

PAULINA PAWŁOWSKA
Pomeranian University in Słupsk, Department of English Studies
paulina.pawlowska@upsl.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-9232-4103

Adults' Perceptions of Swear Words in Children's Literature: A Survey Study

Abstract

Since profanities are primarily an oral phenomenon, research on their presence in children's literature remains relatively scarce. This study aims to examine adults' perceptions and acceptance of offensive language found in literature intended for children and young adults. To this end, a total of 73 respondents evaluated the appropriateness of Polish offensive expressions excerpted from the Polish translation of *The Book of Dust – La Belle Sauvage* by Philip Pullman. The results indicate that the acceptability of offensive words in children's literature decreases as the age of the readership increases. Furthermore, the situational context in which book characters use the word and the degree of its offensiveness also play a role in determining whether such language is acceptable. The study also identifies the expressions perceived by the respondents as most offensive, ranking them from most to least offensive.

Keywords: bad language, profanity, impoliteness, offensiveness, swear words, children's literature

Introduction

The presence of profanity in a variety of daily settings such as media, public discourse, but also everyday speech seems to be undeniable. The scholarly attitudes toward swearing are twofold. A growing body of research highlights the increasing vulgarisation of language and its undesirable consequences such as the impoverishment of "stylistic and cultural-communication competence" (Sikora 2016), the poor impression of the person using swear words (DeFrank, Kahlbaugh 2019), "disintegration of the linguistic norm" (Grybosiowa 1998: 7), and verbal aggression (Griffith 1996: 135, Bralczyk 2008). On the other hand, there is evidence suggesting positive outcomes of swearing, such as enhanced physical performance (Washmuth, Stephens 2022: 2), improved pain tolerance (Stephens, Atkins, Kingston 2009), the feeling of catharsis (Byrne 2018: 87), and an easily-accessible help in communicating emotions (Byrne 2018: 270).

The use of obscene language is strictly connected with the social assessment of offensiveness and general consent to profanity in a particular context, and this, unsurprisingly, is acquired throughout the socialisation process, since “children learn the linguistic rituals associated with politeness (...). The child learns not only when to be polite but what degree of politeness is warranted in a given social setting” (Jay 1992: 30). By parents’ and caretakers’ reactions to children’s output, young language users are socialised into life and learn linguistic patterns such as polite or rude expressions (Kasper 1990: 212).

Scholarly interest in swearing is fairly widespread, with numerous studies devoted to swearing in adults, yet noticeably fewer investigating swearing in children (Jay, Jay 2013: 460). Moreover, swearing is a primarily oral practice (Jay 2000: 260) and attention towards swearing in written forms seems more scant than in oral interactions. Possibly on account of its pedagogical aims, the quality of language in children’s books raises multiple debates (*Daily Mail* 2017; *The Guardian* 2023; *The Guardian* 2010). The unique nature of children’s literature makes it important to examine how authors and translators balance the need to uphold pedagogical values while ensuring the use of natural, accessible language that resonates with young readers. Referring to the general acceptance of profanity, one fact is apparent—it is the society that decides what is adequate for children. Through exposure to social situations, they derive a sense of what is to be said in a particular context, and what degree of politeness is acceptable.

To provide an insight into the level of acceptance of profanities in language directed at children, the present paper seeks to explore the viewpoints of adult language users on the inclusion of swear words in the Polish version of the children’s fantasy novel *The Book of Dust—La Belle Sauvage* by Phillip Pullman. The ongoing debates surrounding Pullman’s language use influenced the decision to analyse his work. As a highly acclaimed author of children’s literature, recognized by multiple awards, Pullman is widely regarded as a writer for young readers (*The Independent* 2023; *The Bookseller* 2017; *The Guardian* 2017). Despite his global influence and literary stature, his works have also sparked controversy over the appropriateness of their language, with some critics finding it objectionable (*Daily Mail* 2017). All English swear words were identified using McEnery’s five-point scale of offence (2006), followed by the extraction of their Polish equivalents from Wojciech Szypuła’s 2020 translation. McEnery’s study is possibly one of the most comprehensive reference frameworks regarding the scale of offensiveness of English language expressions.

The present paper is a follow-up to the author’s previous research on the translation of the book into Polish, the main objective of which was to compare the level of offensiveness in both the English and the Polish texts (Pawłuszek 2022). The findings of the 2022 paper reveal that the English version was deemed slightly more offensive than its Polish translation and that the instances of euphemisation and omission of swear words might have occurred not due to educational reasons, but rather owing to language-specific grammatical patterns and problems in finding suitable equivalents. This investigation forms part of a broader, cross-cultural investigation into the acceptance of swear words in children’s literature, which is why Polish terms are used. Understanding social attitudes towards the degree to which bad language is tolerated may contribute to further research on the overall offensiveness of Polish swear words. The findings could potentially serve as a reference for translators, media regulators, and research in sociolinguistics.

Swear Words

Swear words usually relate to taboo spheres, most notably sex, religion and bodily functions (Montagu 1967; Hughes 1991). Although the perception of offensiveness regarding individual expressions frequently changes (Montagu 1967), these three categories remain notably consistent across cultures and time (Stapleton 2010: 289). Agreeing on a universal definition is challenging since evaluating the offensiveness of a particular taboo expression extends beyond the pragmatic glosses present in dictionaries and frequently involves conflicting views on what should be considered as swearing. Hence, there are various, often contradictory, definitions of tabooed parts of language. Montagu (1967: 100) defines curse words as those “possessing or capable of being given an emotional weight.” According to this view, any word or phrase carrying an emotional load can be assigned the role of profanity. A somewhat more detailed definition by Jay and Janschewitz (2008: 268) reads that “swearing is the use of taboo language with the purpose of expressing the speaker’s emotional state and communicating that information to listeners.”

Andersson and Trudgill (2007: 195) believe there are three criteria that must be met for a word to be offensive. According to these scholars, an offensive word 1) “refers to something taboo or stigmatised,” 2) “is not to be interpreted literally,” and 3) “expresses strong emotions or attitudes.” Andersson and Trudgill’s second criterion appears to be the most contentious aspect in swearing research as it entirely excludes the literal (referential) use of offensive expressions. While Montagu (1967), Hirsch (1985), Andersson and Trudgill (2007), and Ljung (2011) agree on this criterion, other scholars adopt a broader approach, assuming that both non-literal and literal instances of swearing can be swear words (e.g. Pinker 2007; McEnery 2006; Hughes 2006). One of the main reasons behind the dispute is that referential uses of offensive words do not fulfil the function of emotional cathartic expression and can be replaced with inoffensive synonyms, which is otherwise not possible (see Ljung 2011: 12).

From a neurolinguistic perspective, it is important to emphasise that both literal and non-literal usages are psychologically arousing – which does not happen with neutral terms – and can therefore be considered inappropriate and abusive (cf. Janschewitz 2008). In the present paper, all the swear words are understood according to McEnery’s definition of profanity, which states “any word or phrase which, when used in what one might call polite conversation, is likely to cause offense” (McEnery 2006: 1).

Given the above considerations, the ambiguous nature of profanity makes it difficult to establish clear-cut boundaries between different expressions, both in terms of semantic meaning and level of offensiveness (Jay, Janschewitz 2008: 269). As mentioned earlier, fully accounting for the nature, functions and type of obscene expressions requires incorporating pragmatic variables of social interactions such as nonverbal communication, degree of formality, location, conversational topic, etc. (*ibidem*). The upcoming sections of the present paper constitute an analysis of Polish equivalents of the swear words found in *The Book of Dust–La Belle Sauvage* by Phillip Pullman, identified by applying the following scale of offence created by McEnery (2006: 30):

A scale of offence

1. very mild (*bird, bloody, crap, damn, god, hell, hussy, idiot, pig, pillock, sod, son-of-a-bitch, tart*);
2. mild (*arse, balls, bitch, bugger, christ, cow, dickhead, git, Jesus, jew, moron, pissed off, screw, shit, slag, slut, sod, tit, tits, tosser*);

3. moderate (*arsehole, bastard, bollocks, gay, nigger, piss, paki, poofter, prick, shag, spastic, twat, wanker, whore*);
4. strong (*fuck*);
5. very strong (*cunt, motherfucker*).

The scale includes five levels of offensiveness ranging from very mild to very strong and is based on the previous classifications created by Millwood-Hargrave (2000) and the British Board of Film Classification Guidelines. McEnery's scale presents one of the most extensive large-scale corpus-based studies of contemporary English, integrating sociological theory and historical analysis. No equally extensive research has been carried out on Polish swear words. All words assigned to each level of offensiveness served as a reference point for selecting expressions to be used as indicators in extracting Polish swear words. It is believed that McEnery's scale of offensiveness in English may also be applicable to Polish, given the cross-cultural universality of swear words and the observation that major taboo themes are recurrent in many languages (Ljung 2011: 35, Stapleton 2010: 289, McEnery 2006). This assumption was validated by lexicographic evidence (WSJP; SJP; *Słownik Polskich Przekleństw i Wulgaryzmów* 1995), which confirmed that all the Polish terms used in the present study exhibited offensive qualities.

Perception of Offensiveness

The nature of the present study, which involves having respondents evaluate the offensiveness of expressions, requires clarification that a person's assessment and perception of impoliteness are influenced by neurological, psychological, and sociocultural (NPS) factors. These perceptions will vary based on factors such as one's experiences with a language and culture, the location of the interaction, relationship between the interlocutors, motivation, intention, and whether the speaker and listener are native speakers of the language (Jay, Janschewitz 2008). From a social perspective, foul language is connected to socio-economic status (see, *inter alia*, McEnery 2006: 44). Vulgar language has frequently been perceived as a reflection of social class differences, with its use – particularly swearing – more commonly associated with lower social strata, lower levels of formal education, and it has even been linked to violence and aggression (Mohr 2013: 11, Ljung 2011: 7).

In 19th century Poland, for instance, curse words were perceived as a sign of low cultural and social status, inappropriate for official situations, and were mostly used in private conversations (Grybosiowa 1998). At the turn of the 20th century, however, the spreading and acceptance of swear words became discernible (e.g. Ożóg 2001, Grybosiowa 1998, Kowalik 2008). The use of swear words can be viewed as part of a broader linguistic shift toward colloquialisation, a phenomenon closely correlated with social and political transformations. In Poland, the increasing use of informal and taboo language has been attributed to the political changes following 1989, which fostered a preference for directness over formality (Garcarz 2004). This tendency is particularly evident among younger generations, for whom slang and swear words are becoming more prevalent (Garcarz 2004, Święcicka 2006, Stenström 2014). It also appears that young women and men swear in similar ways. A study carried out by Garcarz (2004) examined slang, swearing, and derogatory language among 60 Polish-speaking youth (aged 17–19), focusing on gender differences. The findings revealed that both young men and women use informal language similarly, challenging the common belief that men swear more frequently (Garcarz 2004).

Despite the growing use and acceptance of swearing, it is still considered to be “a violation of the existing norm,” as evidenced by a survey in which over 91% of Poles reported being offended by uncensored language (Feliksiak 2013: 6). Interestingly, studies devoted to the use, frequency and level of offensiveness of bad language in Poland have long been neglected, and existing research tends to focus on classifying and recognising swear words (Zarzycki 2024: 5; 38).

One's sensitivity to language quality is contingent on many factors, including those connected with personal differences such as experience and fluency in a language, the feeling of offence, gender, sociocultural knowledge as well as intention and general understanding of rudeness (Jay, Janschewitz 2008: 271–277). One fact, however, is of particular importance with reference to obscene components of language – the sense of offensiveness lies not in the words themselves, but in the context. One word can bring about a variety of different reactions depending on what it pertains to. The significance of context is widely acknowledged in linguistics and remains essential across multiple disciplines. Its role was already evident in Grice's Conversational Maxims (1975) and Searle's Speech Acts (1969), where it is fundamental to interpreting linguistic utterances. Context plays a crucial role in meaning construction, inference, variation, modulation, and sense disambiguation (Faber, Aarus 2016: 2). It is equally vital in cognitive linguistics, as processing inherently involves linking an utterance or object to the appropriate context – an ability the human brain executes with ease (Faber, Aarus 2016: 3).

It seems safe to assume that the significance of context is well established in contemporary research on swear words (see Jay 2020; Jay, Janschewitz 2008; Fägersten 2012: 15; 10). Interestingly, early research on bad language did not always account for context. As noted by Fägersten (2012: 76), initial studies on swear words deliberately removed contextual information, leading to consistently high offensiveness ratings. This approach contributed to what is known as the “Swearing Paradox,” a phenomenon where the most frequently used swear words are also those judged to be the most offensive (Fägersten 2012).

As emphasised by Faber (2012: 256), “the main purpose of a linguistic context is to widen the knowledge horizon of text receivers since a meaning definition is always an underspecification, and is not sufficient by itself to provide the user with a full understanding of the term.” The selection of context cannot be arbitrary; instead, providing appropriate contextual information is essential to creating an environment conducive to understanding meaning while minimising complexity (*ibidem*).

Empirical studies support the claim that swearing is entirely dependent on contextual variables (Jay, Janschewitz 2008). Moreover, any reports of “average” offensive speech productions or perceptions of swearing risk “gloss[ing] over the importance of contextual and personal differences” (Jay 2020: 10). Among the key factors influencing perceived offensiveness are also the speaker-listener relationship, social and physical context, the particular word used, the speaker's gender, and prior experience with the language. Swearing practices are socially conditioned, as children learn how to swear over time based on whether such behaviour is rewarded or punished (Jay, Janschewitz 2008: 165; 272).

Children's Literature

The key challenges in defining the whole category of children's literature arise from the primary objectives of books. Additionally, the aims of children's literature are diverse and have evolved over time (Hunt 2006: 10). They include, for example, entertainment, acquiring literacy, developing imagination, instilling social

attitudes, and teaching how to overcome struggles (*ibidem*). Although many books intended for children exhibit characteristic traits of children's literature, defining the category in a comprehensive manner and differentiating it from adult literature remains a complex task. Scholars frequently acknowledge fallacies of the term "children's literature" and point to the semantic opposition of the words "children" and "literature," which always results in the meaning of one word being reduced: "If we prioritize one word for another (...), the prospects for confusion remain substantial. (...) And when we join the two words, have we excluded certain possibilities which might otherwise attach to each?" (Hollindale 1997: 8).

Hollindale lists three key factors significantly related to formulating any definition of children's literature: "suitability, preference and response" (*ibidem*). All of these aspects, however, might change as soon as the book is published and distributed due to the fact that books can be read by a group of readers for whom they were not intended. While defining children's literature by its readership might seem reliable to some, it appears to have certain limitations since many books commonly regarded as part of the genre *children's literature* were not originally written for children or adolescents, but intended for adult readers (Wall 1991). Hunt provides a somewhat wide definition of children's literature, defining it as "books read by, especially suitable for, or especially satisfying for members of the group currently defined as children" (Hunt [in:] Hollindale 1997: 24). It must be noted that such a definition includes different types of texts and therefore is "not very practical" (*ibidem*). Defining children's literature with the focus placed on the preference of the potential audience would include any type of text appealing to children and this, undeniably, would include low-quality texts and non-literary works (Gubar 2011: 209).

The multiplicity of texts commonly recognised as children's literature has led some literary critics to abandon attempts at definition. Pursuing this approach, Townsend concludes that "children are not a separate form of life from people" and one should "abandon the attempt and say that there is no such thing as children's literature" (Townsend 1971: 196–197). At the other end of the extreme one finds approaches rooted in the idea that there are distinct differences between adults and children and, accordingly, between books addressed to each group. McDowell puts forward the idea that "children think quantitatively differently than adults" and certain thoughts conveyed in adults' literature are therefore not accessible to children (1973: 52). Such differences in understanding concepts might principally account for children's fiction presenting different features than books written for adults. In McDowell's view, the main differences are as follows:

Children's books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order, probability is often disregarded; and one could go endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity, and adventure. (McDowell 1973:51)

Taking into account the dynamics of book publishing, it might as well be stated that "the only practical definition of a children's book today – absurd as it sounds – is a book which appears on the children's list of a publisher" (Townsend 1971: 10). The presence of such undeclared disagreement as regards the term in question and the lack of universal standards for the word "literature" might contribute to the discussion as to whether children's literature is literature at all, or whether it is a mere "courtesy title," to quote Hollindale (1997: 9). The primary aim of this study is to gain an insight into the socio-

linguistic aspects of the texts made available and popular among children, leaving the assessment of their belonging to various classifications to literary scholars.

Although delineating a universal standard for children's literature with the use of readership-based criterion has its imperfections, this approach constitutes the basis for choosing the text discussed in this paper. The ongoing discussions about the language used by Pullman prompted the selection of the book for analysis. Moreover, Philip Pullman, the winner of numerous awards for children's literature, seems to have established himself as an author of books for children, and is considered as such (see *The Independent* 2023, *The Bookseller* 2017, *The Guardian* 2017).

The Use of Swearing in Children's Media

As language evolves to reflect societal shifts, literature and film similarly adapt, incorporating elements of everyday speech – including profanity – to enhance authenticity and relatability. Among the various functions of swear words used in mainstream television series, Bednarek identifies their role in adding humour, driving the plot, influencing the audience's perception and emotions, as well as serving as catchphrases (Bednarek 2019).

At the same time, concerns about children's exposure to offensive language highlight the role of parental consent in media regulation. As evidenced by the British Board of Film Classification, parental approval of highly offensive swear words in media content is not widespread. The study indicates that parents act as "gatekeepers" and prefer not to hear strong language, instead expecting the media industry to share the responsibility. While the trend in increasing offensiveness seems to be raising concerns, one of the studies reported that despite an overall increase in swearing on television, its prevalence in US teen-oriented movies has declined over the past three decades (Cressman *et al.* 2009). This decrease spans nearly all types of profanity, potentially due to social and political pressures or shifts in audience expectations. The rise of home viewing may also contribute to more restrained language in teen films (*ibidem*).

Swearing in children's television naturally varies by country. In Denmark, its inclusion is allowed but remains controversial, as opinions on acceptable language in media differ. An official statement by the head of the children's TV channel in response to parental criticism towards bad language used in one of the series reads as follows: "We are not interested in displaying children the way they ought to be, but the way they actually are. [Pendlerkids] is a very modern series about the life of children, unregulated by their parents" (Rathje 2017: 38). The audience's requirements and the broadcaster's demands for authenticity are frequently conflicting, and the reason for the growing use of bad language in Danish children's television might be due to the fact that "the public service television station no longer considers it relevant for children's programmes to have an educational mission" (Rathje 2017: 71).

As regards literary texts for the young, swearing is both stylistically and semantically diverse, serving various functions, such as conveying realism, humor, emotional expression, and wordplay (Višček 2024). In a study examining the 40 most popular adolescent novels, 88% of books were found to contain swear words (Coyne *et al.* 2012). The influence of publishers on language moderation in children's literature further illustrates the tension between realism and social acceptability towards swear words as well as social taboos. Dyla-Urbańska (2020) discusses the case of the Polish publisher Akapit Press,

which hesitated to publish Joanna Nadin's *The Rachel Riley Diaries* due to its liberal depictions of sexuality. As a result, the publisher insisted on making substantial changes to the translation, removing or softening terms such as "lesbian," the offensive British slang expression "bender," the adjective "lesbo," several references to body parts, and mentions of abortion. Dyla-Urbańska challenges this approach, expressing concern that it may constitute a "violation of translation ethics" (2020: 207).

The role of cultural factors in the perception of swearing is undeniable, much like the varying ways it is allowed in the media. Kuzio's (2018) research on Polish and British English speakers found that while many believe swearing should not be openly used in public discourse, its acceptability varies by context. British English speakers were found to be more expressive with taboo words in emotional situations than Poles. This variability most certainly influences both children's literature and movies, where content creators must strike a balance between authenticity and societal expectations.

Methodology

The present study takes a step towards understanding the general perspectives of adult language users regarding the presence of swear words in children's literature. The inquiry centres on the assessment of Polish offensive expressions present in the translated version of *The Book of Dust: La Belle Sauvage* by Philip Pullman from 2017. The paper constitutes an element of a more comprehensive study whose aim is to develop a framework for the translation of offensive expressions in English and Polish found in literary texts. Accordingly, the present paper partially builds on the author's previous work (Pawłuszek 2022), focusing primarily on Polish expressions. The results of this study might offer insight into societal views on the accessibility of bad language among Polish respondents, contribute to future studies on the overall offensiveness of Polish swear words, and serve as a reference for Polish translators, media regulators, and linguists.

The survey participants consisted of 73 Polish native speakers aged between 25 and 70, mostly university lecturers and students. The identification of terms as offensive and their inclusion in the analysis are based on McEnery's (2006) scale of swear words detailed earlier. The (English) expressions from the book were initially identified, and then the Polish version of the book, translated by Wojciech Szypuła, was scanned to retrieve the Polish equivalents to the English expressions. In total, 34 swear words were identified. The list of Polish vulgar expressions from *La Belle Sauvage. Księga Pyłu* reads as follows, along with their English translations¹:

| Contextualised Offensive Expressions with Their English Near Equivalents | Contextualised Offensive Expressions from the Polish Translation |
|--|---|
| Whatever Mal says, I believe him, so stop grinning, jerk! | Cokolwiek mówi Mal, ja mu wierzę, więc się przestań głupio uśmiechać, palancie! |

1 Polish expressions listed here are those used by the translator in *La Belle Sauvage. Księga Pyłu*. Most of the terms were not word-for-word translations of English terms found in the original text. As evidenced in Pawłuszek (2022), many words were either added, omitted, euphemised or strengthened in the translation process, with a number of them appearing in the adjacent textual vicinity, reflecting specific strategies employed by the translator.

| Contextualised Offensive Expressions with Their English Near Equivalents | Contextualised Offensive Expressions from the Polish Translation |
|---|--|
| Go bite off your other hand, shrew . Come on, bite... | Weź sobie drugą łapę odgryź, franco . No dalej, gryź... |
| Shut up, bitch . | Zamknij się suko . |
| Damn! Do you think he's a Muscovite? | Do diabła! Myślisz, że to moskwianin? |
| What did I tell you? That you're a fool? Worse, you're a complete, stupid idiot . | Co ci powiedziałam? Że jesteś neptek? Gorzej, jesteś skończonym, tępym głupolem . |
| A: Do you know where the garden sheds are? - B: In the monastery? - A: Where else, idiot ? | -A: Wiesz, gdzie są szopy ogrodnicze?- B: W klasztorze? -A: A gdzie indziej, głupku ? |
| Mal is stronger than me, and when he says he's going to do something, he fucking does it! | Mał jest silniejszy ode mnie i kiedy mówi, że coś zrobi, to tak właśnie, kurwa , robi! |
| Take the kid and that bloody backpack. | Zabierzcie dziecko i ten wasz przeklęty plecak. |
| She's too young, you bloody idiot ... | Za młoda jest, durniu skończony... |
| It's bloody uncomfortable here. | Diabelnie tu niewygodnie. |
| Then look in the mirror, damn it . | To spójrz w lustro, do cholery . |
| Just shut your stupid mouth . I need to think about what to do next. | Po prostu weź i stul ten głupi dziób . Muszę pomyśleć, co dalej. |
| Good thing this is a pharmacy and not some bloody forge. | Dobrze, że to apteka, a nie jakaś zakichana kuźnia. |
| Why do you need her? – asked Malcolm, pressing the child closer to his chest. Because she's a bloody pervert! – Alice replied. | Po co ci ona? – zapytał Malcolm, mocniej przyciskając dziecko do piersi. Bo to jest popieprzony zbok! – odparła Alice. |
| Is it about that bloody League? All of Malcolm's nerves suddenly snapped into place. | Chodzi o tę cholerną Ligę? Wszystkie nerwy w ciele Malcolm'a nagle się ocknęły. |
| You'd cover yourself with your legs if I smacked your fucking head . | Nogami byś się nakrył, jakbym cię piznęła przez łeb . |
| I wonder how you'll paddle in that shitty canoe... | Ciekawe, jak będziesz wtedy wiosłował w tym swoim zasranym kanoe... |
| Put down that stool, bugger , I haven't finished feeding her yet. Add to the fire and don't come near me. | Odstaw ten stółek, szmaciarzu , jeszcze nie skończyłam jej karmić. Dorzuć do ognia i nie zbliżaj się do mnie. |
| Quiet, little one, quiet. Don't cry. Alice got annoyed at that jerk , but she's not mad at you, sweetheart. | Cicho, małeńka, cicho. Nie płacz. Alice wkurzyła się na tego gnoja , ale na ciebie się nie złości, kochaniutka. |
| It's about time, damn it – Alice muttered. | Najwyższy czas, psiakrew – burknęła Alice. |
| What the bloody hell ... – the helmsman babbled incoherently. – Didn't you see that painting?! Do you know who it was?! | Do psiakrew ciężkiej cholery ... – Sternik bełkotał bez ładu i składu. – Nie widziałeś tego malowania?! Wiesz, kto to był?! |
| It's a big, white house, a little further down the river... What the hell is that bastard doing? | To taki duży, biały dom, kawałek stąd w dół rzeki... Co ten dureń wyczynia, do wszystkich diabłów ? |

| Contextualised Offensive Expressions with Their English Near Equivalents | Contextualised Offensive Expressions from the Polish Translation |
|---|--|
| Lying little shit . | Kłamliwy gówniarz . |
| Tell the truth, little shit! – her aunt scolded him. | Gadaj prawdę, gnojku! – zrugła go ciotka. |
| Rude bastards – she muttered, frowning her brows in anger. | Nieuprzejme dranie – burknęła, marszcząc gniewnie brwi. |
| Yeah, yeah – Alice interrupted Malcolm. – Bastards . | Tak, tak – przerwała Malcolmowi Alice. – Łajdaki . |
| Alice Parslow? It's you, right? I know your mom. And you're Malcolm Polstead from Trout... God bless me . What happened, George? | Alice Parslow? To ty, prawda? Znam twoją mamę. A ty jesteś Malcolm Polstead z Pstrąga... A niech mnie . Co się stało, George? |
| By God , there was no other shelter for her, but I was against it because it seemed impossible. | Jak mi Bóg miły , nie było dla niej innego schronienia, ale byłam temu przeciwna, bo wydawało mi się to niewykonalne. |
| Oh God! What happened?! | O mój Boże! Co się stało?! |
| By God , what a treat. | Na Boga , ależ pyszności. |
| Good God! – Coram exclaimed, who knew the story well. – How did that happen? | Wielkie nieba! – wykrzyknął Coram, który doskonale znał tę historię. – Jak do tego doszło? |
| Stick it up your arse . | W dupę je sobie wsadź . |
| We must have hit a rock. Goddammit . | Musieliśmy uderzyć o kamień. Szlag by to trafił . |
| Oh, bollocks! – Alice dropped her backpack on the grass. – This is driving me crazy! | Kurde , no! – Alice zrzuciła plecak na trawę. – To mnie doprowadza do szału! |

The Polish expressions thus identified were incorporated into a two-part online survey. In part 1 of the survey, participants were asked to assess the general level of offensiveness of the words and expressions on a four-point Likert scale: non-offensive, slightly offensive, offensive, highly offensive. Research on the perception of swear words commonly employs questionnaire-based methodologies, utilising various classification systems to assess offensiveness. For example, studies conducted by Briechle and Eppler (2019) and Pavessi and Zamora (2024) utilised a 1–4 Likert scale, while Kapoor (2014) implemented a three-point scale, categorizing expressions as mild, moderate, or severe. In a similar vein, this study adopts a survey-based approach to explore the perception of Polish swear words concerning their level of offensiveness. The scale used in this study was specifically created for the purposes of this research. No additional background information or context was provided at this stage, but the respondents were informed that the study investigates swear words, which naturally suggested the words' offensiveness. The aim of this procedure was to examine a potential change of perception upon learning that the words are supposed to be part of children's literature. A positive result would further emphasise the importance of context². The question to this part read: *What is your assessment of the degree of vulgarity of the following words and expressions?* Participants could add comments for each of the words/expressions presented.

2 Appropriateness ratings of swear words in children's literature were solely determined based on words within context. More detailed description is presented in the tables found in the following sections.

In part 2 of the survey, the respondents were asked to assess the same words and expressions, however, this time they were presented along with their immediate co-text (*i.e.*, they were given the whole sentences from the novel in which the words/expressions were used). The participants were also asked to evaluate the degree of offensiveness of the words/expressions if they appeared in a book addressed to a specific age group. To better suit the purpose of this article, the readership has been divided into three age groups: 7–12, 13–18, and 18 and older. The first two groups correspond to the typical schooling stages in Poland for the years 1999–2019, with the 7–12 age group representing primary school years and the 13–18 corresponding to secondary education, including middle and high school. The age of 18 marks the legal age of majority in Poland³. The exact question read: *What would be your assessment of the degree of vulgarity of the following words and expressions if you learnt that they appeared in a book addressed to the following readers aged: 7–12, 13–18, 18+.* The same four-point scale from part one of the study was used. Similarly to the previous questionnaire, participants could add comments for each of the words/expressions presented.

The questionnaire was so designed that the participants could not return to the first part after completing it. This procedure ensured that no changes were made in part 1 upon learning the full context of the study, the aim being to collect unsolicited feedback. The respondents were sent the online survey, and there was no time limit for the completion of the questionnaire. Each participant could fill in the survey only once.

For the purposes of the analysis, the options in the Likert scale were replaced with discrete values, according to the following scheme: non-offensive (value=0), slightly offensive (value=1), offensive (value=2), and highly offensive (value=3). The results are presented as a mathematical average, pointing to the perception of vulgarity on a scale from 0–3, with 0 representing the non-offensive end, and 3 pointing to the highly-offensive end.

Results and Discussion

The data obtained in the entire study are presented in Table 1. The discrete values are colour-coded to reflect the value-ranges obtained in the study and reflecting the degree of offensiveness: yellow – slightly offensive (values: 0.001–1.000), orange – offensive (1.001–2.000), and red – highly offensive (2.001–3.000).

Table 1. Perceived degree of offensiveness of Polish words/expressions found in the Polish translation of *The Book of Dust: La Belle Sauvage* by Phillip Pullman

| Ex. | word/ expression | Part 1 general assessment | Part 2 intended readership age | | |
|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| | | | age 7–12 | age 13–18 | age 18+ |
| 1 | A niech mnie! (God bless me!) | 0.028 | 0.068 | 0.028 | 0.014 |

3 Due to educational reforms in 2017, the middle school system designed for 13–15-year-olds was abolished, and replaced with primary schools for students aged 7–14. Middle schools (gymnasiums) existed in Poland for 20 years, which significantly contributed to society's familiarity with this division. It was therefore assumed that the age groups classified as 7–12 and 13–18 align with the general aim of the study. Moreover, under the new system, students finish primary school at the age of 14, meaning the change only affects a one-year difference compared to the previous division.

| Ex. | word/ expression | Part 1 general assessment | Part 2 intended readership age | | |
|-----|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| | | | age 7–12 | age 13–18 | age 18+ |
| 2 | Boże! (God!) | 0.056 | 0.068 | 0.042 | 0.042 |
| 3 | cholerny (bloody) | 0.887 | 1.222 | 0.600 | 0.429 |
| 4 | diabelnie (bloody) | 0.167 | 0.438 | 0.211 | 0.141 |
| 5 | Do cholery! (Damn it!) | 0.794 | 1.438 | 0.732 | 0.577 |
| 6 | Do diabła! (Damn!) | 0.288 | 0.736 | 0.286 | 0.171 |
| 7 | Do psiakrew ciężkiej cholery! (What the bloody hell!) | 0.887 | 1.301 | 0.662 | 0.394 |
| 8 | Do wszystkich diabłów! (What the hell!) | 0.278 | 1.123 | 0.563 | 0.394 |
| 9 | drań (bastard) | 0.233 | 0.479 | 0.268 | 0.169 |
| 10 | dureń (bastard) | 0.694 | 1.288 | 0.718 | 0.563 |
| 11 | franca (shrew) | 0.658 | 1.589 | 1.099 | 0.8 |
| 12 | głupek (idiot) | 0.583 | 1.096 | 0.592 | 0.479 |
| 13 | głupol (idiot) | 0.437 | 1.384 | 0.803 | 0.620 |
| 14 | gnojek (little shit) | 0.863 | 1.466 | 0.915 | 0.718 |
| 15 | gnój (jerk) | 1.630 | 1.493 | 0.930 | 0.761 |
| 16 | gówniarz (little shit) | 0.959 | 1.671 | 1.070 | 0.859 |
| 17 | Jak mi Bóg miły! (By God!) | 0.028 | 0.082 | 0.056 | 0.028 |
| 18 | Kurde, no! (Oh, bollocks!) | 0.264 | 0.658 | 0.197 | 0.155 |
| 19 | kurwa (fuck) | 2.726 | 2.611 | 2.225 | 1.789 |
| 20 | łajdak (bastard) | 0.397 | 0.630 | 0.282 | 0.183 |
| 21 | Na Boga! (By God!) | 0.085 | 0.096 | 0.014 | 0.014 |
| 22 | palant (jerk) | 0.849 | 1.704 | 0.971 | 0.629 |
| 23 | piznać przez łeb (smack someone's fucking head) | 2.096 | 2.301 | 1.873 | 1.549 |
| 24 | popieprzony (bloody) | 1.411 | 2.178 | 1.648 | 1.239 |
| 25 | przeklęty (bloody) | 0.247 | 0.750 | 0.437 | 0.296 |
| 26 | psiakrew (damn it) | 0.333 | 0.808 | 0.408 | 0.254 |
| 27 | Stul ten głupi dziób! (Shut your stupid mouth!) | 1.380 | 1.452 | 0.887 | 0.676 |
| 28 | suka (bitch) | 2.315 | 2.685 | 2.380 | 2.099 |
| 29 | Szlag by to trafił! (Goddammit!) | 0.458 | 0.904 | 0.493 | 0.296 |
| 30 | szmaciarz (bugger) | 1.808 | 2.096 | 1.634 | 1.324 |
| 31 | W dupę je sobie wsadź! (Stick it up your arse!) | 1.639 | 2.027 | 1.507 | 1.296 |
| 32 | Wielkie nieba! (Good God!) | 0.056 | 0.068 | 0.028 | 0.014 |
| 33 | zakichany (bloody) | 0.247 | 0.548 | 0.239 | 0.155 |
| 34 | zasrany (shitty) | 1.644 | 1.890 | 1.338 | 1.014 |

As can be seen from the table, the respondents' acceptance of the use of swear expressions grows with the age of the intended readers. In four cases (examples 8, 11, 13 and 25), the perceived degree of offensiveness of the words/expressions is lower in part 1 of the study (general, decontextualized assessment) than the perceived degree of offensiveness evaluated against all defined age groups considered in part 2 of the study. This may indicate that these relatively mild-to-moderate expletives gain 'strength' when used in literary texts, which may indicate an underlying shared understanding of the appropriateness of certain language choices in this type of writing. Interestingly enough, the data related to the words *gnój* and *kurwa* (examples 15 and 19, respectively) seemingly reveal that the perceived degree of offensiveness in literary texts, even those addressed to the youngest readers, is lower than in the case of the general assessment of vulgarity.

Exploring nuanced perceptions of word appropriateness may require a more comprehensive study, incorporating examples presented in various contexts alongside in-depth interviews to understand informants' rating choices. Further analysis could integrate contextual variables, such as examining how offensiveness varies based on the speaker (child vs. adult), setting (school vs. home), intent (joking vs. insulting), etc. Additionally, it may be beneficial to expand the offensiveness scale to capture more detailed distinctions and variations in perception. Another reason for a low degree of offensiveness for the mentioned words might be due to the twofold nature of the words in question, ie. *kurwa*⁴ and *gnój*⁵ can be both derogatory terms referring to a person, but can also have a possibly less offensive meaning in different contexts – *kurwa* is also an emotional interjection and *gnój* is a colloquial term for 'manure'. What could aid further analysis of the discussed words is the classification of respondents' evaluations based on demographic data, such as gender, age, profession, etc. However, with only 73 respondents, including detailed demographic data would have limited the ability to perform statistically meaningful subgroup analyses.

Given the small sample size, any breakdown by demographic variables could lead to comparisons with insufficient statistical count, potentially rendering them less informative. This decision ensured that the primary objective – capturing general public sentiment – remained clear and uncompromised by the noise that small subgroup analyses might introduce.

In all other cases, the perceived offensiveness of words and expressions aimed at readers aged 7–12 is noticeably higher than the overall assessment of the offensiveness of the analyzed linguistic means. On average, these values are 47% higher for the 7–12 age group, 54% higher for the 13–18 age group, and 101% higher for the 18+ age group. The finding indicates that the acceptance of swear words used towards young children is lower than for young adults and adults.

The results related to the age category 13–18 suggest a considerably greater degree of acceptance for expletives in literary texts for this age group, compared to the lower age category of 7–12, with all the values lower in the former group, and with as many as 15 (44%) words/expressions featuring values lower than those obtained in the general assessment test. This finding seems convincing, in so far as the 15 language items mentioned above rank from mildly to highly offensive (examples 2, 3, 5, 7, 15, 18, 20,

4 The complete sentence with context used in the study was: "Mal jest silniejszy ode mnie i kiedy mówi, że coś zrobi, to tak właśnie, kurwa, robi!" (*La Belle Sauvage. Księga prochu*; translated by Szypuła 2020).

5 The complete sentence with context used in the study was: "Cicho, małeńka, cicho. Nie płacz. Alice wkurzyła się na tego gnoja, ale na ciebie się nie złości, kochaniutka."; (*La Belle Sauvage. Księga prochu*; translated by Szypuła 2020).

21, 23, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34). All of the values are also higher than those referring to the age category 18+ (by a mean percentage of 30%).

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The numerical data allowed for the comparability of data across all the categories analysed. Therefore, it was possible to rank the words/expressions according to their perceived degree of offensiveness for each category. Table 2 shows the results arranged from the most to the least offensive.

Table 2. Swear words by the degree of offensiveness: general assessment and by age category of readership. Data arranged from the most to the least offensive items

| Rank | GENERAL ASSESSMENT | age 7–12 | age 13–18 | age 18+ |
|------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | kurwa | suka | suka | suka |
| 2 | suka | kurwa | kurwa | kurwa |
| 3 | piznąć przez leb | piznąć przez leb | piznąć przez leb | piznąć przez leb |
| 4 | szmaciarz | popieprzony | popieprzony | szmaciarz |
| 5 | zasrany | szmaciarz | szmaciarz | W dupę je sobie wsadź! |
| 6 | W dupę je sobie wsadź! | W dupę je sobie wsadź! | W dupę je sobie wsadź! | popieprzony |
| 7 | gnój (about a person) | zasrany | zasrany | zasrany |
| 8 | popieprzony | palant | franca | gówniarz |
| 9 | Stul ten głupi dziób! | gówniarz | gówniarz | franca |
| 10 | gówniarz | franca | palant | gnój (about a person) |
| 11 | Do psiakrew ciężkiej cholery! | gnój (about a person) | gnój (about a person) | gnojek |
| 12 | cholerny | gnojek | gnojek | Stul ten głupi dziób! |
| 13 | gnojek | Stul ten głupi dziób! | Stul ten głupi dziób! | palant |
| 14 | palant | Do cholery! | głupol | głupol |
| 15 | Do cholery! | głupol | Do cholery! | Do cholery! |
| 16 | dureń | Do psiakrew ciężkiej cholery! | dureń | dureń |
| 17 | franca | dureń | Do psiakrew ciężkiej cholery! | głupek |
| 18 | głupek | cholerny | cholerny | cholerny |
| 19 | Szlag by to trafił! | Do wszystkich diabłów! | głupek | Do psiakrew ciężkiej cholery! |
| 20 | głupol | głupek | Do wszystkich diabłów! | Do wszystkich diabłów! |
| 21 | łajdak | Szlag by to trafił! | Szlag by to trafił! | Szlag by to trafił! |
| 22 | psiakrew | psiakrew | przeklęty | przeklęty |
| 23 | Do diabła! | przeklęty | psiakrew | psiakrew |
| 24 | Do wszystkich diabłów! | Do diabła! | Do diabła! | łajdak |
| 25 | Kurde, no! | Kurde, no! | łajdak | Do diabła! |

| Rank | GENERAL ASSESSMENT | age 7–12 | age 13–18 | age 18+ |
|------|--------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 26 | zakichany | łajdak | drań | drań |
| 27 | przeklęty | zakichany | zakichany | zakichany |
| 28 | drań | drań | diabelnie | Kurde, no! |
| 29 | diabelnie | diabelnie | Kurde, no! | diabelnie |
| 30 | Na Boga! | Na Boga! | Jak mi Bóg miły! | Boże! |
| 31 | Boże! | Jak mi Bóg miły! | Boże! | Jak mi Bóg miły! |
| 32 | Wielkie nieba! | Boże! | Wielkie nieba! | Wielkie nieba! |
| 33 | A niech mnie! | Wielkie nieba! | A niech mnie! | A niech mnie! |
| 34 | Jak mi Bóg miły! | A niech mnie! | Na Boga! | Na Boga! |

The set of data presented in Table 2, with individual cells colour-coded for the ranges of values representing the degree of offensiveness (see above for explanations), may be used to illustrate the attitudes towards profanities in children's literature (age categories 7–12 and 13–18). It is worth emphasising that in the case of these two age categories, as many as 15 items share the same rank in the table, while other 14 items fall within the range of +/-1 position, and 3 items fall within the range of +/-2 positions on the rank list. The exceptions here are *Kurde, no!* and *Na Boga!*, each differing by 4 places on the rank list for age categories 7–12 and 13–18. Notably, the greatest differences occur between the positions based on the values linked to the general assessment of the degree of offensiveness, and the remaining three categories (for reasons already mentioned above).

Although the expressions were presented within sentences that helped convey their original meaning and were carefully selected, certain words' interpretation might still depend on broader context, such as the relationships between book characters, membership in a particular social group, or characters' previous experiences. A more detailed analysis of such terms merits particular attention. *Kurwa* (=fuck, shit...), for example, is one of the most offensive Polish expressions, and is labelled as such by Grochowski (1995) (i.e. *wulg.* = *vulgar*), as well as dictionaries of Polish language (SJP; WSJP). As regards the present survey, the word was unanimously considered very offensive, gaining in the general assessment 73% of answers for "very offensive," 27% for "offensive" and no answers for "non-offensive" or "slightly offensive." Surprisingly, 14% of recipients labelled *kurwa* as slightly offensive when assessing its appropriateness for the age group 13–18. This may be attributed to the co-text as well as the fact that the view on what is considered offensive has changed over time.

Similar results are observed for the phrase *piznąć przez łeb*, which is labelled as very offensive by Grochowski (*wulg.*!), WSJP (*wulg.*), SJP (*wulg.*), while in the present study, 54% of respondents marked it as "offensive" in the general assessment part, 49% of them labelled it as "very offensive" in the age category 7–12, and 35% as "offensive" for the age category 13–18). What seems rather surprising is that 38% of all answers for the age category 7–12 indicated that the phrase is not classified as an expression with the highest degree of offensiveness. Similarly, the word *suka* was labelled as "very offensive" in the general assessment (44%) as well as the two age categories 7–12 and 13–18 (75% and 54%, respectively), yet a significant number of responders claimed it is only "offensive" (48% in the general assessment test, 21% in 7–12 age category and 35% in the 13–18 age category). According to the dictionaries consulted,

the expression is very offensive and marked as offensive/ colloquial, pejorative (WSJP) or as colloquial/offensive, abusive (Grochowski 1995).

The numerical evidence supporting a strict assessment of highly offensive swear words finds its reflection in the comments provided by the respondents, with 9 such entries indicating that the words/expressions analysed should not be used in the literature addressed to children:

- “Swearing in children’s literature should be avoided.”
- “Highly negative vocabulary should be removed from children’s books.”
- “Words that value negatively and express negative emotions should not be in this type of book.”
- “There are words that, regardless of context, are offensive and should not appear in children’s books.”
- “The word ‘kurwa’ is always offensive even if it is used in strong emotions.”
- “‘Suka’ and ‘kurwa’ are inappropriate.”
- “Too strong for children.”
- “When surprise is expressed with ‘Olaboga!’– I do not find it vulgar at all. On the other hand, it seems to me that surprise expressed with ‘Oż, kurwa!’ is one of the most vulgar words.”
- “The word ‘kurwa’ should be labelled as very offensive in all categories.”

Several comments in part 2 of the questionnaire indicate that participants recognised the significance of context in evaluating the appropriateness of such expressions:

- “It all depends on the situation.”
- “Depends on the context of the whole speech. It is difficult to say on the basis of such excerpts.”
- “For me, the main factor in what I define as vulgar is the intention of the speaker, with the exception of a few words that I consider vulgar regardless of the context.”
- “It is hard for me to judge because it all depends on the context and who is speaking to whom.”
- “It depends. Coming from a lower middle class background, I have a completely different sensitivity to vulgarity than an upper class person.”

Finally, some comments point to the fact that the language used by children and adolescents is elusive, which makes it very difficult to assess the appropriateness of words such as the ones investigated in this study:

- “In fact, it is difficult to tell the difference between the 13–18 and 18+ categories. This is primarily because today’s young people use language similar to that of adults.”
- “Often the words indicated have lost their vulgarity, they are emotional interjections to release tension.”
- “It is hard to say, because the language of children nowadays is more vulgar than that of adults.”
- “There is a huge difference in sensitivity to vulgarity within the given age ranges, *i.e.* between 7 and 12 years.”

Conclusions

The main objective of the present study was to examine the attitudes of adult language users towards Polish offensive expressions in literary fiction intended for children and young adults. The results of this study

indicate that the respondents seem to have a rather strong sense of offensiveness and inappropriateness of profanity when used in the literary language addressed to children and young adults. The study highlights the expressions considered the most offensive by respondents, ranking them from the most to the least offensive. The results also demonstrated that the acceptance of the use of swear words in the literature for specific groups grows with the age of the target readers. Interestingly, some of the theoretically most offensive phrases, such as *kurwa*, *suka*, or *piznąć przez łeb*, *popieprzony*, *szmaciarz*, *w dupę je sobie wsadź*, *zasrany*, *gnój*, were never rated as “very offensive” in this study. Given the highest degree of perceived offensiveness of these expressions and the frequently educational role that children's literature is to fulfil, it is necessary to undertake further research into the attitudes towards swearing, especially with reference to particular types of swear words allowed and specific situations justifying or prohibiting profanity use. This finding prompts consideration of the educational role of children's literature and necessitates further research into the attitudes towards swearing, especially with reference to particular types of swear words allowed and situations justifying or prohibiting profanity use. Despite its relatively limited scope, the study can serve as a guide for authors and translators of literature for children and adolescents. The data collected could also be used to draft a typology of swear words, based on their perceived degree of offensiveness. This task, however, falls beyond the scope of the present paper.

What requires clarification in the first place, and what adds to the major limitations of the study, is that the four categories of offensiveness provide only an approximation and are not to be interpreted within stringent criteria. The difference between *non-offensive* and *offensive*, or *slightly offensive* and *offensive* can be subtle. Understanding these distinctions may vary not only across individuals but also among researchers studying offensive language, on account of the rather undefinable nature of swear words themselves. However, the overall assessment might serve as a valuable reflection of views on children's literature and swear words, despite not fully portraying the actual perception of offensiveness in society.

Although the answers do not serve as an accurate account of the perception of the linguistic trends in society, the results shed some light on the general attitudes in the sampled group of respondents. As far as the study of swear words is concerned, it is worth taking into consideration the specificity of offensiveness. The evaluation of each expression is subjective and depends on individual factors, such as age, type of education obtained, personal preferences and the perception of context, to name but a handful. More generalisable results would require a large-scale survey focusing not only on swear words but also the hearers' idiolectal varieties and individual differences affecting the attitudes, such as age, occupation, sex, and social background. Further studies should also focus on the highly offensive Polish expressions, their distribution in various genres (written and spoken), the perception of their offensiveness in society, the pedagogical role of literature and the attention paid to linguistic etiquette in the face of widespread use of swear words.

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