

## A Discussion of Profanity

*Grant me some wild expressions, Heavens, or I shall burst.* -George Farquhar

*When angry, count four; when very angry, swear.* -Mark Twain

Why is it that (as Mr. Twain has noted), when we are very angry, we swear? The usage of words that can be all lumped into the general category of "dirty words" is not unique to American culture, and indeed, it can probably be assumed that most cultures have their own reservoirs of profanity to call upon when needed.<sup>1</sup> Where do we learn to use these words, and what meanings are transferred with their use?

### What is Profanity?

A good working definition of profanity is as follows:

- (a) The expression refers to something that is taboo or stigmatized in culture,
- (b) The expression should not be interpreted literally, and
- (c) The expression can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes.

(Andersson p. 53)

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the several categories of curses, oaths, obscenities, blasphemies, etc., shall be gathered under the general label of profanity. The definitions of each are not within the scope of this paper—it is only necessary to note that they are "dirty".

## **A Child's Profanity**

An example given in Timothy Jay's excellent book *Cursing in America* is that of a two-year-old girl who spilled a carton of milk in front of her father. The little girl asked, "Daddy, are you angry? You didn't Goddamnit me." (Jay, p. 20.) The little knew that the word meant that the father was angry, but did not know what the word itself meant.

Children seems sometimes to be nothing more than little tape recorders, recording everything that comes within reach of their senses, and storing it for future retrieval. Adults may, especially when under sudden stress, utter profoundly emphasized words which are remembered by the child, and associated with the apparent emotion from the adult. Herein lies the truth of the old story about the father hitting his thumb with the hammer and unwittingly providing his small boy with a new word, which his mother is later shocked to hear him use while playing.

Potty training for young children is a stressful time, and the experiences of being soiled and messy are translated into insults later. The disgusting substance (urine or feces) is applied to someone through language. The author once observed several young children, around

four or five years of age, screaming insults at each other, of which the vast majority were "You're a poo-poo head!" or derivations thereof. The insult is made worse by the fact that a head is generally the least desirable place to have poo-poo on, due to the proximity of the face. A small child will rarely be heard calling someone a "poo-poo hand" or "poo-poo foot", and indeed, the expression *shitheels*<sup>2</sup> requires a great deal more prior knowledge in its connotation than a small child would have at his disposal. Thus, a child's profanity has mainly to do with the processes of elimination, or with those body parts used in those processes (Jay p.73).

As it is with children, so it is with adults. Adults have a much wider range of experiences to draw upon than children, and as a result, the profanity of an adult is much more varied and carries much more meaning than the limited profanity of a child. The most commonly used profanities fall into three categories, of which the first two are considered more or less taboo in open conversation: bodily functions, sex, and religion (Anderson p. 55). (Religion as a source of insults has changed over time, and does not carry the impact that it once did.) These terms

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<sup>2</sup> A hick, or hayseed, so called because of the presence of farm manure on the boots.

all have meanings generated through experience and applied in other areas through language.

### **Sexual taboos**

Adults, of course, know about sex. They know how to do it, with whom to do it, and with whom it should not be done. This last produces some of the most spectacularly insulting expressions in the English language, and in other languages and cultures as well. The word *fuck* in English has a great many varied uses<sup>3</sup>, and is applied in every sort of situation. The act of masturbation is generally used to describe a frustrating situation, as in *He was just jerking me off*, or laziness, *He's over there just jerking off*, where the implication is that masturbation is a lazy, unfulfilling act that is certainly viewed as taboo among most males. The epithet *bastard* has rather far-ranging implications of engagement in social tabooed actions, if one gives it thought—that the subject's mother is promiscuous, his father unknown, and his inheritance seriously in doubt. *Son of a bitch* implies bestiality, the incest taboo is drawn upon for *motherfucker*, and for many people a homosexuality taboo is strong enough to produce epithets such as *faggot*, *ass bandit*, *cocksucker*, and others. The meanings of these words are not meant to be

literal, but instead connote forbidden acts, that the subject is implied to be engaging in.

Sexual violation is a source of many expressions, all of which mean to be cheated or treated unjustly. The idea of social abuse is understood by the idea of sexual abuse through expressions like *I got screwed* or *He fucked us over*. (Jay p. 78)

### **Religion**

Deities may be called upon in the use of profanities. This is a more widely varied usage, where the utterance of the phrase *Jesus Christ, that was a good taco!* does not mean that the speaker is informing Jesus Christ his taco was above average, but merely emphasizes that opinion with the name of Jesus Christ. The "tabooness" of this realm of profanity lies in the fact that many people are offended by the offhand use of names and ideas sacred to them. While *Jesus Harold Baldheaded Christ!!* will produce some degree of consternation among many audiences, no one cares if *By Apollo!* is spoken for emphasis, because Apollo is a mythological figure, and is not sacred. The emphasis is not present, and in fact, most may think the speaker a rather strange old bird for using such a silly phrase in ordinary conversation.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix I, *The Many Meanings of Fuck*.

The other realm of religious taboo involves calling a deity to perform some act of harm upon the subject. *Damn, goddamn, the hell with you,* and similar expressions all express a desire to see the subject in disfavor and placed in hell.

It is interesting to note that these expressions have lost much of their force in the last hundred years or so. Society is not so much concerned with religious as in past days, and the usage of religious profanity does not produce the degree of shock as it once did. (Jay p. 35.) Religious swearing is quite commonplace, actually, and through much usage has lost its force.

**And?**

Other societies have taboos which, when called upon, yield profanity which ranges from perfectly translatable to perfectly incomprehensible across cultural boundaries. Captain Cook recorded the *whakapohane*, a Maori gesture of disapproval, in 1774: "One fellow shewed us his back side in such a manner that it was not necessary to have an interpreter." (Hughes p.260) On the other hand, the Tiwi practice of regarding dead ancestors' names and homonymic words taboo is not significant to Americans. (Andersson p. 57)

It can be seen that, although not all taboo subjects produce profane expressions, all profane expressions have their root in taboo subjects. As taboos change over time, so does profanity. Religion is no longer a source of intense profanity, as it once was; in America, a new source is that of racial and national origin. A furor is raised over public figures who apply the stereotypically negative characteristics of other races through forbidden racial epithets, while other forms of profane expression are not nearly as explosive.

## Appendix I

### FUCK...

Perhaps one of the most interesting and colorful words in the English language today is the word "fuck". It is the one magical word which, just by its sound, can describe pain, pleasure, love, and hate. In language, "fuck" falls into many grammatical categories.

It can be used as a verb, both transitive (John fucked Mary) and intransitive (Mary was fucked by John).

It can be an action verb (Mary fucks like a rabbit), a passive verb (Mary really doesn't give a fuck), an adverb (Mary is fucking interested in John),

or as a noun (Mary is a terrific fuck).

It can also be used as an adjective (Mary is fucking beautiful)

or an interjection (Fuck! I'm late for my date with Mary). It can even be used as a conjunction (Mary is easy, fuck she's also stupid).

As you can see, there are very few words with the overall versatility of the word "fuck". Aside from its sexual connotations, this incredible word can be used to describe many situations:

1. Fraud "I got fucked by the car dealer."
2. Resignation "Oh, fuck it!"
3. Trouble "I guess I'm fucked now."
4. Aggression "FUCK YOU!"
5. Disgust "Fuck me."
6. Confusion "What the fuck.....?"
7. Difficulty "I don't understand this fucking business!"
8. Despair "Fucked again..."
9. Pleasure "I fucking couldn't be happier."
10. Displeasure "What the fuck is going on here?"
11. Lost "Where the fuck are we."
12. Disbelief "UNFUCKINGBELIEVABLE!"
13. Retaliation "Up your fucking ass!"
14. Denial "I didn't fucking do it."
15. Perplexity "I know fuck all about it."
16. Apathy "Who really gives a fuck, anyhow?"
17. Greetings "How the fuck are ya?"
18. Suspicion "Who the fuck are you?"
19. Panic "Let's get the fuck out of here."
20. Directions "Fuck off."
21. Disbelief "How the fuck did you do that?"

It can be used in an anatomical description- "He's a fucking asshole."



It can be used to tell time- "It's five fucking thirty."

It can be used in business- "How did I wind up with this fucking job?"

It can be maternal- "Motherfucker."

It can be political- "Fuck Clinton!"

It has also been used by many notable people throughout history:

"What the fuck was that?"

Mayor of Hiroshima

"Where did all these fucking Indians come from?"

General Custer

"Where the fuck is all this water coming from?"

Captain of the Titanic

"That's not a real fucking gun."

John Lennon

"Who's gonna fucking find out?"

Richard Nixon

"Heads are going to fucking roll."

Anne Boleyn

"Who let the fucking woman drive?"

Commander of Space Shuttle Challenger

"What fucking map?"

Mark Thatcher

"Any fucking idiot could understand that."

Albert Einstein

"It does so fucking look like her!"

Picasso

"How the fuck did you work that out?"

Pythagoras

"You want what on the fucking ceiling?"

Michaelangelo

"Fuck a duck."

Walt Disney

"Why?- Because its fucking there!"

Edmund Hilary

"I don't suppose its gonna fucking rain?"

Joan of Arc

"Scattered fucking showers my ass."

Noah

"For fuck sakes!"

Thomas Blachaller