Use of swear words has declined by more than a quarter in the UK since 1990s, says research

August 23 2021

Researchers from Aston University have found that the use of swear
words in Britain have declined by more than a quarter since the 1990s. Dr. Robbie Love, based in the College of Business and Social Sciences, looked at how swearing changed in casual British English conversation between 1994 and 2014.

As part of the study, which is published in *Text & Talk: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse & Communication Studies*, Dr. Love used two large bodies of transcriptions to analyze the use of language, including *The Spoken British National Corpus* gathered in 1994 and the same corpus from 2014. Both texts include over 15 million words, although it was found that swear words accounted for less than 1 percent.

In total, the amount of swearing was found to have fallen by 27.6 percent, from 1,822 words per million in 1994 to 1,320 words per million in 2014. The research findings also suggest that the word "f***" has overtaken "b***dy" as the most popular curse word in the UK.

In the study, Dr. Love compared the use of 16 of the nation's most common swear words, including p***, c*** and s**g, from the 1990s to the 2010s.

He also found that trends in the type of swear words used have changed over the last few decades, with 'b****y' being the most common curse word in the 1990s and 'f***' taking precedent in the 2010s.

The analysis suggests that this is largely down to a big decline in the use of 'b****y,' while 'f***' has remained relatively steady over the years. It was also found to be the second most commonly used swear word in 1994, followed by s**t, p***, b****r and c**p.

Other key findings of the study included:
• Over a twenty year period b****r had fallen from the fifth most common curse to the ninth, while b*****d dropped from seventh to 10th.
• The big climbers include s**t, from third to second, a**e, from eighth to sixth and d***, from tenth to seventh.
• T**t also rose from the 16th most common swear word in the 1990s to 13th by the 2010s.

Dr. Love then analysed demographics and discovered that, although swearing is more common in men than women, the difference between the genders has decreased notably from 2.33 times more frequent in men in 1994 to 1.68 times in 2014.

Another change concerned how much people swear as they age. In both data sets, swearing is most common among people in their 20s, and then declines with age. However, the decline was less steep in the 2010s, suggesting that people continue swearing later in life more than they did in the 1990s.

Dr. Robbie Love, lecturer in English at Aston University, said:

"This research reinforces the view that swearing plays a part in our conversational repertoire, performs useful functions in everyday life and is an everyday part of conversation for many people.

"Despite this, it is relatively under-researched precisely because it is considered to be taboo.

"Swearing performs many social functions including conveying abuse and humor, expressing emotion, creating social bonds, and constructing identity.

"The strong social conditioning around swear words makes them more
psychologically arousing and more memorable than other words, and something different happens in the brain when saying them compared to euphemistic equivalents, such as saying "f***" compared to 'the f-word.'"


Provided by Aston University

Citation: Use of swear words has declined by more than a quarter in the UK since 1990s, says research (2021, August 23) retrieved 30 October 2023 from [https://phys.org/news/2021-08-words-declined-quarter-uk-1990s.html](https://phys.org/news/2021-08-words-declined-quarter-uk-1990s.html)

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