

Indecent influence: The positive effects of obscenity on persuasion

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This experiment examined the effects of judicious swearing on persuasion in a pro-attitudinal speech. Participants listened to one of three versions of a speech about lowering tuition that manipulated where the word “damn” appeared (beginning, end, or nowhere). The results showed that obscenity at the beginning or end of the speech significantly increased the persuasiveness of the speech and the perceived intensity of the speaker. Obscenity had no effect on speaker credibility.

In 1939, David Selznick, producer of *Gone With the Wind*, was fined \$5,000 by the Hollywood Production Code Commission for the profane word that ended Rhett Butler’s famous line, “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn” (Vertres, 1997). Sixty-five years later, US Vice President Dick Cheney used a substantially stronger word when he told Vermont Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy to, in the words of *The Washington Times*, “perform an anatomical sexual impossibility” (Simms, 2004, p.98). The statement garnered no fine, and Cheney offered no apology. Indeed, in an interview with Neil Cavuto of Fox News, Cheney expressed no regrets, explaining instead that he “felt better afterwards” (FOXNews.com, 2004, ¶101).

Clearly, society’s stance against swearing has become more relaxed in recent years. The increasing acceptability of swearing raises the possibility that obscenity could have a positive effect on the perceptions of the speaker. In fact, Cheney’s use of obscenity actually endeared him to some. As blogger

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Ravenwood explained, “The more I hear about Vice President Dick Cheney telling Senator Patrick Leahy to go fuck himself, the better I like Cheney” (Ravenwood’s Universe, 2004, ¶1). Along these lines, a poster to the bulletin board on PromoteLiberty.org argued that Cheney’s comment “shows a remarkable degree of restraint on the part of the Vice President yet a willingness to stand up for his personal honor and convictions” (FMeekins, 2004, ¶4).

The present experiment was designed to examine the effects of obscenity on the perceptions of a speaker and the persuasiveness of a speech. However, as the reactions to Cheney’s statement suggest, obscenity may have its most positive effect when targeted at a congenial audience. Given this, the present experiment examined the persuasive impact of a single swear word incorporated into a pro-attitudinal speech. The present experiment also examined the effects of obscenity on the perceived intensity and credibility of the speaker.

SWEARING AND PERSUASION

What are the effects of swearing on the influence process? Past research suggests two possibilities: (a) increasing the perceived intensity of the communicator and (b) decreasing credibility.

Intensity

Hamilton, Hunter, and Burgoon (1990) defined intensity as a stylistic feature of language that is expressed through emotionality and specificity. Emotional intensity is the degree of affect in the source’s language. Obscene language can be seen as a form of intense language (Bradac, Bowers, & Courtright, 1979).

A study examining motivation for why people swear had female and male college students complete a survey to determine their beliefs about the common motives for their use of obscenity and why others use obscenity (Fine & Johnson, 1984). The study examined 10 possible motives: to express anger, to emphasize feelings, out of habit, peer pressure, to relieve tensions and frustrations, because the word is taboo, to act cool, to get attention, because the word is acceptable, and lack of another word. Across gender, the motives of expressing anger and emphasizing feelings were found to be of greatest importance.¹

¹ Although people swear to express anger, they also swear to express other emotions such as happiness. At the 2003 Grammy awards, for example, Bono of the rock group U2 used an obscenity to express how happy he was with the fact that his band had just won an award.

Fine and Johnson's (1984) results demonstrate that the emphasis of feelings is an important motive for swearing. Furthermore, people recognize that other people swear, in part, to emphasize feeling. In this regard, Mulac (1976) found that a speaker can demonstrate strong emphasis about a topic by using obscene language, but the obscene language detracts from other aspects of how the speaker is perceived. Nonetheless, in regards to persuasion, Fine and Johnson's results suggest that if an audience hears a speaker swear when giving a speech on a particular topic, then the audience might infer that the speaker is emphasizing feelings. Acknowledgement of such a point might motivate the audience to take particular note of the argument and, quite possibly, to be especially influenced by the communication.

In fact, research supports the idea that speakers can increase persuasion by increasing the intensity of their language. According to a causal model by Bradac, Bowers, and Courtright (1980) based on reinforcement expectancy theory, language intensity influences attitude change through two steps: language intensity affects source evaluation and source evaluation affects attitude change. If swear words act as strong or intense language, then obscenity may increase persuasion in the same way as other forms of intense language. However, unlike some other forms of intense language, swearing may negatively impact source evaluation by reducing credibility.

Credibility

In *Cursing in America*, Jay (1992) claims that cursing at an inappropriate time will reduce a speaker's credibility, persuasiveness, and perceived professionalism. Therefore, Jay cautions that swearing for persuasive reasons should be used only when the speaker has nothing to lose.

Past research on obscenity and persuasion supports Jay's (1992) concern. For example, Bostrom, Baseheart, and Rossiter (1973) examined reactions to people who swear. This experiment looked at the persuasive effects of three types of profane language: religious (e.g., damn), excretory (e.g., shit), and sexual (e.g., fuck) obscenity. The participants listened to a tape-recorded interview about a topic and evaluated the topic before and after listening to the tape. Overall, Bostrom et al. (1973) did not find support for the prediction that obscenity would increase persuasion. Another study conducted by Hamilton (1989) found that obscenity increased audience disgust with the message and negative perceptions of the source.

However, the lack of persuasion effects in these studies may have stemmed from the choice of topics, which were counter-attitudinal for most participants. For counter-attitudinal topics, listeners may use swearing as an excuse to reject the message. On the other hand, swearing may increase

persuasion for pro-attitudinal topics. Nevertheless, given Jay's (1992) caution, the present experiment examined the possible detrimental effects of obscenity on the credibility of the speaker.

THE CURRENT EXPERIMENT

The current experiment examined the effects of swearing on the persuasive impact of a speech and the intensity and credibility of the speaker. Because of the dearth of evidence for the persuasive power of obscenity, the present experiment used swearing in a manner optimized for its effectiveness: one relatively mild swear word ("damn") was placed at the beginning or end of a pro-attitudinal speech.

Method

Participants. A total of 88 introductory psychology students from a large Midwestern university participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement.

Design and procedure. The participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (no swear word, swear word at the beginning of the speech, swear word at the end). After giving informed consent, participants were seated in front of a computer and instructed to follow the instructions on the computer.

The computer played a 5-minute videotaped speech about the topic of lowering tuition at a different university, a pro-attitudinal topic of low relevance to the participants. When the participants finished watching the speech, they completed scales that measured their attitudes on the topic and their perceptions of the speaker. After the participants finished, they were probed for suspicion and debriefed.

Materials. There were three speeches of similar length. The speeches discussed the topic of lowering tuition at a different university. The speeches had a mixture of strong and weak arguments. Strong arguments included how students have to take into account how much school will cost when deciding where to go and how the school will be saving the students money. Weak arguments included how the school could use lowering tuition as a selling point and how the community will be more attractive to businesses because the students would have more money to spend in the town. Judicious swearing was operationalized as a single instance of the relatively inoffensive word "damn." The swear word appeared either at the beginning ("... that lowering of tuition is not only a great idea, but damn it, also the most reasonable one for all parties involved.") or end ("Damn it, I think

lowering tuition is a great idea.”) of the speech. The control speech was the same speech without the swear word.²

The speeches were delivered in a video format on a computer screen using Medialab experimental software (Jarvis, 2002). The male speaker could be seen from mid-chest up in front of a neutral background. The speaker attempted to maintain the same tone for every speech.

There were two surveys that assessed the participants' attitudes about the speaker and the speech. The first survey was a nine-item scale that asked questions about the participants' attitudes toward the speaker. The questions of most interest were the three questions about the intensity of the speaker (how passionately, strongly, and enthusiastically did the speaker feel) and three questions about the credibility of the speaker (how credible, trustworthy, and knowledgeable the audience found the speaker). There were an additional three questions about how similar the speaker was to the participant (was the speaker like them, similar to them, and akin to them) that were used for further study. The second survey was a four-item scale that asked about the participants' attitudes about lowering tuition (how much did they like the idea of lowering tuition, how much did they think it was a good idea at the school that was implementing the plan, would they implement such a plan at their school, and did the speech make them feel more positive or negative towards the idea). All questions used similar seven-point response options with all points labeled (e.g., not at all credible, not credible, somewhat not credible, neutral, somewhat credible, credible, very credible).

Results

The purpose of the present experiment was to examine the effects of swearing on the perceptions of the speaker and the persuasiveness of the speech. These were tested using a series of univariate ANOVAs comparing the three conditions on each dependent variable (speaker intensity, speaker credibility, and attitude about topic; see Table 1). Each dependent variable displayed good internal consistency (intensity: $\alpha = .87$, credibility: $\alpha = .83$, and attitude about topic: $\alpha = .82$). Speaker intensity was correlated with speaker credibility ($r = .28$, $p = .009$) and with attitude about the topic ($r = .35$, $p < .001$). Speaker credibility did not correlate with attitude about the topic ($r = .12$, $p = .267$).

² The experiment contained an additional condition with swearing in the middle of the speech. Unfortunately, this condition inadvertently confounded the placement of the swear word with its use (“... then the alumni may feel that the damn school already has taken enough money from them.”). This condition did not differ from the control condition on persuasion, speaker intensity, or speaker credibility, but given the confound, it is unclear whether the lack of an effect was due to the placement of the swear word or its use.

TABLE 1
Effects of one swear word on persuasiveness of a speech and perceptions of the speaker

	<i>No obscenity (control)</i>	<i>Obscenity at the beginning</i>	<i>Obscenity at the end</i>
Attitude about lowering tuition	4.14 <i>SD</i> = 0.40	4.42 ^a <i>SD</i> = 0.45	4.34 ^a <i>SD</i> = 0.41
Speaker intensity	4.40 <i>SD</i> = 1.03	4.89 ^a <i>SD</i> = 0.81	5.02 ^a <i>SD</i> = 0.98
Speaker credibility	4.91 ^a <i>SD</i> = 0.73	4.91 ^a <i>SD</i> = 0.75	4.98 ^a <i>SD</i> = 0.76

Scales range from 1–7 with higher values indicating more persuasion, greater intensity, and greater credibility. Means within a row that share a superscript are not significantly different.

Swearing had a significant effect on participants' attitudes about lowering tuition, $F(2, 85) = 3.751$, $p = .027$. Follow-up contrasts showed that the speeches with the swear word at the beginning or end were significantly more persuasive than the control speech (see Table 1). The speeches with the swear word in the beginning and end did not significantly differ from each other. Swearing also had a significant effect on participants' perceptions of the intensity of the speaker, $F(2, 85) = 3.473$, $p = .035$. Follow-up contrasts revealed the same pattern as for attitudes about lowering tuition: swearing at the beginning or end of the speech led to significantly higher perceptions of speaker intensity than no swearing. Swearing did not significantly impact perceptions of speaker credibility, $F(2, 85) = 0.052$, $p = .945$.³

Mediational analysis. To test whether the effects of swearing on persuasion were fully or partially mediated by increased intensity, three regression analyses were conducted (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In each of these regressions, the three conditions were represented by two contrast vectors. Contrast vector 1 (CV1) compared the beginning and end conditions against the control condition. Contrast vector 2 (CV2) compared the beginning condition against the end condition. CV1 represented the comparison of interest. CV2 was included to fully represent the three conditions in the regression equations.

In the first regression, intensity was regressed on the contrast vectors. Consistent with the ANOVA results above, CV1 was a significant predictor of intensity, $B = -.395$, $SE_B = .152$, $\beta = -.270$, $t = -2.599$, $p = .011$. In the second regression, attitude toward lowering tuition was regressed on the contrast vectors. Also consistent with the ANOVA results, CV1 was a significant predictor of attitude toward lowering tuition, $B = -.938$,

³ When looking at the expertise and trustworthiness components of credibility separately, the results were similarly nonsignificant—expertise: $F(2, 85) = 0.184$, $p = .832$, trustworthiness: $F(2, 85) = 0.224$, $p = .800$.

$SE_B = .352$, $\beta = -.276$, $t = -2.661$, $p = .009$. In the third regression, attitude toward lowering tuition was regressed on the contrast vectors and intensity. CV1 remained a significant predictor, $B = -.067$, $SE_B = .031$, $\beta = -.228$, $t = -2.131$, $p = .036$, although the beta was reduced somewhat, suggesting partial mediation. Speaker intensity approached significance, $B = .075$, $SE_B = .046$, $\beta = .174$, $t = 1.628$, $p = .107$. It should be noted, however, that although the experimental manipulation allows a causal interpretation of the effect of swearing on intensity and persuasion, the relationship between intensity and persuasion is correlational, and the data are consistent with other possible causal relationships.

Discussion

The purpose of this experiment was to examine the effects of judicious swearing on persuasion in a pro-attitudinal speech. Results demonstrated that swearing at the beginning and at the end of the speech led to more positive attitudes about the topic and greater perceptions of speaker intensity. These results provide the first demonstration of the persuasive power of obscenity, and they suggest that judiciously used obscenity can increase persuasion, at least within the context of a pro-attitudinal speech.

Mediational analyses suggested that speaker intensity partially mediated the effects of swearing on persuasion, although the effect of intensity on persuasion in the final regression equation was not statistically significant. This may be due to a lack of statistical power. Additional research should be conducted to further test the mediational effect. These findings are congruent with the idea that language intensity can lead to higher levels of attitude change and they suggest that swear words can be used in a similar way to other forms of intense language.

In the present experiment, swearing had no impact on speaker credibility. In regards to credibility, it is possible that swearing may be affecting credibility both positively and negatively, leading to an overall null effect. Obscenity could impact credibility positively because the use of obscenity could make a credible speaker appear more human. Consistent with this, Aune and Kikuchi (1993) found that language intensity increased source credibility in a pro-attitudinal message. However, obscenity could also impact credibility negatively because the use of obscenity could be seen as inappropriate for a credible speaker. Future work is needed to tease apart the relationship between swearing and the different aspects of credibility: expertise and trustworthiness. It is also possible that credibility would have greater importance in a counter-attitudinal speech in which the audience might be motivated to reject the speech by derogating the qualities of the speaker.

Limitations and future directions. As described above, the present experiment was designed to examine the persuasive power of obscenity in an optimal setting: a pro-attitudinal speech containing a single, relatively mild swear word. Future studies could examine whether obscenity's persuasive effect is limited to this domain. Are there situations in which obscenity can increase persuasion even in a counter-attitudinal speech? Would obscenity be more or less useful if the message arguments are all strong or weak? What would be the effects of using stronger (and potentially more offensive) swear words? Would an increase in the number of swear words increase their persuasive impact? It might be the case that the effects of swearing on persuasion are curvilinear; additional swear words may increase a message's persuasive impact only to the extent that they are perceived as appropriate. Once the swearing becomes excessive, however, it may backfire.

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