#24 PAPER 34 -
WHEN AND WHY DRIVERS SWEAR? A QUALITATIVE PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

The use of swear words while driving is considered to be an aggressive behaviour in traffic but studies on traffic situations that determine the use of swear words are scarce. Through this study we explored the motives and the traffic characteristics that lead to swearing while driving. A semi-structured interview was conducted and 43 different traffic situations were clustered in three main categories, namely actions performed by other drivers, actions performed by pedestrians and other traffic events, whereas the motives that determine the use of swear words are centred on expressing strong negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and frustration.

Keywords: swearing; anger; aggression; traffic circumstances; expressing negative emotions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Associated with an increased risk of road crashes, aggressive driving behavior is an alarming phenomenon for road safety (Clarke, Ward & Truman, 2002). Emerging from anger (Ellison-Potter, Bell & Deffenbacher, 2001), frustration (Shinar, 1998), driver’s impatience, hostility or motivation to reach the destination in a short time (Tasca, 2000), aggressive driving is meant to harm, intimidate, threaten, dominate, or express displeasure with another driver or user of the roadway (Deffenbacher, Richards & Lynch, 2004).

Aggressive driving includes behaviors such as tailgating, forcing a car to pull over by flashing head lights, gesticulation, verbal abuse, beeping the horn, threatening another driver, breaking or slowing down abruptly, cutting off or swerving in front (Elliott, 1999).

In developing countries there is an increasing focus on this problem. A Romanian survey conducted on a national sample of drivers revealed that 80% of drivers are aggressive, drivers stating that they had stressed others with horns and flashes (50%), used verbal aggression (21%), and used obscene gestures (13%) (ICPC, 2010). Moreover, 43.50% from 1,119 drivers mentioned being verbally aggressed in traffic (Traffic Police Direction, 2011), being the third most usual form of traffic aggression after flash sites or horns, and threatening or obscene gestures.

1.1. Verbal aggression in traffic

Although swear words or obscene language are considered to be a form of aggression, namely verbal aggression (Deffenbacher, Oetting & DiGiuseppe, 2002), it remains unknown in which traffic circumstances drivers swear. Two approaches in Social Psychology are used to explain drivers’ behavior, namely the attributional theory (Wickens, Wiesenthal, Flora & Flett, 2011) and the frustration-aggressiveness paradigm (Berkowitz, 1993; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowever & Sears, 1939).

In driving environment, the attributional theory states that driver’s aggressive behaviors are a response to perceived intentionality, controllability, locus of causality, stability, and globality of the others driver’s behavior. Stability (Britt & Garrity, 2006) and intentionality (Wickens et al., 2011) were found to be the most effective of the causal dimensions in predicting traffic anger and aggression. From this approach, aggressive behavior is triggered by perceiving others’ behavior as being intentional and stable over time.

The frustration-aggressiveness paradigm is one of the reference models on aggressiveness. Thus, aggressiveness is studied in specific situations where there are obvious signs of frustration and the driver can be clearly identified as the source of the anger (see for example, Ellison, Govern, Petri, & Figler, 1995; Ellison-Potter, Bell & Deffenbacher, 2001; Pouliot, Vallières, Bergeron & Vallerand, 2007; Yagil, 2001). From this

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approach, aggressive behavior is triggered by frustrating behaviors, situations or events (Shinar, 1998) and influenced by the driver’s emotions (Roidl, Frehse, Oehl & Höger, 2013), such as anger (Mesken, Hagenzieker, Rothengatter & de Waard, 2007; González-Iglesias, Gómez-Fraguela & Luengo-Martin, 2012).

Moreover, Deffenbacher et al. (2002) have shown that drivers express their anger in different manners, some of them might not express it; some drivers might try to manage it in a positive way and other might show different levels of anger. Some of the moderator factors of manifesting aggressiveness are anonymity given by the vehicle (Doob & Gross, 1968; Ellison et al., 1995; Ellison-Potter & Deffenbacher, 2001), high temperature (Kenrick & MacFarlane, 1986), and the presence of aggressive stimuli on the road such as guns (Ellison-Potter & Deffenbacher, 2001; Turner, Layton & Simons, 1975) or witnessing another aggressive behavior (Parker et al., 1998).

Behaviors such as insulting another driver or making hostile gestures fall into hostile aggression, as defined by Shinar (1998) to be a strong negative affective state, making the driver to unload psychological tension accumulated. Swearing, as a hostile form of aggression, is considered to be a coping mechanism, being unique in its ability to cope with strong emotions, able to correct others behavior without physical interventions (Jay, 2000; Rassin & Murris, 2005).

1.2. Swearing as a response to strong negative emotions

Swearing is a verbal expression referring to taboo practices, mostly culturally stigmatized, which should not be connotatively interpreted and is used in expressing emotions (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Jay, 2000, Rassin & Murris, 2005). The Neuro-Psycho-Social theory of swearing integrates three broad aspects of human behavior, namely (1) neurological control, (2) psychological restraints, and (3) socio-cultural restriction, stating that swearing is a product of these three interlocking systems (Jay, 2000). The role of swearing depends on the conversational purpose of the speaker, and it may have personal and interpersonal benefits, affecting others in a positive or negative way (Clark, 1996; Daly, Holmes, Newton & Stubbe, 2004). Swear words are considered to tap into “deep and ancient parts of the emotional brain” accompanying anger, aggression, and fear, protecting individuals from psychological tension like an analgesia and correcting others behavior (Pinker, 2007).

The primordial utility of swearing is the ability to express strong negative emotions (Jay, 2009; Rassin & Murris, 2005). The emotional strength of swear words is greater when spoken in maternal language (Dewaele, 2004) and the most common reason that determine swearing are centralized around expressing negative emotions, strengthening arguments, habit (Rassin & Murris, 2005), expressing discontent among others (Daly et al., 2004).

Jay (1992) states that there are multiple variables that altogether play a role in determining the use of swear words and integrates them in a Five-Stage Model of swearing. This model explains why and when an individual utters swear words as a response to anger. First of all, individuals evaluate the offensive event occurred with emphasis on the physical and psychological characteristics of the other individual who is responsible of the offensive act. In this stage, the age, gender, status, ethnicity, looks, behavior and intentionality are appreciated. Anger management takes place in the second and third stage depending on the age, status, physical power of the offender and the relationship between the two. In the fourth and the fifth stage, swear words are uttered as a response to the event and are meant to correct the offensive behavior of the offender.

2. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The aim of the current paper is to examine in which traffic circumstances drivers regularly swear. Moreover, a great emphasis is put upon knowing the motives that determine the use of swear words while driving.

3. METHOD

A semi-structured interview was conducted on 35 drivers ($n_{men} = 16$) with age ranging from to 22 to 48 ($M = 31.97; SD = 8.18$), driving experience ranged from 3 to 23 years ($M = 9.60; SD = 5.25$), and the average mileage in the last year was 32,320 km. The interview guide was constructed using Jay’s (1992) five stage model of swearing. The participants had to describe five traffic situations when they regularly swore, indicating the person, object, or situation characteristics that determined the use of swear words. Furthermore, each traffic situation was described with emphasis on the motives that determine the use of swear words and the frequency of swearing in each situation. Background data such as age, gender, driving experience and average mileage were recorded.
4. RESULTS

Through a content analysis we obtained a total of 175 traffic situations in which drivers regularly swore and 43 of them were describing different situations. Through a classic content analysis we clustered the obtained situations in three main categories depending on the main character or situation characteristics that determined the use of swear words. Namely, the obtained situations were clustered in three main domains: (1) actions performed by other drivers, (2) actions performed by pedestrians and (3) other traffic events.

The most frequently reported situations that determine the use of swear words while driving fall into the first category of situations, namely actions performed by other drivers (f = 111), followed by other traffic events (f = 39) and ultimately, actions performed by pedestrians (f = 25). Concerning the motives that determine the use of swear words, most of them were centered on experiencing strong negative emotions, such as anxiety (f = 47), perceived lack of respect from others (f = 38), frustration (f = 37) and anger (f = 30).

In the first category of situations, drivers reported actions performed by other drivers such as ignored right of way (f = 21), overtaking without signaling (f = 17), driving under legal speed allowed (f = 14) or receiving flashes in order to change the lane (f = 8). This being said, 12% of the most frequently reported situation is being ignored right of way (e.g. “[I swear when] other drivers cut me off when I have the right of way and I’m forced to use the brakes”). Moreover, in 70.9% out of ten situations drivers reported swearing while being ignored right of way. Participants mostly concluded that they swore in this situation because they felt anxious on suffering an accident, anger or because the other driver is disrespectful.

Actions performed by pedestrians that determine the use of swear words were described as illegal crossing (f = 25), in various ways (e.g. in intersections, single-lane streets). Moreover, 14.28% of the most frequently reported situation is pedestrian crossing in illegal places (e.g. “[I swear when] a pedestrian jumps in front of the car in illegal places without reassuring”). In ten situations of this kind, participants reported swearing in 71.6% of the cases. Concerning the motives that determine the use of swear words, drivers mostly concluded that they felt anxiety, anger and being displeased by the pedestrian behavior.

The “other traffic events” included traffic situations such as cars illegally stopped (f = 11), bad roads (f = 7) or hidden police cars (f = 6). In this case, the most common situation is described as illegally stopped cars that provoke traffic jams (e.g. “[I swear when] cars illegally stopped determine traffic jams”). In this traffic situation, participants reported swearing in 66.3% of cases. Moreover, it seems that anger, frustration and displeasure determine the use of swear words when encountered with this kind of situation.

5. CONCLUSION

Through this study we managed to find out in which traffic situations drivers frequently swear. Furthermore, researching the motives that underlie the use of swear words while driving might bring some insights in understanding the traffic aggressive behavior.

First of all, the situation obtained in this study are similar to those obtained in other countries. Britt and Garrity (2006) asked drivers to recall when they had experienced specific anger-provoking events and concluded that most of this kind of situations are related to other driver’s behavior. Through our study we managed to find out that swear words are most likely to be uttered when pedestrians cross the street in illegal places, or the driver is being cut off or stuck in traffic by cars illegally stopped.

According to the frustration-aggressiveness paradigm, aggression is a response to frustration. Moreover, frustration is a response to an inadequate behavior (Shinar, 1998). This being said, it seems that drivers tend to evaluate others’ behavior as being an inadequate one and therefore engage in an aggressive behavior, namely swearing. Others’ behavior, either drivers or pedestrians, is perceived as deviant, broking the social and legal norms in traffic. Furthermore, the perceived gravity of a potential aggressive behavior are being evaluated. Therefore, drivers tend to use swear words in order to express themselves and not a form of instrumental aggression which may have serious consequences. In line with the attributional theory, drivers aggress when they perceive others behavior as being an intentional and stable one (Wickens et al., 2011). In most of the descriptions made by drivers, they usually swear when they consider that others’ behavior is an intentional one, meant to harm or displeasure.

Moreover, it seems that drivers appreciate that negative affect, namely anxiety, anger and frustration, play an important role in swearing. It seems that not only others behavior or traffic event determine the use of aggression but also emotions. Therefore, as being stated by Jay (1992) swearing may have a role for both the individual (as a mean to discharge a strong negative affect) and the other driver (as a way to correct other’s behavior).
These findings are important for a better understanding of the aggressive behavior in traffic. Namely, acknowledging that the aggressive behavior is not meant only to harm others, but to correct their behavior or to discharge emotional tension. As limitations of the current study we can mention the low number of participants and the unrepresentative sample use, compared to the entire population of Romanian drivers. Nevertheless, the present study brought an insight on the factors that determine verbal aggression, a common behavior in traffic.

6. REFERENCES