Swear Words and Face in Tamil

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Abstract: *Swear words are an essential part of emotive language. The Tamil speaking community is observed to associate such usage with insult and disrespect. They are expressions considered bad by the speakers owing to the social and cultural factors, their use is apparent in discourse. Though various politeness strategies are often employed to avoid such deeds, nevertheless speech acts involving such words risk the image or face of the hearer. Hence, as a reaction - verbal or non-verbal acts are performed, to fix or save this image. These acts are directed towards maintaining a positive face and are seen to be subjective, influenced by social, cultural and situational factors. The paper deals with this concept, its need for swear words in communication and the various face maintaining or restoring acts performed by the hearer.*

Keywords: **Pragmatics, Swear words, Speech acts, Face threatening acts, Face saving acts.**

1. Introduction

Language has an essential role to play in society. It acts as a communicative tool to convey information and serves to express one's ideas, emotions, and feelings to others. Speakers of a language collectively form a speaking community and are assumed to share a common set of social ideas, values and principles thus establishing a social and cultural environment parallel to the language. These social and cultural implications are always imbibed as one speaks the language. They deem and define their society on their terms and the speakers are assumed to have the innate knowledge of these codes. Discussions, topics or interpersonal communications have a way of their own with unsaid rules regarding the type of language one uses. Pragmatics, the study of meaning beyond utterances, attempts to study such language usage in context, inclusive of social, cultural and situational backgrounds. Formal or informal code, degrees of politeness, intonation and many such features are duly taken good care of while speaking in varied social settings. These restrictions are either acquired, taught or mutually understood and are thereon assumed to be adhered to, by every speaker in society. Hence, when one speaks of language in society, this social and cultural influence makes it one of the important reasons to study the pragmatics of language in society.

When one begins to observe the role of language in society, it burdens itself with the role of maintaining social relationships. It is a well-established fact that social values hold importance, but it is also important to note that the speakers exploit these rules in either adhering to or flouting them for effective communication. This is a phenomenon observed, specifically to indicate the mood and tone of the speaker or the speech itself. When speech is casual and unconsciously delivered as a response to a situation, there is a possibility that the utterance could turn out inappropriate either to the speaker or the hearer, especially in the case of a formal gathering. Expressive language often succeeds in making such an impression. They contain expressions corresponding to different emotive states, one of which includes 'bad words. These 'bad words' are often considered taboo, and socially unfitting and are metaphorically phrased in instances, belonging to topics that are considered culturally inappropriate and are usually avoided being spoken in public.

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2. Aim

The paper aims to examine the topic of swear words synonymous with what is perceived as 'bad words' in the Tamil speaking community. It discusses the status of swear words as a part of communication amongst speakers in everyday speech, particularly in formal, social situations. The core idea is to test the presence of this phenomenon; its need; and the attitude towards such usage on the hearer's part. This framework also helps to examine the various acts used by the hearers to protect their faces in response to such face threatening acts.

3. Background of the study

Despite its prevalence, the studies dedicated to swear words are limited. Face is a commonly found universal phenomenon in almost all the communities with a cultural underlining. It is culture-specific and takes a special effort in understanding the attitude people hold toward swear words, though generally assumed to be negative. Works relating to the face acts – face threatening and face saving acts are being carried out more focusing on the speaker's speech acts. Since speech acts on the hearer's part are more inclined toward sociology, linguistic studies related to it are very limited. Hence, the paper tries to fill this gap by recording the various ways that the hearer acts to restore or maintain their face when their faces are threatened.

Tamil community is renowned for its affinity for and, the capability of maintaining interpersonal bonds be it, family or friends. The community regards self-respect as an esteemed moral value and plays a major role in deciding the face of the person. Swear words are an essential part of communication often causing humiliation or insult, risking the image of the hearer. When the speech is a result of spontaneity, which may not be avoided, the response and reaction to the utterance or probable conversation can provide fruitful insights into the language and its reception in society. There seems to be a debate if they are really bad or do any harm to society. They are often avoided as a part of discourse but the same cannot be said in the case of emotive expression. Hence, measures are assumed to be taken to save or maintain both the image and as well as the social bond. Deliberate attempts too are made to corrupt the image of the hearer, adding to a reason for such swearing. Therefore, it is only right to say that every speaking community holds politeness strategies to avoid these acts and has a discreet way to defend their face on such occurrences. The speakers of the language change and thereon views and innate restrictions also change. As in any case, many social norms have been bent and flouted from time to time despite a strong urge and resistance to doing otherwise. Such is the case appears to be for swear words. Hence, it is necessary to linguistic explore these words, their usage and their verbal acts indicating the social implications.

4. Methodology

The participants for the study were expected to be native Tamil speakers, literate and well aware of the socio-cultural nature. One of the most important traits of the urban population happens to be the influence of English as a prestige language alongside a blend of various socio-cultural features of other languages due to migration. It is also assumed that there exists an awareness of Tamil cultural implications reflected in the language and a

parallel stand-alone progressive thought attached to it. Hence, the people of urban and well-developed areas of the Tamil speaking population fit the criterion as ideal participants.

The method used to collect data on the implications of using swear words, both the attitude and face maintaining strategies is using a questionnaire prepared with the help of Google Forms, an online platform. Since the current attitude was aimed to be recorded, the age group of participants were capped from 22 years to 28 years benefitting from their technological resources. A brief introduction about the study and measures to obtain consent was provided before jumping to the questions. The questions featured three opinion-based and seven situation-based questions. The situation-based questions with aspects of face threatening acts namely social distance, power and absolute ranking were formulated. A description of relatable, commonly experienced social situations involving swear words used by hypothetical speakers, indicating these aspects were a part of these questions. The verbs – feel, respond, react, describe were used as a part of the questions giving the respondents the choice to either express their feelings or to describe how they would react. (Refer to Appendix).

5. Swear words

As a linguist, one cannot but have only a neutral ground and consider to look at all the words and expressions as one, without any bias. No word is good or bad. But the same cannot be said in the case of their pragmatic uses. Speakers have their free will to use language however and whenever they feel like considering them as mere tools for communication. They, therefore consider certain lexical items to be either good or bad, according to their usage. Hence, 'bad words' refers to all those which are words, phrases, and expressions indicative of topics and ideas that have social dissent and are considered inappropriate or taboo. They are culturally influenced and not meant to be spoken in public spaces. Examples of the words associated with topics like sex, menstruation, caste, creed and so on. One cannot say that they are not spoken privately but they are not accepted socially and questions the moral nature of the people involved in such discourse.

Swear words, that resonate with these bad words are a class of words and phrases that relate to the taboo topics. They are found to be the core of emotive expressions. It is observed to be a part of everyday discourse and negative emotions often contain swear words. One cannot comment on whether it is really bad as it can be used to display a wide range of emotions in discourse. It is also noted that speakers expressing their feelings towards an object, person, or topic generally negative have a higher chance of using these swear words. Examples of cursing using swear words in English include *Damn! Shit! Fuck! Motherfucker!* Similar words are available in almost all the languages and are used extensively in their speech. In Tamil, offensive words are often associated with fruits and vegetables like onion, garlic, and tomato, or with animals like pig, dog, buffalo, cow and so on. Swear words use expressions concerning body parts, specifically private ones and derogatory phrases surrounding the same. One of the most commonly used swear words are *myru*, and *ootha* which translates to *public hair* and *fuck*. It is considered disrespectful and damages the face of the speaker. Therefore, swear words symbolizes humiliation, insult and certain speech acts are needed to help clear or combat such occurrence.

6. Face acts

As long as humanity persists, communication persists. It is necessary for existence and that every human has rights, freedom, and opinions on various matters. As one speaks or acts, his/her individuality is reflected as an image in society. Image or face is referred to as

how one is seen in the eyes of others in the community. Positive face and negative face are the two types of faces. Social and power roles play a vital role too in deciding the appropriateness of discourse and influence how one needs to maintain this image. Since everyone is different, the is undeniable contrast in morals and values, hence, agreements or disagreements and misalignment of ideas come as complementary. When one's act matches that of the social view, his/her face is positive. Likewise, when his/her actions and verbal acts are independent or questionable, his/her face is negative. There will unavoidably be a reaction to a particular action and in the case of discourse, indirect and direct speech acts deal with it. Verbal fights, expressive lexical exchanging and in some cases non-verbal extension of the same are also observed as a byproduct of misinterpretation or clash of opinions.

Any speech act, that affects the positive face of the hearer is a face threatening act. As swear words spin out in conversations, it affects the positive face of the hearer, irrespective of the matter at hand, it is a face threatening act. The intensity of the situation and the lexicon are matched, reflecting the attitude of the speaker. It questions or mirrors the character of the addressee. While various politeness strategies are often chosen to not threaten the face, one cannot say that it is the same in the case of emotive, expressive speech. Hence, the hearer will choose to either leave the face untended or fix the face. He can also choose to be silent on the matter. These measures are termed as face maintaining acts in this paper. These are often reflected in acts performed by the addressee/hearer considering the subjectivity of the face threatening acts. Various strategies like apologizing, explaining, offending, and swearing back at the speakers are some of the ways the hearers attempt to explain or react to their face being threatened.

For example, imagine that in a room, a cricket match is on television and a group of girls are watching it. One of the girls' mothers enters the room with some snacks. The fielder misses a prominent catch. Not aware of the mother's presence, a girl yells' Fuck you!', expressing disappointment. The mother looks at her apprehensively. The girl immediately apologizes and is assumed to feel bad about the expression. Here, the phrase used by the girl is though does not invite reaction from the other girls indicating her face is not at risk, the mother's looks did harm. She immediately apologizes so as to save face and follow the rule of no swear words, chiefly in front of elders. Now, imagine on road, a bike hits a car due to some reason. The car driver yells at the biker, '*ootha! Kannu terila? (Swear word! Have you lost your eyesight?)* and the biker yells back,*' myru! unaku oota terila? (Swear word! Don't you know how to drive?*). Thus begins a verbal fight which is then broken up by a fellow traveler. In this case, the face of the biker is threatened by the car driver in his speech act. Hence, to save his face, he yells back at the car driver. There are many more cases where similar acts happen and their corresponding reactions to maintain their face.

7. Discussion

Pragmatic studies are often tricky with the interplay of contextual indicating the psychological and social implications on the communicative sphere. A language is merely a tool of mediation amidst these variables. Any changes in these variables will have changes in the tool - the language being used. Though bad language is justified as bad indefinitely by the speakers, there is no denial of its usage. There is no surety that it will gradually be refrained from being used in the future. It will continue to exist only behind closed doors and will be an essential part of maintaining social bonds and relationships. They signify and symbolize the temperament, and emotive nature of the human being on one hand and reflect their peers, social environment and various factors influencing the use of language on the other hand.

Social hierarchy indeed plays a strong role in deciding the type of discourse the speakers will be a part of. Feelings are expressed more strongly than verbal or non-verbal acts.

While verbal acts are more established in the case of a higher social hierarchy, non-verbal acts are only chosen if the speaker is lower at the communicative level. The social bonds are given more importance and it is observed that the higher face threatening acts by the higher social hierarchy, the higher the resort to fix the face is initiated by the speakers. In the case of unknown status, it is unpredictable and can be said that it is leaning toward the intensity of the situation. Since there is no background knowledge about the hearer, their absolute ranking is loosened and there rests no obligation on the part of the hearer to save face. It is also similar to that of the same social hierarchy like friends where though there are cases of avoiding or changing the scenario, there is not much damage to the face of the hearer.

In short, it can be observed and said that face maintaining attitudes are present in public places irrespective of all situations and relationships with the speaker. The ways in which the acts are performed are highly subjective in nature but collectively reflect the social and cultural rules. While not much can be said about the choices of verbal and non-verbal acts, the preference seems to be verbal. One of the notable features is, that most of the participants as representative of the speaking community happen to be expressive in terms of verbs indicative emotions states, corresponding to the verb feel. It is right to say, as long as face exists, there will be face threatening and the corresponding face maintaining acts as a part of social discourse.

8. Results

The questionnaire links were sent to about 5 men and 5 women. Since the choice to skip questions if felt uncomfortable was present, a couple of questions were left unanswered. The two binary questions and one reflective question were answered by all the participants. The remaining questions were answered briefly either corresponding to the verb respond or feel. While all the questions were descriptive and speaker-centric, a combination based on formal or informal usage corresponding to a social distance of three degrees namely, family, friends, and strangers were used. Participants chose to express their feelings rather than to respond both non-verbally or by speech acts. There was one constant, diplomat answer to all the questions.

While seven participants affirmed the use of bad language, three denied using them in speech. When asked if such language is necessarily good or bad, being used in public spaces, two remained neutral and eight were considered bad. Upon questioning the possible reasons people in general use language, responses were maximum associated with emotive states including five responses indicating anger and two indicating frustration and agony. A perspective to connect better with people was also given alongside reasons citing current trends and bad social–interactive influence by three people. The remaining seven questions were a combination of six formal, one informal situations and social distance (higher, same and lower social hierarchy), while the intensity of the situation was decided by the degree of fault (full, unintentional/partial, no-fault) on the part of the hearer.

Hence, when there was a full fault, the speaker in the higher social hierarchy, the participants express feelings namely anger, sad, upset, frustration, quiet, dislike the behavior and would want the issue to be communicated politely and one participant wanted it to be reported. When a similar question with the same hierarchy and no-fault was tested, only three expressed feelings namely anger and hurt. Others retorted to reactions namely demanding an apology, report, and physically hitting back. When there was no fault, the speakers belong to the lower social hierarchy, the participants express feeling namely shock, speechless, insulted, angry, uncomfortable and awkward. Only one participant said they would take it easy and one commented it would change depending on the context. A handful would want to warn, discipline, explain, and counsel them. Non-verbal reactions to this question included slapping

them and leaving the place. When a similar situation was asked with a full fault, higher social hierarchy and informal domain (parents), the participants express guilt, very bad, and three retorted with an apology. While two refrained to comment, one expressed a chance to take revenge, and one remarked that it was not the likes of parents to use bad words. Unintentionally at fault with an unknown hierarchy was also checked where the responses were feelings of guilt, helplessness, overreacting on the part of the speaker, and being upset. They verbalized their responses as offending them back, apologizing, crying, explain the situation. Upon questioning the use of bad language amongst the same hierarchy (friends) in public places, a few participants express emotions of happiness, enjoyment, fulfilment, did not mind such language and others express embarrassment, avoidance, and non-encouragement of such behavior. Two refrained to comment on the aspect.

9. Limitations

Owing to the limited scope of only attempting to provide an insight into the status of swear words and reaction from the hearer, the study limits itself to that of only dealing with the perspective of the hearer. It does not include the reasoning of the speaker which pushed to such verbal utterances. It does not look into the intensity of the social situation in which such an utterance had to be made. The power and solidarity roles were given more importance as the social variable and the cognitive, and psychological factors were not given much due diligence. The participants chosen for the study were educated, well exposed and had a high chance of progressive influences in their language use considering their education and occupation. Also, the topic was perceived as delicate and not many people were willing to participate in the study. Consequently, the number and age group were limited yet divided equally. In future studies, if the same study is conducted on a larger scale, there could be stronger volumes of agreement towards swear words, gender-based contrastive patterns and the range of face maintaining acts as responses would also be different in terms of choices.

10. Conclusion

Language cannot be viewed as void of cultural and social factors by virtue of its communicative function in society. Depending on the situation, the individual ideas and principles are matched alongside the social obligations for effective communication, making it an extremely complicated and difficult task in nature. Even in the case of casual speech when one overrides the social rule, a certain population of people seem to be accepting. There is no denying the fact that bad words exist as a part of speech but the measures to ignore considering them inevitable is also evident. There will continue to exist the debate of whether this expression of swear words is right or wrong in the eyes of society. There will always be certain topics such as swearing which will be termed taboo in some way even as social values might change over time. There will nevertheless be reactions and responses in some from the speakers supporting or refraining from certain language usage because that is the framework of society. A person will give status to face and will either want to be inclusive or do not really mind and prefer to stick to one's reasoning irrespective of the society's social view and their verbal actions are proof of it. Hence, language acts as a stronghold on these phatic and social interpersonal obligations and this study attempted to understand this notion.

11. Appendix

1. Do you use bad language?
2. Why do you think people use bad language?

3. Is using such language good or bad in a public environment?
4. How would you feel/react/respond/explain when are being sworn at / when inappropriate language is used by your boss due to negligence on your end?
5. How would you feel/react/respond if your younger sister or brother during a conversation or an argument uses bad language accidentally at an outdoor space with people surrounding you?
6. How would you feel/react/respond/explain when bad language is used for absolutely no fault of yours but the person using such language happens to be your senior at the workplace?
7. How would you feel/react/respond/explain when bad language is used by your mother/father when you are caught red-handed doing an act they warned you not to do?
8. How do see the use of bad language amongst friends as a part of casual conversation in a public gathering like parks or restaurants?
9. How would you react/respond/feel/explain when you are accused and verbally offended for an unintentional action like accidentally stepped on a co-passenger's toe?
10. How would you react/respond/feel/explain in a situation wherein a group discussion bad language is used by a person, but you are mistaken to be that person and another person in the same group accuses you and reprimands you?

12. References

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