

**ANATHEMA AND CURSING AS NEGATIVE SPEECH ACTS: A LINGUISTIC AND PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS***Nasiba Hasanova*

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**ABOUT ARTICLE**

**Key words:** anathema, cursing, taboo, swearing, profanity, speech acts.

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**Abstract:** This study examines anathema expressions as a type of negative and offensive language. It explores their semantic, pragmatic, and historical aspects, focusing on curses as ritualized speech acts often involving divine or supernatural authority. The article highlights similarities and differences between anathema, cursing, swearing, taboo, and profane expressions. Findings show that these expressions convey not only strong negative emotions but also culturally and socially shaped verbal acts with significant communicative force. The study contributes to a better understanding of anathema expressions in linguistic and social contexts.

**ANATEMA VA LA'NATLASH SALBIY NUTQ AKTLARI SIFATIDA: LINGVISTIK VA PRAGMATIK TAHLIL***Nasiba Hasanova*

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**MAQOLA HAQIDA**

**Kalit so'zlar:** anatema, qarg'ish, tabu, so'kinish, profan til, nutqiy aktlar.

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu tadqiqot anatem ifodalarni salbiy va haqoratli nutq birliklari sifatida o'rganadi. Tadqiqot semantik, pragmatik va tarixiy jihatlarni yoritadi, ayniqsa qarg'ishlarni marosimlashgan nutqiy aktlar sifatida, ko'pincha ilohiy yoki g'ayritabiiy kuchlarga murojaat bilan bog'liq bo'lganligini ta'kidlaydi. Maqolada anatema, qarg'ish,

so‘kinish, tabu va profan ifodalari o‘rtasidagi o‘xshashlik va farqlar ko‘rsatib berilgan. Natijalar shuni ko‘rsatadiki, bu ifodalari nafaqat kuchli salbiy hissiyotlarni ifodalaydi, balki madaniy va ijtimoiy jihatdan shakllangan, kommunikativ kuchi yuqori nutqiy amaliyotdir. Tadqiqot anatem ifodalarning til va ijtimoiy kontekstdagi ahamiyatini yaxshiroq tushunishga xizmat qiladi.

## АНАФЕМА И ПРОКЛЯТИЕ КАК НЕГАТИВНЫЕ РЕЧЕВЫЕ АКТЫ: ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ И ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ

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### О СТАТЬЕ

<b>Ключевые слова:</b> анафема, проклятие, табу, брань, речевые акты.	анафема, профанизм,	<b>Аннотация:</b> В исследовании рассматриваются анатематические выражения как форма негативной и оскорбительной лексики. Анализируются их семантические, прагматические и исторические аспекты с акцентом на проклятия как ритуализированные речевые акты, часто с обращением к божественной или сверхъестественной власти. Статья выявляет сходства и различия между анатемой, проклятиями, бранной речью, табуированной и профанной лексикой. Результаты показывают, что такие выражения передают не только сильные отрицательные эмоции, но и культурно и социально обусловленные вербальные действия с высокой коммуникативной силой. Исследование способствует лучшему пониманию анатематических выражений в лингвистическом и социальном контексте.
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**Introduction.** In linguistic research, expressions of condemnation, cursing, and verbal hostility have long attracted scholarly attention due to their complex semantic structures and powerful pragmatic effects. Among such phenomena, anathema expressions occupy a distinctive position, as they combine emotional intensity with cultural, religious, and historical dimensions. Linguists have approached these expressions using various terms—such as curses, expletives,

taboo words, swearing, and profanity—often employing them interchangeably, which has led to conceptual ambiguity in the field.

Linguists have examined anathema-related expressions from various perspectives, including their semantic content, historical origins, pragmatic functions, and domains of use, employing a wide range of terminological labels. Anathema expressions are associated with negative emotional states and are defined in lexicographic sources as severe verbal condemnations directed at individuals for unforgivable wrongdoing, grave misconduct, or serious crimes. In scholarly literature, this phenomenon is described using several overlapping terms, such as expletives, taboo expressions, curses, and swear words, which are often used interchangeably.

**Literature Review.** Cursing, in particular, is commonly understood as a verbal act performed in moments of intense anger or in situations where the speaker is unable to seek direct revenge. In such cases, the speaker appeals to divine authority, requesting misfortune or harm to be inflicted upon another individual. This appeal to supernatural power serves as a symbolic means of retaliation against those who have caused offense or injustice. Hornby (1948: 373) characterizes curses as words or expressions believed to possess magical force, employed with the intention of causing harm or exacting revenge. Ballmer and Brennenstuhl observe that expressions such as “Damn you,” “Go to hell,” and “Screw you” are frequently used in contemporary English, each carrying distinct pragmatic functions and producing varying perlocutionary effects. Despite their functional diversity, these expressions primarily convey anger and negative emotional states on the part of the speaker [1981: 73].

According to D. Vanderveken, cursing constitutes a ritualized speech act with religious foundations, typically performed by an individual endowed with special authority who pronounces a curse upon the target. This institutional or symbolic authority enhances the illocutionary force of the curse, allowing it to function as a powerful verbal act. During the act of cursing, speakers often explicitly reference a higher power and direct harmful wishes toward a clearly identified individual. For instance, expressions such as “May you be condemned to eternal damnation” exemplify canonical curse constructions [1990: 198–199].

Hassel defines cursing as an appeal for harm or divine punishment to befall another person [2005: 78–79], whereas C. Olson conceptualizes it as a negative speech act aimed at inflicting harm through language. Olson further interprets cursing as a symbolic “weapon” available to marginalized, powerless, or oppressed individuals who perceive themselves as victims of injustice [2011: 63]. T. Jay expands the scope of curses to include insults and ethnically or racially discriminatory expressions, situating them within the broader category of offensive language [2009: 155]. Similarly, P. Murphy employs the term taboo language to capture this range of

socially prohibited expressions [2010: 138]. Pinker proposes the more inclusive term swearing, applying it to words that are regarded as taboo regardless of contextual variation [2007: 5].

**Methods and Materials.** We use monolingual English and Uzbek dictionaries to define exact meaning of the umbrella term of negative language and differences between the words denoting bad language. We have addressed the works of established scholars from different nations having worked in the field.

Z. Ningjue (2010) classifies anathema expressions as a subset of taboo language, while distinguishing curses, profane expressions, and insults as separate categories. He defines curses as linguistically directed acts that convey pain, hostility, and condemnation toward another individual. In such interactions, the communicative intent is transparent: the speaker deliberately selects anathema expressions, and the addressee recognizes themselves as the explicit target. Profane language, by contrast, involves the inappropriate or irreverent use of religious terminology, particularly references to God or sacred concepts. Z. Ningjue notes that this category ranges from relatively mild forms such as “hell” or “damn” to more forceful expressions like “goddamn” [2010: 6].

T. Jay (1992) conceptualizes cursing as the expression of intent to harm another individual through specific lexical items or constructions. He further argues that profane expressions are not necessarily motivated by deliberate religious offense, but often stem from indifference toward or ignorance of religious values [1992: 8]. J. Pearsall (2025) explains that within Protestant discourse, the term anathema is frequently interpreted as signifying eternal divine condemnation. However, this interpretation does not fully align with historical usage. Originally, anathema referred to a formal ecclesiastical sanction applied by church courts in response to severe transgressions. This sanction was administered through ritualized procedures and aimed primarily at encouraging repentance. In practice, such measures were rarely applied and were eventually abolished [2025: 1].

Additional definitions describe anathema as referring either to a person or object that is profoundly detested, or, in its religious sense, to one who has been excommunicated. In biblical contexts, anathema denoted objects or individuals set apart from everyday use, often designated for sacrifice. Lexicographic sources likewise present diverse interpretations of cursing. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines curses as offensive expressions uttered in moments of intense anger, as well as verbal appeals to divine or magical forces intended to bring harm. The Longman Cultural Dictionary emphasizes the invocation of supernatural power, while the Advanced English Dictionary [2001: 194] characterizes cursing as the expression of a wish for misfortune. Cambridge Dictionaries Online (2011) associates cursing primarily with the expression of strong anger.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary offers a multifaceted definition, describing curses as prayers or invocations seeking harm, states of being cursed, misfortunes believed to result from supernatural punishment, or causes of great suffering. Across these definitions, a shared conceptual core emerges: cursing universally involves the desire or intention for harm to befall another. This understanding aligns with the definition found in the Explanatory Dictionary of the Uzbek Language, which defines cursing as the act of verbally wishing misfortune, suffering, or death upon someone.

Regarding etymology, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary traces the word *anathema* to Greek origins, where it initially signified an offering or dedication. In biblical narratives, enemies captured during religious conflicts were destroyed as offerings to God, and their weapons were regarded as accursed. Over time, these meanings evolved to denote objects or individuals associated with evil or condemnation. In the New Testament, Saint Paul employed *anathema* to describe individuals expelled from the Christian community, particularly unrepentant heretics condemned to eternal punishment.

By the sixth century, semantic shifts transformed the term into a formal designation for excommunication pronounced by ecclesiastical authorities against those opposing the Church. In English, *anathema* first appeared in 1526 with the meaning “something accursed,” later acquiring temporary associations with sacred dedication before settling into its modern sense of something or someone deeply detested. Although the term retained religious connotations, by the eighteenth century its usage broadened to encompass secular contexts, often signifying public condemnation or collective rejection [2004: 25].

Finally, early seventeenth-century scholarship by the German theologian J. Gretser traced the term *malediction* to Latin roots—*male* (“bad”) and *dico* (“to speak”) - emphasizing its foundational meaning as the act of speaking ill or pronouncing a curse [1615: 244].

**Results.** The analysis reveals that *anathema* expressions share a common semantic core centered on condemnation and the wish for harm, yet they differ significantly in form, function, and pragmatic orientation. Cursing emerges as a distinct subtype within offensive language, characterized by explicit or implicit appeals to divine or supernatural forces. This feature differentiates curses from insults, which are typically directed at an addressee without invoking higher authority.

The findings also indicate that cursing operates as a ritualized speech act, often following conventionalized linguistic patterns. Such expressions are intentional, future-oriented, and socially recognizable, enabling both speaker and listener to clearly interpret the communicative intent. In many cases, the effectiveness of a curse depends less on its literal content and more on its perceived symbolic or cultural power.

Diachronic analysis demonstrates that the meaning of anathema has undergone substantial transformation. Initially denoting sacred offerings or formal ecclesiastical condemnation, the term gradually expanded to encompass broader notions of social rejection and moral outrage. In contemporary usage, anathema frequently functions as a metaphorical expression of extreme disapproval rather than a literal religious sanction.

Additionally, the results show that taboo and profane expressions overlap with anathema language but serve different pragmatic purposes. While profanity often reflects emotional release or irreverence toward religious concepts, anathema expressions are more directly oriented toward condemning a specific target.

**Discussion.** The findings of this study support the view that anathema expressions cannot be fully understood through purely lexical or emotional analyses. Instead, they must be examined as context-dependent speech acts shaped by cultural norms, power relations, and historical traditions. The ritualized nature of cursing highlights the role of language as a symbolic tool for asserting moral authority, particularly in situations where speakers lack material or institutional power.

The distinction between cursing and other forms of offensive language has important implications for pragmatics and discourse analysis. By invoking higher authority, curses amplify their illocutionary force and create stronger perlocutionary effects, such as fear, social exclusion, or moral condemnation. This helps explain why cursing persists across cultures despite shifts toward secularization.

Furthermore, the historical evolution of anathema illustrates how religious concepts can be recontextualized within secular discourse, retaining their expressive power while shedding institutional constraints. This semantic flexibility allows anathema expressions to remain relevant in modern communication, particularly in political, moral, and ideological debates.

Overall, the study contributes to offensive language research by offering a clearer theoretical framework for distinguishing anathema and cursing from related phenomena. Future research may expand this analysis through corpus-based studies or cross-cultural comparisons to further explore how anathema expressions function in diverse linguistic communities.

**Conclusion.** The analysis presented in this article confirms that anathema expressions constitute a complex and multifaceted category of negative language, situated at the intersection of semantics, pragmatics, and cultural tradition. While often grouped together with swearing, taboo expressions, and profanity, anathema and cursing exhibit distinctive features, particularly their frequent reliance on appeals to divine or supernatural authority and their function as intentional acts of condemnation.

The study demonstrates that cursing operates as a powerful speech act with both illocutionary and perlocutionary force, enabling speakers to express moral judgment, emotional release, or symbolic retaliation in contexts of social or personal power imbalance. Historical evidence further reveals that the concept of anathema has undergone significant semantic shifts, evolving from a religious and institutional sanction into a broader marker of social rejection and condemnation.

By comparing definitions and classifications proposed by various scholars and dictionaries, the article highlights both shared conceptual cores and meaningful distinctions among related terms. These findings underscore the importance of contextual, cultural, and historical factors in shaping the interpretation of anathema expressions. Ultimately, this research contributes to the theoretical refinement of offensive language studies and provides a clearer framework for analyzing anathema and cursing as linguistically and socially significant phenomena.

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