

◆ REVIEW ◆

1. Timothy JAY, *Why We Curse – A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech*, 2000, Amsterdam, John Benjamins B.V., 328 pp.

by Remus GHIUZELI

“At a fashionable dinner, a dignified lady tells to Winston Churchill: “Sir, you are drunk.” “Yes”, he replied “and you are ugly. But tomorrow I shall be sober and you shall still be ugly” (p.184).

What else is this dialogue but a joke that puts a smile on our faces and immediately makes us think of political correctness: it is a man of state offending a woman, in a formal situation. No such thing is acceptable as per common social practices and, still, it has happened. Why is that?

Why We Curse – A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech is a book that studies in depth the mechanisms of using taboo words or cursing as explained by neurological, psychological and social factors and it represents a valuable resource for scholars in communication field. It contains five parts, covering 29 chapters of quantitative and qualitative data collected from direct studies, cross-cultural observation and medical sources and explaining in a detailed way how the human brain works in order to produce curses, and moreover, how and why it manages to keep this ability to express emotions in the most different circumstances, in sickness and in health.

Part I of the book, “Introduction to the Study of Cursing” (pp. 3-32), 4 chapters, presents the scientific background of the study, especially the medical premises of cursing. The author describes the Neuro-Psycho-Social (NPS) theory of cursing and establishes the levels of study necessary in order to understand the respective process: language, behavior, psychology and cognitive research. The author emphasizes the fact that cursing has been underestimated in terms of scientific value as well as in terms of the expressivity related to human feelings and emotions. Cursing is a two-way communication tool: it allows the speaker to express powerful feelings and it strongly affects the listener: “Cursing is wishing harm on a person”, as Jay puts it (p. 9). The importance of studying cursing derives from the modern need to have a better perception of human language and this is why debates over the subjects, studies and discussions matter to the development of the present and future language theories. The last chapter of first part

lists a number of 24 postulates, grouped into 3 classes and discussed in Parts II through IV.

The second part of the book, "Neurological Factors Underlying Cursing", (pp. 33-80), made up of 5 chapters, deals with the medical aspects, related to the neurological diseases and their influence on cursing habits and language. The author discusses the first six postulates in the context of a variety of brain damages closely related to the specific features of patient populations, with the declared aim to help the reader understand the way the brain functions in terms of language production. The main idea is that regardless of the brain disease (e.g. Tourette syndrome, aphasia, Alzheimer, dementia, senility, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder), the patient is still able to curse. This fact is explained by the relation between the cursing language and the functioning of the nervous system based on inhibitory or excitatory processes and on connections between various areas and structures of the brain. Part II establishes the main neurological framework necessary in order to understand how the cursing process works.

The third part, "Psychological Factors Underlying Cursing" (pp. 81-146), 7 chapters, deals with the psychological factors that trigger cursing, organized around ten postulates stated in Part I. The main aspects of cursing treated in this part are related to: the personal memory, the education received especially in early childhood, the curse habits acquired during formal education, the personal sexual language and the whole cognitive development of the individual. The psychological factors are the key for analyzing cursing since its specific wording has a critical role in communication: on one hand, it is the most expressive way of verbalizing emotions and feelings, and, on the other hand, it is a useful instrument for understanding the others' emotions and feelings in certain situations. Cursing is usually associated with less inhibitory efforts which brings a high degree of sincerity in human interactions and also contributes on a large scale to the individual development. "Cursing that is automatic and reflexive may be produced with little conscious awareness on the part of the speaker (Goffman, 1978) while novel, propositional constructions (e.g. creating a dirty joke) are intentional, effortful and controlled processes that take time and conscious effort." (p. 83).

Part IV of the book, "Social and Cultural Factors Underlying Cursing" (pp. 147-242), 10 chapters, brings into the reader's attention

the last component of the NPS theory – the cultural background of cursing and discusses the last 8 postulates defined in Part I and related to this theme. The author studies cursing language making a point in indicating that in different cultural circumstances the factors that influence cursing rising are similar. Cursing language related to context, power, gender, slang habits, humor, religion, taboo speech and disgust is analyzed in various cultures as well as their response to this aggression under the form of law or etiquette restrictions. There is a special note for the cursing language in the Asian areas, where focus on Japan and Hong Kong reveals two important aspects of the cultural approach of the theme: the difference between the Asian and Western civilizations and the relevance of the accurate translation of forbidden words from the respective regions. The cultural context is shaping the language of cursing since it is the main indicator of taboo and offensive words in a certain society and it gives specific features to a process that, from the neurological and psychological point of view, is the same in every human being. As the author puts it: “It is not the word that is offensive *per se*, it is the concept that has been defined by the culture that is marked as offensive” (p. 153).

The last part of the book, “Why Do We Swear? Why Do We Choose the Words We Do?” (pp. 243-276), summarizes the main findings from previous chapters and elaborates on the need for a thorough research on cursing. In light of the modern social demands on a professional and personal level, that act as strong inhibitors on the language people are using, the real understanding of the mechanisms of cursing are an important part of the communication studies as well as a tool for improving the personal interactions and individual life as a whole.

Dr. Timothy Jay succeeds in offering a comprehensive study on a subject that deals with taboos and seemed to be taboo for many years in communication research. He proves, starting from valid premises, that cursing is a natural drive for humans, since regardless of their cultural background certain situations act as triggers for their brains. Also, the author underlines the importance of the study in terms of understanding the others, their reactions and emotions as well as their predictable responses to certain stimuli from the environment.

For many years, the lack of a systematic approach on cursing language and mechanisms brought the subject to an ungracious position: everybody knows it exists, most of us use curses more or less

type of language and this is where studies as the present one are supposed to offer explanations and tips for an appropriate approach.

Timothy Jay's book benefits from a solid scientific background coming from his own studies and a vast bibliography. The structure makes it easy to read and the summarizing of main concepts in every chapter helps the reader to follow the ideas and anchor them in his/her mind for later reflection. The writing style is informal, suitable for the audience intended as well as for fostering debate and further reading, as per one of the main goals of the author – the encouraging of research and discussion on the subject. Phrases are coherent and do not overuse the technical language.

Ideas and concepts are clearly stated and explained whilst the definitions are reiterated constantly sometimes with the risk of making the book seem to lose its substance. Also, the author is at times not careful with matters that might have an impact on the results of his work. For instance, he disregards the way the translation affects the results of his studies or the relation between the new technologies and information systems on taboo language and cursing.

In conclusion, the book *Why We Curse – A Neuro-Pscho-Social Theory of Speech* by Dr. Timothy Jay succeeds in creating the framework for further research in communication sciences related to cursing and usage of taboo words. It is written in a friendly and attractive manner being an interesting reading for every kind of public, not only for scholars in humanities. It brings into discussion topics that have been previously developed by other authors but it also opens new horizons for thinking and debates. The book represents a valuable contribution to studying universal culture and to a better understanding of language mechanisms in the context of the modern world.

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