

HUMS 140

# Bad Language: Swears, Slurs, & Bullshit

DAMIEN STOREY | SPRING 2025 | VERSION 0.1  
MO/WE 16:00–17:10 | SOS B11

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## COURSE PARTICULARS

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course looks at two kinds of ‘bad’ language. The first is words or phrases that are found intrinsically offensive in certain contexts: swears and slurs. And the second is language use that is distinct from lying, but still shows a disregard for meaningfulness or truth: bullshit. We’ll approach these topics from a variety of theoretical directions, including linguistics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, and we’ll make heavy use of *pragmatics*, which is the study of language in real contexts, especially the everyday settings in which most language occurs.

Some examples of the questions we’ll ask are: What functions—grammatical, psychological, and social—do swear words play in a language? Is it wrong to swear? Is the derogatory content of a slur part of its meaning or a result of other pragmatic features? Can we give a univocal account of bullshit? What forms does bullshit take in domains like politics, art, and academia? If bullshit involves speech that is sometimes literally meaningless, how does it persuade people?

The course will be divided into four sections:

*Part 1: Pragmatics.* [3 weeks] Illocutionary acts: acts, like promising or apologising, performed simply by speaking. Conversational implicature: implying (or ‘implicating’) one thing by saying another. Pragmatic theories of metaphor.

*Part 2: Swearing.* [3 week] The history and etymology of common swearwords like ‘fuck’ and ‘cunt’. The grammatical functions of swearwords. The social and psychological function of swearing. Censorship and the ethics of swearing.

*Part 3: Slurs.* [2 weeks] How slurs differ from (other) swearwords. The unique linguistic features of slurs. Competing accounts of how slurs derogate.

*Part 4: Bullshit.* [5 weeks] Bullshit versus lying. Definition(s) of bullshit. Examples of qualitative and quantitative bullshit. Critical examination of psychological studies on bullshit.

Your learning outcomes will include an understanding of:

- pragmatics and how it is applied to common questions in linguistics.
- the grammatical, psychological, and sociological role swearwords play in our language.
- how philosophers and linguists have explained the derogatory content of slurs.
- how bullshit is defined, how to recognise it in various areas, and how it is currently being studied by several academic disciplines.

(Sections of this course overlap with a course from Spring 2024: PHIL 353, Selected Topics in Philosophy. If you took this course, you are not advised to take this one.)

## HOW TO CONTACT ME

[www.damienstorey.com](http://www.damienstorey.com) | [dstorey@ku.edu.tr](mailto:dstorey@ku.edu.tr) | Office: S O S 162 | Office hours: TBD

I'm always happy to answer questions by email, but if your question concerns an administrative issue—attendance, course rules, and so on—please first contact our TA. I can usually make time to see students outside my office hours: drop by my office or email to arrange a time.

## STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Your most important responsibility is to *do the assigned reading* before the lecture. In addition, in lectures, students are expected to take an active role: asking questions and engaging in discussion with each other and with me.

## ASSESSMENT

The course is assessed by:

1. (40%) Seven lecture tasks. These are short in-class tasks, related to that week's reading, which might be writing tasks or quizzes. *These will not be announced in advance, so regular attendance is necessary to pass all lecture tasks.* Your grade will be an average of the best five tasks. Assessment: letter grade, F to A+.
2. (30%) In-class exam on the course readings. A mostly multiple-choice exam at the end of the course that tests the breadth of your knowledge of the topics covered in the course. This will be in the last class of the semester and the best way to prepare for it is simply to attend all the lectures. Assessment: letter grade, F to A+.
3. (30%) Final exam. You will have three hours to write a more in depth answer to a question, chosen from a selection of topics that you will have the opportunity to research in advance. The topics, and accompanying reading, will be announced early in the semester. Assessment: letter grade, F to A+.

Your grades will be given to you as one of the following letters:

A+	— —	Exceptional / Almost publishable
A	4.00	Superior
A–	3.70	Above Average
B+	3.30	Above Average
B	3.00	Average
B–	2.70	Average
C+	2.30	Below Average
C	2.00	Below Average
C–	1.70	Borderline
D+	1.30	Deficient
D	1.00	Deficient
F	0.00	Failing

## COURSE POLICIES

*Course material.* All required reading will be on LearnHub at least a week prior to the relevant lecture. Optional reading will not usually be on LH, but both the library and the internet exist.

*Extensions and exemptions.* Extensions and exemptions for take-home work or in-class tasks are possible (though not guaranteed) if *both* of two conditions are met: (a) it is for a sound academic, medical, or emergency reason and (b) I am made aware of the request *before* the due date. There are no exceptions to these rules, even for tragedies or traumas.

*AI and writing tools.* Using AI tools, such as ChatGPT, for literally any purpose whatsoever—even for research for written work—is forbidden and in most cases is considered plagiarism. Moreover, using *any* tool to help you write other than a word processor like MS Word or LaTeX—even tools like Grammarly, Google Translate, or the various paraphrasing tools—is forbidden and results in failure of that component.

*English coherence rule.* From your first day as a fresher, you are expected to be able to write in English, even if it is bad English. Language errors do not affect your grade, except if they make your writing imprecise or unclear. However, if your English is highly unusual, so that it appears not to have arisen from a normal writing process—i.e. not to have arisen from you using what English you have to try to say what you mean—there will be a significant marking penalty. Examples include: the confused sentences sometimes produced by using Google Translate or paraphrasing with a thesaurus; a lot of rare or unusual word choices, outside a normal vocabulary; or writing that is of a higher standard of English than you could plausibly have written yourself (e.g. in comparison with previous written work).

## GENERAL READING

While there is no text that will cover all the content of the course, reading any of the following would be great preparation:

- John McWhorter (2021) *Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter—Then, Now, and Forever* (Avery) [Historical and grammatical insights on swearwords.]
- D. Sosa (ed) (2016) *Bad words* (OUP) [Excellent collection of articles on slurs.]
- T. McEnery (2006) *Swearing in English: Bad Language, Purity and Power from 1586 to the Present* (Routledge) [Socio-historical look at ‘bad language’ examining the origin of modern attitudes to swearing.]
- H. Cappelen & J. Dever (2019) *Bad Language* (OUP) [Despite the title, not a text book for the course. Chapters 4 and 6 are most relevant, but it will all be interesting and helpful.]
- Harry Frankfurt (2005) *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press) [This is a 5000-word ‘book’—and widely available online—that kickstarted the academic interest in bullshit.]
- C. T. Bergstrom and J. D. West (2021) *Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World* (Random House) [Example-driven text with a focus on quantitative bullshit. Many helpful resources are also on their website: [callingbullshit.org](https://callingbullshit.org).]

# LECTURE OUTLINE

## PART I: PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics is an area in philosophy and linguistics that studies language in real contexts, especially the everyday settings in which most language occurs. It examines the ways in which speakers often use language to convey something different from or in addition to what their words literally mean. It is an essential tool for understanding human language use, and, apart from its intrinsic interest, it is a necessary foundation for many of the topics in this course.

### Illocutionary acts

Week 1: Lecture 1 & 2

- J.L. Austin ‘Performative Utterances’ in Austin (1961) *Philosophical Papers* (OUP) 234–52 [Also widely available online.]
- Optional (but very helpful): William G. Lycan, *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd edition, (Routledge: Oxford, 2008), chapters 11–12, pp. 137–55.

### Conversational implicature

Week 2: Lecture 3 & 4

- Grice ‘Logic and Conversation’ in Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press: Harvard, 1967) [Also widely available online.]
- Optional: William G. Lycan, *op. cit.*, chapter 13, pp. 156–70.

### Metaphor

Week 3: Lecture 5 & 6

- William G. Lycan, *op. cit.*, chapters 14, pp. 175–89.
- Optional: Donald Davidson ‘What Metaphors Mean’ *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978) 31–47 [A classic paper on metaphor—it’s short, highly controversial, and entertaining.]

## PART 2: SWEARING

Nearly everyone swears, and this is true across languages and cultures. Why? Most of us have no idea, and that is already interesting: swearing is both common and unlike any other part of language, and yet we have little idea why we do it. A first instinct might be to reduce it to a form of insult, but this function, so-called “aggressive” swearing, is itself puzzling: how does “you fucking asshole” differ from “you very bad person”? And more importantly, aggressive swearing makes up only a small part of the everyday use of swearing. When we examine it, we find that swearing has a wide range of grammatical, sociological, and psychological functions.

### The etymology and grammar of swearwords

Week 4: Lecture 7 & 8

- John McWhorter (2021) *Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter—Then, Now, and Forever* (Avery), chapter 2: ‘What is it about Fuck?’ (pp. 45–74), and, optionally, chapter 3: ‘Profanity and Shit’ (pp. 75–104).

## The psychological and social functions of swearing

Week 5: Lecture 9 & 10

- Stapleton, et al. (2022) ‘The power of swearing: What we know and what we don’t’ *Lingua* 277: 1–14 [Overview of studies primarily on ‘non-propositional’ uses of swearing (e.g. crying ‘fuck!’ when you stub your toe.)]
- Optional: T. Jay & K. Janschewitz (2008) ‘The pragmatics of swearing’ *Journal of Politeness Research Language Behaviour Culture* 4(2): 267–88.
- Optional: Stapleton (2010) ‘Swearing’ in Miriam et al. (eds) *Interpersonal Pragmatics* (De Gruyter) 289–306 [Overview of studies on the social/communicative uses of swearing.]

## Should we swear?

Week 6: Lecture 11 & 12

- Bouke de Vries (2023) ‘Is swearing morally innocent?’ *Ratio* 36: 159–68.
- Optional: Shoemaker, D. (2000) ‘Dirty words’ and the offense principle’ *Law and Philosophy* 19: 545–584 [This is the paper to which de Vries is responding. Does de Vries correctly represent Shoemaker’s position?]
- Optional: Carmen M. Cusack (2014) ‘Use of the Word ‘Fuck’ in Pedagogy and Higher Learning’ *Journal of Law & Social Deviance* 8: 133–68.

## PART 3: SLURS

Slurs (e.g. faggot, kike, or pleb) are words that refer to a social group (e.g. racial, religious, or economic groups) and convey derogation towards this group. While they might be seen as a subspecies of swearwords, they have several unique linguistic features. We will focus on the challenge of explaining slurs’ derogatory content: is a slur’s derogatory content part of its meaning or a result of pragmatic or other non-semantic features?

## What are slurs?

Week 7: Lecture 13 & 14

- Geoffrey K. Pullum (2016) ‘Slurs and Obscenities: Lexicography, Semantics, and Philosophy’ in D Sosa (ed.) *Bad words* (OUP), pp. 168–92 [A broad-ranging, entertaining, and opinionated take on the nature of pejorative language and slurs.]

## How do slurs derogate?

Week 8: Lecture 15 & 16

- Leopold Hess (2022) ‘Slurs: Semantic and Pragmatic Theories of Meaning’ in Stalmaszczyk (ed) *The Cambridge Handbook of the Philosophy of Language* (OUP), pp. 450–66.
- Optional: Cappelen and Dever (2019) *Bad Language* (OUP), chapters 6 and 7, pp. 90–125.

## PART 4: BULLSHIT

Bullshit is a specific type of language that falls short of lying but nonetheless shows disregard for meaningfulness or truth. It differs from other nearby categories—like misinformation, propaganda, or fake news—by avoiding any explicit charge of dishonesty. As a result, it is very common. For example, politicians “talking around” questions they don’t know the answer to; the unnecessarily scientific language used in cosmetics commercials; the vague and uninformative language a company or university might use to describe its “mission”; or the pseudo-profound language of an online guru like Deepak Chopra.

### Defining bullshit

Week 9: Lecture 17 & 18

- Pre-lecture task: try to define (i.e. find necessary and sufficient conditions for) lying.
- Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2005) [This is a 5000-word ‘book’—and widely available online.]
- *Optional*: G. A. Cohen (2012) ‘Complete Bullshit’, in *Finding Oneself in the Other* (Princeton University Press), pp. 94–114 [A commentary on Frankfurt and definition of a second kind of bullshit.]
- *Optional*: Thomas L. Carson (2016) ‘Frankfurt and Cohen on bullshit, bullshitting, deception, lying, and concern with the truth of what one says’ *Pragmatics & Cognition* 23, 53–67 [Critical assessment of both Frankfurt and Cohen’s accounts.]

### Examples of qualitative and quantitative bullshit.

Week 10: Lecture 19 & 20

- Calling Bullshit case studies: [99.9% Caffeine-free](#) and [Musicians and mortality](#).
- Alan Sokal (1996) ‘A physicist experiments with cultural studies’, *Lingua Franca* 6: 62–4 [Sokal’s report on his deliberately bullshit paper that was accepted in a respected cultural studies journal.]
- *Optional*: G. A. Cohen (2012) ‘Complete Bullshit’ [Same as last week, but focus this time on the section ‘Why one kind of bullshit flourishes in France.’]
- *Optional*: [International art English](#) [Essay on the language used by artists and galleries.]

### The psychology of bullshit 1: bullshit reception

Week 11: Lecture 21 & 22

- Gordon Pennycook, *et al.* (2015) ‘On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit’ *Judgment and Decision Making* 10: 549–63 [This is the paper that popularised the study of bullshit in social psychology. Given what we’ve learned about the topic so far, can you see any problems Pennycook’s study?]

### The psychology of bullshit 2: recent papers

Week 12: Lecture 23 & 24

- Littrell, Risko, and Fugelsang (2021) ‘You can’t bullshit a bullshitter’ (or can you?): Bullshitting frequency predicts receptivity to various types of misleading information’ *Social Psychology* 60: 1484–505.

## Generative AI and bullshit

Week 13: Lecture 25 & 26

- Hicks, M.T. *et al.* (2024) 'ChatGPT is bullshit' *Ethics and Information Technology* 26 [open access version [here](#).]
- Bergstrom, C & Ogbunu, C (2023) 'Opinion: ChatGPT Isn't 'Hallucinating.' It's Bullshitting.'



## ESSAY & WRITING ADVICE

### WRITING PHILOSOPHY

Please pay close attention to the following advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' writing. Please take them seriously.

1. *Justify*. Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking 'why on earth should I believe that?' In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write 'Plato believes that p', you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.
2. *Explain*. In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to fully understand your essay without needing to read the authors you're writing about. For example: if you use a technical term, or discuss an argument or position, you must clearly and fully explain it to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be explicit and easily understood, but it is also because your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is what you're being assessed on. Your readers, including your grader, know that you understand something only if, and to the extent that, you've successfully explained it. You might well know, for example, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate how important it is, and how much work it takes.

*A bad essay:* 'p!'

*A good essay:* 'For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.'

*An excellent essay:* 'Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines ... However, I think there is a promising response to this objection ...'

3. *Use headings*. Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.
4. *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments*. You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. But in philosophy your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you've provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student's essay. So be careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that p for an argument that shows conclusively that p. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: 'this shows decisively that p'; 'this is a strong reason to believe that p'; 'this suggests that p'; 'this makes it less implausible that p'; and so forth. Be especially careful with strong success verbs like 'refutes', 'proves', or 'shows'.

5. *Show independence of thought rather than originality.* You might think that in philosophy you ought to express your own unique opinions, different from those of the authors you read. But originality—the simply fact that an idea is new—has little value by itself and should not be your aim. After all, an idea can be both highly original and obviously false. What *has* value is independence of thought. For example, if you agree with the conclusions of a certain author because you fully understand them, have thought critically about their arguments, and have carefully considered alternative possibilities, then you believe nothing original, but you are showing admirable independence of thought.
6. *Be sufficiently detailed.* The topics you'll consider are large. People write books about them, but you only have a few pages. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to show that you're familiar with the whole topic; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at any one issue in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. One approach might be to devote about the first third of your essay to a more general introduction of the topic and then use the last two-thirds to examine one or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on *one* argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.
7. *Use quotes correctly.* Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many) to use a quote is the following: make a claim; present a quote that supports the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to *show* that and why it supports your claim. But a caution: never use a quote as a way of *saying* something—rather, a quote should be presented as evidence *about which* you have something to say.

For more guides to essay writing, see Jim Pryor, [Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Essay](#), or this [guide from the Harvard writing center](#).

#### SOME BASICS OF TYPOGRAPHY

The following are a few typographic conventions worth learning.

1. *Indent paragraphs.* But do not indent the opening paragraph of the document or the first paragraph after a section heading. You may instead—not in addition—separate paragraphs with a blank line, although this is better suited to list-like texts, such as legal documents, than continuous prose.
  2. *Use single line spacing.* It's easier to read. Double spacing is only necessary when a printed copy of your work will be annotated.
  3. *A footnote mark is always placed after punctuation.*<sup>1</sup> It is almost always best to place a footnote at the end of the sentence, after the sentence-ending full stop. Avoid consecutive footnotes; instead, place all information in one footnote if possible.
1. This includes full stops, commas, colons, semi-colons, and quotations marks.

4. *Correctly indicate titles.* The titles of books and journals should be italicised; the title of articles or papers should be in inverted quotes.
5. *Indicate quotes with either quotation marks or by using a block quote.* Extra flourishes, such as italicising, are unnecessary. And never place a block quote within quotation marks.
6. *Learn the difference between a hyphen (-), en-dash (–), and em-dash (—).* Use an en-dash like ‘to’ in ranges of dates or numbers (e.g. 87–142) and to express certain relationships between words: for example, an ‘on–off switch’ or ‘Irish–American relations’. Either an en- or em-dash can be used to indicate a parenthetical phrase. If you use an en-dash, add a space either side – like so – but em-dashes are always unspaced—like so.
7. *Make ellipses with three full stops separated by spaces.* Like this . . . , with a space either side. You will most commonly use an ellipsis to indicate portions of text that you’ve omitted from quotes. Don’t omit any sentence-ending full stops that precede an ellipsis (i.e. together they make four stops). For example:

[P]articular care needs to be exercised when eliding text to ensure that the sense of the original is not lost . . . A deletion must not result in a statement alien to the original material. . . . Accuracy of sense and emphasis must accompany accuracy of transcription. (CMS, 16th, 13.49)

8. *Use a single space after full-stops.* A double space, once common, is now recognised as unnecessary.

## PLAGIARISM

Koç University does not tolerate plagiarism of any kind or degree, whether deliberate or accidental.

### Definition

Plagiarism is the inclusion in your work of something that is not your own—such as another author’s ideas or phrases, or AI generated text—without acknowledgement, so that it is presented as your own original contribution. It is entirely *your* responsibility to learn what plagiarism is and how to avoid it.

### Degree of plagiarism

No amount of plagiarism is acceptable: a single plagiarised line in an essay will result in failure, and could result in disciplinary procedures.

### Quotation marks

Quotations need to be in quotation marks; otherwise, it is plagiarism, whether or not you cite the author.

### Accidental vs. deliberate

Students accused of plagiarism invariably claim it was accidental. That’s irrelevant: the problem is the plagiarism itself, not the motivation behind it. The consequences of allegedly accidental plagiarism are no different from deliberate plagiarism. Frankly, if you are unable to avoid plagiarism even while sincerely trying, you should not be in a university, just as you should be allowed to drive if you accidentally run people over.

If you are worried that you might be plagiarising, you can always ask me before you submit your work.

### **Paraphrasing**

Read this section very very carefully.

Paraphrasing an author is repeating what they say, but in your own words. Some forms of paraphrasing are acceptable, others are not. One reason to paraphrase is simply to state the author's ideas in your writing, perhaps to support your argument: if you genuinely use your own words and reference the author, this is acceptable. But if you paraphrase because you are unable to describe what they say by yourself—since you do not trust your English, for example, or fully understand them—then you are plagiarising, *even if you cite the author*.

The crucial point is that you should never use paraphrasing as a *writing* tool. Directly using an author's words to construct your own sentences or paragraphs—looking back and forth at what they wrote as you type—will almost certainly result in plagiarism, even if you try to change the words. What should guide you when you are writing is not the author's words, but your understanding of what they mean. As a rule of thumb, ask yourself 'could I have written what I wrote even if I had entirely forgotten the original author's wording?' If your answer is no, then you are plagiarising their writing, since a genuine understanding of their ideas will be independent of the words and phrases they use to express them.

**Will it help if I tell you I loved your course or beg or cry?**

No. I will just fail you harder.