

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2023.19.2.084>**BODY, MISOGYNY AND RELIGION IN SWEAR WORDS****Anna Knyazyan***<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6880-9549>*Yerevan State University***Linda Artoni****<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6241-8633>*University of Bologna*

The main focus of this article is on the use of the most common English, Italian and Russian swear words. The language of swearing has been taboo for many years considering that swear words have always been regarded as offensive, inappropriate and unacceptable in any social context. Profanity reflects not only our emotions but also our values, taboos, and prejudices. It is evident that different cultures have distinct rules and perceptions surrounding cursing – the most powerful words that can express both positive and negative emotions; therefore they are actively used by people of all ages, genders, social statuses and languages. Taking into consideration that swear words and obscenity are common in all languages, there are many similarities and differences between them and their rendition of obscenity. Even though the topic of swearing has been neglected for many years, it is a quite complex one and many discussions and different interpretations can be made. That is to say, the formation of swear words, their functions, degrees of offensiveness, different typologies and classifications are investigated through a comparative method, to conclude what common taboos are shared by these three cultures.

Keywords: *swear words, cursing, derogatory language, misogyny, masculinity, femininity.*

Introduction

The act of cursing or swearing, is defined as “to use profane or obscene language” (“Swear”, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019), or even as “undereducated, obscene, rude and profane language in society” (Wang, 2013)

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the use of swear words are natural human behaviors, practiced in almost all languages in the world. They are used to express all kinds of strong emotions from anger and disappointment to excitement. Swear words are very versatile and they prove to be vitally important in understanding the spoken language and improving one's proficiency in the language of choice.

Almost every language develops and uses its own repertoire of curse words. This repertoire consists of various expressions which, in one way or another, refer to certain existing taboos, consisting of a prohibition imposed by social custom or something that is not acceptable to say, mention, or do □

Different cultures have different rules about who is allowed and when it is acceptable to swear: while in places like the United Arab Emirates, Russia and Australia, there are laws in place to punish those who curse in public (Lazzarus, 2020). In many other states it is just not socially accepted: in Armenia, for example, until 2021 you could be sanctioned for up to 3 million AMD (5100 EUR) for the crime of “grave insult” (CSO meter report for Armenia, 2022). In numerous cultures, women are taught to be polite and must not use harsh language, which leads to Lakoff's conclusions stated in *Language and woman's place* (1973): “females are the experts at euphemisms”. This does not mean women do not swear at all: it just means they are much more pressured into not doing so in public.

Oftentimes, most of cursing lexicon revolves around bodily parts and functions: but what makes referencing the human body shocking or controversial? The dualistic concept that juxtaposes the *mind* and the *body* dates back to Plato (Duke, et al., 1995), in whose philosophy the material world is regarded as inferior. Western Christianity drew on these concepts and during the high Middle Ages the body came to be considered sin's instrument—The body constrains the soul, the *spiritus*, to the material world, on one hand, but is also a sanctuary for the Holy Spirit, which must be preserved and kept pure, on the other).

Swearing or cursing at someone is the degrading and/or submissive role traditionally associated with women and the female body, especially when involved in sexual intercourse. While cursing it is frequent to break the religious taboo, to violate the third commandment: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Deuteronomy 5:11). Different cultures approach this specific subject in more or less explicit ways.

Cursing and invoking deities

The connection between the act of cursing and religion is immediate and intuitive, given that the term *curse* means “a prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon one” (“Curse”, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019), and *to curse* would literally be “to call upon divine or supernatural power to send injury upon” (Ibidem). There are quite a lot of idioms in which the English language involves references to *hell*: Portia in the *Merchant of Venice* prays: “Let Fortune go to hell for it” (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 2, verse 21). According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (“Hell”, n.d. Online Etymology Dictionary), it has been common to define a chaotic situation as *hell breaking loose* since the 17th century. If you want to tell someone to *go to hell* in Russian, you should actually address the devil, *chiort* (чёрт) (Kovalev, 2016), as in *poslat' k chiortu* (послать к чёрту). Italian employs both *vai all'inferno* and *vai al diavolo*. The act of *damning* has acquired less and less religious meanings while actually meaning “to condemn to a punishment or fate” (“Damn”, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019) it is “often used to express annoyance, disgust, or surprise” (Ibidem): it can be employed as a verb, as in *I'll be damned*, *damn it*, or *damn you/him/her/them* (of which the literal sense would be “may them be damned”, invoking, as explained before, at least metaphorically, a higher power); as an adjective: *that is a damn nuisance*; or as an emphatic *you knew damn well what could happen*; or lastly, as an exclamation: *damn*. In Italian, the same verb *dannare* (“Dannare”, n.d. in Vocabolario, Treccani) is usually employed as an adjective in the past participle: *dannato/a/i/e*.

However, the Italian speaking world has got something almost any other culture lacks: the *bestemmia* or *bestemmie* when plural. The act of *bestemmiare* is translated as “to blaspheme” and defined as “to blaspheme God and the saints” (“Bestemmiare”, n.d. in Vocabolario, Treccani). It is not anything new, given that the Bible condemns it in multiple instances; Leviticus 24:16 recites: “And whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death”, whereas Mark 3:28-29 declares “[...] he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness”. Nonetheless, the especially intriguing development is that in many regions and social groups in Italy the act of *bestemmiare* and its direct religious implications have parted completely. It will not be uncommon to hear the same old women and men who go to church every Sunday invoke the name of God (*Dio*), Christ (*Gesù Cristo*), the Holy

Mary (*Madonna*) and other saints juxtaposed with the words *porco* or *porca* (pig, masculine and feminine), *cane* or *cagna* (dog, masculine and feminine), *boia* (hangman), *bestia* (beast), *ladro* or *ladra* (thief), and many more, particularly in the Veneto region and in Tuscany. This happens regardless of the article 724 of the Penal Code, which punishes “Anyone who publicly blasphemes, with invectives or outrageous words, against the Deity” (Codice penale commentato. Art. 724) as an administrative offence with a fine between 51 and 309 euros.

Cursing the body

If the body is the realm of the impulses which must be repressed, it may not come as a surprise that the body parts more subjected to censorship and shame are the genitals, both male and female. Since the early stages of languages these bodily parts have been referenced through a variety of terms, all considered vulgar and inappropriate (oftentimes, even the correct scientific ones): the English speaking world refers to the penis as *dick*, which can also be used to indicate “a mean, stupid or annoying man” (“Dick”, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019); *cock*, but also *weenie*, which has demeaning connotations and can be synonym to “nerd” (Ibidem). The Italian language covers this semantic space with the word *minchia* (*minchia* in Vocabolario, Treccani), originally from the Sicilian dialect, and most importantly *cazzo* (“Cazzo”, n.d. in Vocabolario, Treccani), which are used as exclamations or for emphasis, and can be employed, like *fuck* in English, to signify something insignificant or nonexistent, as in *non me ne frega un cazzo/una minchia*, translatable as “I don’t give a fuck”. To refer to people, both of them can change into *minchione*, *minchiona* when feminine and *cazzone*, *cazzona* when feminine, which Oxford Dictionary translates as *prick* and describes as a “nasty or contemptible person” (“Prick”, Oxford English Dictionary, 2023) – the same meaning that the word *coglione* or *cogliona* (the masculine literal meaning is “testicle” but vulgar) has. Russian people use *khuy* (*xyŭ*) (Kovalev, 2016) with the same meaning, with *na khuy* (*на xyŭ*) as an exclamation, while *khuyev* (*xyев*) is the adjective.

The landscape of terms for female genitals is also varied: the vulva in Italian can be referred to as *fregna* (“Fregna” in Vocabolario, Treccani), especially around Lazio, *gnocca* (“Gnocca”, n.d. in Vocabolario, Treccani) and mainly *figa* or *fica* (“Fica”, n.d. in Vocabolario, Treccani). All of the three words can double as nouns and adjectives to indicate an attractive woman or

girl. They also have masculine versions: *fregno*, *gnocco*, *figo*, which refer to attractive men or boys. *Fighetta*, on the other hand, formed with the diminutive suffix *-etto/a*, has acquired the same derogatory meaning as *pussy* in English, a word with a complex history (Ellie, 2023): the word *pus*, probably related to the word *pusillanimous*, was originally a call name for *cat* and became a “term of endearment” for women since the 16th century; only in the 19th century it gained the meaning of *female genitalia*. In the way it is employed, the word equates femininity with weakness and it is used to refer to someone as “a timid, passive person, especially a man”, but it can also mean “sexual intercourse with a woman” and, offensively, “women collectively, regarded as sex objects” (“Pussy”, n.d. Dictionary.com.). *Cunt*, from the Proto-Germanic **kuntōn* (“Cunt”, Online Etymology Dictionary 2017), which is of uncertain origin, but similar to the Latin *cunnius* – “female pudenda” and also vulgarly “a woman”, means “vulva or vagina” but can also be used disparagingly as “a contemptuous term to refer to a woman” (“Cunt”, n.d. Dictionary.com). The Russian word *kiska* (куска), (Kovalev, 2016) doubles as *cat* and *female genitalia*, while *pizda* (нузда) (Kovalev, 2016) is closer to the English *cunt*, but the Russian word is also employed as an emphatic.

The last body part very amply referenced is the *butt*, *arse* (“Arse”, n.d. Cambridge Dictionary) or *ass* (“Ass”, Ibidem) in colloquial English, employed in many different ways as an emphatic. It has gained various other meanings: calling someone an *ass* would be similar to calling them “a pompous fool”; but *getting ass* is slang for sexual intercourse. *Asshole* is both “a stupid, annoying or detestable person” and “the least attractive or desirable part or area” (Ibidem). The Italian *culo* (“Culo”, n.d. in Vocabolario, Treccani) as well as referencing the body part, works also as a *vox media* to indicate both good and bad luck, while being often employed in the untranslatable expression: *vai a fare in culo!*, which is roughly utilized like the English *go fuck yourself!* but whose actual meaning would be closer to encouraging the listener to go far away from you, to a remote place. Interestingly enough, Russians also say something similar: with the word *zhopa* (жона), *ass*, the formulation *id’i v zhopu* (иду в жопу) invites the listener to do the same thing (Kovalev, 2016). Diametrically different is the meaning of the sentences *chto za zhopa* (что за жона) and *che culo*: if the latter has, more often than not, a positive connotation indicating luck, the Russian one has a strongly negative one.

Related to these are the vulgar versions of the term *pee* and *faeces* or *poop*: the English *piss* (“Piss”, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019), and the Italian *piscio* (“Piscio”, n.d. in Vocabolario, Treccani), the noun, and *pisciare*, the verb, are etymologically related and are subject to interesting uses, such as the Italian *pisciarsi addosso dal ridere*, “to pee oneself from laughing”, something that the Russian people also say: *opisatsa ot smekha* (опуститься от смеха) (Kovalev, 2016). The Italian *merda*, meaning *faeces*, is mostly used as an exclamation, like *shit* (“Shit”, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019) in English. They are very versatile, allowing colorful expressions such as *shitfaced* and *shithead*, *faccia di merda* and *testa di merda* in Italian. Russian comes in with *говно* (говно), with the adjective *govnenniy* (говнённый) (Kovalev, 2016), and *d’ermo* (дерьмо), with the adjective *der’movij* (дерьмовый) (Ibid.).

As much as the link comes spontaneous to us, to consider the association to bodily functions, and bodily parts especially, as derogatory or vulgar is not something inherently reasonable: it fits into the rationalist narrative of the body as inferior, as a mere mean to an end; moreover, it plugs into the culture of shame which surrounds sexuality and pleasure, particularly when it comes to women.

Cursing women and femininity

To discuss the origins of misogyny, that is to say the ingrained hatred and prejudice towards women and femininity, we could begin by quoting the *Genesis*, and how the First Woman is created from a piece of the First Man’s body (Genesis 2:21), as she is intended to please the lonely man (Genesis 2:18). She is also the first to err, as she eats the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:6, 22-24). In the New Testament, husbands are encouraged to “treat [wives] with respect as the weaker partner” (Peter 3:7), and wives to “submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22). The female body is viewed by the biblical texts as dangerous, unclean, and a source of potential contamination (Leviticus 12:15). “These lines from the Pastoral Epistles have been used to reify gender norms that privilege men over women”, argues Judith Baskin in the article *Misogyny* (Baskin, 2021). In Revelation, Babylon is symbolized as a “great whore”, who will be brought “to ruin” and left “naked”; her “flesh” will be eaten and she will be burned “with fire” (Ibid.h). According to Baskin, “while Babylon represents the evils of this world for Christians, it is problematic that the language draws on sexualized violence against women”

(Ibidem). What the landscape of curse words often refers to is the archetype of the woman as described in these passages of the Bible: the, more often than not, subconscious and unaware belief that women are inherently evil and deceitful, and/or weak and submissive by nature and overall inferior to men, leads society to equate femininity with an insult, an injury when cast against someone. Here is how the language we employ strenghtens these beliefs.

A common theme would be that of “immoral sex”, depicted through explicit remarks regarding sex workers, as the word *whore* in English, which comes from the Proto-Germanic root **horan-*, feminine **hora-*, probably from the Proto-Indoeuropean **ka-*, which would mean “to desire”, it might have shifted by influence of Middle English homonym *hore* “physical filth, slime,” also “moral corruption, sin” (“Whore”, Online Etymology Dictionary). Men can also be addressed as *manwhores* or *mansluts*, though these terms imply that women are “regular whores” and “regular sluts”.

The Italian *puttana* (“Puttana”, n.d. Dizionario Etimologico Online), related to the Spanish *puta* and the French *putain*, all come from the Ancient French *putaine*, originally derived from the vulgar word to say *girl*, *puta* or *putta*. The Italian language also involves various synonymous terms, such as *troia*, *zoccola*, *battona*, *baldracca* whose etymologies differ quite a lot, even though they all come to express the same thing: belittling women by hinting at their “immoral” sexual behaviour. The Russian *блядь* comes from *блядити*, which means “to be deceived” or “to be disappointed” (Slovar’ sinonimov, 2014), and it can be contemporarily translated as *slut* (Kovalev, 2016), while *shlyukha* (*шлюха*) comes from *shlyatsa* (*шляться*) (“Shlyukha”, n.d. Etymologeek), which means “to saunter”, “to dawdle” or “to hang around” (“Shlyuha”, Ibid.). Words whose meaning is frequently far from that of *prostitute* eventually converge to the same idea: that is the case for the aforementioned *blyad’* (*блядь*) and *shlyukha* (*шлюха*), but also for the Italian *mignotta*, from Ancient French *mignotte*, literally *cat*, most commonly “favored woman” (“Mignotta”, n.d. Wikizionario, Il dizionario libero).

The sexual references can also be implicit: *bastard* in English, or *bastardo* and *bastarda* in Italian, *ublyudok* (*ублюдок*) (Kovalev, 2016) in Russian, mean that a child was born of an unwed mother, who must have engaged in “immoral sex” (Jahnavi, 2020). The verb *to fuck*, and its various declinations as *fucking* or *fucker*, perpetrate ideas of men as “eternal doers” and women as eternal “done-ups”, as argued by Ankita Anand in *The Hindu* (Anand, 2019). The same

goes for the similar verbs *fottere* (“Fottere”, n.d. in Vocabolario, Treccani) in Italian, usually employed with the past participle *fottuto*, *fottuta*, *fottuti*, *fottute*, which is passive and implies the idea of “someone or something that has been fucked”; and *trakhnut’* (*трахнутъ*) (Kovalev, 2016) and *yebat’* (*ебать*) (ibid.) in Russian.

Curiously, expressions often employed to curse men are literally directed at a woman: one example is the aforementioned *bastard*, but the same goes for the English *motherfucker*, and even *son of a bitch*, which shares the same meaning as *figlio* (but also *figlia*, *figli*, *figlie*) *di puttana* or *di troia* in Italian, *сукин сын* in Russian.

A common thread is the one that relates women and “immoral sex” with dirt or filth: since the 14th century, the word *slut* referred to having a “disreputable appearance” (Malcolm, 2015) or at least that is what Chaucer had in mind when he wrote “Why is thy lord so sluttish...” (Chaucer, 1400). The Oxford English Dictionary (2023) first definition for *slut* is “slovenly, untidy, dirty; vulgar, disreputable”. It was only in the 20th century that it gained the sexual connotation.

Inseparable from these vocabulary is also the association with animals: *bitch* in English, *cagna* in Italian and *suka* (*сука*) in Russian. All share the same meaning. Italian goes even further with *vacca* (*female cow*) and *porca* (*female pig*), which doubles as both a noun and an adjective, and as such is often used in association with different injurious epithets. However, misogyny in the Italian language and culture is so deeply rooted that hinting at prostitution is as easy as declining a word or expression in the feminine form: as brilliantly explained by actress and comedian Paola Cortellesi in her monologue “Sono solo parole” (Cortellesi, 2018) translated as *They are just words*, oftentimes indicating femininity is the same as alluding to prostitution. Here are some examples: while a *cortigiano* is a “man of the court”, a *cortigiana* is a *slut*; if a *massaggiatore* is a “massage therapist”, a *massaggiatrice* is a *slut*; *un uomo disponibile* is “a helpful man”, whereas *una donna disponibile* is a *slut*; on the one hand, *uno squillo* means “the ring of the phone”, but on the other *una squillo* means a *slut*; *un gatto morto* is “a dead cat”, but *una gatta morta* is a *slut*; lastly, *uno zoccolo* is a *hoof*, while *una zoccola* – a *slut*. Cortellesi’s monologue continues with “Luckily, they are just words. Now, if words were the translation of thoughts, then it would be a nightmare, a nightmare since childhood. A boy could start thinking that girls are less important than him. As

a teenager, he could grow up mistakenly believing that other girls are somehow his belonging. And as an adult [...] it wouldn't seem wrong to offend, mock, touch or harass women. [...] A woman could be hurt or killed by a man that loves her so much he believes he owns her. [...]. But thankfully, they're just words." (Cortellesi, 2018).

The way in which one speaks and the categories through which one perceives the world are not separate. Recognizing and deconstructing problematic speech habits is as essential as anything to prevent misogyny to keep on slythering in and poisoning our perception of the world, of society, of femininity.

Conclusion

This exploration of cursing and swearing across languages has revealed the intricate relationship between language, culture, and societal norms. Swear words, often considered taboos, serve as a fascinating window into the complexities of human expression and social dynamics. The connection of cursing with religion underscores the tension between religious beliefs and spontaneous human expression, especially in instances of discomfort, as well as the evolution of language over time. The derogatory nature of many of the terms referring to bodily parts highlights society's historical discomfort with the human body, especially in the context of sexuality. This discomfort often carries a deeply ingrained misogyny, perpetuating prejudices against women. Furthermore, this discussion has shed light on how language can be used as a tool of oppression and objectification, particularly concerning women. The derogatory terms and slurs directed at women, often rooted in notions of immorality and submission, reveal the enduring influence of historical gender biases. The normalized state of derogatory language against women contributes to a culture of discrimination and violence. In the quest for gender equality, it is imperative to recognize the power of language and the harm it can perpetuate. By addressing the underlying prejudices of problematic speech habits, we can work towards dismantling misogyny and fostering a different discernment of femininity.

Ultimately, this exploration of cursing and swearing underscores the profound impact of language on our understanding of society, gender, and human relationships. It serves as a reminder that words are not just words; they

are mirrors reflecting our collective values and beliefs, and they have the potential to shape the world we live in.

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**ՄԱՐՄՆԻ ՄԱՍԵՐԸ, ԿՆԱՏՅԱՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ԵՎ ԿՐՈՆԸ
ՀԱՅՀՈՅԱԽՈՍՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՈՒՄ**

**Աննա Կնյազյան
Լինդա Արտոնի**

Սույն հոդվածը նվիրված է անգլերեն, իտալերեն և ռուսերեն հայհոյական բառապաշարի քննությանը: Հայհոյանքի լեզուն երկար տարիներ ընկալվել է որպես տաբու՝ հաշվի առնելով, որ հայհոյանքները միշտ դիտվել են որպես վիրավորական, անտեղի և անընդունելի ցանկացած սոցիալական համատեքստում: Հայհոյանքը արտացոլում է ոչ միայն մեր զգացումները, այլև արժեքները, տաբուները և նախապաշարմունքները: Չանազան մշակույթներում հայհոյանքների կիրառության հետ կապված հստակ կանոններ ու ընկալումներ կան, որոնք արտացոլում են քաղաքավարության և նույնիսկ գենդերային դերերի վերաբերյալ տարբեր հասարակական մտեցումներ: Այսուհանդերձ, հայհոյական բառապաշարը կարող է արտահայտել ինչպես դրական, այն-

պէս էլ բացասական հույզեր, հետևաբար դրանք ակտիվորեն օգտագործվում են բոլոր տարիքի, սեռի, սոցիալական կարգավիճակի և լեզվի մարդկանց կողմից: Հաշվի առնելով, որ հայիոյանքները և անպարկեշտ խոսքերը տարածված են բոլոր լեզուներում, կան բազմաթիվ նմանություններ և տարբերություններ: Թեև հայիոյանքի թեման երկար տարիներ անտեսված էր, սակայն դրա շուրջ կարելի է բազմաթիվ քննարկումներ ու տարբեր մեկնաբանություններ անել: Այսինքն՝ կարելի է ուսումնասիրել հայիոյանքների ձևավորումը, դրանց գործառույթները ու դասակարգումը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *հայիոյանք, նվաստացուցիչ լեզու, կնասոյացություն, կանացի, իզականություն արականություն:*