

Sociolinguistic Analysis of Imprecations Through Theoretical Lenses: A Comparative Study Across Uzbek, Russian, And English Societies

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Abstract: This article explores the sociolinguistic significance of imprecations (curses) as a discursive practice embedded in cultural norms, gender dynamics, and power structures. Through an integrated comparison of the theoretical insights of William Labov, Erving Goffman, Deborah Tannen, Janet Holmes, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler, the study evaluates how curses function as expressions of identity, resistance, and social control in Uzbek, Russian, and English-speaking societies. Using a comparative sociolinguistic methodology, it demonstrates how curses operate across social strata, genders, and communicative contexts. The findings underscore the performative, symbolic, and stratifying functions of imprecations, while revealing their discursive potential to resist and reproduce social hierarchies.

Keywords: Imprecations, sociolinguistics, performativity, discourse analysis, gender and language, power relations, Labov, Goffman, Tannen, Holmes, Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler, Uzbek society, Russian profanity, English curses, linguistic capital, variationist theory, politeness theory, cultural pragmatics.

Introduction: Language and society are interdependent constructs, with everyday expressions- especially imprecations- revealing deeply embedded cultural ideologies and power asymmetries. Imprecations, often dismissed as vulgar or emotionally impulsive language, are in fact socially loaded speech acts that reflect, negotiate, and contest societal norms. They function as sites of gender performance, class signaling, politeness strategies, and discursive resistance. Despite their social stigma, curses represent fertile ground for sociolinguistic analysis, particularly when examined through a range of theoretical perspectives that account for both structure and agency.

This study aims to understand the role of imprecations in three linguistically and culturally distinct societies- Uzbek, Russian, and English- through a comparative theoretical framework. It synthesizes and critically evaluates the contributions of major linguistic and sociopolitical theorists, including Labov, Goffman,

Tannen, Holmes, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Butler, not as isolated perspectives but as intersecting approaches to understanding how imprecations function at the nexus of language, power, and identity.

Literature Review

While Labov's (1972) variationist sociolinguistics offers an empirical foundation by associating linguistic choices with social stratification, Goffman's (1967) face theory shifts the focus to the interactional level, where imprecations can function as both face-threatening and face-saving acts. Labov's studies of New York department store clerks and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) demonstrated how linguistic forms are socially stratified and index class identity. In relation to imprecations, his framework suggests that cursing can function as a class marker, distinguishing informal working-class discourse from the sanitized speech of elite circles. For example, in Russian society, the frequent use of *mat* by working-class men acts both as an identity marker and a form of social bonding. This

aligns with Labov's observation that nonstandard speech forms can serve as in-group solidarity mechanisms while being stigmatized in dominant discourses.

Goffman's interactional model complements Labov by offering a micro-level view of social interaction. Curses, in Goffman's terms, may constitute face-threatening acts (FTAs), especially in formal settings or mixed-status interactions. However, they can also function to preserve face when used in peer-group contexts or as humorous mitigations. In English-speaking societies, phrases like "bloody hell" or "oh fuck" serve as both emotional release and alignment cues, depending on prosody and context. Goffman's theory is particularly useful in examining how speakers manage social roles and identity through the strategic use or avoidance of imprecations.

Tannen's (1990) work on gendered discourse shifts the discussion to how conversational style is shaped by gender socialization. Women, conditioned toward rapport-building speech, may avoid imprecations to maintain politeness and avoid negative evaluation. Tannen's insights are especially salient in Uzbek society, where women are often sanctioned for overt expressions of anger. In contrast, male discourse permits more direct and confrontational language, including curses. However, Tannen also shows that the avoidance of imprecations can be a strategic choice rather than an inherent deficiency in expressive range. For instance, English-speaking women may adopt softened curses ("crap," "heck") to maintain group cohesion without violating politeness norms.

Janet Holmes (1995) expands on this by focusing on politeness strategies and how gendered norms influence language use. She finds that women's imprecations are often coded as indirect, ironic, or humorous to avoid overt conflict. In Uzbek, expressions like *voy dodim* or *dod vey* act as substitutes for harsher curses, especially among older women. Holmes' framework highlights how women maintain social harmony through linguistic choices, and how even their imprecations are subjected to normative constraints. Her analysis is vital in showing that even when women curse, they often do so in ways that mitigate potential social transgressions.

Foucault (1978), diverging from the interactional and variationist traditions, reconceptualizes language as a form of power-knowledge. Imprecations are not simply emotional outbursts but part of larger discursive regimes. For Foucault, profanity disrupts normative orders and calls attention to the constructedness of polite language. In Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, the repression and clandestine circulation of *mat* exemplify

how power operates by regulating speech. The use of profanity in political protest or countercultural art reflects Foucault's notion of discourse as a field of struggle, where imprecations destabilize dominant narratives.

Bourdieu (1991) builds on Foucault's theory by introducing the idea of linguistic capital. Curses, in Bourdieu's terms, often possess low symbolic capital in formal fields such as education, government, or religion. However, in informal domains—gang culture, online communities, rap music—they can carry high symbolic value. His notion of habitus explains why speakers from different backgrounds use imprecations differently and perceive their usage through internalized social dispositions. In Uzbekistan, for example, the use of religious imprecations by rural men reflects a habitus shaped by patriarchal norms and traditional authority structures.

Judith Butler (1997), extending the theory of performativity, argues that language does not merely reflect identity—it creates it. Imprecations, as performative utterances, can either reinforce or challenge gender and social roles. Butler's theory helps explain why reappropriated slurs like "bitch" or "slut" in English feminist discourse function as acts of resistance. In Uzbek society, where gender roles are more rigid, the performative power of imprecations is more constrained, though not absent. Social media platforms provide a rare space where Uzbek women occasionally use imprecations to critique patriarchal norms, thus enacting Butlerian resistance through speech.

Taken together, these frameworks reveal the multifaceted sociolinguistic reality of imprecations. Labov and Bourdieu offer insights into structural hierarchies; Goffman, Tannen, and Holmes shed light on interpersonal dynamics; and Foucault, Butler, and Bourdieu foreground the ideological and performative dimensions of cursing. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive but complementary, each revealing a different facet of how imprecations function within and against systems of social control.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative qualitative and quantitative sociolinguistic approach. It combines ethnographic field observations, corpus analysis, and semi-structured interviews with native speakers from Uzbekistan, Russia, and English-speaking countries (United Kingdom, United States, and Canada). The data were collected over six months from 2024 to 2025.

Participants included 60 native speakers from each society (20 men, 20 women, 20 non-binary/younger informal speakers), aged 18–60, sampled across rural

and urban areas. They were asked to discuss and evaluate the appropriateness, frequency, and emotional intensity of commonly used imprecations in their native language. Additionally, natural speech recordings and digital content (e.g., social media, YouTube comments, television dialogues) were analyzed to observe the pragmatic functions of curses in different contexts.

The imprecations were categorized by:

- Gender of speaker
- Social status/class
- Emotional intent (anger, solidarity, humor, etc.)
- Level of taboo (mild, moderate, extreme)

A statistical chart was used to compare frequency and perceived appropriateness of curses across the three societies.

Results

The analysis yielded several trends, visualized in the charts below:

Table 1: Frequency of Imprecation Use (Mean Instances per 1,000 Words)

Language/Society	Male Speakers	Female Speakers
Youth (18–30)		
Uzbek	7.5	2.3
Russian	12.8	6.2
English	9.7	6.8

Figure 1: Appropriateness Ratings of Imprecations in Formal Settings (Scale: 1–5)

(Uzbek: Mean = 1.2; Russian = 2.1; English = 2.8)

Table 2: Most Commonly Reported Emotional Functions of Imprecations (% of total usage)

Emotion	Uzbek (%)	Russian (%)	English (%)
Anger	62	55	45
Humor	12	21	30
Group Bonding	8	14	15
Shock Value	10	5	6
Protest	2	3	4

Qualitative results also indicated that in Uzbekistan, religiously based imprecations (“Alloh ursin”, “la’nat bo’lsin”) were used with caution, largely by older males or rural speakers. Female speakers generally refrained from such usage due to strong social sanctions. Russian speakers exhibited the most frequent and intense use of profanity, particularly in male-dominated informal

networks. In English-speaking countries, gender differences were less pronounced, and imprecations were used more flexibly for humor, irony, and empowerment.

DISCUSSION

By integrating these theoretical insights, the study reveals that imprecations are multifaceted speech acts whose meaning and impact are contextually determined. While Labov and Bourdieu emphasize structural constraints—class, habitus, symbolic capital—Goffman, Tannen, and Holmes illuminate the micro-level pragmatics of cursing within interactions. Foucault and Butler, on the other hand, draw attention to the political and performative potential of imprecations.

In Uzbek society, the high degree of linguistic conservatism limits the subversive potential of imprecations, although digital spaces are beginning to challenge this. Russian society, shaped by historical repression and expressive resistance, exemplifies both the structural and subversive dimensions of imprecations. English-speaking contexts offer the broadest spectrum, with imprecations functioning as both instruments of power and tools of resistance.

The comparison also highlights how imprecations function as cultural artifacts—revealing what a society permits, prohibits, or reclaims through language. In patriarchal societies like Uzbekistan, curses reinforce gender roles; in Russia, they mark group boundaries; and in English societies, they can destabilize hierarchies, especially when reappropriated.

CONCLUSION

Imprecations are not random verbal outbursts but socially patterned and ideologically charged linguistic acts. Through the comparative synthesis of Labov, Goffman, Tannen, Holmes, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Butler, this study shows that cursing is both a reflection and an instrument of social structure. While Labov and Bourdieu help us understand who curses and why, Goffman, Tannen, and Holmes reveal how curses operate in social interaction. Foucault and Butler, meanwhile, remind us that imprecations are never neutral; they have the power to reproduce or resist dominant discourses.

In all three societies studied, imprecations remain powerful markers of identity, gender, and resistance. Their study offers profound insights into how language both constrains and liberates human expression.

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