

*Swear words make you resilient...
impoliteness in a pandemic-stricken world*



Those in my team, or those who know me a little more personally, can attest that I have a tendency (when speaking in English) to occasionally break out a swear word. My justification for swearing is that I am Australian and in Australia, swearing is ubiquitous. As an anthropologist, I would therefore argue that swearing is not just a particular set of words, but rather a set of contextually dependant and socially determined functions.

But is this really the sole reason for my swearing? Of course not! Even though swearing is not something that I am particularly proud of, nor the politest thing to do or say,

‘there are moments in a day when, releasing a very short string of profane syllables feels great!’

And science seems to back me up on that, reporting that [swearing is good for us](#). A 2009 study, for example, had subjects dip their hands in icy water: those who were allowed to swear were able to keep their hands in the water for longer and experienced less pain than those who had to stick to a friendlier vocabulary. Emma Byrne has even written a whole book on the subject: [Swearing is Good for You: The Amazing Science of Bad Language](#).

[Clifford Giff](#) from Griffith University in Queensland, Australia, asserts that ‘swearing stands at the crossroads of multiple fields of study: pragmatics, including interactional pragmatics and impoliteness studies..., sociolinguistics..., social history..., descriptive linguistics..., psycholinguistics..., and the philosophy of language’. Moreover, the [origins of swear words](#) are varied, but, unsurprisingly, most are related to bodily functions and body parts.

In this pandemic-focused world, it also interesting to note that a large number of swear words and obscenities in Dutch are derived from diseases. A [recent article](#) in the [Economist](#), states ‘in most languages, if someone said you had cancer, it would be a diagnosis. In Dutch, it is more likely to be an insult. [Kankerlijer](#) (“cancer-sufferer”) is one of a long list of Dutch profanities and expletives derived from diseases. An undesirable person might be told to “typhus off” ([optyfussen](#)) or “get consumption” ([krijg de tering](#)). If in (American) English you laugh your ass

off, in Dutch you might “laugh yourself the pleurisy” ([lachen je de pleuris](#)). A damned long way is a [klereneind](#) (“cholera-end”). And so on’. We may have to ask our Flemish-speaking colleagues, Patrick ‘Bas’ Bastiaensen and Peter Melens, if this has made its way across the Dutch–Belgian border. And if so, which is their favourite?

Languages are in constant evolution and it is no wonder that COVID-19 has also made its way into the dictionary of Dutch profanities. According to a [recent article in the World](#), Dutch linguist Martin van der Meulen states that the Dutch have already coined a new swear word involving coronavirus, using the following construction ‘[krijg de coronavirus](#)’; which, more or less, translates to ‘I hope you get coronavirus’. Nice, huh?!?

Although hardly a justification, my occasional swear words seem so much nicer, and while therapeutic for me, are hardly a curse for those who unfortunately have to listen to me. During this second confinement and on the days when you are feeling a little less motivated, open up this [Wikipedia list of Dutch profanities](#) and read them aloud ... you will definitely sound funny, no doubt you will pronounce them incorrectly, but it may just make you laugh and feel better! Innovative linguistical approaches to resilience. 😊

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