

## TEXTBOOK REVIEW

**What the F:** What swearing reveals about our language, our brains, and ourselves. By BENJAMIN K. BERGEN. New York: Basic Books, 2016. Pp. 271. ISBN 9780465060917. \$27.99.

Reviewed by LAURA W. MCGARRITY, *University of Washington*

**INTRODUCTION.** I teach an undergraduate course on swear words and taboo language designed to interest students in the study of language and introduce the field of linguistics to nonmajors. As a result, I have looked on with interest over the past few years at the spike in the number of published books devoted to the topic of taboo language (alternatively called swearing, profanity, cursing, or obscenity in the literature; see Adams 2016, Green 2014, Mohr 2013, to name a few). Cognitive scientist Benjamin K. Bergen's latest offering *What the F: What swearing reveals about our language, our brains, and ourselves* is a valuable contribution to this growing library.

B's book emerges from the following basic premise: because of its taboo nature, swearing has traditionally been ignored in scholarly research, but we ignore it to our detriment. Swear words can tell us a lot about language, the brain, and even human nature. B employs wit and humor in an engaging style to make the scientific research on swearing engrossing and accessible to even the most uninitiated reader. As such, this book serves as a perfect entry point for getting students interested in the scientific study of language.

In this review, I provide a brief summary of the content of the book and then address its suitability for use in the classroom from an instructor's perspective.

**BOOK SUMMARY.** The book contains eleven chapters, each focusing on a different dimension of the science of swearing.

Ch. 1 (provocatively titled '*Holy, fucking, shit, nigger*') looks at the similarities and differences in the semantic categories of swear words and their use across cultures. In Ch. 2 ('What makes a four-letter word?'), B addresses the phonology of swear words, examining whether there is a connection between the phonological shape of a swear word and its degree of tabooeness as judged by listeners. Ch. 3 ('One finger is worth a thousand words') investigates the iconic vs. arbitrary nature of obscene gestures around the world, as well as how swears are represented in various signed languages. In Ch. 4 ('The holy priest with the vulgar tongue'), B demonstrates how the brain processes swear words differently than it does the rest of language. Ch. 5 ('The day the pope dropped the C-bomb') discusses speech errors or 'slips of the tongue', showing how innocent and not-so-innocent speech errors can give us insight into how the brain plans and even edits our speech. Ch. 6 ('*Fucking* grammar') covers the grammar of swearing, revealing that there is a subgrammar to swearing that differs from that of nontaboo words. In Ch. 7 ('How *cock* lost its feathers'), B takes a historical look at how swear words and their meanings can change, becoming more or less taboo over time. The next two chapters discuss swearing and children. Ch. 8 ('Little Samoan potty mouths') explores child language acquisition, while Ch. 9 ('Fragile little minds') asks whether exposing children to profanity can cause them harm. Following up on this, Ch. 10 ('The \$100,000 word') focuses specifically on the use of slurs and their ability to cause psychological and social harm to their targets. Finally, Ch. 11 ('The paradox of profanity') addresses censorship, investigating whether there are better ways to deal with profanity than to suppress it.

**INSTRUCTOR'S PERSPECTIVE.** This book was not designed to be a textbook; however, it did emerge from material that B developed in the course of teaching his own class on the topic. As a result, there is a distinct instructional style to this book that reveals its origins. This is evident in how the book is structured and organized, making it quite suitable for introducing students to and interesting them in the scientific study of language. It may be used as a standalone text for a basic

course on swearing and its role in language study, or in conjunction with additional readings if the course is to serve as an introduction to linguistics or other related fields.

Instructors devoting an entire course to the study of swearing could assign the book to be read in order, but for those wanting to incorporate a section on swearing within a larger class, the chapters could also be assigned piecemeal, as each is largely self-contained and can stand on its own. Most of the chapters line up well with some of the main linguistic subfields and thus could be used (perhaps in combination with other, discipline-specific readings) to introduce these areas to students interested in linguistics. For example, phonetics and phonology are addressed in Ch. 2, syntax in Ch. 6, and semantic categories are the main focus of Ch. 1. In addition to these core subfields, related linguistic disciplines are given attention in their own chapters as well. For example, Chs. 4 and 5 can be used to introduce neurolinguistics, Ch. 7 historical language change, and Chs. 8 and 9 various aspects of language acquisition and development.

There are several ways in which B's book sets itself apart from other recent offerings on the topic. One is the inclusion of a discussion of the structure of sign language. In Ch. 3, B looks at various obscene gestures used across cultures to investigate to what degree they are iconic vs. arbitrary in what they represent. He then proceeds to examine the role of iconicity and arbitrariness in taboo signs used in various sign languages. The manual modality does not usually get as much attention in linguistic discussions as the spoken modality, so the fact that it gets its own chapter here is a welcome addition. Similarly, the phonology of swear words is not well studied and rarely gets much consideration in other books on the topic, but B devotes an entire chapter to it. Lastly, because he is a cognitive scientist, B's discussion of how the brain processes swear words is quite comprehensive. I found the discussion on taboo slips of the tongue (Ch. 5) particularly interesting and informative.

That said, there are a few notable omissions from B's book. I do not mention these inherently as criticism, but as something to note for someone looking for an all-in-one text. With respect to the core linguistic subfields, B includes no discussion of the morphology of swearing. My sense is that this was due to the familiarity that so many linguistics instructors have with using 'expletive insertion' (e.g. *abso-fuckin'-lutely*) to make morphology accessible to students. Similarly, no chapter specifically addresses the sociolinguistics of swearing or how the use of swear words may differ according to the gender, class, or age of the speaker. In my class, I have found this to be one of the topics that interests students most, so its omission feels like a missed opportunity.

One of the book's main strengths is its emphasis on reporting empirical studies and scientific experiments. B presents a wide array of experimental data to show how scientific investigation of swear words can give us unique insight into how language works. He cites numerous studies, describing them in clear terms (often with accompanying figures and charts), to address some fundamental and thought-provoking questions about swearing: Do some bad words sound worse than others? When a child hears a swear word, does it cause them harm? What is the meaning behind the middle finger gesture? Why are so many aphasic individuals with a complete loss of language still able to swear? Do we treat people differently if we hear them described with a slur? At multiple points in the book, B raises a question that had not been previously investigated. Instead of leaving it unanswered, he goes on to describe how he designed and ran an experiment (often involving the students in his classes) just to address it. Showing students that they can seek to answer their own questions in this way can inspire them to foster their own curiosity and spark their interest in scientific inquiry.

From an instructor's standpoint, the only drawback of the book is likely to be that it is not structured as a textbook. At the current time, there is only one textbook on swearing that I am aware of (Eggert 2011, *This book is taboo*). One of the obvious advantages that a traditional textbook has over a popular press book as an assigned text for a course is the inclusion of those conventions that make textbooks most helpful for use in the classroom: end-of-the-chapter exercises for use in assignments or discussion, chapter summaries, bolded terms, glossaries, colored text boxes in the margins, lists for 'further reading', and so forth. Not having these features could be seen as a negative for use of this book as an assigned course text; however, B's book makes up for

this possible downside with its clear presentation style and readability, making many of those textbook conventions unnecessary.

Because B's book is written for a general audience, it is accessible to a wide variety of readers with a diversity of backgrounds. He has a knack for presenting arguments and discussing complex ideas in an easily digestible way. Students with no prior knowledge of linguistics should get as much out of the book as those with more experience in the discipline.

B's fascination with and enthusiasm for this topic are evident in his writing style. His tone is entertaining and engaging as well as enlightening. He writes as someone who wants others to become as captivated by profanity as he is. Using vivid examples and a keen sense of humor, B is able to capture even the most casual reader's attention and interest.

In addition to a winning way with words, B includes numerous displays and figures to accompany and complement the text. For example, the findings of studies are frequently summarized with easy-to-read charts and graphs, while the chapter on obscene gestures and signs helpfully contains images of all of the items under discussion. The pictures serve not only to clarify the content but also to break up denser passages by providing visual interest. This will appeal to students of different learning styles.

**SUMMARY.** Though it is not intended to be a textbook, the content and structure of B's book make it a good fit for an introductory class, providing an enticing point of entry for getting students interested in the study and science of language. *What the F*, to use B's own words, is a 'book-length love letter to profanity'. With his humor and engaging examples, he is sure to make many of his readers love it too. Written for a general audience, this book should appeal to both advanced and beginning students of language alike.

#### REFERENCES

- ADAMS, MICHAEL. 2016. *In praise of profanity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- EGGERT, RANDALL. 2011. *This book is taboo: An introduction to linguistics through swearing*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.
- GREEN, JONATHAN. 2014. *The vulgar tongue: Green's history of slang*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MOHR, MELISSA. 2013. *Holy sh\*t: A brief history of swearing*. New York: Free Press.

University of Washington  
Department of Linguistics  
Box 352425  
Seattle, WA 98195  
[lauramcg@uw.edu]