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Swearing and perceptions of the speaker: A discursive approach

Abstract

Swearing has been shown to affect hearers’ perceptions of speakers. Existing studies show mixed effects. Some identify favourable perceptions, including: greater speaker informality, intensity, humour, and credibility. Others show negative outcomes, with swearers perceived as: less competent, intelligent, and trustworthy; and as more aggressive and socially inept than non-swearers. Most existing studies are based on experimental methodologies, typically using constructed data and directly eliciting evaluations. In this paper, using Discursive Psychology principles, I adopt a perspective that is closer to ‘real world’ processes of perception and evaluation. Specifically, I analyse online reader responses to news reports of a celebrity host’s swearing during a televised awards event. Here, the data are unelicited, discursively formulated, and produced in response to a concrete swearing example. In the analysis, I examine the meaning frameworks through which the respondents evaluate swearing; and the types of perceptions that they form about the speaker, including his motivations for swearing and his personal characteristics. I demonstrate that: (a) evaluative categories are negotiated in different ways; and (b) evaluations are inextricably linked to existing representations of the speaker, as well as contextualised judgements and expectations. The study highlights the role of socio-pragmatic concerns in swearing and speaker evaluation.

Keywords
Swearing; Perception; Attribution; Speaker Evaluation; Discourse Analysis; Non-Experimental Methodology
1.0 Introduction

Swearing has been shown to significantly affect hearers’ perceptions and evaluations of speaker(s), including judgements of personality, competence, humour, credibility, and intelligence (Johnson and Lewis, 2010; Johnson, 2012; DeFrank and Kahlbaugh, 2019). However, results of empirical studies are mixed, particularly with respect to favourable vs. unfavourable judgements. The majority of such studies have utilised some form of experimental design. Meanwhile, linguistic (pragmatic, discursive, sociolinguistic) research demonstrates that swearing is a highly complex socio-pragmatic activity, which produces different effects, depending on, inter alia, features of the context, speaker and hearer categories, speaker-hearer relationships, and cultural and social expectations/ideologies (see Stapleton, 2010; Beers Fägersten, 2012 for a fuller discussion). However, studies of swearing perception have differed in the extent to which they have explicitly incorporated socio-pragmatic variables into their design; and crucially, most have not considered the discursive nature of evaluation in everyday life. From a discursive (and specifically Discursive Psychology) perspective, which is the approach adopted in the present study, evaluation is an active process that is accomplished through language and interaction, typically in the course of other social practices, such as blaming, excusing, praising and explaining (Wiggins and Potter 2003).

Because existing studies of swearing perception are predominantly located with the experimental paradigm, hearers’ evaluations have typically been elicited directly (often using rating scales) in response to constructed instances of swearing (see 4.0). Where social and cultural variables have been incorporated, this has been done in a controlled manner for the purposes of comparison or correlation. In this paper, using Discursive Psychology (DP) principles (see Edwards, 1997; Potter, 2000; Wiggins, 2017), I adopt a perspective that is closer to “real world” processes of perception and evaluation. Specifically, I analyse online reader responses to news reports of a celebrity host’s swearing during a televised awards event. While these are written, rather than spoken, data and generally do not provide an interactional context, they respond to a number of methodological imperatives, which are discussed in full in section 4.0. These include focusing on an actual instance of swearing, rather than constructed examples; and on evaluations that have been freely expressed by the participants, using their own meaning categories, rather than being elicited by the researcher in response to pre-constructed scales and measurements. Empirically, this
approach shows how perceptions and evaluations of swearing are negotiated in light of hearers' existing knowledge of the speaker and context; and it also highlights the role of socio-pragmatic considerations in the evaluation process. The discursive design is not intended to replace experimental or questionnaire-based approaches to the topic, nor to provide definitive findings on evaluations of swearing per se; but rather to provide a complementary perspective on the swearing-perception process and to offer a methodological framework by which this may be achieved.

In the next sections, I provide a brief overview of swearing as a socio-pragmatic activity before reviewing existing studies of swearing perception. I then discuss the methodological considerations that provide a point of departure for the present study design, which seeks to understand perceptions of swearing from a discursive (DP) perspective.

2.0 The Socio-pragmatics of Swearing

As a form of linguistic and social taboo, used expressively, swearing is a fundamental characteristic of languages and cultures (Jay, 2009; Dewaele, 2010; Ljung, 2011; Vingerhoets et al., 2013), but its use is circumscribed and consequential for speakers. Swearing is characterised by its potential to cause offence: it is “the use of words which have the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, objectionable, or unacceptable in any given social context” (Beers Fägersten, 2012: 3). While such words can be referred to in different ways (e.g. expletives, curse words, bad language, profanity, obscenity), the default term adopted in this paper is “swear words”. Despite some chronological and cultural variation, most analyses of swear words identify a number of core taboo categories, most commonly: excretion; sexual acts; body parts; ancestry; and profanity/blasphemy (see Montagu, 2001; Kaye and Sapolsky, 2009; Byrne, 2017).

The taboo/offensive nature of swearing means that it is sanctioned at both individual and societal levels (Jay, 2009), and this, in turn, gives it a unique interpersonal and psychological potency. At an individual level, swearing is often associated with the expression/release of strong emotions (Dewaele, 2016; Stephens et al. 2009; Stephens and Zile, 2017). However, because of its taboo nature, as well as complex social expectations around speaker and contextual appropriateness, it also facilitates a range of interactional and identity functions, which are not easily achieved by other linguistic means. Stapleton (2010) categorises these
functions as: expressing emotion (positive and negative); creating humour and/or verbal emphasis; social and group bonding; and constructing/displaying identity. Norrick (2012) further demonstrates the role of swearing in conversational narratives, with functions including: obtaining the floor; justifying the tellability of a narrative; marking climaxes and closings; and evaluating narrative action. Moreover, while swearing is traditionally associated with impoliteness, aggression and hostility (Winters and Duck, 2001; McEnery, 2006; Culpeper, 2011), its use can also signal positive politeness and an orientation towards face-saving (Daly et al. 2004; Dynel, 2012; Christie, 2013: see further below). Core to this distinction is the hearer’s perception of the speaker’s intention within a given context; in particular, whether he or she intended to cause offence (see Culpeper, 2011; Christie, 2013). The issue of intention will be discussed further in the analysis.

As noted above, swearing is subject to social judgements and ideologies (see Christie, 2013; Bednarek, 2019). These often draw on ideas of “appropriateness” for different groups of speakers, which, in turn reflect folklinguistic beliefs about social groups and linguistic behaviour. Thus, inter alia, swearing is typically associated with men (rather than women); with lower socioeconomic groupings; and with younger speakers (see McEnery and Xiao, 2004; Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2017; Byrne, 2017). While these assumptions are not always borne out by empirical research, they nonetheless shape perceptions of swearing and also its interpersonal effects. There are also cultural and/or ethnic differences regarding swearing perceptions, tolerance, and usage patterns (see for example, Dewaele, 2016; Kapoor, 2016; Stenström, 2017), although a discussion of these is outside the scope of this paper. A final point to highlight here is the importance of context in the use and interpretation of swearing. This issue has been researched in a number of pragmatic and sociolinguistic studies. For example, Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) showed that among a sample of college students, the frequency and function of swear word usage varied according to a combination of gender and conversational type. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) found that appropriateness judgements of swearing were dependent on a combination of factors, including speaker-listener relationship, social and physical context, gender of speaker, and the particular word(s) used. More recently, and with reference to newspaper reports of swearing, Christie (2013) has applied a discursive pragmatic approach to show that the meaning of swearing is indexical and that its evaluation is triggered by the context in which it occurs; importantly, this includes the prevailing metadiscourse, which links swearing with particular affective stances and social identities.
The section has provided an overview of key issues in the study of swearing as a socio-pragmatic activity. In the next two sections, I outline the complementary body of research that forms the focus of this paper; that is the effects of swearing on perceptions and evaluations of the speaker and/or the message that he or she is conveying. While having some overlaps, particularly methodological, with the sociolinguistic study of language attitudes (Garrett, 2001; Giles and Billings, 2004; Giles and Rakić, 2014), this work on swearing has developed primarily within social psychology and communication studies.

3.0 Swearing and Perceptions of the Speaker

In psychological terms, social perception may be defined as “the process through which we seek to know and understand other people” (Baron and Branscombe, 2014: 81). Perception is an ongoing process, involving a series of interlinked components: attending to social cues (for example, appearance, language use, non-verbal behaviours); organising this information in light of existing knowledge; and thus, coming to an understanding of the person or group in question. A related process is attribution, whereby people seek to explain behaviours and events. For example, an individual’s behaviour may be interpreted by an observer as being the result of situational influences, or as a manifestation of an internal personality trait (Heider, 1958; see Malle and Korman, 2013). The attribution applied to the behaviour will, in turn, affect the perceiver’s overall impression of the individual. In this paper, a discursive approach will be adopted to conceptualise and explore perception and attribution (Wiggins and Potter, 2003; see 4.0 below).

As a social cue, swearing significantly affects hearers’ perceptions of speakers. In many social contexts, it is an unexpected activity and hence it invites specific interpretation on the part of listeners. Some researchers (Johnson and Lewis, 2010; Johnson, 2012) have examined this issue from the psychological perspective of Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT; Burgoon, 1993). EVT states that the way in which people process social information is shaped by their existing expectations of others’ behaviour. When expectations are violated (e.g. by invasion of personal space, failure to return a greeting), the recipient is compelled to cognitively appraise the behaviour and thus, to form a social evaluation of the speaker, which may be positive or negative. While EVT is not the theoretical framework guiding the present study, it is relevant to consider the role of expectations in relation to the present study data,
where the situation (televised awards ceremony) is one of institutional discourse, and therefore carries particular expectations about formality, participation rights, and role conventions (Thornborrow, 2014; see 7.0 below). Given the socio-pragmatic complexity of swearing, it is unsurprising that swearing expectations are derived from a range of variables (Johnson and Lewis, 2010). It is also unsurprising that research on swearing perception has produced mixed results. For present purposes, I have broadly categorised these findings into positive and negative evaluations.

Starting with positive perceptions, swearing has been shown to enhance speaker evaluations on some solidarity dimensions, including informality and humour. In certain cases, it may also increase persuasiveness of the message being delivered. Cavazza and Guidetti (2014) asked participants to read fictitious blogs by hypothetical political candidates and then form evaluations of the sources. The inclusion of swear words in the blogs increased perceptions of candidate informality and improved overall perceptions of the source. However, swearing was also found to reduce perceptions of message persuasiveness; and overall, there was no link between source evaluation and participants’ voting likelihood. In contrast to this latter point, Scherer and Sagarin (2006) found that, in judgements of pro-attitudinal speech (where speakers articulated an argument with which they agreed), participants deemed messages containing a mild swear word to be more persuasive than those without. Here, swearing also increased perceptions of speaker intensity (that is, the degree of affect, passion, enthusiasm and specificity that they displayed; see Hamilton et al. 1990), although perceptions of speaker credibility were not affected. Focusing directly on credibility, however, Rassin and van der Heijden (2005) showed that fictitious legal testimonies containing swear words were judged as more believable than those without. Interestingly, this finding was in contrast to another measure in the same study in which participants reported that they would find swear words a sign of deceit.

Responses to swearing have also been studied in the education setting. Generous et al. (2015) examined students’ retrospective accounts of instructor swearing in the classroom. The students identified a number of positive functions of swearing, including: gaining attention, elaborating/clarifying, accommodating/converging to students, and showing humour. Gaining attention and clarifying/elaborating were rated as the most appropriate uses, particularly when directed at course content. Thus, instructor swearing was perceived as communicatively competent when used to facilitate student learning. A further study by
Generous and Houser (2019), which examined swearing targets, perceived motivations, and emotional responses, also showed that specific instances of instructor swearing were associated with positive outcomes and perceptions of the instructor. The role of swearing in directing attention to messages, and simultaneously increasing approval, has also been examined in online settings. Kwon and Cho (2017) analysed the effects of swearing in a large body of user comments on news websites in South Korea. Based on site interactions, they concluded that swearing generally increases attention to comments, and also attracts approval from other users.

On the other hand, a number of studies have identified negative evaluations of swearing. These mostly centre on two dimensions: offensiveness and (in)competence. Applying an EVT framework (see above), Johnson and Lewis (2010) used a questionnaire-based methodology to investigate perceptions of swearing in a series of workplace situations, which manipulated the gender and hierarchical status of the speaker (supervisor vs. co-worker), as well as the strength of the swear word. A sample of 123 undergraduate students participated in the study. In line with EVT, perceptions were shaped by the degree of surprise and norm violation generated in the different scenarios presented. In general, the degree of surprise felt by participants correlated with perceptions of speaker incompetence. Johnson (2012) built upon this research by using a wider population sample (100 undergraduates as well as 378 participants from the US national population) and by including the variable of “violation valence”, that is, whether the norm violation itself was seen as positive or negative. A correlation was found between the violation valence and perceptions of speaker effectiveness. Johnson suggests, therefore, that “organizational members can be made aware that use of expletives may affect not only others’ perceptions of their messages but also of their character…or overall competence” (2012: 147-8). Perceptions of (in)competence associated with swearing have been identified in other workplace contexts. Paradise et al. (1980) used constructed recordings of a counselling interaction. In some recordings, swear words were used by the counsellor. Participants then answered a series of questions about their impressions. In all cases, the counsellors who swore during the interaction were rated as less competent in that participants self-reported as less likely to use their services or to recommend them to others. In a sporting context, Howell and Giuliano (2011) elicited participant responses to a fictitious speech given by a male basketball coach to his team, one version of which contained swearing. In general, the presence of swear words led to lower ratings of effectiveness. However, for male participants, this effect was
moderated by the gender of the (fictitious) target; for female participants, this effect was not noted.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, studies have also shown that swearing produces higher ratings of message/speaker offensiveness, although this can be mediated by social and contextual factors. DeFrank and Kahlbaugh (2019) used conversational dyadic vignettes in which the composition of the dyad (mixed vs. single gender), gender of speaker, and inclusion of swearing were all manipulated. Participants were asked to rate the speakers on a range of dimensions. In all cases, the inclusion of profanity resulted in lower impressions of the speaker and higher perceptions of offensiveness. Core evaluations included: higher anger, lower trustworthiness and lower intelligence. Overall, the study concluded that “profanity leads to poorer impression ratings, independent of the speaker’s gender” (2019: 136). Jacobi (2014) examined perceptions of offensiveness through a written vignette-based study in which participants judged swearing in a series of manipulated conditions, with key variables being the ethnicity and gender of the speaker and the type of profanity used. Results showed that perceptions of offensiveness were affected by an interaction between ethnicity and swear word type. White speakers using ethnic slurs were judged as more offensive than Black speakers using these words, but Black speakers were perceived as more offensive than White speakers when using other swear words. Thus, offensiveness judgements were affected by swearing, but other factors and interactions contributed to this main effect.

In a recent study of online reviews (yelp.com), Hair and Ozcan (2018) explored the effects of swearing/profanity on perceptions of reviews’ usefulness, as indicated in reactions to the reviews. This was followed by an experimental study which examined attribution and impressions of the speaker. It was demonstrated that swearing increased the perceived usefulness of positive, but not negative, reviews. Further, the inclusion of swearing in negative reviews reduced perceptions of user objectivity, while its inclusion in positive reviews increased perceptions of user credibility. Hence, both the valence of a review and attributions about the user’s reasons for swearing were shown to mediate perceptions of the review. Young (2004) also highlighted the importance of attribution in evaluating swearing, this time in the context of conflict interactions. In a questionnaire-based study, participants recalled a recent conflict event in which either they or an interactional partner had used swearing/profanity; they then responded to a series of measures exploring perceived
reasons for swearing, relational satisfaction, emotional reaction to the conflict and evaluations of the conflict outcome. A clear link was found between attributions for swearing (e.g. that it was being used to antagonise vs. to bond) and the overall conflict outcome (escalation vs. resolution). As noted by Young, this finding is in line with attribution theory in that “(t)he specific reasons people provide for why they believe someone engaged in a particular behaviour will affect their emotional responses and perceived outcomes of the interaction” (2004: 339).

4.0 Methodological Considerations: A Discursive Perspective

The above studies highlight the significance of swearing as a social cue for perception and speaker evaluation. In all cases, swearing had a discernible effect on the impressions formed about the speaker (or online poster) and/or the effectiveness of the message being conveyed. However, the findings are mixed and do not provide clear-cut conclusions about the evaluative consequences of swearing. As noted earlier, this is unsurprising given the complexity of swearing as a socio-pragmatic activity, which includes effects of speaker, context, social norms, and socio-cultural expectations. It should be noted that many of the cited studies explicitly address contextual complexity in their design and analysis (e.g. Johnson and Lewis, 2010; Howell and Giuliano, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Generous et al., 2015; Generous and Houser, 2019). In this paper, however, I want to raise another consideration relating to the methodology of most existing research and its relation to real-life contexts of swearing, perception, and attribution. With the exception of the analyses of online sources (Kwon and Cho, 2017; Hair and Ozcan, 2018), all of the studies have adopted an experimental and/or questionnaire-based research design, with many conducted in a laboratory setting. This has a number of methodological implications. First, the instances of swearing under evaluation are either constructed by the researchers (vignettes, fictitious examples, recordings) or based on the participants’ recall of instances from their own lives. As part of an experimental paradigm, there is also frequent manipulation of variables for the purposes of comparison or correlation. Finally, the data (evaluations, perceptions,

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1 These two studies used online data, although they did not analyse them from a discursive perspective, instead using measures such as user ratings, and number/type of responses to posts.
attributions) are directly elicited by the researchers, and usually take the form of responses to pre-constructed rating scales or response options.²

While experimental/survey design has a long tradition in swearing research and has offered valuable insights to the field, I propose that it has inherent limitations as a means of accessing perceptions and attributions of speaker swearing. In everyday life, people encounter and form impressions of swearing in diverse contexts and relationships; and they express these evaluations while pursuing interpersonal goals. In addition, they will often have existing “knowledge” of the speaker, which, along with cultural and socio-pragmatic expectations, will shape the attributions that they form about a specific instance of swearing. Therefore, I argue that it is necessary to examine swearing perceptions and attributions outside of the experimental setting. I adopt a discursive perspective, drawn largely from Discursive Psychology (DP) (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Potter, 2000; Wiggins, 2017). DP is centrally concerned with how social psychological processes are performed in discourse; for example, justifying, evaluating, accounting (see Edwards, 1997). These processes are seen as active constructions, rather than reflections of internal mental states (as they might be conceptualised in questionnaire-based investigations). Importantly, social entities and category meanings are themselves constructed through language and different versions may emerge in different settings. DP further examines the meaning structures and ideologies through which people interpret and make sense of the world. Thus, Wiggins and Potter (2003: 513) state that discursive approaches “study evaluative expressions as part of varied social practices, considering what such expressions are doing rather than their relationship to attitudinal objects or other putative mental entities”.

It is from this general perspective that I aim to address swearing perception/evaluation. However, this poses a methodological challenge in itself. Any such analysis requires firstly an actual instance of swearing, and secondly, explicit discourse data in which listeners respond to this; and to access these features in purely naturalistic data, without researcher intervention, would require a high level of serendipity. Therefore, I have chosen to analyse a body of online news comments that respond directly to an instance of celebrity swearing.

² As an additional point, it should be noted that the research participants were often undergraduate students; this feature is, of course, common to many forms of psychological/social research.
While these are written, rather than spoken, data, and generally do not provide an interactional context, they fulfil the criteria of: (a) directly addressing the core research issue of how swearing affects speaker perception; (b) responding to an actual instance of swearing, rather than constructed examples; (c) being freely expressed, rather than elicited by a researcher; and (d) using the participants’ own category meanings, rather than pre-constructed scales.

5.0 The Present Study: Context and Data

The analysis focuses on responses to one high-profile instance of celebrity swearing from UK television. This occurred at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) annual awards ceremony (BAFTA Film Awards). BAFTA awards are prominent events, which are televised and transmitted in delayed edition by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC). On 8 February 2015, the ceremony was hosted by Stephen Fry, a well-known English comedian, presenter, actor and writer. During the event, there were two instances of swearing by Fry. Near the start of the show, he stated, “It’s pissing down with stars”, and later, when introducing the presenter of an award, he stated, “It’s Tom fucking Cruise!” As in many cases of swearing in broadcast media (see Kaye and Sapolsky, 2009; Bednarek, 2019), these expressions drew complaints from viewers. The BBC issued a statement in response in which they noted, among other things, that the show had taken place after the watershed, and that warnings had been issued to viewers at the start of the programme. They further accepted that some viewers would disagree with this approach and stated that their feedback had been noted by the BBC.

Interestingly the statement also makes reference to Fry’s “irreverence and style”, which the BBC claimed, was “extremely well-known to viewers”. To this extent, they might be seen as implicitly excusing the incident and/or defending themselves against the viewer response on the bases that: (a) swearing is part of Fry’s style; and (b) it might not have come as a surprise to viewers given widespread public knowledge of Fry’s presenting style. This point is of key relevance to the present study. One of the central issues that I will explore is how existing “knowledge” of the speaker is drawn upon to explain his swearing; and how this

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3 See full response at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/complaint/BAFTA080215/
knowledge and attribution contribute to overall evaluations of both the behaviour and the speaker himself. With this in mind, it is useful to briefly outline some facts about Stephen Fry, which would be well-known to the UK online commenters and thus form the context for their perception\textsuperscript{4}. As already noted, Fry is a well-known English personality. He has been nominated for and/or has won many honours and awards, including the Screen Actors Guild Award (Actor, 2002) and the UK National Television Awards (Special Recognition, 2010). He is often perceived as intellectual and/or upper-class and is recognisably politically left-wing. A long-standing and prominent advocate of LGBT issues, in 2015, he married his husband, Elliot Spencer. Fry was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at the age of 37. He has spoken publicly about mental health issues and in 2006, made a television documentary about his own experiences.

The data comprise online reader comments in response to reports of the BAFTA ceremony (and specifically the swearing component) in three national UK newspapers between 10-11 February 2015. Following a general search of newspaper websites from the time period, the newspapers in question were selected primarily on the availability of online comments for a relevant article, rather than for any strategic research design features. Nonetheless, they provide a reasonably diverse representation of news perspectives and readership. The Daily Mail is politically right-wing; the Guardian is left-wing; and the Independent is positioned as politically neutral. The number of comments for analysis varied considerably by newspaper. The Independent article had 35 comments, the Guardian had 94, and the Daily Mail had by far the largest number with 1768. For the purposes of analysis, I selected the 200 most popular comments from the Daily Mail article, as indicated by the number of likes that they had received from other readers\textsuperscript{5}. It should be noted that many of these “main” comments were followed by replies, thereby forming threads of multiple comments. While it may be assumed that the content of such comments was influenced by others in the thread(s), it was beyond the scope of this paper to examine this aspect. It was also unnecessary for present

\textsuperscript{4} See sources at: http://www.stephenfry.com/
https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000410/bio

\textsuperscript{5} This was a somewhat arbitrary cut-off number, but it appeared to provide a sufficient body of data for analysis while not dramatically overshadowing the numbers of comments drawn from the other two websites.
research purposes, since the aim of the paper was not to produce overall findings about the effects of swearing per se, but rather to explore how swearing perceptions are discursively formulated in a non-experimental setting. Hence, each comment was analysed separately, and no analytic distinction was drawn between those that occurred in isolation versus those that occurred as part of a thread (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Data sources for analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper website</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No. of comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>10/02/15</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td>10/02/15</td>
<td>1758 (most popular 200 used)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Independent</td>
<td>11/02/15</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comments and their reply threads were downloaded and saved as one dataset. The first stage of the analysis was to identify and extrapolate all comments that explicitly referred to perceptions of Stephen Fry himself in light of the swearing incident; and/or those that attributed reasons for his swearing. Thus, comments and threads discussing swearing itself were excluded from the analysis, as were general comments about Fry that were not demonstrably linked to the swearing event. This stage of the process inevitably involved a degree of researcher subjectivity with respect to inclusion/exclusion of comments. At the end of this process, the extrapolated dataset comprised approximately 130 comments.

This second dataset was then analysed thematically to produce a comprehensive set of meanings and judgements. The core analytic task was to examine: the explanatory and descriptive categories being applied by the commenters (henceforth, “participants”); how these categories were negotiated to produce specific distinctions and meanings; how they were used to achieve particular descriptions of Stephen Fry (henceforth, alternately, “the speaker”); and how the overall process drew upon existing representations of Fry himself as well as wider ideologies of swearing. For ease of reference, the analytic unit is referred to as
a “theme”. However, it should be noted that from a discursive perspective, these are not static features or meanings which can be drawn from the data in a straightforward way; rather, they are socially available categories, repertoires and meaning frameworks that are actively used by speakers (here, participants) to construct and interpret the phenomena in question (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins and Potter, 2003; Wiggins, 2017).

Seen in this way, the themes identified here are interlinked and often overlapping. In line with DP principles, when conducting the analysis, I aimed to identify what participants were doing with their descriptions; for example, what kind of descriptions they were attempting to achieve, how they were presenting their personal stance, and what type of explanations they were offering. While this approach generally led to one main thematic designation for each of the comments, the themes were not mutually exclusive, and some comments fell into more than one designation. Where this happened, the comment was simply included under each of the relevant themes. Basic frequencies for each theme are presented in the next section (Table 2). Given the disparity in datasets drawn from each website, it is unsurprising that the Daily Mail provides by far the highest frequencies for almost all of the themes. While this feature of the dataset may be expected to have shaped the content of the analysis (see 7.0), it does not, in itself, provide a problem for the study design, since the aim was not to produce generalisable or verifiable findings about swearing perceptions, or indeed about media representations/uses. Therefore, thematic frequency is not, in itself, a central feature of the analysis and the response patterns were not directly compared across the three websites.

6.0 Analysis

The analysis examines the perceptual judgements and attributions made by the participants, using the principles outlined in 5.0. It is organised under a number of themes, which reflect broader swearing ideologies, specifically: intelligence; social class; offensiveness and (dis)respect; age and maturity; humour and relevance to youth; and control of behaviour. It

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6 Two further discernible themes, which could feasibly have been analysed in their own right were: ‘Boring and tedious’ and ‘Embarrassing’. However, these themes, which indexed personal reactions by the participants, were invariably intertwined with one or more of the main themes; most notably, ‘Arrogant and self-indulgent’ and/or ‘Past it: Time to retire’. As such, they have been subsumed with the analysis of the other themes. Finally, there were two themes that indicated more positive perceptions of the speaker. Each of these occurred only once; rather than being included in the main analysis, these are referenced in section 7.0.
is worth noting at the outset that the themes identified here may be seen alternately as evaluative categories that are applied by the participants; and as meaning frameworks, through which the participants perceive, evaluate and “make sense” of to the speaker and the event in question. In the analysis, all of these terms/concepts will be used to describe different aspects of the themes and their application.

An overview of themes is provided in Table 2. Each one will be discussed separately. Sample comments are supplied for each, with the relevant newspaper websites indicated for reference.7

Table 2: Thematic analysis of comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Guardian</th>
<th>Daily Mail</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intelligence:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does he need to swear?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence vs. commonsense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupid, buffoon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social class:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privileged: He gets away with it</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>A leftie and a luvvie</td>
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<td><strong>Age and maturity:</strong></td>
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7 In the sample comments, I have tried to provide a representative selection of how the theme was negotiated; however, there is no link between number of sample comments and prevalence of the theme in the data.
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Immature: Needs to grow up</th>
<th>Past it: Time to retire</th>
<th>Trying to be funny/cool</th>
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6.1 Intelligence

Swearing is often associated, at least in popular ideology, with lower levels of intelligence and/or education (see McEnery and Xiao, 2004; Jay and Jay, 2015). This ideology is evident in many participant responses. However, rather than having a straightforward application, the category is negotiated in specific ways.

6.1.1 Why does he need to swear?

Starting from the assumption that Fry is intelligent, this representation questions the need for swearing and/or decries the behaviour.

Comment 1
At the end of the day it is still obscene language, which is continually used by people of low intellect; and Stephen Fry (with his intelligence) ought to be one of the very last who should feel the need to resort to it, even for shock effect, which now only depends upon particular place and circumstances. (G)

Comment 2
He’s an intelligent and articulate man - so why was he not able to use any of the suitable words in his wide vocabulary without resorting to the gutter? Strong language has its use but I think it should only be used as a last resort in place of violence. He just belittled himself - and this comes from someone who, until now, has respected the man. (DM)

Comment 3
considering who he is I am shocked why he sunk to this level, I have always thought that people who have to use foul language have a very low vocabulary!!! (DM)

Comment 4
It is a pity that someone as articulate and witty as Stephen Fry found that these attributes failed him and that he had to swear in an attempt to improve his performance and to seek to achieve a cheap joke. (…) resorting to the use of swearing was unnecessary and beneath both him and his normal sparkling humour. (G)

In comments 1-4, the participants juxtapose the common sense view that swearing reflects low intelligence and/or a poverty of vocabulary (see Jay and Jay, 2015) with the idea that Fry is an intelligent, witty and articulate man, who possesses a “wide vocabulary”. Thus, swearing in this case does not lead to a perception of lower intelligence, but rather raises questions about Fry’s motivations for swearing, and specifically, why somebody who does not “need” to swear would do so. Notably, as part of its association with low intellect, swearing is presented here as a degrading behaviour, often within a metaphorical frame of height/level. Swearing is the language of “the gutter” and Fry himself, particularly as an intelligent/articulate man, is seen as “sinking” and “belittling” himself by using language which is (or ought to be) “beneath him”. This repertoire has two main effects: to lower the participants’ overall impression of the speaker (comments 2 and 3); and to prompt them to seek explanations for his behaviour, for example, to shock or appear funny (comments 1 and 4; see further, 6.4-6.5 below).

6.1.2 Intelligence vs. common sense
This representation involves negotiation of the category meaning of intelligence before its application as an evaluative dimension.

Comment 5
Stephen Fry, whilst acknowledged to be super intelligent, has no common sense. His ill timed and ill judged judgments, let alone actions, are earning him no support or friends. He has joined Jonathan Ross in agreed switch off in this house… (DM)

Comment 6
The man (?) has lost it. He may be intelligent but he acts like an idiot and talks like he owns the world…. (DM)

Comment 7
For a clever man, he does make a fool of himself quite regularly. (DM)

In comments 5-7, a distinction is drawn between intelligence and having “common sense” or knowledge of how to behave appropriately. Fry is again explicitly acknowledged to be intelligent and thus, his swearing does not result in perceptions of lower intelligence per se. However, his swearing can be seen to invite negative evaluations of his common sense and his ability to judge situations. Within this negotiated category, it is possible for him to be perceived simultaneously as intelligent/clever and as an “idiot” (comment 6), who makes a fool of himself (comment 7) and exercises poor judgement about his actions (comment 5). The participants’ negative evaluations on this dimension can, further, be seen to affect their overall impressions of Fry and/or their own behaviours towards him (comments 5 and 6).

6.1.3 Stupid, buffoon
Comment 8
How on earth did this foul mouthed idiot ever get to host the Baftas? (DM)

Comment 9
Foolish old man. (DM)

Comment 10
Total prat. We have boycotted him from our house, just like all the others like him (…) (DM)

Comment 11
He’s a first class idiot, what else could you expect from this buffoon (DM)

The representations in comments 8-11 draw upon a standard ideology which links swearing with a lack of intelligence (and/or education; see above). A range of derogatory vocabulary is used to form attributions of stupidity (“idiot”, “foolish”, “prat”, “buffoon”). This set of representations overlaps with the idea (6.1.2), that the speaker lacks common sense, rather
than intelligence. However, here, the attribution of stupidity is formed in a more straightforward manner, with no overt negotiation of the intelligence category. That is, Fry’s swearing is seen as expressing or reflecting a personality characteristic of stupidity. However, it is notable that even in this context, the attribution is formulated in a particular way, with specific reference to the speaker. For example, other possible expressions denoting lack of intelligence, which were not used in the sample, include: “dim”, “slow”, “unwise”, “obtuse” (among others). Instead, the expressions used here all have connotations of general incompetence, clownishness and lack of judgement. While swearing has been shown in other studies to reduce perceptions of competence (Paradise et al., 1980; Johnson and Lewis, 2010; Johnson, 2012), this particular formulation also evokes a propensity to openly display his lack of judgement to others, perhaps for intended comical effect (as connoted in the references to “prat” and “buffoon”). This forms part of a wider perception of Fry’s character and personality, further reflected in the next section on social class.

6.2 Social class

Swearing is conventionally associated with vernacular forms of speech and is typically taken to index lower position or socioeconomic status (Jay, 2009; Murphy, 2010; Stapleton, 2010). While this assumption is not always borne out in empirical research, the perceptual link between swearing and lower social status is strong. In the present analysis, however, the category meaning is again negotiated to form nuanced understandings of Fry’s swearing.

6.2.1 Privileged: He gets away with it

Comment 12

Swearing while associated with building sites is actually predominately done in public life by people who have power and/or money and like to show it off. You won’t find a Sainsbury’s minimum wage checkout person swearing at you, and if you try and speak to staff in the jobcentre like that, you'll be swiftly taken off the premises. (G)

In comment 12, the attribution that might be expected – i.e. that Fry’s swearing reduces his status in the eyes of the listener is reversed. Here, he is seen to swear specifically because of his higher status and privilege, or because he can get away with it. The participant implicitly links Fry’s status to a “right” to swear, which is denied to other lower status groupings, for example, job seekers and minimum wage workers, who, it is suggested,
experience more constraints on their behaviour. Other comments in this vein (not reported here) reference Fry's public-school education\(^8\) and his celebrity status, clearly evoking a discourse of privilege in which he is constructed as being (or seeing himself to be) exempt from normal standards of politeness. This construction is closely related to the next theme.

6.2.2 Arrogant and self-indulgent

Comment 13
Yes, an arrogant pompous know-it-all who hasn't the sense to keep his mouth shut. Seems to think that being a celeb makes him right about everything. (DM)

Comment 14
Think he needs to remember that the awards were not about him, he was just the self-indulgent host. (DM)

Comment 15
Stephen Fry is getting too big for his boots. Once upon a time he was a clever, witty and largely self-effacing person. Nowadays he wants to push himself centre-stage and seems determined to ram his personality down people's throats. (DM)

In comments 13-15, the participants attribute Fry's swearing to internal (rather than situational) factors, specifically, personality characteristics and personal wishes. Thus, he is perceived as arrogant, pompous, and self-indulgent (comments 13 and 14); and as motivated by self-promotion and attention-seeking (comment 15). There is also the clear implication that he is deluded about his own importance; evident in the claim that he mistakenly perceives the award ceremony as being “about him” (comment 14) and in the characterisation that he is “too big for his boots” (comment 15). While being focally about Fry himself, this set of constructions links swearing with a position of status and privilege from which particular personality characteristics and motivations derive. Beyond the notion of socio-economic class, which pervades many of the comments on this theme, Fry is also seen as privileged by virtue of his celebrity status. This idea is made explicit in comment 13, although it is notable that here, it is framed as a perception by Fry himself, rather than a

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\(^8\) In the UK, public schools are private and fee-paying and are generally associated with wealth and privilege.
statement of reality. Moreover, in using the phrase “seems to think”, the participant again implies that Fry is deluded on this point, rather than perceiving the situation accurately.

6.2.3 A leftie and a luvvie

Comment 16

(...) He swore endlessly and will not be admonished as he is one of the BBC luvvies. It was unnecessary and totally inappropriate. (DM)

Comment 17

Yet another blunder by the BBC bosses who seem to specialise in giving these obnoxious “luvvies” a platform (literally)! Why do we have to put up with and pay for these self obsessed, egocentric and mostly foul mouthed idiots? Of course, they are left wing, just like the BBC! (DM)

Comment 18

What sticks a little in the craw is that there are certain groups of people that the BBC doesn’t mind offending and others that they do not dare offend. TV funnyman Stephen Fry’s "irreverent" schtick would be a bit more tolerable if he wasn't so careful about sticking with what is politically correct... (G)

In this set of comments, another category of privilege is constructed, which is linked to representations of the BBC itself. Fry’s swearing is explained in terms of two related sources of status. Firstly, he is seen as a member of the BBC elite in-group; specifically, as a “luvvie” (comments 16 and 17). This is a term applied in colloquial British English to a performer who is especially effusive or affected (Oxford English Dictionary). As used here, it underlines a position of privilege and acceptance within the BBC, while also presenting Fry as arrogant and attention-seeking (see 6.2.2). The comments also reference the idea of an establishment ideology, or accepted political position, within the BBC, which is characterised as left-wing (comment 17) and politically correct (comment 18). It is further claimed that Fry

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9 British colloquial (humorous or mildly derogatory).
An actor or actress, esp. one who is considered particularly effusive or affected; (hence) anyone actively involved with entertainment or the arts. https://www.oed.com/
is personally aligned to this ideology; and for this reason, he will not be censured for his behaviour. In this set of comments, Fry is again constructed as having a latitude to swear by virtue of his privileged position, both as a “luvvie”/member of the BBC’s inner circle, and as somebody who adheres to the prevailing political views of the BBC establishment. Hence, swearing is again perceived as the preserve of those with status and privilege, with attendant characterisations of arrogance, egocentrism and self-indulgence.

6.3 Offensive and disrespectful

This theme relates to the swearing behaviour itself and its interpersonal effects as enacted by Fry. A direct association is drawn between swearing and offensiveness or interpersonal insult.

Comment 19
Obnoxious, plain and simple (...) (DM)

Comment 20
Obnoxious and offensive coupled with 100% proof smugness. (DM)

Comment 21
(...) it is one thing to swear, but he was insulting another actor personally and not in jest. This is not acceptable behaviour is it? (...) (I)

Comment 22
Stephen Fry should know better, he needs to look back at playing Jeeves and relearn manners. (DM)

As discussed in 1.0, swearing has traditionally been seen as an act of verbal aggression, the use of which is offensive. While many studies have, conversely, identified affiliative and/or face-saving functions (e.g. Daly et al., 2004; Stapleton, 2003, 2010; Dynel, 2012), in this set of comments there is a straightforward perception that Fry’s swearing is offensive and unacceptable. In comments 19 and 20, the descriptor “obnoxious” is used. Although it is not clear whether this is being applied to the swearing behaviour or to Fry himself, the most likely reading, particularly in light of the general comment thread/discursive context, is that it refers
to both possible targets. Hence, the perceptual effect of the behaviour extends to the speaker, who is judged as behaving in an offensive way. As in previous examples, however, the category is applied in a specific way to the speaker, rather than being judged in isolation. Thus, comment 20 links the obnoxious behaviour with “smugness”, thereby echoing the representations of Fry, discussed in 6.2. There is also, in comment 21, the attribution that Fry intended to insult another individual, again, directly applying the conventional understanding of swearing as verbal aggression. Finally, the idea of impoliteness is addressed in comment 22, in the (semi-facetious) suggestion that Fry should refer to one of his famous TV roles as the butler Jeeves in order to “relearn manners”. In this case, swearing is framed as breaching conventional standards of politeness, etiquette, or “manners”, rather than being directly aggressive or insulting. As in 6.1.1, it is claimed that Fry (with his background/experience) “should know better”; and indeed, that he should relearn the manners that he presumably displayed at some point in the past (even if only in a fictional context).

6.4 Age and maturity

Although used by speakers of all ages, swearing is often associated with adolescence and young adulthood. In empirical studies, this association is evident in usage patterns (McEnery & Xiao 2004; Schweinberger 2018) and also in its use as a resource for adolescent identity construction (Stenström, 2017). In the present data, the category of age and/or maturity is evoked on a number of occasions to evaluate Fry’s swearing. Thematically, there are two forms of application.

6.4.1 Immature: Needs to grow up

Comment 23
Stephen Fry needs to grow up! (…) His humour is that of fourteen year olds, smutty and pathetic. (DM)

Comment 24
Fry has never grown up, he is just an obnoxious show-off (…). (DM)
The fact that he has hosted the awards for a few years surely does not give him carte
blanch to insult and give an innuendo riddled performance reminiscent of the end of the pier
humour of the late 1900's. It is about time he grew up. (DM)

These comments all index swearing as an activity of youth/adolescence, with early
adolescence specifically mentioned in comment 23. However, rather than generating a
straightforward perception of youth (or even a youthful disposition), Fry’s swearing instead
produces an ascription of immaturity. The participants’ knowledge that he does not fit into the
relevant age category means that his swearing is here marked as age-inappropriate and thus
as an indicator of a juvenile disposition. Moreover, there is again the attribution that the
behaviour is attention-seeking (comment 24) and/or motivated by the speaker’s assumption
that he does not need to follow normal rules and constraints (comment 25).

6.4.2 Past it: Time to retire
Comment 26
(…) The forced swearing was painful, it's definitely time for him to take a year or two out
of the limelight he so desperately craves! (G)

Comment 27
I think Mr Fry is past his "use by" date. He's been lauded for so long by the glitterati, that
he believes he truly is wonderful. He's not. (DM)

The idea that Fry needs to retire, as exemplified in comments 26 and 27, recurred in the
data. Thus, rather than evoking associations with youth, this swearing incident can be seen
to invite exactly the opposite ascription; namely that the speaker is waning, and no longer
able to fulfil his role as a presenter/public figure. In comment 26, he is advised to take some
time away from public life, while in comment 26, he is explicitly described as “past his ‘use
by’ date”. Both comments also implicitly reference a reduced level of competence. This latter
perception has, of course, been found in experimental studies of swearing perception (see
3.0, 6.1.3), but here, interestingly, it is located within a repertoire of age and/or celebrity
duration, suggesting that the speaker was once able to fulfil his role competently, but is no
longer able to do so. Again, this construction shows how perceptions of swearing are
formulated in light of existing representations and views of the speaker. It is notable that both
of the comments above also reference notions of attention-seeking (comment 26) and/or celebrity-endowed privilege (comment 27).

6.5 Trying to be funny/cool

While on the face of it, the ideas of immaturity (6.4.1) and decline (6.4.2), above, are contradictory, they both arguably evoke a broader meaning framework in which the speaker is attempting – but failing – to be relevant to a younger audience. This construction emerged as a discrete theme in the data and, as such, will be discussed in this section.

Comment 28
(….) I really do not have an issue with Fry as an actor nor as a ‘personality’ but this was not his shining hour. It was a bit like an older teacher or close adult trying to be up with the youngsters: the presenting equivalent of dad-dancing. (G)

Comment 29
(…) getting down with the young ones so to speak, it kind of backfired ! (DM)

Comment 30
So were Stephen Fry's announcements really that tired, or was it the audience suffering from the lateness of the hour; and needing to be awakened to the fact that he isn't really an intellectual, but just one of the lads after all? (G)

Comments 28-30 are direct attributions for swearing. That is, they ascribe a motive to the speaker to explain his behaviour; namely, that he is attempting to create a youthful or modern persona. A number of features may be noted about this construction. First, swearing is clearly presented as something that can index youth (comments 28 and 29) and/or vernacular culture (comment 30). However, Fry’s use of swearing is perceived as contrived or inauthentic in this regard; he is “trying to be up with the youngsters” (comment 28), “getting down with the young ones, so to speak” (comment 29), and tying to present himself as being “just one of the lads, after all” (comment 30) (emphases added). Again, these perceptions are formulated with reference to existing shared representations of the speaker. The latter include his age (comments 28-29) and his widely acknowledged intellect (comment 30), both of which may be juxtaposed with a contemporary and/or laddish
person. Ultimately, the behaviour is seen as unsuccessful and, indeed, as something to be disparaged and derided: it “backfired”, was “not his shining hour”, and was “the equivalent of dad-dancing”. This construction again shows Fry’s swearing to invite negative perceptions of the speaker, specifically in light of his perceived motives and his existing personal features.

6.6 Out of control

Comment 31
He has lost the plot. (DM)

Comment 32
(...) Fry was clearly out of control during the BAFTAS and I did feel badly for him as it IS a mental illness and not by choice. (DM)

Comment 33
Fry seems to be riding on some sort of manic high. This will not end well. (DM)

Comment 34
By his own admission, Stephen Fry snorts the white stuff. Maybe he had "indulged" prior to the event. Who knows. (I)

The final theme also explains Fry’s swearing via a direct attribution: namely, that he has lost control of his actions. This construction invokes, indirectly, the common evaluation of swearing as impolite, aggressive or offensive (see 1.0). Because, as such, its use is circumscribed to particular contexts (Stapleton, 2010), a speaker who swears indiscriminately may be seen as transgressing standards of acceptable behaviour. This idea is also evident in 6.2 and 6.3 above, where Fry is perceived as wilfully breaching behavioural conventions due to personal arrogance and/or a desire to offend others. In contrast, in this set of comments, he is constructed as being unable to curtail this behaviour. To this end, two specific explanations are offered. The first is mental instability: that is, he has “lost the plot” (comment 31); is “out of control” (comment 32); or “riding…a manic high” (comment 33). The second is the suggestion that he might have consumed drugs prior to the awards show (comment 34). Both explanations use publicly available information about Fry’s past in order to contextualise and explain his swearing within an overall framework of unacceptable
behaviour. Interestingly, and in contrast to the other thematic constructions, this set of comments arguably excuse the swearing, in that Fry is perceived as not fully responsible for his actions. Indeed, one participant directly expresses sympathy for him on the basis that his actions indicate a mental illness that is not of his choosing (comment 32).

7.0 Discussion

This section will firstly explore some methodological and theoretical considerations relevant to the findings of the study. The findings themselves will then be discussed in light of existing studies on perceptions of swearing.

Although the study did not set out to produce findings about the effects of swearing per se, it is worth noting that almost all of the comments presented a negative impression of the speaker. Ostensibly, this might be taken to support studies which report negative perceptual outcomes for swearing (e.g. Jacobi, 2014; DeFrank and Kahlbaugh, 2019). However, it is very possible that the finding in this study is a methodological artefact based on the data sources and the selection process. As explained in 5.0, by far the greatest number of comments were found on the website of the Daily Mail, which has a conservative political stance and whose readers might be expected not only to generally disapprove of swearing, but also (and as demonstrated in many of the comments above), to oppose figures and causes that they perceive as liberal or politically correct. In addition, because only the most popular 200 comments were selected from this website, many other comments were not analysed. It is very likely that some of these others expressed positive impressions of the speaker, in line with other findings on swearing perception (e.g. Cavazza and Guidetti, 2014; Generous et al., 2015; Generous and Houser, 2019), but that these more positive comments did not find favour with the main readership on the website.

A few further points should be noted here. Firstly, there was some favourable discussion of swearing itself on the Independent website, although these comments were excluded from the analysis as they did not explicitly refer to either Fry himself or to explanations for the swearing incident and thus could not be taken to comprise perceptions of the speaker or attributions for his behaviour. There were also, within threads, some challenging responses to the negative evaluations being offered. For example, in response to Comment 11, another participant stated: “Erm. Well he isn't actually. He's an extremely intelligent man who
you don’t happen to like”. Comment 18 was also challenged by another participant: “So your saying that Fry and the BBC target certain groups to offend. Seriously? What groups and please give examples.” These (and other) challenges, however, did not make definitive statements in their own right, and thus could not be included in the analysis. They typically did not receive a response from the participant who had posted the original negative evaluation. Finally, there were two separate comments which can be categorised as positive perceptions of Fry’s swearing. Each of these occurred only once (on the Guardian website) and suggested that Fry’s swearing showed, respectively, that he was “his own man” (or independent minded) and that he was “normal” (rather than “perfect” or a “prig”). As these represented single instances, they have not been included in the main themes that formed clusters in the analysis. However, it is entirely possible that analysis of the less popular comments on the Daily Mail website would have revealed further occurrences.

The strength and breadth of negative evaluation may also be related to the context in which the swearing took place. EVT would suggest that because swearing is not commonly associated with the hosting of high profile, televised awards shows, its use in this context is likely to trigger negative evaluations by listeners (see Johnson and Lewis, 2010). The issue, however, is complicated by the fact that, as noted in the BBC response to viewer complaints, Stephen Fry, personally, is known to have a generally irreverent style of presenting, which has included other instances of public swearing. As noted in 3.0, from a sociolinguistic/pragmatic perspective, the context under analysis is one of institutional (media) discourse, which places greater emphasis on role expectations and participant structures and constraints, than does non-institutional or everyday discourse (see Scannell, 1996; Tolson, 2006; Thornborrow, 2014). In such a context, the “key” of the event (Goffman, 1974), which provides the set of conventions around which it is framed, will shape expectations and interpretations of the host’s behaviour. Therefore, even though Fry has been known to swear publicly in the past, this behaviour was clearly deemed by most participants to be inappropriate within the institutional frame of the televised event. It may also be argued that this judgement escalated participants’ views of the host himself and his behaviour, and played at least some part in generating the widespread negative evaluations that were found across all three websites.

The main part of the analysis considered in detail the themes of the participants’ evaluations and perceptions. From a socio-pragmatic perspective, the issue of intention vs. character is
worth noting at this point. Sometimes the participants make a direct evaluation of the behaviour (e.g. it was offensive) and sometimes of the speaker himself (e.g. he is stupid or rude). Moreover, when directly evaluating his behaviour, they sometimes ascribe an intention (e.g. he was trying to be funny) and on other occasions, they attribute his actions to unintentionality (i.e. that he was out of control). While formulation of intention plays a key part in the meaning derived from pragmatic acts (see Haugh and Jaszczolt, 2012), and is something that may be pursued in future research, this aspect has not been foregrounded in the present study, since the speaker perception and behavioural attribution were generally too closely intertwined to be usefully separated for present analytic purposes.

Moving to the empirical findings, the analysis shows some parallels with the findings of experimental studies, particularly regarding the core dimensions of offensiveness and competence identified in EVT studies (Johnson and Lewis, 2010; Johnson, 2012). In line with these studies, Fry's swearing was perceived as offensive (6.3; see also Jacobi, 2014; DeFrank and Kahlbaugh, 2019); a perception that was interpreted in light of other ascribed traits of smugness and arrogance. Also reflecting earlier studies (e.g. Paradise et al., 1980; Johnson and Lewis, 2010), the participants linked Fry's swearing to reduced levels of competence, either in a general sense (6.1.3) or more specifically in relation to his ability to fulfil his role as TV presenter/host (6.4.2). Once again, their views here were framed with reference to other ascriptions and categories, including ostentatiousness/lack of judgement (e.g. “buffoon”, “foolish”, “show off”) and increasing age (“past his ‘use by’ date”).

In their evaluations, the participants also frequently applied social categories/features to the speaker, most notably: intelligence; social class; and age. All three of these categories have been the focus of academic research on swearing (see Jay, 2009; Stapleton, 2010; Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2017); and just as importantly, they inform relevant folklinguistic and public beliefs (see Jay and Jay, 2015; Byrne 2017). Broadly speaking, swearing is associated in the popular imagination with lower intelligence, lower social class, and younger age groups. Thus, while academic studies provide a more nuanced picture of actual usage patterns, people may be expected to form socio-pragmatic judgements about swearing in light of these categories. The results of experimental studies also show that participants are attuned to such expectations, particularly in forming impressions related to status, class, occupational position and ability/competence (e.g. Johnson and Lewis, 2012; DeFrank and
Kahlbaugh, 2019). In the present study, however, the categories are not applied in a straightforward manner.

While clearly central to the participants' perceptions, the social categories are discursively formulated to produce particular interpretations, and are also bound up with both existing knowledge of the speaker and/or other attributions about his personality and his behaviour. In addition, the contextual expectations attendant on institutional/media discourse are apparent (sometimes implicitly referenced) in the participants’ evaluations. Thus, when applying the category of intelligence (6.1), the participants do not form the impression that Fry’s swearing means he is less intelligent per se, but rather start from the knowledge that he possesses a high intellect (and wide vocabulary) and then use this knowledge to form a series of other attributions, including attempting to find an explanation for why somebody in his position would swear. Similarly, his swearing is not taken as indicating low social status (6.2) or youth (6.4) but is rather interpreted in light of the knowledge that he occupies a privileged social class and is of a mature age group, respectively. Again, both premises form the basis of the subsequent attributions and inferences regarding his behaviour. His social status is linked to the notion of privilege and arrogance, while his age is invoked both as a reason for his lack of competence (evidenced in his swearing) and also as a motivation to appear more youthful than he actually is. Moreover, in this process, the categories themselves are negotiated and refined to produce context-specific meanings. Several category distinctions are drawn in relation to intelligence: most notably, there is an explicit distinction between intellect vs. common sense (6.1.2), as well as a particular version of stupidity/buffoonery (6.1.3) which is more clearly based on notions of clownishness and exhibitionism than on an “actual” lack of intelligence. Social class is also formulated in specific ways. Rather than simply representing status, it is presented variously as: general privilege and entitlement (6.2.1); enabling arrogant and self-indulgent traits/behaviours (6.2.2); and alignment with a liberal and celebrity elite (6.2.3). Finally, age is reconfigured in terms of maturity and age-appropriate behaviour (6.4.1) on the one hand, and as a waning of ability/judgement on the other (6.4.2).

In seeking explanations for Fry’s swearing, the participants produced some attributions that were clearly specific to this context and to his personal biography. For example, in 6.5, it is claimed that he was trying, but failing, to appear modern/relevant. This attribution would not be immediately identified or included in standard studies of swearing perception, or indeed,
of swearing motivations, since it relies on indexical meanings in this context (Christie, 2013). These, in turn, derive from other ascriptions about Fry’s age and personality, as well as the nature of the event. Taken together, these provide a meaning for swearing itself as a socio-pragmatic act. Another contextually specific meaning was evident in 6.6 where swearing was taken to indicate a loss of control. Of course, swearing is often associated with emotional catharsis or release (Jay 2009; Stephens et al., 2009; Dewaele, 2010; Stapleton, 2010), which implicitly signal relinquished control of one’s behaviour. However, a distinctive meaning is being evoked here. Fry is constructed as being unable to curtail his behaviour, not because of heightened emotion per se, but because of two specific issues in his biography: namely, his history of manic-depression and of past drug consumption, both of which are perceived as currently relevant. Hence, while “loss of control” is not, in itself, a novel attribution for swearing, the specific meanings generated here would not typically be included in standard studies, since they again, rely on current contextual indices.

8.0 Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined swearing perceptions and attributions in a discursive context that approximates to a “real life” setting. The aim was to consider how such processes are discursively constituted outside of the experimental setting which has characterised most existing research. The analysis focused on a body of online comments about a specific instance of celebrity swearing. In line with a DP perspective, a number of methodological imperatives were addressed. Firstly, this was an actual instance of swearing, rather than a constructed example or a recording produced for the purposes of study. Further, the comments were freely expressed by the participants, rather than being elicited by a researcher. Finally, rather than using pre-constructed scales and ratings, these perceptions/attributions were formulated discursively, using the participants’ own categories and explanatory frameworks. In as far as possible, then, swearing perception was studied in a naturalistic setting, where the data were generated spontaneously by the participants in the context of their own impressions, meanings, and concerns. Of course, online asynchronous contributions cannot be fully equated with the interactional settings in which perceptions are routinely formulated and expressed. However, given the methodological challenges inherent in accessing naturalistic perceptions of swearing (see 5.0), they represent a viable textual alternative. Crucially, the dataset allows us to observe the role of socio-pragmatic
expectations and cultural knowledge of the speaker, which may be expected to inform everyday perceptual processes.

The discursive analysis of swearing perceptions presented here is not intended to replace experimental or questionnaire-based approaches to the topic, nor to provide verifiable empirical findings on evaluations of swearing per se; but rather to provide a complementary perspective on the swearing-perception process, and further, to offer a methodological framework by which this may be achieved. The approach, informed by DP concepts of construction, action, and indexicality, along with socio-pragmatic consideration of speaker and contextual variables, has produced a number of conceptual and methodological insights. First, I have demonstrated how social categories (e.g. intelligence) are negotiated in order to produce interpretations and evaluations of the swearing behaviour. This raises questions about the reliance on constructed scales and ratings used in many studies of swearing perception. It is possible, however, that more nuanced scales could be produced for specific explorations. Second, rather than being perceived in isolation, the swearing instance is interpreted in light of participants’ knowledge and existing views of the speaker. Many of the participants’ perceptions are configured with reference to “facts” about Fry’s biography and crucially, to core representations of his personality, which prevail in much of the data; namely, that he is arrogant and self-satisfied and feels himself to be exempt from usual behavioural standards. In fact, this latter set of concepts may be seen to provide a locus from which the more fine-grained impressions and attributions are formed. The present analysis has also clearly highlighted the role of the wider context in shaping participants’ perceptions. For example, understandings of the BBC and its (perceived) culture, expectations about behavioural standards (both in formal televised events and more generally), views of social privilege, and feelings about celebrity culture all contribute to the specific impressions formed by the participants. Again, these points raise questions for an experimental paradigm, in which perceptions/impressions are often elicited in response to decontextualised and/or hypothetical examples. Finally, the analysis has further highlighted the indexical meanings of swearing itself, or what it can be taken to signify in a given context. Here, new meanings have been demonstrated which are again, linked to specific information about the speaker (e.g. previous drug use) and thus, would not fit neatly into taxonomies of swearing motivations or impressions.
It is recommended that in considering the mixed findings of studies on swearing perception, more attention should be given to the perceptual process itself, and in particular, the complexity of these judgements and attributions in real-life settings, where discursive negotiation, contextual knowledge, and socio-pragmatic concerns are paramount. While providing empirical data on the content of swearing perceptions was not the primary aim of the study, this issue is something that could be developed in future research. Thus, online responses to other instances of swearing by celebrity/public figures could be analysed to explore perceptual patterns or themes. In line with a discursive perspective, it is to be expected that each instance will produce the type of nuanced and contextualised judgements that have been found in this study. Nonetheless, a more extensive, comparative analysis may establish common or core evaluative categories/frameworks, albeit differently negotiated in different contexts. Future research using this approach may then build cumulative empirical categories upon which practical implications may be developed; for example, regarding the efficacy or desirability of swearing by public figures in different discursive contexts. It is also recommended that research be conducted in different cultural and linguistic contexts in order to access a wider range of perceptions and perspectives on the act of swearing. In pursuit of such data, social media sites may provide a fruitful avenue for research, with appropriate ethical considerations in place.

References


