

## **The Impact of Language Attitude on the use of Swear Words: A Sociolinguistic Study of Pashtu Non-native Speakers of English**

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### **Abstract**



*Swear words make an important aspect of any language despite their taboo nature. Taking this feature of language into account, this paper investigates how the language attitude of Pashtu non-native speakers of English towards Pashtu and English languages might impact the use of swear words in these languages in different situations. Data from 30 male undergraduate university students were collected through semi-structured interviews. The analysis revealed that Pashtu non-native speakers of English had a positive attitude towards English and Pashtu languages owing to instrumental and integrative motivation, respectively. Swearing in Pashtu and English was shown to be determined by the speakers' perceptions of the degree of offensiveness of swear words in the languages, social status of the users of the language in the society, and the setting and context in which those words were used. It was concluded that the positive attitude of Pashtu non-native speakers towards English and Pashtu resulted in their swearing-in English and Pashtu for different reasons: swearing-in English was controlled by the high status of the language in the society, whereas swearing-in Pashtu was used as a marker of solidarity and covert prestige.*

**Keywords:** Language Attitude, Swear Words, Non-Native Speakers, Prestige, Taboo Language

### **Introduction**

Language attitude as a subfield of sociolinguistics has drawn considerable attention from various researchers (Dweik and Qawar, 2015; Mamun et.al, 2012; Navarro-Villarroel, 2011 and Schwarzs & Bohner, 2001). Sociolinguists describe language attitude as an individual's feelings towards his/her language or any other language which may vary from positive to negative (Crystal, 2003, p. 266). An attitude (favorable or unfavorable) towards a language may be determined by various factors, such as the status of the language in a society, social recognition of the speakers, economic gains that are offered in one way or the other by a language, and the user's intentions to identify themselves with a certain social class (Redinger 2010, p. 53). According to Dweik and Qawar (2015, pp. 5-6), dominant languages i.e., languages of the developed and powerful communities exercise influence over speakers' language preferences as dominant languages are used to gain power, prestige, and authority. The positive attitude of a speaker towards prestigious languages is thus mainly driven by utilitarian motives. Hence, choosing to speak a prestigious language by an individual is aimed at achieving "social recognition" and prestige in society (Redinger, 2010, p. 52).

Studies on swear words (Dewaele, 2004; Dewaele, 2010; Dewaele & Qaddourah, 2015; Horan, 2013; Jay, 2009) suggest that non-native speakers of English make use of English swear words throughout the world in their informal communication. Other studies also assert that speakers choose to use a particular language for swear words, and the choice of language varies from one multi-lingual population to another. Studies such as (Dewaele 2004; Dewaele 2010; & Dewaele & Qaddourah 2015) reveal that the use of L1 (first language) as opposed to L2 (second language) is higher in swearing. According to Horan (2013, p. 291), some speakers of English (as a foreign language) use swear words due to the prestige and coolness associated with English. Coolness in Horan's study implies the acceptability of swearing by society at large.

Socially prestigious languages can be used to maintain control and power offered by those languages (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994, p. 58). According to Joubert (2011, p. 34), a positive attitude and the socially prestigious status of a language are inseparable as a positive attitude towards a language not only indicates the prestige of a language but also explains and helps to maintain it. Pillai (2006) argues that a speaker's use of a language is his/her strategic choice to gain prestige, economic

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stability, and authority in the society. The choice of a particular language by speakers, therefore, is mainly governed and determined by utilitarian motives.

That English is the dominant language of the world today is evident from the fact that the number of non-native speakers of English is greater than its native speakers as English is widely used for “interlingual and intercultural communication” (House, 2008, p. 79). Due to the British colonization of various countries across the world in general, and in South Asia in particular, the English language has gained a special position/status. In several South Asian countries, English is now used as a foreign and/or second language (Crystal, 2003; Rasool & Winke 2019). Today’s Pakistan was part of India before the Indian subcontinent was divided into two separate countries, India and Pakistan. What is now called Pakistan remained under the rule of the British till 1947. Since the inception of Pakistan, English has been its official language and has enjoyed great social prestige as is evident from it being the medium of education, the language of the legal/judicial system as well as official correspondence. Taking into account the popularity that the English language enjoys in the country, the Pakistani non-native speakers of English use set English expressions such as swear words as part of projecting elite social status/identity despite the taboo nature of these words. This study explores the attitude of the Pakistani Pashtu non-native speakers of English towards English and Pashtu languages about the use of swear words in these languages. It is pertinent to mention that no study has been done about language attitude and its impact on the use of swear words in the context of Pakistan. Considering the taboo nature of swear words, people in our part of the world hesitate to investigate taboo language resulting in a research gap in this area. The present work is thus the first of its nature in the Pakistani context and may pave the way for future studies in the field.

To investigate the issue as set forth above, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the attitude of Pashtu non-native speakers of English towards English and Pashtu languages?
2. How does speakers’ positive or negative attitude towards Pashtu or English impact the use of swear words in these languages?

### **Methodology**

To answer the research questions, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to investigate the perspectives of the participants regarding the use of swear words with special reference to the attitudes towards Pashtu and English languages and how those attitudes might influence the use of swearing in each language. The data were recorded using a voice recorder and were transcribed for analysis. As some respondents wanted to be interviewed in Pashtu or Urdu, so their views were translated into English.

Thirty male undergraduate students, between the age of 18 and 21 years, from three different universities of Peshawar, were interviewed. All spoke Pashtu as their mother tongue and English as a foreign language.

The transcribed data were repeatedly and closely studied for finding patterns and themes, and for highlighting sets of concepts and their relationships. Moreover, the participants were given a list of English swear words and their Pashtu equivalents to rank swear words according to their degree of offensiveness. To answer the research questions, three major codes were generated which are as follows: 1) Domain-specific use of Pashtu and English language, 2) attitude towards Pashtu and English, and 3) the use of swear words: language preferences.

### **Analysis**

#### **Domain-specific Use of Pashtu and English**

All respondents without exception said that they use Pashtu and English in different social contexts. While Pashtu was reported to be used in everyday conversation on almost every occasion in social life, the use of English was reported to be limited to formal situations. Pashtu being the mother tongue of the participants was the main and widely used medium of communication among members of the speech community in both formal and informal settings, especially with friends and family members. English, on the other hand, was used mainly in formal settings i.e., with classmates and teachers in the classroom, as well as in informal contexts such as text messages, Facebook comments, and on social media. A majority of the respondents reported that they did not use English at home. The use of English was thus limited to formal situations as it was rarely used at home, except for occasional instances of code-switching and code-mixing.

Sources of acquiring English included movies, TV dramas, newspapers, books, television, cartoons, magazines, and teachers. Movies, as a source of acquisition of set English expressions, however, were reported by all respondents, suggesting that English was not only learned informally supervised and monitored settings of the classroom but through other informal means as well.

**Attitudes towards Pashtu and English Languages**

The analysis of the data (as shown in Figure 1) reveals the positive attitude of all the participants towards the English language, indicating that English was considered as a ‘key to success. Also, an important factor in employability in public and private organizations, English was believed to be the language of the educated class and was considered as a prerequisite for ‘good communication skills. The majority of the participants believed that a person speaking English was more educated than the one who spoke Pashtu only. The participants believed that they used English to portray a positive image of themselves.

Several participants, however, believed that they felt more comfortable with people speaking Pashtu as opposed to English (see Figure 2), signaling a positive attitude towards the Pashtu language and the covert prestige that the language enjoys. Moreover, conversation in Pashtu was reported to give the participants a sense of belonging and identity. This perception on part of the participants reinforces the positive attitude of participants to Pashtu as an identity marker and indicates the presence of integrative motivation in using the language.



Figure 1: Codes Determining Attitude towards English Language

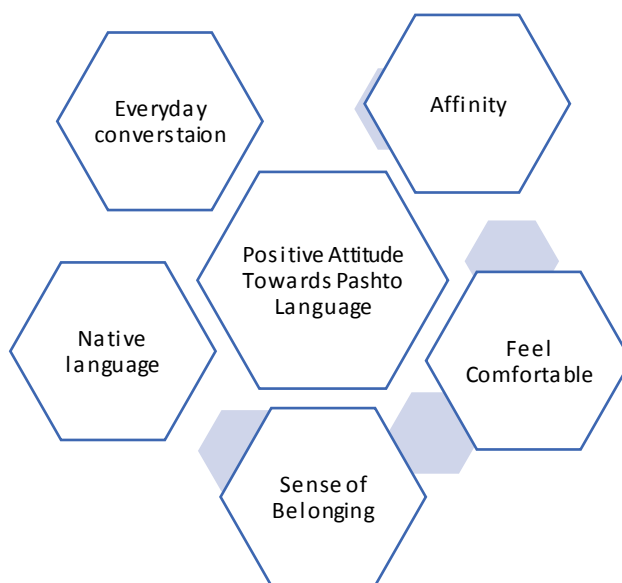


Figure 2: Codes Determining Attitude towards Pashto Language

**Use of Swear Words: Language Preferences**

Although all participants were aware of the taboo nature of the swear words in both languages, the choice of a language for conveying a particular emotion depended on his perception of the severity and offensiveness of the swear word. While English was used for expressing emotions such as love, hatred, and anger, etc., Pashtu was mainly used for conveying the feeling of anger and indignation. According to a representative view: “Swearing in Pashtu is odd, so I mostly use English swear words”. The participant found swearing in Pashtu ‘odd’ because, according to him, swearing in Pashtu was more offensive and non-acceptable as opposed to swearing in English. English swear words were ‘fine’ because they did not seem ‘bad’ or ‘rude’. Swearing in English was, thus, considered less offensive and less taboo by the participants as compared to swearing-in Pashtu, which indicates that the ‘emotional strength’ of swear words in L1 is greater than that in L2.

The knowledge of how, when, and where to use swear words in their native language is acquired by speakers as part of growing up. This difference in perception about the offensiveness of swear words in the two languages may be ascribed to the fact that whereas the participants were aware of the meaning (literal/connotative) of the Pashtu words, their understanding of the meanings of several English swear words were vague. Moreover, some participants described their use of euphemistic swearing—the original form of the English swear word is changed in a manner to make it sound less offensive, such as using *shoot* instead of *s\*\*t* in oral communication.

It follows from the above that while the use of English swear words was aimed to signal a socially superior status in the society, swearing-in Pashtu was aimed at portraying the image of a less educated person, belonging to a lower or uneducated class.

When the respondents were given a list of Pashtu and English swear words to rate the offensiveness of those words, they were reluctant to say Pashtu swear words and instead responded by using either the code number for them as per the given list or by using their English equivalents (See Table 1). However, they were comfortable with using English swear words and used them quite ‘comfortably’. This was clear from what one of the respondents said: “If I want to insult someone, I would like to use Pashtu swear words because swearing at someone in Pashtu gives me the pleasure of expressing my strongest emotions”. This suggests that the ‘emotional force’ of Pashtu (L1) is greater than that of English (L2) and the choice of swearing-in mother-tongue shows the speaker’s intentions to be offensive and to cause insult.

Sr.no	English Swear Words	Pashto Swear Words
1.	Bitch	Spay
2.	Shit	Ghul
3.	Damn it	Ghark shay
4.	Swine/pig	Soar/ khanzir
5.	Slut	Kanjara
6.	Jerk/Idiot	Kamaqal
7.	Bastard	Harami
8.	Duffer	Shoda
9.	Son of a bitch	Da Spi bachiya
10.	Go to hell/Fuck off	Wrak sha
11.	What the fuck	Da sa bkwas de
12.	Pimp/broker	Dala/kanjar

Table 1: List of Pashtu and English Swear Words

Based on their perceptions, participants rated Pashtu and English swear words for the degree of offensiveness. Figures 3 and 4 below show the degree of offensiveness of English and Pashtu swear words, respectively. Figure 5 shows the relative offensiveness of English swear words and their Pashtu equivalents.

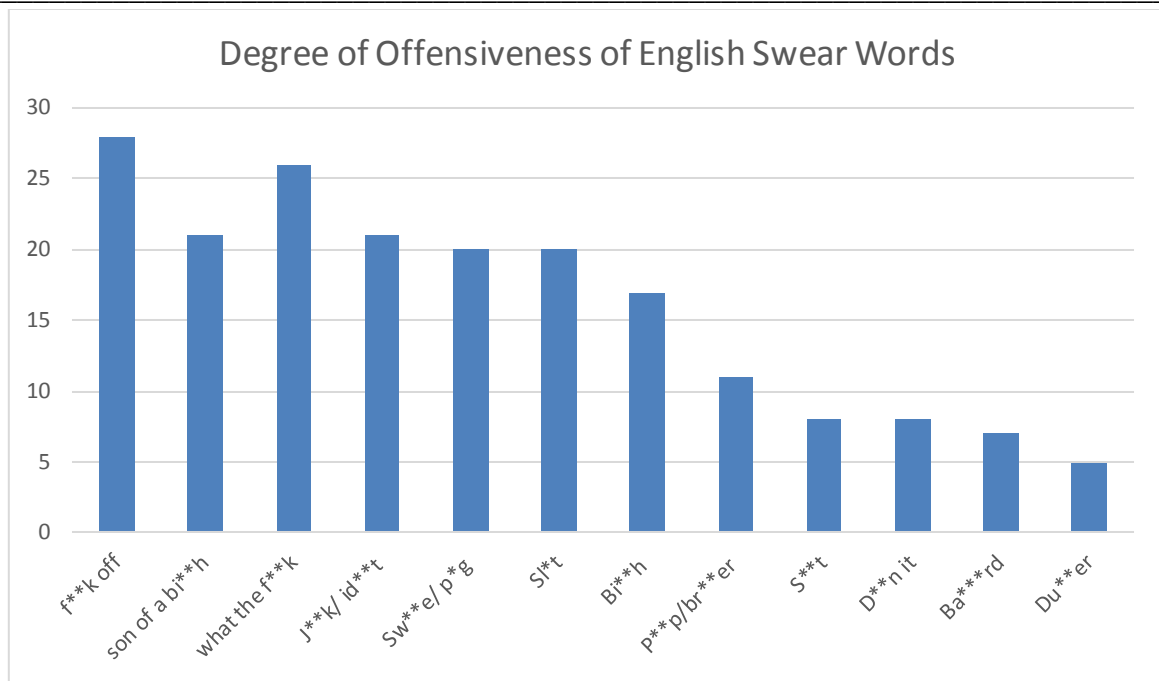


Figure 3: Degree of Offensiveness of English Swear words

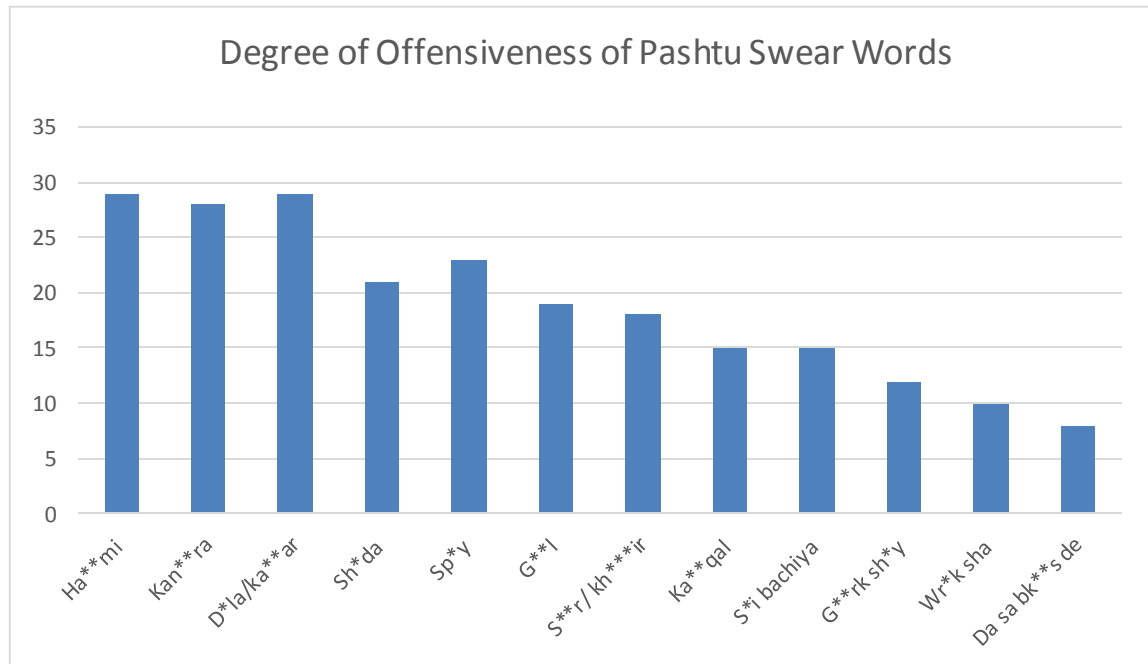


Figure 4: Degree of Offensiveness of Pashto Swear Words

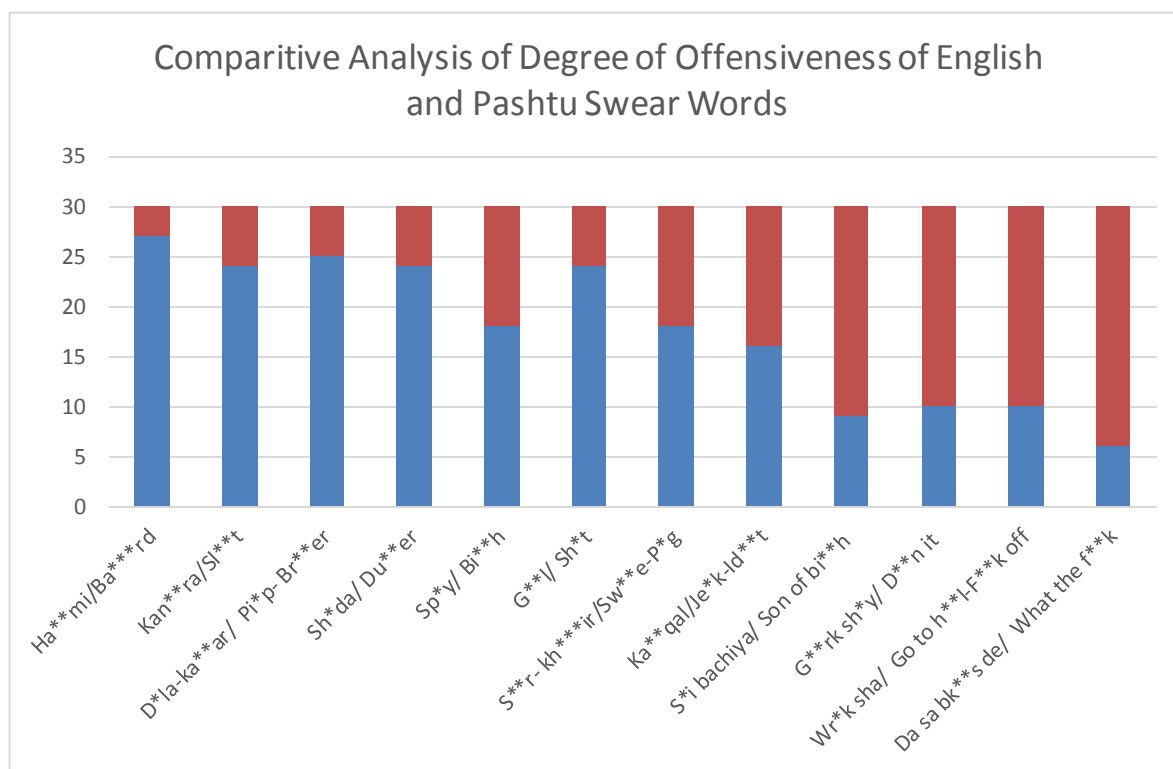


Figure 5: Comparative Analysis of Degree of Offensiveness of Pashto and English Swear words

The color distinction in Figure 5 is representative of Pashtu and English swear words where the orange color represents a degree of offensiveness of English swear words, and the blue color represents offensiveness of Pashtu swear words. The results clearly show that Pashtu swear words were found more offensive than their English counterparts.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated the language attitude of Pashtu non-native speakers of English about the use of English and Pashtu swear words. It was concluded that the Pashtu non-native speakers of English had a positive attitude towards both English and Pashtu languages. The reasons for their positive attitude towards Pashtu were rooted in the integrative motivation and could be ascribed to their affinity with the language: Pashtu is an identity marker of belonging for them. English, on the other hand, was viewed as means of achieving success in social and economic spheres, a key factor in employability, and a symbol of ‘elite’ status. Hence the motivation had mainly been instrumental. The participants’ choice of a language for swearing was governed by their attitudes toward the language they swore in. Since English enjoys an overt prestige in Pakistan, Pashtu non-native speakers of English made ‘strategic’ use of English swear words to signal an ‘educated’ identity, while being aware of their taboo nature. Swearing in Pashtu was driven by the sense of belonging and solidarity with fellow speakers, by the covert prestige of the language, and the stronger ‘emotional strength’ of swearing-in L1. The ‘satisfaction that the users get from swearing-in one’s L1 may thus be a key factor for the participants’ use of swearing in Pashtu. Given that the participants were aware of the taboo nature of the swear words in the two languages, the use of swear words in either language seems to be a conscious/strategic choice indicating that speakers use swear words as a means to project an intended identity and to harvest certain social and economic benefits offered by a language.

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