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Profane Language: On the Philosophy of Cursing in the Contemporary Era

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Abstract

Politeness is a foundational virtue taught from an early age that shapes human relations and social participation. Yet, alongside norms of courteous speech, there persists profane language—commonly called cursing or swearing—that stands as an ironic counterpoint to politeness. This paper investigates why certain words become taboo and how the very nature of language is entangled with the practice of cursing by combining a concise historical sketch with three philosophical lenses: hermeneutics, speechact theory, and Wittgenstein's languagegames. The historical overview locates key English expletives within shifting social hierarchies and lexical taboos; hermeneutics reveals how authorial intention, textual context, and the interpreter's horizon shape moral responses to profane utterances; speechact theory clarifies the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary forces that can render an utterance injurious, consoling, or mobilizing; and the languagegames framework shows how communities instantiate rulegoverned practices that make swearing meaningful, permissible, or sanctionable. Short case analyses, political rhetorical cursing, socialmedia posts that contain profanity, and everyday emotive expletives demonstrate how cursing indexes group identity, enacts solidarity or aggression, and can both contest and reproduce power relations. This paper argues for a pragmatic, contextsensitive approach: profanity should be understood as a socially embedded communicative practice that reveals and negotiates taboo, identity, and power, and its ethical appraisal must depend on the interactional functions and consequences of utterances rather than on lexical form alone.

Keywords: *cursing, hermeneutics, language, profanity*

INTRODUCTION

In today's technological society, teaching children politeness is crucial, complex, and laborious. Thus, politeness is one of the fundamental

and foundational characteristics taught to every human at a very young age.¹ Teaching this critical value is vital, considering every human interaction and social participation. Discipline in action, thought, and even the utterance of words are all basic foundations in everyone. This implies respect and propriety for everyone interacting with the whole community.

In this context, the words that people speak are essential. This hints that language has something to do with the culture, community, and their very selves. It shows and projects through a thorough observation of the nature of language. Ludwig Wittgenstein, a contemporary philosopher, even acclaims by saying, “When they (my elders) named some object and accordingly moved towards something, this I saw this, and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out...I gradually learned to understand what objects they signified, and after I had trained my mind to form these signs, I used them to express my desires.”²

So, every word has meanings that can reflect people's emotions and even intentions. In this contemporary era, almost everybody sees on the news and on social media how words tremendously impact people's minds and even affect their behavior. With progressive development, even how people speak and utter words progress occasionally. Before, it was impolite to use obscene language, and because of this, people learned to be very discreet about how they should speak and the words they say. However, today, it is already a form of freedom of expression to speak, even using vulgar words. Some well-known personalities constantly engage in this behavior, which some consider “ill-mannered.” For example, one can consider Mr. Rodrigo Duterte, President of the Philippines, who has become very vocal in criticizing his critics with disrespectful words. The journal article in Rappler even enlists this, “President Rodrigo Duterte's constant cursing during speeches is affecting the youth, experts said on Monday, June 18, as an activist nun said the chief executive should be more mindful of how he conducts himself.”³ It infers that there are words that must be considered harmful and are known as profanity.

The word *profanity* is also known by others as cursing, cussing, swearing, and many more. It is civil-disobedient, counter-cultural, defiant, disruptive, edgy speech. Being profane may also be expressed in other ways, such as gestures,

1 Katherine Lee, “Teaching Children Good Etiquette and Manners.” *VeryWellFamily*, February 1, 2019. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/teaching-children-manners-620111>.

2 W.T. Jones, *The Twentieth Century to Wittgenstein and Sartre*. 2nd ed., rev. (United States of America: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), 367.

3 Sofia Cruz, “Duterte's Cursing is Affecting the Youth; Experts Say,” *Rappler*, June 18, 2018. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/205216-duterte-cursing-affect-filipino-youth/>.

vocal music/singing, or visuals, particularly, the focus of this paper, in speech.⁴ Considering even the etymology of the term profanity, one may see essential information. Profane language strongly suggests that profanity reflects the civilized human struggle with one's own physical and emotional nature, such as their desires, passions, mortality, and even their relationship with the divine.⁵

The terminology of profanity or speaking bad words is acknowledged, "in contemporary secular societies usually derives from words standing for excretory or sexual bodily functions, the body-parts associated with those, or sexual practices, especially including copulation, procreation, and the kinship relations deriving from procreation."⁶ In general, profanity is classified into two kinds: carnal profanity and blasphemous profanity.

However, a deeper investigation would lead to various studies on the word *taboo*. It has now become vital because it has become a characteristic of society. After all, taboo "refers to a prescription of behavior for a specific community of one or more persons at a specific time in specific contexts."⁷ Pondering this, one can see how language, particularly the usage of taboos, mirrors a specific community. Therefore, it is essential to examine the history of this terminology to understand and extract the underlying theme.

The English term *taboo* can be traced back to the Tongan *tabu*, a concept that became relevant to researchers until the end of the 18th century.⁸ Radcliffe-Brown even writes, "In the languages of Polynesia, the word means simply 'to forbid,' 'forbidden,' and can apply to any prohibition. A rule of etiquette, an order issued by a chief, an injunction to children not to meddle with the possessions of their elders, may all be expressed by the use of the word *tabu*."⁹ At first, according to some researchers, this term was not associated with speaking vulgarly, but with action and norm. Captain James Cook's first journey to Tahiti (1768–1771) was to observe the transit of the planet Venus across the Sun. During his stay, he

4 J. L., Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674411524>.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words. Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11.

8 Keith Allan, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Language*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-handbook-of-taboo-language-9780198813509> (accessed November 1, 2025).

9 Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Taboo*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 5f.

observed that women were not allowed to eat together with men, for this is their custom, even though they did not have any valid reason to explain why.¹⁰

Moreover, the term taboo is too universal, so one can see and focus on swearing. Swearing/Cursing is under the general term taboo, which centers on speaking slurs or offensive or foul words. To put it simply, this is profanity. According to Allan and BurrIDGE, swearing has four functions: “expletive, insult, solidarity/camaraderie, and vividness.”¹¹

Lastly, this rising trend is not considered novel because profane language was seen as one of the exciting topics in the philosophy of language a decade ago. Various thinkers, professionals, and philosophers have been captivated by this rising culture, especially because language is essential in what is known as contemporary philosophy. Numerous arguments are offered to explain what, why, and how this trend in speaking slur dramatically affects the lives of every human. This paper follows these clear steps. It begins with a review of key literature on profanity, and then provides a short history of major English swear words. Next, it presents three philosophical lenses—hermeneutics, speech act theory, and Wittgenstein’s languagegames concept—and shows how each can help interpret swearing. These tools are then used to analyze three short cases: political cursing, socialmedia profanity, and everyday expletives. The final section brings the findings together and argues for a practical, contextbased way to judge profanity.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

Language plays a vital role in society. It is the medium for every individual’s communication and functions as a pedal in every societal development and transformation. Kjersti Flottum posits, “Language is crucial for communication and interaction. Language not only reflects and expresses facts and observations; it also influences attitudes and behavior. It thus constitutes a vital component of the cultural prerequisites underlying societal development.”¹²

10 James Cook, *Captain Cook’s Journal During his First Voyage Round the World, Made in H.M. Bark Endeavour, 1768-71: A literal transcription of the original MSS*, ed. by W.J.L. Wharton. (London: Elliot Stock, 1893), 91.

11 Keith Allan and Kate BurrIDGE, “Swearing,” in *Comparative Grammatical Studies in Australian and New Zealand English*, ed. Pam Peters, Peter Collins, and Adam Smith (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009), 361-86.

12 Kjersti Flottum, “*Language, Culture, and Society*,” University of Bergen, last modified 2017, <https://www.uib.no/en/rs/bsrs/103131/language-culture-and-society#course-programme>.

The connection between society and language is deeply anchored in their nature. Each one provides a tremendous impact on the other. Language executes various cultural functions, and society does the same for language. Language is the principal means of overall communication and the tool for establishing peace and order in our society. It also shows the power and dominance needed to accomplish the plans and projects that the people agreed upon for their benefits and advantages. On the one hand, it can destroy society if it is misused. Confusion, misunderstandings, and conflicts will arise without the proper usage and consideration of language.¹³

In another sense, society controls the language by providing bases and factors for what is acceptable and unacceptable, because every individual has their perception or point of view. A group of people may find one language adequate, but it could be seen as an offense or insult to others. Therefore, one must know the know-how, when, and where to say something, and for what purpose. Marciano even added that “social changes produce language changes. It affects values in ways that have not been accurately understood. Language incorporates social values. However, social values are only the same as linguistic values when the society is stable and unchanging. Once society starts changing, then language change produces special effects.”¹⁴

Language and Impoliteness

The consideration of proper language usage is now established because of its vital role in societal changes and every interpersonal relationship. Not considering the words can be classified as something negative or impoliteness. The term *impoliteness* will lead one into linguistic pragmatics. Although being impolite can be associated with different disciplines, it is still grounded in the branch of linguistics that deals with language usage in a context. This means that a particular language, according to its usage in a specific context, can be identified as taboo or having impolite meanings. Specifically, “it is at home in the subfield of sociopragmatics, which deals with local conditions of use.”¹⁵ As an example, the word *shit* might be considered acceptable if it is used with someone’s friends at a social occasion in which all of them understand its meaning. Indeed, this is not to deny that taboo or impolite meanings can be

13 Joshua A. Fishman, *Language and Nationalism: Two Integrative Essays* (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1972), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED080014>.

14 Ibid.

15 Geoffrey N. Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics* (London: Longman, 1983), <https://www.routledge.com/Principles-of-Pragmatics/Leech/p/book/9780582370246> (accessed November 1, 2025).

connected with any particular linguistic expression. This is why people can identify such expressions even out of context.¹⁶

So, much precisely, “linguistic impoliteness typically refers to language that is used to offend or is perceived to offend.”¹⁷ Culpeper added, “Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires, and beliefs about *social* organization, including, in particular, how others mediate one person’s or a group’s identities in interaction. Situated behaviors are viewed negatively – such as being ‘impolite’ □ when there is a conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be, and how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviors always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to offend.”¹⁸ This shows that it can be considered impolite if conflicts arise and emotional damage occurs to a particular person. One can see the tremendous impact of language in every human relationship or connection.

Censorship of Language

As stated, language can be used for impolite and unwanted behaviors. This is an undesirable characteristic one may possess. To address this issue, people could have a social agreement to prohibit the usage of terms and phrases that could create rifts among the relationships of individuals in a society. Here, one can see the idea of censorship.

“Censorship is the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is condemned as subversive of the common good.”¹⁹ Language censorship is synonymous with language prohibition. Word utterances that are prohibited at a particular moment, in defined or specifiably circumstances, are recognized to be forbidden language expressions. It is to condemn specific expressions for being destructive of the good of some specified, specifiable, or contextually identifiable group. Therefore, censoring such profane language and being blasphemous supposedly secures against moral harm that could be committed.

16 Jonathan Culpeper, “Taboo Language and Impoliteness,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Language*, ed. Keith Allan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

17 Ibid.

18 Jonathan Culpeper, *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23.

19 Keith Allan, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Language* (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-handbook-of-taboo-language-9780198813509> (accessed November 1, 2025).

But how can one identify that the word/s used is/are destructive or immoral? This now covers the ambiguity of language.

Ambiguity of the Uttered Words

Many philosophers and linguists consider the various things one can do with language usage. One theory given is the concept of Speech Acts. J.L. Austin, a British philosopher of language, introduced the Speech Act theory in 1975 in his well-known book, 'How to Do Things with Words.'²⁰ Austin, with his research, found that people use language to state things and "to do things."²¹

The speech act theory states that the production or issuance of words and symbols is a basic communication unit. "A theory of language is a theory of action," as Greig E. Henderson and Christopher Brown posited. Moreover, this theory emphasizes that the utterances have a different or specific meaning to the speaker and the receiver of the message, not just the meaning according to the language. The theory further stated the two kinds of utterances: constative and performative. Austin clearly explained the differences between constative and performative utterances.

The word "constative" came from the Latin word "constate," which means 'to be manifest or to be a fact.' Moreover, the term constative represents utterances that describe the situation, which may be either true or false. "In other words, constatives are utterances or prejudices in that they are used to describe or state something, and which thus are true or false."²² These words are often used today, mainly when language describes reality.

THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH AND THE BIRTH OF CURSE WORDS

Many curse words are used when one is full of emotion, particularly when angry. These words emphasize and color every word we utter daily, especially when expressing our feelings. Various scientists suggest that saying good curse words is beneficial and positive. It is because uttering these kinds of words in line with the emotion one does feel gives a particular boost of "strength and

20 "Speech Act Theory in Technical Communication," *Communicationtheory.org.*, <https://www.communicationtheory.org/speech-act-theory/> (accessed November 1, 2025).

21 Ibid.

22 S. Mace, "Text and Ontology," 2009, *Scribd*, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/883073/Text-and-Ontology?autodownload=pdf> (accessed November 1, 2025).

may also be a sign of someone's "verbal fluency, openness, and honesty."²³ Nevertheless, one must ask, where do all of these nasty or filthy words come from?

An article by John McWhorter talks about how the discovery of the things that claim to be offensive has changed and can be traced back to medieval times. Back when people were very concerned with the matter of God and valued so much religiosity, swearing or cursing in the name of God was such a huge and controversial topic. When religions' power suddenly declined, these matters soon became "the source of profanity, especially in matters related to sex and excrement — both functions that were once more public before moving behind closed doors with the rise of personal privacy."²⁴ Then, here comes the story of the English language that started with two old languages: Old English and Old French. These two languages were linked because of the event known as the Norman Conquest, the climax of a conflict over the succession to the English crown between Harold Godwinson and William, Duke of Normandy. With the conquest, England was divided into two groups that spoke the languages above. The peasants spoke Old English, the forefather of modern English and German. On the other hand, the nobles used Old French, a Gallo-Roman dialect that evolved from Latin and was spoken in northern France, the progenitor of contemporary French. This, now, gives background as to why most swear words in English have a similar sound to German ones, and that is because of the considered vulgarity of the word. Those popular curse words now have gained their offensive potency, at least in part, because of a long-standing cultural bias that taught people to view their conqueror's French language as cultured, high-class, and educated, while the Germanic language as unpleasant and insensitive.²⁵ As the world progresses, language has also changed and generated new kinds of words, even curse words. Below are some of the many curse words often used at this point.

23 "Where the Bleep Did That Curse Word Come From?" Dictionary.com, May 21, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/s/bleep-curse-word-come/#the-f-word>.

24 Reed Tucker, "Origins of the Naughtiest Swear Words in the English Language," *New York Post*, April 24, 2021, <https://nypost.com/article/origins-of-the-naughtiest-swear-words-in-the-english-language/>.

25 Adrastos Omissi, "Swear Words, Etymology, and the History of English," *Oxford University Press Blog*, July 11, 2015, <https://blog.oup.com/2015/07/english-swear-words-etymology/>.

The “Fuck” Word

The “fuck” word is probably the most common profane word used in the English language. This word was not recorded until the 1500s because profane words were not recorded and were historically inscribed down. This is often used as an alternative word for sex or the actual and physical fucking. But unlike the idea of today that this term means sex, this word is traditionally believed to have come from its ancient root, the Middle Dutch word “fokken, token, or pukka,” which means “to strike.”²⁶ This idea came from the possibility when the Vikings invaded England in 787. A now-obsolete Norwegian form such as *fukka* plausibly stands as an ancestor of the modern four-letter term, since the phonetic and semantic fit is straightforward rather than fanciful.²⁷ With regards to the concept of hitting or striking, various earliest instances of fuck then, such as Simon Fuckebotere (recorded in 1290), who was disappointingly probably in the milk industry, hitting butter rather than doing anything else with it, or Henry Fuckebeggar (1286/7) who may have, unfortunately, hit the poor.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that the Fword may have deeper Old English roots that simply left no written trace because people avoided recording obscene language. As John McWhorter observes, “One of the hardest things about tracing curse words is people aren’t going to write them down,” and after the 1500s, the term is rarely printed despite clear evidence of vigorous oral use. The earliest unambiguous printed instance often cited is a 1528 marginal note in a monk’s copy of Cicero’s *De Officiis*, which refers dismissively to an “fkin’ Abbott,” a usage McWhorter reads as analogous to modern dismissive modifiers such as “fkin’ taxes.”²⁸ This fits the broader pattern: taboo terms frequently prosper in speech long before they appear in print. Over time, the Fword expanded its functions, becoming usable as a noun, verb, interjection, and intensifier. Its pragmatic force derives less from fixed lexical meaning than from its flexible role in signaling intensity, contempt, solidarity, or shock depending on context.

26 Kate Wiles, “Swearing: The Fascinating History of Our Favorite Four-Letter Words.” *New Republic*, February 23, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/116713/swear-word-history-where-your-favorite-curses-came>.

27 Ibid.

28 John McWhorter, *Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter — Then, Now, and Forever* (New York: Basic Books, 2012). <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/624619/nine-nasty-words-by-john-mcwhorter/>.

The “Shit” Word

Like the Fword, “shit” has deep Germanic roots and began as a plain word for defecation. Old Norse forms, such as *skit*, and Old English terms show that it was originally a neutral, bodily term. Over centuries the word shifted into figurative use: by the late Middle Ages and the early modern period it appears in forms like *shiten* for the verb “to defecate,” and people began to use it as an insult for contemptible persons. From there it multiplied into many uses—literal waste, a dismissive label, an expression of anger or surprise, and an intensifier in everyday speech.²⁹

Some sources claim the word was used much earlier: by 1508, it could mean an “obnoxious person,” and by the late 1800s, it was applied to anything regarded as “worthless.” Even nineteenth-century figures like the courtesan Cora Pearl used it this way, writing of “the government” as “a load of shit.”³⁰ Today, its force depends largely on context and audience: among intimates, it can sound casual or humorous, while in formal settings, it is likely to offend. This history shows how a once-ordinary bodily word acquired strong social and moral weight through changing speech practices.

The “Damn” Word

Researchers say that this curse word came from the Old French “*dam(p)ner*” and the Latin term “*dam(p)nare*,” which means “to inflict loss on,” and from “*damnum*,” which means “loss, damage.”³¹ According to some research, the word “damn” has been evolving at least since 1300. This word is insulting to say for the reason that this is a word that wishes to inflict some to undergo tremendous suffering, pain, and agony for the rest of eternity.³² Many people consider this curse word doubly offensive. It is because sometimes the word used is “Goddamn.” It contains *damn*, which asks for someone’s condemnation, and the word “God,” which is seen to be a sin for its blasphemy by taking the name of God in vain. That double offensiveness hasn’t stopped many folks from

29 “Where the Bleep Did That Curse Word Come from?” Dictionary.com, May 21, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/s/bleep-curse-word-come/#shitsome> sources claim.

30 Natasha Ishak, “From Victorian Commoner to Royal French Courtesan: The Luxurious Life of Cora Pearl,” *All That’s Interesting*, May 28, 2021, May 28, 2021. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/cora-pearl>.

31 Taylor Dennis, “The Etymology of the Top 7 Curse Words.” *Scribendi*, accessed March 23, 2022, https://www.scribendi.com/academy/articles/etymology_of_curse_words.en.html.

32 Ibid.

using it since at least the 1400s, when the term was first recorded.³³ Moreover, the word “Damn” appeared in spoken and written language much earlier than its equivalent “dang”. Dang was first used around 1780.³⁴

PHILOSOPHY ON PROFANE LANGUAGE

Language and Philosophy have always been connected. Dialogue is vital in philosophizing, especially when explaining and teaching philosophical concepts. Philosophy would always have something to say about the world, especially since it is too obvious to see the connections between language and the world. In this pursuit, language is used as a medium to explain the environment, nature, and world. Naturally, language is utilized to describe the world and is a type of representation. For example, the word ‘ball’ can embody a particular playing material, and the sentence ‘The ball is out of air’ can represent the truth that the ball in question has no air.³⁵

Moreover, for numerous years, philosophers and thinkers have turned to the concept of the mind and eventually formulated the idea of the “language-mind relationship,” which discusses the ambiguous yet numerous arguments that support the connection between language and mentality. Human beings use language as the medium of expression, feeling or emotion, and thoughts. Subsequently, the factors in people’s perception are vital because they influence the capability of expressing something in words.

Traditionally, philosophers have seen the mind as having priority over language insofar as the very meanings of words have been seen as derivative of speakers’ thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and/or intentions. This is also the case with the speaking of curses or swear words.

Hermeneutics in Swearing Among the Texts and Posts

Since words can be written or spoken, it is possible that a hermeneutical analysis can be done in this matter. It is because these profane words are also used to communicate. Understanding the texts and interpreting information

33 “Where the Bleep Did that Curse Word Come from?”

34 Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the Englishspeaking World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315706412/encyclopedia-swearing-geoffrey-hughes>.

35 Steven Geisz, “What’s New in... Philosophy of Language,” *Philosophy Now*, 2001, https://philosophynow.org/issues/33/Whats_New_in_Philosophy_of_Language.

from words and sentences are the aims of hermeneutics. This becomes possible by having a hermeneutical approach because these kinds of words are usually uttered. They can be found in texts, especially with the widespread usage of social media.

With the advent of technology, this instance also gave birth to the world of the internet. Another world was found within the internet: the realm of social media. Social media platforms have become widespread because of gadgets such as cell phones and computers; all people have one of these things or even both. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the platforms that people often use and hear about. Communication has become easy and accessible to all because of these. Bonds, relationships, and the strengthening of ties have been built and have happened thanks to these platforms. However, the prevalent usage also sprouted conflicts, violence, disputes, and misunderstandings. One of the starting factors is when a specific post is created that includes profanities and vulgar words. With the context that it is a “social” platform, there will probably be a lot of mixed reactions toward this. Others will probably become furious, and a riot will happen online, eventually affecting the truest societal relations. There are instances in which the creator or author of the post did not mean any harm or offend someone, but because of the immediate biases, problems, and misconceptions arise.

The spoken word, the written word, and social media platforms are the most common ways of communication. In communicating, we presume the involvement of the sender and the receiver. “As persons, what is expressed necessarily needs to be interpreted.”³⁶ One way to solve the clash of individuals caused by misinterpretation is to analyze the text critically, especially the one that contains profanity, which raises the degree. One must consider many things when conducting a hermeneutical analysis to interpret and extract the message. Calano would say that there are three things involved: “the author, the text, and the reader.”³⁷ Three types of analysis must correspond to the three factors: “An author-centered analysis looks for the world behind the text, a text-centered analysis looks for the world within the text, and a reader-centered analysis looks for the world in front of the text”³⁸

First is the author-centered consideration. In interpreting a particular text, it is crucial to think about the author. A confident statement in a text or post has a specific author or creator, even if it is not written. It is impossible that it

36 Mark Anthony Calano, *Interpreting a Social Media Post: What We Can Learn from Hermeneutics* (Ateneo de Manila University), 1.

37 Mark Anthony Calano, *Interpreting a Social Media Post*, 2.

38 Ibid.

just popped out of nothing. Thus, valuing the author means acknowledging the intention and message he wants to impart. The message of the author or speaker undoubtedly has a context. Various factors indeed influenced the speaker's decision to speak or write. The message's audience certainly wants to know the very reason and the things in his mind, or, in other words, "the conscious intention" of the speaker.³⁹ His situation's issues, problems, and context hint at why the reason has been articulated, especially when speaking curse words. Calano echoes that the audience must have realized this by saying, "What did the writer(speaker)—consciously or unconsciously—have in mind? It will never be settled. All possible answers will always remain tentative and incomplete." So, if one now recognizes the speaker who cursed, he will never know the intention of why the speaker expressed that.

On the other hand, after the speaker utters or posts the words, the interpretation is now based on the audience or receiver of the words. This gives equal importance not just to the speaker but also to the receiver. It is because there must be a particular person or group of persons being addressed; if there is none, then there is no communication at all. The receiver is the one who would resurrect and give life to it through his interpretation.

At this level, considerations must be like those in author-centered analysis. The author or speaker must be open to the reality that after he posts or speaks the curse, he no longer controls its meaning. However, his intention is just a joke; the receiver could interpret it otherwise or vice versa because they can never express everything perfectly and in totality. There is always a "gap" in this so-called message delivery process. It is more problematic when the speaker is a stranger to the receiver or audience, and the swearing happens. This is something to reconsider because neither of them knows the other's context. In connection, David Maclean stated, "If you say to someone, 'go fuck yourself,' I'm not telling them to go and do that, but the recipient understands the meaning and fills in the gaps."⁴⁰ So, there is an underlying message coming from the author himself.

Moreover, one eventually sees another reality, the receiver, or the hearer, who happens to bring his world into the world through his interpretation. Dr. Calano uttered, "Readers bring their world to the text, their various life experiences, their presuppositions, their ideologies, their interests, their

39 Calano, *Interpreting a Social Media Post*, 5.

40 David McLean, "On Swearing and Philosophy: An Interview with Rebecca Roache," *Institute of Art and Ideas (IAI)*, May 21, 2017, <https://iai.tv/articles/on-swearing-and-philosophy-an-interview-with-rebecca-roache-auid-832>.

competencies, and the methods they use.”⁴¹ These factors within the reader's world influence him greatly in interpreting the word. Dr. Calano added, “Reading is dynamic, open-ended, always open to change, correction, or enrichment because the reader changes. People often say that they search for the objective meaning of a text, but reading is always subjective. We all read through our glasses.” He sounds so much like a person who sees that eisegesis has always been the process of interpretation used by everyone or the majority. All our presuppositions and biases affect the way we understand things. Hence, it is also a huge possibility that our context may affect our understanding of a specific curse word. This is why the interpretation of the text by various readers will have different results. There will always be differences in meaning by other people, places, and times. For example, a particular person utters the word “fuck” while a confident person happens to be passing. In the context of the speaker, he has said that to express and communicate the beauty he sees, especially in that place, that word is often used to exaggerate a particular thing. On the other hand, the hearer or the receiver of the word, thinking that the curse word is immoral and not appropriate, may feel that it is a rude sentiment to give. This could result in a conflict in which there is a gap between the two, and the words have different meanings.

Lastly, there is the text itself. “A text is a world of its own.” Some texts may even become independent of the prevailing historical, social, economic, and political conditions. Their value and significance go beyond the condition of changing factors. The author's limited, constrained, finite world is replaced by the text's unbounded, unfettered, endless reality. The relations and structures, which are firmly held together and have been unified with a specific system, are considered a text. It takes the text as it is now, in its final form.⁴² This is why, regardless of whether the texts or words are read or heard by people with the author's knowledge, it is possible to accumulate meanings from them and somehow understand them, though there are differences in cultures and different periods in time.

As an example, when a politician swears in a speech, listeners may interpret the curse as passion, provocation, or carelessness depending on the speaker's intent, the sentence's tone, and the audience's expectations. On social media, the same expletive can be read as friendly banter among followers who share a background, but as aggression to outsiders who lack that context. In a one-on-one conversation, a friend's offhand curse can signal closeness, while

41 Mark Anthony Calano, *Interpreting a Social Media Post: What We Can Learn from Hermeneutics* (Ateneo de Manila University, 9.

42 Ibid.

the identical word from a stranger may offend. Hermeneutics, therefore, reveals that understanding profanity depends on interpreting intentions and situations, not on the word alone.

Speech Act Theory

In the speech act theory, Austin famously distinguished between the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act is an act of making a meaningful utterance. An illocutionary act is an action performed in making an utterance. The perlocutionary act brings about specific effects on the hearer or hearers. The prevailing thought about slurs is that they are terms whose purpose is to derogate their target. Debates in the philosophical and linguistic literature primarily concern the locutionary content of these expressions. If, for instance, the literal content of a slur is derogatory, then an explanation of its apparent non-derogatory use must include an account of what happens to that derogatory content.

Consider the utterance “I am very thirsty.” The locutionary act is the simple act of saying a meaningful sentence with a determinate sense and reference—the speaker uses “I,” utters the predicate “am very thirsty,” and thereby states a condition. The illocutionary act is what the speaker does in saying it: depending on context, the sentence can function as a complaint, an expression of need, or an indirect request (the conventional force the speaker intends, e.g., “Please give me some water.”) The perlocutionary act names the actual effects the utterance produces on hearers: perhaps John fetches a glass of water, or another listener offers to turn on a water cooler, or someone ignores the remark; these consequences depend on the setting, relationship between speakers, and how the utterance is taken.⁴³ Another example, a coworker who snaps “That’s fucking ridiculous” performs an illocutionary act of complaint and evaluation; the perlocutionary effects can include persuading colleagues to take the complaint seriously, provoking defensive reactions from the targeted person, or signaling solidarity to others who share the speaker’s frustration. Likewise, a comedian who drops the Fword in a routine performs an illocutionary act of emphatic humor or boundarypushing; the perlocutionary outcomes may be laughter and increased rapport with an audience attuned to edginess, or offense and audience withdrawal if listeners find the use gratuitous. These cases

43 Radhika Mamidi, *Introduction to Linguistics*, Slidetodoc.com, accessed 29 March 2022, <https://slidetodoc.com/lecture-3-introduction-to-linguistics-3-radhika-mamidi/>.

show that identical lexical items can do different things in the world depending on speaker intention, audience expectations, and the surrounding context.⁴⁴

Relationships and intimacy with other people affect how we understand the usage of profane language. For instance, the statement, “It’s so fucking hot!” was spoken by a student when he entered the classroom, where the electric fans were turned off, and found himself with one classmate. The locutionary act will say that this statement implies the speaker’s dissatisfaction because of the temperature. This dissatisfaction made him act, particularly to speak and exclaim, followed by curse words to give degree and overemphasize his feeling right now. At the same time, the illocutionary act would say that he exaggeratedly used this statement, which has an underlying meaning that tells an order. It is an order of the speaker, the student, to ask his classmate if he could turn on the electric fans in the classroom to lessen the heat. Lastly, the perlocutionary act would posit that if the hearer, the classmate, made him understand the underlying meaning of the statement by turning on the electric fans inside the classroom, then the communication is successful. It is because the statement caused a specific effect on the hearer.

These speech acts can be used and considered a tool to assimilate the intended meaning of swearing or curse words used by a particular person. In this way, considering this theory could decrease or prevent conflicts and problems in each situation involving the practice of profane language.

Ludwig Wittgenstein on Profane and Abusive Language

Ludwig Wittgenstein became popular for his contributions to philosophy, particularly in the field of language. His work “*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*” presented his concept of language, which is picture reality, known as the picture theory of language. The notion of disrespect here, however, complicates the picture theory of meaning. First, there needs to be some clarification of what object corresponds to disrespect. Indeed, there are actions claimed as disrespectful. The action says it is disrespectful, but there is a wide range of disrespectful things.⁴⁵ In some countries, it might show someone the soles of your feet; in others, it can be biting your thumb. What constitutes a disrespectful action varies mainly from place to place.⁴⁶ The essentialist might say that the

44 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Speech Acts,” accessed November 1, 2025. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/speech-acts/>.

45 “Gesture,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed November 1, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gesture> (accessed November 1, 2025).

46 “10 Gestures You Should Never Do Around the World,” *WorldAtlas*, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/10-gestures-you-should-never-do-around-the-world.html>.

essence of these acts is that they express a low opinion of the person they target. The essentialist account, however, dodges the question because it is a certain kind of action that is disrespectful.⁴⁷ Disrespectfulness cannot pick out an action and make that action disrespectful everywhere. It can ignore the fact that a few actions are disrespectful to everyone. Showing the soles of your feet or biting your thumb do not picture a point, but they are symbolic acts that have meaning in a given context. They require context to capture their more performative meaning. The language Wittgenstein constructed here, the essentialist language, can only do one thing, which makes it difficult to account for an insult.⁴⁸

After some time, there had been a change in his belief, and he claimed that the meaning of words derives from their usage instead of the idea that words correspond to the physical world. According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of our linguistic utterances, and by extension, the various meaningful practices that make up our various modes of being, are context-dependent; the meaning of an utterance is how it is used in a specific meaningful context or practice.⁴⁹

With his introduction to the idea that a word depends on its usage, or the meaning of the word is based on its usage, the language games theory has come into play. For him, language has innumerable uses in this world. Language is not just used to make empirical claims or describe the material universe. The use of language also comes in the form of showing emotion, expressing frustration, and more. The different uses of the word above show a representation of how language games work. Expressing emotion is a language game distinct from describing a physical object. What makes this problematic and sometimes tricky is that they use the exact words. Wittgenstein is now convinced that the problems of philosophy were brought about by people and not because of the understanding of the language game.

Wittgenstein's languagegames cast profanity as rulegoverned moves within specific social activities, so each case study involves distinct games with

47 Maja Malec, "Essentialism Contextualized," *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2009): 201–17, PhilPapers, <https://philpapers.org/rec/MALEEC> (accessed November 1, 2025).

48 Alexander S. Coppins, "Wittgenstein and the Problem of Abusive Language," *Philosophy Honors Projects*, Paper 9 (2015), http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil_honors/9.

49 Zachary Fruhling, "The Philosophy of Cursing: Heidegger and Wittgenstein on Being-in-the-World and the Language Game of Cursing," *Zachary Fruhling* (blog), September 10, [year unknown], <https://www.zacharyfruhling.com/philosophy-blog/the-philosophy-of-cursing-heidegger-and-wittgenstein-on-being-in-the-world-and-the-language-game-of-cursing>.

their own permissible moves, goals, and expectations.⁵⁰ In political speech, the relevant game prizes rhetorical impact and media visibility, making a curse a strategic move to signal authenticity or to provoke opponents; in this arena the norm permits transgressive language as a form of contest. On social media, the game is fragmented into overlapping subgames, such as in ingroup mockery, performative outrage, and viral attentionseeking, so the same expletive can count as solidarity in one subgame, as harassment in another, or as clickbait in a third. In everyday interpersonal settings, the game often prioritizes relational trust and mutual recognition, so an offhand curse among a circle of friends functions as a closenessbuilding move, while the identical utterance from a stranger violates the local rule set and produces offense. Conflicts across these games explain why identical words provoke different moral responses: misalignment of norms between speaker and audience turns a permitted move in one game into a rule breach in another, and effective interpretation requires locating which languagegame governs the interaction. This makes Wittgenstein convinced that an utterance's meaning is context-dependent.⁵¹ An ordinary worker may somehow find cursing as usual and maybe part of life, but for conservative religious and moral views, cursing may be seen as not. So, it goes to show that both are considered part of language games, but what makes them distinct is their usage in very different contexts.

Moral Issue of Profanity

For various people, cursing or swearing has been seen as a disgrace, offensive, and immoral. How? It is because they claim the words' inappropriateness and impoliteness, mainly if they are used in a place where their context is morally upright. However, what are the concrete standards by which we can claim that using profanities is immoral? This has been a controversial topic of debate among several thinkers for a long time.

One could even think that if all people curse, are there people who do not curse? It is so hard to understand that if someone happens to experience a very peculiar and shocking instance, one surely yells and says a swear word, like the rest of all people. Even the people who strive vigorously to be innocent and pious still have an emotion of anger, become irritated, and turn out to say profane words. However, this seemingly part of human nature has made some individuals, such as coercive moralists and coercive authoritarians, sickened, infuriated, and offended, using curse words. They considered it a critical topic

50 "Wittgenstein, Ludwig," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified October 22, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/>.

51 Ibid.

that blocks a person's morale. Some countries do have a clear understanding of this matter and act on it. Many jurisdictions criminalize public use of obscene or offensive language; a clear example is Singapore, where the Penal Code outlaws "obscene acts" and the public utterance of "obscene" words that cause annoyance or outrage, and where more recent statutes (notably the Protection from Harassment Act) have been used to prosecute and deter abusive or offensive communications in public and online, so that deliberately profane or threatening speech can result in fines, corrective orders, or even imprisonment depending on the severity and context.⁵²

Coercive moralists and authoritarians assert that any public or interpersonal occurrence of profanity is to be considered abusive, antagonistic, or hate-expressing. They use profanity to say they are deeply offended and disgusted by its use. These people strongly resist and disagree with profane language, even when the user of profanity does intend abuse, antagonism, or the expression of hatred.

On the one hand, most people who disagree with profane language would probably admit that those words do not pose a serious threat to someone's life. It is only seen as something unpleasant to hear and very vulgar. It is because a well-mannered person, in the back of their mind, would not do that. So, the underlying point for others, which is sometimes missed, is that although profane words can be used sometimes to bring harm using violating the respect for "human dignity and the associated coercive oppression that goes along with such violations (e.g., physical violence, or threats of physical violence, "up against the wall, motherfucker!" the sticks, stones, or bullets that break your bones) more generally, merely being deeply disgusted, angered, or offended by profane words simply isn't harm in this robust moral and political sense."⁵³ This is harmful when one is pushed to act because of the hurt he felt from those words. So, what makes the words profane and immoral? Benjamin K. Bergen claims that culture makes a word evil or sinful. He classified it as the *Profanity paradox*. He specified that Profanity paradox, "is that it's that very act of suppression of the language that creates those same taboos for the next generation."⁵⁴ The profanity paradox captures a persistent clash between social disapproval of swearing and the tangible benefits swear words can produce in real situations:

52 Singapore, *Penal Code* (Chapter 224), §294, "Obscene acts and songs," *Singapore Statutes Online*, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?ProvIds=pr294-> (accessed November 1, 2025).

53 Ibid.

54 Kristin Wong, "The Case for Cursing." *The New York Times*, last modified 27 July 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/27/smarter-living/the-case-for-cursing.html>.

beyond marking deviance, swearwords increase emotion, crystallize rhetorical points, foster ingroup solidarity, and sometimes provide immediate pain relief or stress release. In practice, this means policy and moral judgments entail tradeoffs, for instance, a hospital that tolerates a patient's expletive during acute pain may promote rapid emotional release and slightly higher pain tolerance, while a workplace that bans all coarse language might reduce offense but also suppress candid feedback and informal bonding that facilitate teamwork. In public discourse, a politician's wellplaced curse can cut through sterile rhetoric to signal authenticity to supporters while alienating undecided voters, and on social media, a shared profanity among subgroup members can strengthen group identity even as the same word functions as harassment when used across group boundaries.⁵⁵ It seems like a social contract or agreement in which a word becomes immoral and indecent. This is true because a word's meaning depends on the individuals who use it in their context, situation, or experience.

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, it has been obvious that every language has undergone a humongous transformation. Each language has contributed a lot to the establishment of every community and society. In its transformation, there were positive and negative effects. One of the results of the evolution of language is the existence of what we call profane language. This category includes all offensive, curse, or swear words used to insult human beings.

Profane language has been, for a long time, considered to be taboo. The very reason for this is the hearer's interpretation of the word. From time to time, every curse word develops, and so does the intensity of its offensiveness. Notice how the beginning of those words happens to be not aggressive and inappropriate at that time. The hearers and the audience are why they have become taboo and have been seen like this until now. This is the very prejudice of the people about the existence of these languages. These words are being categorized as such because they treat them as such. So, if the power of its being insulting came only from human beings, are there any other reasons how they gain influence and a lousy reputation?

Looking at them through the lenses of philosophy, there will be different reactions and interpretations. Hermeneutics, one of the branches of philosophy and a contemporary pursuit of truth, would say that examining these words should consider various factors such as the speaker, hearer/receiver, and

⁵⁵ Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2007), <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/299279/the-stuff-of-thought-by-steven-pinker/>.

the text itself. Its analysis would recognize not the word itself but its context. Moreover, another prominent theory of the philosophy of language is the speech act theory. In this category, communication is seen as an essential aspect. The user or the speaker of the word may have something different in his mind, far beyond the existing prejudgment about the words. It is essential to uncover the underlying message here. However, there are still moral arguments regarding this. Some highly conservative moralists do prohibit this, while others do not. To solve this, the famous language game theory of Ludwig Wittgenstein can be used as a tool. Every word differs in its usage, specifically by an actor or speaker.

Together, the three lenses give a clearer, more practical understanding of profanity and of language itself by shifting focus from isolated words to the practices that give them force: hermeneutics trains us to recover speaker intention and the textual cues listeners use to interpret swearing; speechact theory shows how expletives accomplish actions—expressing anger, creating solidarity, or inflicting insult—and how those actions produce downstream effects; and Wittgenstein’s languagegames locate each use within rulebound social activities so that identical words can legitimately function in one setting and breach norms in another. Applied to real cases, this combined framework explains why a patient’s curse in an emergency room can be therapeutic rather than offensive, why a standup comedian’s profanity may build rapport with a target audience but alienate others, and why the same tweet can be read as ingroup banter by followers and as harassment by outsiders. Far from treating profanity as merely vulgar vocabulary, the lenses reveal it as a site where semantics, social norms, speaker intentions, and audience interpretations intersect; that intersection teaches us both how language performs social life and how policy or ethical judgments about words should be sensitive to context, intention, and likely effects rather than to lexical form alone.

With all this diverse information, the issue of profanity is indeed such a rich topic. Until now, it continues to evolve and transform, adding more details and related matters. The influence of language in the context of profane language is seen and observed. So, philosophical analysis must be applied and executed in this matter. See how its authority continues to progress because of its relevance and how it relates to every human experience. This is why one needs to be cautious of the words uttered out of one’s mouth. Regardless of all the philosophical concepts and contexts related to it, one can still say that words, being part of man’s system, do contain power. How? Humanity and experiences are involved in this matter, directly or indirectly. It is a power that serves as a medium that every individual possesses within their identity. A medium that can communicate, express, create, destroy, and even subject a person to a particular action. Learning from Coleman Young’s words: “Swearing is an art form. You can

express yourself much more exactly, much more succinctly, with properly used curse words.”

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