

The Function of Profanity in Modern English

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The Function of Profanity in Modern English

Chapter 1- Introduction and Clarification

Since the beginning of the English language, there have existed certain words that were considered by the majority to be taboo, or not to be spoken in polite discourse. Over the centuries, these words have changed, some disappearing from the language altogether and some simply taking on new meanings or functions. One wonders why, if these words were considered too rude to be spoken, they were ever used, and consequently, how they remained a fixture in a language known for its passing trends and short-lived fashions. Could it be that these words were, and are, essential for communication? Would the English language be as effective without these words? Are efforts to repress them futile? Does the popularization of such vocabulary create the need for new words with the same taboo status as the original words? To summarize: Does profanity serve a useful purpose in the English language?

In order to answer a question this complex, certain guidelines must be set. The word "profanity" has a long list of taboo words associated with it, not all of which can be accommodated within such a short study. It is therefore necessary to limit which words we consider. Since this is a study of modern English, the words should be representative of the kind of profanity used today. In his superb study "Swearing," Geoffrey Hughes said:

...A major shift has occurred in comparatively recent times in that a quite different emphasis has become dominant. The 'lower' physical faculties of copulation, defecation and urination have come very much to the fore as referents in swearing.

Therefore it seems appropriate to choose a set of 'four-letter words' in American English, known by American linguists as the "Big Six," which range from mildly to extremely taboo and also cover these 'contemporary' topics in swearing. They are: fart, piss, shit, fuck, cock and cunt. The first two are of Anglo-Saxon origin and date from c.1000 and c.1250, respectively. Piss, however, is of Norman French origin and dates from c.1290. Fuck is a well-known word for sexual intercourse, and cock and cunt are slang, if not profane, terms for the male and female organs involved in this activity. All three are of unknown origin, and date from c.1500 for fuck and c.1400 for cock and cunt.

Unfortunately, we must also make an attempt at defining "useful purpose," even if it is impossible to come to a conclusion that will please everyone. A good question to ask here is: "What properties does a word with purpose have?" Most linguists would likely respond that a word does not have a purpose unless it has both a meaning and a grammatical place in a sentence, and some would probably want to include the use of the words as phatic and emotive expressions. How, though, do you ascertain when this purpose becomes a "useful purpose"? Can it be deemed useful merely by having a purpose at all? That question, fundamentally, presents the answer. One must consider the original purpose of language: to aid in transferring knowledge or ideas or even emotions from one person to another. Therefore, any word that assists in this transfer can be considered both useful and purposeful. It should be noted, however, that there are different degrees of usefulness. Our choice of words in communication indicates our preference of one word over another, revealing our belief that a certain word is more useful for communicating a certain idea than any other in our active vocabulary.

With these terms defined, it is now possible to rephrase a question in a way that facilitates a clear and equally defined response. The new question would look something like: Do the words fart, piss, shit, fuck, cock and cunt serve to aid in the transfer of ideas or information between people speaking the English language?

Chapter 2- Everyday Usage of Profanity

Probably the best place to start any study of profane language is where it is spoken. Try this quiz from the sidewalks of New York:

1) A young man was a step too slow racing for the Second Avenue bus. As it pulled away, he angrily shouted one word for everyone nearby to hear. It was: (a) Gadzooks; (b) Doggone; (c) Phooey; (d) Fuck.

2) A fast-moving bicyclist screamed at a middle-aged man trying to cross Broadway. "Watch where you're going, you ..." His next two words were: (a) Errant knave; (b) Brainless dolt; (c) Pedestrian poltroon; (d) Dumb Shit.

It should be obvious that the correct answer, both times, is (d). These are but two

examples, mild at that, of the vulgarization of a city awash with people who, if a mere five or six words were removed from their vocabulary, would effectively be struck dumb. Two men in pinstripe suits, riding the subway to Wall Street, ignore others' sensibilities as they keep up a high-volume conversation laced with profanities. The same with three teenagers on a bus. Ditto for a taxi driver complaining about the "fucking traffic." Or for a police officer in Times Square who, when asked politely what a street protest is about, replies: "How the fuck should I know?"

These are not incidents merely specific to New York, or even the United States. All over the English-speaking world (of course, outside it as well, but that is impertinent) and in all sections of society there are other examples of this sort of language, and the adverse responses it brings about. Take the example of Sissy Lax, a well-respected teacher who was quietly laid-off when it was revealed that she let her students use profane language in a series of poetic and dramatic exercises intended to encourage them to adopt a more socially acceptable vocabulary.

Chapter 3- How Profanity Offends

Why does this language cause such strong reactions? Perhaps it has to do with the way Malinowski saw language: "The word has power of its own; it is a means of bringing things about Language in its primitive function is to be regarded as a mode of action rather than as a countersign of thought." All the people in the examples above were affected deeply, almost physically, by the words that were used. These words probably didn't require as much thought as, say, a formal greeting. This is because they are not so much mental responses to situations as they are physical ones. The childhood rebuttal "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" comes to mind, perhaps because these words are as close as words can get to being physical expressions.

Mary Ritchie Key is a professor emeritus of linguistics at UC Irvine. She has studied language and explored the "socio-linguistics" culture in which profanity and vulgarisms have flourished. She sees extreme profanity and vulgarity as the speech equivalent of violent action. "Aren't emotions really important in human behavior?" she said. "So these are extreme emotional outlets, and they are important and they do make a difference, because people need that once in a while. The Victorian Age suppressed anger, and I don't think that that was especially good for us, so we need a release."

Rather than actually doing physical damage or bodily harm, the decision is made to use a strong word, perhaps fuck or cock, as a substitute. Any person hearing the word recognizes that choice, maybe only subconsciously, and responds almost as if the speaker had actually opted to take the physical instead of verbal route of relieving their frustration. Many people then interpret this reaction as offense. This, of course, isn't the only reason that these words seem so offensive.

Originally, these words might have held more meaning to those who spoke and heard them, and the meaning itself is what offended. Now though, people are simply brought up with the notion that these words are 'bad' before they are taught what they mean, and hence they assume that the taboo nature of the words is innate. Of course, more mature speakers will question the reason behind this, and will most likely conclude that the words are taboo because of their meaning. Since this is the case, then it is a good idea to explore briefly what these words really do mean, how they are used, and what sort of other taboo subjects with which they have come to be associated.

Chapter 4- A Look at the Literal Meanings and Taboo

Starting with piss, which, in noun form, means urine, and in verb form, means to urinate, placing it in the most basic taboo category, excretion. It is used in forms ranging from the crude: "to kick the piss out of someone" (to beat someone quite badly) to the simple: "take a piss" (to urinate). Next on the taboo ladder is another word in the same category, fart. It is synonymous with conflagration (in the form: "to fart") but can also be used, although not nearly as successfully, as a derogatory term for someone - usually male (i.e. "He was a lazy fart"). Shit is the last word in this category, most typically used in noun form to mean "feces" and in verb form to mean "to excrete feces," although it is also commonly used as an expletive ("Shit!") or improperly as an adjective (i.e. "That performance was shit"). In "Swearing," Geoffrey Hughes had this to say about these first three words:

It is a curious feature in the taxonomy that of the various forms of excretion and erucation, shit should be the most used term (cf. German scheiss, French merde, Italian stronzo, English turd). By comparison, fart has diminished force, piss has little currency (beyond the contemptuous piss artist and the unceremonious piss off!) while burp has none whatever. It would seem that the two dominant factors in making terms in this field highly charged or otherwise are their degree of solidity and their proximity to the genital/anal area.

Fuck has its own category among these six words, sex (although that does admittedly have a lot to do with cunt and cock). It is used as a synonym for sexual intercourse as well as an expletive (i.e. "Fuck that!") and a derogatory term for someone (i.e. "She's a lazy fuck"). Cock and cunt are alternate words for the male and female sexual organs, respectively. They are also both used as derogatory names.

Clearly, these definitions illustrate how graphic these terms are, and how closely linked they are to activities and objects most societies categorize as taboo. It is the shyness and embarrassment with which people approach any of these topics that more or less dooms these words to their taboo fate. Interestingly, it seems that most of the traits that we share with other animals (i.e. excretion and sexual intercourse and organs) are traits that we would rather not discuss. Thus, words that would be used in an informal discussion about these topics become taboo. This in turn leads to the words being reduced to use only in flashes of anger or moments of despair, or perhaps not at all (the mortality rate for rude words and expressions is astonishing -- the noun/verb bugger and the noun dolt are two examples of words weakened by time and overuse -- nevertheless they are continuously replaced by an equally impressive birth rate).

Chapter 5- Phatic and Emotive Language

Many linguists would argue that because these words have become part of the English language's phatic and emotive vocabulary (used only for the purpose of establishing an atmosphere or maintaining social contact, or in the case of emotive expressions, used to express rather than to describe), they have no real function in the language. To prove that phatic and emotive language is indeed a useful, if not necessary, part of the English language would be to prove that these six words also have a purpose. Why, then, is phatic/emotive language useful? Technically, phatic/emotive language includes many expressions common in conversation (i.e. "Nice day again, isn't it?" and "How are you? Still sick?") and correspondence ("Dear Sirs" at the beginning and "Yours truly" at the conclusion of a letter). However, expletives such as shit and fuck also fall under the labels of phatic/emotive language. Obviously, as the definition confirms, phatic/emotive language is necessary for establishing an atmosphere and maintaining social

contact. While the first set of examples from conversation and correspondence are the kind of phatic/emotive language that maintains social contact, expletives and exclamations are definitely the 'atmosphere establishers.' Even if the atmosphere is not a desirable one, it cannot be denied that this sort of vocabulary succeeds in defining it. In fact, to some degree, the four of the six that are not used as expletives (piss, fart, cock and cunt) are also good examples of phatic/emotive language. While their usage would certainly establish a certain atmosphere, they fall more into the part of phatic/emotive language that maintains social contact. This is mainly due to expressions such as the very informal greeting "Hey, you old fart!" and, as Hughes said, the unceremonious exclamation "Piss off" (British English slang for "go away").

Chapter 6- The Employment of Substitutes

This raises the question: Isn't it possible to establish the same atmosphere with much more "acceptable" language? In some cases, this is feasible. For example, to call someone "thick" and to call someone "stupid," two words with roughly the same connotations, would achieve the same thing. However, for stronger words, such as the six with which we are dealing, the distinction between the atmosphere created by one and the atmosphere created by another becomes much more obvious. Admittedly, this group of words is too small to prove this theory, but any study of the larger vocabulary of swearing would find many grammatical synonyms (i.e. words having the same function and literal meaning). These would be invalid, however, because each of these "synonymous" words would have completely different insinuations and implications from the other. For example, using the word crap instead of shit in the expression "I've had enough of this shit" would induce two distinct reactions due to the different undertones each word has. Most people would consider shit a much more angry, vulgar word than crap, and would probably end up overlooking the use of crap in this sense anyway. Since a synonym is defined as: "a word having the same meaning as, or a meaning very similar to, that of another word in the same language" (with the example: "mix, blend and mingle"), and the different reactions indicate that the meanings are not the same, these words cannot technically be synonyms.

The distinction is not merely technical. As implied above, a simple switch of words can bring about an entirely different reaction. This is, of course, the purpose of having different words that mean basically the same thing: it enables the speaker to more clearly and accurately convey his or her message. To illustrate, imagine the following situation: A man says to his wife at the dinner table: "If my boss gives me any more shit about my work, I'm quitting!" Would it have had the same impact if he had said "complaints" instead of "shit"? Obviously, the answer is no, and not only because of the taboo nature of shit, which means that there is probably a reason for his choice of words. In this case, it is probably because using the word shit instead of complaints generates more sympathy for his decision to leave his job, because it implies that the complaints are not justified.

Chapter 7- A Brief Historical Perspective

Another way to illustrate the importance of these words is to look at the history of profanity. It seems that the more taboo the vulgar vocabulary became, the more it would adapt and metamorphasize into different words and forms of usage, which either took on their predecessors taboo status and started the cycle over again or disappeared from the language as the old words were used once again. One terrific example of this is the Cockney rhyming slang that was developed in the middle of the 19th century. Consisting of two words, sometimes connected by and, these phrases ended in a word that rhymed with the disguised term. Using examples only for our six words, some phrases were: Almond rock (cock), Berkshire Hunt (cunt),

Friar Tuck (fuck), Hit and miss (piss) and Tom tit (shit). It became so popular and useful as a disguise mechanism that it eventually stretched to include perfectly civil words, at first as part of a quasi-code and then, more popularly, as witty terms in themselves (i.e. the familiar trouble and strife for wife).

Chapter 8- The Use of Profanity in the Media

If these six words are indeed useful, and cannot be substituted, then why is it that they are used so little in the media? The answer is fairly simple. Given the freedom, most writers for newspapers and magazines (and now the increasingly popular e-zine) still would choose not to use profanity because it wouldn't make their message any clearer. However, if a situation arose where it would aid their communication, they would almost definitely use it. So why is it not allowed? This is because, given the choice between prohibiting profanity -- which would upset very few people (including the writers themselves) -- and letting the writers use whatever vocabulary they see fit -- which would cause at least a small uproar -- the media would rather 'play it safe' than risk losing business to those who disapprove. Unfortunately, the cost for the consumer is that we lose that little bit of information that would have necessitated the use of profanity.

Times are changing, however, and we are regaining the linguistic freedom that our medieval ancestors had. Actually, it is a circular process. The more profanity that makes it into the media, the more acclimatized we become to it, and the less it bothers us, meaning that the writers are given even more freedom so they use even more profanity, and so on. The same can be said of nearly all media, including television, theater and radio. Many television situation comedies and dramas in particular gain from this because they are able to make the situations more believable by using realistic language. Call-in radio talk shows and television programs are screening their callers less and less as it becomes easier to get away with the occasional on-air expletive. Words that used to get books banned are now commonplace in corporate boardrooms as well as bars.

Curiously, the music industry is one of the slowest to respond to these recent changes. Despite being the most emotive of the media, using strong language to express strong feelings is still not considered generally acceptable. Although it is possible to have an occasional word or two from the 'big six' on an album without having to display the 'explicit lyrics' label on the front, which is more than was possible ten years ago, any more requires the label. Unfortunately, this significantly reduces the potential audience and can possibly mean that performers never receive the artistic credit they deserve.

However, not all musicians have ignored the recent revolution in acceptable language. Indeed, there are entire genres of music that seem to thrive on it. For example, from the early 1970s the popular music world has been augmented by the genre of 'rap', a predominantly black form of social and political commentary. This genre is rhythmically accentuated and uses markedly strong language. Contemporary rap artists who can be included in this category are 'Ice T', 'Easy E' and the group '2 Live Crew.' The latter released an album in 1990 which included numbers with titles such as 'Bad Ass Bitch' and 'Get The Fuck Out of My House (Bitch)'.

Chapter 9- Conclusions

In keeping with Samuel Beckett's comment: "The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener," many people would predict that this popularization of profanity will weaken its effect. Indeed, this is such a common phenomenon (words such as damn and hell were once just as taboo as fuck and cunt are today) that it even has its own term in linguistics: "Verbicide." Many words have survived

verbicide in the past - shit, for example - but the spread of profanity in the media combined with the recent capability to distribute this media worldwide might lead to an even larger explosion of profanity, which might linger for an unusually long time. Nevertheless, the 'big six' are probably not in much danger from recent verbicide because, as H.C. Wyld said: "It seems to be the case that the serious oaths survive longest... while each age produces its own ephemeral formulas of mere light expletive and asservation." One can conclude therefore that these words will only fade from our vocabulary when popular usage moves from "serious oath" to the realm of "light expletive," not an event in the foreseeable future.

It should be clear that, although profanity usually does succeed in offending, that is not always its purpose and certainly not why it should be considered useful. These six words have not only the grammatical place and function in English, but also a purpose in communication in general. Even when used as expletives, perhaps as a method of relieving built up tension orally rather than physically, these six words are still useful to the speaker. There is more meaning packed into one fuck than ten maybes. Describing a man as a cunt says just as much about the speaker as it does the man. 'Taking a piss' doesn't mean the same thing as urinating. There is no word more useful than a word that communicates simply, precisely and effectively, which is why these words are not only useful, but irreplaceable.

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