

PROFANITY IN NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

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Abstract

This study examined the negative effects of profane words on the individuals. Swearing is prevalent in our society and men are said to be bigger swearers than women. Although swearing is not gender-specific, it is believed to be reserved for men because women are expected to speak 'properly'. (Knyazyan, 2015). One of the purposes of the study is to investigate the effects of swear words on the individuals. The work achieved this by investigating through qualitative descriptive method the literary work of Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, to reveal the negative effect of profane words on the individuals. A total number of five (5) utterances were purposively selected from the texts. Impoliteness theory propounded by Jonathan Culpeper in 1996 formed the theoretical framework. This theory helps in analyzing the selected utterances from El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. An attempt was made to see the extent profane words affect individuals. The researcher found out that most people swear to ridicule a person, to attack the face, to damage the face, to accuse, to express one's feelings and so on. The study recommends that other researchers should broaden the study using other approaches (i.e pragmatic and stylistic approaches) other than sociolinguistic approach.

Keywords: Sexism, Profanity, Profane words, Swearing, Impoliteness theory

Introduction

Communication plays an important role in human life. Without communication, people in the society will not be able to understand each other since they do not have any social contact. Social contact is very essential for human beings because it is a foundation through which connection is built among people in the society. Therefore, to make a social contact function properly, people need to have language as a means of communication. As a means of communication, language has several functions. Some people use words that are considered profane to express themselves especially when angry. Some of these profane words are taboo, euphemism and dysphemism. They are used to swear, insult or mock a person. Many words and expressions are viewed as taboo and dysphemism. Such words are those used to describe death, sex, our bodies and their functions; and words used to insult other people.

This paper also shows how we use language playfully and figuratively in order to swear and to insult. This can be seen as euphemism. Euphemism is an important part of everyday speech. Many linguists, sociologists and anthropologists have noted the crucial role that euphemism plays in different aspects of real-world communication. Euphemism, therefore, can be examined through different discourses: social, religious, linguistic, political and so on. It is also believed that euphemism is employed to exert an effective emotional power on a listener's mind. Hence, euphemism is an expression intended by the speaker to be less offensive or troubling to the listener than the word or phrase it replaces (Sadock, 43).

Statement of the Problem

Language is very vital in the society. It can be used to redirect the consciousness of the society. There are quite a number of research works on profanity and sexism. Knyazyan (25) looked at *Male and Female Profanity in English Anecdote*. Amadi (121) looked at *Sexism in English: A Lexical Study of Teachers' Vocabulary Choices in Select Institutions of Higher Learning in South-East Nigeria*. Also, Kremin (18) looked at *Sexist Swearing and Slurs*. However, very few researchers focused on the use of language as a potent tool used to oppress and suppress women and the implications of the use of profane words on the individual.

This study filled the gap in scholarship and the researcher intends to fill it by exposing the negative effects profane words have on the individual.

The following research questions are expected to guide this paper:

- a. To what extent is language used in expressing profane words in El Saadawai's *Woman at Point Zero*?
- b. To what degree does the effect of the use of swear words and have on the individuals in E Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*?

The Concept of Profanity

Profanity can sometimes be interpreted as antisocial, harmful and abusive if, for example, it is intended to harm or convey aggression and hostile emotions (Stone, McMillan and Hazelton, 66). Mabry (214) says that profanity also refers to the use of obscene language including taboo and swear words, which in regular social settings are considered inappropriate and in some situations unacceptable. Mabry further says that profanity includes sexual references, blasphemy, objects eliciting disgust, ethnic-racial-gender slurs, vulgar terms or offensive slang. On the other hand, Jay and Janschewitz (5) advise that instead of thinking of swearing as uniformly harmful or morally wrong, more meaningful information about swearing can be obtained by asking what communication goals swearing achieves? They went further to say that swear words can achieve a number of outcomes as when used positively for joking or storytelling, stress management, fitting in with the crowd or as a substitute for physical aggression.

Speech involving profane words has a stronger impact on people than regular speech and has been shown to be processed on a deeper level in people's minds (Jay, Caldwell-Harris and King, 99). Jay and Janschewitz (6) noted that swearing is a natural part of language development and that male speech differs from female speech in terms of swearing. The reasons for using swear words depend on the person and the situation, yet profanity is commonly related to the expression of emotions such as anger, frustration or surprise (Jay and Janschewitz, 6).

Types of Swearing

Taboo

The word 'taboo' has become universal and widely used nowadays. The term originates from the Tongan language which is spoken by the inhabitants of Polynesia in the Pacific archipelago. It was first defined and introduced in English in 1777 by Captain James Cook and it usually means 'untouchable' or 'forbidden'. Many words and expressions are viewed as 'taboo' such as those used to describe sex, our bodies and their functions and those used to insult other people (Allan and Burridge, 30).

Cook uses taboo (or tabu) to describe the behaviour of Polynesians towards things that were not to be done, entered, seen or touched. For instance, there are food taboos in most societies. These are mostly religion-based: the vegetarianism of Hindus, the proscription of meat on

Fridays during lent among Catholics, the proscription of pork in Islam, the constraints of food preparation in Judaism and so on.

Various Definitions of Taboo

Roth (39) asserts that taboos can be a repugnant and appalling action which includes the display of some bodily functions. Fershtman, Gneezy and Hoffman went further in their definition:

Taboos are sometimes referred to as doing the ‘unthinkable’. Even thinking about violating a taboo is problematic. The sanctions associated pertain not just to the behaviour that contradicts the taboo, but also merely thinking or considering such a behaviour. Under this interpretation, a taboo is a form of ‘thought police’ that governs not just human behaviour, but also its thoughts (142)

Hughes (343) admits that taboo transforms into some prohibitions and restrictions varying in all societies. Hughes tries to expand the definition into some aspects in which taboo is manifested. The manifestation could be in several relations of things, creatures, human experiences, condition, deeds and words. Hughes notes that taboo is linguistically rooted in ‘word magic’ in which people believe that certain creatures or forces cannot or must not be named. In addition to this, Allan and Burridge (32) explain that taboo arises out of social constraint on the individual’s behaviour where it can cause harm, discomfort or injury.

According to Allan (160), “that which is taboo is forbidden”. Taboo words are those considered offensive, shocking, or indecent when used in certain contexts. Allan and Burridge (30) define taboo as a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts.

From the foregoing definitions and explanations of taboo, it can be understood that different contexts of place or time serve different manifestations of taboo. This is why several authors such as Allan and Burridge (32) claim that there is no absolute taboo.

Euphemism

Euphemism is as old as language itself. Tal (111), states that the old Greek people used euphemism to avoid talking about bloody mythological creatures by the holy and gracious ones. He also confirms that the Romans tend to omit rough expressions from their speeches by replacing them with expressions accepted by the society.

Euphemism is an important part of everyday speech. Many linguists, sociologists and anthropologists have noted the crucial role that euphemism plays in different aspects of real-world communication. Euphemism, therefore, can be examined through different discourses: social, religious, linguistic, political and so on. It is also believed that euphemism is used to have an effective emotional power on a listener’s mind. Hence, euphemism is an expression intended by the speaker to be less offensive or troubling to the listener than the word or phrase it replaces (Sadock, 43).

Dysphemism

Dysphemism is technically the opposite of euphemism. Whereas euphemisms seek to soften the impact of some horrific event or taboo subject by indirect language and calming metaphors, dysphemisms are starkly direct, metaphorical or gruesomely physical (Hughes, 344). Hughes claims that although dysphemism was first recorded in 1884, it has only recently been unlisted in many general dictionaries and reference books.

Allan and Burridge (35) agree with Hughes that dysphemism is the opposite of euphemism and, by and large, it is tabooed. Allan and Burridge claim that speakers resort to dysphemism

to talk about people and things that frustrate and annoy them; that they disapprove of and wish to disparage, humiliate and degrade. Allan and Burridge go further to say dysphemistic expressions include curses, name calling and any sort of derogatory comment directed towards others in order to insult or wound them.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research was based on Impoliteness theory by Jonathan Culpeper in 1996.

Impoliteness theory

Jonathan Culpeper made good use of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness to introduce his theory of impoliteness which is considered a "parasite of politeness". Although impoliteness is based on Brown and Levinson's politeness, Culpeper refutes Brown and Levinson's view of politeness as "marginal" to everyday conversation. It asserts that understanding the notion of politeness is impossible without comprehending impoliteness phenomenon and, therefore the analytical framework of impoliteness needs to be improved and receive the due consideration (Mullany and Stockwell, 72). The Culpeper's model has an advantage because it is built on real life data.

The most well-known definition of impoliteness is mentioned by Culpeper cited in Bousfield and Locher (134) in which he described impoliteness "as the use of strategies designed to attack face and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony".

Super-strategies for Impoliteness

Culpeper sets up five super strategies by which impoliteness can be created and received, these are:

Bald on Record Impoliteness: According to Bousfield (71), this strategy is employed when there is much face at risk and when a speaker intends to damage the hearer's face thus the impolite utterance will be performed directly and clearly.

Positive Impoliteness: Bousfield and Locher (135) claim that this strategy is used to damage the hearer's positive face want. Culpeper (252) cited in Mullany and Stockwell (72) adds a range of sub-strategies to positive impoliteness and these include:

- a. Ignoring and snubbing the other.
- b. Denying common ground with the hearer.
- c. Selecting a sensitive or undesirable topic to talk about.
- d. Using appropriate identity markers.
- e. Being disinterested and unsympathetic with the hearer.
- f. Looking for disagreements.
- g. Using obscure language and inserting secretive words without the discourse.
- h. Using taboo words.

Negative Impoliteness: This strategy is designed to attack the hearer's negative face want (Thielemann and Kosta, 238). Culpeper cited in Mullany and Stockwell (73) says that negative impoliteness involves the following sub-strategies:

- a. Scorn
- b. Frighten
- c. Ridicule
- d. And invade the hearer's space literally or metaphorically.

Sarcasm or Mock Impoliteness: According to Thielemann and Kosta (239), this strategy, the speakers performs the FTA using politeness strategies which are clearly insincere. In other words, sarcasm means the use of one or more sub-strategies which are superficially suitable and accepted but deeply, they have the opposite meaning (Bousfield, 72).

Withhold Politeness: Withhold Politeness happens when a speaker does not do politeness strategy that is wished by the hearer, or he speaker just keeps silent (Thielemann and Kosta, 239).

Functions of Impoliteness

Culpeper (252) proposes three functions of impoliteness. They are: Affective impoliteness, coercive impoliteness and entertaining impoliteness.

Affective Impoliteness: Affective impoliteness is one of the specific functions in impoliteness strategy. Here, the speaker exposes his anger towards the hearer and this consequently generates a negative emotional atmosphere between the speaker and the hearer (Huang, 150).

Coercive Impoliteness: the function seeks a rearrangement of values between the speaker and the hearer. It is like that the speaker has his current benefits reinforced or protected. The benefits could be material (e.g speaker uses this function to force hearer to give him something) or symbolic (e.g an impolite insult to reduce hearer's value and increase speaker's own). Culpeper believes that this impoliteness type takes place, to a greater extent, in situations where the producer belongs to a higher and more powerful social level than the hearer's level.

Entertaining Impoliteness: Culpepper states that this function involves entertainment at a potential target of the impoliteness. The potential target is also called a potential victim. In this case, the victim is not often aware of the impoliteness that is done by another participant, but the participant who is entertained is aware of the target.

Methodology

The utterances drawn from the selected novels were subjected to qualitative descriptive analysis. The qualitative descriptive method was used to describe the utterances that were made by the characters in order to ascertain the effect profane words have on an individual and the reason people use swear words. The representation of the textual data were described based on the theoretical framework (Impoliteness theory), the study also answered the research questions.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi

s/n	Utterances	Types of Profanity	Output Strategies	Super Strategies	Types of Impoliteness
1	They're going to hang her in a few days time. What use are you, or anybody else to her. Leave her alone! (p. 2)	Dysphemism	Seek disagreement	Negative Impoliteness	Affective Impoliteness
2.	For after all, I was only a successful prostitute. (p. 9)	Euphemism	Insincere	Sarcasm/mock politeness	Entertaining Impoliteness
3.	His mouth was like that of a camel with a big opening and wide jaws. (p.18)	Dysphemism	Ridicule	Negative Impoliteness	Affective Impoliteness

4.	She is a good girl but the world is full of bastard. (p.37)	Dysphemism	Insincere	Negative Impoliteness	Coercive Impoliteness
5.	How dare you raise your voice when you're speaking to me, you street walker, you low woman! (p.52)	Dysphemism	Attack Face	Bald on record Impoliteness	Affective Impoliteness

Discussion of Findings

The researcher analyzed 5 utterances from the novel under the subheading: Types of profanity, output strategies, super strategies, types of impoliteness. The major type of profanity found from the analysis was dysphemism. The researcher successfully found out the reason people swear. Some of these reasons were to ridicule, attack face, being insincere and to seek to disagree.

Based on the result of the data, the researcher tends to compare the present work with previous researchers. Putri analyzed dysphemism in series titled *Teen Wolf Season 1*. Putri used Allan and Burrige's theory to find the types of dysphemism and the purposes of the use of dysphemism.

Apart from the finding (i.e people mostly swear when they are angry) that is closely related to Putri's findings, this present research used textual data that was purposively drawn from the novel for the analysis. Moreover, the object of this present work extends to more findings and it successfully analyzed the types of profanity in the novel.

Conclusion

There are a lot of profane words that are not borne out of emotions. The swear words can be used to entertain the hearer. Though the present study has done reasonably well on the analysis of profanity, the analysis is by no means exhaustive. As a result of limitations, among which time was a 'principal factor', the study was restricted to a study of profanity using the sociolinguistic approach only. A critical examination of this phenomenon, however, reveals that other approaches such as a stylistic approach and pragmatic approach were not covered in the present study. We therefore recommend further studies in these areas.

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