

## What the Hell, Language?: Profanity's Impact on Linguistic Development

In 1972, American comedian George Carlin announced the "Seven Dirty Words," a humorous and unofficial compilation of words that could not be spoken during live performances that quickly became a famous issue of censorship. Complaints to the Federal Communications Commissions (FCC) lead to a Supreme Court decision on speaking obscenities in a public forum, restricting First Amendment rights and igniting a linguistic controversy throughout the United States (Sergi). Naturally, by noting what seven words could not be said appropriately, Carlin went to great lengths in his comedic performances to say these seven words as much as possible. Yet, outside of Carlin's immediate provocation, his anecdotes on language and the classification of "dirty words" in society carry a point:

In looking for these words, I kept finding new categories. We have so many ways of describing these dirty words—we have more ways to describe dirty words than we actually have dirty words. That seems a little strange to me. It seems to indicate that someone was awfully interested in these words. They kept referring to them; they call them bad words, dirty, filthy, foul, vile, vulgar, coarse . . . bawdy, naughty, saucy, raunchy, rude, crude, lewd, lascivious, indecent, profane, obscene . . . cursing, cussing, swearing, and all I could think of was shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits. (Carlin)

Indeed, language marked as profanity, such as Carlin's "Seven Dirty Words," does fall under a classification system, regarded often as an outlier of language that determinedly remains within conversations. As the present culmination of linguistic development, Standard American English (SAE) is rife with profanity, to where the term is used as an umbrella to oversee the continuous existence and creation of more obscenities; simultaneously, this umbrella is used as a shield

against profanity, as demonstrated by Carlin's case with the FCC, where the words that fall under this category are kept separate, stereotyped to protect impressionable youth and dignified society. Yet, other than being noted as "dirty words," like Carlin pointed out, there is no clear definition on what makes a word into profanity. For example, Carlin amended his routine to acknowledge the changes in profanity, recognizing how different individuals brought new interpretations of "dirty words" to the conversation: "[Shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits] was the original, but we've added a few since then . . . and I know there are some other words . . . you are wondering about, why they haven't been considered . . . We're looking at them all very closely, so your favorites might make the list this year" (Carlin). Overall, there are arguably a vast number of words in SAE that could be considered explicit, and their impact varies depending on location where spoken, listener, and the context of the sentence. Thus, the purpose of this study is to attempt to bring into focus the innumerable overwhelming: What is profanity? How did profanity come into existence? How does profanity continue today? By understanding the origins of "dirty words," no less the amount of variables to their linguistic development, profanity can begin to be recognized as a historical staple of speech, not to be consistently shunned due to a wild reputation.

When defining profanity, it is easier to define the censorship of profanity rather than the term itself. According to *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* by Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, censorship in relation to language is defined as "the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is condemned as subversive of the common good" (13). Yet, as Allan and Burridge are quick to point out, "the problem lies in the interpretation of the phrase *subversive of the common good*," begging the question again of a classification system for profanity; generally, it is assumed that "the censorship of profanity and blasphemy supposedly

guards against his/her moral harm," but that is a severely limited scope to examine the countless of words that can be regarded as profanity (13). However, this did not prevent early ideas of "indecent language" being counted as contagiously evil, where "a concern for the common good and for the protection of the citizenry from physical and moral jeopardy" echoes modern-day sentiments that impressionable listeners must be shielded (14, 13). This is reflected in a City of London Ordinance delivered in 1574 regarding explicit theatrical performances:

Whereas heartofore sondrye greate disorders and inconvenyences have been found to ensewe to this Cittie by the inordynate hauntynge of greate multitudes of people, speciallye youthe, to playes, enterludes and shewes; namelye occasyon of frayes and quarrelles, eavell practizes of incontineneye . . . inveyglynge and alleurynge of maides, speciallye orphanes, and good cityzens children under age, to previe and unmete contractes, the publishinge of unchaste, uncomelye, and unshamefaste speeches and doynge, withdrawinge of the Quenes Majesties subjectes from dyvyne service on Soundaies & hollydayes, at which tymes such playes weare chefelye used, unthriftye waste of the moneye of the poore & fond persons, sondrye robberies by pyckinge and cuttinge of purses, utteringe of popular, busye and sedycious matters, and manie other corruptions of youthe, and other enormyties . . . And whear in tyme of Goddes visitacion by the plaigye suche assemblies of the people in thronge and presse have benne verye daungerous for spreadinge of Infection. (qtd. in Allan & Burrige 13-4)

According to "Elizabethan [Londoners]," the "attendance of plays [kept] the youth away from divine service" while they were simultaneously "in moral jeopardy of being led astray by exposure to drink, seditious and indecent talk, and licentious behavior" (14). Notably, this decree

comes from the Middle English time period, still fraught in a transition from Old English, following the Norman Conquest of 1066. From Allan and Burridge's studies, while profanity certainly had some sense of presence in Old English, originating between sailors and the mercantile class as English developed as the language of trade, the combination of burgeoning literacy and the printing press, granting advertisement power to speech, is what began the targeted approach against obscenity.

Specifically, censorship rose to great historical prominence by becoming an issue of class and religion. Profanity was not necessarily an issue when it was shared between the lower- and working-class citizens, but as soon as it entered the upper-class forum, profanity quickly degenerated into an enemy of piety. Again, though, the steps toward censorship were not exactly how English speakers today recognize plights against profanity—rather, the religious turmoil inspired by King Henry VIII and the Reformation period of the 1500s determinedly emphasized censorship as the weapon against any "heresy and anything likely to stir up political revolt," immediately elevating profanity into a space that labeled outliers from acceptable society (14). When a merchant used profanity, picked up in casual conversation, it was no longer a blithe expression—it was an offense against God and country. As a larger example, King Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon produced Mary I, best known as Bloody Mary, who "reinstated the Roman Catholic religion" only for it to be "revoked by her half-sister Elizabeth I" (14). As a result, Mary I delivered an arguably blasphemous speech against Elizabeth I in 1553:

And furthermore, forasmuche also as it is well knowen, that sedition and false rumours haue bene nourished and maynteyned in this realme, by the subtelye and malyce of 14 Forbidden Words some euell disposed persons, whiche take

vpon them withoute sufficient auctoritie, to preache, and to interprete the worde of God, after theyr owne brayne, in churches and other places, both publique and pryuate. And also by playinge of Interludes and pryntyng false fonde bookes, ballettes, rymes, and other lewde treatises in the englyshe tonge, concernyng doctryne in matters now in question and controuersye, touchinge the hyghe poyntes and misteries of christen religion . . . Her highnes therefore strayghtly chargeth and commaundeth all and every her sayde subiectes . . . that none of them presume from henceforth to preache . . . or to interprete or teache any scriptures, or any maner poynts of doctryne concernyng religion. Neyther also to prynte any bookes, matter, ballet, ryme, interlude, processe or treatyse, nor to playe any interlude, except they haue her graces speciall licence in writyng for the same, vpon payne to incurre her highnesse indignation and displeasure. (qtd. in Allan & Burridge 14-5)

The fact that Mary I takes God's name in vain—instead of spewing expletives argumentative sisters share today—caught the attention of the public; thus, "taking the Lord's name in vain" became "frowned upon and eventually banned," echoic retribution as per the Bible's teachings (15). Interestingly, censorship versus profanity became a tool of political and religious propaganda, reflecting the times, and not from any true dramatic rise in obscene speech, where "it was rare to find the concern with indecency and licentiousness" prior to Middle English breaking societal chains imposed upon Old English, strengthening as a country-wide language (14). Consequently, the presence of censorship followed a self-fulfilling prophecy, wherein profanity was arguably not a societal issue until censorship created conflicts over freedoms of expression. Although what constituted as profanity appeared differently, the arguments between

ensorship and profanity maintain the same markers in Modern English today, transforming only on par with historical context.

Thus, profanity gained a reputation. The stronger Middle English became as the common language, the more dedication there was to linguistic progression and preservation; from there, the more words received attention with increased literacy and publication, the more censorship gained traction as a tool against the possibility of profanity. Ultimately then, the more censorship was threatened against the power of speech, the further profanity stood out as language—to be protected, to be silenced, but overall, to receive development, unable to be forgotten as Middle English transitioned into Early Modern English, due to how pertinent censorship was. For example, in *Expletive Deleted: A Good Look at Bad Language*, Ruth Wajnryb identifies how budding lexicographers of Middle to Early Modern English were "unwilling to include swear words in the dictionary for fear of offending the literate public and, through that offense, negatively impacting on publishers' commercial interests" (Wajnryb 5). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) serves as a primary symbol of how much language became the center for discussion; from the preservation of Old English, to the influences of Latin, French, and Germanic, and finally the evolution from Middle English to Modern English, the OED conveyed its message as "to chart every word in the language," but it "began including so-called four-letter words only in the early 1970s" (5). Similarly, Wajnryb reports how "the editors of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*," first published in 1966 as an American dictionary to stand out against the OED, "agonized for decades over the same issues, with their four-letter inclusions not appearing until 1987" (5). The pattern is clear: dictionaries, or the compilations of the newly-powerful English language, were a product of the invention of the printing press, knowledge of literacy, and living with enough wealth and privilege to not only

procure a dictionary but to also have a say in what it included. By applying such censorship, to where the upper class changed the course of linguistic documentation to shield what was politically or religiously determined to be defamatory, profanity was forced to become a staple of the English language, if not simply out of rebellion.

In hindsight, profanity's inextricable relationship with censorship may not carry as much weight today as it did in the eras of Middle to Early Modern English. While indecency laws remain in effect in the United States, the First Amendment of the Constitution grants American citizens the right to freedom of expression, contrasting greatly with Europe's monarchical presence oppressing linguistic development. Furthermore, it is the twenty-first century—language is arguably an unstoppable force thanks to the technological advancements of the time, constantly morphing via the internet, barely able to be restrained by religious or political forces as demonstrated in history. However, just like SAE today remains rooted in its European influences, the United States' relationship with profanity does occasionally harken back to its populace's predecessors. Indeed, profanity is still weaved tightly with classism, to the point that some linguists refuse to study profanity due to its inappropriate reputation, similar to how the OED initially refused to include obscene terms: "The taboo overlying the language of swearing has so stigmatized the subject that academics are hesitant to soil their hands even by association. . . . it may not be deemed a specialization likely to win the esteem of their research fellows, a sine qua non for most academics" (3-4). As a result, even the most popular of obscene terms are still entrenched in mystery today, as "getting to the bottom of the etymological mystery is hampered by the fact that . . . taboo terms come with buried or suppressed evidence—just as the word was suppressed, so, too, was information about it" (52). For example, there is the ever-present *fuck* in the English language. According to Wajnryb's research, *fuck*'s "likely

etymological roots are in English's Continental partners—the Latin *future* (or *pungere* or *battuere*), the French *foutre*, the German *ficken*" (52). Furthermore, each of these origins "follow the pattern of having two contextual meanings: the first, a physically violent one (to beat, bang, hit, or strike); the second, to engage in sexual activity for which a multitude of euphemisms exist" (52). Despite *fuck* serving as a cultural phenomenon of profanity, its background is surprisingly unremarkable, where only its definitions truly empower the term as something risqué: "As linguistic historian Geoffery Hughes puts it, '[Although] some people might feel that beating, driving, and love-making are quite distinct . . . these are clearly deep metaphorical matters'" (qtd. in Wajnryb 52-3). Hence, again, the reputation of profanity endures the test of time more than the term itself, where "even lexicographers have been shy about including and discussing *fuck* in their lexicons," regardless of how *fuck* stands as a pariah of obscenity (52).

Yet, there is also the matter of profanity that has been narrowed down even further in linguistic order, like racial epithets or slurs; in contrast to *fuck*, which appears fruitful in its existence by how malleable it is, a word like *nigger* weightily refers to a minority of individuals, unmovable as a genuinely indecent word. In "The New Profanity," Steven Finz examines the 1971 case of Paul Robert Cohen, who wore a jacket that read, "Fuck the Draft," to express resentment toward the drafting process of the current Vietnam conflict. Cohen was subsequently arrested for violating laws of indecency, soon bringing his case before the Supreme Court in regards to his First Amendment rights:

[The Supreme Court] recognized that . . . linguistic expression conveys inexpressible emotions as well as precise ideas, and that words are often chosen as much for their emotive as their cognitive force. He added that while *fuck* may be more distasteful than other words, it is often true that 'one man's vulgarity is



another's lyric.' . . . the constitutional right of free expression is powerful medicine that may at times fill the air with verbal cacophony; this is not a sign of weakness but of strength, because it implicates fundamental societal values. (Finz 3)

However, the 1970 case of Manuel Alcorn tells a different example, initiating a distinction between profanity and racial profanity. When "[Alcorn's] employer called him a *goddamn nigger*," Alcorn sued and received national coverage over how "the court noted that blacks are known to be extremely sensitive to the particular words that had been used, and that knowledge of this sensitivity made its use in the workplace outrageous" (4). Thus, while the employer claimed his First Amendment rights, similar to Cohen's case, the term *nigger* carried far dire implications; its historical context was too heavy to be justifiably excused by the United States Constitution. This resulted in the Supreme Court deciding "that the slang epithet 'nigger' may once have been in common usage, along with such other racial characterizations as 'wop,' 'chink,' 'jap,' 'bohunk,' and 'shanty Irish,' but that it had become particularly abusive and insulting in light of recent developments in the civil rights movement" (4). Again, times changed—and, again, the meaning of the profane word is what caught attention, recognizing that its impact on linguistic society needed to transform, as language had done countless times before. Thus, as Finz recounts when comparing Cohen and Alcorn's historical cases, "It may be distasteful to call an employee a *motherfucker*, but it is not illegal. On the other hand, an employer . . . who permits the use of 'any derogatory racial or ethnic epithets,' in violation of an injunction may be imprisoned for contempt of court. Ethnic slurs have truly become the new profanity" (6).

Ultimately, profanity is powered by the speaker. Like all language, the implications of words, taking into account such things like tone of voice, the context of the sentence, and potential listeners, changes from speaker to speaker, gaining or losing traction from one

conversation to another. Thus, George Carlin, while performing for the sake of attention, also had a honest recount of "dirty words"—profanity does not exist until someone examines a word or term so long as to classify it as such, applying censorship in order to create avoidance of an obscene reputation, as opposed to a word being born purely explicit to begin with. Even when taking into account the historical developments of popular profane words, it is difficult to discern if awareness will matter: *fuck* will continue to be censored in most public forums, simply due to how it can no longer be heard as anything *but* obscene. Arguably, the emphasis inherent of swearing—like cursing, "Fuck!" versus "Hallelujah!"—is far more satisfactory to the anatomical structure of speech to begin with. Yet, it is still critical to understand the origins of profanity, even if it continues to be an unstoppable force for linguists to follow; *fuck* may be thrilling in its rebellious nature, especially when studying it in an academic setting, but racial epithets or slurs must remain separate from generic profanity due to their significant context. Overall, the existence of profanity begs the question of if, when words are sent on the path of profanity, determined by popular opinion, is there any way to withdraw them into some semblance of "appropriate" language or are they merely lost forever to the widening umbrella of "dirty words." As with all areas of language, only time will tell.

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