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German as a foreign language

Aapkatt, Ramfotzn, Zierlabbe. What does the Schimpfwörterbuch tell us about the role of swearing in modern German?

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Research into the topic of swearing in modern German reveals contradictory attitudes and opinions. Swearing, in the sense of insulting another or swearing at oneself, is regarded as a taboo utterance, and is widely condemned for being aggressive, a sign of low social standing, and of poor and inappropriate language use. Yet swearing is a common feature of everyday language and there are contexts in which certain speakers of a particular status use swearing spontaneously, or strategically, and this is positively connoted. This would suggest a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of swearing in the speech community, which is essential in acquiring communicative competence in the language. The analysis in this article focuses on popular attitudes to swearing, both folk linguistic and social, and on the role of the *Schimpfwörterbuch*. There are a large number of swearing dictionaries in German, the majority of which are dialect swearing dictionaries. Drawing on theories of language, status and power by Bourdieu (1991, 2010), and linguistic research conducted by Andersson & Trudgill (1990), McEnery (2006), Shandler (2006), and Reershemius (2009), this article will explore the relationship between swearing and power in modern German, and will discuss to what extent the existence of swearing dictionaries reveals not only an interest and delight in taboo language, but also a desire to establish a regional or group identity through reference to such publications.

1. Introduction

Sag deinem Hauptmann: Vor Ihre Kaiserliche Majestät habe ich, wie immer, schuldigen Respekt. Er aber, sag's ihm, er kann mich im Arsch lecken! (Goethe 1984 [1773]: 72-73).

What better, if a predictable, way to commence a discussion of swearing in German than with reference to the (in)famous Schwäbischer Gruß, otherwise known as the Götz-Zitat? It provides us with an apt example of an outburst of swearing in a formulation that is still used today. The opinions expressed about this quotation provide an insight into the apparently contradictory attitudes regarding swearing that prevail in modern society: the use of the vulgarism is admired as an accurate representation of actual speech, as an example of the raw, emotional Genie-Sprache that characterised the *Sturm und Drang* movement; yet there is also surprise that such a literary classic would use such language, and discomfort or disapproval at the vulgarity of the expression.¹ The

¹ The 1984 Reclam edition omits the offending phrase: “er kann mich – – –”. The ‘Götz-Zitat’ has remained in the popular imagination. For example, in a parliamentary exchange on 5

tension between swearing as a common, everyday utterance and its taboo nature is still very much apparent. Swearing is a central component of a speaker's communicative repertoire, and provides the linguistic means to express a range of emotions, including anger, frustration, fear, as well as surprise and happiness. It is a form of speech acquired at an early age and is, not infrequently, one of the few forms of utterance left to those who suffer neurological damage that otherwise robs them of the power of speech (Jay 2000). Yet, it is often stigmatised from a linguistic and social perspective, and is categorised as bad language and grouped together with deviant behaviours, such as gambling or drinking (Burnham 1993).

This analysis will examine the contradictions in attitudes to swearing in German by focusing on two themes in particular:

- popular and public attitudes to swearing
- the swearing dictionary in German.

The stigmatisation of swearing, and its restriction through legislation contrasted with the popularity of the *Schimpfwörterbuch* in German, present us with a seemingly puzzling contradiction. In the analysis, I suggest that they are not as irreconcilable as they first appear: what is required is a more nuanced understanding of the role and function of swearing in modern German. As a theoretical background, the analysis draws on Pierre Bourdieu's notions of language and power (Bourdieu 1991), which have been developed further in a sociolinguistic context by Tony McEnery (2006), on Peter Trudgill and Lars Andersson's notions of taboo language and impurity (1990: 53-66), and on the concept of post-vernacular language practices identified by Jeffrey Shandler (2006) and Gertrud

September 1991, the wittiness of an exchange between SPD politician Rudolf Dreßler and CDU/CSU Employment Minister, Norbert Blüm is based entirely on the assumption that everyone is familiar with the 'Götz-Zitat'. Dreßler: "Zur Charakterisierung Ihrer fortwährenden sozialpolitischen Selbstbeweihräucherung, Herr Blüm, fällt mir eigentlich nur das bekannte Zitat aus dem *Götz von Berlichingen* ein". Zurufe von der CDU/CSU: "Oh!". Dreßler: "'Wo viel Licht ist, fällt viel Schatten.' Die Bemerkungen der Kollegen aus der CDU/CSU-Fraktion beweisen, daß Sie den *Götz von Berlichingen* nicht zu Ende gelesen haben" (Quoted in Pursch 1992: 126). See also discussions about the potential offensiveness of the expression "Leck mich im/am Arsch": "Bei der Aussage 'Leck mich am Arsch' handelt es sich um eine im Alltag häufig verwendete Floskel. Eine Herabwürdigung des Gegenübers ist darin nicht zusehen [sic] und damit auch keine strafbare Beleidigung (Beschluss vom 24.06.2009 - Az.: 2 Cs 36 Js 7167/09)". 'Das Götz-Zitat ist keine strafbare Beleidigung', *Silicon.de* 16. März 2010 <http://www.silicon.de/lifestyle/auch-das-noch/0,39041065,41529050,00/das_goetz_zitat_ist_keine_strafbare_beleidigung.htm>, accessed 10 September 2010.

Reershemius (2009). Through the application of these approaches and findings, I will argue that the swearing dictionary fulfils a range of functions, including popular entertainment, language interest, and emblematic shows of regional identity, and that it highlights differences between acceptable and taboo swear words, so maintaining the stigmatisation of swearing in German. Although the general discussion of attitudes to swearing incorporate references to both German and English, the main focus of the analysis will be on German.

2. Swearing: language of power or powerlessness?

Bourdieu's notions of legitimate competence in language and the socially and economically determined factors influencing these are relevant to swearing on two accounts (Bourdieu 1991: 44). First, as Bourdieu argues, 'the legitimate language', in most cases the standard language, is something that those in power strive to maintain and impose on others, and those of lesser status attempt to adopt in order to enjoy a degree of social and economic success. This powerful form of speech is maintained through distinction and disassociation from others; it becomes the model against which other forms, for example, regional dialects, are measured (Bourdieu 1991: 45-49). Thus, regional, 'non-standard' varieties are not considered legitimate and become stigmatised, along with their speakers.² Although Bourdieu does not specifically mention vulgarisms or profanity, I would argue that his notions of social distinction and stigmatisation can be readily applied to swearing. Second, swearing is excluded from the standard, and from official usage. Whilst being is a common feature of everyday language, it is nonetheless stigmatised in formal situations and has no place within the education system. This is reflected in attitudes to the education of native speakers and learners of German as a foreign language alike. Although research on language learning identifies learners' (in)appropriate use of swear words as being part of the acquisition of communicative competence, language learning materials rarely thematise swearing as a

² Howard Giles and Nancy Niedzielski discuss how negative social connotations attached to a particular language or dialect result in certain speakers subjecting themselves to 'linguistic self-hatred', and that "how 'well' we speak can have great social currency ... research has shown, across cultures, that speaking in a way that is consensually agreed upon to be unpleasant would lead to some unfavourable social consequences. These might include when one is being diagnosed in a clinic, when giving evidence in court, seeking housing and when seeking statusful employment" (Giles & Niedzielski 1998: 87-88).

characteristic of everyday language (Hymes 1974: 75-76; Mercury 1995: 28-36; Yorio 1980: 440-441).³ The psychologist Timothy Jay comments that

[s]ome of the first words that non-native speakers want to know when learning a foreign language are the taboo, dirty, and obscene words in the language. Why is this so? Nonnative [sic] speakers have to recognize insulting speech directed towards them, as well as know what words not to say in polite situations. (Jay 2000: 154-155)

As swearing, particularly in German, is often regionally determined (as illustrated by the plethora of dialect swearing dictionaries in German), it is a sign of powerless language on both accounts, as being considered ‘base’ and ‘vulgar’, and by its close association with dialect (Bourdieu 1991: 50-59).

Contemporary attitudes to swearing have been shaped by centuries of developing perspectives on what constitutes powerful and legitimate forms of speech, and swearing has been classified in most languages as illegitimate and lacking in prestige. Based on Bourdieu’s notion of taste and distinction in a social context, McEnery describes how swearing in English becomes part of the attempt to establish the language of a particular group or groups as the language of power. Language becomes one of the ‘shibboleths of taste’ which distinguishes those that recognise and use it from those who cannot, and forms what McEnery terms the “linguistic mandate of power” (Bourdieu 2010; McEnery 2006: 11, 128)⁴. Thus, ‘bad language’, i.e. swearing and obscenities, become ‘emblematic of exclusion from the establishment’; these utterances do not form part of the linguistic ‘habitus’ that defines a legitimate, powerful speaker. However, the existence of a prestige variety of language in itself creates the linguistic environment in which non-standard manifestations of the language, e.g. slang, swearing, enjoy covert prestige amongst particular social groups. In contexts, speakers will swear as part of their everyday language, or will use swearing strategically, and this is sanctioned by the speech community. What is more, as McEnery states, “the possibility was created to use bad language as a token of rebellion against that establishment” (McEnery 2006: 127). Swearing as linguistic rebellion has potentially powerful consequences: it constitutes a threat to authority, as Edward Battista describes: “[i]t makes for public insecurity in that

³ See, for example, *How-to-learn-a-language.com*, which has a discussion forum on the theme of “[profanity and swearing](#)”, accessed 25 October 2010. For a humorous approach to language learning and swearing, see Sterling Johnson (1995) *English as a Second F*cking Language*. New York: St Martin’s Press.

⁴ Although McEnery refers to the 1984, first edition of Bourdieu, I cite the 2010 second edition here).

it challenges the solemnity and respectability associated with authority or its symbols” (Battistella 2005: 74). The rebellious act of swearing, therefore, has to be controlled by the state through legislation and a system of fines and imprisonment.

2.1 Swearing: definitions and examples

The expression ‘swearing’ itself requires closer examination, as it refers to a range of communicative activities and draws on a variety of lexical resources. Andersson and Trudgill, for example, point to the difficulty of defining swearing satisfactorily (1990: 53-55). Their working definition of swearing is as follows. Swearing:

- refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatised in the culture;
- should not be interpreted literally;
- can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes. (Andersson & Trudgill 1990: 53)

Although very generalised, these three characteristics highlight the central principles behind swearing that is common to all languages: it cannot function without drawing on taboo or stigmatised topics, behaviour or activities; it involves a high degree of creative or figurative use of language; and it is not commonly employed in ‘neutral’ speech. Andersson and Trudgill describe how swear words fulfil a variety of functions, including expletive, abusive, humorous, and auxiliary (i.e. with no specific reference, e.g. in English, “this bloody car won’t work” (Andersson & Trudgill 1990: 61). Despite the stigmatisation of swearing as ‘bad’ or ‘lazy’ language, it is nonetheless subject to grammatical patterns that distinguish a non-native from a native speaker. Andersson and Trudgill cite, for example, the expression “who the hell has been here?” with the Swedish “vem i helvete har varit här?”, literally “who in hell has been here?” for a native speaker to use the ‘in’ pronoun in the English expression would be considered unidiomatic (Andersson & Trudgill 1990: 62). This is particularly problematic for non-native speakers of English, as it is similar to the expression ‘what in hell’s name ...?’. Similarly, the German expression ‘so ein fuck’, as analogous to ‘so ein Scheiß’, has no equivalent in English (lit. ‘such a fuck’), although there are contexts in which ‘fuck’ can be used in nominal form, albeit to refer to a person. This is common in US English, with expressions such as ‘you dumb fuck!’

The swearing lexicon of a particular individual is of course shaped by national, regional or dialectal factors, and languages vary in the source domains of their swear words, with some drawing more heavily on animal terms and others preferring sexual or scatological

swear words. Nationally and regionally, some languages or dialects may favour religious swear words. Damaris Nübling and Marianne Vogel's analysis of cursing and swearing in Dutch, German, and Swedish reveals differences in the thematic preferences for swear words and their corresponding lexical fields, with Dutch drawing largely on sexual vocabulary, German on scatological, and Swedish on religious terminology (Nübling & Vogel 2004).⁵ On a regional level, Bavarian is well-known for its expressive range of religious curses, with *Herrgott*, *Sakrament* and *Kruzifix* being the most common elements, and can often be combined within one utterance, e.g. 'Herrgottsackramentkruzifix!'. As an example of how curses can be uttered in Bavarian dialect, Reinhold Aman cites "Kruzifixalleluja, bist du ein dammischer Schafzipfel, ein dammischer!" (Aman 1972: 180-181). The dialect swearing dictionaries focus precisely on these regional differences in swear words and emphasise the uniqueness of a particular dialect in possessing the fitting swear word in a particular context.

The differentiation between *cursing* and *swearing* provides a further complication. Cursing represents the invocation of a divinity, such as 'May God strike me dead!', or 'scher dich zum Teufel', and was traditionally regarded as a blasphemous utterance and therefore separate from more secular forms of exclamation and insult. In modern times, however, cursing has for the most part lost its divine, supernatural associations. There are examples of swearing that involve the combination of religious and vulgar (sexual) vocabulary, e.g. 'goddam motherfucker', or 'bloody shithead' (Kiener 1983: 229). However, whereas in British English, the two terms remain lexically separate; for example, one can combine them in the phrase 'cursing and swearing'; in US English they are largely synonymous.⁶

It is not only the differences between American and British English terminology that are evident; working with German and English similarly requires some clarification of the expressions used and their meanings. The English term *swearing* incorporates the meanings of both the German 'schwören' and 'schimpfen', and although the link between *fluchen* and *schwören* is no longer obvious, in previous centuries, they were regarded as part of the same speech act. 'Schwören', in the sense of 'swearing an oath', was seen as a ritualistic, legitimate and authoritative speech act, which involved

⁵ See also Burgen (1998).

⁶ US English refers to 'curse words' and uses 'to curse' in the British English sense of 'to swear'. See, for example, Timothy Jay's *Why We Curse. A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech* (2000).

invoking the divine as a witness to the act, whereas ‘fluchen’ was an illegitimate act, which nonetheless also had potentially serious consequences (Horan 2007: 47-48). The act denoted by the English *swearing* corresponds to *fluchen*, *schimpfen*, *jdn beschimpfen*, *ausschimpfen*, etc. The choice of expression may depend on the directionality of the swearing, i.e. whether it is directed at another or at oneself (Kiener 1983:123).

3. Attitudes to swearing: legal, moral, and folk-linguistic opinions

In his analysis of cursing (used here in the US English sense), Jay puts forward a Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of why cursing is central to our everyday communicative practices, and draws on neurological, psychological, and sociocultural motivations. Cursing, or swearing, can be automatic, or reflexive, or it can be premeditated and employed for specific purposes. Our specific cultures and languages may shape the range of taboo subjects and expressions employed in swearing, but the functions remain the same:

Cursing permits humans to express strong emotions verbally in a manner that noncurse words cannot achieve. Humans are emotional, sexual, and aggressive animals. Because we have strong emotions *and* speech, we learn to use cursing to express our emotions. (Jay 2000: 243. Italics in original).

As emotional ‘animals’, we swear to express our feelings and relieve inner tensions. This appears to be a necessary linguistic activity and one that is widely condoned, as communicated by the expressions ‘Dampf ablassen’, ‘etwas loswerden’ in German, as well as the clichés ‘Schimpfen tut gut’, ‘Schimpfen is Balsam für die Seele’, or even ‘Schimpfen ist der Stuhlgang der Seele’. Yet swearing at another, in public, is subject to regulations and potential punishments, and is often stigmatised in the popular imagination as morally dubious and linguistically impoverished.

3.1 Legal restrictions on swearing in German

In expressing strong emotions through swearing, the speech act can be potentially directed at three addresses, as outlined by Gabriele Scheffler (2000: 119):

1. addressatenorientiert: Herabsetzung des Beschimpften mit dem Ziel, ihn zu deprimieren/kränken/reizen/ihm eine Niederlage zu bereiten;

2. sprecherorientiert: sich abreagieren des Beschimpfenden zum Lösen von Spannungen, affektiven Erregungen/Befriedigung von Ausdrucks-, Handlungsbedürfnissen/Steigerung des Selbstwertgefühls;
3. am Dritten orientiert: Herabsetzung, Verunglimpfung des Beschimpften im Beisein anderer.

Swearing at an individual or group of people, as identified in the first and third of Scheffler's categories is regarded as an act of aggression, resulting potentially in a fine or even imprisonment, depending on the severity of the offence. Such speech acts are governed under the following paragraphs of the *Strafgesetzbuch* in Germany: 185 (Beleidigung), 186 (Üble Nachrede), 187 (Verleumdung) (Stellmacher 2001: 212).⁷ Numerous websites dedicated to providing legal information and advice on instances of swearing at public servants, particularly police officers, or swearing at one's boss or colleagues illustrate that this is a common phenomenon and one that causes uncertainty about (severity of) punishment (see the example cited in footnote 1).

3.2 Moral and folk-linguistic attitudes to swearing

Cursing and swearing have long been regarded as a morally and socially unacceptable form of behaviour, together with other iniquitous activities such as drinking, smoking, or gambling. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious pamphlets and dictionaries of curses were published in German, warning of the dire earthly and divine punishments that could be incurred upon expression of such utterances (Horan 2007: 54-55). The seventeenth-century 'Fluchteufel', for example, was part of a series of *Teufelsbücher* that addressed contemporary societal and behavioural vices, including dancing and the fashion of wearing puffed hose amongst men (Roos 1972: 78). Pamphlets often saw the various taboo behaviours as being interlinked, i.e., gambling and drinking might lead to swearing, for example, and this is a notion that persists in modern societies. John Burnham's analysis of *Bad Habits. Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Gambling, Sexual Misbehaviour, and Swearing in American History* describes how "[s]wearing was, in fact, part of the ritual of antisocial behavior. In addition, swearing conveyed, symbolically and publicly, lower-order parochialism. Indeed,

⁷ See the *Strafgesetzbuch* online: <http://bundesrecht.juris.de/stgb/_185.html>, accessed 28 August 2010.

swearing was the purest example of the power of lower-order/underworld culture” (Burnham 2003: 208).

Swearing is regarded as both a social and a linguistic act and is stigmatised in the popular imagination on both counts. It is often regarded as a sign of ‘bad character’, low social class, lack of education, or ‘poor socialisation skills’, and this is where the social and linguistic factors interlink. Swearing is regarded not only as transgressive speech act but also as a sign of an incompetent communicator: the act of swearing is seen as ‘lazy’ – one often hears the myth that speakers that use swear words do so because they possess a limited vocabulary and either do not want to or are incapable of choosing other expressions (Andersson & Trudgill 1990: 63-64). Thus, as a contrast to swearing, which is stigmatised as ‘unimaginative’ and ‘repetitive’, lexical variation is regarded as a sign of a successful and educated speaker, as evidence of communicative competence. These negative attitudes to swearing, however, seem at odds with the amusement and delight in the expressiveness and creativity of swearing which is so clearly celebrated in the swearing dictionary.

Notions of swearing as a form of ‘contamination’ and of impoverished expression result in it being categorised as ‘bad language’ together with other non-standard and stigmatised forms of the language, including dialect, slang, and even orthographical and grammatical errors (as illustrated by Andersson & Trudgill 1990). In German, the Duden volume *Vernäht und zugeflicht! Von Versprechern, Flüchen, Dialekten & Co.* (Achilles & Pighin 2008) addresses areas of linguistic ‘panic’ among lay linguists, including Anglicisms, youth language, and swearing, and attempts to allay fears about how these manifestations of language may be both the symptom and cause of the ‘decline’ of the German language.

From a social and moral perspective, Andersson and Trudgill link the social taboos surrounding swearing with Mary Douglas’s notion of social structure. Of particular relevance is her concept of the ‘purity rule’, which relates to many areas of behaviour in society. Purity becomes the goal of social order; dirt “is essentially disorder” (Douglas 1966: 2). Thus, swearing is associated with contamination and is seen as an aspect of speech that should be eliminated. This can perhaps be traced back to creationist notions of language as a divine gift that should not be misused, and of the Christian belief that having received Holy Communion, one should strive not to sully one’s mouth with swear words. This association of swearing with dirt and contamination, and the attempt

to place strictures upon such utterances in an ordered society can also be linked to sociologist Norbert Elias's concept of the civilising process. According to Elias's model taboo behaviour, such as cursing or swearing for example, is at first regulated by external forces, i.e. through the threat of physical or pecuniary punishment, but then over several decades or even centuries becomes subject to internal control (Bogner 1997: 47-54; Elias 1994: 90-93; Horan 2007: 39-68). The act of self-censuring and -censoring is evidence that the civilising process is completed.

Therefore, notions of purity, civilisation, as explored by Douglas and Elias, and Bourdieu's concepts of social propriety, good taste and powerful language provide a cohesive theoretical framework for understanding popular stigmatisation of swearing and swear words. Those lacking in the linguistic qualities attributed to these factors are socially as well as linguistically disenfranchised. Andersson and Trudgill point out that swearing is associated largely with 'outgroups':

[I]ndividuals on the edges of society – young people, the unemployed, alcoholics and criminals (with the most peripheral last) – can be expected to show less control over their social behaviour and language. And there is no doubt that swearing is very typical of peripheral groups. (Andersson & Trudgill 1990: 66)

Although swearing is often linked to 'outgroups', an understanding of popular attitudes to swearing and reception of swearing requires a more nuanced analysis of social context and speaker. The impact and reception of swearing depends not only on the taboo nature of the utterance, and the (in)appropriateness of the situation in which it occurs, but also on the status of the speaker. If a speaker from a (powerful) ingroup occupying a powerful status swears, then it may well result in a positive reception. Jay claims that speakers are "likely to curse ... in contexts where power differences are salient, tensions are high, and the cost-benefit of cursing is appealing to the speaker" (Jay 2000: 163). In politics and the media, there are several examples of prominent figures employing swear words, which have received largely favourable responses and whose outbursts are positively connoted. Green Party politician Joschka Fischer's utterance to Bundestagspräsident Stücklen on 18 October 1984, "Mit Verlaub, Herr Präsident, Sie sind ein Arschloch!", resulted in his being ejected from that particular parliamentary session, but gained him a popular reputation as a refreshing change to most other politicians, as plain-speaking, and without artifice.⁸ The effect of Fischer's

⁸ Press articles continue to mention Fischer's utterance, both in accounts of Fischer's political life, and in accounts of how politicians lack the wit and talent for insulting opponents in

utterance came not only from his use of a vulgarism, ‘unparliamentary language’, to address a figure of authority in parliament and within a formal, semi-public context, but also because it was framed – rather incongruously, and to great effect – within the polite, ritualistic phrase ‘mit Verlaub’, which nonetheless signals disagreement with the previous speaker.

To give another high-profile example: Rudi Völlner’s outburst during an interview on the German public television channel, following the Germany versus Iceland match on 6 Sept 2003, in which he employed the expressions ‘Scheiße’, ‘so ein Scheiß’, and ‘den Arsch aufreißen’, similarly received a largely favourable reception in the public sphere. Völlner’s tirade has been portrayed subsequently as a legitimate reaction to the comments of overly-critical sports commentators, and as an exasperated defence of the German national football team, and furthermore attracted attention because it was seen as uncharacteristic of his usual verbal behaviour. The interview has become immortalised in numerous video clips on *YouTube* and elsewhere, variously titled as “Rudi Völlner rastet aus”, “Rudi tickt aus”, “Rudi Völlners Wutrede”, which receive hundreds of thousands of hits even several years after the event. Although these are regarded as rule-breaking utterances, they are more effective for being so, and do enjoy a certain prestige. What is also noticeable in these examples is the gender of the speakers. The fact that both were men means, arguably, that their taboo utterances were positively connoted, as swearing is often regarded as a (positive) marker of masculinity (Jay 2000: 165-171, Coates 2003: 45-46).⁹

parliament. See, for example ‘[Vom Straßenkämpfer zum Außenminister](#)’, *Welt online*, 12.4.08, accessed 9 September 2010, and Lydia Harder, ‘Mit Verlaub, Herr Präsident, Sie sind ein Arschloch. Nachruf auf den Zwischenruf’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *FAZ.NET*, 8 March 2010 <www.faznet.de>, accessed 9 September 2010. Harder links Fischer’s utterance with the political immaturity of the Green Party and describes this linguistic rebellion as a transitory phase: “Als die Grünen vernünftiger wurden, übernahmen die Linken deren Rolle”. It is interesting to note the variation in word order in quotations of Fischer’s words. The ARD news programme *Tageschau* quoted Fischer as saying, “Herr Präsident, mit Verlaub, Sie sind ein Arschloch”; Günter Pursch, by contrast includes the following words in his dictionary: “Herr Präsident, Sie sind ein Arschloch, mit Verlaub!”. Pursch comments that Fischer’s words were not recorded by the stenographer (Pursch 1992: 21-22).

⁹ Further examples of prominent male public figures who have used swear words include John Kerry and Dick Cheney, who, in the 2004 presidential election campaign, both used word forms of *fuck*. Battistella comments that “[b]oth received some mild criticism for their language but each man also positioned himself as a speaker who puts directness over convention” (Battistella 2005: 77).

These examples of positively connoted swearing in the public sphere, contrasted against negative attitudes to swearing, would suggest that the speech community is capable of differentiating between appropriate, status-enhancing and inappropriate manifestations of swearing. Moreover, the reception of outbursts by Fischer and Völler would suggest an interest in, even admiration of swearing, an attitude which is borne out by the popularity of swearing dictionaries in German.

4. Swearing dictionaries in German

In episode two of the third series of the BBC historical comedy *Blackadder*, entitled ‘Ink and Incapability’, the main character, Edmund Blackadder, attempts to recreate Dr. Johnson’s dictionary of English after Blackadder’s servant, Baldrick, has accidentally burnt the manuscript. Towards the end of the episode, aghast that his patron Prince George has been looking up words such as ‘fart’, Dr Johnson remarks “I hope you are not using the first English dictionary to look up rude words!” Blackadder replies, “I wouldn’t be too hopeful, that’s what all the other ones will be used for”.¹⁰ This highlights how ‘rude’ words, a category to which swear words belong, have long proved fascinating to readers of all ages. Thus the German-language swearing dictionary has enjoyed a long tradition: sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publications warning of the evils of cursing and swearing in German (referred to earlier) often included lexika of ‘forbidden’ words and expressions, for example, Andreas Musculus, *Von dem vnchristlichen / erschrecklichen / vnd grawsamem Fluchen vnd Gottslestern / Trewe vnd wolmeinende vermanung vnd warnung* (Erfurt, 1559) and Georg Albrecht, *Fluch-ABC, Das ist, Christlicher, Theologischer Bericht, Von dem grausamen Fluchen und Gotteslästern* (Dresden, 1675).¹¹ Although these were not dictionaries as we understand them today, particularly Musculus’s publication, they did codify common cursing expressions used at the time, and one might assume that their popularity was not merely due to a pious desire to avoid blasphemous and offending language. Keith Roos’s analysis of the sixteenth-century *Teufelsbücher* mentioned earlier shows that the ‘Fluchteufel’ was a bestseller at the time, and part of the reason for high sales must have

¹⁰ This witty exchange is doubtless based on a conversation between acquaintances of Dr Johnson, a Mrs Digby and a Mrs Brooke, who complimented Johnson on not having included ‘naughty’ words. His reply was, “What, my dears! Then you have been looking for them?” (Best 1829: 11-12).

¹¹ Dieter Stellmacher cites Albrecht’s *Fluch-ABC* as the earliest swearing dictionary in German (Stellmacher 2001: 211).

been an interest in the entertaining and possibly shocking examples provided (Roos 1972: 115-116). Wilfried Seibicke's entry on 'Das Schimpfwörterbuch' in Hausmann et al.'s *Ein internationales Handbuch zur Lexikographie*, vol. 2 (1990) mentions Ambrosius Gabler's *Die Nürnberger Schimpfwörter* (1797-99) as an early example of a regional dictionary, one of the many types of swearing dictionary.

4.1 Typology of the *Schimpfwörterbuch*

In my research to date, I have encountered over thirty German-language swearing dictionaries published between 1970 and 2010, with some currently in their seventh or eighth reprint. The majority of swearing dictionaries are devoted to a particular dialect or region of Germany, but there are other categories that deserve mention. The *Schimpfwörterbücher* can be categorised as follows:

- a) The 'general' swearing dictionary, e.g. *Das große Schimpfwörterbuch*.
- b) The dialect swearing dictionary, e.g. *Das Hessische Schimpfwörterbuch*.
- c) The multi-lingual swearing dictionary, e.g. *Zu Gast bei Freunden: Schimpfen und Fluchen in 114 Sprachen, Englisch schimpfen: Beleidigungen, Flüche, Sauereien*.¹²
- d) 'Specialised' swearing dictionaries ('Fachschimpfwörterbücher'), e.g. *Das Parlamentarische Schimpfbuch*,¹³ *Das Szene-Schimpfwörterbuch*, *Das ultimative Schimpfwörterbuch fürs Büro*, 'Gib's ihm!'. *Schimpfwörter gegen Männer*.

Category c), the multi-lingual swearing dictionary, reflects an interest amongst the general public in swearing in an intercultural and interlingual context. Learning about 'rude' or swear words in another language provides a light-hearted introduction to the expressive possibilities afforded by a foreign language, and facilitates a comparison with the reader's own native language. This is also evident from press articles in German on the theme of swearing in foreign languages. The German weekly magazine *Focus*, for example, compiled an online quiz which tests readers' familiarity with English swear words and expressions.¹⁴

¹² The latter title forms part of a series of books published by the Eichborn publishing house on swearing in various European languages.

¹³ There is an earlier version of this publication by Günter Pursch, entitled *Das Parlamentarische Schimpf & Schmunzel Lexikon. Von 'Abbruchunternehmen' bis 'Zynismus' 1949-1991* (1992). Pursch's 2009 publication retains the alphabetical format of the earlier dictionary, but groups the entries into theoretical categories, including 'Wahlkampf, Wahlen und Wahrheiten', and 'Den Bockmist auslöffeln – Fäkalsprache unter dem Adler'.

¹⁴ 'Englische Schimpfwörter. Have you lost your marbles?', <http://www.focus.de/reisen/reisefuehrer/englisch-schimpfen_aid_9605.html> (accessed 9 September 2010).

Looking at category b), the dialect swearing dictionary, a series was brought out in the early 1990s by the Michaela Naumann publishing house, covering the Bavarian, Cologne, Franconian, Hamburg, Palatinate, Rheinland, Saxonian, Swabian dialects. The Schuster publishing house, which specialises in publications in and about Low German, has published four dictionaries: *Plattdeutsches Schimpfwörterbuch für Westfalen* (1992); *Plattdeutsches Schimpfwörterbuch für Ostfriesen und andere Niederdeutsche* (1997); *Schellen, Schafutern un schanderen. Schimpfwörterbuch für Schleswig-Holstein* (1996); and *Von Blubberbüxen, Landhaien und Troonbüdels. Das Schimpfwörterbuch für Hamburger* (1991).¹⁵ The Schuster dictionaries are aimed at a more informed, scholarly audience, whereas the Naumann publications aim to be lighthearted and humorous, although the former group of dictionaries are intended to be entertaining as well as informative. Herbert Pfeiffer's *Das große Schimpfwörterbuch* focuses on swear words that occur in the written language, and limits his entries to nouns (Pfeiffer 1997: 7). The afterword by Wilfried Seibicke provides an insightful and academically informed analysis of swearing, addressing themes such as 'Das Wort *schimpfen* und Verwandtes' and 'Schimpfen als Normverletzung' (Pfeiffer 1997: 494-501). The existence of such a significant number of dialect swearing dictionaries in German is something that distinguishes them from their English-language counterparts, for example. Although there are swearing dictionaries in English, they tend to focus either on foreign languages or on specific themes or sources, such as swearing in the military, or in the comic *Viz* and do not address regional swear words.¹⁶ The presence and popularity of these dialect swearing dictionaries in German, I would argue, can be attributed to 'post-venacular language use', a concept explored by Jeffrey Shandler to describe the use of Yiddish in the United States after the end of the Second World War. Shandler argues that even speakers who are not fluent or frequent users of Yiddish still draw on it as a means of community identification, through symbolic or emblematic uses, such as performing in the language or using borrowed words from it (Shandler

¹⁵ See Stellmacher (2001) for an overview of the authors and types of entry for Low German swearing dictionaries.

¹⁶ See, for example, Daniel Chaffey (2008) *Dirty German: Everyday Slang from What's Up? to F*ck off!* Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press. This is one title in a series of publications on slang and swearing in other languages, including Chinese, French, Italian, and Spanish. See also William Priest (2001) *Swear like a Trooper: Dictionary of Military Words and Phrases*. History Press: Stroud; *Viz* (2008) *Roger's Profanisaurus Rex. The Magna Farta*. London: Dennis Publishing Company. The cover boasts "The world's swariest dictionary. Twice as big and swearsy. Now with over 10,000 rude words and phrases".

2006). Gertrud Reershemius explores this concept within the context of Low German usage in East Frisia in northwest Germany, and finds that speakers similarly engage in token codeswitching and emblematic use of Low German for a range of purposes, as a means of constructing “a concept of regional identity in an ever more globalized world”, and as Reershemius goes on to mention “of course, to attract tourists. Low German has become an accessory” (Reershemius 2009: 138-144). Similarly, it could be argued that compiling and reading a swearing dictionary is a part of a desire to establish a form of regional identity or even solidarity through post-vernacular engagement with the language on a light-hearted basis.¹⁷

4.2 Swearing dictionaries: motivations for compilation

Although amongst the swearing dictionaries, there are differences in the reasons for compiling and defining lists of swear words and in the potential readership of the publications, there are also a number of common, recurring topoi that address both linguistic and social questions, including the definition and codification of a dialect swear word, and the relationship between swearing, regional identity and stereotypes.

a) *Swearing is an ignored area of study/interest.*

Despite swearing being an integral part of communication, swear words are seldom documented. Herbert Pfeiffer claims that “in den Nachschlagewerken die gemeinen gegenüber den allgemeinen Wörtern zu kurz kommen, ja oft einer Selbstzensur der Wörterbuchsreiber zum Opfer fallen” (Pfeiffer 1997: 7). In a similar vein, Reinhold Aman’s *Bayrisch-österreichisches Schimpfwörterbuch* includes a section entitled “Ein unbeachtetes Forschungsgebiet: Schimpfwörter” (Aman 1972: 163).¹⁸

b) *Swearing is a humorous and fun activity.*

Particularly in the Naumann series of swearing dictionaries, the foreword often includes puns and jokes to emphasise the lightheartedness and non-threatening nature of the

¹⁷ Post-vernacular engagement with a regional form of the language can also often involve non-linguistic activity. See, for example, a series of opinion polls in the Cologne edition of the tabloid newspaper *Express* in August 2010, which asked readers to name their favourite swear word in Kölsch, and to identify their favourite brand of Kölsch beer: Chris Merting, ‘[Prost! Darauf ein Reissdorf!](#)’, *express.de*, 9 August 2010 und Sandra Ebert, ‘[Sackjeseech schönstes kölsches Schimpfwort](#)’, *express.de*, 12 August 2010.

¹⁸ Aman is the editor of *Maledicta. The International Journal of Verbal Aggression* (now discontinued). For details of contributions, see <http://aman.members.sonic.net/journal.html>, accessed 1 September 2010.

swear words: “Dieses Buch ist ein wissenschaftliches Werk, weil es Wissen schafft” (Müller 1991: 7). This example also draws on another topos in the foreword: that swearing dictionaries do not intend to present themselves as scholarly publications (see below). Similarly, the author of *Das neue Berliner Schimpfwörterbuch* emphasises the carnivalesque nature of swearing and therefore the swearing dictionary. The foreword is entitled ‘Schimpfonie einer Großstadt’; followed by a succession of puns:

Was ihr vorschwebte von “Berlin Crazy” lag und lügt fluchstäblich noch immer in der Luft – von kultur-politischem Schwafel-Dioxin ganz abgesehen [...] Wie man hört, verabschieden die Mitglieder der Deutschen Schimpfwörter-Buchgemeinschaft ihre Lieben mit “Guten Fluch”, was auch gewisse Luftfahrtgesellschaften angesichts wachsender Unfähigkeit, pünktlich zu starten, ihrem Bordpersonal als passende Grußformel nahelegen. (Hammer in Constantin 2005: 7-8).

c) *There is a distinction between (dialect) swear words and base vulgarisms.*

The former can be expressive and amusing, whereas the latter are offensive and lacking in creativity. Theodor Constantin comments on his decision to omit expressions with *Scheiß* and *Arsch*, on the grounds that they are not specific to the Berlin dialect and, on a more linguistic-aesthetic and even puristic level of argument

[i]n ihnen [...] spiegelt sich aber (abgesehen von einigen treffenden Neubildungen) weniger der aufblitzende Sprachwitz als polternd-aggressive Sprachlosigkeit. Ziel der vorliegenden Sammlung war es aber, gerade das zusammenzustellen, was den Pli [i.e. ‘Gewandtheit’] ausmacht, die Kunst der Beschimpfung. (Constantin 2000: 11)

Similarly, ‘fashionable’ swear words, such as the trend towards nouns ending in *-er*: ‘Bei-Gefahr-Dackel-Hochnehmer’, ‘Chefgrüßer’, ‘Foliengriller’ are deliberately avoided in some dictionaries.¹⁹

d) *The dictionary deliberately avoids ‘traditional’ lexicographical methods and is not attempting to be ‘scientific’ or ‘academic’.*

This topos is most common among the Naumann dialect dictionaries, and forms part of the humorous, light-hearted aim of the publications. The light-heartedness also serves to emphasise the inoffensive nature of the collection and to pre-empt any complaints both on a moral and on an academic, lexicographical level. Pfeiffer states that his methods may seem unconventional but that there is a purpose behind them: “Um dem engen Korsett schulmäßiger Lexikographie zu entgehen, mußten Ungenauigkeiten in Kauf genommen werden.” (Pfeiffer 1997: 8). In the foreword to his dictionary of Austro-

¹⁹ For examples of this particular category of swear words, see Nils Brennecke (2000) *Du Warmduscher! Meckern für Weicheier*. Frankfurt a. M.: Eichborn.

Bavarian swear words, Aman describes his decision to compile the dictionary for the general reader rather than for “ein paar Dutzend Fachkollegen”. Therefore, he explains, “wird deshalb vermieden, den sprachwissenschaftlich nicht vorgebildeten Leser mit ‘präfigierten Pejorationsmorphemen’ zu beeindrucken und zu verwirren” (Aman 1972: 7). Some authors claim to have collected their material through listening to ‘genuine’ conversations, in pubs or on the street; others have drawn on examples sent in by members of the public:

Jahrelang hatte ich in fränkischen Wirtshausstuben Nacht für Nacht den Streitgesprächen an den verschiedenen Stammtischen gelauscht, um gewissenhaft Schimpfwort für Schimpfwort zusammenzutragen. Notizblock und Bleistift waren meine ständigen Begleiter. (Ehrlitzer 1998: 7)

As part of the justification for the compilation of the dictionaries, the authors acknowledge that there is some debate concerning what constitutes a dialectal swear word, as many are common to several dialects, and that orthographical conventions do vary (Aman 1972: 189-203; Müller 1991: 8-9). The tone of the foreword to many of the dictionaries is deliberately informal and playful. In addition to puns and word play, are other manifestations of informal register, including the use of the pronouns *Ihr*, as well as the use of closing greetings, for example, ‘Euer Volker Gröbe’ (Gröbe 2001: 7). Images accompanying the text, such as the stone figure of the *Kallendresser*, the character that defecates in the guttering, that is on the front cover of *Das große Schimpfwörterbuch*, and the cartoons that accompany the entries in the majority of the swearing dictionaries also convey the non-serious, entertaining remit of the dictionary. Similarly, the integration of some swear words into the foreword is intended to set the light-hearted tone, even in the more ‘serious’ Schuster dictionaries, for example: “Zu danken gilt es ausdrücklich den *Sludertaschen*, die sich bereitwillig befragen ließen ... Nicht genannt werden wollen die *Hasenköster*, denen ich gelegentlich heimlich etwas ablauschte” (Nissen 1996: 10).

e) *Swearing is manifestation of regional pride and identity:*

In the introduction to dialect swearing dictionaries, it is clear that swearing adopts an emblematic function, and that there is a close (positively charged) association between dialect and swearing. Dialect, comments Volker Schielke in the foreword to *Das Märkische Schimpfwörterbuch*, is “die schlichte Sprache der Völker: reich an gefühlsbetonten und direkten Ausdrücken” (Schielke 1992: 8). Thus dialect is regarded

as having a distinctive swearing lexicon, one that has been lost through standardisation, and is part of a recognisable "Schimpfkultur" (Ehrlitzer 1998: 9). 'Myths' about which peoples are more adept at swearing than others are addressed: Jörg Müller in his foreword to *Das Hamburger Schimpfwörterbuch*, for example, describes how the Bavarians are traditionally regarded as being 'better' at swearing than the natives of Hamburg:

weil hier der Beweis dafür angetreten wird, daß es auch in Hamburg eine Schimpfwortkultur gibt. Dor schalln sick all de Schietbüdels ut Bayern, Franken, Hessen oder Sassen nu mol wunnern. Diese Quidjes haben doch bisher wirklich nicht glauben müssen, wir Hamburger könnten überhaupt nicht rummucken, poltern, maulen, schnottern oder bölsen. Wie sollten sie auch. Schließlich gilt der Homo hamburgensis allgemein als zurückhaltend, freundlich und bedächtig. (Müller 1991: 7-8)

In addition to discussing regional differences in character and ability to swear, the swearing dictionary also provides the opportunity to address the relationship between stereotypes of regional character and swearing.²⁰ According to the author of the swearing dictionary in the Cologne dialect, for example, an episode of swearing should not be regarded as offensive, as it is part of the 'typical' upfront and direct, yet cheerful and easy-going Cologne character. A typical *KölnerIn* speaks his or her mind, but doesn't bear any grudges:

So trefflich diese Wörter auch ausgeformt sind, wie genau der Kölsche mit ihnen seine Mitmenschen zu treffen versteht, k.o. schlagen will er damit aber niemanden. Und das Schimpfwort, die Schimpfwortsalve oder gar die Schimpfkanonade abgeschossen, der dicke Hals abgeschwollen, die Zornesröte einer gesunden Gesichtsfarbe gewichen, der Pulsschlag wieder im Normbereich, kann es durchaus heißen: Dat moot ens jesagt wäde. No es et jot. Jetzt künne mer widder e Kölsch zesamme drinke – Das mußte einmal gesagt werden. Nun ist es gut. Jetzt können wir wieder ein helles, obergäriges Bier miteinander trinken. (Gröbe 2001: 7).

Non-linguistic themes regarding regional and national pride are also thematised, including the cliché that one should consider discovering more about one's own country rather than travel or holiday abroad (Schielke 1992: 9). In *Das Sächsische Schimpfwörterbuch*, Kleeberg links the changes and frustrations of life in post-unification Germany to the need to swear in dialect (Kleeberg 1991: 7-9).

²⁰ On the theme of regionalisms and regional stereotypes, see Reershemius (2001) and (2009).

4.3 Why do swearing dictionaries in German exist?

The question is: why do these swearing dictionaries exist? If swearing is stigmatised and is not considered a socially powerful or prestigious form of speech, as far as Bourdieu's notion of legitimate, powerful language is concerned, then why does the public display such interest in publications that codify these forms? The answer lies precisely in the combination of the genre of the dictionary with the taboo nature of swearing, and in particular, swearing in dialect. The dictionary codifies, defines these words, but it also restricts them within a particular format. The fact that swear words are listed in swearing dictionaries is evidence in itself that they are considered amusing rather than offensive. The swearing dictionaries are highly selective in their choice of entries and avoid expressions considered racist or that discriminate against the physically or mentally disabled. Thus, as Stellmacher states, the swearing dictionary is a 'curiosa', an object of interest and entertainment (Stellmacher 2001: 211, 217).²¹ This interest is part of a wider fascination for what Deborah Cameron terms "linguistic arcana, ephemera and trivia with dictionaries of this and glossaries of that" (Cameron 1995: viii).²²

Stellmacher and Cameron's observations about dictionaries prompted me to elicit answers from a group of potential users. I asked a group of fourth-year undergraduate and postgraduate students in a German linguistics seminar why they or anyone would buy a swearing dictionary. Although this was not a statistically significant socio-linguistic study, and offers anecdotal evidence that requires further, indepth study, it nonetheless provides some insight into possible motivations for purchasing and/or reading a swearing dictionary. The group of twenty-two students consisted of native and non-native speakers of German, and my question did not focus specifically on German swearing dictionaries, although I did refer to them prior to asking the question and gave them examples of types of swearing dictionary in German. The significance of choosing this group was that they are both linguists and folk linguists, and can express opinions

²¹ Stellmacher also comments that "Schimpfwörter bieten also nicht nur bannisch deftige Wörter und verquere Schnacks, sondern viel mehr, wenn man sich die Mühe macht, diese lexikographischen Kuriositäten als ‚Anti-Pathos-Breviere‘ ernster zu nehmen, als sie es vielleicht selbst beabsichtigen" (2001: 217).

²² Cameron also quotes Roy Harris's wry observation in the London Review of Books that "modern lexicography is the last refuge of that mania for amassing curiosities and odd tit-bits of information which for so many centuries in Europe passed for 'polite' learning" (Harris 1983: 13, in Cameron 1995: viii).

from both perspectives.²³ Some of the verbal responses were predictable and reinforced the notion of the swearing dictionary as a non-serious publication. In summary, the main responses can be grouped as follows: “curiosity to find out what is the inventory of swear words in one’s own or a foreign language”, “swearing dictionaries are good fun”, “a swearing dictionary spares one the chore of having to look up swear words in a standard dictionary”, “as a joke present for a friend or family member”. Other comments included “dictionary porn”, which points to the gratuitous and voyeuristic fascination with what is considered taboo in a society, which extends in this case to language, and lends the feeling that looking up swear words is an illicit activity; and “swearing dictionaries are the Jerry Springer of popular publications”. This last response is of particular interest: when I asked the individual to elaborate on the comment, he (used in its gendered rather than generic function here) remarked that he regarded swearing dictionaries as being bought or read largely by the middle classes and not necessarily by those most likely to use the swear words listed and defined. To refer back to Bourdieu’s notions of legitimate language and power, this would mean that those who have command of the prestige form of the language have nothing to lose from engagement with swear words, either by reading swearing dictionaries, for example, or by using swear words strategically .

Although the comments made by this group of students are anecdotal, they do provide insights into reasons for the popularity of these dictionaries in general. In the case of the dialect swearing dictionary, though, interest is motivated by a broader engagement with the particular dialect and its stereotypical associations, as a post-venacular activity. Stellmacher highlights the close connection between dialect and swear words and observes that “jedes (großlandschaftliche) Dialektwörterbuch [stellt] auch ein partielles Schimpfwörterbuch [dar]” (Stellmacher 2001: 212). This interest in dialect as well as swear words is also evident in the purchasing and possible reading habits of those that buy swearing dictionaries: following the link entitled “Kunden, die diesen Artikel gekauft haben, kauften auch ...” on the pages of swearing dictionaries listed on the *Amazon.de* website reveals that the typical purchaser possesses an interest in publications about the particular dialect, rather than about swearing in general. Similarly, for purchasers of the dictionary of swearing terms for the office, the interest seems to lie

²³ See the discussion of the relationship between linguistics and folk or lay linguistics in Davies & Langer (2006 19-22).

more in characteristics of the office environment. A specialised preoccupation with a particular dialect, for example, is also accompanied by a ludic delight in temporary linguistic anarchy. These dictionaries are not intended to provide the reader with an arsenal of newly-acquired swear words; instead they offer the notional *possibility* of swearing, and allow the reader to indulge in a Bakhtinian-style linguistic carnival, with examples of the language of Billingsgate (Bakhtin 1984: 5-17).

5. Conclusion

Swearing (and/or cursing) is a common feature of everyday language and would seem to constitute a central part of our psychological, social, linguistic and communicative processes. It is often regarded as a manifestation of violence, particularly in its spoken form, and as such is subject to regulation and punishment through law. Using Bourdieu's notion of 'legitimate language', swearing forms part of non-standardised and stigmatised usage, and is therefore used primarily by those without access to powerful forms and avoided (with some exceptions) by those seeking to gain 'capital', both social and economic, from usage of the accepted standard. From a folk-linguistic perspective, swearing is perceived as 'lazy' and impoverished, attaining covert prestige status amongst certain groups of speaker. Given the negative associations with swearing, it seems contradictory that swearing dictionaries in German are so popular and part of mainstream publishing. The act of swearing, however, is subject to contradictory attitudes, being regarded as both lazy and creative, contaminating yet also liberating and entertaining. The swearing dictionary in German fulfils an interesting role here: as outlined above, these dictionaries can be regarded as manifesting a 'controlled' and ultimately non-threatening rebellion against social and linguistic norms. The swearing dictionaries communicate two primary, interlinking ideas:

- swearing in dialect is regarded as less offensive than in the standard, and is amusing and creative,
- swearing is a manifestation of regional identity and pride.

In many respects, the swearing dictionaries reflect contemporary attitudes to swearing, namely that in certain ritualised contexts, i.e. through use of dialect, in parliament, in the office (theoretically), swearing is acceptable, or at least the notion of how one might swear, is condoned. Swearing can even become an emblematic identity marker, and can signal membership of a particular community, but not a community or manifestation of

the language that poses any threat to the standard and the prestige associated with it. Most importantly, for native and non-native speakers, swearing dictionaries highlight a difference between ‘harmless’ swear words (mostly in dialect) and racist, sexist, anti-disabled swear words, with the former group regarded as humorous, the latter offensive and taboo. Thus, the swearing dictionary serves to reinforce this divide by contributing to a ‘Verharmlosung’ of certain types of swearing, and, through its omission of offensive expressions, maintains the linguistic taboos and the power of swearing to shock and offend.

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