

Swearing and Cursing. Contexts and Practices in a Critical Linguistic Perspective. Edited by Nico Nassenstein and Anne Storch. Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton 2021.: Book Review

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Swearing and cursing are little-recognised and cross-culturally ostracised, but subliminally particularly effective expressions in any language. As the papers in *Swearing and Cursing*, an anthology edited by Nico Nassenstein and Anne Storch as proceedings of a 2015 convention in Cologne, demonstrate, the two terms imply more than a speech act, though. Verbal snotting, the use of taboo words and its emotion make use of materialities and modalities whose study usefully complements the existing book-length analyses by Magnus Ljung (*Swearing: A cross-cultural linguistic Study*, 2010) or Timothy Jay (*Why we Curse*, 2000). It is Jay whom the editors present as the opener to their collection of sixteen articles, giving him room for consideration of the state of arts in Swearingistics and Cursingology.

Spit(tle) and a tonal intensity, a certain high frequency in the sound waves, gestures and facial expressions, and 'the voice' are part and parcel of swearing. Anne Storch and Janina Traber observe it, each in her way, in reminiscences of their past fieldwork in West Africa as well as in today's tourist zones of Mallorca in the Mediterranean, where African vendors of gadgets (and their bodies) meet with European relaxation- and cheap-fun-seekers and their expressions of aloofness and racialised contempt. Together with Nico Nassenstein – in a chapter on Lingala-based Mock Chinese used by Kinshasa youngsters to demean labor and permanent residents from the Far East – they are concerned with "a more holistic approach to swearing" (185). The three go beyond what conventional language analysis does, the interpretations of words, inflected accordingly and strung up syntactically, and their meaning in this or that language. Their papers include extra-verbal features necessary for a full understanding of what is being expressed: the showing of sex toys to be traded under precarious and highly gendered circumstances to tourists in Mallorca (Traber), thumb point gestures (as in Felix K. Ameka's analysis of invectives from the Lower Volta Basin, provocatively entitled "I sh.t in your mouth") or efforts taken to produce and exhibit engravings on tombstones (as in Elisabeth Steinbach-Eicke and Sven Eicke's elaboration of Ancient Egyptian curses).

Keying in on the contextual and otherwise para-verbal aspects of swearing and cursing – an *object* rather than an object of linguistic study – their papers are set next to methodically more traditional approaches. *Swearing and Cursing* also comprise a comparative taboo word analysis in the Manambu and Tariana languages of Papua New Guinea and the Amazon area of Brasil respectively (Alexandra Aikhenvald) as well as another on the invocations of kinship terms that can be (mis)understood as imperatives among Datooga and their language in Tanzania (Alice Mitchell); the huge-corpus-based juxtaposition of rude vocative use by urban teenagers in the United States, Latin America, and Spain by Anna-Brita Stenström; and the linguistics of Jamaican swearing with a focus on the 'bomboklaat' item – a legal offense, if uttered publicly, ever since the 19th century and a stereotype in the globe-wide commodification of post-immigrant African Jamaican culture in e.g. Reggae (Joseph, Farquason, Clive Forrester, Andrea Hollington).

Apart from analyses (and comparisons) of foul language use on a structural-linguistic level, the anthology includes interpretations of communication-situative use of dysphemism and "ethnophaulisms", as Angelika Mietzner names the ethnically offensive slurs she observed to be exchanged between local beach vendors ('beach boys') and North-global tourists "at a beach in Diani,

Kenya" (244). Her chapter thus invokes the established SAT distinction of 'illocutionary acts' (i.e. the intention of the speakers when cursing) and their effects on the addressees (the perlocutionary effect). The same is the case for Ricardo Roque's deconstruction of the East Timorese nickname 'arbiru' for a Portuguese colonial lieutenant in the 1890s, which conveys not only the coloniser's fearsome boldness but also his unbridled and violent freewheeling as recalled by the locals.

Each of the sixteen papers is thus replete with insights that broaden the horizon about condemning words and the verbal use of taboo. The papers show that swearing and cursing is, or could be, an anthropological constant that has not been explored closely enough. A Eurocentrism in the so far conducted research is noticeable, as can also be seen in the analyses of Papua New Guinean, site-specific Mediterranean, Jamaican and Tanzanian, Central and West African, Kenyan and Latin American or Ancient Egyptian modes of cursing.

Speaking of Eurocentrism. In a way, the lingua franca of science, English, shoots its own goal with its narrowing of meaning and simultaneous ambiguity. Swearing, in English, stands at the same time for 'swearing' and 'swearing an oath'. Felix Ameka lists in his contribution the semantic nuances and "multiple readings of swear" in a table, together with the equivalents in German, Dutch, and Ewe (125):

Swear profane (religious): *blaspheme* (Eng), *ketteren* (Dutch), *verfluchen* (German), *ya 'X ŋka dzódzrö* (Ewe) [...]

Swear out of frustration etc.: *curse, cuss* (English), *vloeken* (Dutch), *fluchen* (German), ?? (Ewe)

Swear (oath-taking): *take/swear an oath, affirm, vow, pledge* (English), *zweren, en eed avlegen* (Dutch), *einen Eid schwören* (German), *ká atám* (Ewe)

With that, he delivers the most hidden keynote ever placed in a conference volume. If English, German, Dutch, and Ewe differ so much in the meaning and speech act sequences of 'swear/swear/zweren/ká atám', to name just the oath-related meaning of it, what must it be like outside their respective ranges, imploded and migrated as the world is with its uncountable languages and practices of swearing?

About the Author

Bruno Arich-Gerz graduated at the University of Cologne and received his PhD. from the University of Constance with a thesis on Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. He taught German and English studies at the universities of Antwerp, Darmstadt, Cologne, Wuppertal and RWTH Aachen University. His research interests include literary theory, memory culture(s) and Namibian cultures, literatures and linguistic varieties (one monograph, numerous peer-reviewed journal articles, external reviewer RNF, advisory board member Journal of Namibian Studies).