

## Is Swearing a Sign of a Limited Vocabulary?

New research challenges the idea that vulgar words are a sign of failure

By [Piercarlo Valdesolo](#)

April 5, 2016

When words fail us, we curse. At least this is what the “poverty-of-vocabulary” (POV) hypothesis would have us believe. On this account, swearing is the “[sign of a weak vocabulary](#)”, a result of a lack of education, laziness or impulsiveness. In line with this idea, we tend to judge vulgarians quite harshly, rating them as [lower on socio-intellectual status](#), [less effective at their jobs](#) and [less friendly](#).

But this view of the crass does not square with recent research in linguistics. For example, the POV hypothesis would predict that when people struggle to come up with the right words, they are more likely to spew swears left and right. But research shows that people tend to fill the awkward gaps in their language with “ers” and “ums” not “sh\*ts” and “godd\*mnits.” This research has led to a competing explanation for swearing: fluency with taboo words might be a sign of general verbal fluency. Those who are exceptionally vulgar might also be exceptionally eloquent and intelligent. Indeed, taboo words hold a particular purpose in our lexicon that other words cannot as effectively accomplish: to deliver intense, succinct and directed emotional expression. So, those who swear frequently might just be more sophisticated in the linguistic resources they can draw from in order to make their point.

[New research](#) by cognitive scientists at Marist College and the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts attempts to test this possibility, and further debunk the POV hypothesis, by measuring how taboo word fluency relates to general verbal fluency. The POV hypothesis suggests that there should be a negative correlation: the more you swear, the lower your verbal prowess. But the researchers hypothesized just the opposite: the more you swear the more comprehensive your vocabulary would be.

Across three studies, they gave participants a well-known measure of verbal fluency called the Controlled Word Association Test (COWAT). The COWAT asks participants to say as many words as they can that start with a given letter (e.g. F, A or S) during a specified time window. The amount of words that they generate is summed into a fluency score. Then, in what has to be one of the most awkward and hilarious experimental situations in the history of cognitive science, participants had to say, out loud to the experimenter, as many swear words as they could think of in one minute. This was the measure of taboo word fluency.

Results from Study 1 showed that participants generated 400 unique taboo words (see the Results for some of the more colorful entries) and, as the researchers predicted, fluency in generating these words correlated positively with performance on the COWAT. This finding was replicated in Studies 2 and 3, using a written version of the tests as well. The more taboo words participants could generate, the more verbally fluent they were in general.

This finding can serve as a nice empirical middle-finger from vulgarians everywhere, directed at those who had, until now, been unfairly judging them for their linguistic abilities. Swearing, it seems, can be [creative](#), [smart](#), and even [downright lyrical](#). This should also open our eyes to the unique subfield of research that spends its time deconstructing the many and varied ways in which, and reasons why, we swear. For example, did you know that some linguists and philosophers of language draw meaningful distinctions between taboo words that express heightened emotional states (e.g., f\*ck), general pejoratives (e.g., f\*cker) whose meaning is connotative but person-directed, and slurs (e.g., sl\*t), which have both expressive and derogatory descriptive elements? I did not know this.

That said, these results need to be taken with a grain of salt. Knowledge of taboo words and the regular *use* of those words are two very different things. I might very well have an encyclopedic knowledge of vulgarity, but I might also have the tact necessary to regulate my language in social situations. In other words, just because verbally fluent people have the ability to cuss with the best of them, does not mean that they will do so. This presents a bit of a problem with the current research since the authors do seem to want to make the claim that their results inform what kinds of people actually curse in the real world. This conclusion cannot be drawn from these data. The studies tell us nothing about how speakers *use* taboo words, just what they would be *capable* of

saying if they chose to use them. Swearing regularly and being able to generate a long list of curse words when prompted are very different. Indeed, the POV hypothesis could still survive this criticism. It still might be true that those with greater verbal fluency, even though they also have greater taboo fluency, swear less because they have the lexical database required to actually express themselves in other ways.

In 1977 Norman Mailer confronted Gore Vidal at a party after Vidal poorly reviewed one of Mailer's books. Mailer's anger boiled over and he sent Vidal to the ground with a punch. From the floor, Gore Vidal looked up and famously quipped: "Once again, words have failed Norman Mailer." No doubt, Vidal could have unleashed a string of profanities at his aggressor. He surely had a mastery of taboo language comparable to his mastery of language in general. But his verbal fluency allowed him to craft an even wittier response. And had words not failed Mailer, perhaps he too would have reacted less crassly.