WTF! Swearing and the Development of Human Language

A response to *Swearing is Good for You: The Amazing Science of Bad Language* by Emma Byrne

by C. R. Hallpike (February 2018)

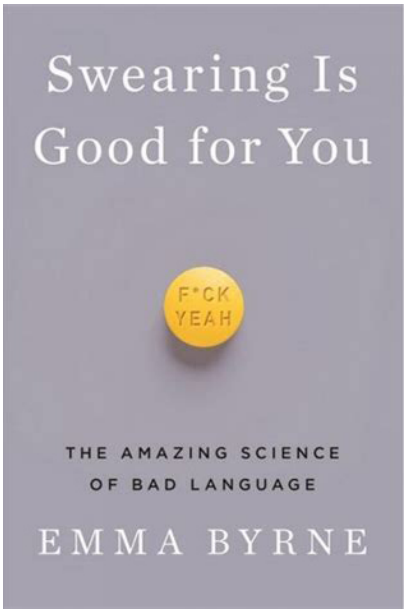
Screaming Man, Christian Worthington, 2012

Most of us, when confronting some particularly obstinate piece of DIY furniture, for example, know the satisfaction of letting rip with some fruity swear-words, so it is reassuring to learn that laboratory experiments confirm that swearing really does diminish sensations of pain. But Byrne's thesis is more important than merely showing that

swearing can be beneficial in various ways, since she argues that swearing has been an integral part of human evolution, especially in the development of language, from ancient to modern times:

> It's my hypothesis that swearing started early, that it was one of the things that motivated us to develop language in the first place. In fact, I don't think we would have made it as the world's most populous primate if we hadn't learnt to swear. As we've seen, swearing helps us deal better with our pain and frustration, it helps us to build tighter social groups and it's a good sign that we might be about to snap, which means that it forestalls violence. Without swearing, we'd have to resort to the biting, gouging and shit flinging that our primate cousins use to keep their societies in check (Byrne 2017:119).

Dr Byrne is a neuroscientist and a specialist in artificial intelligence, but unfortunately has no knowledge of anthropology that would have been rather useful in relation to her chosen topic. As a result, the vast majority of her examples are drawn from the Anglosphere and Western culture in general, and far too little attention is given to non-Western cultures: Japan, for example, which apparently 'suffers' from an almost complete lack of swearing, deserves a whole chapter to itself. But Westerners are often making the ethnocentric assumption that what is normal for them must also be normal for everyone else, a constant and universal feature of human nature itself, whereas in fact it may just be a product of social and cultural factors, and I will show that



this is the case with swearing.

Before we discuss Byrne's theory in detail, however, we should briefly review the basic features of swearing. In many cultures people deliberately use certain words, known to us as 'swear-words', that are normally considered offensive, in order to add force to what they are saying ('intensifiers'), or as insults, or to express frustration or pain. It should be noted, however, that not all insults are swear-words'liar', 'scum', or 'thief', for example—nor are many intensifiers—'fantastic', 'amazing' and so on. Cross-culturally, we find that by far the commonest criteria of offensive and insulting language are references to excretion of all kinds, the sexual parts and behaviour, especially in relation to a person's mother or other near relatives, and blasphemy. It is ironic that the basic and original meanings of 'swear' and 'oath' are the highly respectable contexts of justice and religion, as when witnesses in court swear on oath to tell the truth 'so help me God'. They only acquired their more common and opposite meanings when people 'took the Lord's name in vain' and indulged in profanity ('violating the sacred') and cursing.

The first essential feature of swear-words is, therefore, that they should refer to some particular subject-matter that has shock value derived from the violation of various taboos. The commonest of these taboos are sexual matters, followed by those related to excretion and, in many cultures, blasphemy. In an immense range of cultures, notions of pollution centre on certain bodily states—excretion, sexuality, menstruation, birth, eating, and death—and one might say that the archetypal image of dirt is that of faeces. Certainly, the original meaning of English 'dirt' was Middle English *drit*, 'ordure, 'excrement'. While disgust at faeces is a cultural universal,

disgust in itself is not sufficient to generate swear-words. Pus, vomit, and decomposing flesh are also disgusting but play only a minimal part in the vocabulary of swearing, while the human genitals in and of themselves are not considered disgusting at all, nor is sexual intercourse. We should be clear then that the notion of pollution is not based narrowly on disgust, and the central meaning of impurity or 'dirt' has plausibly been said to be 'the organic aspect of man' (Dumont 1970:50), 'the irruption of the biological into social life' (Parker 1990:63). When it comes to swearing we are dealing with complex cultural categories, not with simple psychological reactions like anger, frustration, or hostility.

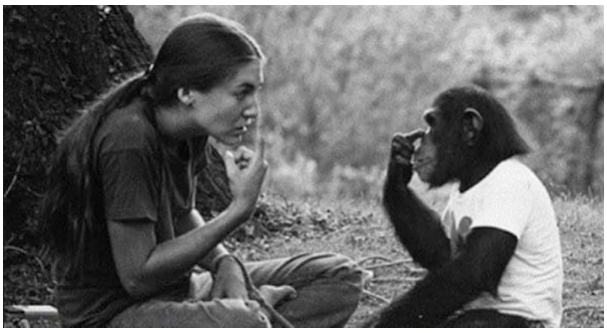
Secondly, and equally important, the culture must also distinguish in some way between *types* of words that are considered coarse, as opposed to polite or formal, and have conventions about when each type of word is permissible. The shock is delivered by using a 'coarse' word in a polite context, whereas using a 'polite' word with an excretory or sexual meaning simply doesn't work as a swear-word—'excrement-head' instead of 'shit-head' for example. Thirdly, social context is crucial in determining whether a coarse word is might actually cause offence: a group of men or workmates as opposed to mixed company or where children are present, a private conversation as opposed to an official meeting, speech as opposed to writing, etc. While swearing clearly provides various types of psychological satisfaction, it can only work in a particular type of culture with taboos and an appropriate vocabulary.

We can now move on to consider Byrne's theory about the necessity of swearing in the emergence of language. Since it is obvious at the outset that we have no evidence at all for how language developed among early human groups, nor do we

know anything about what they may have talked about, Byrne's belief that swearing must have been an essential part of the process has to look elsewhere for support. As she puts it,

> If we can't observe the development of swearing directly, what we need is a society with brains and social structures somewhat like our own, but that are only just beginning to use language. Thankfully, at least one example does exist, in the shape of the chimpanzees who have been taught to use sign language over the years (p.120).

She is referring to the studies of chimpanzees carried out in particular by the well-known Washoe project run by the Gardners, and at the "Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute" in Washington state by Professor Roger Fouts. It is very important to note, however, that these animals were not



in their wild state, but reared in Western homes and, since chimpanzees do not have the vocal apparatus for human speech, Washoe and the other apes (including those trained by Professor Fouts) were taught American Sign Language. We may accept that they were able to produce strings of a few signs to communicate with their human guardians in rudimentary ways; however, to describe these chimpanzees, as 'a society with brains and social structures somewhat like our own, but that are only just beginning to use language' is more than a little wide of the mark. A few chimpanzees living in a human household do not constitute a 'society' of any recognizable type, and certainly not one in any way resembling the foraging bands of early man; after five million years of evolution chimpanzee brains are in many ways significantly different from our own (ours are three times

larger, for example), and most linguists would likely deny that the chimpanzees in question were actually beginning to use language in the sense of acquiring grammar.

It is of special importance in assessing this attempt to simulate early human society to note that in order to live in a human household, as distinct from remaining in the wild, the chimpanzees obviously had to be toilet-trained and were made to understand that doing their "business" anywhere but in the potty was BAD and DIRTY. 'Among Washoe and the other chimpanzees raised by the Gardners and their team, the DIRTY sign was consistently used by chimpanzees and humans alike for faeces, dirty clothes and shoes, and for bodily functions' (p.137). It is the crucial sign that Byrne claims links the chimpanzees with swearing. Not perhaps surprisingly, the DIRTY sign also became used as an insult 'when people or other animals did not do what Washoe wanted. This wasn't something Washoe was taught to do; she spontaneously began using DIRTY as a pejorative and as an exclamation whenever she was frustrated' (p.137). Byrne admits, however, that this use of DIRTY was the result of the intensive potty-training that they were given by the human experimenters, and the same seems to have been the case with Fouts' chimpanzees who used the DIRTY sign in the same way. Wild chimpanzees will throw faeces when angry, as they will any other convenient object, but they are not reported as treating faeces as especially offensive, and defecation is evidently considered a normal function like eating. So it should be obvious that the association between excretion and something dirty was not one that the chimpanzees made spontaneously, by themselves, and was one that they would surely never have made in the wild.

Again, while DIRTY as used in the Washoe programme was *about* faeces, among other things such as clothes and shoes, it did

not itself specifically denote faeces and was a perfectly respectable sign, unlike SHIT in our vocabulary. (This also appears to apply to Fouts' experiments as well.) While DIRTY may have been an expression of anger, dislike, or frustration it was therefore not really swearing at all, any more than we are swearing when we angrily describe some item of pornography as 'sheer FILTH'. Byrne provides no evidence that the animals used *sexual* or *scatological* signs either as abuse or as exclamations of pain or frustration. It must also be emphasised that Byrne says nothing at all about signs referring to sexuality and the genitals in the chimpanzees' training either, but sexual modesty, like excretory modesty, is not found among wild chimpanzees or bonobos, and while junior male chimpanzees may conceal their copulation from alpha males this is merely from fear of reprisals. In human society, however, sexual modesty is a cross-cultural universal, as to a considerable extent excretory modesty is also. Where then might early humans have got the idea that sex and excretion were 'dirty' in the first place, since this association is unknown to animals? Even the evolutionary psychologist must surely falter when asked how potty-training could have worked among our ancient ancestors. It would seem, then, that the idea that excretion and sex are dirty could only have been communicated by some sort of language, which must therefore *already* have existed, and that swearing must if anything have been a consequence and not a cause of this process.

But even if our ancient ancestors had had the notion that excretory and sexual matters were in some sense dirty or taboo, it seems implausible that, at the very beginning of their experience with language, they could also have simultaneously developed a distinctively 'coarse' vocabulary in which to refer to them. Let us, however, assume for argument's sake that swearing has always throughout history

been an essential part of human language and conversation. If this were so then we would obviously expect to find it in every society, but this is not the case.

When I lived among the Konso of Ethiopia (1965-67) and the Tauade of Papua New Guinea (1970-72), I discovered that they did not swear at all, in our sense of 'What the f*ck?', 'A shitty day', 'A piss-poor effort', and so on. This was simply because they *had* no swear-words whatever: the words they used

for faeces, sexual intercourse, penis, vagina, and so on were at the same level of propriety as the words for house, tree, pot, woman, and so on. In relatively simple cultures of this type there is no such thing as a slang or 'coarse' vocabulary that is distinct from a proper or formal or polite one. So it would have been quite bizarre for a Konso man to say *suda*, 'sexual intercourse', if he dropped a rock on his toe, and his response would actually have been a cry of pain, something like '*Aieee*!'. It is therefore impossible in these societies to use what we may call 'biological' words with the necessary shock value to intensify speech in the way that we do when swearing. Intensification of speech is achieved simply by emphasis and intonation.

The Konso and the Tauade seem in fact to be typical of primitive societies—small scale, non-literate, societies based on kinship, gender and age, without political centralisation or money—in lacking swearing in our sense of the word. In the

888 cultural categories listed in the *Outline of Cultural Materials* published by the Human Relations Area Files (Murdock et al. 1961), a world-wide survey primarily concerned with primitive societies, there is no category concerned with swearing, and it does not occur in the indexes of the many ethnographies from various parts of the world in my own library. Bergen (2016) in his survey of swearing cited by Byrne does not mention any primitive societies either and, while it is notoriously hard to prove a negative, it seems reasonable to conclude that swearing is not a primordial human trait at all, but a relatively late cultural development. This may be associated with literate society in particular, because these societies are especially likely to develop distinctions between 'coarse' and 'polite' discourse and enforce sexual and excretory modesty with particular severity. Blasphemy, too, which is a fertile source of swearing, is not a cross-cultural universal either. It could not exist among the Tauade because their only supernatural beings were evil spirits whom it would have been pointless and probably dangerous to abuse, and ancient culture heroes at the beginning of time who had turned to stone long ago. Waqa was the Sky-God of the Konso, who was a moral deity who punished sinners and sent the rain to the good, so that it would have been unthinkable for them to blaspheme his name and I never heard of anyone doing so. It would seem that blasphemy is more likely to develop in literate societies with official priesthoods and formal religious institutions.

The absence of swear-words did not mean that either among the Tauade or the Konso one could talk about sexual matters as freely as anything else. On the contrary, it was considered most improper to refer to them when in the homestead, or in mixed company. While the unmarried Konso girls could joke harmlessly with me when I first arrived about which of them I would marry, I once accidentally said the word for 'vagina'

when one of them was standing near me, and she hurried off very quickly. It is not therefore the vocabulary itself that is inherently offensive, but the context in which it is used.

Insult, however, is quite a different matter from swearing because in this instance the whole purpose is to give offence, and it is not necessary to use swear-words in order to do so although, of course, they are extremely useful for this. Among the Tauade and the Konso we do indeed find the same basic taboos concerning sex and excretion as seem to occur all over the world. Among the Tauade, for example, (Hallpike 1977:248) the typical insults were of the following types, using standard vocabulary in each case:

Eat my/your faeces
Eat my/your pig's/dog's faeces
Lick my/your wife's vagina/anus
Drink my/your husband's semen/urine
Come and copulate with my/your pig

And among the Konso the standard imprecation, particularly among the boys, was 'Your mother's vagina'.

The only other possible function of swearing in groups of early man might have been as a form of social bonding. Byrne notes the very common use of swear-words among small groups of people who know each other well, often as teams of co-workers. We can agree with her that swearing functions here as an important aspect of joking relationships, and the mutual tolerance of what would otherwise be insulting or indecent language is actually a token of the group's solidarity: 'We

like each other far too much to take offence’. But we have no particular reason to suppose that these conditions could have applied among the small groups of early Man in the initial stages of language development. These small groups do not develop the necessary distinction between ‘coarse’ and ‘polite’ vocabularies, and if we consider social relations in modern-hunter-gatherer bands, as reported by anthropologists, they do not seem to be of the type that would easily tolerate jocular insults at all.

While one might expect forager bands to be tightly knit groups rather like teams of co-workers in our society, the reality is clearly very different, one of considerable mutual indifference and even some social tension and unease. Whiting cites a cross-cultural study of child-rearing by Barry, Child and Bacon (1959) which found that foraging cultures tend to stress assertiveness and independence rather than the compliance which is typical of agricultural and pastoral norms (1968:37). Marshall says of the !Kung, ‘Altruism, kindness, sympathy, or genuine generosity were not qualities that I observed often in their behaviour’ (1976:350). Howell observes of the Chewong of Malaysia, ‘Although they do not compete, they do not help each other either . . . It is a rare sight to witness someone asking someone else for assistance. Similarly, offers of assistance are also rare (1989:30). Holmberg says of the Siriono, ‘Unconcern for one’s fellows is manifested on every hand’ (1969:260), and Gardener says of the Paliyans that they ‘work and live in parallel rather than in joint fashion and exhibit little cooperation outside their rather loose nuclear

families’ (1966:394). Woodburn says that ‘The Hadza are strikingly uncommitted to each other; what happens to the individual Hadza, even close relatives, does not really matter very much’ (1968:91). And Balikci says of the Netsilik Eskimo that their bands were permeated by suspicion and hostility: ‘Practically any minor or trivial event could produce a quarrel and lead to overtly aggressive behaviour’ (1970:173). In these types of society swearing would not forestall violence but would be much more likely to provoke it, and hunter-gatherers have perfectly effective means of preserving the peace, such as gift-exchange, public ridicule, ostracism, and mutual avoidance.

It seems likely that a major reason for this relative lack of solidarity is that hunter-gatherer bands do not regularly interact with other bands, so that group solidarity is not a very relevant value. In pastoral and agricultural societies, however, with much larger populations, these are divided into groups which do have to interact constantly with each other, such as lineages, residential groups within settlements, age-groups, and working parties, and these sorts of groups do indeed tend to have strong norms of friendliness and co-operation between their members. For example, I was once sitting with a group of Konso men who were digging the grave for one of their ward members who had just died, and among whom just these norms of friendliness and co-operation applied. Grave-digging is carried out by neighbours, not kinsfolk, and the dead man’s family give them liberal quantities of beer, so these are actually very social occasions with plenty of laughing and joking. They were asking me if we had lions, or elephants, or leopards, or rhinos in England, to which I had repeatedly to answer ‘No’. Finally, exasperated by this, the grave-digger, who was working naked to preserve his cotton shorts, pointed to his penis and said ‘Do you have these in England?’, and we all fell about

laughing. If this had occurred in one of the public assembly places, especially with women present, it would have been considered grossly indecent, but in a friendly group of men it did indeed work as a form of joking relationship and solidarity enhancement. Again, a group of men and boys would often gather in the doorway of my hut in the evening, and if one of them broke wind we would play the game of ‘Who’s the farter?’, where one of the men would pull some straws from the thatch and the boy who drew the short straw would be given a good-natured pummelling.

To sum up, therefore, joking about taboo subjects such as sex and excretion among single sex groups especially may have been a social lubricant from the most ancient of times, but *swearing* needs at least three conditions: tabooed subjects, a special coarse vocabulary to refer to them that is considered impolite, and a willingness to tolerate its use on certain occasions or situations. The second and third of these conditions are missing in many primitive societies in particular, so it seems fair to conclude that swearing is highly unlikely to have featured in the conversation of our early ancestors and been an essential stimulus of language, or to have been a constant phenomenon throughout history. On the contrary, far from being an ancient relic of our Palaeolithic past, it appears to have been a much later product of social and cultural complexity.

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