

Taboo

A few dozen lexemes comprise the special category of *taboo* language – items which people avoid using in polite society, either because they believe them harmful or feel them embarrassing or offensive. The possibility of harm may be genuinely thought to exist, in the case of notions to do with death and the supernatural, or there may be merely a vague discomfort deriving from a half-believed superstition. Embarrassment tends to be associated with the sexual act and its consequences. Offensiveness relates to the various substances exuded by the body, and to the different forms of physical, mental, and social abnormality. Words associated with certain other topics may also be called taboo, from time to time, because society is sensitive to them. During the recession of the early 1990s, newspapers would talk about ‘the R word’, and after the 1991 Maastricht conference would refer to the proposed *federalism* of the European Community as ‘the F word’. For some people, indeed, all jargon is taboo (p. 174).

The prohibition on use may be explicit, as in the law courts (‘contempt of court’), the Houses of Parliament (‘unparliamentary language’), and the broadcasting media (words officially banned until after a certain time in the evening, so that children are less likely to be

exposed to them). More commonly, it is a tacit understanding between people, which occasionally becomes explicit in the form of a comment, correction, or sanction (such as a parental rebuke). The comment may be directed to oneself (‘Pardon my French’) or to others (‘Ladies present’), and may be jocular (‘Wash your mouth out’) or serious (‘God forgive me for swearing’).

There are various ways of avoiding a taboo item. One is to replace it by a more technical term, as commonly happens in medicine (e.g. *anus*, *genitalia*, *vagina*, *penis*). Another, common in older writing, is to part-spell the item (f—k, bl—). The everyday method is to employ an expression which refers to the taboo topic in a vague or indirect way – a *euphemism*. English has thousands of euphemistic expressions, of which these are a tiny sample:

casket (coffin), fall asleep (die), push up the daisies (be dead), the ultimate sacrifice (be killed), under the weather (ill), after a long illness (cancer), not all there (mentally subnormal), little girl’s room (toilet), spend a penny (urinate), be economical with the truth (lie), adult video (pornography), let you go (sack), industrial action (strike), in the family way (pregnant), expectorate (spit), tired and emotional (drunk).

GORDON BENNETT

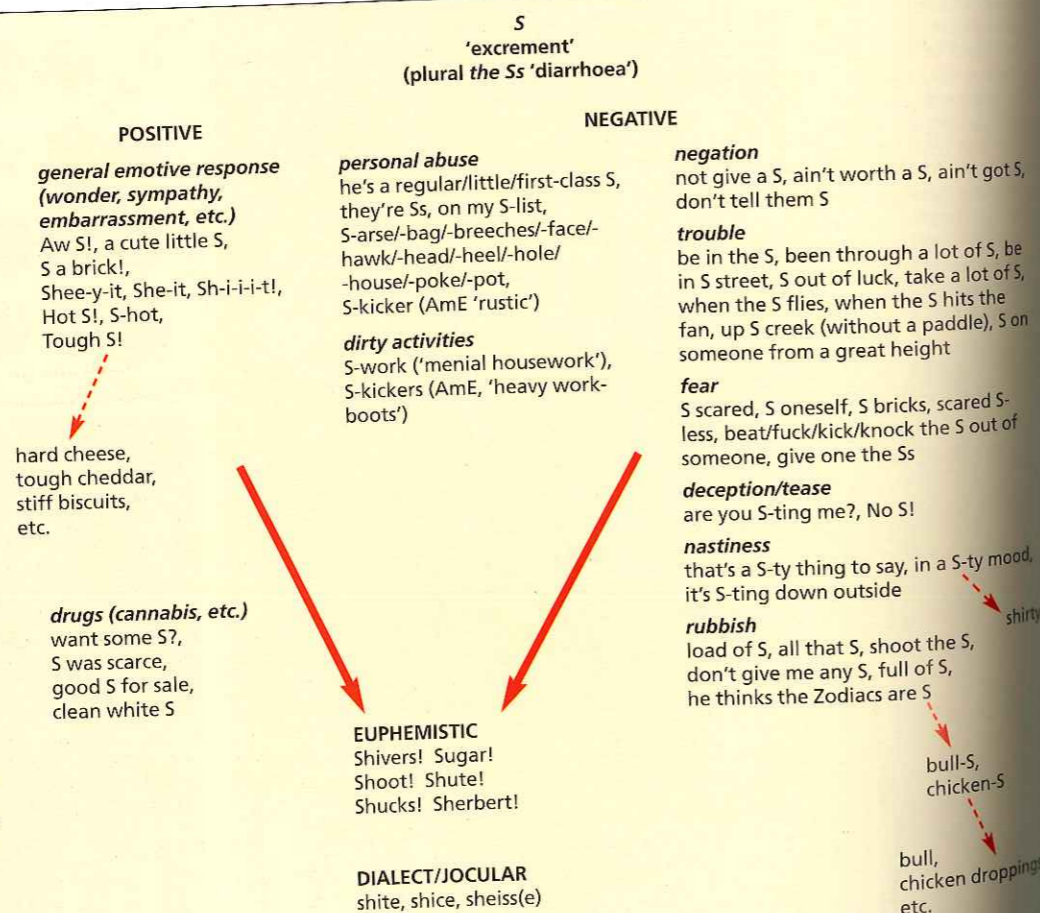
A list of euphemisms involving the word *God*, and the year of their earliest recorded use in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, would begin with *gog* (1350s), *cokk* (1386), *cod* (1569), and include such later forms as *gosh* (1743), *golly* (1743), *gracious* (1760s), by *George* (1842), *Drat* (= God-rot) (1844), *Doggone* (= God-Damn) (1851), and *Great Scott* (1884). Many pronunciation variants can be found, over the centuries, such as *adad*, *bedad*, *begad*, *begar*, *begob*, *dod*, *gar*, *ged*, *gom*, *gosse*, *gud*, *gum*, *icod*, and *igad*. *Gordon Bennett* and *Gordon Highlanders* are more recent coinages.

All swear words generate euphemisms, sooner or later, and the stronger the taboo, the larger the number of avoidance forms. The number of euphemistic expressions based on *God* is quite impressive, but the strongest taboo word, *cunt*, has accumulated around 700 forms. (After G. Hughes, 1991.)

TABOO USAGE

It is difficult to generalize about the usage of taboo words. They express varying degrees of force, and no two are exactly the same with respect to the way they are grammatically used. It may seem strange to think of taboo words as following grammatical rules, but they do. *Damn*, for example, cannot be used with a preceding personal pronoun (**You damn!*) and *arse* cannot be followed by one (**Arse you!*); *fart* cannot be followed by *off* or *it*; *bugger*, however, can be used in all four of these contexts. Taboo words, moreover, vary in their ability to be used as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, or to form part of compounds. *Shit* is a versatile term, in this respect.

It is also difficult to define the ‘tabooness’ of a taboo word. *Shit*, for example (represented as *S* in the display), includes a great deal more than its central, literal sense of ‘excrement’ (as in *have a shit*). It has several figurative and idiomatic uses, which vary greatly in rhetorical force, from insult and rudeness to intimacy and solidarity, and it merges with an interesting range of euphemistic and jocular forms. The usage display is already complex, but it is by no means complete, because of the problem of keeping track of the way such forms are used among social dialects and subcultures.



Swearing

We need to draw a clear distinction between the language of taboo, the language of abuse (*invective*), and the language of swearing. The three may overlap or coincide: to call someone a *shit* is to use a taboo word as a term of abuse, and if said with enough emotional force would be considered an act of swearing. But there is no necessary identity. *Piss* is a taboo word which is not usually employed on its own as invective or as a swear word. *Wimp* is a term of abuse which is neither a taboo word nor a swear word. And *heck* is a swear word which is neither taboo nor invective. Yet other distinctions are often drawn, some being given legal definition, and invoking sanctions in certain circumstances. Probably the commonest notions are *obscenity*, which involves the expression of indecent sexuality – ‘dirty’ or ‘rude’ words; *blasphemy*, which shows contempt or lack of reverence specifically towards God or gods; and *profanity*, which has a wider range, including irreverent reference to holy things or people (such as, in Christianity, the cross or the saints). However, despite these distinctions, the term *swearing* is often used as a general label for all kinds of ‘foul-mouthed’ language, whatever its purpose.

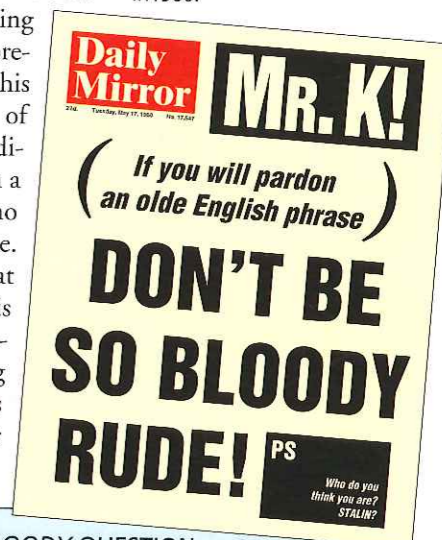
In a narrower sense, swearing refers to the strongly emotive use of a taboo word or phrase. ‘Use’ is perhaps too weak. Swearing is an outburst, an explosion, which gives relief to surges of emotional energy. It is a substitute for an aggressive bodily response, and can be aimed either at people or at objects (as when our head makes inadvertent contact with a low roof beam). Its forcefulness is reflected in its use of short, sharp sounds (p. 251) and emphatic rhythms. Its function is to express a wide range of emotions, from mild annoyance through strong frustration to seething anger, and not to make sense. Indeed, if we look closely at swearing formulae, we may find no meaning at all: *fucking hell* and other such phrases are, literally, nonsense.

However, the view of swearing as an emotional phenomenon is itself too narrow. Swearing has important social functions. It can mark social distance, as when a group of youths display their contempt for social conventions by swearing loudly in public or writing obscene graffiti on walls. And it can mark social solidarity, as when a group develops identical swearing habits. It is important to appreciate, in this respect, that swearing is universal. Everyone swears – though the mild expletive use of *sugar* or *golly* by one person would probably not be considered as swearing by someone whose normal imprecation is *sonofabitch* or *motherfucker*.

When we join a new social group, it seems we are much influenced by its swearing norms. Swearing is contagious. In one study, the swearing patterns of zoologists during an expedition to the Arctic were observed by a psychologist. She noted that when the

members of the group were relaxed, there was a noticeable increase in the amount of social (‘one of the gang’) swearing. This, the commonest swearing pattern, always depended for its effect upon an audience being present, and varied in intensity according to the swearing habits of the participants – social swearing diminished all round if a non-swearer was present. Annoyance swearing was different: this occurred as a reaction to stress, regardless of audience, and became more frequent as conditions became more difficult. However, when a situation was extremely stressful, there was no swearing at all, not even of the annoyance type. One of the psychologist’s conclusions was that swearing is a sign that a stressful situation is bearable, and indeed may be a factor in helping to reduce stress. It raises the interesting hypothesis that those who swear suffer less from stress than those who do not. (After H. E. Ross, 1960.)

This was a daring front page, for a British newspaper in 1960.



TO B— OR NOT TO — THAT IS THE BLOODY QUESTION

TO-NIGHT'S "PYGMALION," IN WHICH MRS. PATRICK CAMPBELL IS EXPECTED TO CAUSE THE GREATEST THEATRICAL SENSATION FOR YEARS

On 28 May 1714, Jonathan Swift commented, in one of his letters to Stella, that ‘it was bloody hot walking today’. Almost exactly 200 years later, the *Daily Sketch* of 11 April 1914 used the above headline to report a sensation, when Mrs Patrick Campbell had to say the line ‘Not bloody likely’ for the opening of Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, thus using in public a word which ‘is certainly not used in decent society’. (For the full report, see p. 383). Indeed, public outrage at even the hint of the word had caused Gilbert and Sullivan in 1887 to alter the spelling of their opera *Ruddygore* to *Ruddigore*.

The literal use of the word can be traced back to Old English, and was common in Elizabethan drama: ‘O most bloody sight’ (*Julius Caesar*, III.2) is one of many Shakespearean quotations. Its later use as an intensifier (with the basic meaning of ‘very’) has never been satisfactorily explained. One theory has associated it with the rowdy behaviour of the ‘young bloods’ of the Restoration period; another

(rather more likely) claims a figurative development, meaning ‘the blood is up’ (so that *bloody drunk* would mean ‘ready for a fight’). There are several popular etymologies (p. 139) deriving the word from *by Our Lady* or from *God’s blood*. Perhaps the association of the word with uncouth behaviour, plus the popular belief that it might be profane, gradually led to its being used by the lower classes as a swear-word. It had certainly begun to fall from grace in Britain by the end of the 18th century, when it was recorded as part of underworld slang, and dictionaries began to refer to it as ‘vulgar’. It was definitely a common swear-word by the early 19th century, called a ‘horrid word’, and printed as b—y.

The word became a major social issue only in Britain. It never gained popularity in America, and in Australia it became so frequent that it quickly lost its pejorative associations. The ‘great Australian adjective’, as it was called

towards the end of the 19th century, ceased to be regarded as swearing by the 1940s, and was often heard in respectable settings. This contrasts with the situation at the time in Britain, where the Lord Chamberlain’s office was still excising the word from plays submitted to it, and people were being fined for using the word in public. But times were changing, and indeed *The Times* printed it in full in 1941 (in a poem containing the line ‘I really loathe the bloody Hun’). The word’s progress towards renewed respectability has been steady since then, though Prince Charles’ comment in 1989 that English ‘is taught so bloody badly’ received less publicity for what he said than for the way he said it. The associations of some 200 years die hard, and many people never use the word in public, feel embarrassed if someone does so, and (in Britain) complain to the BBC if they hear it on air before 9 pm.