

A Sociolinguistic Study of Swear Words Used by Carroll Shelby to His Superiors and Subordinate in *Ford v Ferrari*.

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how Carroll Shelby uses swear words in *Ford v Ferrari*, focusing on his interactions with his subordinate and his superiors. Using Pinker's (2007) types of swear words and Holmes's (2013) sociolinguistic approach, this study aims to identify the types and frequency of swear words, as well as the social factors and dimensions involved in both interactions. A descriptive qualitative method is applied by analyzing selected scenes from the movie. The findings show that Shelby uses three types of swear words, namely idiomatic, emphatic, and abusive, in interactions with both groups. The results further show that the overall frequency of swear words toward subordinates and superiors is not significantly different. Emphatic swearing is the most dominant type in both interactions, while abusive swearing is used more toward the subordinate. Overall, similarities in swearing patterns are more prominent than differences, showing that swearing is shaped by context and pressure.

Keywords: film analysis, Ford v Ferrari, social dimensions, social factors, sociolinguistics, swear words.

INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, people might not realize that they use swear words more often than they think. According to Batty (2024), swearing has become more popular in society over the last 20 years because of its function in building social bonds rather than insulting people. Swear words are generally considered negative and hurtful; however, scholars argue that their meaning depends on context. Fägersten (2012) explains that swear words are words that people may find rude or unacceptable depending on where and when they are used, while Ljung (2011) states that society often views swear words as inappropriate. Nevertheless, swear words can also function positively, such as expressing surprise, making jokes, bonding with friends, or showing closeness within a culture (Batty, 2024; Henning, 2025).

The use of swear words is commonly associated with casual settings, where they may work as social bonding or expressive functions. However, communication in a workplace environment is typically different due to its context and setting. Wienclaw (2018) states that workplace communication is often more formal and filtered to remove unwanted messages in order to avoid misunderstandings. This tendency is particularly common in white-collar workplaces, which are generally associated with office-based, administrative, or managerial tasks (Hayes, 2025). As a result, swearing is usually considered rare or inappropriate in such professional environments, especially in interactions involving hierarchical relationships between superiors and subordinates.

The movie *Ford v Ferrari* presents an interesting case of workplace communication that challenges this assumption. Based on real events involving Ford Motor Company, the film shows the company's efforts to defeat Ferrari at the 1966 Le Mans race. While the movie highlights this iconic moment in automotive history, it also portrays frequent use of swear words among characters in a professional setting. One character in particular, Carroll Shelby, stands out because he often uses swear words not only when interacting with his subordinate, Ken

Miles, but also when speaking to his superiors, Leo Beebe and Lee Iacocca. This behavior is unusual in a white-collar working environment, where language is typically expected to reflect formality and power distance.

Several previous studies have examined the use of swear words in media and public discourse. Bram and Putra (2019) analyzed swear words used by Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street* and found that all five types of swear words proposed by Pinker (2007) appeared in the movie. Prayogo (2025) also found that swear-word usage was influenced by social factors such as topic and function in Gary Vaynerchuk's speech. Unlike these studies, this study focuses on a workplace setting in which a character uses swear words toward both subordinates and superiors. Using Pinker's (2007) theory of swear-word types and Holmes's (2013) social factors and dimensions, this study analyzes the types, frequency, and sociolinguistic factors influencing Carroll Shelby's use of swear words in *Ford v Ferrari*.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative approach. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research seeks to analyze and understand the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to social or personal issues. This approach emphasizes the researcher as the key instrument, the use of multiple sources of data, and a focus on participants' meanings rather than imposing external interpretations. In this study, the writer personally collected and analyzed the data to understand how swear words are used by the character Carroll Shelby in specific workplace interactions in the movie *Ford v Ferrari*.

The data for this study were taken from all swear-word utterances spoken by Carroll Shelby when interacting with his subordinate, Ken Miles, and his superiors, Leo Beebe and Lee Iacocca. The writer downloaded the official movie transcript from Deadline.com and watched the entire movie to understand the storyline and conversational context. The movie was then rewatched to identify and record all utterances containing swear words. Each utterance was verified by replaying the scenes and cross-checking them with the transcript to ensure accuracy, while visual elements such as facial expressions and settings were also considered to understand the context of the utterances better.

The data were analyzed using Pinker's (2007) theory of swear-word types and Holmes's (2013) theory of social factors and social dimensions. First, the writer identified and classified the swear words based on Pinker's categories, using Fägersten's (2012) definition to determine whether an utterance qualified as a swear word. Next, the writer analyzed the social factors influencing the use of swear words, including participants, setting, topic, and function, as well as the related social dimensions of solidarity, status, formality, and function proposed by Holmes (2013). This analysis was conducted to reveal how status and social contexts influenced Carroll Shelby's use of swear words when interacting with his subordinates and his superiors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that Carroll Shelby used three out of five types of swear words proposed by Pinker (2007), namely idiomatic, emphatic, and abusive, in his interactions with both his subordinate (Ken Miles) and his superiors (Leo Beebe and Lee Iacocca). Descriptive and cathartic swearing did not appear in either interaction. Table 1 shows that Shelby produced 11 swear-word utterances when interacting with his subordinate and 10 utterances when interacting with his superiors, showing that the overall frequency is not significantly different. This finding contradicts the initial assumption that swearing would occur more frequently toward a subordinate. Instead, it suggests that Shelby's position as the main person between the

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racing team for Le Mans and Ford executives placed him under constant pressure, resulting in frequent swearing in both directions.

Table 1. Types and Frequencies of Swear Words Used by Carroll Shelby

Addressee	Idiomatic	Abusive	Emphatic	Total
Subordinate	4	3	4	11
Superiors	3	2	5	10

Idiomatic swearing is frequently used in both interactions to convey meaning implicitly rather than literally. For example, when speaking to his subordinate, Shelby states, “Do you know the shit I have had to eat just to get four wheels on that grid?” (1.2), where the word “shit” expresses frustration. Similarly, when speaking to his superior, he says, “Half that race is in the dark. You can’t see shit,” (2.1) emphasizing poor visibility rather than referring to its literal meaning. **Emphatic** swearing is the most dominant type, particularly in interactions with superiors, and is used to intensify emotions, as seen in “It was a hell of a drive” (1.9) and “Now explain what the fuck that means.” (2.4). **Abusive** swearing occurs least frequently and appears during moments of heightened tension, such as “Please try not to be an asshole” (1.6) toward Ken Miles and “You knew, you bastard!” (2.9) toward Leo Beebe. Under this are more examples from each type in both interactions with subordinates and superiors.

Idiomatic Swearing

Idiomatic swearing is used to convey meaning implicitly rather than literally. In this study, idiomatic swear words are commonly used to express frustration or emphasize a situation without directly insulting the addressee. The following are examples of idiomatic swearing used by Carroll Shelby:

1. “No. YOU DON'T, because you don't want to deal with any of that **"crap"**. (1.3 - Subordinate)

The utterance above can be classified as idiomatic. The word “Crap” here does not mean a literal junk or trash, but rather a way of saying Ken Miles does not want to deal with any of these problems that Shelby needs to handle by himself.

2. “Go to **hell**.” (1.5 - Subordinate)

The utterance above is classified as idiomatic. The utterance “Go to hell” is a reply from Carroll Shelby to express his jokes after their intense fight previously, but after the overall mood shifted, Ken Miles asked about the medical pills that Shelby still took in the middle of their interaction. Shelby replied by saying, “Only because they’re so delicious,” which is a sarcastic reaction since there is no delicious medicine, and then they cheered their drink, and Shelby said, “Go to hell,” which in that scenario means “Just shut up”.

3. “Not even my wife got to **screw** me the same way twice, Lee.” (2.6 - Superiors)

The utterance above is classified as idiomatic. The context of this is that the usage of the word “screw” was after Shelby won an argument with Mr. Henry Ford the Second. After that, his superior (Lee Iacocca) complimented him for winning that argument, and Shelby replied

using the word “screw” in his sentence, which simply means not even my wife is going to mess with me twice.

4. “If there was a 'Twenty Four Hour of Kissing **Ass**', you'd be world champion.” (2.7 - Superiors)

The utterance above is classified as idiomatic. At first, the writer thought that this could be classified as emphatic because, in a way, it makes the sentence have a stronger emotional tone, but the word “ass” is combined into two words, “Kissing Ass,” which means someone, mainly superior, in this case Leo Beebe, who keeps bothering by trying to gain a favor over and over again.

Emphatic Swearing

Emphatic swearing is the most frequently used type in both interactions. This type of swearing functions to intensify emotional expression and strengthen the speaker’s message. Shelby uses emphatic swear words when expressing excitement, anger, or urgency.

1. “Stick on your stubborn **ass** since day one”. (1.8 - Subordinate)

The utterance above is classified as emphatic. Shelby uses the word “ass” here to give a stronger feeling about how stubborn and reckless Ken Miles usually is when Shelby tries to give orders, and he uses that word “ass” to intensify his overall expression of Ken Miles’s stubbornness.

2. “Well, what the **hell** are we doing here?” (1.10 - Subordinate)

The utterance above is classified as emphatic. Same as previous examples, Shelby uses the word “hell” to intensify his expression in that situation with Ken Miles. He could have said, “What are we doing here?” but instead he added the word “hell” to convey a stronger feeling.

3. “**Shit**, you can put Doris Day in there if all you wanna do is lose.” (2.5 - Superiors)

The utterance above is classified as emphatic. The word “shit” that Shelby uses in this context is to intensify doubt and subtly mock his superior (Leo Beebe) about the racer that he chose for the race in Le Mans.

4. “Where's the **goddamn** tie!?” (2.8 - Superiors)

The utterance above is classified as emphatic. The word “Goddamn” here is used by Shelby to confront his superior in an aggressive way about the tie that his superior (Leo Beebe) promised if Ken Miles followed his order to wait for his teammates to cross the finish line together. That word “Goddamn” helped to convey that intensified message.

Abusive Swearing

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Abusive swearing is used to directly insult or attack the addressee. This type appears less frequently than idiomatic and emphatic swearing and is usually found in moments of high emotional tension.

1. “We'll get the **bastards** next year”. (1.11- Subordinate)

The utterance above can be classified as abusive. Even though this swear word was uttered by Shelby to hurt Miles's feelings, this utterance was said in their interaction after Leo Beebe tricked Miles, making Ford own men their champion instead of Ken Miles. Shelby, in that stressful condition, said “Bastards” to show his anger towards Leo Beebe and his team for betraying them at the end of that race in Le Mans.

2. “Did you bring your son out here to watch you act like an **idiot** or to get disqualified?” (1.1 - Subordinate)

The utterance above is classified as abusive. The word “Idiot” here is used by Carroll Shelby to hurt Ken Miles's feelings because of how he acts however he wants in front of the car inspector before the race, which can damage their reputation in front of other car brands that could be their potential investor.

3. “**Assholes**” (2.2 - Superiors)

The utterance above is classified as abusive. Like what happened previously in Shelby's interaction with his subordinate, this swear word is not intended directly for his superior (Lee Iacocca), but more like the impression of Carroll Shelby for the people around him and his superior in the opening ceremony at the airport. The only reason this utterance is classified as abusive in this interaction is that Shelby said that in the middle of the conversation with his superior (Lee Iacocca).

4. “You knew, you **bastard!**” (2.9 - Superiors)

The utterance above is classified as abusive. This can be classified as abusive because this is purely Shelby swearing to his superior (Leo Beebe), since his superior tricked Ken Miles and him in the final minutes of the Le Mans race, causing Ford's own men to be the champions on the podium instead of Miles.

Table 2. Similarities and Differences in Swear Words Used by Carroll Shelby

Adressee	Descriptive	Idiomatic	Abusive	Empathic	Cathartic	Total
Subordinate	-	4	3	4	-	11
Superiors	-	3	2	5	-	10

To further highlight the similarities and differences between Shelby's interactions, Table 2 presents a direct comparison of swear-word usage toward his subordinate and superiors. While the types of swear words used are identical, differences emerge in topic, function, and dominance of certain types.

The comparison shows that Shelby does not significantly change the *types* of swear words based on status position; however, he adjusts how and why they are used. Swearing toward his subordinate is more personal and affective, showing emotional closeness and high solidarity. In contrast, swearing toward his superiors is more impersonal and informative, showing power distance and professional constraints.

Table 3. Social Factors and Functions Affecting Shelby's Use of Swear Words

Social Factors & Dimensions						
Participants	Setting		Topic		Function	
	Formal	Informal	Personal	Impersonal	Informative	Affective
Subordinate	6	5	5	6	4	7
Superiors	10	-	-	10	6	4

The influence of social factors and social dimensions on Carroll Shelby's use of swear words is summarized in Table 3. Based on Holmes's (2013) framework, the use of swear words in the movie is affected by participants, setting, topic, and function, as well as the related dimensions of solidarity, status, formality, and functionality. These factors work together to shape how swear words are used and interpreted in Shelby's interactions with his subordinate and his superiors.

In terms of participants, solidarity, and status, Shelby's interaction with his subordinate, Ken Miles, reflects high solidarity and a smaller social distance. Their close working relationship allows swear words to function mainly as affective expressions of emotion, such as frustration or encouragement, rather than as personal attacks. Shelby's higher status in this relationship enables him to use swear words more freely, including abusive types, without threatening the relationship. In contrast, interactions with his superiors, Leo Beebe and Lee Iacocca, show lower solidarity and greater social distance due to hierarchical differences. As a result, swearing toward superiors is more limited and occurs mainly in moments of tension, serving to emphasize urgency or disagreement rather than to express personal emotion.

Regarding setting, topic, and function, interactions with superiors take place in formal workplace settings and involve impersonal topics related to work and performance. Although Shelby still uses swear words in these contexts, their function is predominantly informative rather than affective. On the other hand, interactions with the subordinate occur in both formal and informal settings and involve both personal and impersonal topics. This flexibility allows swear words to function affectively and reflect emotional involvement. Overall, these findings demonstrate that Shelby's use of swear words is not random but is shaped by social relationships, power dynamics, and communicative goals within each interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the use of swear words by Carroll Shelby in the movie *Ford v Ferrari*, focusing on his interactions with his subordinate, Ken Miles, and his superiors, Leo Beebe and Lee Iacocca. Using Pinker's (2007) classification of swear-word types and Holmes's (2013) sociolinguistic framework, the study identified the types, frequency, and sociolinguistic factors influencing Shelby's use of swear words in different hierarchical relationships.

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The findings show that Shelby uses three types of swear words, namely idiomatic, emphatic, and abusive, when interacting with both his subordinate and his superiors. In terms of frequency, the difference between the two interactions is not significant, indicating that hierarchical position does not strongly affect how often Shelby swears. However, differences are evident in the function and context of swearing. Swear words directed toward the subordinate tend to be more affective and occur in both formal and informal settings, reflecting higher solidarity and closer social distance. In contrast, swear words used toward superiors are more controlled, occur only in formal settings, and primarily serve informative functions, such as emphasizing urgency or disagreement.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the use of swear words is shaped not only by individual speaking style but also by social relationships, power dynamics, and communicative goals. The findings support Holmes's (2013) view that language variation is closely tied to social factors and dimensions. This study contributes to sociolinguistic research by showing that swear words can function as strategic communicative resources rather than merely offensive language, particularly in professional and high-pressure contexts. Future research may explore swear-word usage across different characters, genres, or real-life workplace interactions to gain broader insights into the sociolinguistics of swearing.

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