Taboo terms and their grammar

Jack Hoeksema, University of Groningen

1. Introduction

Taboo terms have a vast and growing set of grammatical uses in western languages such as English, German or Dutch. To what extent this remarkable syntactic versatility is shared by languages associated by non-western cultures remains to be investigated. This chapter focuses on the well-researched languages of western Europe, in the hope that linguists working on non-European languages will find it useful for making a comparative study.

I will discuss the various grammatical constructions in which taboo expressions are used, above and beyond those in which they would be normally expected to appear. For instance, in the following examples, the taboo word *shit* is used in a variety of ways:

(1)   a. You need to remove the shit that your dog left on the carpet.
        b. We're in deep shit.
        c. I want you to take your shit and go live somewhere else.
        d. I don't want to listen to that shit anymore.
        e. Yes, I'm talking to you, you piece of shit.
        f. Do bears shit in the woods?
        g. Are you shitting me?
        h. Shit! My credit card is maxed out.
        i. Eat shit, you moron.
        j. What the shit is going on?
        k. I don't give a shit what you think I should say.
        l. The cops haven't told me shit.
        m. It will cost a shitload of money.
        n. You're a shitty father.
        o. We will beat the living shit out of you.

The list could be continued ad nauseam. The point of these examples is to show the many ways in which taboo words such as *shit* (cf. McEnery 2006, Napoli & Hoeksema 2009) are employed, including the literal use in (a), a metaphorical use in (b), and a variety of other uses in (c-p). In some cases, the word has a strong negative connotation (e.g. d,e), in others it is neutral in connotation (e.g. *your shit* in (1c) need not be viewed as negative: it means roughly your stuff, and can be used in positively evaluated contexts as well: *you have some fancy shit in your gun rack: respect!*) Besides giving something a negative connotation, a swear word may also be used to provide the speaker (or writer) with a certain macho or tough-sounding style. E.g. (c) is not a negative evaluation of the stuff referred to, but it is certainly more colloquial, less salonfähig (socially acceptable), than the otherwise similar

(2)   I want you to take your things and go live somewhere else.

What some of the examples have in common is an expressive meaning component (Potts 2007), which serves not so much to describe various aspects of external reality, but rather a subjective emotional response, on the part of the speaker (e.g. e,h,i). While it is usually their literal meaning that gives expressions such as *shit* their taboo status, they are typically not to be interpreted literally in the constructions reviewed in this chapter. We will look at cases

where taboo words provide spice to the conversation, and may provide a window on the emotional state of the speaker.

Most of the discussion will be focused on English and Dutch. The latter language is of some special interest because it makes heavy use of disease names as taboo terms, besides the more common sexual, scatological and religious taboo expressions. While many (perhaps all) languages make use of taboo words for various purposes, there is considerable variation with regard to which taboo word is used to what end. In a study of curses and swear words, Nübling & Vogel (2004) found considerable differences even among three Germanic languages. In Table 1, I reproduce their main findings (ibidem, 20):

Table 1: Domains of taboo terms in swearing and cursing

Domain→ Language↓	sexual	scatological	religious	disease
Dutch	+++	+(+)	+(+)	++(+)
German	[+]	+++	++	-
Swedish	[+]	+	+++	-

Three pluses indicate high frequency and productivity, a minus absence, and [+] means attested but rare. As we will see below, these differences even hold outside the area of cursing and name calling, as there are many constructions that employ taboo terms.

2. Strong utterances

2.1. Curses

For the purposes of this chapter, I reserve the word *curse* for short utterances of an emotional, usually negative, nature, such as *Damn!* or *Shit!*, and use the word *malediction* for negative wishes. Curses in this sense tend to be short, and involve religious, sexual or scatological notions (cf. Hughes 2006). Other terms are *profanity* (especially when religious notions are involved) or *swear word.* Typically, a curse is an exclamative. Being exclamatives, they cannot be said to be true or false, but express an emotion, usually anger or frustration, and in the case of weaker curses also amazement and even pleasure: *damn, what a nice cup of coffee!*

It is very common for curses to have phonological variants that serve as euphemistic counterparts (Allan & Burridge 1991, Allan 2012), e.g. *Darn!, Gosh!, Shoot!* or the early modern English *Zounds!* (from *God's wounds*). Next to *oh my God* (which uses the name of the Lord in vain) there is *oh my goodness!* or the clipped version *oh my!* There are subtle differences in conditions of use between *Damn!* and *Oh my God!* both in terms of users and situations of use (the latter is more typical of teenagers, especially girls (Murphy 2010), and expresses more often amazement or excitement than anger). Since our focus is on grammar, we will ignore such matters in this chapter.

Curses may be embroidered upon in various ways, by reduplication, vowel lengthening, and addition of extra material, e.g. *fuckety-fuck fuck* instead of plain *fuck*. The character Clay Davis (a corrupt state senator) from the HBO series *The Wire* became known for his extensive vowel lengthening in the expletive *shiiiit*. For a morphosyntactic analysis of curse expressions in Dutch, including their more elaborate variants, see van Sterkenburg & van Sterkenburg (2001) and Corver (2014).

2.2. Maledictions

Maledictions are evil "wishes", typically the result of anger or frustration at someone, such as *Drop dead!, Go to hell!, Eat shit!* Note that these evil wishes are typically not interpreted as wishes, but as hostile acts, reflecting anger or other negative emotions. The person toward whom this anger or frustration is directed may be indicated by a vocative expression: *Drop dead, you commies!* As these examples show, they often involve taboo terms, relating to death, hell and damnation or bodily excretions (cf. Sanders & Tempelaars 1998, Ljung 2011).

Imperative maledictions are directed at the hearer, who is the object of anger or frustration. Another type of malediction takes the form of a declarative clause with a modal verb in it. This type can be used to indicate anger at a third person, or, again, the hearer: *you can go to hell for all I care; Donald Trump can take his wall and shove it up his you know what.* Somewhat old-fashioned are maledictions with sentence-initial *may*: *May you all go to hell.*

The expressions found in maledictions are often stereotypical and hyperbolical. Typically, they are positive polarity items, since they cannot be negated (Ljung 2011: 19, Hoeksema 2017) without losing their ordinary maledictory interpretation. While (1a) is a standard malediction, (1b) is at best a warning not to do something unsavory, but never a malediction (nor, for that matter, much of a benediction). The same is true when words such as *please* are added (1c):

(1)   a. Eat shit!
          b. Don't eat shit.
          c. Please eat shit.

The fixed expression *why don't you*, while superficially negative, is used to make positive adhortations (Green 1975), and may therefore embed maledictory expressions without loss of maledictory force:

(2)   Why don't you go fuck yourself.

The formulaic character of maledictions is clear from the observation in Ljung (2011: 19), that while *fuck you* and *screw you* are standard maledictions, potential variants involving synonyms such as **shag you* or **bonk you* are not.

2.3. Other exclamations

Short exclamations such as *Bollocks! Bullshit! Poppycock!* are used to indicate a difference of opinion between the speaker and the hearer. They all mean *nonsense*, but in a fairly rude way. They can all be used as predicate nominals in full sentences, as well as in other grammatical functions, such as direct objects:

(3)   a. That is absolute bollocks.
          b. Go peddle your poppycock elsewhere.

Sometimes what would count as a curse in one language is a disagreement exclamation in another. Compare the following Dutch and English examples:

(4) A: We hebben onze trein gemist! [Dutch]   A: We missed our train!
      B: Klote! [= Damn!]   B: Bollocks!

The Dutch word *kloten* ("testicles") means the same as *bollocks*, but in exclamations, it serves as an expression of frustration, whereas its English counterpart is an exclamation of disagreement.

2.4. Name calling

Name calling frequently makes use of taboo terms. E.g. *son-of-a-bitch*, *motherfucker, asshole, bastard, dickhead, piece of shit, turd, cunt, jerk, tosser* etc. may all be used to refer to people in a denigrating way. As with curses, the origin and severity of these derogatory names may vary. In a study of abusive terms in verbal aggression in 11 cultures (Spain, Germany, France, Italy, Croatia, Poland, Great Britain, USA, Norway, Greece, and the Netherlands), Van den Oudenhoven et al. (2008) found that taboos relating to sex, excrements, mental retardation, as well as social shortcomings, including rural background, dirtiness, animals etc. were most popular. One country, Norway, had words for the devil as most prominent category in name calling, in the other cultures words for the devil were not found to be prominent (but see Table 1 above for Swedish, a language not covered in their study). These terms of abuse may appear in full clauses, as well as short utterances:

(5)　a.　Fritz is a bastard.
　　　b.　You bastard.

For the latter type of utterance in a variety of Germanic languages, see Corver (2007) and Julien (2016). Corver notes that only evaluative nouns (both negative and positive) are acceptable in the short utterances, which he calls evaluative vocatives, cf. the difference between *piece of shit* (evaluative) and *dentist* (nonevaluative):

(6)　a.　Fritz is a {piece of shit/dentist}.
　　　b.　You piece of shit/*dentist.

Note that evaluative nouns may be modified by *such a*:

(7)　　You are such a bastard/dickhead/worm/doll/*dentist/*biped

While positive evaluative nouns such as *doll* are acceptable in a *You X!* type utterance, it turns out that this construction is mostly used for name calling. A search of the most common nouns in the Corpus of Contemporary American (COCA, cf. Davies 2010) for utterances that fit the pattern *you+NOUN+exclamation mark*, yielded *bastard* (106 times, including cases of the plural *you bastards*), *idiot* (83), *asshole* (41), *moron* (20), *fucker* (17), *fool* (17), *motherfucker* (15), *son-of-a-bitch* (12), *liar* (10), *coward* (10), *monster* (9), *loser* (8), *devil* (7) and *coward* (7). Positive ones such as *you smart aleck* are only found in the tail of the list, as single occurrences.[1]

　　In Dutch, pejorative affixoids derived (mostly) from taboo terms can be added to nouns to express contempt or dislike on the part of the speaker (Booij 2005). For example *rotschool* 'rotten/shitty school', *kutboek* 'cunt book = lousy book', *klotefiets* 'bollocks bicycle = lousy bike', *kankerlaptop* 'cancer laptop = shitty laptop', *teringherrie* 'phthisis noise = awful noise', *klerebuurt* 'cholera neighborhood = shitty neighborhood'. Words so adorned tend to

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[1] Sometimes, name calling may be done in jest, without any kind of slur intended. This usage seems especially common with some evaluative nouns, e.g. *You dirty dog!* can be said in admiration of a modern-day Casanova, much like *You devil!*

prefer the distal demonstratives as determiners over the proximal ones (this is what Lyons 1977 has called *empathetic deixis*). In German, *sau-* 'sow, female pig', and *scheiß-* 'shit' are prefixoids with a pejorative function (Finkbeiner, Meibauer & Wiese 2016).

2.5. Rude imperatives

Rude imperatives, such as *Fuck off!*, are akin to maledictions. Instead of wishing the hearer harm, they tell him (or her) to go elsewhere, to stop talking, etc. in a rude way. Like maledictions, they cannot be negated without losing their idiomatic meaning. For instance, *Get lost!* is a rude invitation to leave, but *Don't get lost*! is an admonition to stay safe.

(8)   a. Fuck off!
       b. Get the hell off my property!
       c. Get lost!
       d. Tell him to bugger off.
       e. Shut the fuck up.
       f. Leave her the hell alone.
       g. Piss off, will you?

Cases like *get the hell out of her* look a lot like *beat the hell out of him*, discussed in 5.2 below, look similar, but differ in important ways (Hoeksema & Napoli 2008, Haïk 2012). Cases with *get out* and other intransitive verbs of motion are typically found in directive sentences (imperatives, sentences embedded under *I want you*, etc.), a class I refer to here as "rude imperatives", unlike cases such as *beat the hell out of.* The two constructions also differ in which taboo words they employ. E.g. one can threaten to *beat/kick/smack the bejesus out of someone*, but it sounds odd to demand: *get the bejesus out of here!* or *Shut the bejesus up!* (However, such differences are pretty fluid, and may rapidly change.)
    Verbs such as *fuck off*, *piss off* appear to be mostly restricted to directive clauses as well. Of the 129 cases of *fuck off* in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA, cf. Davies 2012), only 2 were in nondirective sentences.
    In Dutch, taboo words show up as the stems of particle verbs in rude invitations to leave. (All the examples in (9) have the same meaning as *Fuck off.*)

(9)   a. Rot op!   [Dutch *rot* = to rot]
       b. Sodemieter op!   [*sodemieter* = sodomite]
       c. Flikker op!   [*flikker* = faggot]
       d. Pleur op!   [*pleur* < pleuris 'pleurisy']
       e. Donder op!   [*donder* = thunder]
       f. Lazer op!   [*lazer* < lazarus 'leper']
       g. Duvel op!   [*duvel* = devil]

German uses a prefix, rather than a particle, to turn a taboo word into a verb intended for rude commands:

(10) Verpiss dich!
      pref.piss refl
      'Piss off!'

3. Verbal constructions

Many of the Dutch verbs in (9) above also have a transitive counterpart, without the particle *op*, meaning 'to throw in a rough and careless manner'. While the cases with *op* in (9) are restricted to directive clauses, like their English counterparts, the transitive cases are not:

(11) a. Ze flikkerden de boeken weg.
          they faggoted the books away
          "They tossed the books away"
      b. Betsy lazerde haar schoenen onder het bed.
          Betsy lepered   her shoes   under the bed
          "Betsy tossed her shoes under the bed"

There are also anticausative uses of these verbs:

(12) a. Piet flikkerde van de trap.
          Piet faggoted of   the stairs
          "Piet fell down the stairs"
      b. Betsy lazerde van het podium.
          Betsy lepered off the podium
          "Betsy fell off the podium"

In Dutch, a subset of the stems in (9) may also be combined with a prefix, *be-*, to express the meaning 'to deceive': *bedonderen, besodemieteren, belazeren, beduvelen* 'to deceive'. In English, the verb *toss* also has some taboo-related uses, e.g. *toss off* 'masturbate' or *toss up* 'throw up, vomit'.

Yet another Dutch construction uses the same stems as in (12) to denote beating (or metaphorical beating, as in a verbal dressing down): *op zijn lazer/flikker/donder/duvel/ sodemieter geven/krijgen*. Literally, they mean *to give* or *to get on one's X*, where X is a derogatory term for body. This means either *to beat* (with *geven*) or *to get beaten* (with *krijgen*).

The Germanic verbal prefix *ver-*, which is very productive in Dutch and German, has among its many uses a number which are negative in nature. Sometimes, the interpretation of *ver-X* is 'to destroy by Xing', or 'to X in a wrong or bad way'. E.g. Dutch *zich verlopen* (from *lopen* 'to walk') means 'to walk in the wrong direction, to get lost while walking', and *verdrinken* means, apart from 'to drown', 'to destroy by drinking'. Taboo verbs are a natural host for this prefix, compare Dutch *verneuken* 'ver-fuck = to fool', *verkloten* 'ver-bollocks = to destroy by messing around, to fuck up'. German examples of this kind are *versauen* 'ver-sow = to mess up', *verarschen* 'ver-ass = to mess with, to take the piss out of'.

3. Emphatic wh-questions

Wh-questions can be reinforced with various taboo words (Pesetsky 1987, Den Dikken & Giannakidou 2002). English used to do this with words referring to the devil, later hell, and now a variety of taboo terms:

(13) a. What the devil are you afraid of?
      b. Who the hell is professor Smith?
      c. Where the fuck are you?
      d. Where the bloody hell are the police?

The English construction is apparently a calque from French, which had reinforced questions as early as the 13th century, according to the OED s.v. *devil*. Middle English had wh+*devil* (without the article), like French *qui diable* etc.:

(14) What devel have I with the knyfe to doo?[2]

Similar questions can be found in early modern Dutch, but these are now obsolete:

(15) Wat duivel is dat voor een klant?[3]
      what devil is that for   a   customer
      "What the hell kind of customer is that?"

Italian and other Romance languages also have emphatic questions involving a word for *devil.* Instead of the devil or hell, there is another type of reinforcement involving God, heaven, etc. + *name*:

(16) What in heaven's name are you talking about?

Unlike *the devil* and its ilk, these appear to be more loosely connected to the wh-word. They can be fronted, or extraposed:

(17) a. In heaven's name/*the hell, what are you talking about?
      b. What are you talking about, in heaven's name?

Dutch has similar expressions:

(18) Wat heb je   in godsnaam   met je   haar gedaan?
      what have you in God's name with your hair done
      "What in God's name did you do to your hair?"

Note that these expressions are not restricted to wh-questions. They also show up in imperatives:

(19) In God's name don't torture me![4]

Besides God and heaven, hell and the devil may also be used in this construction, as well as other taboo expressions:

(20) a. What in hell's name are all these people doing here?   [Elizabeth George, *A suitable vengeance*, Bantam Books, London etc., 1992, p. 143]
      b. What in fuck's name have you done to my dog? [Mark Haddon, The curious incident of the dog in the night-time, Vintage Books, New York, 2003, p. 4]

When the strengthened *wh*-question is embedded, the type of matrix predicate is relevant. Factive verbs such as *know* are not good hosts, unless they themselves are part of a nonveridical context (Den Dikken & Giannakidou 2002). In (21b) the matrix clause is veridical, in the sense that "I know X" is stated as a fact, whereas in (21a) it is nonveridical.

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[2] Chaucer, *The legend of good women.*
[3] *Het Leeskabinet*, magazine, 1840.
[4] Mark 5, verse 7.

My knowing X is not stated as a fact, but rather as a desirable outcome. In the theory of Giannakidou (1998), nonveridicality is a central property of negative polarity items.

(21) a. I would like to know what the hell you are up to.
      b. ?I know what the hell you are up to.

A similar restriction pertains to the *in X's name* construction, illustrated in (22) for Dutch:

(22) a. Ik vroeg me af waarom je   in godsnaam   meedoet.
          I   asked me off why   you in God's name with-do
          'I wondered why in God's name you cooperate'
      b. *Ik weet waarom je   in godsnaam   meedoet.
           I   know why   you in God's name with-do
          'I know why in the name of God you cooperate'

4. Negative & positive polarity items

The use of taboo terms in negative polarity idioms is pervasive and well-known. The function of a taboo word in negative sentences is typically to make the negation more emphatic, less neutral. We can already see this in comparing the negative answer *No* with its emphatic counterpart *Hell no!*

In English there is the prolific pattern of *give an X*, e.g. *give a damn, give a shit, give a toss, give a fuck, give a flying fuck, give a hoot in hell* etc. In combination with negation, these expressions serve to express indifference on the part of the subject of the predicate. As is commonly the case with taboo terms, we may also find a variety of euphemistic substitutions, e.g. *give a darn,* or my favorite, *to give a tinker's malediction*, a variant of *to give a tinker's damn*:

(23) Mr. Lewis does not give a tinker's malediction whether he is on any committee.[5]

In questions, these expressions make the question rhetorical, with negative import:

(24) a. Who gives a fuck what you want?
      b. Why should I give a fuck?

Some taboo terms (Horn 2001: 185ff. calls them *squatitives*) may be used as mass nouns in negative contexts, and can be paraphrased in such contexts as *anything*:

(25) a. You haven't told me shit.
      b. They didn't do dick.
      c. You don't mean fuck all to me.

After a change in meaning which is typical of the so-called Jespersen Cycle, these expressions can also be interpreted as *nothing*, in which case an overt negation is not needed (Horn 2001, Hoeksema 2009a). The uses as inherently negative expression, and as negative polarity item are currently both accepted, and can be found side by side in the work of a single author:

(26) a. He doesn't know sod all.[6] [= anything]

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[5] *The Ogden Standard-Examiner*, November 6, 1945.
[6] Elizabeth George, *Playing for the Ashes*, Bantam Books, New York etc., 1995, p. 336.

b. I'm hearing sod bloody all from you[7] [= nothing]

Similar variation can be seen in German, regarding the expression *einen Dreck* 'a shit' (cf. Richter & Sailer 2006), but here the change is clearly further along: *keinen Dreck* 'no shit = not anything' is far less common than *einen Dreck* 'a shit = nothing'. A search in Cosmas II (corpus W3, part of DeReKo, the German reference corpus made available by the IDS in Mannheim) yielded 40 hits for *einen Dreck angehen* 'to concern a shit' versus 1 for *keinen Dreck angehen* 'to concern no shit'). An example from this corpus is given in (27) below:

(27) Das geht euch einen Dreck an![8]
      that goes you a   shit   on
      'That concerns you a shit = that does not concern you in any way'

   Minimizers in Dutch frequently have a taboo origin (Hoeksema 2002), e.g.:

(28) a. Hij deed geen flikker.
          he did   no   faggot
          'He did nothing/fuck all'
      b. Het kost geen drol.
          it   costs no   turd
          'It costs nothing'
      c. Het interesseert me geen reet.
          it   interests   me no   asshole
          'It does not interest me at all'
      d. Hij weet er   geen bal   van.
          he knows there no   testicle of
          'He knows shit about it'
      e. Ik begrijp   er   geen bliksem van.
          I understand there no   lightning of
          'I don't understand a thing (of it)'
      f. Het kan hem geen tering schelen.
          it   can him no   phtisis concern
          'It does not matter one bit to him'

   Taboo words used in Dutch minimizers are words for thunder and lightning, various deadly diseases, words for excrements, for reproductive organs, and words denoting homosexuals. As noted in Postma (2001), the determiner *geen* 'no' in the examples above may be replaced by the complex *geen ene* 'no one' in taboo minimizers, but usually not in non-taboo minimizers. This is evidence that taboo status may be syntactically relevant as well.
   Strong negation of the *hell no* kind can also be found in sentences where negation itself is implicit. English has a number of ways to express negation merely by using expletives (Drozd (2001) calls this phenomenon exclamative sentence negation). In (29) below I give a couple of examples. Cases such as (29d, sub B), with a peculiar inversion, are discussed in Sailor (2017) and appear to be found solely on the British Isles. North America, Australia and other English-speaking areas appear to lack it entirely. In all of these examples, B strongly disagrees with A or gives a negative answer to a question:
(29) a. A: The party seems to be over.
          B: The hell it is.

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[7] Elizabeth George, *Deception on his mind*, Bantam Books, New York etc., 1998, p. 632.
[8] *Neue Kronen-Zeitung*, 22-2-2003.

b. A: Will you help me?
   B: Like hell I will.
c. A: It is cold outside.
   B: Bullshit it is cold.
d. A: John is a nice guy.
   B: Is he fuck/hell/bugger – he stabbed my cousin.

Positive polarity items, just like negative polarity items, may have a taboo background. E.g. Dutch *het verdommen* 'to damn it = to refuse to do something' (and its euphemistic counterpart *het vertikken*) are inherently negative, but cannot be negated themselves:

(30) Ik verdom het (*niet) om naar mijn werk te gaan
     I damn it (*not) for to   my work to go
     "I refuse to go to work"

English has a similar (in terms of meaning and components) expression, involving a conditional: *I'll be damned if I go to work.* This too, cannot be negated without losing its idiomatic interpretation.
    A few more positive polarity items with taboo background are given in (31):

(31) a. Zuid-Afrikanen hebben schijt aan de wet.[9]   [Dutch]
        South Africans have   shit   on the law
        'South Africans don't give a shit about the law'
     b. Man ging, man sprach, man schlief mit dem oder der, die einem gefielen,
        one went, one talked, one slept with whomever   that one   liked
        und kümmerte sich sieben Teufel um   die andern.[10]   [German]
        and cared   refl seven devils about the others
        "People went, talked, slept with who they liked, and did cared sod all about other people"
     c. If we don't catch that train, we're screwed.

As we saw above, idiomatic maledictions (*drop dead, go to hell*) are commonly positive polarity items, as well as some other types of rude commands, like *get the hell out of here*.

5. Degree expressions

5.1. Degree modifiers

Degree expressions from a variety of domains may originate from taboo words. To indicate a high degree on a temperature scale, one might use phrases such as *very warm,* or *exceedingly hot*, but also *damned hot, hot as hell, hellishly hot,* and so on. Both words for God and the devil may be used to indicate a degree: *godawful = very awful, fiendishly clever = very clever, devilishly complicated = very complicated, ungodly hot = very hot* etc.
    Adverbs of degree with a taboo background are boosters, never diminishers (to use Bolinger's 1972 terms) such as *a little, somewhat, a tad, slightly* etc. The same is true in German and Dutch: compare German *verdammt gut* 'damned good = very good', *scheißegal*

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[9] *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 3-5-2012, page 11.
[10] Stefan Zweig, *Die Welt von gestern.* Stockholm: Fischer Verlag, 1942.

'shit-indifferent = completely indifferent', and Dutch *donders goed* 'thunderly good = very good', *verdomde lekker* 'damned tasty'. Compare also the use of *dead/dood* as a booster:

(32)   a. Finding your house turned out to be dead simple.
       b. Het was doodeenvoudig om je   huis   te vinden.   [Dutch]
           it   was dead simple   for your house to find
           "It is very simple to find your house"

Some nominal expressions, namely the ones that are inherently gradable, may also be modified by degree words (Morzycki 2009, 2012). These come in two types: adjectives and PPs. Degree adjectives include *big, immense,* and *enormous* in English. Cars may be big only in a literal (= physical size) sense, but *a big mistake* or *a big liar* typically denote things or persons that are high on a scale of error or mendacity, respectively. Morzycki (2009: 181) notes the following generalization:

> "*The Bigness Generalization*: Adjectives that predicate bigness
> systematically license degree readings. Adjectives that predicate
> smallness do not."

E.g. a *big liar* lies a lot or is a liar with a big body, whereas a small liar can only be a liar with a small body. I believe this generalization follows from a bigger generalization, namely that there are a lot more linguistic resources, in any language, for intensification than for de-intensification. We can see this by noting the following generalization, which I will term the *badass generalization*:

(33)   *Badass generalization*
       Taboo terms typically strengthen, rather than weaken, an utterance. They may be high
       degree adverbs (boosters) or high degree adjectives, not low degree adverbs
       (diminishers) or adjectives.

Taboo terms found in this domain include the English construction *a hell of a*: *that was a hell of a problem = that was a very big/serious problem.* Note that *a hell of a* not only has a degree reading (with gradable nouns), but also a quality reading, meaning 'very good': *Mary is a hell of a teacher* (= a very good teacher). Note the contrast with the equally evaluative, but entirely negative *Mary is a teacher from hell.*
   Dutch *hels* 'hellish' is an intensifying adjective for nouns meaning noise, pain or task/job. E.g. *een hels karwei* 'a hellish job' is a taxing job. With other gradable nouns, there is no intensifying reading associated with *hels*, but only qualitative readings, including 'furious'. Compare the following example, where both *fan* and *lawaai* 'noise' are gradable. Note that someone who is physically diminutive may nonetheless be a huge fan.

(34)   De helse   fans maakten een hels   lawaai.
       the furious fans made   a   hellish noise
       'The furious fans made a hell of a noise'

What is important to note is that the degree reading associated with *huge fans* or *big fans* is absent in (34), unlike the degree reading for *lawaai* 'noise'. This implies that the use of degree adjectives with degree nouns is lexically restricted, much as it is with degree adverbs. To illustrate this point with an English example, the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) provides only the following adjectives as being modified more than once in the

entire corpus by the modifier *fiendishly*: *clever* (11 times), *hot* (7), *difficult* (5), *complicated* (4), *complex* (2) and *hard* (2). The adjectives come from two domains: heat, and intellectual difficulty (if *clever* can be related to *difficult*, otherwise three domains). For *devilishly*, we find much the same set of modified elements, plus a few newcomers, such as *handsome*. Presumably analogy plays a role here, since we also speak of a handsome devil (in a completely non-derogatory way), but not a handsome fiend.

Comparisons such as *cold as hell* should be seen as complex degree expressions. They express a high degree without invoking any kind of actual comparison. In English, such quasi-comparatives with a taboo term as object of comparison form a minor paradigm, illustrated in (35) with examples from the internet:

(35) a. These guys rocked HARD, and were heavy as hell.
    b. Beyonce is stupid as fuck to have two more children with a man who cheated on her.
    c. So Daenerys returns happy as shit from annihilating the Lannister army.

5.2. Degree resultatives

English sometimes uses resultatives to express a high degree (Capelle 2014). Compare e.g.:

(36) a. We were scared stiff/shitless/witless/to death.
    b. You were bored stiff/silly/out of your skull.
    c. They were worried sick/half to death.

In the above examples, the predicates do not straightforwardly denote a state resulting from the action described by the verb (as in: *the table was scrubbed clean*), but rather indicate a high degree of fear, boredom and worry, respectively. Dutch has similar resultatives (Gyselinck & Colleman 2016):

(37) a. Ik schaam me dood.
       I   shame   refl dead
       'I am ashamed to death'
    b. Ik lach   me rot.
       I   laugh refl rotten
       'I am laughing my head off'
    c. Ik erger me   kapot.
       I   annoy refl kaput
       'I am annoyed out of my skull'

In many cases, such predicates have a taboo origin (death, in particular, but also diseases (in Dutch), dismemberment, and the like). Compare:

(38) a. The inmates were freezing their balls off.
    b. The girl was twerking her ass off.
    c. The dog was barking his head off.

Such constructions are common only in languages which employ regular resultatives as well, such as English and other Germanic languages. Romance languages, which largely lack resultatives, by and large do not have them. (But see Arrizabalaga 2014 for a recent innovation (*hasta la muerta* and *a muerta*) under influence of English *to death*.)

Transitive verbs may also be intensified by resultatives with taboo origins:

(39) a. We will beat the crap out of your team.
      b. The soldiers scared the living shit out of their prisoners.
      c. This class annoys the hell out of their teachers.

In Dutch:[11]

(40) a. We slaan jullie   tot moes.   [Dutch]
          We hit   you.pl to   pulp
          "We will beat you to a pulp"
      b. De sergeant schold hem verrot.
          the sergeant scolded him rotten
          "The sergeant gave him a severe dressing-down."
      c. Ze   hebben die   rothond   de   moeder getrapt.[12]
          they have   that   rotten-dog the   mother   kicked
          "They have kicked the mother [= the shit] out of that damn dog"

Disease names show up here as well:

(41) a. Hij werkte zich de tyfus.   [Dutch]
          he worked refl the typhoid fever
          "He worked his tail off"
      b. We schrokken ons de pleuris.
          we startled   refl the pleuritis
          "We were scared out of our minds"
      c. Trump liegt zich de tering.
          Trump lies refl   the phthisis
          "Trump is lying his head off"

5.3. Speed and intensity expressions

In the case of motion verbs, intensity and high speed, two otherwise entirely distinct notions, come together. In the following examples, comparatives involving *like* are used to intensify various verbs (examples are from the Cambridge Online Dictionary

(42) a. We ran like hell.
      b. We worked like hell.
      c. It hurt like hell.

Whereas the *as hell* modifiers (see section 5.1) prefer adjectives, *like hell* prefers verbs. In the case of *run*, the intensified verb denotes high speed. Other motion verbs can be similarly modified by *like*+expletive (the following examples are all from the internet):

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[11] I will use the term resultative in a broad sense, including ditransitive constructions such as the ones in (41) and (40c).
[12] The use of *de moeder* 'the mother' as an intensifier is quite new, but robustly attested on the Internet. Ljung's (2011: 41) claim that "the mother theme is conspicuously absent from the Germanic languages, being found neither in Danish, Dutch, German, Icelandic, Norwegian or Swedish" must now be qualified somewhat for Dutch.

(43) a. Swimmer's advice if he sees a shark: 'Swim like hell'.
      b. Keep calm and drive like hell.
      c. Cyclists pedal like hell to escape psycho ostriches.
      d. Be like a duck - above the surface look composed and unruffled, below the surface,
         paddle like hell!

Besides *like hell*, there are various other expletives in current use to intensify verbs:

(44) a. The puma would run like a motherfucker.
      b. It hurts like a motherfucker.
      c. My back hurts like a bitch.
      d. The engine runs like a son of a bitch.
      e. Darn, my leg hurts like tarnation.
      f. Run like fuck and hope for the best.

Dutch speed expressions such as *als de donder* 'like the thunder' differ from their English counterparts in a number of ways. They are strictly for motion predicates (hence 45d is out of the question), and require a goal or source expression:

(45) a. Ga als de donder *(naar huis)
         go like the thunder to   home
         'Go home like greased lightning'
      b. De poema rende als de bliksem *(naar ons toe)
         the puma   ran   like the lightning toward us to
         'The puma ran toward us like a blue streak'
      c. Rijd als de sodemieter terug.
         Drive like the sodomite back
         'Drive back like a bat out of hell'
      d. *Ze werkten als de sodemieter.
         they worked like the sodomite
         'They worked like hell'
      e. Ga als de duvel terug.
         go like the devil back
         'Get the hell back'

Expressions such as *als de weerga* 'like the counterpart' do not make much sense, but play on the sound of *als de weerlicht* 'like the lightning', comparable to *like heck* as a substitute for *like hell*.

5.4.   High degree readings of taboo verbs

Vardi (2015) has called attention to a small group of predicates in modern Hebrew that express high levels of adoration or love, including verbs meaning *to die, be sick, be crazy*. One of her examples is given in (46):

(46) Lehaka madhima, ani met aleiha.
      band   amazing, I   die on-it
      'The band is amazing, I am mad about them'

In English, you can express the same thing in almost the same way: The band is great – they kill me. In a similar vein, you can be *sick with love, love someone to death* or *love someone madly, be crazy/nuts about someone.*

The Dutch verb *sterven* 'to die' can be used to indicate a high degree as well, but not of love. Compare:

(47) Het sterft hier van de kwallen.
      it   dies here of the jellyfish
      'The place is crawling with jellyfish'

Here, the verb indicates a high density of some kind of objects covering an area, a reading which is typical for the so-called *swarm*-alternation (Salkoff 1983, Dowty 2000, Hoeksema 2009b). A few other negative verbs can be used here as well:

(48) Amsterdam is vergeven van de toeristen.
      Amsterdam is poisoned of the tourists
      'Amsterdam is lousy with tourists'

Note that the participle *vergeven* merely indicates large amounts of tourisms, and not that the place is poisoned or suffocating. Just like the English expression *lousy* in the translation, it has a constructional meaning that is far removed from its literal meaning.

5.5 Amalgams

So-called amalgams (Lakoff 1974, Kehayov 2009, Kluck 2010, 2011) may contain taboo words. Often, but not necessarily, these are of religious origin:

(49) a. My husband has been having sex with God knows how many women.[13]
      b. The entities as a whole are devil knows how many orders of magnitude above that.[14]
      c. I had read that trite phrase Lord knows how many times in Lord knows how many thrillers, and taken it for a figure of speech.[15]
      d. I used reasoned argument on you for fuck knows how many years[16]
      e. The last bridge cost $30 million, and goodness knows how much a new one will cost[17]

This amalgams probably originate from another type (*I don't know how many*), denoting an indefinite quantity. If the speaker does not know the quantity, then perhaps only God does (by virtue of being omniscient). From God to the devil is then a small step. Finally, the taboo word for God or devil is replaced by the omnipresent and extremely versatile expletive *fuck*. (Similar substitutions can be found in constructions such as *in the name of fuck, stop it*, or *I am your wife, for fuck's sake*.) As is common, the taboo term may be replaced by something

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[13] http://wis.pr/whisper/054c90124e192d3e18feaf755c3b249c3b568d/My-husband-has-been-having-sex-with-God-knows-how-many-women-I-thought
[14] https://forums.spacebattles.com/threads/the-culture-vs-the-entities-worm.342208/
[15] Elizabeth Peters, *Night Train to Memphis.* New York: Warner Books, 1994.
[16] Al Ewing, *The fictional man.* Oxford: Solaris, 2013.
[17] http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/goodness-only-knows

more innocent-sounding, such as *goodness.* Dutch has similar examples with *God*, as well as the proper name *Joost* 'Just':

(50) Ze hebben Joost mag weten hoe vaak gebeld.
they have   Joost may know how often called
"They have called God knows how many times"

According to the Dutch dictionary WNT (De Vries & Te Winkel 1926), *joos* was a Javanese name for a (Chinese) deity, itself a loan from Portuguese *deos*. Dutch colonials used it to refer to the devil, but nowadays the expression is an opaque idiom.

Note that the intended interpretation involves a shift from "to a degree unknown to the speaker", the literal interpretation of *I don't know how much/many*, to the actual reading "to a very high degree". This is the reason why amalgams are treated in the section on intensifiers.

Kehayov (2009) mentions cases from Polish, attributed to Robert Bielecki, where the subject of *know* is not God, but a taboo term:

(51) a. On   myśl-i,   że   jest   diabl-i   wiedz-ą   jak mądry.   [Polish]
he   think-3sg   that   be.3sg   devil-pl know-3pl   how smart
'He thinks he is devils know how smart.'
b. On   myśl-i,   że   jest   chuj wie   jak   mądry.
he   think-3sg   that   be.3sg   dick know.3sg   how   smart
'He thinks he is so smart' (lit. 'He thinks he is dick knows how smart').
c. On   myśl-i,   że   jest   cholera wie   jak   mądry.
he   think-3sg   that   be.3sg   cholera   know.3sg   how   smart
'He thinks he is so smart (lit. 'He thinks he is cholera knows how smart').

In Estonian, some of these amalgams have turned into negative polarity items (Kehayov 2009).

6. In conclusion

Besides the cases mentioned above, a great number of others could be mentioned. Space limitations prevent me from attempting a fuller coverage. While the use of expletives for purposes of swearing and name calling is likely to be universal, many of the constructions described here are relatively new and unlikely to have counterparts in languages unrelated to English.

What counts as an expletive, and how it may be used, also varies somewhat. For instance, English uses *faggot* as a derogatory term for homosexuals, but does not employ it in negative polarity constructions, degree expressions or rude commands, unlike Dutch in the case of *sodemieter* and *flikker*. Dutch, on the other hand, entirely lacks the English expletive infixation phenomenon (*fan-fucking-tastic, abso-bloody-lutely* – cf. McCarthy 1982).

By and large, the purpose of taboo-related expletives appears to be (a) to sound rough or angry (for a fuller discussion, see Jay (this volume)), (b) to make expressions more emphatic, by boosting the degree of a gradable predicate, or (c) to add a negative (pejorative) connotation.

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