emotional regulation. For example, studies link adolescents' social jetlag (circadian misalignment between biological and social clocks) to more conduct problems and hyperactivity, even after controlling for age, sex, puberty, insomnia, and sleep duration. While not directly studying language, this suggests behavioral dysregulation creates conditions ripe for impulsive, emotionally driven expression like swearing (Chen et al., 2022).

Swearing also serves a social function. Within certain groups, particularly among friends, curse words can act as markers of intimacy and solidarity. In such contexts, swearing becomes a form of bonding language, signalling trust and shared norms rather than hostility (Baruch and Jenkins,2007). The irony lies in the fact that words deemed offensive in public discourse may function as terms of endearment in private interactions. Humorous exchanges of mock insults among friends illustrate how meaning is shaped by context rather than vocabulary alone (Cameron 89).

2.1.2 The Spontaneous Overflow of Uncomfortable Feelings

The act of swearing, as Mark Twain humorously observed, often provides immediate emotional relief. His remark, "When angry, count four; when very angry, swear," captures the cathartic appeal of profanity (Twain 212). Swearing allows emotions to be released quickly, bypassing reflection or restraint. Linguistically, it operates as a shortcut for emotional expression, compressing complex feelings into a single verbal outburst (Jay 78). Psychological studies suggest that impulsive, emotionally charged behaviors often tie into bigger issues with biological and emotional regulation. Research on social jetlag, the clash between work/school days and free days, links it to various mental health and behavior problems, like aggression, conduct issues, mood swings, cognitive slips (think weaker school or work performance), and substance use. This points to the idea that poor self-control isn't just situational; it can stem from deeper physiological and brain-related disruptions. While these studies don't zoom in on language, they explain why impulsive, emotion-fueled outbursts like swearing pop up more when self-regulation is off (Beauvalet et al., 2017).

However, this rapid emotional discharge comes with consequences. While the speaker may feel temporarily unburdened, the listener may experience offense,

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humiliation, or emotional harm. Over time, repeated reliance on abusive language can damage relationships and shape negative perceptions of the speaker's character or professionalism (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

2.1.3 Immediate Relief Versus Long-Term Consequences

Although swearing may provide short-term relief, its long-term repercussions are especially significant in public and professional settings. Abusive language directed at others can leave lasting emotional scars and undermine trust in personal and workplace relationships (Cameron, 2001). In many societies, legal frameworks increasingly recognize verbal abuse as a punishable offense, particularly when it occurs in public spaces or online environments. Insults and threats may lead to defamation claims, workplace sanctions, or criminal charges under harassment and hate-speech laws (Matsuda et al., 1993). Research on institutional and public communication reinforces these concerns. Research on police use of profanity shows that such language significantly lowers perceived professionalism and increases negative judgments, while studies of social media interactions demonstrate that publicly visible profanity often triggers shame and social disengagement among audiences. In digitally mediated environments, emotionally impulsive language thus becomes not only socially risky but reputationally and institutionally costly (Patton et al., 2017).

The rise of surveillance technology and citizen journalism has further amplified these risks. Smartphones, CCTV footage, and social media platforms ensure that even momentary lapses in judgment can be recorded, shared, and archived indefinitely (Trottier, 2012). As a result, abusive speech can have consequences that extend far beyond the original moment, affecting careers, reputations, and mental well-being.

2.2 Poetic Expression: A Safer and Saner Alternative

2.2.1 Benefits of Poetic Expression

In contrast to swearing, poetic expression offers a safer and more constructive outlet for strong emotions. By channelling feelings through metaphor, simile, irony, or satire, speakers can communicate dissatisfaction or anger without resorting to verbal aggression. Poetic language encourages reflection and creativity, transforming raw emotion into meaningful expression (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Studies support this claim. Longitudinal research on students exposed to euphemistic and indirect language shows a significant reduction in the use of harsh or corrupt communication over time. Importantly, these changes were accompanied by sustained levels of empathy and reduced prejudice, suggesting that the adoption of more refined communication styles fosters broader social and emotional benefits (Chen et al., 2022). From a cognitive perspective, poetic language engages the mind differently than abusive language. Metaphors

and figurative expressions require the listener to process meaning through conceptual mapping, which often leads to deeper understanding and less emotional reactivity (Gibbs, 1994). This cognitive engagement reduces the likelihood of escalation and promotes more thoughtful dialogue.

2.2.2 Strategies for Poetic Expression

Poetic expression encompasses a range of linguistic strategies that allow speakers to convey strong emotions or criticism without causing unnecessary offense:

1. Using Metaphors and Similes: Metaphorical language allows speakers to express criticism or frustration indirectly, framing the message as observation rather than accusation. For example, instead of calling someone "incompetent," saying, "You're navigating this task like a ship without a rudder" conveys the same critique with less hostility. Cognitive linguistics research shows that such figurative language shapes understanding while softening emotional impact (Lakoff and Johnson 10).
2. Employing Irony and Satire: Irony and satire allow speakers to critique behaviour or situations indirectly, often with humour. These devices create emotional distance, making criticism easier to accept and less likely to provoke retaliation (Simpson 31).

2.2.3 English as a Storehouse of Sophisticated Expressions

The English language, shaped by centuries of cultural contact, colonization, and literary development, possesses a vast repertoire of polite and indirect expressions. Over time, English has developed nuanced strategies for diplomacy, understatement, and emotional restraint, particularly in formal and professional contexts (Biber et al., 1999). This linguistic richness enables speakers to convey dissatisfaction, disagreement, or anger without resorting to abuse.

2.2.4 Say It Softly, Say It Sweetly—But Say It Straight

One of the greatest strengths of poetic expression is its ability to balance clarity with civility. Poetic language allows speakers to be direct without being harsh, preserving both the message and the relationship. As discourse analysts note, indirectness can often be more effective than blunt confrontation, especially in emotionally charged situations (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Linguistic analyses of institutional discourse show that euphemism and metaphor function as pragmatic mitigation strategies, allowing speakers to maintain harmony while still communicating criticism or sensitive content. Drawing on speech-act theory, cognitive metaphor theory, and politeness frameworks, such research demonstrates how indirectness systematically reduces the interpersonal risks associated with direct and emotionally charged expressions (Dadamirzayeva, 2020).

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various contexts.

A few examples of poetic alternatives:

| Direct / Harsh Expressions | Poetic, Gentle Alternatives |
|----------------------------|--|
| Don't waste time. | You never step into the same river twice. Life is like an ice-cream, enjoy it before it melts. |
| Stop complaining. | Complainers never create, creators never complain. If you can't stand by the heat, get out of the kitchen. |
| You are lazy. | Your wings are wet. It's time to dry them. It's time to pull your socks. |
| This is useless. | All that glitters is not gold. Perhaps this stone is a diamond. |
| Be patient. | Always in hurry, always behind. / Hastily makes waste. Slow and steady, wins the race. |
| Mind your own business. | Those who can do something they do; those who can't, they teach. / Fly high, don't fall in love with the nest. |

These alternatives convey disapproval but do so in a way that maintains civility, allowing for continued dialogue rather than escalating conflict.

3. Methodology

This paper uses a theoretical and conceptual approach. It draws from research in psycholinguistics, communication studies and cognitive linguistics to analyze the functions and results of profanity vs safer poetic expressions. The methodology is literature-based. It uses findings from varied fields to present a comprehensive argument about language choice and its social consequences.

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative comparative analysis framework. Through the examination of research on profanity's psychological functions (Jay, 2000; Stephens et al., 2009), social implications (Baruch & Jenkins, 2007; Villanova, 2024), and institutional implications alongside theoretical frameworks from politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and cognitive metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), this paper studies patterns and suggests meanings behind the relative merits of different communication strategies.

3.2 Data Sources

The Analysis uses three primary sources:

- Empirical Research: Peer Reviewed research documenting the psychological, social and institutional effects of abusive language in

Theoretical frameworks: Literature rooted in politeness theory, speech act theory, cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis which provide conceptual tools for understanding indirect communication and face-threatening acts.

Linguistic examples: Idiomatic and euphemistic expressions drawn from English Language usage and examined for their pragmatic functions and social implications.

The paper employs comparative discourse analysis to identify the pragmatic function of profanity in various communicative contexts. This involves:

- Identifying the pragmatic functions of profanity (satirists, emphasis, social bonding) based on psychological and linguistic research.

- Documenting the social consequences of profanity in professional, digital, and surveilled contexts through synthesis of empirical studies.
- Analyzing euphemistic and metaphorical alternatives through the lens of politeness theory, examining how these expressions manage face-threatening acts.
- Demonstrating through examples how poetic expression achieves communicative goals while minimizing interpersonal and professional risks.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) provides a foundation for understanding how different linguistic strategies help with face threatening acts. The cognitive metaphor theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explains how metaphorical language structures understanding and reduces harsh emotional reactions. Speech act theory (Austin, Searle) explains how indirect utterances can achieve communicative goals while mitigating potential offense. These works enable systematic comparison of profanity's direct and face threatening nature with poetic expression's indirect, face-saving strategies.

4. Limitations

This research's theoretical and conceptual approach has limitations. It doesn't involve empirical data collection, experimental manipulation, or statistical analysis. The conclusions are drawn from synthesis of existing research. The focus on English Language examples limits cross-linguistic generalizability.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Institutional Support for Poetic Expression

Given the potential of poetic language to enhance communication and build positive relationships, institutions of higher education should consider offering courses and training in this regard. Incorporating poetic expression into communication curricula can help students develop the tools to handle conflict constructively. Some suggested programs include:

- English for Specific Purposes (ESP): Courses focused on sophisticated and professional communication in various fields.
- Training for Polite and Sophisticated Expressions: Workshops designed to teach individuals how to use polite, diplomatic, and poetic language effectively.
- Workshops on Poetic Expression: Activities and exercises that train individuals to use metaphors, similes, and other poetic devices to express emotions in ways that preserve relationships rather than damage them.

5.2 Envisioning a Safer, Saner, and More Harmonious Future

By promoting poetic expression as an alternative to abusive language, we can envision a future where communication fosters harmony rather than discord. Poetic language allows for the expression of emotions in a way that respects others while still being clear and direct. In a world where tensions are increasingly high and public scrutiny is constant, this shift in communication style could lead to a safer and saner society.

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