



## **Study of Swear Words in Selected Literary Works: A Syntactic-Semantic Analysis**

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### **Keywords**

swearing, swear words, syntactic, semantic, expletives, cursing.

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the syntactic and semantic functions of swear words. The reason behind conducting this study is the steady increase of the use of swear words in every day conversations, which is naturally reflected in literary works. The study aims at revealing the roles and functions that swear words have within the structure of the sentence, showing the different types of swear words and giving reason for the act of swearing in human beings especially young ones. Hypothetically assumed that swearing has emotive, emphatic and even social purposes. In addition, swear words have a variety of syntactic and semantic functions, which mainly depend on the context and the situation. Furthermore, the classification of swear words vary from one scholar to other because of the subjective and connotative implications that swearing have. The significance of the study lies in the fact that although swearing is frowned upon by many people, it represents an essential part of human language. Additionally, any linguistic phenomenon is worth investigating whether it seems inappropriate or not. The data under analysis is the novel *Eleanor & Park* by the American novelist Rainbow Rowell. The novel is a love story between two teenagers set in the 80s and it was chosen due to the ample use of swear words among the characters. The study uses the classification of McEnery's (2005) who categorizes swear words based on their syntactic and semantic functions. The results of the study show that syntactically swear words occupy almost all slots in sentence structure and semantically the function range from emotive, emphatic, connotative, literal and social.

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## **1. Introduction**

People used to say that the use of swear words and the act of swearing is a characteristics of an inappropriate or bad language and often equated with profanity, cursing, blasphemy, and vulgar language and has been described as dirty, foul, offensive, low, inferior, etc. However, what has once been considered a low and inferior language is now shared and normalized among all people. Whether people like it or not, swear words have become a significant part of everyday interactions. A major swing toward normalizing swearing has been a trend in societies all over the world and a parallel trend in all types of literature is trending as well.

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Many scholars in various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, history have studied swear words and the act of swearing. Within the realm of linguistics, swear words and swearing have been the subject of interest in multiple subfields such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics, neurolinguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis etc. However, due to its bad character, the studies on swear words are far less than other types of study and scholars who conduct those studies often facing negative attitudes from their peers.

In this study, the focus is on the syntactic and semantic analysis of swear words and swearing in an American novel. The study aims at identifying the different types of swear words used in the novel and secondly to examine both the syntactic forms and functions of these words. The study will hopefully shed light on how fiction writers imbed swear words into the syntactic structures of sentences and how these words add to the semantic meaning those sentences.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1. Syntactic Analysis**

The word syntax, according to Crystal (2008), is “[a] traditional term for the study of the rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences in a language” (p.471). It is one of the main constituents of grammar. The syntactic rules enable people to know how to start a question how to form noun phrases in which adjectives usually precede nouns, how subjects normally come before verbs in non-question sentences, how prepositional phrases begins with a preposition etc.

According to Sportiche et al. (2014), syntax is mainly related to the analysis of sentences in which several methods are employed in analyzing a sentence. Syntacticians study word order in which words must occur in a certain order. Another type of syntactic analysis is constituency. Among the things that syntax should explain is how different word orders of the same sentence are once acceptable i.e. (grammatical) and other times are not (ungrammatical). It must account for the fact that only certain orders acceptable. Another focus of syntax is constituency or constituent structure which studies how components e.g. (articles, nouns, verbs etc.) combine to build larger constituents (noun phrases, verb phrases etc.). Syntax also explains a linguistic phenomenon called substitution. By substituting one element with another the syntactician can test which string of words form a single unit and which ones do not. Other types of syntactic analysis include ellipsis, topicalization, movement, subordination and coordination, form classes, phrase and clause structures and types etc.

### **2.2. Semantic Analysis**

Crystal (2008) defines semantics as a “major branch of linguistics devoted to the study of meaning in language” (p.428). The term semantics raises several controversies among linguists but simply put, it is the study of the relationship between words and how to draw meaning from them. Goddard (2013) proposes that in semantic analysis, linguists relate syntactic structures, from the levels of morphemes to the level of the writing as a whole, to “their language-independent meanings.” In addition, it involves the removal of particular features that are only

understood within certain linguistic and cultural contexts i.e. related to pragmatics. Semantic analysis starts with the relationship between words which requires an understanding of lexical relations such as hyponymy synonymy, antonymy, etc. Semantics also studies concepts like denotation, connotation, collocation etc.

Since, as mentioned before, meaning is a complex phenomenon to study, linguists divide semantic studies into several areas of which are the main three theories: formal semantics, lexical semantics, and conceptual semantics. In formal semantics linguists use various methods and techniques derived from all fields of knowledge such as mathematics, philosophy, and logic in order to analyze the wide range of connections between language in one hand and reality, truth and possibility in the other. In lexical semantics, linguists analyze linguistic items such as words and phrases within text to understand meaning in terms of the context. This includes studying separate nouns, verbs, adjectives, prefixes, root words, suffixes, or longer phrases or idioms etc. Finally, in conceptual semantics linguists deal with concepts and how they are formed from a thought in the human mind to become a word or a phrase.

### **3. Swearing and Swear Words**

As it seems simple at first sight, the term swearing is not easy to define nor to explain since it contains a lot of other terms within it such as oath-taking, cursing, insulting etc. According to Ljung (2001), English, French and Swedish are the only languages in which the term swearing has two meanings oath-taking and uttering a profane expression. The following definitions reflect the complexities and the varieties of the use of the term swearing.

Trask (2014, p.213) defines swearing in general as “using language which is considered vulgar, obscene or blasphemous by the community as a whole.” The use of swear words according to him, may be deliberate in everyday conversations, or they may be uttered impulsively by a speaker in response to an unpleasant shock. He argues that the impulsive and unconscious use of swear words is not controlled by the usual areas of the brain that are responsible for language production, but rather by a part much deeper and more ancient which is called ‘the limbic system’. On the other hand, Jay (1992) defines swearing as offensive words uttered to express powerful emotions or to harm other people by insulting them. He suggests that swearing is an act directed toward a particular person(s) as an act of insult. According to him, the use of certain words swearing in specific contexts affects both the speaker and the listener within the setting of a speech situation. For him, the usage of swear words, or how the words function in use, is more significant than identifying the grammatical or the etymological categories of swear words. Furthermore, he argues that swearing, or as he prefers to call it ‘cursing’, is not restricted to a specific semantic or linguistic item used in a specific act, but rather “each usage having a different intention or function for the speaker or listener.” He further suggests that swearing refers to many types of acts such as insulting, humoring, using profanity or ethnic slurs.

‘Bad language’ is the term used by McEnery (2009) to describe the use of swear words. According to him, the power of swear words depends on the preference of

the speaker which might range from very weak to very strong offence. (Ljung, 2011) goes further in suggesting that swearing has a function as a device that gives extra emphasis to utterances. These utterances, according to him, are combined with phonological techniques such as stress, intonation, tone, and non-linguistic techniques like gestures, and facial expressions. Swearing also, Ljung adds, contains taboo words that are used with non-literal meaning.

Lipka (1992) defines swear words as a semantic category of lexemes which are marked "stylistically, affectively, or emotionally" (p.66). He points out that the meaning of swear words are not based on the denotative meanings but rather connotative ones either totally or partially. These distinct vocabulary items, according to him, are marked connotatively by taboo references. Conversely, many scholars have attempted to give a definition of swear words which is not constructed on semantic basis but on the function they fulfil. The functions are classified according to the denotative and connotative functions of the lexical units. The connotative functions range from emotional to social aspects of communicative expressions. Emotional expressions have a phatic or exclamatory functions used to express anger, despair, contentment, emotion, hatred and all other kinds of inner feelings.

### **3.1. Significance of Swear Words**

The Classification of swear words allows linguists to define different types of reference or meaning that swear words have. What is considered taboo or profane depends on certain scopes of human experiences and there are logical and philosophical purposes behind swearing. Swear words are not simple speech sounds with no intrinsic meaning. In addition, some expressions or swear words have cross-classification in terms of meaning and use. Thus, it is not possible to interpret the meaning of swear words devoid of contextual elements. Expressions like 'Son of a bitch' can be either an insult or an epithet according to how the speaker uses it.

Another reason for the importance of classification is that swear words have unique characteristics that they seem interesting to study. Moreover, natural languages are constantly growing and changing over time. This leads to the fact that some swear words such as (fuck) have been in use for many centuries and other derivatives like (motherfucker) are relatively new. So in order to understand the changes in the nature of swear words from one class to other it is important to be aware of the factors behind language change.

### **3.2. Classification of Swearing**

Although they are mainly subjective and emotive, the classification of swearing differs from one scholar to another. Furthermore, they are distinguished according to field of study. For instance, the classification of swear words in linguistics is different from literature. Even within linguistics, the classification differs according to the subfield of linguistics or the focus of study.

Hughes (1991), following Montagu's (1967) work, classify swear as circling around taboo expressions such as sexual taboos, bodily functions (excretory/scatological taboos) religious taboos (profanity). The words themselves do not manifest taboo

characteristics and did not use to be obscene but they are developed as a result of social prohibition. Furthermore, swear words do not necessarily convey their conventional literal meaning.

According to Wajnryb (2005), swear words are expletive expressions that are classified into social connection, catharsis and aggression. Cathartic and aggressive functions are in compatibility with Pinker's (2007) postulation of swearing as a means of releasing pain and anger.

Crystal (2003) makes a distinction between taboo language, the abusive (invective) language, the language of swearing, though the three may overlap or coincide. He classifies swear words as: obscenity (the expression of indecent sexuality); dirty or rude words; blasphemy (showing contempt or lack of reverence particularly towards God or gods); and profanity (including irrelevant reference to holy things or people). In addition, Crystal suggests that under the term swearing lies all types of 'foulmouthed' language.

Swan's (2005) classification divides swear words in English into three basic groups. The first group contains words connected with Christianity for instance holy names e.g. Jesus, Christ, God which might be used by people either in formal and respectful situations or when being upset or shocked. The second group involves the use of certain words associated with sexual activity parts of the body e.g. (fuck, balls, and tits) which are considered profane or taboo by many people. And the last group of words refer to the bodily wastes and the parts associated with them e.g. (piss, shit, and fart).

### **3.3. The Functions of Swearing**

The functions of swearing are far greater and complex than some of the ones mentioned in the previous definitions of swearing. Montagu (1967) in his book *The Anatomy of Swearing* investigates the origin of swearing in human language. He traces the roots of swearing back to the expression of discomfort and frustration by children. He claims that children acquire new ways to express anger according to the response of caretakers whether positively or. He takes as an example the word 'damn' by which parents express anger when the child does something bad. To the child the word is associated with negative states such as anger and frustration.

Swearing includes various forms such as that people swear because 'something is so', swearing 'to do something', swearing at 'somebody or something', and sometimes simply out of exasperation (Hughes, 1991). Hughes claims that swearing at somebody is the most dominant mode of swearing. Similarly, Wierzbicka (1987) points out that swearing at somebody is meant to express an emotion, a particular message or a particular attitude towards someone or something. These functions are reiterated by Jay and Janschewitz (2008) who argue that the main purpose of swearing at someone is to express emotions, especially anger and frustration. However, they show that swear words used to offend other people can be mild or strong. Although dependent on the context in which they are uttered, the mild swear words are not intended to offend unlike strong swear words whose primary purpose is to produce an undesired emotional influence on a listener.



The act of swearing is more probable to happen when people feel a great level of stress (Montagu, 1967). This view is similar to Jay's (2009) who considers swearing as a cathartic action that frees people of anger and frustration. The cathartic effect might be a perfect explanation to why swearing might be a substitute for physical aggression. This explanation is supported by a study conducted by Vingerhoets et al. (2013) who argue that the feelings of anger and frustration can be reduced by the act of swearing which results in decreasing the levels of stress and consequently avoiding physical encounters. In addition, Stephens et al. (2009) suggest that swearing can be effective in relieving pain by studying the ability of people to hold their hands in extremely cold water which led to the conclusion that people who were swearing during the experiment could hold their hands for twice as long those who didn't.

Another function of swearing which the most relative to language is a communicative function. The act of swearing might communicate a warning due to an emotional state. Thus, swearing functions as an alarm signal which means according to Vingerhoets et al. (2013) that a potential threat is being communicated. This can work in opposite direction by swearing in response to another act of swearing by showing aggression in order for the attack to stop. This can be traced back to a primitive response similar to ones that animals show. "[T]he growling of an animal communicates its emotional state, so other animals will be deterred from further action, and the resulting growling animal's stress level will subsequently be reduced (Vingerhoets et al. 2013, p.290). This act might have changed after humans started to use language to communicate in which growling might have been replaced by the use of swearing to demonstrate the intention to cause harm. Moreover, Rassin and Muris (2005) point out that both verbal and physical actions are usually accompanied by swearing. By swearing, people show that they are ready to respond and fight back. So, this can increase self-confidence and self-esteem. In short, swearing can cause terror and fear in others.

To sum up the functions and purposes of swearing, it is quite helpful to present Pinker's (2007) list of five types of swearing classified according to its functions. The first function is abusive swearing which is intended as an act of offense, intimidation or to inflict emotional or psychological damage. The second type of cathartic swearing that is used as a response to inner pain or hardship. The third type is dysphemistic swearing in which is used to express that the addresser has negative thoughts of the subject matter and tries to impose the same on thoughts on the addressee. The fourth type is emphatic swearing that is meant to attract additional attention to something considered worth paying attention to. And the final type according to him is idiomatic swearing which is used for no specific purpose but rather as a sign to show informality and solidarity between the addresser and the addressee in an informal situation.

#### **4. Previous Studies**

Numerous studies have been conducted to study swear words from a linguistic point of view. But, there is not enough space to mention all of them, so the studies will be mainly on the use of swear words in literature.

A study by Dooling (1996) discusses the biological reasons of why people, especially males, curse and use swear words. He argues that females' reactions are different towards swearing. In addition the study have shown that normal language is produced in the higher structure of the brain, whereas 'bad language' is preserved in the lower structure, i.e., in a different part of the brain. Furthermore he argues that males use the lower structure of the brain more than females do, which supports the claim that male's brain is wired for violence and swearing.

Alquraishy (2009) has studied Shakespeare's use of swear words in his famous play Hamlet. The study concludes that although most swear words are taboos or profanity, but it does not necessarily mean that they are insulting the listener. In certain contexts, she points out, a speaker's intention is only to promote social harmony. At others, the speaker swears out a pain cry. Thus, the effects of swearing, according to her, depend mostly on the psychological state of the speaker and hence it can be determined whether the kind of swearing is abusive, cathartic, social, emphatic or blasphemous.

According to Grey (2020), citing the words of the psychologist Francis Compton, a great number of teenagers imitate adults by swearing. Hence, they associate maturity with the children and verbal demonstration of swearing. Teens think that their peers will perceive them as mature and assume that swearing helps them to do that. Even children, according to Compton, believe they would seem 'older' when using swear words. Similarly, Kirk (2013) argues that as young people get older, they generally start to use lesser swearing. Nonetheless, the word 'shit', according to the study, remains usable by all age groups. Swear words such as 'fuck', 'dick', 'bitch' and 'faggot' decline drastically as young people grow old and they replace them with words like 'crap', 'damn' and 'darn'.

## **5. Methodology and Data Analysis**

### **5.1. Data Selection**

The data of this study is a New York Times Best Seller novel *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell an American novelist. It is a love story of two young people set in 80s of the twentieth century. The main characters are Eleanor and Park who fall in love. The novel was selected because the language used by the characters is full of swearing, and swear words. The analysis will all the 58 chapters of the novel. The swear words are only taking from the dialogues between characters and not from the words of the writer.

### **5.2. The Model and Analysis of the Data**

The analysis of the data is McEnery's (2005) classification according to syntactic and semantic categorization of swear words. The following are the categories with examples from the novel (if available):

#### **'Predicative negative adjective**

'Life's a bastard.'

"You're full of shit"

### **Adverbial booster**

“She’s fucking hot is what she is”

“They’re fucking huge”

### **Cursing expletive**

“Those were my Human Growth and Development notes, dicklick”

“Are you retarded?”

“Watch it, raghead”

“Fuck David Carradine – fucking Chuck Norris.”

“Fuck, Sabrina, can’t you shut her up?”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.”

“Motherfuckers, all of them.”

“That little fucker ...”

### **Destinational usage**

“Fuck off”

### **Emphatic adverb/adjective**

“It’s just a fucking box,”

“How could you forget the fucking pumpkin on Christmas,”

“You look ready to bite the head off a fucking bat.”

“It so fucking does”

“I fucking told you”

“But what’s the fucking point?”

“Tina’s house must be fucking Disney-land, huh?”

“Your fucking stepdad?”

“Fucking stepdads,”

“What the fuck does Sheridan know about kung fu?”

“Fucking Kung Fu, fucking David Carradine.”

“What the fuck is that noise?”

“What the fuck is this?”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Park?”

### **Figurative extension of literal meaning**

“and he’s gonna shit if you’re not ready”

“I didn’t go near Steve’s ass,”



### **Idiomatic 'set phrase'**

"If my Jonesy kicked Steve's ass"

### **General expletives**

"Imagine that bastard losing his shit on you."

"Shit, Mikey"

"What's your dad? An ass."

### **Premodifying intensifying negative adjective**

"you're such a fucking racist"

"Anyone who whups Steve Dixon's sorry ass deserves a medal,"

### **'Pronominal' form with undefined referent**

"it's a real fucking thing"

### **Religious oaths used for emphasis**

"Jesus, you sound so stupid."

"God. You too?"

"Oh my God, he's so cute"

"God," she said.

"Jesus-fuck,"

**Table 1.** Frequency of Types of Swear Words'

| <b>Types of Swear Words</b>                  | <b>Frequency</b> |
|--|------------------|
| Predicative negative adjective               | 2                |
| Adverbial booster                            | 2                |
| Cursing expletive                            | 9                |
| Destinational usage                          | 1                |
| Emphatic adverb/adjective                    | 14               |
| Figurative extension of literal meaning      | 2                |
| Idiomatic 'set phrase'                       | 1                |
| General expletives                           | 3                |
| Premodifying intensifying negative adjective | 2                |
| 'Pronominal' form with undefined referent    | 1                |
| Religious oaths used for emphasis            | 5                |

### **5.3. Discussion of the Results**

The results of the study show several significant points. The first one is the variety in the use of swear words such as 'fuck' and all its derivatives. The word fuck is present in 6 different categories in which it occupies various syntactic and semantic slots. The results also show that the 'Emphatic adverb/adjective' is the most used one with 14 different usages. The second most used category is 'General expletives' which is used 9 times. The third prominent category is the 'Religious oaths used for emphasis' which is used 5 times. All other categories are used only once or twice.

Another important observation is that swear words seem to occupy all slots in the sentence structure that can be occupied by an open class item with exceptions such as the use of swear words as adverbs. Swear words may occur as subject, verb, complement, object, and adverbials. However, most of the swear words seem to be optional constituent in the sentence and can be omitted without affecting the syntactic structure of the sentence. Moreover, the semantic roles of swear words are generally to modify or emphasize the utterances and they usually express emotive and connotational meanings.

## **6. Conclusion**

The use of swear words, especially among young ones, has significantly increased in the last few decades. Naturally, with this increase, a parallel one seems to occur in literature. The use of swear words is as old as literature itself but in recent years, it is almost impossible to have a literary work with no swearing and cursing. The aim of the study is to examine and analyze the roles that swear words have within the structure of the sentence and to show their syntactic and semantic properties.

The novel under investigation is full of swearing and swear words. However, the use of swear words is mainly done by the young characters and only used rarely by adults. In addition, only few young characters use swear words and not all of them. This finding supports the previous study conducted by Kirk (2013) who argues that the use of swear words is popular among teenagers and this use declines as they grow older.

Another finding of the study is that the use of swear words is more frequent with males and less with females. This is an evidence in support of Dooling (1996) who suggests that males and females react differently to the use of swear words and this reaction is biologically determined in human beings.

The use of swear words is not always to cause harm or to insult other people but also it has some social and cultural functions. This is what is concluded by Alquraishy (2009) who argues that the use of swearing is sometimes intended to create social harmony and solidarity and its function can only be determined by the context within which it occurs.

Finally, the study has shown that swear words have a wide range of syntactic and semantic functions and they fill almost all slots in the structure of the sentence. In addition, the study reveals that swear words not only have connotational and metaphorical meaning but sometimes they are used in the most literal way. Furthermore, the semantic functions of swear words vary from emotive to emphatic to social according to the context and the situation.

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