**Swearing, Discourse and Function in Conversational British English**

1. **Introduction**

In this study we focus on the interaction of swearing and discourse – that is, meaning above the level of the sentence (e.g. Stubbs 1983), or, for the purposes of focusing on spoken English, the turn. The paper has three objectives. Firstly, we explore how organization above the level of the turn in general, so called ‘macrostructures’ (after Van Dijk, 1977), interact with swearing. Secondly, we explore one specific discourse macrostructure, the narrative, and consider how swearing interacts with it. In doing so, we also explore how both views of macrostructure relate to each other. Finally, returning to the work of [Author] (2006), we re-examine narratives and their relation to swearing in terms of functional categories of swearing, rather than wordforms.

We begin by reviewing work on discourse, relating that to swearing and introducing our approach to exploring discourse macrostructures. That approach is then used to investigate the relationship between swearing and macrostructures in discourse through an exploration of a large subset of the Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al, 2017), a corpus of conversational British English. The paper then considers swearwords in relation to narrative, another commonly studied discourse macrostructure, in a subset of the Spoken BNC2014.. Following this, we examine swearing in narratives from a functional perspective. The paper concludes by comparing the three studies undertaken and reflecting upon the relationship between swearing and discourse in general, and in narratives in particular.

1. **Discourse**

The study of swearing is increasingly well served by corpus-based studies of microstructures – studies in which analysis focuses on and below the sentence level – and especially lexically oriented research.

In this paper we take two distinct – yet, we argue, compatible – views of discourse macrostructures. Both of these views are functionalist (Schiffrin, 1994) rather than being rooted in a propositional view of macrostructures (Van Dijk, 1977). The first is in line with Schiffrin’s view of discourse units as focusing upon ‘a particular unit of language (above the sentence), and a particular focus (on language use)’ (Schiffrin, 1994:20). The units themselves are not terminal, they are finite in number, and they may combine together to create longer stretches of discourse, much as in Van Dijk’s model of discourse macrostructures. Thus, in principle, they may form larger discourse units. The second approach we take aligns with Crystal’s (1992:25) view of discourse as ‘a coherent unit such as a sermon, argument, joke, or narrative’, analogous to Hymes’s (1974:52) notion of the speech event. By this definition, discourse is composed of units of varying length and purpose, with clearly different capacities for combination; one might imagine a joke being part of a longer discourse and being more likely to be used in a broader range of contexts than a sermon, for example. Yet we believe the two approaches are not incompatible, e.g. a narrative may be made up of macrostructural units while also itself being a macrostructure, as we show in Section 6. We reserve the term ‘discourse unit’ in this paper to describe those macrostructures which constitute the inventory of basic units of discourse we have identified. While these are macrostructures in their own right, they may also be combined to create macrostructures which are distinct. These are shown in Table 1. The mnemonics in parentheses, italicised for ease of reference, will be used to refer to the functions of discourse units throughout this paper. Readers interested in the process whereby the functions were determined, and how these relate to other research on creating inventories of discourse units, should see [Authors] (2021:720-733).

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| Situation-dependent commentary (*sdc*). Occurs when speakers in a conversation are commenting on people or objects that are present, or events that are occurring in their shared situational context. |
| Joking around (*jok*). Conversation that is intended to be humorous, including both light-hearted and darker humor. |
| Engaging in conflict (*con*). Disagreement of any type, including light-hearted debate as well as more serious quarrelling. |
| Figuring things out (*fto*). Discussion aimed at exploring or considering options or plans, including discussion about how things work and what the best solution to a problem may be. |
| Sharing feelings and opinions (*fel*). Discussion about feelings, opinions, and beliefs, including the airing of grievances and the sharing of personal perspectives. |
| Giving advice and instructions (*adv*). Occurs when one speaker offers directions, advice, or suggestions to another speaker. |
| Describing or explaining the past (*pas*). Narrative stories about true events from the past or other references to people or events from the past. |
| Describing or explaining the future (*fut*). Descriptions or speculations about future events and intentions, including those that are planned and those that are more hypothetical. |
| Describing or explaining (time-neutral) (*des*). Descriptions or explanations about facts, information, people or events where time (past or future) is either irrelevant or unspecified. |

Table 1: Discourse units used in this paper (adapted from[Authors], 2021:730-731).

The blending of functions in discourse units can be seen as akin to combining the basic colours of red, blue and green in different proportions to create the full range of colours. Some of these may be coterminous with the colour desired (e.g. red), while others will be formed from combinations of colours. This is true of the macrostructures identified by Crystal. For example, joking around is a communicative function in [Authors] scheme while other types of macrostructures in discourse, e.g. sermons, are not present in Table 1 but are, rather, composed of the basic macrostructures, discourse units, shown in Table 1.

The discourse units identified in [Authors] scheme are coded for all functions in Table 1. However, in reality, most of the values assigned to a discourse unit function are 0, indicating non-occurrence, though the identification of a main function (assigned a value of 3) is common. Likewise, secondary and tertiary functions (assigned values of 2 and 1, respectively) are also assigned frequently. The blending of discourse unit features thus starts at the atomic level first, i.e. with the discourse unit itself, and these discourse units may then combine to create a larger macrostructure. The extract below gives an example of a relatively discrete discourse unit, taken from the Spoken BNC2014, that is coded as primarily joking around, but with a tertiary function of describing or explaining (*des*):

**Example A (file SZCM, primary function: *jok*, 1st discourse unit)**

A: you wouldn't be much use in an actual SOS situation if you're looking up SOS Morse code on Google before you send it

B: well I might remember it now I've looked it up

A: (laughs)

B: probably the last time I looked it up was when I was a child or I found what it was (laughs)

A: yeah you'll probably never need to use it

(phone rings)

The creation of the annotation scheme was a collaborative effort which involved multiple attempts to analyse the BNC data (see [Authors]2021 for further detail). An initial set of codes, based on a manual analysis of the data, was proposed, along with guidelines for identifying discourse units. This was then refined in successive analyses which moved cyclically between the Lancaster and Norther Arizona teams. One team would apply the scheme to fresh data, amend the approach if necessary and then pass the data, and revisions, to the other team. They, in turn, would do the same with fresh data until a final scheme and protocol for the identification and labelling of discourse units was achieved. The process took approximately two years and was complete once both sides agreed that the approach worked robustly and plausibly on unseen data.

The cyclical nature of the process used to determine the scheme was then mirrored in the annotation process which produced the corpus used in this paper. The coding was undertaken by a team of analysts and our goal was “for independent coders, trained using the same framework, to make coding decisions that other trained coders would deem plausible” ([Authors] 2021: 728). This corpus data annotated is comprised of a 50% sample (479 files) of the 958 files containing two or three speakers in the Spoken BNC 2014. We selected files with two or three speakers as Love (2020:155) cautions against the use of files from this corpus that contain more than two speakers for sociolinguistic research due to issues of speaker identification in transcription.

Coders were trained to use the annotation scheme with guidelines derived from the coding development phase. These proposed that the identification of discourse units were based on three criteria ([Authors]2021:724) which required the discourse unit to be: “1. functionally coherent: A speech event is a sequence of utterances characterized by a single dominant communicative goal. 2. sequentially bounded: A speech event has an identifiable beginning and end. 3. length requirement: A speech event must be a minimum of five utterances or 100 words.”

The results of the training process were good (see [Authors] 2021:727) – an initial ‘fair’ coding agreement (Krippendorf’s alpha of 0.29) improved as training progressed (to 0.33). Once training was complete, annotation began. Each round of annotation would begin with each member of our team of analysts being allocated a batch of ten transcripts. Analysts worked initially on different corpus files. When the round of annotation was complete, analysts were paired at random and each member of the pair swapped one of their transcripts from their batch with the other at random. Each then read through the analysis of the other, making comments on the plausibility of the annotations and noting any inconsistency within it or with the guidelines. On receiving such feedback an analyst then wrote a report detailing their response to each point that an academic in charge of the project acted as arbiter upon. When the response to the feedback was agreed, the analyst would then implement revisions on that file but would then also review and revise any transcriptions they had previously done, where necessary, to ensure a consistency of approach across the data. In cases where the feedback highlighted a point which impacted upon the agreed approach to the data, or dealt with a recurring point, the case would be communicated to the whole team for consideration and revision would be requested. When all data had been annotated, a final quality check of the data was then undertaken by the academics managing the project ([Authors]). This led to a further round of revisions for some files which were then assessed again. Only once this process was completed were the files accepted as being ready for analysis (for a further discussion of the coding process see ([Authors] 2021:727-729).

A possibility arising from the coding scheme is that coherent macrostructures may be discovered within discourse units; for example, a secondary function might relate to a subordinate macrostructure within the discourse unit, much as an atom is composed of inter-related subparts. This possibility is examined when we explore narrative in Section 6.

Accordingly, we view the approaches to macrostructures in discourse outlined – what we may characterise as the elementary ‘building block’ approach and the informal inventory of discourse type approach – as being compatible in that they match Schiffrin’s view of discourse as ‘a system (a socially and culturally organised way of speaking), through which functions are realised’ (Schiffrin, 1994:32), as we should be able to explain the informal inventories in terms of the basic categories such as those in Table 1. Our position can be summarised by the view that, ‘[o]n the surface, it appears that conversational language is produced in a stream of spoken utterances. In reality conversation is composed of contiguous units that are characterized by coherent communicative purposes’ ([Authors] 2021). For us, discourse units are functionally determined, rather than being focused on ‘discourse as product (priority to syntax), or on discourse as process (priority to intonation)’ (Degand and Simon, 2009:6). For us, discourse is composed of a sequence of functionally coherent units, collectives of utterances with a definable function. These units, which we call discourse units, then cohere to produce discourse.

In this paper, we are interested in exploring the relationship between swearing and such macrostructures which, we argue, constitute discourse. Yet to what extent, if any, has research on swearing focused on macrostructures in discourse? We turn to this question in Section 3.

1. **Swearing and Discourse**

Research into the use and perception of swearing has taken a range of directions and approaches. For example, Kapoor’s (2016) study examined the perceived appropriateness of swearing within the Indian English speech community, contrasting the results with the non-Indian speech community. A similar approach was taken by Beers-Fägersten (2007), whose analysis focussed on the perceived level of offensiveness of swearwords in American English. While insightful, the focus of these studies is strongly socio-linguistic, in which broad contextual factors are considered alongside a microstructural analysis.

The same is true of corpus-based studies such as [Author] (2004), who used the spoken part of the British National Corpus 1994 (Aston and Burnard, 1998) to describe the word fuck in terms of occurrence across demographic features (e.g. age, sex and social class). [Author] (2004) also provided a classification of functions of the word *fuck* (p.257) which depended upon an interpretation of immediate context, i.e. it was oriented to microstructure.

In a similar study, Stenström (2006) investigated the use of swearwords in British English and Spanish conversations amongst teenagers in London and Madrid. Using a corpus approach, she devising a list of the most frequently used swearwords in both languages and noted their syntactic positions. Like [Author], Stenström pursued a functional interpretation at the level of microstructure, concluding that swearing could either be used as an insult or a phatic device.

At the time of writing, the most comprehensive corpus-based study of swearing in spoken language in socio-linguistic terms was undertaken by Love (2021). His study, which built upon and extended the study of swearing in the BNC1994 by [Author] (2006), contrasted the use of swearwords in the early 1990s and the early 2010s, using two broadly comparable corpora of orthographically transcribed spontaneous conversational English: the spoken demographic section of the BNC1994 (approximately 5 million words) and the Spoken BNC2014 (approximately 11.5 million words). This approach mirrored closely that of the studies discussed so far – a lexical and functional analysis of swearwords which draws on demographic data about the speakers, microstructural analysis, and general world knowledge. As with the other studies already reviewed, Love’s account of the swearwords is microstructural and does not systematically look above the level of the sentence/turn.

These corpus-based explorations of swearing in spoken language focused on local context at the microstructure level, then. At the macro level, the focus was on social context. This general pattern is more broadly typical of swearing research. There is a broad acceptance that context has an effect upon swearing, with Jay and Janschewitz (2008:285) concluding, based on a psycholinguistic study involving 121 speakers of L1 and L2 English, that “[i]nterpersonal swearing is a complex communicative act that is influenced by contextual variables such as speaker-listener relationship, social and physical setting, and the topic of discussion”. This finding aligns with the summary of key themes in swearing research in general reported both by Stapleton (2010) and Beers-Fägersten and Stapleton (2017:6), i.e. “taboo and censure, offensiveness, frequency, psychological vs. social functions, context, social categories, expectations and judgements, and the role of swearing in identity management”.

Studies looking at such contextual factors have been extended to a range of cultural contexts, e.g. as shown in a range of studies in Nassenstein and Storch (2020) and Beers-Fägersten and Stapleton (2017), in which context (broadly conceived) and microstructural studies of swearing interact. Yet while work such as Jay and Janschewitz (2008:268) claims that “offensive language is often used within the boundaries of what is considered situationally appropriate in discourse”, their work emphasises the social and physical situation in which the words are used but does not consider the linguistic choices that may be made at the macrostructural level in discourse itself, thus remaining silent on the question of how these may relate to conceptions of what is situationally appropriate. The exclusion of the consideration of macrostructural linguistic choices in discourse, and the influence of those choices in interaction, leaves the gulf between the micro level of analysis – i.e. the behaviour of words in local context – and the broad macro level – i.e. those general contextual features outlined – largely unexplored. The exception comes when a specific macrostructure is considered in a study. Joke-telling is one such macrostructure which is often observed in studies of swearwords, e.g. swearing in joke telling (Garde, 2008; Nelson, 2014) and jokes and swearing in humorous comic strips (Beers-Fägersten, 2017). However, such studies then tend to focus on microstructural analysis, and its relationship to broader context (e.g. gender, class), within that macrostructure. They do not consider variation of usage across macrostructures (e.g. how swearing varies across different types of discourse). Thus, they maintain the primacy of the microstructural and contextually bound approach.

While swearing and swearwords in spoken conversation have thus received increasing attention, the potential of corpora of spoken conversation to facilitate explorations of the interaction of swearing with macrostructures in discourse remains largely untapped. This is partly because corpus studies of swearing have limited their focus to the microstructures of conversation, i.e. they are lexically focused and largely turn-bound. Love (2021:756) notes this limitation and calls for more research on the interaction of discourse and swearing because macrostructures may play a role in how we use swearwords and what grammatical and pragmatic functions swearwords fulfil in those contexts, as isolated studies of single macrostructures, e.g. jokes, suggest. Love’s identification of discourse effects as a potential area of research seems warranted also from the perspective of the literature on discourse analysis. Koch and Oesterreicher (2021) argue that discourse is responsive to the conditions under which it is produced and understood. Given that it is established that the use and interpretation of swearing are contextually bound, we should expect discourse to mirror that. Discourse is a feature of language which may, following Auer (1992:4), “make relevant, maintain, revise or cancel … any aspect of context which, in turn, is responsible for the interpretation of an utterance in its particular locus of occurrence”. Given that research on swearing has highlighted both the importance of context – including, on occasion, macrostructures – and the interaction between discourse and context, Love’s call for more work on discourse and swearing seems well motivated. Hence it is the departure point for this paper. We will take a corpus-based approach to examining swearing within conversational discourse units ([Authors] 2021) and narrative units (see [Authors] 2022) in an attempt to identify patterns and frequencies of the forms and functions of swearwords within this context.

1. **Beginning the Study – which words to analyse**

While research into swearing has gained momentum, the definition of swearing itself has been contested (see Love, 2021). In this paper, we follow the definition used by Stapleton (2010), who suggests that swearing, albeit touching upon taboo topics such as scatology (e.g. *shit*), sex (e.g. *cunt*) or profanity (e.g. *damn*), also fulfils an important, non-offensive communicative function. For example, Aijmer (2018) describes the communicative functions of *fucking*, emphasising the term as an intensifier rather than a swearword per se. She argues that *fucking* is a non-degree-modifying intensifier that is near-synonymous to *bloody* (a word which has seen a sharp decline in use since the 1990s). As such, *fucking* is described as a strongly emotional term, which is used to convey strong emotions and attitudes towards a person or object. In that function, the term most frequently co-occurs with polarising adjectives, i.e. adjectives that express either positivity or negativity (p.68).

Apart from the functions of swearwords, the current discussion also regards the lexical forms of what can be categorised as a swearword. Love (2021:739) describes a list of ‘16 pure swearwords’, focussing on their lexical forms, claiming that:

“[…] swearing can be viewed as a type of so-called bad language, which, when used literally, relates to taboo topics (typically sex, bodily functions and religion), but can also be used figuratively to perform a range of functions, including abuse, humour and expression of emotion.”

(Love 2021:742-743)

In this paper we will, accordingly, focus on Love’s ‘pure swearwords’. Appendix A lists all of the wordforms we studied.

1. **Swearwords across discourse types**

For this analysis, we use a sub-sample of the Spoken BNC2014 that was manually segmented into discourse units as described above. We extracted discourse units that were assigned a single dominant function, either because they were given a score of 2 (secondary function) or 3 (primary function) and no other functions with scores of 2 or 3. Our goal in doing this was to look for as clear a link as possible between swearing and a range of discourse functions that were dominant, clearly identifiable and limited in number. This resulted in 10,012 discourse units (1,276,857 words) that were classified into one of nine macrostructures based on their primary or secondary function. Table 2 contains counts and percentages of the 10,012 discourse units in these 9 macrostructures.

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| **Macrostructure** | **Discourse Unit Count** | **Percentage** |
| Time-neutral description | 2,444 | 24.4 |
| Past-time oriented description | 2,247 | 22.4 |
| Figuring-things-out | 1,809 | 18.1 |
| Personal feelings and evaluations | 1,605 | 16.0 |
| Situation-dependent commentary | 713 | 7.1 |
| Future-time oriented description | 608 | 6.1 |
| Joking around | 327 | 3.3 |
| Giving advice | 168 | 1.7 |
| Conflict | 91 | 0.9 |
| **TOTAL** | **10,012** | **100.0** |

Table 2:Counts and percentages for the nine discourse type categories.

Using a Python script, we identified all occurrences of the various forms of each of the swearwords in Appendix A and calculated a total count for each swearword within the nine macrostructures. These counts were normalized to a rate per 10,000 words (PTKW, henceforth). We used R to conduct the quantitative analyses and produce the plots reported below. We also used AntConc 3.5.9 (Anthony, 2022) to generate concordance lines so we could carry out qualitative analyses.

Figure 1 contains a stacked bar chart showing the frequency PTKW of each swearword lemma across the macrostructures annotated in the corpus.

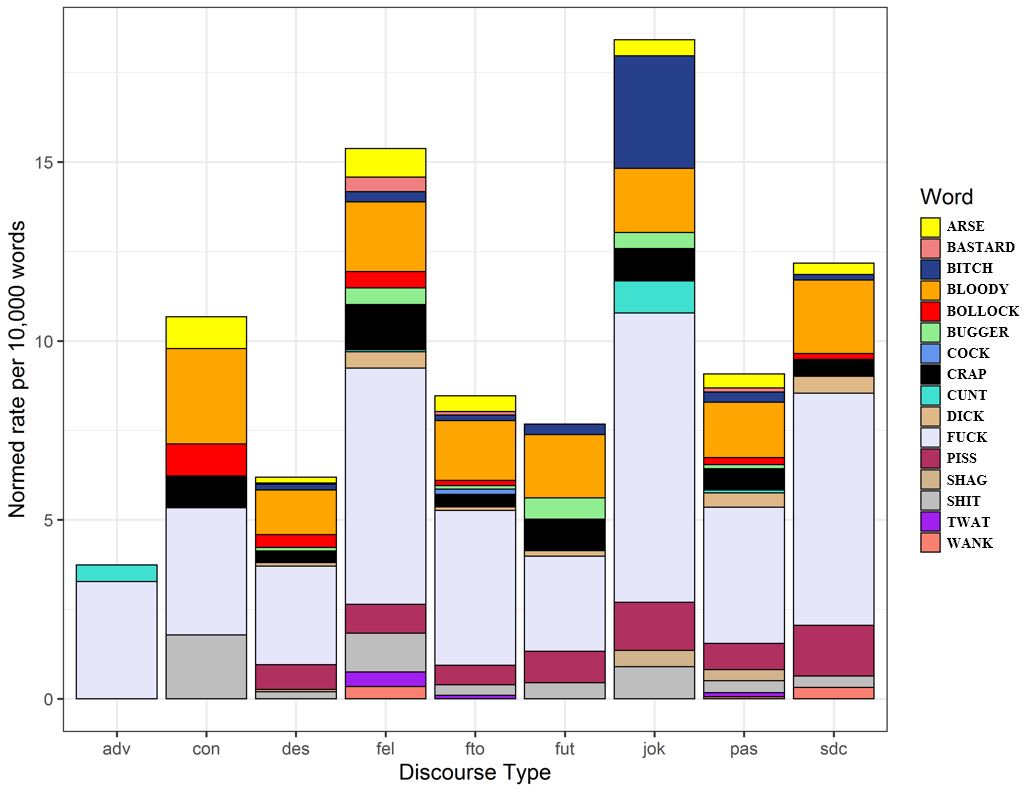


Figure 1: Distribution of swearwords across macrostructures.

Overall, swearing occurs relatively infrequently in this dataset. At most, a single type of macrostructure includes 18.4 swearwords PTKW (once in every 8 *jok* discourse units), and at the least, 3.7 PTKW (once in every 21 *adv* discourse units). Several other studies have also shown swearwords occur somewhat rarely (Jay, 2009; Love, 2021). The low rates of swearing could be true reflections of swearing in British English among the populations represented, but they may also be influenced by the fact that all speakers in the Spoken BNC2014 knew they were being recorded (see Love, 2021). In either case, examining the use of swearwords is meaningful because it is a marked feature which likely follows frequency and function usage patterns.

There are similarities in the patterns of swearword use across macrostructure types. Some words occur often, fuck being the most proportionally frequent in each macrostructure type, followed by bloody, shit, piss, and crap. Some swearwords, such as bastard, cock, cunt, shag, twat and wank, are used rarely in the corpus as a whole and are only present in a couple of macrostructure types – showing the first clear evidence that there is an interaction between macrostructure and swearing.

Differences in the usage patterns of swearwords also exist across macrostructures. In terms of rates of occurrence, swearwords are largely more frequent in macrostructures that consist of emotionally charged interaction than those that do not. The *jok* units are characterized by the most swearwords (18.4 PTKW), followed by *fel* (15.4 PTKW), and *con* (10.7 PTKW). The emotional nature of these interactions naturally lends itself to increased swearing because swearwords have been shown to not only convey strong emotion (Finn, 2017) but also provoke more intense emotion (Bowers & Pleydell-Pearce, 2011). Hence, the interaction between swearing and emotion on the one hand, and the macrostructure used by a speaker on the other, combine, we would argue, to influence the selection of the macrostructure by a speaker. The following excerpt from the *fel* discourse type exemplifies how swearwords can be tied to more emotional content:

**Example B (file SKPP, primary function: *fel*, 36th discourse unit):**

A: like everything's kind of just out of proportion with my body but that's the kind of thing that when you look at me you don't see my insecurities but it's the same with me I look at you and I don't see your insecurities because I don't know what the *fuck* you bang on about all the time because I literally look at you and I'm just like what the *fuck* are you talking about now?

B: and I feel the same when you *fucking* say the same *shit*

A: that's what I mean it's like we have to start understanding each other rather than looking at each other and we're like just block it out

Selection of the macrostructure may also be influenced by lack of emotion and lack of swearing. The types of macrostructure characterized by the least frequent use of swearwords tend to be less emotionally charged. These include *adv*, with the fewest swearwords of any discourse unit types (3.7 PTKW), followed by *des* (6.2 PTKW), *fut* (7.7 PTKW), *fto* (8.5 PTKW), and *pas* (9.1 PTKW). Rather than conveying emotion, these macrostructure types typically rely on interlocutors describing events in the past, present, or future. Again, there is an interaction with broader social context also - when communicating effectively, interlocutors assume that the speaker is reliable in conveying truthful information (Grice, 1975). Because swearing has been shown to make interlocutors appear less trustworthy (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019), speakers may generally avoid using swearwords when accomplishing these communicative purposes, making swearwords less frequent among them.

Despite their lower rates of occurrence, swearing is still present in these discourse types, in part because some swearwords within the *pas* discourse units occur in reported speech as a strategy to make others seem unreliable, as shown in Example C when a speaker claims that an acquaintance is *cocky*. While *cocky* is not a swearword, the person thus described is linked to the use of swearing in direct speech. Thus, speakers may avoid using swearwords in direct speech to make themselves appear more reliable but use swearwords in reported speech to make others appear less reliable. Interlocutors also use swearwords in stories to demonstrate how emotional they were at a previous point in time (see Example D, in which the speaker expresses their previous annoyance). Speakers using swearwords to strategically communicate emotion reinforces the idea that more frequent swearwords are characteristic of emotionally charged macrostructure types.

**Example C (file STZ3, primary function: *pas*, 41st discourse unit):**

A: and as soon as he became fa- well he didn't he didn't become famous he erm he got on BBC and he had his erm first music video first single

B: right

A: and that as soon as his video was finished recording that's when he became cocky like I'm *fucking* better than you you're a *cunt* like *fuck* off sort of thing and like he were just

B: I've heard stories like that about him as well he's cocky

**Example D (file SKPP, primary function: *pas*, 16th discourse unit):**

A: and I was just like but we've been looking for you for two hours and like short of saying you ruined our night because we were looking for you rather than enjoying it I was like just stay *fucking* exactly where you are stop moving at the same time we are and then when you said I'm going home and all that kind of stuff I was like

One macrostructure that does not fit neatly into either category of emotional discourse nor narration is *sdc*, which requires both commentary about unfolding events and the communication of emotion. This discourse type yields 12.2 swearwords PTKW (one in every 9 *sdc* discourse units), which makes it the macrostructure type with the third highest frequency of swearwords. This high rate of swearing could be because the commentary is based on a situation that interlocutors experience in real time, so (1) the appearance of reliable narration is less necessary, and (2) the language is largely reactionary in nature. Example E illustrates this when Speaker A uses *bloody* to react to a bad driver in real time.

**Example E (file SUPB, primary function: *sdc*, 39th discourse unit):**

A: don't actually know why don't ask it just is

B: okay

A: and I just couldn't be bothered to no don't even look when you pull out why don't you? stupid drivers *bloody* Sunday drivers

Another notable difference between discourse types is in the use of *bitch*. While this swearword occurs relatively frequently in *jok* (3 PTKW), it occurs only 0.3 times PTKW at most in other discourse unit types. Although *bitch* has historically been considered “an offensive way of referring to a woman, especially an unpleasant one” (Hornby, 2015, p. 143), it can also be used in a self-empowering way (Vinter, 2017). In joking around, bitch is more frequent because its use is related to the latter, as a means of self-empowerment, such as when one speaker considers herself a “boss bitch” (file SAG4, 11th discourse unit, primary function: *jok*). The derogatory function of bitch is still present within the joking around discourse type, but in such cases is typically accompanied by a disclaimer e.g. when a speaker exclaims “screwed you over bitch” and follows up immediately with “I’m kidding” (file S9KS, 8th discourse unit, primary function: *jok*). This contrasts the use of bitchin all other discourse unit types, in which the derogatory function of the word occurs as when a speaker states, with no mitigation, that somebody is “an obnoxious bitch” (file SCPR, 49th discourse unit, primary function *pas*).

There can be little doubt, then, that swearing is selected as a function by macrostructure. In turn, the range of factors usually associated with the study of swearing are, doubtless, in play when speakers use a macrostructure in conversation. Note that this is a co-operative act – the data we are looking at is conversational, hence the discourse units are typically co-constructed by the speakers in question. Therefore, while one speaker may initiate a macrostructure, and that may seem appropriate given the broader context, the macrostructure overall is the result of co-operative production by all contributing speakers at the very least. In that context, it is interesting to note that swearing may be challenged by hearers, though the possibility that this is self-presentation by respondents who know they are being recorded is an important possibility to keep in mind. For example, in file S6W8 one speaker exclaims “fucking hell” and another responds, “stop swearing”. However, on other occasions hearers seem to validate the swearing. In response to the example “an obnoxious bitch” cited above, the hearer does not challenge the judgement nor the choice of language – they validate it by saying “you wouldn’t employ her”.

1. **Swearing in Narrative**

The analysis so far has showed that individual macrostructures, as represented by discourse units, attract swearing or seem to shun it. While that process of selection arises from co-construction and results from broader contextual forces and communicative goals, it is clear that macrostructure is a locus of variation for swearing. In this analysis, we look at a macrostructure identified by Crystal, narrative, and ask whether, in fact, the influence of swearing on macrostructures applies uniformly across this macrostructure or whether it may, in fact, be related to macrostructures nested within the narrative macrostructures.

To explore narrative, 100 files, randomly selected from the discourse annotated data, were annotated for narrative structure. For this purpose, we used the framework for identifying and analysing narratives suggested by Labov and Waletzky (1967). This approach has the advantage of being a macrostructure composed, in principle, of macrostructures (i.e.the six narrative elements: Abstract; Orientation; Complication; Evaluation; Resolution; and Coda). These are summarized by Labov (1972:370) as follows:

1. Abstract: ‘what, was this about?’
2. Orientation: ‘who, when, what, where?’
3. Complication: ‘then what happened?’
4. Evaluation: ‘so what?’ (how was this interesting)
5. Resolution: ‘what finally happened?’
6. Coda: ‘puts off a question’ (indicating that the complicating action and evaluation are no longer relevant)

Previous corpus research applying this framework has shown that most of the elements of this scheme are optional in a narrative ([Authors] 2022), which minimally is composed of at least two narrative clauses (i.e. clauses containing a verb in the simple past tense or historic past tense), one of which must be a Complication.

The files were composed of 755,988 words, including 197,722 words related to narratives (1,223 files). The remaining 558,266 words were non-narrative. The narrative annotation was undertaken using the same procedures as were used to annotate discourse units. Annotators were trained to undertake the analysis and their work monitored, with cross-checking being undertaken to verify the plausibility of the analyses introduced.

The congruence between the discourse unit and the narrative annotation is immediately apparent when the boundaries of the annotation are considered. While neither trained nor instructed to do so, the annotators who introduced the narrative annotation, who were distinct from those who introduced the discourse unit annotation, began narratives where discourse units began. The termination of narratives also coincided with the termination of discourse units. These are both signs that compatible macrostructural phenomena were being annotated. From the perspective of the discourse units, we can ask: what was the characterization of the narrative? When we investigate the patterns, a dominant set of discourse unit functions are clear – narrative discourse units have a clear primary discourse function of *pas* (77.54%) and a dominant secondary and tertiary function of *fel* (24.64% in both cases).

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Function** | **Primary %** | **Secondary %** | **Tertiary %** |
| *adv* | 0.00 | 0.72 | 1.45 |
| *con* | 1.45 | 0.00 | 0.72 |
| *des* | 4.35 | 10.14 | 5.80 |
| *fel* | 7.25 | 24.64 | 24.64 |
| *fto* | 7.25 | 10.87 | 8.70 |
| *fut* | 1.45 | 0.72 | 2.90 |
| *jok* | 0.00 | 1.45 | 4.35 |
| *pas* | 77.54 | 13.77 | 8.70 |
| *sdc* | 0.72 | 0.00 | 0.00 |

Table 3: Relative proportions of discourse unit functions per narrative.

The dominant organizational feature of a narrative is progression through time, hence the dominance of *pas*. However, key sub-parts of the narrative, for example evaluation or resolution, may well be related to expressions of feelings, leading both to the salience of *fel* in the discourse unit analysis and to the possibility that it is in coherent sub-parts of a narrative, not in the narrative as a whole, that we may expect swearing to occur.

To test this, we begin by exploring narrative and non-narrative in general. Throughout the comparison, the narrative and non-narrative contrast relates to data in the same corpus files, i.e. different speakers may not be presumed to be this source of variation. We use a simple effect size measure, LogRatio (Hardie 2014), to check the strength of association for each swearword occurring in narrative, and its sub-parts, relative to its frequency in non-narrative. LogRatio is an intuitive effect size measure – 0 means there is no effect, a positive value denotes a positive effect (attraction) and a negative value denotes a negative effect (repulsion). The measure uses a log scale, meaning, for example, that a score of 1 indicates that there is twice the frequency of a feature in A than B, 2 that there is four times the frequency, 3 that there is eight times the frequency and so on. The comparisons are made on the basis of normalised data to control for corpus size. For the purpose of our study, we will ignore any comparisons where fewer than 10 examples in the whole corpus are used as the basis of comparison. We will also only focus on cases where we have positive evidence of the appearance of a word in narrative, i.e. the word must have a frequency of at least one in the narrative data and an overall frequency of at least ten in the whole dataset to be considered.[[1]](#footnote-2)

We began by bringing the microstructural (words in this case) and macrostructural (narrative in this case) perspectives together. Table 4 shows the results of the application of LogRatio to the data. The results split into four – words with a negative effect (which we count as being -1 to -1.99), a strong negative effect (any negative value of -2 or less), a positive effect (any positive value of 1 to 1.99) and a strong positive effect (any value of 2 or more).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Effect** | **Words** |
| Negative effect | None |
| Strong negative effect | None |
| Positive effect | None |
| Strong positive effect | *twat* |

Table 4: Affinity of swearwords for narrative as opposed to non-narrative.

The overall result here is of interest – of the words analysed, only one (*twat*)has what we would term a strong positive effect. None of the other words studied have either a positive or negative effect that meet our thresholds for reporting. Hence, if we limit ourselves to one view of microstructure (word) and focus on one macrostructure (narrative) the results are not of great interest. May this be because the narrative, in essence, averages away differences which may be apparent if we look at swearwords distributing across the elements of a narrative, i.e. what we may call macrostructures within the macrostructure of narrative? To explore this, we repeated the previous analysis, but this time we looked at how the swearwords studied distribute across the different elements of a narrative. Once again, we applied LogRatio with the minimum evidence requirements we set for the previous analysis. One result was immediately apparent – both Abstract and Codafall outside of the scope of our analysis. Only two examples of swearing appear in a Coda in the data, and only four in Abstract. For the remaining categories, Table 5 shows which words occur in each narrative element with one of the four strengths of association used in Table 4. Unlike in Table 4, however, there is one result with a LogRatio score higher than three (*twat* in Evaluation, LogRatio score of 3.45).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Element** | **Strong -ve** | **-ve** | **+ve** | **Strong +ve** |
| Complication |  | *bloody*, *piss* | *dickhead* |  |
| Evaluation |  |  | *bloody*, *dickhead*, *fuck*, *shit* | *bollocks*, *fucked*, *twat* |
| Orientation | *bloody* | *crap*, *shit* | *twat* |  |
| Resolution |  |  | *bloody*, *fuck*, *pissed* |  |

Table 5: Affinity of swearwords for narrative elements as opposed to non-narrative.

The results in Table 5 strongly suggest that the distribution of swearwords across the narrative elements vary. An order of association with swearing seems apparent in the Table. Most associated with swearing seems to be Evaluation, which is linked purely positively to swearwords, sometimes strongly so. Resolution is also only positively associated with swearwords, though with fewer swearwords and less strongly than Evaluation. Next is Complication which is mixed, being linked positively to *dickhead* and negatively to both *bloody* and *piss*. Finally, Orientation is similar to complication as it is linked negatively to two swearwords, with *twat* being the only word linked positively with this element. Unlike Complication, however, Orientation has one word, *bloody*, with which it has a strongly negative association. Broadly speaking, the Table seems to group Evaluation and Resolution together on one hand (as they are exclusively positively linked to swearwords) and Complication and Orientation on the other (as they are mainly negatively linked to swearwords).

If we look at micro and macrostructure again, but this time assign the words into functional groups based on the coding of those words in context, what is the result? Does that give a better sense of whether it is a specific function, as opposed to a specific word or set of words, which is the cause of the effects reported in narrative and its elements? To explore this, all 770 swearwords in the 100 files marked for narrative structure were annotated with the functional annotation scheme for swearwords used by [Author] (2006). Table 6 outlines the major categories of that scheme.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Annotation Code** | **Description** |
| AdvB | Adverbial booster: “Fucking marvellous” |
| Curse | Cursing Expletive: “Fuck You!/Me!/Him!/It!” |
| Dest | Destinational usage: “Fuck off!” “He fucked off” |
| EmphAdv | Emphatic adverb/adjective: “He fucking did it” |
| Gen | General expletive “(Oh) Fuck!” |
| Idiom | Idiomatic expression: “Could not give a fuck” |
| Personal | Personal insult referring to defined entity: “You fuck!” |
| PredNeg | Predicative negative adjective: “the film is shit” |
| PremNeg | Premodifying negative adjective: “the fucking idiot” |
| Pron | ‘Pronominal’ form with undefined referent: “got shit to do” |

Table 6. Coding scheme for swearing functions.

As before, we will set aside the data from abstracts and codas and focus instead on the four narrative elements where the effect seems to lie. We will again focus on words which appear in narrative. As the data is now gathered into larger groups, we will increase the thresholds we use, requiring a total of at least five examples from narrative data in any one swearing function for inclusion in the analysis. As the focus is on categories, before we analyse any swearing function we require i.) at least one example of that swearing function in a narrative and ii.) at least 10 examples of that function in uses across the whole corpus.[[2]](#footnote-3) Table 7 below shows, for each narrative element and for narrative overall, the swearing categories’ occurrence relative to non-narrative.[[3]](#footnote-4)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Complication** | **Evaluation** | **Orientation** | **Result** | **All Narrative** |
| AdvB | -1.52 | 0.44 | -0.85 | 0.90 | -0.28 |
| Curse | 1.03 | 2.99 |  | 1.45 | 1.28 |
| Dest | 0.93 | 1.31 |  | 1.94 | 0.76 |
| EmphAdv | -1.44 | -0.06 |  | 0.66 | -0.93 |
| Gen | -0.03 | 2.11 | -2.69 | 0.87 | 0.44 |
| Idiom | -1.25 | 0.54 |  | 0.17 | -0.72 |
| Personal | 0.23 | 1.41 | -2.11 |  | -0.12 |
| PredNeg | -0.97 | 1.15 | -1.30 | -1.14 | -0.37 |
| PremNeg | -1.19 | 0.60 | -2.11 | 0.64 | -0.42 |
| Pron | -0.81 | -1.24 | -1.37 | -0.62 | -0.96 |

Table 7: distribution of LogRatio scores comparing the frequency of different swearing functions in narrative elements versus non-narrative.[[4]](#footnote-5)

If we contrast the overall picture for swearing and the narrative elements in Table 7, it is apparent that variation occurs within the narrative. The results for the whole narrative are neither notably positive or negative, with only Curse showing up as positive. However, as with Table 6, the shift to narrative elements changes this picture markedly. Once again, Orientation and Complication seem to form a group as do Evaluation and Result. Orientation is exclusively linked to negative or strongly negative values, with the negative score for the Gen being greatest. Once again, Complication is not as negative as Orientation, but it balances one positive score for Curse against four negative scores for AdvB, EmphAdv, Idiom and PremNeg. On the other hand, Evaluation has only one negative function, Pron, while it has three positive (Dest, Personal, and PredNeg) and two strongly positive functions (Curse and Gen) associated with it. Result is similar in that it has one negative function (PredNeg) and two positive functions associated with it (Curse and Dest). At the level of swearing function, we can once again see that specific elements of a narrative can have marked positive affinities.

Overall, insofar as swearing expresses emotion, we may see, in the functions of swearing, how the expression of emotion by swearing may vary by narrative element. In this view of the narrative, Evaluation and Result are more laden with emotion than Orientation and Complication. In this, we may also see a shadow of the findings in the previous section – macrostructures principally concerned with the conveyance of information (e.g. Orientation) rely less on swearing than those elements more closely associated with the expression of feelings (e.g. Evaluation). At the same time, we can see how a discourse unit containing a narrative can be principally *pas*, but that in its sub-parts, notably Evaluation and Result, the expression of feelings may be dominant enough to generate a secondary or tertiary coding of *fel* at the discourse unit level, as occurs in the annotated narrative data.

1. **Conclusion**

This paper has focused on the need to consider swearing in discourse beyond the microstructural or broad contextual levels. While acknowledging that some studies of swearing have considered elements of macrostructure, we have looked at macrostructure in two distinct ways – through a generic set of macrostructures that can be used to characterise conversation in general, and with reference to a specific macrostructure, narrative, and the distinct macrostructures contained within it.

The study of the broad set of macrostructures allowed us to analyse systematically, for the first time, the affinities that exist between swearwords and functional discourse units. This revealed discourse units related to joking around and the expression of feelings to be those in which swearing was principally used. The switch to exploring narrative demonstrated an affinity between narrative elements and certain swearwords. The cause of this effect was shown in an exploration of the macrostructures that compose narrative, with Evaluation and Resolution in particular being positively linked to the use of specific swearwords. At the level of swearing function, these were, in turn, distributed unevenly across the narrative elements with Evaluation and Resolution attracting swearing functions most markedly. These findings broadly reflect findings from other researchers, for example Peterson and McCabe (1991:42) who see Evaluation as ‘the provision of emotional information’ associated with ‘highly colored vocabulary’

The overall picture that emerges is that there is a strong and selective interaction between swearwords and macrostructures in discourse. Moreover, the different approaches to exploring macrostructures in discourse used in this paper, the general (discourse unit) versus the specific (narrative), were mutually supporting, and the exploration of swearing in both helped to show that compatibility.

Pragmatics and discourse interact, with collections such as those of Schneider and Barron (2008), Schneider and Barron (2014) and Peterson, Kern and Hiltunen (2022) showing clearly, in a range of contexts, cultures and theories that discourse pragmatics is a key part of conversation as where “the focus is on interactional issues, then this is the realm of discourse pragmatics” (Schneider and Barron, 2014:2). Yet all three of these major collections are notable in that they do not focus on swearing, in spite of swearing being, as this paper has shown, i.) a resource that is drawn on by a number of discourse macrostructures in interaction; ii.) subject to a degree of negotiation by participants in a conversation, and iii.) being known to be used for specific effects in discourse in certain contexts (e.g. in politics, see Cavazza and Margherita, 2014). There has also been studies of swearwords at the microstructural level in which the role of swearwords as discourse markers has been evidenced. In addition, the link of discourse markers to ‘textuality’, i.e. the collective grouping of units in discourse, has also been noted (e.g. Ljung, 2011:88). Yet the gap in systematic studies of the role of swearing in generating that textuality in discourse persists.

In this paper we have shown that discourse and swearing interact across a range of macrostructures in conversational British English. In so doing, we contribute to a body of work on discourse pragmatics, yet also show that a turn towards swearing in discourse pragmatics may be as important a shift as that which studies of swearing need to make towards discourse pragmatics. Both would strengthen a trend in “contemporary pragmatics (which) bases its analysis mainly on discourse – extended sequences of actual text and talk” (Blum-Kulka, 2010:38). It should be noted that this trend could be greatly facilitated by corpora such as the BNC2014. However, much work in so-called corpus pragmatics tends to focus on microstructural analyses, as is apparent from Rühlemann (2022), giving a clear pointer to where future work in corpus-based discourse pragmatics may fruitfully go.

The benefits of the corpus approach may also be further realized if the dimension of time was considered. This paper has shown an interaction between pragmatics, discourse and swearing. However, with corpora becoming available which allow for the study of such features in conversation over time, as undertaken by Aijmer (2022:9) with the BNC1994 and the BNC2014 for example, it is becoming possible to begin to address the “lack of research using empirical data to study on-going changes in pragmatics and discourse”. With that in mind, an obvious future direction for the work outlined here would be to undertake the same study with the demographically sampled section of the spoken BNC1994 to explore whether the findings reported here resonate, or otherwise, with what may be observed in casual conversation from twenty years before our data was collected.

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1. This means that, for the first study, the words *arse*, *bitch*, *bloody*, *bollocks*, *crap*, *dickhead*, *fuck*, *fucked*, *fucking*, *piss*, *pissed*, *shit* and *twat* are considered. It should be noted that only one word has a frequency of ten or more in the corpus but is not attested in narrative, *bugger*, which occurs 11 times in non-narrative, but not at all in narrative. Of the 24 words attested in non-narrative but not narrative, their mean frequency is 2.61 and their modal frequency is 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Note that as the thresholds are now applied to the functions, not words, there are wordforms contributing to this analysis that did not meet the threshold for the previous two studies in this section. Those words are *arsehole*, *bastard*, *bastards*, *buggered*, *dick*, *shite*, *shitload* and *shitty*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The table is based on all of the examples of swearing in the corpus bar 4 which could not be classified: 9 in the Figurative category from [Author] (2006) and 44 examples of words which are not used as swearwords but are in the Literal or Image category for [Author] (2006), e.g. *shit* referring to excrement, in line with the arguments presented by Ljung (2011:12-14). So overall, this table represents the use of 713 swearwords in the data. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Empty cells indicate that combination of swearing function and narrative element is not attested. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)