



Episode #23

PROFANITY- Talking Taboo

*with linguistics professor
Darin Flynn*

EXPLICIT version:

<https://talkabouttalk.com/23s2-explicit-profanity-talking-taboo-with-linguistics-professor-darin-flynn>

CLEAN version:

<https://talkabouttalk.com/23s2-clean-profanity-talking-taboo-with-linguistics-professor-darin-flynn>

SHOWNOTES

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Key Learnings

Myths About Swearing

People have a lot of misconceptions about swearing. For example:

1. People swear because they don't have a large vocabulary. In fact, as Darin says, “People that have the most swears also have the most vocabulary and they are more highly verbal.”
2. People who use profanity are cursing – they are cursing God, invoking the devil. Also not true.

Swearing & Personalities

Of course there are exceptions, but research shows that **sweariness** (I LOVE that word) is correlated with extroversion, with riskiness, with dominance, with being disagreeable and non-conformity. So people who swear might be extroverted, risk-seeking, dominant, disagree-able non-conformists.

Swearing is Risky

Darin mentioned that swearing can be risky. Swearing can break the ice. Make people relax a bit. But it can also be risky. It's like using metaphors or similes or hyperbole. It is expressive but risky.

The Worst Swears

I think this is my favourite point from the whole interview. Darin mentioned a few times that these days, **the most profane, the most offensive words in the English language are the ones that are derogatory to minorities.** In fact, those are the profanities that Darin himself refuses to say. Think about that for a moment. Isn't that just wonderful? We now live in a society where the worst possible things you can say, the most profane expressions, are derogatory towards minorities? I love that. It makes me feel optimistic.

References & Links

Professor Darin Flynn

- University of Calgary faculty page - <https://www.ucalgary.ca/dflynn/>
- “Shift Happens” interview - <https://ucalgary.ca/dflynn/swearing>
- “White people should never rap the n-word: A linguist breaks it down” - <https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmn/white-people-should-never-rap-the-n-word-a-linguist-breaks-it-down>
- “What the &*\$%?: What qualifies as a “bad” word nowadays?” - <http://www.calgaryherald.com/swerve/features/What+What+qualifies+word+nowadays/8873621/story.html>

Profanity Resources & References

Books:

- “What the F” by Benjamin Bergen - <https://amzn.to/2LLwc9T>
- “The Stuff of Thought” by Steven Pinker - <https://amzn.to/2JtBCF9>
- “Why We Curse” by Timothy Jay - <https://amzn.to/2LOtm3S>
- “Cursing in America” by Timothy Jay - <https://amzn.to/2XEdWSb>

Articles & other:

- Youtube video of two guys giving each other the finger - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOJ0HpVvAFE>
- George Carlin’s 7 Words you can’t say on TV - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbZhp3sQxQ>
- “Strong Language” blog - <https://stronglang.wordpress.com/>
- Jonathan Haidt TEDTalk– Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives (reactions to statue of David) - https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind
- Steven Pinker - <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/27/smarter-living/the-case-for-cursing.html>
- Linguist Taylor Jones - <https://www.languagejones.com/recent-work>
- John McWhorter on Anti-racism as the new religion - <https://www.thedailybeast.com/antiracism-our-flawed-new-religion>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGJbrLs_8_0
- Iain McGilchrist interviews - <http://iainmcgilchrist.com/videos/>

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Dr. Andrea's Commentary

Welcome to Talk About Talk! I am Dr. Andrea Wojnicki. Please call me Andrea. Today, we are talking about taboo language. Yes – **PROFANITY**. Before I get going, you need to know, **there are two versions of this podcast available one is Explicit, and one is Clean** and family friendly.

FYI - These shownotes are clean – the swear words are bleeped out. 🙄 🙄 🙄

If possible, I recommend that you **listen** to the explicit version. Of course, if these words personally offend you or if there are young ears around, you should probably listen to the CLEAN version. Otherwise, there are two main reasons why I recommend the explicit version:

1. Our guest expert, Professor Darin Flynn, is not at all gratuitous with the profanity. And in fact there are some words that he refuses to say, as you will hear.
2. It'll be much easier to follow along if you listen to the explicit version, since you will hear what words we are talking about.

Given the controversial or taboo nature of profanity, I was a bit nervous about this interview. A few months ago when I told people that I was doing an episode, I got some very strong responses. I heard, “oh no. Well, you’ll have to bleep out the swears, right?” and I heard, “awesome! Can’t wait to hear it!”

I told our guest expert, Professor Darin Flynn, about these varied reactions and he told me that there are certain **personality types** that are more accepting of profanity. By the end of this podcast, you will learn about these personality types, the type of people who are more or less likely to swear. You will also learn **types of swear words**, how they **evolve over time**, the **myths** associated with profanity, and lots more.

I was a bit nervous about this episode. But after interviewing Professor Darin Flynn, my nervousness shifted to excitement. I couldn’t wait to get this episode released Darin is easy-going, undeniably friendly, and extremely knowledgeable about profanity, and language in general.

I’m going to introduce **Professor Darin Flynn** to you now, then get right in to the interview. As always, I will sum up with key learnings. These key learnings, along with references and the full cleaned-up transcript are available on the Talk About Talk website. OK – here goes:

“**Darin Flynn** is Associate Professor and Chair of Linguistics at the University of Calgary. His areas of interest and expertise include phonology (that is, how the mind organizes speech sounds into utterances), Indigenous languages, rap music, and—most relevant for today’s podcast—taboo language.”


When Darin and I first connected, I told Darin how I did my undergraduate degree in marketing at the University of Calgary, where he now teaches. He immediately went in to the connection between marketing and swearing:

Interview Transcript

Professor Darin Flynn: There is a connection between swearing and in marketing. Sometimes it's just about getting a bit of an edge and swearing can give you that. But people will just stand on the edge of something and get away with it. The most striking example is probably The French Connection UK, which was such a successful campaign.

Dr. Andrea Wojnicki: So, recently my 10 year old daughter saw someone wearing a shirt. It said FC UK, and she's did a double take. And then she looked at me and her eyes went bug-eyed. I told her exactly what you just said, it's a marketing ploy. It actually stands for French Connection, United Kingdom, Baba and she was like, *Oh my gosh, why would you wear that?* I said, *you just looked at her, again with bug eyes. That's why she's wearing it. That's why it exists.* It really works. Yeah.

AW: I started by asking Professor Darin Flynn whether I should call him Professor Flynn or Darin. His response set the tone for the rest of the conversation.

DF: Darin’s fine, please. The whole point of swear words is it, it just creates an informal aura. So it creates a strange disconnect between *Professor Flynn* and then saying  and it's just - It's like you're giving yourself an epileptic seizure by kind of going back and forth between the two. They are such two different modes that even my brain would have a hard time moving back and forth.

AW: That could be your brand though. You're that guy!

DF: Yeah, I just prefer Darin, if you don't mind.

AW: I don't mind at all. Thank you very much, Darin, for joining us here today. I thought it would be best perhaps to start with a more, I guess, technical question. So is there a certain sound that makes a word more likely to stay in our vernacular as a swear word?

DF: Yeah, it's something short and cut off. A swear word has the effect of making people go “huh!” and that's pretty much what defines a swear word. And that feeling usually starts in childhood when you're talking about something taboo and then somebody will cut you off or you

realize it yourself and you cut yourself off. They tend to be really short words that are cut off. You don't want to kind of drag on if you have a long word. So, especially in English with essentially anything, if there's like two or three or more syllables. That's something that's a fancy fancy word. Whereas, a nice little one syllable word is a good short, informal word and it doesn't carry on. And it's also been found – in some research by [Ben Bergen who wrote this lovely book called *What the F?*](#) And he's a cognitive scientist in California who noticed that largely English words, even one syllable words would have an equal chance of ending with a sound that we call these words something sonorant. So that includes words that sound like vowels, but also sonorous consonants are things like L-M-N , they're a bit softer.

AW: Okay.

DF: At the other extreme are harsh cut off sounds, which we call stops. PTK are the best examples but also BDG. And so there's a 50-50 chance of ending in one of those at the ends of words in general. But in swear words, the cut off forms are much more common. So like, 😞, 😞 you know, things that end with K. They're cut off really quickly.

AW: That makes sense. And actually, your face lit up like this, I was thinking the word *shock*, right? It's just shock. 😞 . They're shocking works.

DF: That's right. So there is some truth to *the four letter word* in that, it tends to be words that begin with a consonant and then end with a consonant. And it just so happens with English writing that we often will write, you know, with CK or P or something. You can actually make a word, more vulgar sounding, if you shorten it. So they are, you know, words like *Hispanic*. If you say SPIC, you know, and I'm sorry for the slur, but that means it's an offensive word for Hispanic people, right? And then Bergen was told by one by students recently for people that have Asperger's. They'll call them SPERG. Just the end. Ending with a consonant, but also just one syllable. And this is really quite common. So you'll find one of the most offensive words nowadays is the word *retard*. The most offensive words nowadays are the slurs, and so this is worse by you when you say TARD.

AW: Oh, wow. So it's a doubly offensive term?

DF: Yeah, It is culturally determined. So it's in a cultural context, you, you say, the word 😞 or whatever, even as a little kid without in a context where you wouldn't even have heard that word. But the adults around you will go like that (!). And then once they've done that, you realize that effect and then maybe you'll even be told off. And in traumatic cases, you'll have people you know, get their mouths washed out with soap.

AW: It's amazing when I tell people about this episode that I'm doing - how this is getting into the topic of taboo, but how some people are like, *really?*... and some people are like, *awesome!!!*

DF: Yeah, yeah. Well, those people that go one way or another, it aligns with different personality types that some people are. Some people are likely to say *awesome!* Some people are like to go hmm. You might have heard of [Jonathan Haidt? He had a really popular TED talk a few years ago, where he's showing, the sculpture of David](#), I think it is, to two people. One will just be just transfixed by the beauty. Just like *awesome gorgeous*. The other person will be kind of uncomfortable with the nudity. And so he was just pointing out that you could tell me on the spot a whole lot about those two people and so like one...

AW: Wow!

DF: Yeah. One was more likely to vote for George Bush and he had a sense of who was more conservative. And this is important because a lot of these personality traits are set in advance. People tend to be born with these predispositions. So then you also have people reacting one way or another to swear words. It tells you a lot about them.

AW: Back to the technical part of cursing, can swear words be categorized?

DF: So there are the ones that are rooted in taboo topics. Often they don't really make sense for a kid. They might have an innate sense of things that are filthy, like poop or pee or something, but it's all the way people react to - all the sense of disgust. You tend to associate certain areas with that gut reaction and it's negative.

AW: So there's filth, there's sex, there's religion and deity, right?

DF: That's right. So they have some commonalities. There's some sense of taboo. We'll have filth, sex or things that should be kind of indoors know, close-in, in private. A lot of people feel that way about, well, pretty much any kind of body function. But a lot of it is related to the outdoors. There is a sense of a boundary. A really good analogy in our American context is this concept of the wall. Building the wall. Some people that want the wall versus people that don't. So the wall protects first of all, inside and outside people. So those slurs for instance, they mark in the worst way possible somebody was in inside or outside.

AW: us versus them?

DF: Yeah. And I think the sense of disgust that people have with body parts and body functions and so on - is often tied up with that too. It's has to do with basic survival. People, you know, we know people do get wiped out by diseases people will often associate outsiders with danger or diseases. There's a strong biological sense to mark things outside or inside and you want to keep track of this. And this means that setting boundaries also relates to morals. So, you know, do you have sex with your mother? Do you have sex with your sister? These are all setting up moral boundaries. Again, there's biological reasons. In that instance, it's not really clear whether it's a chicken or egg thing with what created the taboo or not. So the point is that this is where swear words come from - is all these areas where, you know, you don't have sex with your mother so like 🤢 or and we're even whether you're homosexual or not right? 🤢 . The worst possible offensive terms - so I think you can probably come up with a unified theme through all of them. It's associated with basic emotions like fear. But strangely enough at that moment when something is really kind of intimidating, there's an opportunity for excitement too. We're funny creatures. And so both the positive and the negative at the same time. It's something really strange. So you can get these reversals were awful can become awesome.

AW: awful and awesome!

DF: the more recent example is 🤢 . So 🤢 will be associated historically semantically with just something that's very repellent and disgusting and it's full of germs and it'll kill you and it's something you want to avoid. But then people will talk about *this is the* 🤢 .

AW: I'm the 🤢 .

DF: And that's because of meanings that are complicated. Because you first of all, we all know that when one meaning is activated, the opposite meaning is activated too. So when you think something big than you think of smaller. When you think something, you know, dirty, it kind of activates the concept of clean. So you define light with darkness. Or so you can say that light is the absence of darkness, for instance. And good is like the absence of evil, or truth is the absence

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of lying. And so, often part of the definition of something is its opposite. One of the more famous examples was that example I gave you -- awful versus awesome -- when you see the word all has that double meaning. 🤔 is another great example. There's a whole bunch of detail, interesting detail in the meanings that you can build off. So when you take a work like 🤔 there's something really raw and real about it. There's nothing more real than 🤔 .

AW: It stinks. It's ugly.

DF: Ugly. And so when somebody says that they're 🤔 . You understand that they're real, they're grounded.

They're good. Oddly enough, it's a positive term, but it's not in some airy-fairy, angelic way. It's grounded

in reality. So it's not that the meaning of 🤔 is completely gone.


AW: Another example of what you're saying with the words activating the opposite - and then the meaning changing but still maintaining the original meaning - is the word *sick*, right? If you're sick, you're going to die and then now *I'm sick* or *that was sick* is like the ultimate compliment. Awesome.

DF: That's another term that's rooted in that what biological sense of trying to stay alive and not being sick. And the sense of disgust that I described earlier that defines so much. Sickness is something you'd want to avoid and get away from. The person who says *this is sick* is like the snowboarder.... Right? They're taking risks, they're willing to accept the outside, you know, they're knocking down boundaries. That's the classic line between introvert and extrovert. And so the extrovert is the one that is open to the outside, open to new experiences, and is willing to knock down or jump over boundaries and allow for the possibility of sickness, meeting new things, but also the payoff is great. And so the more conservative type, the introverted person, is a person who would rather not take the risk. And the reason I am mentioning this is because extraversion is strongly correlated with your swearing rate. If you're an extrovert versus introverted, it's quite predictive.

AW: So you used the term in an email to me – you used the term *sweariness*, which I had never heard before, but I love it. So your responses on the Myers Briggs scale for introvert versus extrovert is correlated with your sweariness?

DF: Yeah. I did the Myers Briggs when I was a teenager. I'm an E N F G. The extraversion determines your sweariness. So for instance, if you asked you would you like to do a podcast? Well, I can meet somebody new and the topic is swearing. It's like, Oh, that sounds interesting. And like I said, you can almost predict the kind of person who's likely to work in this area and be willing to speak to somebody on the podcast. The swearing – it originates in repression, in a way. Once the word is released, it's like it is a release. It's cathartic because it breaks the ice. So if you're having a really uncomfortable business meeting where people don't know each other and people are doing small talk, talking about the weather, but you can tell there might be some professional tension. There's a bit of competitiveness and but then that's as soon as, you know, somebody gets a paper cut or something. And you ask – *are you okay?* And they say, *Oh, yeah, it hurts like a 🤔* . It's just that moment, you know, that is the turning point of the, you know, make dinner conversation, people having fun and it really allows everybody's brains to relax in that way. [This is research by Steven Pinker, I think he's the one who originated this idea that he associated swear words with that part of the brain that triggers the flight or fight response.](#) I think

it's really true, it's related to what we were talking about before, where the stakes are raised. And at that moment, it just brings out a little bit more of yourself in a public context.

AW: A friend of mine was telling me that she's paid thousands of dollars to see Tony Robbins and he swears like a  sailor. Have you seen him?

DF: Yah.

AW: He does?

DF: I think it's really effective and yet it's respectful. I watched the Netflix documentary on him and it's really good. It was really good and yeah, he swears a lot. And I think it does help him in his work. Yeah.

AW: I'm actually really interested, as we were talking before, about the evolution of some words and how it becomes to mean the opposite. And then people can start labeling themselves with what was previously a negative one and the N word, which I'm not going to say. (I'll just refer to it as the N word .) It's fascinating. People are fascinated and confused .It's perhaps the most taboo word in our culture. My son isa basketball player. And he plays with a bunch of black kids. And he said they drop it all the time. And he said, *I almost feel like they're daring me to say it, but I never would.* I said *good. Don't.*

DF: No. So those are actually two completely different words. Right from the slavery days, there was a separate N word that rhymes with *ninja*. Well, it doesn't really rhyme with *ninja* but I say *ninja* for that one. And that meant *dude, guy*, without any negative connotation. So, in that one has been around since the days of slavery. It was used even among black slaves with each other. And it's actually evolved into a whole bunch of meanings now. So there are a dozen meanings. There's a [linguist called Taylor Jones who documented dozens of meanings](#) and it's quite striking. He said, one meaning that evolved as *ninja* means *me*, and then *ninja is hungry* means *I'm hungry*.

AW: Wow.

DF: This is really common. We call it semantically bleached, you know, standard term washed away from its meaning. And it doesn't even mean *guy* anymore. And that's just one of many meanings that it can it can even it doesn't even refer to black people anymore. So there's this white *ninja* in my classroom that are, you know, such and such great and so on. [I actually have a piece on the N word online.](#) It's been pretty widely read. I go over how this word is really very different from other words and the N word that ends with *trigger* is the one that to among blacks and among whites is just so unbelievably offensive. It's by far like ---like off the charts--offensive in North America, it's there's nothing more offensive in the English language. It's like the nuclear bomb of words. And so much that among blacks, that word is hardly ever used. Ever. And now the reason why the word -- the other N word, the *ninja* word -- can't be used by whites is that it's too close to that other one. And so it's just can't be used. In even if you're surrounded by people... In my article, I emphasize the fact that Eminem is a good example of somebody who was just surrounded by that word, and his music his peers, and it has 00, negative connotations to it, the N word that's like *ninja*. But he still would never use it because he's not ... just it's just too risky that he'd be associated with that.

AW: So is there a common trajectory or evolution of words like that?

DF: The general theme is, is one way that people will take away the sting of a word is by using it among themselves. So if it's a word that's meant to be wielded against you, if you start using it

with each other. It loses its bite, it loses its power. Yeah, but it doesn't quite apply in the case of the N word because the N word, even the one that rhymes with trigger, has actually acquired more of its negative meaning more recently. So it used to be a pretty neutral descriptive term for black people, in the same way that people referring to black people as Negros. And so the negative association, it came from the way people were using the word. That association got worse over time. So you'll sometimes read some old literature from the 1800s. Where they're using the N word, the one that runs with trigger, but there's no sense that they're wielding it like an explosive, taboo word. On the other hand, the just everyday meaning that Ninja, that other word, was also documented way back in the slavery days. And again, it had no negative meanings at the time. It just meant *guy* and it still does. That's the most common use of the word. And it's like, unbelievably frequent. So Chandler Jones did a survey of people that are black that use Twitter, and found that it was just by far the most distinctive word. It's used at an unbelievable rate. Yeah, the word *ninja*. And the most common use is *guy*. It's also used very effectively with *my* so *my ninja* would be *my bud*. And so you'll find a girl referring to *my boyfriend* is *my ninja* and that sort of thing. And it's just been completely bleached of its negative content. There's another theory about how these things happen. Which I'm sympathetic to, but again, I don't think it applies to the N word. It is that meanings are complicated. I alluded to that a little bit with the word 🤔. Where there's something real and raw 🤔 you can build off. And so, what happens is the word the N word comes to be associated with stereotypes of black people. And there are a lot of them are very negative. But some of them are kind of, they're still negative in my mind because their stereotypes and yet you can kind of see them as positive. I think definitely among men there'll be something you strive for. So like athleticism, musical ability, strength, prowess, creativity, and... Again, these are stereotypes. But even the most racist people will, you know, associate some part of it. Again, it's negative because they're stereotypes, but they'll associate those positive things with that word, in addition to the negative meanings. What happens is, you can take some of these, so then you can take those meanings and run with those. And then those more positive meanings come to be associated with that word. And now of course, the in-group can get away with this. This happened with the queer – famously - So gay did used to have a negative meaning. And Queer as well. And you could even in the case of queer, you can see it's negative meaning. But it started with the in group taking on some of the positive connotations of that. There's something about being different and unique and not boring or normal.

AW: Not conforming.

DF: Not conforming, yeah, there's something really fun about knocking down barriers. Again, we're back to that, that old division between certain people. And in that case, it's, it was a word that was outside or so I'm able to say queer, for instance, even though I'm kind of the boring non queer, but I'm able to use it because you're a conformist. And I mean, that's a great example of how this thing was just really successfully removed. That's what happened with gay too. So when I was younger, to call something *gay* was definitely derogatory. But not anymore. The success varies with this sort of thing. So in Toronto there's the *slut walk*, for instance, which is trying to take the shame this thing. So back to the N word, the *ninja* form that which again, has no negative connotations that all of us using all sorts of interesting ways that have nothing to do with even being black. It can be used for animals. Like you can say, like a cat that just jumped. You know, a black person could say that *that ninja survived that fall. I can't believe it!*

AW: But back to your point, a black person could say that, and no one would think twice about it. But if a white person did everyone's head would spin. Did that person just say the ninja word or the trigger word? Right?

DF: Well, in white English we literally don't have that ninja word. It's not there. It's blocked from entering our language by this other word, right? Because it doesn't match that when we hear that word we associated with the only where do we have, right? And we only have one N word, they have tons of N-words. And the only one we have in our language, you could almost say isn't part of their language. Right? There's zero use for black people. It's such an awful word. Why would they even have it? So it's what we call it *faux amis*. And you remember, in between French and English, it's a term that comes from English has for so many words in French. The point is that we end up with lots and lots of words that are French in English. English speakers have a particularly false sense of confidence that they understand French, but then you'll often end up with these *faux amis* that feels like a false friend. Like black English, black versus white English, it's like, well, this is English so of course I understand it, and then the association is directly in your head. So Hispanics will often get away with using the N word a lot. And I mean, the most striking examples are rappers who will use the N word and then you look at some of them in the video, and it's like wow, that guy so white! I'm kind of surprised that he can get away with it. There are examples of rappers who aren't black, but you'd never guess. And then others that are Hispanic, but then when you look into them. It turns out both their parents were actually European, Hispanic and then so they're technically Latinos that are using the N word. But they share the common experience with African Americans of being minorities within the white population.

AW: So I want to ask you - I'm really interested in in lists, that hopefully will completely describe a phenomenon. And one of them is motivations for swearing. Is there a list of motivations? So you said, when your dad's working on the car, I'm guessing that's either pain or frustration?

DF: Yes, yes, it can be more negative, but it can also be positive, an exclamation of excitement over something, or, it's pure emotion, right? And the reason why it's good to focus on those is neither of those are necessarily negative in relation to other people. So there's two really interesting aspects about swear words is that, on the one hand, the most offensive swear words nowadays, the ones that young people just consider just beyond ..., all have to do with derogating, especially minorities, right?

AW: yes, sexual minorities, racial minorities. Sexism.

DF: Right after the N word is the C word for women. So offensive right? So derogative, especially to the ones that are less powerful, let's say, in society. And so that those terms are so offensive, meaning that people don't use those words. The words that people do use might be expressing negative meaning, but not necessarily toward somebody. It would be against--- that the damn car, the 🙄 car, or something like that. It's not mean... My dad loves his car. He said, it's just, it's just he's frustrated with that, and he's not denigrating the car. It's an inanimate object. And then on 🙄 plus side, you get, you know, *get in the 🙄 car*, it just shows that you're very serious. You're trying to be really serious. *You need to get in the car now*. It's there's no sense that the car is being derogated. It just it conveys the intensity, or even the person you're talking to, they're not being denigrated, either.

AW: In simple terms, maybe a kind of one way of categorizing -- and this may have been done or it may be way too simple? But there's, it's a two-by-two where you have positive and negative, and then you have other directed and not other directed or even self-directed, right? So it's, it's like, getting the 🙄 car is negative, but it's not really other directed, right, versus the N word, and the C word are negative. And definitely other directed it's particularly minority directed, right. So it's like, the extreme corner of that two by two. And that is, that is not cool.

DF: And everyday conversation to us, especially nowadays, we've created some things that are just completely unacceptable, which is exciting, right? Because it means that the swear words do change a little bit, we can get back to that -- but **the words that are considered most offensive now are all these words that denigrate and put down especially minority, so people that are persecuted or put upon, powerless, and I find that really encouraging.** And then the example of 🙄 as an intensifier, like *get in the fucking car, this is 🙄 awesome.* That is, by far the most common one, use among the young. And like, really, by far. Now, there is this residue, though, of the use of curse, like a curse originates in the religious sense. I mean, part of it is religious, but not always. This predates Judeo Christian religions. So it's like, *witchcraft upon your head* or something like that, whatever, you know, old curse that somebody come up with. It's like a desire for something bad to happen to somebody that you're annoyed with. And now you have like, 🙄 you. Now, in fact, this was actually a fairly recent development that started in the 1900s. But you know, before that it was, you know, 🙄, you say, it's taking somebody -- wanting something bad or, or they don't even have to be there. And, you know, unlike the 🙄 with him or something like that, and those, those are feelings, negative feelings, that you are pairing with somebody. And it was interesting, because my dad, the reason my dad gave up, swearing is because, you know, in his religious texts, he was talking a lot against cursing. And what I tried to show him is that that's not the way you have ever used a swear word. Of all of his swears, he never used it to curse somebody. You know, I mean, people will curse themselves. They'll say, 🙄 me. It's not even towards somebody. And so that's the reason why that's so fascinating is because it's not only slurs, but it's not even in the more old fashioned sense, you know, 🙄 *be upon you* or something, people don't even do that as much anymore. But, of course, they do sometimes... And then so there is [the research of Timothy Jay](#). He is just a great person to read on swear words. I really enjoy his work. He did tons of studies, looking at public use of swear words, and he had one big collection -- he and a few colleagues One in '86, and then again in '97. And then again, 10 years later in 2006. And I believe he's has a newer one in 2016. So basically, every 10 years. And so he collected, like literally 10s of thousands of public incidents of swearing. And, first of all, unbelievably, not one of them ever lead to any kind of physical violence or conflict.

AW: Unbelievable.

DF: Unbelievable. And, and most of them, like, by far, the vast majority I had to do with humor, it's creating, oh, so even if somebody did say, 🙄 you, it's like, you know, that is among friends or something like that. And it's a moment of levity. And then even in those cases, where it was negative, like somebody saying 🙄 you. Well, he said, it's better than physical conflict, because that people exchange a few words, and it was in lieu of an actual conflict that resulted in physical harm, right? I mean, I'm not saying the words can't cause harm, but his point was that it

didn't result in a serious conflict. [There's a YouTube video going around. And sure you've seen it? Where there's two guys giving each other the finger? Have you seen that one?](#)

AW: No.

DF: I have to send it to you. It's like a showdown, people across the street giving each other the finger in silence. It's like the most intense thing I've ever seen. Nothing, nothing happens. It's a nice example of how it can be a substitute for fighting. Oh, the other reason why I will swear, the other reason why people swear is to draw strength on that part. That's not rational like that, you know, to call more on your gut- in that part of your brain that can -- fight or flight -- risk response creates the extra energy you need to either fight or run away at top speed. And so what's been found, of course, is that when people swear, in that moment, they will be able to perform better under duress.

AW: It fires adrenaline in your system, do you think?

DF: yeah. So it gets your blood pumping. Your heart rate is increased, your pupils dilate, you start to sweat. It's very raw in that way. And the reason why that's so interesting is all those physical responses to the swear word like, 🤔, that are generated in your body. They're independent of meaning, or context. So all the things I just described could be in the context of a very aggressive fight with somebody where somebody said, something really cut you off in traffic, and you know, was very rude to you. And so if you swear, all those physical responses that I described, could be in response to something very negative, including leading to a fight or running away from somebody who's about to shoot you or something. But there's the same physical response you would have like during sex, something really positive. When someone says, 🤔, and what's interesting is they don't actually mean sex, right? Like, it's so fascinating - people almost never, ever use the word 🤔, or 🤔, for the physical act, or reference that it's almost never used for that. Yet it activates your bodily responses the same. Or as you see something that's just absolutely amazing. You swear, like, 🤔 or something shocking, happens that's negative, right? The physical response is the same.

AW: So it's all about context.

DF: Okay, what that means is you can't really take the swear word in ascribe it one interpretation, like, Oh, it's used as a curse to against God or something like that. It's not a good interpretation at all. It's more direct, right out of the limbic system.

AW: So question related back to the physical responses. You were talking about them on behalf of the communicator? What about the people around them?

DF: Yeah. People underestimate how much language is about that anyhow. Because there's a great book that I recommend on how language is used, as opposed to how people think it is used, by my colleague at the University of Alberta. And he it's called, *Using Figurative Language*. And that he talks about: Why don't people just say what they mean? And it turns out, people don't say what they mean. And his examples of that are the huge over-representation of things like metaphor, similes, hyperbole, understatement, irony, sarcasm. This is well-known from the field of pragmatics more generally. Language is not used to communicate information between people. That's not the main use the language. Language is mainly used to figure out our interpersonal relationships. Where you stand in society relative to other people. Because that's the other thing. It's amazing to me. We were talking about the right brain earlier. We don't

actually know what we're trying to convey. That's what's it like, the rational brain is always trying to catch up.

AW: So back to profanity, then though, in this context, is profanity like the punctuation? Great. Super. 😊 awesome. Awful. It intensifies negatively or positively?

DF: It's very useful that way. Yeah. But it also has lots of other useful social signaling uses. It's this whole business about in-group and out-group. There's some comfort in using a swear word with you, it means that

we're equals. And so for instance, if you put like a working-class person with their boss, the boss is able to swear. But the working-class guy, who actually technically swears more, because he's working class, wouldn't swear with the boss, because of the dynamics there. If the employee swore with the boss and boss would respond, then you're kind of treating yourself as more equal. Meaning you've set up some environment where you're on the both part of an in-group. This is something that, you know, politicians play with, where they'll use swear words to try to seem relatable, even though you can tell it's scripted. Like when Hillary Clinton swears or something like that.

AW: Yah. It feels cringey. Are she and Bill at home swearing? No! They're trying too hard or something like that.

DF: And yet, somebody might appreciate the effort of trying to relate to them. And on top of that, it's the words you choose, say a whole lot about you too. There are certain swear words that are used by younger people and older people, certain swear words that are used more by males and females. Like, if you say bloody, for instance, that makes you kind of Canadian, or more Brit, then American. You can signal a whole lot about yourself. And so again, it's not about communicating information. It is about figuring out how we relate to each other. Once you understand that, that's actually one of the main points of language, then swearing just makes a whole lot of sense as a tool.

AW: I want to leave the listeners with maybe some tips, or just general thoughts about what to think about in the context of, should I swear, or should I not. Are there pros and cons? Are there rules or tips that you can think of, that people should keep in mind? When they are conscious of their language and deciding whether they should swear or not?

DF: Definitely. It's risky. You're saying a lot about yourself. We talked a little bit earlier about how some people are more likely to swear. And so they're like extroverts, for instance. And so if you want to inform somebody that you're an extrovert, you swear. But people also know that it's more dominant people that swear other than more submissive. Also, I'm sorry to say that it's people that are more negative, so and particularly men, men that are more neurotic, swear more. And so as always, there's pros and cons. So even when you you're using figurative language, like a metaphor, or a simile, or hyperbole or something, there's a high cost of you being misunderstood, So there has to be some kind of bang for your buck. There's a reason why people still do like that. You're revealing a lot about yourself. And also, people that swear are less constrained, they're disagreeable, you know, like a scale of agreeableness. And so it means that you're also telling your boss that there's somebody that's a little bit non-conformist, that can be harder to get along with, which is ironic, because the swearing creates a nice social ice-breaking puree. So it's very risky, and you have to be very socially skilled to know when to swear and














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when not to swear. That's the risk. Now, the other thing too, is that there's a lot of myths associated with swearing. And some of them are true. But some of them are not.

AW: So what are the ones that are not true?



DF: Well, like, you know, that people swear because they don't have a large vocabulary. Or that swearing is because they're called curse words. It's like you're cursing God. People that have - if you're interacting with somebody who has a strong religious background - so swearing is inversely correlated with religiosity. And so if your boss, or you're the person, you're interacting with his religious and you swear, ironically, that you're signaling to them that you're feeding into some, it's not actually true that people use curse words. It's like you're invoking the devil or cursing people, damning, and so on, you're talking about a filthy thing, you know, sex and things that you're not supposed to talk about. It's not actually true. And yet, people believe that. So they associate that with you, all these myths. It doesn't matter if scientists show that it's actually not true. It's actually the opposite. People that have the most swears also have the most vocabulary because they are more highly verbal. The scientific facts don't matter. What matters is the prejudices that people have. And people aren't researchers in the industry on swear words. They associate this and so you're really risking a lot by using it. I wanted to come back to the fact that slurs are now the most offensive, taboo topics, and in terms of categorizing things. We just talked about religious moralistic codes, and then sex and then body functions, fluids, and so on. And slurs as its own category. I think that slurs can also be grouped now into almost a quasi-religious aspect among young people. Because the taboo-ness of slurs is akin to —I mean, I've seen it referred to, somewhat dismissively by some people. There's a great article by John McWhorter where he's talking about how PC is now kind of like a religion. They say a lot of young people aren't religious anymore, but that's their kind of religion. It's really popular among, especially the younger generation. If somebody is part of this minority, what really gives them the right to say use this word as opposed to somebody else. So it's very hard to track. I mean, the way language is used in a social context is just, it's like, why would you take the risk to do that? Or say that? but there must be an incredible bang for your buck. And that's why swearing will never disappear. It'll always be around. And the same words have been around for forever.















AW: Really? They're always the same?

DF: The top 10 words, just they don't seem to change much at all. It was          . And those were the ones that were the most rigorous. And so he was specifically excluding some of the slurs. But even bitch does survive in there. Yeah. And that's a slur. And it really hasn't been changed over time except when people have managed to give it a new life like *gay*, or, you know, the N word. Part of my research is -- due to the fact that I work with rap music. And in my rap linguistics course I have students look at different swear words and taboo words. And words like  continue to be used just really, like overwhelming negatively. Yeah, in lyrics, whereas other terms, you can see people are turning them around and using them or positively. Another term in that list is *sucks*, right? Which is it has all the right sounds. It's like an age thing. Like *sucks*, I think it's dropped out now or you can say that succeed at the highest level political meaning. So I think that's one that's changed, but   alone were like one third to one half of all their data.

AW: Right. So, [George Carlin's list of seven words you can't say on TV](#) -  and  are both on the list. And apparently, he was challenged about that. And he took it, he took  off the list

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for a while and then he put it back on. And he has this whole riff about why it belongs on the list. And it's back, probably back to what you're saying about the word  is all these things  is about incest. Right?

DF: So yeah. But again, it's now used affectionately all the time. You know, like I was saying earlier, this is like a . You know, it's just, it's used as an intensifier, and, I mean, these terms, , they're used in so many exciting ways. Even like how you can say, *I know *, meaning, *I know stuff*, but then they tell somebody, you know, *he knows *. Like, it means *he doesn't know anything*, right? And so the where you put the emphasis, the accent can change anything completely in. In fact, this is very similar, where we tend to put less accents on verb. So  is technically a verb. So, you know, but if you if you add a preposition after it, like, up or off or something, then you can put more emphasis on the verb. So this is something that Byron and has documented. So when you say, like,  off, you can, you can actually have emphasis on the verb in that case, whereas if you say, you know, *john  Mary* there's no actual stress on the verb that's accent, there's a bit of stress, but there's no accent. So *john  Mary*, we tend to put them on the nouns. Right? And so what you'll find is people will turn into a noun to so they can now have that accent again, like, what the  by changing it now has that accent that normally wouldn't have. And, and so what, the way people play around with these words, this is really something to behold. And it's, it's fascinating. There's, they play with the both of the grammar. So something like, you know, if I can cause kind of inversion, or, you know, , *that was wonderful* or  *is it sunny* or something like that, it will create different constructions. And then people will use those words in context that are often poetic, that just replace those expressions, like an expression that's kind of poetic. Like, *I kid you not*. And so that you can use so *I  you not*. And it's the basis of the vowels matching. And then, when you say, you know, *shut the  up*, you know, like, you see how all of those have the same vowels? Like *Shut the  up*? And then people will play with not just the grammar, but the poetry. And so they're asking us on the one hand, which is what brings people those words together, and people find that pleasing.

AW: I am definitely going to be listening to swears differently, I think-- to be honest-- I used to listen from a perspective of negative judgment, right? So you have no self-control, or you're not educated. Now I'm going to be listening with a much more open mind because you're talking about using profanity as punctuation. The other thing that I'm getting from this, that I had never thought of before is, I love your, I share your optimism now that we've come to a point in our culture where the most profane words are denigrating minorities. I love that too. Okay, I'm going to fire my five rapid fire questions at you. Question number one. What are your pet peeves?

DF: I think dishonesty. Somebody who's not being truthful.

AW: okay.

DF: Because I just don't know where I stand.

AW: Second question is, and this is an interesting one for someone who's a linguist. What type of learner are you? visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or something else?

DF: Right, right. This whole categorization, it has been pooh-poohed a little bit in the research recently, but I don't agree. I've looked over the research and I found that there's really something

to it, that just because people have said, all the learners don't really fall into visual, auditory or etc. anymore. It just means they found maybe better categories. Unfortunately, some of the best research in this area seems to have gotten rid of the category I fit in most - is auditory. I'm a very auditory person. I listen to audiobooks, and I'm an avid user of Siri, you can get her to read you the article or the news. And she's, she's amazing. You just say, you know, hey, "her name" because my phone will go off. Speak Screen, or, and then she'll just read the whole thing to me. And I also use texting a lot, which has a text to speech software.

AW: I would have guessed you're an auditory learner. I think most people who are drawn to language probably are

next question. Introvert or extrovert? You already answered?

DF: Yeah. Extrovert. Yeah.

AW: Number four, communication preference for personal conversations.

DF: face to face. It takes me too long to craft a text. And so even if it is with electronics, it has to be FaceTime.

I really need to see people. And in fact, that's the way you connect. I can't - I hate preparing tons of written feedback on something. I prefer to just meet face-to-face with a student or something. There's so many ways of being misinterpreted. When you write, whether to choose to write WTF or not for something you could you know, you don't really know the person until you're kind of in front of them. And then they can misunderstand your intention. There are so many ways in which things can go wrong in writing. It's just missing all that information like what I was talking about ,you know, the difference between you know 🙄 versus you know, 🙄 .


AW: right,


DF: It's just, it's missing some of it. And I think it's really important that we don't lose that in this fascinating research on language-learning, showing that people learn a second language. This happens with new immigrants to Canada or the States where they can't get it just from TV or radio or whatever. They have to be interacting with a physical English person. It seems like everything is there in the electronic medium, but it's not good enough, right? Physical body presence of the person in front of you to learn the language.

AW: Last question. Is there a podcast or blog or an email newsletter that you find yourself recommending the most to your friends and family?

DF: Very broadly, I'm a huge fan of YouTube, which includes podcasts. I just I love the long form format. People will have these two 24 hour interviews and I adore them. They're just great. Anything. For instance, that's where I came across [Iain McGilchrist precisely because I didn't have an audio version of his book, The Master and His Emissary](#), but you get a sense of the author through interviews. And then from there, you you might pick up the book and so on. But a blog I should mention, because of our focus on swear words, is called [strong language. That's a really great blog on swear words](#). Content warning there, of course, but I really recommend that one.

AW: Okay. Can I ask you one other question? I promise you this is the last question I'm going to ask you. Did you have rules in your house when your kids were younger about swearing, and if you were going to do it all over again today, and you had you know, toddlers that were learning to speak? Were swear words against the rules in your house, I'm just curious?

DF: They arose with us is very early. My kids mispronounced words and things like truck would come out, or frog would come out, or something like that. Yeah. And trick would come on this ship, I don't know. They're like, and we would laugh or, you know, get them to repeat it over and over again. And so what they did was even from a young age, they develop as an association that when I say this word, it seems to have this power to make everybody go (...) or laugh or whatever. And so they, they, I think they picked up those words. And then, but they didn't use them very much. I mean, it really depends on their personality, right. So my two oldest ones are somewhat introverted, and, but it'll show up under, like, when they're getting their flu shot or something, you know, my daughter will say , you know, just like of pain. And, I have a seven year old.

You know, when he said, , couple of times, we were trying to create a sense of -- it's kind of a hard balance, because we don't want him to use that word, because other people will judge him. And in our case, because my youngest daughter is autistic, I think we're a little bit more sensitive, because we don't want to her to be in a situation to use a swear word. That's not socially appropriate. And she can't quite figure that out. So we try to avoid swearing around her in particular, because we just don't want her to have to try to figure out when I can use it or not use it. Yeah, it's a tricky question. Because the more you repress it and stomp on it, the worst words, the more power you give the words.

AW: Right

DF: That's literally how swear words are created. Swear words are learned as these really magical, powerful words. And as a kid, and then somebody in life later on tells you that **they actually don't have all that power. That it's just a word. As a whole, society considers them to be quite powerful words, even though there's nothing intrinsic to them. They're just sounds coming out of your mouth, right?**

AW: That's it. So thank you so, so much for your time and sharing your expertise.

Conclusion

Well, THAT was fun. Thanks to Darin, I definitely think differently about profanity now. I learned so much from that interview. I hope you did too. I would like to leave you with a few meta-learnings from this episode:

Myths – People have a lot of misconceptions about swearing. For example:

- People swear because they don't have a large vocabulary. In fact, as Darin says, “People that have the most swears also have the most vocabulary and they are more highly verbal.”
- People who use profanity are cursing – they are cursing God, invoking the devil. Also not true.

Personalities – of course there are exceptions, but research shows that **sweariness** (I LOVE that word) is correlated with extroversion, with riskiness, with dominance, with being disagreeable and non-conformity. You got that? So people who swear might be extroverted, risk-seeking, dominant, disagree-able non-conformists.

Risky – I'm not sure I want to be communicating all of those things. Which is another of Darin's main points. He mentioned a few times that swearing can be risky. Swearing can break the ice. Make people relax a bit. But it can also be risky. It's like using metaphors or similes or hyperbole. It is expressive but risky.

Last – and I think this is my favourite point from the whole interview. Darin mentioned a few times that these days, **the most profane, the most offensive words in the English language are the ones that are derogatory to minorities**. In fact, those are the profanities that Darin himself refuses to say. Think about that for a moment. Isn't that just wonderful? We now live in a society where the worst possible things you can say, the most profane expressions, are derogatory towards minorities? I love that. It makes me feel optimistic.

That reminds me, I found [the video that Darin referenced where there are two guys giving each other the finger](#). It made me LOL. Check it out. I wonder what they were fighting about, and, as Darin said, it makes you thankful that the middle finger seemed to suffice in this battle.

Ok that's all I got for you today. Thanks to Darin for educating us about profanity. Now, I would love to hear what **you** think about this. Did you learn anything? Please email me or let me know on social media.

THANK YOU for listening!

One last thing - If you're not already signed up for the TAT email blog, you really are missing half the fun! Just go to TalkAboutTalk.com to sign up for the blog and to access all of the past blogs.

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