



Second Language Speakers' Perception of Swearing as a Socio-Pragmatic Device

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perception of English swearing in speakers of English as a second language (ESL) within two socio-communicative contexts: private speech and interpersonal interactions. Participants included 34 ESL speakers who watched 14 short, muted videos in which subjects experienced an emotion-evoking negative event either in private or in the presence of others. Participants then took the subject's perspective and produced impromptu responses to the emotion-evoking scenarios. The results indicated that ESL speakers judge more occurrences of English swearwords in interpersonal interactions than in private speech. The swearing patterns were further modulated by the role of gender, whereby ESL speakers attributed a higher frequency of swearing to male subjects in interpersonal communications, while the frequency of swearing did not show a significant difference between male and female subjects in private speech. It is argued that second language swearing functions as a socio-pragmatic device in interpersonal interactions and reflects ESL speakers' assessment of the second language sociolinguistic norms to achieve social goals. Further, different patterns of swearing in relation to gender are discussed through the lens of stereotyped female speech.

KEYWORDS: Communication context; Private speech; Interpersonal communication; Second language swearing; Bilingual emotional expression; Socio-pragmatic device

1. Introduction

Swearing in social interactions is generally viewed as a face-threatening speech behavior. However, more recent studies suggest that swearing can be used to promote the co-construction of group identity and social bonding (Debray, 2023; Wilson & Wedlock, 2023). Stapleton and Fägersten (2023) view swearing within the framework of interpersonal pragmatics and note that swearing not only emerges through interpersonal relationships, but also generates interpersonal relations. Stapleton (2020) further notes that the socio-pragmatics of swearing derives from its offensive nature and social expectations around its contextual appropriateness, and as a result, swearing as a socio-pragmatic device contributes to a range of "interactional and identity functions" which may not be readily available through other means (p. 3).

Distinguishing between potential and actual offence, O'Driscoll (2020) views swearwords as inherently offensive and a transgression of social norms. However, within the framework of linguistic (im)politeness, Jay and Janschewitz (2008) classify acts of swearing into propositional and non-propositional swearing. Propositional swearing is essentially intentional, planned, and controlled and can potentially function to promote social bonding (i.e., polite swearing) or to offend and insult (i.e., impolite swearing), while non-propositional swearing is unintentional, unplanned, and uncontrollable and happens as a result of involuntary emotional reactions or brain damage; non-propositional swearing is considered neither polite nor impolite (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

The socio-pragmatic function of propositional swearing is more complex in a second language due to the fact that emotional expressions function differently in the first and the second language, with the second language swearing being

associated with a diminished emotional force (Beers Fägersten et al., 2024; Dewaele, 2018; Mohammadi, 2022; Velez-Urbe & Rosselli, 2019; Weimer, et al. 2022). Dewaele (2018) notes that bilingual speakers require “proper semantic and conceptual representations as well as considerable sociocultural and socio-pragmatic awareness” in their second language in order to be able to both deploy and understand emotional expressions, including swearwords (p. 219).

On the other hand, socio-pragmatic competence in a second language mainly emerges at the later stages of second language development and depends on repeated exposure to the second language constructions in various contexts. As a result, ESL speakers generally demonstrate some degree of uncertainty and obliviousness to the derogatory force of swearwords in their second language (Dewaele, 2017; Finn, 2017; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Wu et al., 2024). This mismatch between swearwords in the first and the second language becomes consequential in high stakes social situations, such as citizen-police interactions (Hijazo-Gascón et al., 2024).

Given the crucial socio-pragmatic functions of swearing in a second language, some scholars have argued in favor of teaching swearwords as part of the second language curricula, particularly in advanced learners (Finn, 2017; McNab & Navrou, 2025; Wu et al., 2024). This, however, requires a better understanding of the interplay between the expression of emotions in a second language and social context, as well as the socio-pragmatic resources that are available to second language speakers in order to achieve socio-communicative goals.

Research findings reveal that several socio-biographical variables impact the use of emotional expressions, including swearwords, in bilingual and multilingual speakers. Among those, the role of age, gender, level of education, socioeconomic class, proficiency level, age of acquisition, and length of residence have been largely investigated (see Dewaele, 2004; 2010; 2011; 2016a; 2018). However, the significance of socio-communicative context in the use of second language swearwords is relatively unknown. Further, while first language swearing in private has been shown to have less severe consequences (Robbins, 2011), our general understanding of second language swearing in private is limited.

This study, therefore, aims to address the existing research gaps and explore the relationship between the socio-communicative context and ESL speakers’ frequency of swearing in English. The present study is twofold: it first investigates whether the frequency of English swearwords relates to the immediate social environment from the perspective of ESL speakers. The study further aims to uncover the role of gender, if any, in ESL speakers’ judgment of swearing in English. The following research questions further guide the present study:

(a) How is ESL speakers’ perception of swearing in English associated with the socio-communicative context (i.e., swearing in private versus swearing in interpersonal interactions)?

(b) How does swearing frequency in different communicative contexts relate to the speaker’s gender?

In what follows, this paper will first define swearing based on the taxonomy of expressive language (Gutzmann, 2015). The study will further review the literature on swearing in a second language, as well as the role of gender in swearing, to explore the dynamics between gender and swearing in a second language. The paper will then describe the concept of private speech and interpersonal communication as two separate socio-communicative contexts which may connect to different patterns of swearing. Finally, the paper will examine how the perception of swearing in English relates to the immediate socio-communicative context surrounding an emotion-evoking event, and the potential role of gender in moderating the form and frequency of swearing in private and in interpersonal interactions. In light of the findings and against the backdrop of previous research, the paper will argue that ESL speakers perceive English swearing as a socio-pragmatic device that contributes to the interactional function of their second language.

2. The notion of swearing

Although it is generally conceded in the literature that swearing is a consequential speech behavior, the definition of swearing has not been yet established unanimously in the field. Considering the different classifications of swearword that are proposed, Jeshion (2021) notes that swearwords that designate people are among the most widely used pejorative items. Gutzmann (2015) presents a taxonomy of expressive language at the word level which includes *epithets*, *attributive adjectives*, *interjections*, *colored expressions*, and *ethnic slurs*. This taxonomy serves as the building block of swearing classification in the current study. An additional category under the label of *pejorative verbal expressions* has been added to this classification in order to incorporate the different types of verbal insults that emerged in the study.

This study is an extension of Mohammadi (2022), and building on the general definition of swearing in Mohammadi (2022), the present study offers a more fine-tuned categorization of swearwords in order to capture the more subtle interactional functions of second language swearing in different situational contexts. The most widely recognized component of this taxonomy is the epithet. According to Gutzmann (2015), the term epithet refers to a pejorative adjective that is used in lieu of a person’s name. In example (1), the adjective “idiot” in (1)(b) constitutes an epithet replacing “John” in (1)(a).

(1) (a) John has lost the key again.

(b) The idiot has lost the key again.

Adjectives can also be used as qualifiers along with nouns. Attributive adjectives, therefore, refer to derogatory descriptions that qualify a following noun. On the other hand, as Gutzmann (2015) notes, certain attributive adjectives may also

be used as interjections. In the following example, (2)(a) demonstrates the use of “damn” as an attributive adjective, while (2)(b) displays the use of “damn” as an interjection.

(2) (a) I hear your damn dog barking.

(b) Damn, I have lost my keys!

(Gutzmann, 2015)

As shown in (2)(b), pejorative interjections, similar to regular interjections, do not convey a truth-conditional meaning. Unlike the categories discussed so far, colored expressions and ethnic slurs do convey a truth-conditional denotation in addition to an attitudinal connotation. Colored expressions are “lexical items that have an ordinary truth-conditional denotation but in addition, have an expressive component that displays some (in most cases negative) attitude towards the denotation” (Gutzmann, 2015, p.6). For instance, in example (3)(b), “cur” conveys a negative reference in addition to the meaning of “dog”.

(3) (a) This dog howled the whole night.

(b) This cur howled the whole night.

(Gutzmann, 2015)

Furthermore, while epithets are general derogatory descriptive labels, slurs are specific labels that are used for an out-group in connection to a certain race, religion, or nationality (Hughes, 2015). In example (4)(b), “kraut” is a slur used to refer to “German” while conveying a truth-conditional denotation (i.e., German nationality) in addition to an attitudinal connotation (i.e., negative attitude of the speaker towards Germans).

(4) (a) Lessing was a German.

(b) Lessing was a Kraut.

(Gutzmann, 2015)

Verbal expressions, on the other hand, are stand-alone offensive expressions that contain an imperative verb, such as “kiss my ass” or “fuck yourself.” The most common verbal expression is “fuck you” which may be categorized as either a subjunctive or an imperative depending on the interpretation. Ljung (2010) contends that expressions such as “fuck you” or “damn you” are categorized as “curses” which “express a wish on the part of the speaker” and therefore should be considered as optative subjunctive (p. 31).

Regardless of the ways in which swearwords are itemized into categories, swearwords essentially represent the lexicalization of the speaker’s negative emotions and attitudes (Gutzmann, 2015; Jeshion, 2021). Particularly in the present study, swearwords are lexical items or expressions that are used to express contempt or disapproval as the underlying negative emotion. Swearing, therefore, is identified as the lexicalization of negative emotions and attitudes within the context, while the truth conditional value of these items does not affect their identification as a swearword in different communicative contexts.

It is noteworthy that different swearwords do not necessarily convey the same degree of derogatory force. For instance, in the present study, the lexical item “mess” in the statement “you are such a mess!” is categorized as a swearword in the context of a mother admonishing her young boy. Similarly, the word “motherfucker!” in the context of a road rage is marked as a swearword. Undeniably “mess” and “motherfucker” do not have the same degree of offensiveness and derogatory strength, but they are both labeled as swearwords because they connote negative emotions while can potentially express disdain, disrespect, or disapproval within the context.

Further, swearwords are not determined solely based on the pragmatic context, rather this designation regards other textual elements, such as the use of punctuations (e.g., multiple exclamation marks!!!!), use of all-caps (e.g., ARE YOU INSANE?), and other orthographic symbols which can be considered as forms of emotional expression within the context. Therefore, the identification of swearwords in the present study essentially encompasses any expressive item that conveys the speaker’s negative emotions or attitudes regardless of these items’ varying degree of offensiveness and impropriety.

Implementing an all-inclusive and comprehensive list of swearwords is crucial in the present study because second language speakers belong to various mother tongues and cultures, while the emotional impact and the derogatory force of different swearwords may not be shared across languages (Mohammadi, 2022). Another aspect of swearing that may vary across cultures is its relationship to gender. In what follows, section 2.1. will briefly discuss the association between gender and the speech behavior of swearing.

2.1. Swearing and gender

Lakoff (1973), in her prominent study of “women’s language,” claimed that women are expected to speak in a certain way, and accordingly women avoid strong expressions of emotion and favor uncertainty in their speech, which reflect women’s lack of social power (p. 49). Nezakat-Alhossaini and Esslami-Rasekh (2013), on the other hand, show that Persian-speaking females engage in significantly more instances of swearing than males. Nezakat-Alhossaini and Esslami-Rasekh (2013) argue that Persian-speaking women engage in more swearing due to their lack of social power and as a form of “emotional expression to relieve from anger or a feeling of being suppressed” (p. 522).

In the literature, the deficit perspective on female speech has resulted in interpreting the evidence of women's both excessive swearing and lack of swearing as an indication of female powerlessness, albeit with contradictory logical arguments. The deficit view of women's speech constantly characterizes women's communicative behavior as inherently deficient, suppressed, and powerless. Along the same lines, Cameron (2022) argues that the representation of women's public and political speech in the media has consistently been disconnected from reality in a way that has subjected women to the "unequal burden of civility" (p. 30). In other words, women's public discourse is overly portrayed as more civilized, and if women diverge from such representation, they will attract negative and punitive reactions.

Observing the case of US presidential campaigns, Cameron (2022) argues that the treatment of female candidates provides a stark example of biased views on female speech standards. For example, Cameron (2022) notes that former female presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, had been described "not only as aggressive and disrespectful, but as a 'smug, patronising, power-hungry bitch' when she resisted being interrupted during presidential debates. In contrast, during a Senate hearing, when Harris interrupted former male Attorney-General Jeff Sessions, she received a Senate reprimand (p. 31).

More recent evidence points to the fact that in reality the frequency of swearing may not be a marker of gender-based speech, and men and women generally display similar patterns of swearing in English (Coats, 2021; Gauthier, 2021). Empirical evidence further implies that while a meaningful correlation may exist between gender and the force of swearwords, the difference in frequency of male and female swearing is often minimal. Love (2021) argues that men typically use "pure swear words," but "bad language" is equally distributed between males and females (p. 752). In other words, features noted by Lakoff are not exclusively associated with women's speech; rather, such speech features are attributed to a lack of power regardless of the speaker's gender. Especially in the courtroom language, O'Barr and Atkins (2005) note that social power and experience negatively correlate with the emergence of powerless speech.

The dynamics between swearing and gender may be further modulated by different modes of communication as well as socio-cultural norms. For example, McEnery and Xiao (2004) show that male speakers of British English use the swearword "fuck" twice as much frequently as female speakers in both spoken and written language. However, Thelwall (2008) finds that there is no significant difference in the use of "fuck" and its derivations between male and female users of MySpaces in the UK. In contrast, Thelwall (2008) shows that male speakers of American English use significantly more instances of strong swearwords such as "fuck" on MySpaces.

When it comes to digital social networks, Laitinen et al. (2025) argue that the use of swearwords, and in particular fuck, shows considerable variations on digital platforms even among speakers of English as a first language; American speakers use fuck twice as much as British speakers and three times as much as Australian speakers. Laitinen et al. (2025) further suggest that English speakers swear more with acquaintances than with friends in smaller networks on social media, while in larger networks, the frequency of swearing with acquaintances and friends does not differ significantly. On the other hand, Coats (2021) shows that in Nordic countries gender plays a role in the use of Nordic swearwords on social media, while gender difference is less significant for English swearwords.

The different patterns of swearing among males and females may also be influenced by the role of their interlocutors. Beers Fägersten (2012) finds that males frequently refrain from using swearwords in opposite- and mixed-sex interactions. Spontaneous speech data further shows that females similarly "converge to the standard attributed to and imposed upon them" by swearing less frequently in the presence of men in comparison to the same-sex interactions (Beers Fägersten, 2012, p. 141). Similarly, Schweinberger (2018) notes that Irish speakers swear more frequently in same-sex conversations. Reflecting similar insights in the sphere of social media, Muhanović et al. (2018) demonstrate that both male and female users of Facebook swear more often when commenting in reaction to contents that are produced by the same gender.

Examining gendered swearwords, Odhiambo (2012) finds that both genders, while listing male and female derogatory labels, tend to produce a longer list for female-directed slurs. Gendered swearwords refer to lexical items or expressions that demean and degrade people by reducing them to a sexual body part, by comparing them to sexual objects, by attributing them to gendered terms for animals, or by associating them with undesirable sexual behaviors. Consequently, Odhiambo (2012) identifies five clusters of gendered slurs, including those that refer to sexual body parts (e.g., dick), those that refer to sexual objects (e.g., douche bag), gendered slurs associated with animals (e.g., bitch), gender specific social behaviors (e.g., whore), and gendered insults based on mental ability or intelligence (e.g., bimbo).

Recent research findings suggest that the use of gendered swearwords, similar to other forms of swearing, relates to specific social and cultural norms. For example, Gauthier and Guille (2017) show that in the UK, the gendered swearword "bitch" is most significantly associated with female users on Twitter, while according to Worthen (2025), in the US, "bitch discourse" most commonly operates as a feature of internet banging—the exchange of violent rhetoric on social media between gang members. In particular, Chicago-based gang members frequently use the term "bitch" against rival gangs on Facebook as a device that encourages masculinity and disparages effeminacy (Worthen, 2025).

Although the use of gendered swearwords, and most extensively the term "bitch," has been investigated in English, to the best of my knowledge, the use of English gendered swearwords has not been studied among second language speakers of English. This study therefore first investigates how social environment connects to second language speakers' judgement of swearing in English based on gender and then goes further to examine the form and frequency of gendered swearwords in interpersonal communications among ESL speakers.

2.2. Swearing in a second language

Although swearing practices may vary across cultures, swearwords have some universal properties, such as their sound pattern across languages, which may serve to facilitate the expression of emotions. Lev-Ari and McKay (2023) investigated swearwords across typologically different languages and found that speakers of Arabic, Chinese, Finnish, French, German, and Spanish judge foreign words that contain approximant sounds (e.g., l, r, w, and y) to be less likely to be a swearword. Similarly, they found that the euphemistic version of English swearwords (e.g., darn versus damn) contain significantly more instances of approximant sounds. Lev-Ari and McKay (2023) argue that sound symbolism—the intrinsic association between sound and meaning—can “facilitate the pragmatic expression of emotion, attitude or arousal” (p. 1111).

The interconnection between emotional experience and linguistic expression exists in both the first and the second language. Bilingual speakers further report perceived higher degrees of emotional force in their first language. A culmination of self-reported and experimental data reveals that the emotional effect of swearing is universally stronger in the first language compared to the second language (cf. Eilola & Havelka, 2011; Harris, 2004; Harris et al., 2006). Dewaele (2011) further demonstrates that maximally proficient bilingual and multilingual speakers are inclined to use their first language when expressing emotions. Echoing similar findings, Dewaele (2016b) reports that speakers of English as a first language deploy significantly more English swearwords in their daily interactions in comparison to speakers of English as a second or foreign language.

Weimer et al. (2022) attribute the disparity between emotional resonance in a first and a second language to the age of arrival at the second language country. Weimer et al. (2022) note that general swearword superiority (i.e., better word detection for swearwords) in the first language is significant at the group level among Russian immigrants in Germany, but at the individual level, the age of arrival plays a critical role. Russian speakers who arrived at Germany after mid-adolescence show higher swearword performance in their first language. In contrast, Russians who arrived earlier show a swearword superiority in either Russian or German, or in both languages. Imbault et al. (2021) similarly show that ESL speakers' level of proficiency and length of residence in Canada affect their emotional response to English words; that is, a longer length of residence and a higher reported level of proficiency leads to emotional responses similar to speakers of English as a first language.

Although bilingual speakers may perceive their first language to have a stronger emotional force than their second (or additional) language, self-reported data on swearing behaviour suggests that socio-biographical variables, such as age, gender, and education, generally impact the use of English swearwords similarly in monolingual and bilingual English speakers (Dewaele, 2016b). Mohammadi (2022) argues that swearing preferences in bilingual speakers is connected to the level of emotional resonance evoked during an emotional experience. In other words, in emotional situations with high resonance, bilingual English speakers do not show a significant difference in the use of swearwords in the first and the second language, whereas, in emotional situations with low resonance, bilingual speakers deploy significantly more swearwords in their second language.

Mohammadi (2022) notes that this difference is largely attributed to the inherent qualities of heuristic and systematic information processing in emotional contexts. That is, high affective scenarios trigger heuristic processing which is quick and automatic and results in spontaneous swearing in both the first language and the second language. On the other hand, in low affective contexts, systematic processing which is calculated and analytic is activated and results in strategic decision making and consequently more swearing in the second language due to its “perceived lower offensiveness and mitigated social consequences” (Author, X, p. 642).

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) note that the “disparity in the perception of the offensiveness and likelihood of swearing” between monolingual English speakers and ESL speakers is due to the fact that English speakers' judgement of swearing is contextually moderated and is flexible, while ESL speakers are less sensitive to contextual factors, such as the topic, the level of formality, the speaker-listener relationship, and the social setting of communication (p. 268). Jay and Janschewitz (2008) conclude that a greater sensitivity to the nuances of contextual factors is usually connected to more experience with and exposure to English.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that second language speakers of English, in comparison to first language speakers, attribute higher levels of emotion and impoliteness to swearing in interpersonal interactions that are presented to them through audiovisual stimuli (Lorette & Dewaele, 2024; McNab & Mavrou, 2025). This overestimation of offensiveness, according to McNab and Mavrou (2025), may be due to the “metaphorical red-flag” that is attributed to emotional language or swearwords in the context of language learning. Moreover, evidence shows that second language speakers, when exposed to audiovisual inputs, typically tend to focus on non-verbal and visual cues, such as body language, more than verbal cues (Dewaele & Moxsom-Turnbull, 2020).

3. Private speech vs interpersonal communication

Private speech is a form of self talk or “dialogue with the self” (Vocate, 1994, p. 7). According to Vocate (1994), self talk has two distinct forms, one of which is the internal and silent speech known as inner speech, and the other is the external and audible vocalization known as private speech. Inner speech, as the innermost layer of talk, may manifest itself as private speech, which is the observable externalization of inner speech, and research experiments typically rely on this observable element for the investigation of language (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015).

Private speech is, therefore, defined as a context in which the source and the object of communication are the same person (Vocate, 1994). Consistent with this view of private speech, as Vocate (1994) notes, the two components of

communication are identified as the “I,” which “is the dynamic, spontaneous, creative action-taker with biological origins” and the “Me,” which “is the internalized, organized aggregate of attitudes and perceptions garnered from others” (p. 9). In other words, private speech is viewed as a “context, one in which a single human communicator is both the source and the object of interaction” (Vocate, 1994, p. 6).

This view of private speech is comparable to interpersonal communication, which is a context in which the communicative interaction takes place between a different source and object of communication, or interpersonally. Burleson (2010) proposes a message-centered perspective of interpersonal communication which revolves around the notion of social interaction. Accordingly, interpersonal communication is defined as “a complex, situated social process in which people who have established a communicative relationship exchange messages in an effort to generate shared meanings and accomplish social goals” (Burleson, 2010, p. 151).

Formal definitions of interpersonal communication place an emphasis on prior established communicative relationships, the size of audience, or the distinction between impersonal and personal interactions. For the purpose of this study, the definition of interpersonal communication is grounded in Burleson’s message-centered approach but crucially underscores the notion of meaning making (i.e., production and interpretation of messages) and its sociolinguistic function (i.e., accomplishing social goals). However, the definition of interpersonal communication in this study does not prioritize “established communicative relationships,” as proposed by Burleson (2010).

Both private speech and interpersonal communications have been studied in bilingual and multilingual speakers. At issue here is whether speakers of English as a second language judge the use of emotional language, and more specifically English swearwords, differently in the context of private speech as opposed to direct interpersonal interactions. The aim is to test whether second language speakers, taking the perspective of the subject in an emotion-evoking scenario, would produce different frequency of swearwords in private speech as opposed to interpersonal communications. The study further investigates whether social factors such as gender is associated with modulating the judgement of swearing in English as a second language.

4. Methodology

Given the fact that prior research demonstrates that swearing in interpersonal and social interactions is fraught with risk (cf. Robbins et al., 2011), the present study speculated that speakers of English as a second language would predict a lower level of English swearing in interpersonal communicative scenarios as opposed to private speech. Consistent with previous research and in line with imposed social gender expectations, it was further expected that gender would also play a role in regulating the choice and frequency of swearwords judged by ESL speakers. Accordingly, it is expected that ESL speakers would generally attribute less frequent acts of swearing to female subjects compared to males. To test such speculations, the study recruited ESL speakers of linguistically diverse backgrounds and elicited naturalistic linguistic reactions to emotion evoking visual scenarios.

4.1. Participants

Participants in the present study consisted of thirty-four (34) ESL speakers with diverse first language backgrounds, including Persian, Arabic, Portuguese, and Spanish. The average age of participants was 28, and 54 percent identified as male, while 46 percent identified as female. All participants had learned English through formal instruction, and their level of English proficiency varied between intermediate to advanced, according to self-reported data. Based upon a five-point scale of English proficiency, 27 percent of participants reported their English proficiency level as intermediate, while 32 percent selected upper-intermediate, and a total of 41 percent reported advanced levels of English proficiency.

The length of stay in an English-speaking country for the majority of participants was less than five years, and only 14 percent had lived in an English-speaking country for five years or more. Additionally, 73 percent of participants reported a regular use of English and daily interactions with English speakers, while 27 percent reported that they used their first language (i.e., Persian, Arabic, Portuguese, or Spanish) more frequently than English and had limited direct interactions with English speakers on a daily basis. The composition of participants in the present study also reflected the fact that the age of exposure to formal ESL instruction was after adolescence and in adulthood.

4.2. Data collection

This study is an extension of Mohammadi (2022), in which the data that came from an untimed, web-based questionnaire comprising of short emotion-evoking video inputs. The input was consisted of fourteen muted, multi-second videos. Second language speakers of English viewed the videos and were asked to predict what the subject in each video uttered in response to the emotion evoking event. The video inputs were presented in a random order, and half of the videos displayed a scenario in which the subject was in a private environment when the emotion-evoking incident happened. The other half of videos displayed a scenario in which the subject was in the presence of at least one other person and had a communicative interaction with others after the emotion-evoking incident happened. Research participants were then asked to indicate what the subject would have probably said within each different social context. Each scenario created a negative emotional environment within the context of private speech or interpersonal communication (see Appendix A for detailed information about each video input).

The questions that followed each video encouraged participants to take the perspective of the subject in the video and sought to elicit data that would potentially include swearwords. It is important to note that perspective taking has two distinct aspects, namely imagining how the subject would feel and imagining how the participant would feel (Batson, 1997). The questions in the present study underscored ESL speakers' judgment of how the subject would feel and would say. Asking ESL speakers to imagine what another person would feel in a negative situation generally evokes empathy, while asking them to imagine what they themselves would feel could evoke both empathy and distress (Batson, 1997). This study asked the research participants to imagine how another person felt and to judge how that person would react verbally to a negative scenario.

Dewaele and Moxsom-Turnbull (2020) claim that bi- and multi-lingual English speakers compared to monolingual speakers tend to rely on visual cues more than verbal cues when they are exposed to audiovisual inputs in English. In the present study, ESL speakers were presented with the visual channel only and responded to each video input by predicting the vocal and verbal cues. Participants then typed their answer in a text box formatted under each video input, and they were required to answer each question before proceeding to the next video input. Once participants submitted their answer to each question, they were not permitted to return, review, or modify their answers to previous questions.

4.3. Data analysis

The elicited data from responses to video inputs within the context of private speech and interpersonal interactions were collected and tallied. A total number of 373 separate statements were produced in response to the video inputs. The number of statements in response to intrapersonal communicative scenarios was 173, and 200 statements were produced in the context of private speech. A total number of 115 statements included swearwords in interpersonal communicative scenarios, while the number of statements with swearwords was 103 in private speech productions.

To tally the data, the number of statements that contained at least one swearword were counted. Self-echoic swearing, i.e., repetitive or additional occurrences of swearwords within the same statement, were disregarded. For example, "Fuck you! Son of a bitch!" includes two separate pejorative expressions; however, when these two elements were produced within one statement, they were quantified as one instance of swearing. Further, spelling errors (e.g., shet), non-standard spellings (e.g., fuuuck), and partially censored responses (e.g., son of a b****) were considered as swearwords and were counted accordingly. The total number of swearing instances and clean expressions in each context were counted.

For the purpose of data analysis, the differences between the usage of swearwords within the two social contexts, namely private speech and interpersonal communications, were calculated. To determine whether there was a significant association between the social context and ESL speakers' judgment of swearing in English, a chi-square analysis was applied, and Cramer's V was calculated to measure of the strength of association between variables. Additionally, the distribution of different swearing categories was examined in each social context. Each statement containing swearwords was marked for one of the following categories: pejorative verbal expression, attributive expressive adjective, epithet, or interjection.

In tallying the number of items in each category, statements that included multiple categories of swearwords were counted separately for each category. For instance, the statement "fuck you crazy piece of shit" was counted for pejorative verbal expression (i.e., fuck you), attributive expressive adjective (i.e., crazy), and epithet (i.e., piece of shit). Differences between private speech and interpersonal communication in connection with the type of swearing categories were calculated using a chi-square test. The effect size was further determined using Cramer's V results.

Finally, the use of gendered pejorative items and the role of gender in the choice of swearing within the context of private speech and interpersonal interactions were examined in the data. To determine whether there was a significant difference in the perceived use of swearwords by males and females, a chi-square test was used in both situational contexts and Cramer's V was calculated. All statistical tests in the present study have a significance level of .05.

5. Results

The results provide evidence for an association between the expression of swearwords and communication context. ESL speakers attribute significantly more instances of English swearing to interpersonal interactions than to private speech. Further, the distribution of different categories of swearwords varies based on the communication context. Pejorative interjections (e.g., shit!) are a marker of emotional lexicalization in private speech, while interpersonal communications are indexed by the frequent use of epithets (e.g., idiot).

In addition, the lexicalization of emotions in the form of swearwords shows a significant difference between male and female subjects in interpersonal interactions. The subject's gender modulates both the form and the frequency of gendered swearwords in interpersonal communications. ESL speakers tend to judge the male subjects to be more likely to swear in English in interpersonal communicative scenarios. However, in the context of private speech, the judgment of English swearing does not show a significant difference between male and female subjects.

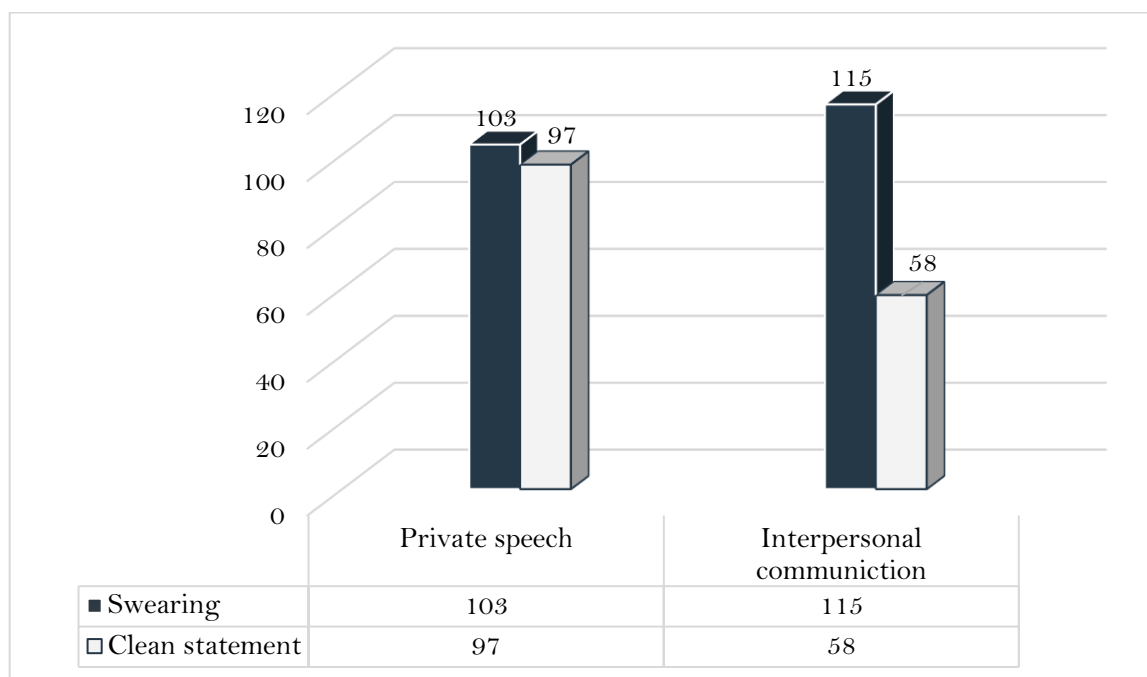
5.1. Swearing and socio-communicative context

The results reveal that bilingual speakers of English judge significantly more occurrences of English swearwords in interpersonal communicative interactions compared to private speech scenarios. This suggests that ESL speakers' perspective regarding the

usage of swearwords in English is associated with the social and physical surroundings. Figure (1) illustrates the raw frequency of swearwords and clean statements in two different social contexts of private speech and interpersonal communication.

Figure 1.

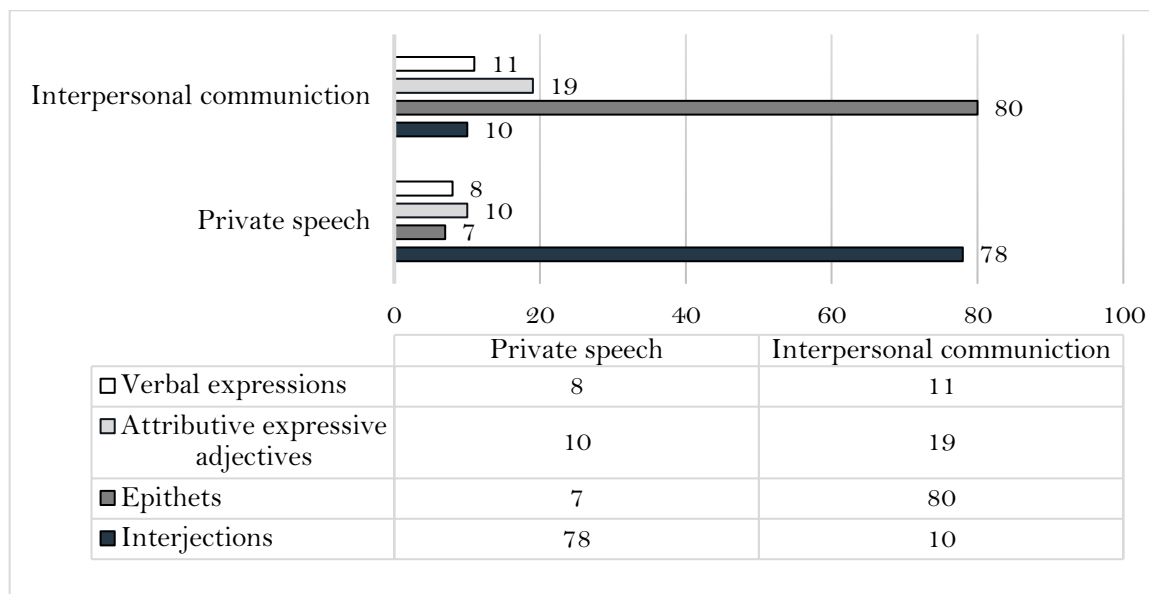
Swearing in private and interactive situational contexts



As shown in Figure (1), the rate at which swearwords occur in ESL speakers' statements is significantly higher in response to interpersonal communications compared to private speech. A chi-square test indicates a significant association between the expression of swearwords and social surroundings, $X^2(1, N = 373) = 8.56, p = .0034$, Cramer's $V = .15$. Speakers of English as a second language attribute a greater number of English swearword occurrences to emotional scenarios that involve interpersonal communications compared to emotional events that take place in private. However, the effect size of 0.15, although statistically significant, is on the weaker side, suggesting that while ESL speakers' perception and use of English swearing is connected to the situational communicative context, the association is not strong.

These findings partially confirm previous self-reported data on the effect of social context on the use of swearwords in a foreign language. Dewaele (2016a) finds that users of English as a foreign language report the highest frequency of English swearing in interpersonal communications with friends, followed by swearing in private; however, the rate of swearing continues to decrease in interpersonal communications with family members, followed by colleagues, and finally strangers. The results from the present study similarly suggest that ESL speakers tend to generally attribute more swearing occurrences to interpersonal communications rather than private speech, but regardless of the type of interlocutors.

The communicative context and social environment regulate the frequency with which swearwords emerge in the statements of ESL speakers. Furthermore, the distribution of swearwords may vary based on the communicative context. For example, the results indicate that in private speech, swearwords predominantly belong to the category of interjections, while epithets prominently appear in interpersonal communications. Figure (2) demonstrates the distribution of swearwords in the context of private speech and interpersonal communications.

Figure 2.*Distribution of swearwords in private and interactive situational contexts*

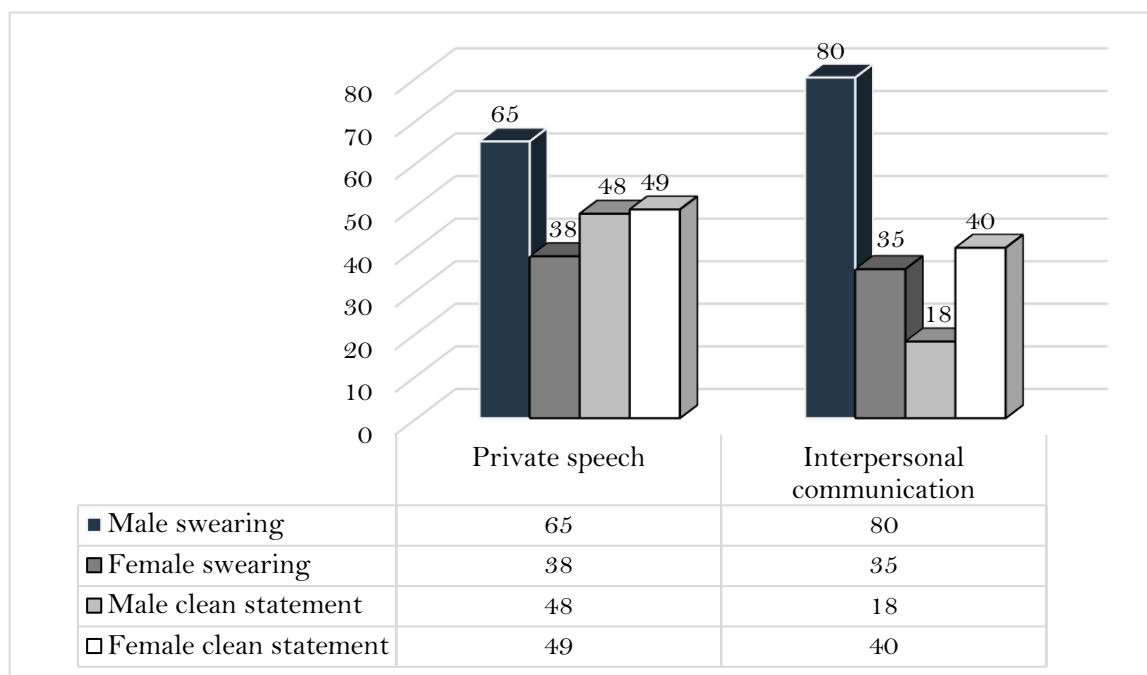
As illustrated in Figure (2), distinct categories of swearwords emerge in different social contexts. The data demonstrate that the frequency of interjections is significantly higher in the context of private speech, while in interpersonal communications, the number of statements containing epithets is considerably higher than other categories. The result of chi-square test provides conclusive evidence for the fact that the type of swearwords used by second language speakers of English is associated with the type of communication context in which swearwords emerge, $X^2(3, N = 223) = 116.44, p < .0001$, Cramer's $V = .72$. The results suggest that ESL speakers are more likely to predict the use of English interjections in private speech, while the use of epithets is judged to occur mostly in interpersonal communications. A Cramer's V of .72 further indicates a significantly strong association between the type of swearwords and communicative context.

5.2. The role of gender

A considerable number of gendered swearwords emerged in the data. Among female-directed swearwords, "bitch" ($n = 25$) was the most prominently used item, while male-directed swearwords varied and included pejorative lexical items such as "motherfucker" ($n = 18$), "son of a bitch" ($n = 13$), "bastard" ($n = 4$), and "dickhead" ($n = 4$). Both the diversity and the raw frequency of male-directed swearwords were higher than female-directed swearwords. However, it is important to note that out of the 7 interactive video scenarios, the majority of interlocutors (i.e., the recipients of swearwords) were men. Nonetheless, the observable patterns suggest that ESL speakers tend to attribute gendered swearwords only to the corresponding gender, that is, "bitch" was exclusively used towards females, while "son of a bitch" was exclusively used towards male recipients.

ESL speakers' judgement of swearing in male and female subjects is further connected to the communication context. In the context of interpersonal communications, second language speakers of English attributed a higher use of swearing to male subjects, while in the context of private speech, the use of swearing did not significantly differ between male and female subjects. Figure (3) illustrates the distribution of swearwords among male and female subjects and within the context of private speech and interpersonal communications.

Figure 3.
Distribution of swearing between genders



As shown in Figure (3), speakers of English as a second language judge a significantly higher use of English swearing among male subjects in interpersonal communications. The results of chi-square test, $X^2(1, N = 173) = 23.31, p < .0001$, Cramer's $V = .36$, indicates a meaningful relationship between the expression of swearwords and gender in the context of interpersonal communications. From the perspective of ESL speakers, male subjects tend to use English swearwords more frequently than females in interpersonal communications. The effect size further suggests that this association between the perception of swearing and the gender of subjects is moderate.

On the other hand, in private speech, second language speakers' judgement of English swearing behavior does not significantly differ between male and female subjects. The results of chi-square test, $X^2(1, N = 200) = 3.77, p = .052$, Cramer's $V = .13$, shows that in private speech the expression of swearwords does not vary significantly based on gender. In other words, ESL speakers judge that in private settings both male and female subjects equally engage in the verbalization of their emotions through swearing.

These findings imply that second language speakers of English do not necessarily see women as unwilling or incapable of swearing. Rather, ESL speakers, perhaps subconsciously, assume that women generally conform to the socially imposed expectations of women's speech. As a result, second language speakers of English attribute a lower frequency of swearing to women in interpersonal interactions and judge that women's speech is clean and swear-free in public. However, this stereotypical pattern does not necessarily emerge in relation to swearing in private, and ESL speakers perceive men and women as equally willing and able to swear in private settings.

6. Discussion

Swearing is subject to perceptions and social judgements. Fiske and Tamir (2025) describe *perception* as a person's attempt to make sense of others by trying to read their minds, which mostly focuses on understanding "the content and workings of another human's various inner states and dispositions" (p. 1223). In this sense, "person perception" is not necessarily an attempt to be accurate, but only an attempt to be functional. Fiske and Tamir (2025) further note that the formation of perceptions is mostly for the purpose of meeting certain interaction goals.

The present study examined the perception of second language swearing in ESL speakers in two socio-communicative contexts: private speech and interpersonal communication. The results indicated that second language speakers of English judge more occurrences of English swearwords in the social context of interpersonal communications. Concurrently, second language speakers produce a larger number of English pejorative interjections in the context of private speech and a larger number of epithets in interpersonal communications. These patterns were further modulated by the role of gender, whereby second language speakers attributed a higher frequency of English swearing to male subjects in interpersonal communications with no significant difference between male and female swearing in the context of private speech.

Engaging in swearing in interpersonal and social interactions is risky, and at times face-threatening (Debray, 2023; Robbins, 2011). Therefore, it is expected that second language speakers judge a lower level of English swearing in interpersonal

communications and attribute a larger number of swearwords to private speech. However, this prediction was not supported, and the results indicate otherwise: ESL speakers perceived and predicted a significantly higher number of swearwords in interpersonal communicative interactions compared to private speech. This suggests that second language speakers may view second language swearwords as a socio-pragmatic device that serves specific communicative objectives.

ESL speakers seem to predict the occurrences of English swearwords in accordance with the expected socio-pragmatic functions of swearing. In other words, the emerging patterns of second language swearing in interpersonal communications are associated with the presumed functions of swearing in social interactions, such as performing social actions or expressing social meanings, while the swearing patterns in private are mainly associated with the nature of unmediated emotional expression in private speech.

In interpersonal interactions, the heightened use of swearwords is a reflection of the second language speakers' conventional understanding of the language as a means of social action and emotional expression. That is, ESL speakers' assessment of the second language community's sociolinguistic norms and accepted socio-cultural behaviours leads them to view English swearing as a socio-pragmatic device that functions in the context of negative, emotion-evoking scenarios. From the perspective of ESL speakers, English swearing may function as a means of expressing contempt or disapproval in an exchange of emotions or as a means of displaying social actions in the presence of other subjects.

On the other hand, in private speech, the communicator is both the source and the receiver of interaction, and the act of communication occurs within one person. As a result, the expression of emotions is unmediated, and the transmission of emotional contents is direct and intrapersonal. Accordingly, in private scenarios, the verbalization of emotions in the form of swearwords is unfelt or is perceived as dispensable. In contrast, in interpersonal communications, the emotional content of the message must be transmitted interpersonally, and therefore, some form of verbalization is needed. As a result, emotional and attitudinal contents of the message emerge through a higher frequency of swearwords, and this pattern is demonstrated through the second language speakers' prediction of more occurrences of English swearwords in interpersonal communications.

The results of the study further indicated that interjections are a marker of emotional lexicalization in private speech, while interpersonal communications are indexed by the frequent use of epithets. This distinction is similarly rooted in the speaker's understanding of language as a socio-pragmatic device and the nature of unmediated emotional expression in private speech. In private speech, the expression of emotional discontent or disapproval is usually directed at self, and therefore, the use of interjections, which are mostly impersonal, drastically rises. However, in interpersonal communications, the expression of contempt or disapproval is directed at another person which consequently results in a rise in the number of epithets, which are pejorative items that are personal and are used to designate others.

This pattern reveals that in the view of ESL speakers, insulting the recipient of an English swearword is perhaps the most prevalent objective of swearing in interpersonal communications, and epithets, which are derogatory labels, serve this impoliteness objective to the greatest degree. Culpeper (2011) views impoliteness "as an interpersonal attitude" which involves negative attitudes that activate negative in-context-behaviors (p. 428). In line with such mechanisms, taking the subject's perspective in negative events will conjure up negative emotions in ESL speakers. The negative attitudes will further lead to contextual negative behaviors, such as swearing, which insult or are presumed to insult the recipient of the swearing. The role of intention, according to Culpeper (2011), is not central; rather, insults are contextually perceived as a marker of impoliteness regardless of the speaker's intentions.

As illustrated in Figure (2), attributive adjectives are also frequently used in interpersonal communications, however by a large margin in the second rank. The relatively frequent use of attributive adjectives along with epithets in interpersonal communications further suggests that second language speakers tend to employ diverse, yet contextually relevant, linguistic constructions in their second language in order to direct negative emotions and attitudes to the recipient of a message, and further to achieve socio-pragmatic objectives.

Swearing is used as a readily available socio-pragmatic device to communicate emotional information and to achieve interpersonal outcomes that are not easily achieved through the use of other linguistic elements. This is what Jay (2009) labels as the "utility" of swearing which uniquely enables the speaker to express emotions and to achieve social goals. In line with the universal utility of swearing, second language speakers use epithets more frequently in interpersonal communications as insults directed at others to connote emotional anger, frustration, or contempt.

This study further demonstrated that in private speech, ESL speakers predicted that both male and female subjects would equally engage in verbalization of their emotions through swearwords. However, women were judged to engage in significantly fewer instances of swearing in interpersonal communications. This suggests that ESL speakers, taking the subject's perspective, judge the use of English swearwords in conformity with the stereotyped women's speech.

In other words, ESL speakers, despite their cross-cultural differences, presumed and predicted that female subjects would refrain from English swearing in the presence of others, while women's swearing rates would not differ from male subjects in private. This pattern indicates that ESL speakers do not necessarily perceive women as unwilling or unable to swear. Rather, the perceived sociolinguistic norms for women lead ESL speakers to assume that women would generally conform with norms and will have a more polite and accommodating communication style in the presence of others, but not necessarily in private.

7. Conclusion

The present study investigated the perception and use of English swearing by ESL speakers in two socio-communicative contexts of private speech and interpersonal communications. The results provided strong evidence for a correlation between the use of swearwords and communication context, whereby second language swearwords were more prevalent in interpersonal communications rather than in private speech. This pattern was further marked by the most frequent use of interjections in private speech and the use of epithets in interpersonal communications. In addition, the lexicalization of emotions in the form of swearwords indicated a significant difference between male and female subjects in interpersonal interactions. ESL speakers judged male subjects to be more likely to swear in interpersonal communicative scenarios. However, in the context of private speech, judgment of swearing did not show a significant difference between male and female subjects.

This study explored ESL speakers' perception of swearing in a second language and the role of situational context in swearing behavior. Future research should investigate these findings by examining the role of other factors, such as the subjects' age and/or the speaker-listener relationship and explore how the judgement of swearing in a second language may be associated with the cross-section of multiple within-subject contextual variables. The majority of studies on swearing in a second or foreign language rely on self-reported data which may be confounded by reporting inaccuracies or a lack of metalinguistic awareness in second language learners. The present study relied on elicited data with minimal manipulation which provides a more reliable source of investigating swearing behavior.

The results of this study can further provide the bedrock for understanding ESL speakers' perception of swearing in order to conceive potential pedagogical proposals. The study highlights the need for context-driven pragmatic instruction of second language swearwords in order to prepare ESL learners for authentic English interactions. It is suggested that teaching about second language swearing give a glimpse into the values and social norms of the target language and culture and primarily focus on the receptive knowledge of second language swearwords, rather than their productive use. Ultimately, advanced pragmatic instruction and intercultural communication training should be always tailored to the learners' needs in an ever-evolving field of second language teaching.

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9. Appendix A

Full Description of Video Inputs and the Follow-up English Questions

Scenario	Subject	Interlocutor	Video Description	Question
Private	male	NA	The subject reaches to pick up the phone, and as he leans back, he falls back in his chair.	What would the man probably say?
Interactive	male	male	Crossing the road, the subject narrowly survives being run over by a van; he then picks up a stone and throws at the van.	What does the man probably say as he throws the stone?
Private	female	NA	The subject takes a boiling pot of pasta off the stove, and as she tries to drain the pasta in a strainer, she burns her hand.	What would the woman probably say?
Private	male	NA	The subject is sitting in a recliner with a bowl of cheese curls next to him; he stretches his arm, strikes the bowl, and drops it on the floor.	What would the man probably say?
Interactive	male	female	The subject is looking down at his phone while sitting at a kitchen counter; a woman jokingly hits the subject hard in the back of the head with a large tray while laughing.	What would the man probably call his girlfriend?
Private	female	NA	The subject is cracking an egg into a frying pan, but the egg falls out just right next to the pan.	What would the woman probably say?
Interactive	female	male	The subject is standing next to a young boy who is trying to fill up a glass of milk but pours it on the kitchen counter.	What would the kid's mother say to him?
Private	female	NA	The subject picks up an upside-down coffee mug off a desk, and coffee pours out all over the desk (mug prank).	What would the woman probably say?
Interactive	female	male	The subject is riding a scooter, an accident happens, and the subject is violently ejected of her scooter.	What would the girl probably say to the guy?
Private	male	NA	Standing on a ladder, the subject is painting a room while he accidentally kicks the paint bucket and drops the paint on a carpet floor.	What would the man probably say to himself?
Private	male	NA	In an office setting, while the subject is trying to replace an office printer cartridge, ink splashes out onto his white shirt.	What would the man probably say?
Interactive	female	female	While the subject is shopping at a store, a young woman walks up to her, takes an item from her cart, and walks away (social prank). The subject looks stunned.	What would the woman probably call the girl?
Interactive	male	male	The subject is riding a bike close to a taxi; after a road rage, the biker gets into physical altercation with the cab driver and starts throwing punches through the driver's window.	What does the biker call the cab driver?
Interactive	male	Not visible	During a road rage, the subject stops in the middle of the road, gets out of his car, and starts punching at the back window of the car in front of him.	What would the man probably say while he is hitting the car?

Note. This table is based on the data in Mohammadi (2022).