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# “Swear words” and “curse words” in Australian (and American) English. At the crossroads of pragmatics, semantics and sociolinguistics

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**Abstract:** This study seeks to show that Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) analytical techniques allow an integrated semantic-pragmatic approach to the use of “swear words” and “curse (cuss) words”. The paper begins with a semantic exegesis of the lexical items *swear word* and *curse word*. This is helpful to delimit and conceptualize the phenomena being studied, and it also hints at some interesting differences between the speech cultures of Australian English and American English. Subsequent sections propose semantic explications for a string of swear/curse words and expressions as used in Australian English, including: exclamations (*Shit! Fuck! Damn! Christ! Jesus!*), abuse formulas (*Fuck you!, Damn you!*), interrogative and imperative formulas (e.g. *Who the fuck do you think you are?; Get the hell out of here!*), and the free use of expressive adjectives, such as *fucking* and *goddamn*, in angry swearing. A novel aspect, with interesting implications for the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, is that the explications incorporate a metalexical awareness section, modelling speaker awareness of the ethnometapragmatic status of the word in the community of discourse. The study goes on to address so-called “social/conversational” swearing. I propose cultural scripts to capture some Anglo ethnopragmatic assumptions about how the use of swear/curse words can be affected by perceptions of familiarity, solidarity, and mutuality. Differences between Australian English and American English are discussed at various points.

## 1 Issues, scope and methods

Swearing stands at the crossroads of multiple fields of study: pragmatics, including interactional pragmatics and impoliteness studies (Culpeper 2011;

Jay and Janschewitz 2008; Norrick 2009), sociolinguistics (Coates 2003; Holmes and Stubbe 2003; Stapleton 2010; Taylor 1975), social history (Hughes 1998; McEnery 2006), descriptive linguistics (Ameka 1992; Goddard 2014b; Ljung 2011), psycholinguistics (Jay 1992, 2000; Van Lancker and Cummings 1999), and the philosophy of language (Blakemore 2014; Croom 2014a). Naturally, swearing has featured prominently in studies of dysphemism, taboo words and bad language (Allan and Burridge 1991, 2006), and it is sometimes mentioned in the context of folk pragmatics and language ideologies (Niedzielski and Preston 2007). There are number of good trade books on swearing, such as Wynryb's (2005) *Expletive Deleted* and Mohr's (2013) *Holy Sh\*t*, which seek to integrate material from these varying fields.

Among all this work there are relatively few contributions from semantics, mainly because the use of swear words is heavily context-sensitive and because their meanings can be seen as expressive, rather than as referential/descriptive (but see Blakemore [2014] and Croom [2014a] for a critique of this dichotomy). Most linguists see swearing as falling into the territory of pragmatics, rather than semantics. What is counted as pragmatics or semantics, however, and where to draw the line, depends in part on one's assumptions and methods. For researchers in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach (Bromhead 2009; Goddard 2011a; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002, 2014; Levisen 2012; Peeters 2006; Wierzbicka 1996; Wong 2014; Ye 2004, 2007, in press; and other works), expressive meanings are seen as belonging to semantics proper (i.e., there is no assumption that semantics deals only with referential meaning), and context-sensitive meanings are tractable under NSM methods, i.e., it is possible to separate stable semantic invariants from contextual effects and to state the semantic invariants in a precise and testable fashion. A number of NSM studies have argued that individual swear word expressions can be assigned specifiable expressive meanings (Goddard 2014b; Hill 1992; Kidman 1993; Stollznow 2002; Wierzbicka 1992, 1997, 2002). The present study will build on these works by proposing semantic explications for a dozen English swear/curse words and formulas.

This is not to say that a full account of swear words and curse words can be given in semantic terms alone. Not at all. There are important aspects of their use and functions that are indeed pragmatic – or as NSM researchers would prefer to say – ethnopragmatic in nature (Goddard 2006, 2014c). One of the hallmarks of the NSM approach is that it allows an easy integration of semantics and pragmatics, as NSM researchers have sought to demonstrate since at least Wierzbicka (1991). This easy integration is made possible by the fact that the

same analytical metalanguage is used for formulating both semantic explications and cultural scripts, which are the main vehicles for NSM analysis in semantics and pragmatics, respectively.

The terms NSM, semantic explication, and cultural script can be briefly explained as follows. NSM is an acronym for Natural Semantic Metalanguage and for the approach to language and cultural analysis based on this metalanguage (Goddard 2011; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002; Levisen 2012; Peeters 2006; Wierzbicka 1996). The metalanguage consists of a small inventory of simple cross-translatable words (semantic primes, see Appendix) and their associated grammar of combination, which, evidence suggests, have equivalents in all or most languages. It is the outcome of a decades-long program of theoretical and empirical research. The metalanguage of semantic primes is well adapted to modelling “expressive” meanings, subjective construals, and social cognition (Goddard 2013). For example, included among the 65 semantic primes are I, YOU, PEOPLE and WORD – elements without analogues in other systems of semantic representation.

A semantic explication is a paraphrase composed in simple cross-translatable expressions drawn from the NSM, intended to model an interpretation of the meaning expressed by a speaker in using a certain word, phrase, or other lexicogrammatical unit. Cultural scripts are representations of cultural assumptions, values, and norms. They are largely phrased in the metalanguage but sometimes include culture-specific words designating culturally important concepts or categories.

The goals of the present study are three-fold: analytical, methodological and theoretical. I would like to show that applying NSM techniques allows an integrated semantic-pragmatic approach to swearing phenomena, which should be applicable to other swear words and expressions in English and to similar phenomena in other languages and cultures. I begin, in Section 2, with a semantic exegesis of the lexical items *swear word* and *curse word*. This is helpful to better delimit and conceptualise the phenomena of interest, and it also hints at some interesting differences between the speech cultures of Australian English and American English. Sections 3 and 4 propose semantic explications for a string of swear/curse words and expressions, including exclamations, formulas, and the free use of expressive adjectives (such as *fucking* and *god-damn*) in angry swearing. Section 5 addresses the issue of so-called “social” or “conversational” swearing, where the uses of such words can express excitement or positive feelings. In this section I propose a number of cultural scripts intended to capture some Anglo ethnopragmatic assumptions about how the use of swear/curse words can be affected by perceptions of solidarity and familiarity.

Section 6 briefly discusses differences in attitudes towards the use of swear/curse words in Australian English and American English. Section 7 recapitulates and adds concluding remarks.

## 2 The lexical semantics of “swear word” and “curse word (cuss word)”

So far we have been talking about “swear words” and “curse words” as if the meanings of these terms were clear and transparent, and as if they could be taken for granted as analytical categories. Much work on swearing, taboo language, and the like, appears predicated on these or similar assumptions, to judge by the fact that there is seldom any sustained effort to define the terms or to differentiate between them.<sup>1</sup> Allan and Burridge (2006), for example, in their well-known work, seem to use the terms “swearing” and “cursing” more or less interchangeably, as stylistic variants, as well as employing terms such as “offensive” and “taboo” (in a somewhat technical sense) as if their meanings were self-evident and unproblematical.

From an ethnopragmatic perspective, there are two reasons to begin our inquiry with semantic analysis of the terms *swear word* and *curse word* (*cuss word*). First, these terms are themselves lexical keys to understanding the ethnopragmatic conceptualisations of ordinary Anglo English speakers. An added point of interest is that only the former (*swear word*, also spelled *swearword*) is much used in Australia, whereas both terms are available and frequently used in American English.<sup>2</sup> Second, de-constructing these everyday concepts will help us develop our scholarly understanding of “swearing/cursing” phenomena,

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<sup>1</sup> Partial exceptions are Croom (2014a) and Blakemore (2014), who address the difference between (purely expressive) expletives, e.g. *fuck* and *damn*, on the one hand, and slur terms, e.g. *nigger*, *slut*, on the other; and Jay (1992) and Ljung (2011), who attempt to differentiate between swearing and cursing.

<sup>2</sup> Figures from the COCA corpus of American English [accessed 30/09/2013] show both terms, and their variants, in high use in American English: *curse words/cursewords* – 64, *cuss words/cusswords* – 45, *swear words/swearwords* – 76. I would not claim that *curse word* is never used in Australia but I am certain that it runs a distant second to *swear word*. The Macquarie Dictionary, which is based on usage in Australia, has no entry for *curse word* or *cuss word*. It does have a short entry for the verb *cuss*, with the style note “Chiefly US Colloquial” [Macquarie Dictionary online, accessed 18/07/2014].

detaching it from the English language, and enabling us to position it more clearly in cross-cultural perspective.

[A] and [B] below are NSM semantic explications for the terms *swear words* and *curse words* (*cuss words*). I will assume that *swear words* has the same meaning in Australian English and American English. The two explications have a common structure or template, whose four sections can be labeled as follows: Category, Exemplars, Metapragmatic Status, and Prototypical Context-of-Use.

[A] *swear words* (Australian English and American English)

words of one kind	CATEGORY
one of these words is ‘shit’, another one is ‘fuck’, there are many other words of this kind	EXEMPLARS
many people think about these words like this: “it is bad if someone says these words” many people feel something bad when they hear words of this kind	METAPRAGMATIC STATUS
at some times someone can want to say words of this kind when it is like this: this someone feels something bad in one moment	PROTOTYPICAL CONTEXT-OF-USE

[B] *curse words* (*cuss words*) (American English)

words of one kind	CATEGORY
one of these words is ‘damn’, another one is ‘fuck’, there are many other words of this kind	EXEMPLARS
many people think about these words like this: “it can be very bad if someone says these words if someone says these words, something bad can happen to someone because of it” many people feel something bad when they hear words of this kind	METAPRAGMATIC STATUS
at some times someone can want to say words of this kind when it is like this: this someone feels something bad towards someone else	PROTOTYPICAL CONTEXT-OF-USE

The category section (a single line) embodies the claim that people see *swear words* and *curse words* in a taxonomic fashion, as “words of one kind”. The next section identifies certain Exemplars (for *swear words*: “*shit*” and “*fuck*”; for *curse words*: “*damn*” and “*fuck*”), while at the same time providing that “there are many other words of this kind.”<sup>3</sup> The partly different exemplars is the first difference in the proposed semantic structures for *swear words* and *curse words*. The differences are magnified in the next section of the respective explications, which is titled Metapragmatic Status. In both cases, it begins with a component “many people think about these words like this:...”, i.e., it spells

3 See Goddard (2011b) for discussion of the semantic prime WORDS.

out a widespread social attitude towards the kind of word in question. The content of this attitude, however, is not exactly the same. For *swear words*, the attitude is simply “it is bad if someone says these words,” whereas (it is claimed), for *curse words* the attitude is, firstly, more disapproving “it can be very bad if someone says these words,” and, moreover, includes a component associating the use of *curse words* with potential bad consequences: “if someone says these words, something bad can happen to someone because of it.” The exact nature of the bad consequence is left unspecified, and the person concerned is also left vague (“someone”). This open-ended formulation is compatible with the thought that using *curse words* could provoke a fight (cf. the concept in American law of “fighting words”), bring down serious social censure against the speaker or even bring down supernatural retribution against another person, i.e. against someone who is being cursed. The implication is that *curse words* (but not *swear words*) are thought of as dangerous, to some extent. Both *swear words* and *curse words*, however, share the following component, which indicates “offensiveness”: “many people feel something bad when they hear words of this kind.”<sup>4</sup>

A third difference in the conceptualization of the two categories comes in the final Prototypical Context-of-Use section, which states that “at some times someone can want to say words of this kind when it is like this:...”, i.e., in certain prototypical situations. The situations in question are both linked with bad feelings but they are not exactly the same. For *swear words*, the situation is that someone “feels something bad in one moment,” while with *curse words*, the situation is that someone “feels something bad towards someone else.” In other words, *swear words* are thought of primarily in terms of “venting” a speaker’s immediate bad feelings, while *curse words* are thought of as being used “against” someone else. This is consistent with the grammar of the speech-act verb *curse*, which can take a person as a direct object.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that this Prototypical Context-of-Use component does not imply that the actual use of these words is confined to the indicated context. For example, if I am

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4 Why not, it may be asked, use a component such as ‘these are bad words’? It is true that the expression ‘a bad word’ is very idiomatic in English and much used in Anglo child socialization. It can be argued, however, that semantically the expression ‘a bad word’ is more complex than it seems, i.e., it is not just a combination of semantic primes BAD and WORD. Consistent with this, the expression ‘bad word’ lacks idiomatic equivalents in some languages.

5 It can be noted that explications [A] and [B] are compatible with the historical links to the other meanings of *swear* and *curse*: e.g. *to swear to do something*, *to curse someone* (= *put a curse on someone*). Both words have descended from speech acts that involved invoking God (cf. Allan and Burridge 2006; Hughes 1998; Wierzbicka 1987).

cooking a steak and accidentally drop it on the floor, I might say *Damn!* or *Damn it!* simply to express frustration or annoyance (see explication [G] in Section 3.1), but this does not conflict with the proposition that, in American English, it is open to a speaker to regard the word *damn* as a “curse word”.

Two further observations. First, explications [A] and [B] are sufficient to conceptually distinguish *swear words* and *curse words* from other nasty, offensive or ugly words, e.g. so-called “slur words” like *nigger* (the *n-word*), *Abo*, *slut*, *retard*, and *faggot* (cf. Blakemore 2014; Croom 2011, 2013). Second, and relatedly, the explications are consistent with the slightly different referential range of the two lexical category words. Expressions like *Damn!*, *Christ!*, and *Jesus!*, for example, readily fall into the American English category of *curse words*, but hardly qualify (at least in Australian English) as *swear words*.<sup>6</sup>

Given that the expressions *swear words* and *curse words* do not mean exactly the same thing, but are, rather, similar-yet-different in meaning, what is the import of the fact that both terms are in use in American English? Anecdotal reports and personal observation suggest that one or other term may be favoured in usage by speakers of different sociolinguistic profiles. At the same time it seems certain that both terms are widely known and thus form part of the semantic competence of most speakers of American English (and some speakers appear to use both terms freely). Until we have more detailed studies in hand, perhaps the most that can be said is that in the USA there are two different but overlapping conceptual models in circulation, whereas in Australia there is one predominant model. More detailed study of American English usage patterns is needed. Equally, there is scope for further exploration of related (ethno)metapragmatic categories in English; for example, examining the lexical semantics and usage patterns, across different varieties of English, of expressions such as *offensive language*, *bad/foul language*, *dirty language/words*,

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<sup>6</sup> Some usage data seems to indicate that, for some sections of the general American public, the term *cuss word* can be extended to take in so-called slur words like *nigger*, *beaner* and *whore*. For example, a website called “the Top Tens” [[www.thetoptens.com/best-cuss-words](http://www.thetoptens.com/best-cuss-words); accessed 22 Sept 2013] lists the “top ten cuss words”. According to the site, over 500 people voted over a two year period. The list reads as follows: “The ‘F’ word, The ‘C’ word for vagina, The ‘S’ word for poop, The ‘D’ word slang [presumably *Damn* – CG], The ‘B’ word for Mexicans, The ‘A’-hole word, The ‘N’ word for black, The ‘W’ word for prostitute, The ‘C’ word for white people, The ‘J’ word for sperm.” Although the possibility of this kind of extended referential range for *cuss word* is understandable, it is clear that racial, sexual, and ethnic “slur words” have certain conceptual and semantic properties (such as the fact that they include some descriptive/referential content) which put them in a class of their own. The nature of slurs has been discussed extensively in recent work by philosophers of language (see Croom 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Blakemore 2014; and references therein).

*rude words*, and *profanity*. Likewise, it would doubtless be instructive to apply a similar approach to (ethno)metapragmatic categories connected with euphemism, which can be seen, broadly speaking, as the converse domain to swearing and cursing (Allan and Burridge 2006). For the moment, however, we turn to the question of whether it is possible to assign specific meanings to individual swear/curse words.

### 3 The meanings of swear/curse words and the role of “metalexical awareness”

In Section 3.1, I present explications for five swear/curse words (*Shit!*, *Fuck!*, *Jesus!* *Christ!* and *Damn!*) used as exclamations. Section 3.2 contains explications for the abuse formulas *Damn you!* and *Fuck you!*, i.e. formulas that are directed at or against an addressee. Section 3.3 looks at two other formulaic uses: question and imperatives that include the phrases *the hell* and *the fuck*, e.g. *Who the hell do you think are?* and *Shut the fuck up!* Brief notes will be provided in support of each explication, but my chief interest is in the overall structure and logic of the explications rather than the fine details. I am relying primarily on my own intuitions as a speaker of Australian English, and on informal discussions with friends and colleagues in Australia. For the time being, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, I am prepared to assume that these explications will apply also to usage in the USA (see Section 6 for further discussion).

#### 3.1 Explications for swear/curse words used as exclamations

Previewing the structure, we can say that the bulk of the explications follow a common semantic template, similar to that which characterises other secondary interjections. It consists of four sections, labelled respectively: Cognitive Trigger (a component based on semantic prime *KNOW* and/or *THINK*, with a complement depicting a situation), Reaction (a *FEEL* component, modelling the speaker's bad feeling response and its intensity, e.g. “bad” or “very bad”),<sup>7</sup> Expressive Impulsive (i.e. the urge to say something; in the case of swear words, something bad), and finally Word Utterance, the speaker's performative utterance of a

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<sup>7</sup> Note that swear/curse word exclamations can also be used to express excitement or strong positive feelings. This is dealt with in Section 5. Note also, in connection with explications [C] and [D] that ‘a moment before’ can be more idiomatically rendered in English as ‘a moment ago’.

particular word. The latter component is key to distinguishing secondary, i.e., word-based, interjections, from so-called primary or “noise-like” interjections (Ameka 1992; Goddard 2014a).

To see how this works, it is helpful to look first at explications [C] and [D] for the exclamations *Shit!* and *Fuck!*, respectively. These are convenient initial examples because they are relatively simple and common, and because they bear a close semantic resemblance to one another. The two interjections share several individual components, and others can be seen as variants, with the effect that *Fuck!* can be seen as overall “stronger”, both in impact and offensiveness, than *Shit!* As argued in the previous section, these two words are the most prominent exemplars of the category *swear words*. Note the final boxed section of the explications, labelled Metalexical Awareness, to which we will turn next.

[C] *Shit!*

I know: something happened a moment before	COGNITIVE TRIGGER
I feel something bad because of it	REACTION
I want to say something bad now because of this	EXPRESSIVE
I want to say it in one moment	IMPULSE
because of this, I say this word: {shit}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
“some people can feel something bad when they hear this word some people think like this: “it’s bad if someone says this word””	

[D] *Fuck!*

I know: something happened a moment before	COGNITIVE TRIGGER
I feel something very bad because of it	REACTION
I want to say something very bad now because of this	EXPRESSIVE
I want to say it in one moment	IMPULSE
because of this, I say this word: {fuck}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
“many people can feel something very bad when they hear this word many people think like this: “it is very bad if someone says this word””	

The metalexical awareness section is critical to the treatment of swear/curse words being advanced in this study, so it warrants some extended explanation and commentary. To begin with, it can be noted that it takes off, so to speak, from the immediately preceding word utterance component, which involves a performative use of semantic prime SAY “because of this, I say this word: [XXX].”

The metalexical awareness section can be thought of as “attached” to the word itself: a kind of lexical annotation depicting the speaker’s ethno-metapragmatic awareness of the status of the word. In the case of *shit* and *fuck*, this awareness obviously concerns the word’s potentially offensive or “taboo” status. Both are introduced as: “I think about this word like this:....,” and the specific content in each case is similar, except that the version for *Fuck!* is “stronger” than for *Shit!* In both cases, there is a pair of parallel components, one phrased in terms of how people can feel when they hear this word (“something bad” for *Shit!*, “something very bad” for *Fuck!*), the other in terms of how strongly people can disapprove of someone saying the word: “it is bad if someone says this word” (for *Shit!*) and “it is very bad if someone says this word” (for *Fuck!*). The two metalexical awareness sections differ in another way as well. For *Shit!* the potential negative reactions are attributed to “some people,” while for *Fuck!* they are attributed to “many people.” Naturally, the greater potential offensiveness (and potential “shock value”) correlates with perceived greater intensity of the word.

The point should be made that different “degrees” of potential offensiveness are being modelled here purely in qualitative terms, i.e., without recourse to any numerical scales of offensiveness. Many researchers of offensive language have sought to gauge offensiveness in the population at large by way of surveys using rating scales. A five-point scale is typical. Though such information can be useful, in the NSM view it would make no sense to attribute numerical ratings to the cognitive representations of ordinary speakers. Nor it is necessary to do so, because, as anticipated by Wierzbicka (2002: 1179–80), it is possible to distinguish a number of qualitatively different categories using combinations such as “bad” vs. “very bad,” and “some people” vs. “many people,” as shown in explications [C] and [D].<sup>8</sup>

As to the significance of presenting the metalexical awareness annotation in a different box, offset from the main body of the explication, this presentational device is intended to reflect two things. The first is the intuition that the metalexical awareness section is indeed attached, as it were, to the specific word, rather than forming an integral part of the explication as a whole. The same annotation occurs in other uses of the word *fuck*, including, for example, in other swearing contexts, such as the intensifying adjective *fucking* (explicated in Section 4 below) and even in “literal” uses of the verb *to fuck*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Extremely taboo words can be tagged with a component like: “it is very bad if someone says this word”. This would express something like absolute condemnation, not linked in an explicit way with people’s reactions.

<sup>9</sup> Euphemisms presumably deserve to have a metalexical awareness component connected with people’s perceived sensitivity to hearing particular words spoken (Allan and Burridge 1991), but this arena lies outside the scope of the present study.

The second is the hypothesis that individual metalexical annotations can have a “life of their own.” It is known that the shock value of particular expressions can decay quite quickly, within decades or so (for example, the words *bloody*, *damn*, and *fucking* were once far more offensive than they are today), and yet there is a functional “pay off” of having strongly offensive terms available for use. This may motivate a speech community to introduce new expressions to fill the slot of a word which is in the process of losing its taboo potency. Given this, it makes sense to see the set of metalexical statuses as somewhat autonomous.

Explications [E] and [F] below for *Jesus!* and *Christ!*, respectively, are somewhat more complex. The cognitive trigger section embodies the claim that these exclamations express one’s reaction to a thought that has just “hit” one, so to speak, e.g. having a sudden realisation or suddenly recalling or facing up to a known situation. The reaction components differ between the two explications and account for their different range of use. These aspects have been dealt with in a previous study (Goddard 2014b), so I will not go into them further here.<sup>10</sup> Instead I would like to draw attention to the metalexical awareness section, because it shows something very interesting about the status of the words *Jesus* and *Christ* as religious – or, more accurately, sacrilegious – swear/curse words.

[E] *Jesus!*....

I thought like this a moment before: “it is like this, I know it now”	COGNITIVE TRIGGER
I think about it like this: “this is something very bad for someone, I don’t want this” at the same time I think like this: “I can’t do anything because of it” I feel something bad because of this	REACTION
I want to say something bad now because of this	EXPRESSIVE
I want to say it in one moment	IMPULSE
because of this, I say this word: {Jesus}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this: “some people say this word at many times when they want to say something about God [m] because of this, some people think like this: “it is bad if someone says this word when this someone wants to say something bad.”	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
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<sup>10</sup> Goddard (2014b) used a slightly different phrasing for the cognitive trigger in explications like [E] and [F].

[F] *Christ!....*

I thought like this a moment before: "it is like this, I know it now"	COGNITIVE TRIGGER
I think about it like this: "this is something very bad, I don't want this"	REACTION
I feel something bad because of it	
I want to say something bad now because of this	EXPRESSIVE
I want to say it in one moment	IMPULSE
because of this, I say this word: {Christ}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
"some people say this word at many times when they want to say something about God [m] because of this, some people think like this: "it is bad if someone says this word when this someone wants to say something bad""	

The content of the metalexical awareness sections must of course be different from those of *Shit!* and *Fuck!*, because there is nothing inherently offensive, let alone taboo, about saying the words *Jesus* or *Christ*. On the contrary, they could be considered, from the point of view of Christian belief, as very positive – even sacred – words, as names for the Saviour or Messiah. The potentially sensitive aspect of using them as negative interjections (as quasi-swear words) is that such use can be seen as an abuse of their proper, religious, function. Hence, the metalexical awareness section in [E] and [F] has two main ingredients; first, awareness that “some people” often use this word “when they want to say something about God [m];”<sup>11</sup> and second, that because of this, “some people” disapprove of using these special words “to say something bad.” Although the metalexical content includes awareness of the words’ referential function, the component is phrased in such a way that it does not commit the speaker to Christian belief, or even to belief in God.

Finally, to expand our sample of metalexical awareness components it is interesting to look at the exclamation *Damn!* As with *Jesus!* and *Christ!* the phrasing here indicates awareness that the word *damn* is known to be potentially offensive to “some people,” but I have not included any overt reference to “God [m]” in the component. In other words, the claim is that *Damn!* is no longer generally seen as a “religious” word in any sense.<sup>12</sup>

**11** As indicated by the notation “[m]”, the word “God” is a semantic molecule. In NSM theory, semantic molecules are complex meanings (i.e. ultimately definable in terms semantic primes) which function alongside primes as building blocks in the meanings of other words (Goddard 2010; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014). See Wierzbicka (2011) and Habib (2011) for explications of the semantic molecule “God,” which appears as a meaning component of many religious words in languages with Christian traditions.

**12** On a historical note, *Goddamn* was once so frequently used in English that in the fifteenth century the French used it (‘godon’) as a slang term for the English (Wajnryb 2005: 129).

[G] *Damn!* (*Dammit!*)

I thought like this a moment before: “something bad happened, I know it now”	COGNITIVE
	TRIGGER
I think about it like this: “this is something very bad for me”	REACTION
I feel something bad because of this	
I want to say something bad now because of this	EXPRESSIVE
I want to say it in one moment	IMPULSE
because of this, I say this word: {Damn}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
“some people can feel something bad when they hear this word	
because of this, some people think like this: “it is bad if someone says this word”	

The explications proposed so far are for exclamatory or interjectional uses, which are, by definition, self-contained utterances. How can this account be extended to uses of swear/curse words in combination with other words? In the next two sub-sections, we take a step in this direction by looking at two kinds of English speech formulas that incorporate swear/curse words. Then, in Section 4 we broaden the discussion to take in more flexible uses, e.g. using *bloody*, *goddamn*, and *fucking* as expressive adjectives.

3.2 Explications for “abuse formulas” using swear words

[H] and [I] below present explications for two abuse formulas: *Damn you!* and *Fuck you!* There are several interesting features. As one might expect from the vocative formation, the explication is very much focussed on the addressee. The cognitive trigger is: “I think something very bad about you now,” and the reaction is a directed bad feeling: “I feel something very bad towards you.” As for the expressive impulse, it involves “I want to say something (very) bad to you,” specifically, to say: “I want something very bad to happen to you.” The word utterance section shows how the swear/curse words are integrated into the utterance: “I want to say it with this word: [XXX].” The speaker signals his or her intention to use the word in question as a means (a tool, as it were) to express the intended message. Finally we come to the metalexical awareness components. These are, as one would expect, just the same as with the exclamatory uses of the respective swear words in question. It appears that the different feel of the two formulas is almost completely accounted for by the difference in the offensiveness of the two swear words.<sup>13</sup>

13 A historically earlier version of the message of *Damn you!* could have been: “it will be good if something very bad happens to you, like something very bad happens to bad people after they die.”

[H] *Damn you!*

I think something very bad about you now	COGNITIVE TRIGGER
I feel something very bad towards you because of this	REACTION
because of this, I want to say something bad to you	EXPRESSIVE
I want to say to you: "I want something very bad to happen to you"	IMPULSE
I want to say it with this word: {damn}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
"some people can feel something bad when they hear this word these people think like this: 'it is bad if someone says this word'"	

[I] *Fuck you!*

I think something very bad about you now	COGNITIVE TRIGGER
I feel something very bad towards you because of this	REACTION
because of this, I want to say something very bad to you	EXPRESSIVE
I want to say to you: "I want something very bad to happen to you"	IMPULSE
I want to say it with this word: {fuck}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
"many people can feel something very bad when they hear this word many people think like this: 'it is very bad if someone says this word'"	

### 3.3 Question formulas and imperative formulas using swear words

Consider question formulas that use the expression *the hell*, such as the following. The phrase *the hell* is "inserted", as it were, after the *wh*-word (*where*, *who*, *what*, etc., as the case may be).

- (1) a. *Where the hell did he go?*
- b. *Who the hell took my pen?*
- c. *What the hell do you think you're doing?*

The euphemistic substitute *heck* can also be used, e.g. *Where the heck did he go?*. From a structural point of view, this formulaic use of the phrase *the hell* is, of course, rather peculiar – and all the more so since the same pattern can be used with *fuck*, e.g. *What the fuck?* (lately abbreviated *WTF*). Also possible, but with a somewhat old-fashioned feel, is the expression *the Devil*, e.g. *Where the Devil is he?*<sup>14</sup> Except for the different effect coming from the choice of swear word, these

<sup>14</sup> I presume that *the Devil* and *the Hell* were the first expressions used in this fashion, and that *the fuck* is a more recent innovation. If so, this innovation illustrates very nicely that once a

question formulas all share the same meaning structure. In the interests of variety, I will exemplify using versions with *the hell*.

The opening components of explication [J] below (namely, “I want to know something; I say: I want you to say something now because of this”) come from the question structure itself. That is, an NSM explication for the plain question, without the inserted swearword, would already contain these components. Compared with a plain question, however, the versions with *the hell* or *the fuck* sound demanding, urgent or angry. This is modelled in explication [J] in the section labelled Attitude, with the component: “I think about it like this: ‘I want to know it now; if I can’t know it now, it is very bad,’” which is followed by “I feel something bad now because of this.”

Given that the speaker (purportedly) feels something bad on account of wanting to know something immediately, the expressive impulse makes sense: “because of this, when I say this, I want to say something bad at the same time.” (Obviously, this is a different expressive impulse to that associated with abuse formulas, which are focused on saying something bad to the addressee.) The word utterance section of the explication follows naturally: “I want to say this word at the same time: [hell].” It is as though the speaker wants to insert the word into the utterance.

The metalexical awareness component for *hell* uses a phrasing that we have not seen before, namely: “at some times some people can feel something bad when they hear this word.” This represents a milder and less uniform level of offensiveness.

[J] *Where (who, what, etc.) the hell... ?*

I want to know something (where, who, what, etc.) I say: I want someone to say something now because of this	
I think about it like this: “I want to know it now; if I can’t know it now, it is very bad” I feel something bad now because of this	ATTITUDE
because of this, when I say this, I want to say something bad at the same time	EXPRESSIVE IMPULSE
I want to say this word at the same time: {hell}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:

METALEXICAL AWARENESS

“at some times some people can feel something bad when they hear this word”

swear/curse word expression is established, most of its power comes from the offensiveness of the word, with logic playing a minor role. Expressions like *For shit sake* and *For fuck’s sake* (presumably modeled on *For God’s sake*, *For heaven’s sake*, *For Christ’s sake*) furnish similar examples.

As noted above, the parallel expression *the fuck* can be used in the same constructions, e.g. *Where the fuck did he go?*. Obviously, with *the fuck* the effect is more intense due to the greater offensiveness of *fuck*, as opposed to *hell*.

Both formations can also be found in similar imperative formulas. The verb must be intransitive and there must also be a post-verbal particle or prepositional phrase to allow an insertion site for *the hell* (*the heck*) or *the fuck*.

- (2) a. *Get the fuck/hell out of here.*
- b. *Shut the fuck/the hell up.*
- c. *Sit the fuck/the hell down.*

Explication [K] below opens with a component that comes from the imperative sentence form itself, i.e. “I say: I want you to do something.” Obviously, inserting *the hell* or *the fuck* into the imperative frame makes this message sound more demanding, urgent, or angry. This can be modelled in a similar fashion to the approach taken in the previous explication, i.e. by positing the attitude component: “I think about it like this: ‘I want you to do it now; it will be very bad if you don’t do it now,’” along with some associated bad feeling. This in turn leads to the expressive impulse to “say something bad at the same time,” which can be achieved by inserting the swear word into the utterance, as per the word utterance section of the explication.

[K] *Get the hell out of here!*

I say: I want you to do something now (i.e. get out of here)	
I think about it like this: “I want you to do it now; if you don’t do it now, it is very bad” I feel something bad now because of this	ATTITUDE
because of this, when I say this, I want to say something bad at the same time	EXPRESSIVE IMPULSE
I want to say this word at the same time: {hell}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this: “at some times some people can feel something bad when they hear this word”	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
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Needless to say, there are a great number of other formulaic and semi-formulaic expressions that incorporate swear words, as well as many other swear/curse word expressions that we have not touched upon, e.g. the profuse phraseology connected with *shit*.

## 4 “Angry” uses of swear words (*fucking* and *goddamn*)

So far we have looked at swear/curse words as exclamations and in other formulaic uses. In this section and the next, we shift to more flexible uses of swear/curse words, i.e., uses in which they are integrated into larger and less predictable utterances. We will start with what can be called “angry” uses of swearing, i.e. contexts in which swear words are associated with bad feelings towards someone or something.

Consider the examples of *fucking* used as an adjective in the two sets of examples below, which sound angry and/or aggressive. Often the target or trigger of the speaker’s feelings is a person, as in the first example set, but it can also be a physical or an abstract thing, as in the second example set.

- (3) a. *You fucking bastard!*  
b. *Shut your fucking mouth!*  
c. *The fucking bastards took my car.*
- (4) a. *The fucking car won’t start.*  
b. *I hate this fucking phone.*  
c. *Fucking rain!*

I propose that the semantic content of the word *fucking*, used in this way, can be captured as in explication [L]. The idea is simply that this content is co-expressed along with the main content of the sentence. Note that expressive impulse is to “say something very bad about this someone/something.”

[L] ... *fucking*<sub>1</sub>... (*adj.*)

when I say this now, I feel something very bad towards someone/something	ATTITUDE
because of this, when I say this, I want to say something very bad about this someone/something at the same time	EXPRESSIVE IMPULSE
I want to say this word at the same time: {fucking}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
“many people can feel something very bad when they hear this word many people think like this: ‘it is very bad if someone says this word’”	

A similar style of explication would apply to “angry” uses of *damn* and *goddamn* (for some reason, the form *goddamn* is the more productive as an adjective). Note that the expressive impulse for *goddamn* is a bit different to that associated

with adjectival *fucking*. As we would expect, given the standing of *damn* as one of the premier *curse words*, the expressive impulse is: “I want something very bad to happen to this someone/something.”

- (5)
 

a. *You goddamn bastard!*  
 b. *Shut your goddamn mouth!*  
 c. *The goddamn bastards took my car.*
- (6)
 

a. *The goddamn car won’t start.*  
 b. *I hate this goddamn phone.*  
 c. *Goddamn rain!*

[M] ... goddamn<sub>1</sub>... (adj.)

when I say this now, I feel something very bad towards someone/something	ATTITUDE
because of this, when I say this, I want to say something like this at the same time: “I want something very bad to happen to this someone/something”	EXPRESSIVE IMPULSE
because of this, I want to say this word at the same time: {goddamn}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this: “some people can feel something bad when they hear this word some people think like this: ‘it is bad if someone says this word’”	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
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5
“Non-angry” or “social/conversational” uses of swear words: explications and cultural scripts

According to studies in several different Anglo communities of discourse (Allan and Burridge 2009; Beers Fägersten 2012; Holmes and Stubbe 2003; McEnery 2006), a great deal of swearing is “social” or “conversational”. These terms refer to the use of swear/curse words in relaxed, in-group social situations, often with the apparent intention of spicing up what is being said, making it more exciting or attention-grabbing. Typical examples:

- (7)
 

a. *I got the last fucking copy dude!*  
 b. *I’d never seen snow in my whole fucking life.*  
 c. *Fucking brilliant!*

In uses like these, the speaker sounds excited, rather than angry, and appears to assume that there is no danger of possible disapproval. According to the

literature, overt disapproval and “offended” reactions are indeed rare in these contexts.

In uses like these, it would not be plausible to interpret the speaker as expressing a specifically bad feeling. Rather, the use of the swear/curse word functions to emphasise the presence of a strong feeling, which can be either good or bad. As Kidman (1993: 69) put it, discussing similar examples: “The existence of an emotional attitude seems more important than specifying what that emotion is.”

Informally speaking, it seems to work as follows. The speaker draws attention to his/her immediate strong feeling by adding a particular expressive word into what he or she is saying. Choosing a word that is potentially offensive testifies both to the strength of the feeling and to the speaker’s confidence in the in-group bond. All well and good. But we are brought up against two questions. First, what is the semantic content of the notion of a “strong” feeling and how can this be incorporated into an explication? Second, how can we model the intuition that using potentially offensive words can convey a sense of confidence in one’s solidarity with one’s interlocutors? The first of these questions can be answered using the familiar technique of semantic explication, but the second requires us to expand our horizons and draw on the descriptive notion of cultural scripts.

As a start, let’s consider explication [N], which is out to capture the expressed meaning content of the adjective *fucking*, as used in social/conversational swearing. The top component is left blank (except for “I say:...”) to indicate the existence of some utterance, the precise content of which is not particularly relevant.

If we compare explication [N] with explication [L] (for the angry use of *fucking*), we can see that some parts of the two explications are the same, but that other parts are somewhat different. Remaining the same are the Word Utterance component at the end and the metalexical awareness annotation, but the attitude is different. It is not that I feel something bad towards someone or something: rather, I feel something special (i.e. “I feel something not like I feel at many other times”) and “I want to do something because of it.” This combination corresponds to an intuition about a strong feeling, i.e. what makes a feeling strong (in this context) is two-fold: its (purported) special character and its capacity to cause the experiencer to want to do something. Linked with this different attitude is a different expressive impulse. The speaker doesn’t want to say something bad about anything in particular (as with angry swearing): rather, the speaker wants to “say something bad” as way of doing something in response or reaction to the strong feeling.

[N] ... *fucking*<sub>2</sub> (*adj*)...

I say:....	
when I say this now, I feel something not like I feel at many other times	ATTITUDE
I want to do something because of it	
because of this, when I say this, I want to say something bad at the same time	EXPRESSIVE
	IMPULSE
I want to say this word at the same time: {fucking}	WORD UTTERANCE

I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
“many people can feel something bad when they hear this word	
these people think like this: ‘it is very bad if someone says this word’”	

What about the second aspect of social/conversational swearing identified above, i.e. the idea that using potentially offensive words can convey and reinforce confidence in group solidarity? This is not a matter of word-meaning, but of certain folk metapragmatic assumptions. To capture these, we need to employ the notion of the cultural script, which is the NSM vehicle for representing cultural assumptions, values, and norms (Goddard 2006, 2009, 2013; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004; Wierzbicka 2002, 2014b). As mentioned in Section 1, cultural scripts are largely phrased in the NSM metalanguage but sometimes include complex words designating culturally important concepts or categories. Most cultural scripts are introduced by the framing component: “many people think like this:.....” This shows that they are intended as representations of widely shared social attitudes (more precisely, they are meta-representations: ways of capturing how people think that many people think). In [Q] below, I propose a cultural script which spells out some of the Anglo cultural logic that underlies social swearing.

Before that, however, it is useful to consider a couple of scripts that capture widespread Anglo attitudes about the use of swear/curse words in relation to social categories of gender and stage of life. Script [O] is about gender-related attitudes to the use of swear/curse words. Script [P] captures strong disapproval of the use of swear/curse words by and to children. Presumably the existence of these attitudes can be taken for granted. To forestall possible misunderstanding, it should perhaps be emphasised that scripts like [O] and [P] are not descriptive statements about how men, women and children actually use (or don’t use) swearwords. It is well established, for example, that many women use swear words aplenty and that the usage can be correlated with socioeconomic characteristics and situational factors (McEnery 2006; McEnery and Xiao 2004; Stapleton 2003). Rather, the claim embodied in script [O] is that it is widely recognized that “many people” disapprove of women using swear/curse words and of men using

swear/curse words when speaking to women. Cf. Stapleton (2010: 293): “[B]ecause of social expectations – i.e. that swearing is more appropriate for men than for women – female use of “bad language” is undoubtedly subject to more social censure than that of their male counterparts.” Likewise, the claim embodied in script [P] is that “many people” strongly disapprove of children using swear/curse words and of people using swear/curse words when speaking to children. Cultural scripts like these can be seen as belonging to folk (meta)pragmatics or language ideology (Cameron 2003; Niedzielski and Preston 2007).

[O] Anglo cultural script about gendered attitudes to use of swear/curse words

many people think like this:

“it is bad if a woman says swear/curse words

it is bad if a man says swear/curse words when he says something to a woman”

[P] Anglo cultural script about attitudes to children and swear/curse words

many people think like this:

“it is very bad if a child says swear/curse words

it is very bad if someone says swear/curse words when this someone says something to a child”

Notice that the two scripts above are not composed solely in terms of semantic primes, but also include the social category words “men,” “women” and “children” (see Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014 for explications of these words). The idea is that people’s social cognition about the use of swear/curse words is indeed partially framed in terms of these social categories. Equally, it should be noted that the scripts employ the expression “swear/curse words,” the attendant claim being that people indeed employ these terms as categories in their social thinking.

Now consider script [Q] below. Unlike the two scripts just presented, it is not attributed to “many people,” but only to “some people.” The script embodies the claim is that it is part of general Anglo ethnopragmatic knowledge that some people feel free to use swear/curse words in certain socially construed contexts. The required social construals correspond to perceived familiarity with one’s interlocutors (‘I know these people well’), “high solidarity” (‘they are not like many other people, they are people like me’), and assumed “mutuality” (‘I know that they think about me in the same way’).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Presumably the same, or similar, social construals license other features of informal style, e.g. the use of slang and other in-group lexis, casual pronunciation style.

[Q] Anglo cultural script for using swear/curse words in high solidarity situations

some people think like this:

“at some times when I am with some other people, it is not bad if say swear/curse words  
it is not bad if I can think about these people like this:

- ‘I know these people well
- they are not like many other people, they are people like me
- I know that they think about me in the same way”

many men think like this, some women think like this

All this is highly consistent with the observations of Beers Fägersten (2012: 176), who conducted a large observational study of swearing on an American college campus. “[T]he most reliable predictors of swear word usage,” she found, were not demographic characteristics of the speaker, but rather speaker-listener variables: “the more variables the speaker and listener(s) have in common ... and the closer they are in social distance, the more likely swearing is to occur.” The final line of script [Q] attributes the attitude in question preferentially to men, while allowing that “some women think like this” too. Like the script as a whole, this is not intended as a description of performance but as a claim about folk pragmatic attitudes.

Needless to say, no one would want to claim that the three scripts presented in this section fully capture Anglo social understandings of social/conversational swearing.<sup>16</sup> My purpose is rather to show how cultural scripts provide a vehicle to model – from the speaker’s point of view – the sociolinguistic observation that social/conversational swearing can help enact and construct community, solidarity, and masculinity.

## 6 Discussion: differences between Australian English and American English

One should not assume that usage of and attitudes towards swear/curse words are the same across different Anglo English speech communities and varieties.

<sup>16</sup> In particular, a consciously different attitude to swear/curse words undoubtedly forms part of the “identity” of some sub-cultural groups, helping to set themselves apart from the mainstream (Stapleton 2010). Using the approach developed in this study, one way to model this would be to add a component to the metalexical awareness annotation for these speakers; essentially, to capture the attitude that although “many people” think swear/curse words are offensive, “people like me don’t think like this.” Equally, attitudes to swearing and other kinds of so-called “bad language” have long been bound up with (ethno) perceptions about “(social) class” (Cunningham 2007; McEnery 2006), especially in the UK.

On the contrary, there are certain to be differences of various kinds. For simplicity, I will illustrate with contrasts between Australia and the USA.

First, given the greater public importance of Christian religion in the USA one would expect that “religious” swearing/cursing is a more sensitive matter in the USA, notwithstanding the existence of variation related to context, scene, community, and region. It could well be, therefore, that the metalexical awareness annotations for words like *Jesus! Christ!, Damn!, Hell!* (and their variants) differ somewhat between Australian English and American English. It is also possible, though in my view less likely, that the main semantic content of some items differs between the two varieties.

Second, there are reasons to believe that patterns of “social/conversational” use of swear/curse words may also differ between Australia and the USA – even if, as I believe, the primary cultural script(s) linking use of such words with familiarity, solidarity and mutuality are the same in the two countries. This may sound paradoxical, but a quick look back at script [Q] will remind the reader that the script works in terms of a speaker’s construals of his or her interlocutors. It says, more or less, that some people feel relaxed about using swear/curse words when they think about their interlocutors in a certain way, including the thoughts: “I know these people well” and (especially) “these people are people like me.” There are independent reasons to believe that speakers of Australian English are more likely to extend presumptions of familiarity and solidarity sooner, and to a broader range of individuals, than are speakers of American English. These reasons are connected with Anglo-Australian cultural scripts that favour presumed “shared ordinariness” (Goddard 2012).

There are also abundant indications that the role of swear/curse words in public life differs markedly between the two countries. Essentially, swearing in the public domain is more tolerated in Australia than in the USA.<sup>17</sup> The background reason, briefly, is that the use of swear words, especially the so-called “b-words” such as *bloody*, *bastard*, *bullshit*, and *bugger*, has been central to Australian vernacular speech culture for over 150 years; cf. sources cited in Baker (1960), Wierzbicka (1992, 1997, 2002), Moore (2010), Rowen (2012), Musgrave and Burridge (2014). The word *bloody* in particular has long held a special place in the traditional Anglo-Australian speech culture: as a “token of defiance” (against an imagined disapproving sector of society), as “sign of belonging” (to an imagined majority of ordinary people), and as a way of

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<sup>17</sup> The present study has concerned itself solely with interpersonal contexts, i.e. with face-to-face, person-to-person interactions. Extending the coverage to embrace the public domain is a separate project, albeit one replete with inherent interest and implications for intercultural communication.

expressing an active attitude in the face of bad feelings (Wierzbicka 2002). The relative acceptability of the *b*-words in general Australian English creates a special cultural context for the *f*-word and other stronger swear words that are now increasingly tolerated in Australian public life.

Finally, another factor that militates against the use of swear/curse words in the public domain in the USA are traditional American ideals of eloquence and civility in public life (cf. Gustafson 2011; Silverstein 2003). Australian public life, by contrast, is characterised by an appreciation of “irreverence” and a distrust of eloquence and verbal technique, in favour of ordinariness (Goddard 2006, 2013; Malouf 2004). Space precludes us from pursuing these issues here.

## 7 Summary and future directions

The twin purposes of this study have been, first, to map out an integrated semantic-pragmatic approach to the Anglo ethnopragmatic phenomenon of “swearing” and “cursing”, and second, to demonstrate the viability of this approach by proposing specific analyses of a sample of English swearing expressions and usages. The main line of argument can be re-capitulated as follows.

At the outset the meanings of ethno-descriptors such as *swear words* and *curse/cuss words* stand in need of explication, for several reasons: to assist with delimiting the object of study, to articulate the culture-internal conceptualizations underlying these terms (which, as we have seen, are somewhat different from one another), and to detach the study from implicit anchoring in Anglophone terminology. This was undertaken in Section 2.

Next it was argued that individual swear/curse words have specifiable meanings. These meanings certainly involve expression of feelings and they are deictic or context-bound (tied to the moment, as it were), but neither of these properties makes their meanings unanalysable: their meanings can be captured, in fine detail, in NSM semantic explications. In Section 3 and Section 4, a series of explications was proposed for uses of swear/curse words as exclamations, e.g. *Shit!*, *Fuck!*, *Jesus!*, *Christ!*, *Damn!*, in abuse formulas, e.g. *Fuck you!* *Damn you!* and semi-fixed question and imperative formulas, e.g. *Who the fuck do you think you are ?*, *Shut the fuck up!*, and for the expressive adjectives *fucking* and *goddamn* as used in “angry” swearing. The most novel aspect of these explications, and the one with the most interesting implications for the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, is the proposal that the explications incorporate a metalexical awareness section. The claim is that

“swearing” and “cursing” involve metalexical awareness, i.e. speaker awareness of the particular words being used, and ethno metapragmatic knowledge about the status of these words in the community of discourse. In Section 5, I sought to show, in a preliminary way, how shared understandings behind “social/conversational” swearing (e.g. assumptions about familiarity, solidarity, and mutuality) can be modelled using cultural scripts. Section 6 went on to sketch, again in a preliminary and programmatic fashion, some sources of possible differences between swear/curse word usage in Australia and the USA.

At a very general level, an overarching contention of this study is that a full account of swear/curse word phenomena requires coordinated description of lexical semantics (via semantic explications) and pragmatics (via cultural scripts). In my opinion, it is a great strength of the NSM approach that both modes of description can be carried out using the same simple, accessible metalanguage. At the theory level, this makes the interplay between semantics and pragmatics particularly transparent and it also means that the resulting analyses can have a *prima facie* claim to authentically modelling the participants’ own tacit understandings of what is going on.

The existence of dozens, if not scores, of swear/curse word expressions and constructions in English and their high frequency in everyday use, indicates that they carry a significant functional load in personal and interpersonal management of emotion, as well as fulfilling important social functions. Swearing phenomena deserve sustained and clear-eyed attention from semantics and pragmatics in tandem. Much remains to be done, including: expanding the coverage of swearing/cursing expressions, bringing more corpus, observational and other data to bear in order to refine and test the explications and scripts, and exploring cultural scripts that capture varying social understandings of swearing across different social groups.

All this, needless to say, remains within the confines of Anglo English. Parallel studies are urgently needed into comparable, or partially comparable, phenomena in other languages and cultures (cf. Ljung 2011), whose cultural underpinnings and ethnopragmatic understandings surely differ in many ways. To progress this agenda, however, we need methods of description and analysis that are not tied in advance to Anglocentric terms and assumptions. Again, it seems to me, NSM techniques and approaches offer the best way forward.

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**Appendix: Semantic primes (English exponents)  
(Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; Wierzbicka 2014a)**

I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, BODY	Substantives
KIND, PARTS	Relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	Determiners
ONE, TWO, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW, SOME, ALL	Quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	Evaluators
BIG, SMALL	Descriptors
THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	Actions, events, movement
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING), (BE) MINE	Location, existence, specification, possession
LIVE, DIE	Life and death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	Time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	Location
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, VERY, MORE, LIKE~AS	Logical concepts

■ Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes) ■ Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes ■ They can be formally, i.e., morphologically, complex ■ They can have combinatorial variants or allolexes (indicated with ~) ■ Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

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## Bionote

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