

# Obscenity, slurs, and taboo

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Hayduke, under the hair and sunburned hide, appeared to be blushing. His grin was awkward. “Well, shit,” he said. “Fuck, I don’t know, I guess ... well, shit, if I can’t swear I can’t talk.” A pause. “Can’t hardly *think* if I can’t swear.”

“That’s exactly what I thought,” said Bonnie. “You’re a verbal cripple. You use obscenities as a crutch. Obscenity is a crutch for crippled minds.” (Abbey 1975: 153f)

## 1. The concepts

*Obscenity* is the use of an abominated and/or repugnant and/or depraved offensively indecent, lewd expression. *Taboo* refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts. A *slur* is an expression of disparagement that discredits, slights, smears, stains, besmirches or sullies what it is applied to. As a rule of thumb, obscenities and slurs are taboo because they are proscribed in polite discourse and, consequently, they proliferate in impolite discourse.<sup>1</sup>

There are, of course, widely differing views on obscenity, slurring, and taboo. This short article makes no claim to be comprehensive but focuses on the linguistics of the pragmatic dynamics involved, without investigating the important issues of power, politics, race, and gender which can better be approached from an anthropological and ethnographic point of view. The latter perspective would bring in more widely comparative cross-cultural data, which remain mostly in the background in this contribution.

## 2. The social dynamics

Primarily, obscenity is ascribed to terms for the body parts and effluvia associated with sex organs and practices, micturition, and defecation (examples: *arseholes, bollocks, cunts, pricks, tits; cum, piss, shit; fucking, having a crap, peeing, wanking*). Although the language expressions themselves are regarded as obscene, this judgment arises directly from uncleanliness taboos on the objects and topics the words denote – though that is not the full

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for comments from the editors and a couple of reviewers that led to clarifications and other improvements. Remaining faults are mine.

story: the connotations of these expressions also play a large part. Uncleanliness derives from physical or moral corruption – whether actually perceived or attributed through prejudice. Death and disease are also subject to uncleanliness taboos, but talking about them in English doesn't normally count as obscene. Yet the following acts recommended in the Bible are judged obscene by some people because they invoke military behaviour that today would be tabooed and might lead to a war crimes trial. Numbers 25: 8 approves human sacrifice in the murder of an Israelite and a Midianitish woman 'so [that] the plague was stayed from the children of Israel'. God told Moses to 'vex ... and smite them [the Midianites]' (Numbers 25: 17), 'And [so the Israelites] warred against the Midianites as the Lord commanded Moses; and they slew all the males', burned their cities, and looted their cattle and chattels (Numbers 31: 7–11). Then Moses sent the Israelites back to complete the Lord's work by killing all male children and women of child-bearing age, keeping other females 'for yourselves' (Numbers 31: 17–18). God's work or not, this is despicable behaviour and arguably obscene for that reason.

Swearing is the strongly emotive use of obscene terms. There are four functions for swearing which often overlap: expletive, insult<sup>2</sup>, solidarity/camaraderie, and vividness (spicing up what is being said to make it more vivid and memorable than if orthophemism were used instead).

- (i) Shit, I've burnt the fucking meat. [Expletives]
- (ii) 'Don't phone me yet as I am having both my ears transplanted to my nuts so I can listen to you talk through your arse.' (ACE S05 873) [Abuse, insult, vividness]
- (iii) 'S1: pray to baby Jesus open up your heart let god's love come pouring in let god's love shine down on you like it has me and Miss Suzanne over here. / S2: oh fuck off' (ICE-NZ S1A) [Social solidarity]
- (iv) 'Welfare, my arsehole' (ACE F10 1953) [Vividness]<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> What constitutes insult? (A) The agent has the perlocutionary intention in uttering  $\epsilon$  (the expression under consideration) to assail the target with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech or action and/or to treat the target with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect. (B) The agent's uttering  $\epsilon$  has the perlocutionary effect (perhaps realising the agent's perlocutionary intention) of demeaning someone and/or of affronting or outraging them by manifest arrogance, scorn, contempt, or insolence.

<sup>3</sup> ACE = Australian Corpus of English comprising written texts from 1986; ICE-NZ = International Corpus of English, New Zealand, collected in the years 1990 to 1998.

Many languages invoke disfiguring, deadly diseases in maledictions. Current English no longer does so, though *A pox on/of you!* (principally smallpox) was used in early modern English, cf. Falstaff's

A pox of this gout! or, a gout of this pox! for the one or the other plays the rogue with my great toe. (Shakespeare *Henry IV Pt.2*, I.ii.246)

With his usual aplomb, Shakespeare puns: the first 'pox' is "smallpox", the latter "venereal disease". There is also Shakespeare's *a plague o' both your houses* (*Romeo and Juliet* III.i.92) – invoking bubonic plague with its blotchy red sores, pneumonic problems, and death. In other languages we find cholera invoked, e.g. in the Polish expletive *Cholera!* which is roughly comparable in function to English *Shit!* Dutch also uses disease terms in insults, e.g. *Krijg de klere/pest/tyfus!* "Get cholera/the plague/typhus!"; *Pleur op!* "pleurisy off" = fuck off; *kankerlaptop* "cancer laptop" = shitty laptop; *teringherrie* "tuberculosis noise" = dreadful noise, *klerebuurt* "cholera neighbourhood" = shitty neighbourhood; *Pim lazerde van het podium* "Pim lepered off the podium" = fell off; (see Hoeksema 2019).

Slurs are tabooed and although most people would probably not class slurs per se as 'obscene'. Uncleanliness slurs like *slut*, *cunt*, *bitch* and *whore* are more readily classed as 'obscene' than are racial slurs like *kike*, *slope*, and *nigger*. Since the 1980s, in several English-speaking countries, obscene language charges have been dismissed, with courts ruling that words such as *fuck*, *shit* and *cunt* are no longer offensive in law. There are two reasons why such words have lost their former power: one, terms of abuse lose their sting with frequent use; two, sex and bodily functions are no longer tabooed as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. While some people still complain about hearing words for such things spoken in the public arena, what is today perceived as truly objectionable are racial and ethnic slurs, use of which may activate legal consequences. For instance, when in 1995 an Australian footballer was disciplined for calling Aboriginal player Michael Long a 'black cunt' during a match, the reports and re-reports of the incident made no reference to the use of *cunt*; it was the racial abuse that triggered the uproar and the incident gave rise to a new code of conduct against racial vilification both on and off the sporting oval.

### 3. Historical change

From earliest times, themes such as private parts, bodily functions, sex, lust, anger, notions of social status, hate, dishonesty, drunkenness, madness, disease, death, dangerous animals, fear, and God have inspired taboos and inhibitions. However, notions about what is forbidden vary across cultures and across time. In the last half century, speakers in western countries have

shown a growing apprehensiveness of how to talk to and about ‘women and minorities’. There has been a gradual establishment of legally recognised sanctions against the new taboos which render sexist, racist, ageist, religiousist, etc. language not only contextually dysphemistic, but also legally so. Such –IST taboos (Allan and Burrige 1991) have surpassed in significance irreligious profanity, blasphemy, and sexual obscenity, against which laws, following community attitudes, have been relaxed. Individual societies will also differ with respect to the degree of tolerance for taboo-defying behaviour, depending on their values and belief systems at the particular time in history. It was not so long ago that transgressions against some western taboos were very severely punished; for instance, in Britain up until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, blasphemy was punishable by burning. There are still people who would take literally such biblical commandments as

He that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, and when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death. (*Leviticus* 24: 16)

In several Islamic societies, blasphemy is a capital crime today.

#### **4. Connotation and emotional response**

Why are orthophemistic expressions such as *vagina* and *excrement* less obscene than their (normally dysphemistic) synonyms *cunt* and *shit*? The obscenity lies in what the latter words connote – and not in what they denote. The connotations of a language expression are pragmatic effects that arise from encyclopaedic knowledge about its denotation (or reference) and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used (Allan 2007). This is why taboo words are often described as unpleasant or ugly-sounding and why they are mis-called *dirty words*. Their connotations give rise to a feeling that they are intrinsically nasty, and that makes them disturbing. The ability of obscene words to ‘chill the blood and raise gooseflesh’ (Wyld 1936: 387) is scientifically confirmed; physiological studies confirm that they elicit far stronger skin conductance responses than any other kinds of words.

Obscenities [...] are fighting words, gross words, dirty words, words charged with power; they are hurled like insults, heaped up to contaminate and defile, to incite or inflame, or just to let off steam. They leap out before we can stop them. They draw attention, they get us into trouble. The emotion and the obscenity proceed together, as if fused, overriding cortical inhibitions in a quick, involuntary burst. (Morris 2000: 174)

We might confidently claim that taboo language is provocative.

The ordinary reaction to a display of filth and vulgarity should be a neutral one or else disgust; but the reaction to certain words connected with excrement and sex is neither of these, but a titillating thrill of scandalized perturbation. (Read 1977 [1935]: 9)

Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum 1957 discovered a general tendency for any derogatory or unfavourable denotation or connotation within a language expression to dominate the interpretation of its immediate context. In the same vein, MacWhinney, Keenan & Reinke 1982: 315 found that

sentences with profane and sexually suggestive language elicited responses quite different from those [without. ...] Sentences with off-color language possess a memorability that is quite independent of their role in conversation.

Instantiating these observations is a true story emailed to me<sup>4</sup> in 1989: ‘The highest award in boy scouting is, or was in the sixties, The Silver Beaver. It was the cause of endless (suppressed) merriment when Grandfather received this coveted award.’ What makes dysphemisms like *bitch*, *cunt*, and *nigger* cognitively prominent is their affective force: they typically evoke stronger emotional response than most other vocabulary because of their combined connotation and denotation. There is no better description of this than Allen Read’s ‘titillating thrill of scandalized perturbation’. But there is an additional factor that makes them more marked than other vocabulary: they are stored differently in the brain from other vocabulary. Thus, people with certain kinds of dementia and/or aphasia can curse profusely, producing what sound like exclamatory interjections as an emotional reaction; however, when called upon to repeat the performance, they are unable to do so because they have lost the capacity to construct ordinary language. The fact that dirty words, abusive words, and slurs pour forth in these particular mental disorders and from people with Tourette syndrome is only possible because they are stored separately (or at least accessed differently) from other language (Allan and Burrige 2006, Finkelstein 2018, Jay 2000, Valenstein & Heilman 1979: 431). As I have said, this is a contributory factor to their cognitive salience, but the latter arises principally from the emotional impact evoked by their combined denotation and connotation.

There is plenty of linguistic evidence for the emotional quality of obscene expressions. Even across languages they can contaminate other words, bringing down innocent expressions that just happen to sound similar. Reportedly, bilingual Thais may get apprehensive about using the Thai words *fâg* “sheath”, *fâg* “to hatch”, and *fuk* “gourd, pumpkin” in the hearing of other Thais likely to know English *fuck*. *Fuk* is used for the name

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<sup>4</sup> By Cynthia R.

of the main character in the award-winning Thai novel *Kham Phi Phaksa (The Judgement)* by Chart Kobjitti 1983, and there was much speculation about how the name would be transliterated when the novel was translated into English; the translator chose ‘Fak’. Thai English-teachers experience some embarrassment, and their students some amusement, with the English word *yet* which is the equivalent of “to fuck” in colloquial Thai. Farb 1974: 82 reports something similar: ‘In the Nootka Indian language of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, the English word *such* so closely resembles the Nootka word meaning “cunt” that teachers find it very difficult to convince their students to utter the English word in class.’ Similar reports of cross-language effects have been reported elsewhere. Moreover, taboo senses seem to have a saliency that will dominate and suppress other senses of a language expression.

## 5. Homonyms, ambiguity, avoidance, and persistence

Throughout the centuries, if a language expression is ambiguous between a taboo sense and a non-taboo sense its meaning will narrow to the taboo sense alone. Cicero pointed out that *ruta* “rue” and *menta* “mint” could be used without impropriety; the same was true for the diminutive of *ruta*, *rutula* but not of *menta*, because the resulting *mentula* meant “penis” (*Epistulae Ad Familiares IX, xxi*, Cicero 1959). In late 18<sup>th</sup> century England, *ass* was gradually replaced by *donkey*. The motivation was exactly what Bloomfield 1927: 228 noted for the same change in American: *ass* was being confused with *arse* and has replaced it in American (meaning “arse or cunt”). Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, *coney* (rhymes with *honey*) was the word for “rabbit”; it dropped out of use because of the taboo homonym meaning “cunt”. The British still use *cock* to mean “rooster”; but, because of the taboo homonym meaning “penis”, this sense of *cock* started to die out in American in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; it is nowadays very rare in Australian. There has also been an effect on words containing *cock*: former Mayor Ed Koch of New York City gives his surname a spelling-pronunciation /kač/; the family of Louisa May Alcott (author of *Little Women*) changed their name from *Alcox*; *cockroach* is often foreclipped to *roach* in American; but on the other hand, *cockpit* and above all *cocktail* show no sign of being avoided; the same is true for those plumbing terms *ballcock* and *stopcock*. And although there were other factors at work too, the use of *haystack* in place of *haycock*, and the use of *weather-vane* as an alternative to *weather-cock*, were probably influenced by taboo avoidance. Among South Africans for whom *kaffir*, pronounced [ˈkafər], “black person” is a dysphemistic slur, the same two syllables in *kaffir*

*lime leaves* are euphemized with different stress and corresponding vowel difference to [ka<sup>l</sup>fɪr] – a nice example of dissimilation as a form of self-censorship to avoid taboo.<sup>5</sup>

There are two reasons why languages abandon homonyms of taboo terms: one, the relative salience of taboo terms compared with co-text; two, a speaker will not risk appearing to use a dysphemism when none was intended. For example, the Danish King of England from 1016–35 was originally called *Cnut* (the English *C* in place of the Norse *K*); but because the letters are as readily transposed as those of today’s clothing manufacturer FCUK<sup>6</sup>, *Cnut* came to be spelled *Canute*. There are a few (older) English speakers who, if they catch themselves using the adjective *gay* in its former sense of “bright, full of fun” will, with mild embarrassment, explicitly draw attention to this intended meaning. Their 19<sup>th</sup> century forbears, fearful of seeming impropriety, avoided the (then) obscene terms *leg* and *breast* even when speaking of a cooked fowl, referring instead to *dark* or *red meat* and *white meat*. Grose and others 1811 list *thingstable* used in place of *constable* commenting ‘a ludicrous affectation of delicacy in avoiding the pronunciation of the first syllable in the title of that officer, which in sound has some similarity to an indecent monosyllable.’ The United States chief of Naval Operations is the *CNO*; the Department of Defense is the *DOD*; however, the Secretary of Defense is not the *SOD*, but the *SecDef*.

Sometimes where there is little likelihood of being misunderstood, the homonyms of a taboo term will persist in the language. This is the case for instance with *queen* “regina” which is under no threat from the homonym meaning “gay male, male transvestite” simply because one denotatum is necessarily female, the other is necessarily male; the converse holds for the end-clipped American epithet *mother* “motherfucker”. Similarly, some do not censor themselves saying *It’s queer* but we generally avoid saying *He’s queer* if we mean “He’s peculiar” preferring *He’s eccentric* or *He’s a bit odd*. More subtly, *bull* meaning “bullshit” is dissimilated from *bull* “male, typically bovine, animal” because it heads an uncountable noun phrase instead of a countable one.

Nonetheless, dissimilarity does not always safeguard the innocent language expression. For instance, *regina* makes some people feel uncomfortable because of its phonetic similarity to the tabooed and therefore salient *vagina*; it is quite usual for speakers to avoid expressions which are phonetically similar to taboo terms. The word *niggardly* “stingy” is currently avoided in North America because it is, incorrectly, linked with *nigger*; in fact, it is most probably from Old Norse *hnoggr* (see Burridge 2005: 55). The linguistic infelicities of non-

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Ana Deumert for this example.

<sup>6</sup> French Connection United Kingdom.

native speakers and the similarity of some foreign language item to a taboo term can have embarrassing effects that may result in amusement or censoring – as Shakespeare has French Princess Katherine tell us

KATHERINE: Ainsi dis-je d'elbow, de nick, et de sin [chin]. Comment appelez-vous le pied et la robe?

ALICE: De foot, madame; et de coun.

KATHERINE: De foot et de coun! O Seigneur Dieu! ce sont mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user: je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. Foh! le foot et le coun! (Shakespeare *Henry V* III.iv. 46–53)

Katherine asks what you call a foot and a gown in English. In response to Alice telling her she says ‘Oh Lord God, these words sound bad, corrupting, gross and impure, and not to be used by women of honour. I wouldn’t like to utter these words in front of French gentlemen for all the world.’ The reason for this outburst is that *foot* sounds to her like *foutre* “fuck” and *coun* (i.e. *gown*) like *con*, which is etymologically linked to “cunnie” and “cunt” (however, “pussy” is probably a better translation). There is a possibly apocryphal (certainly racist) tale of a poster in Japanese English in 1952 that read in part: *we play for MacArthur’s erection* (MacArthur later withdrew from the US Presidential race). A true tale is of a seminar presentation by a non-native male graduate student in which he several times used the phrase ‘my testees’ to refer to “those subjected to a test”: the neologism provoked a good deal of barely suppressed mirth in the audience. I conclude with a letter written in 1943 from war torn Moscow (source <https://lettersofnote.com/2009/10/28/we-all-feel-like-that-now-and-then>). Back then the racism in the final sentence would have been dysphemistic to a Turk; today it is dysphemistic to a much wider public.

H.M. EMBASSY  
MOSCOW

Lord Pembroke  
The Foreign Office  
LONDON

6th April 1943

My dear Reggie,

In these dark days man tends to look for little shafts of light that spill from Heaven. My days are probably darker than yours, and I need, my God I do, all the light I can get. But I am a decent fellow, and I do not want to be mean and selfish about what little brightness is shed upon me from time to time. So I proposed to share with you a tiny flash that has illuminated my sombre life and tell you that God has given me a new Turkish colleague whose card tells me that he is called Mustapha Kunt.



We all feel that Reggie, now and then, especially when Spring is upon us, but few of us would care to put it on our cards. It takes a Turk to do that.

[Signed]  
Sir Archibald Clerk Kerr,  
H.M. Ambassador

## 6. Abuse and reclamation

The implicit racism of Kerr's letter leads me to the topic of reclamation of slurs, some of which almost universally count as obscenities. The words *bitch*, *cunt*, and *nigger* are, when applied to humans, typically deprecated because they are used as insults. But like many such slurs they are sometimes adopted by people who are potentially targeted in the insult and subverted to become markers of ingroup solidarity. Consequently, their representation in a lexicon must be able to predict the probable intended sense according to the context of use (see Allan 2020).

Within many minorities and oppressed groups, a term of abuse used by outsiders is often reclaimed to wear as a badge of honour to mark identification with and camaraderie within the in-group. This is normally because the speaker identifies as a person who has attracted or might attract the slur: in other words s/he trades on the hurtful, contemptuous connotation and subverts it (see Hornsby 2001; Cepollaro and Zeman 2020). For instance, used as an in-group term of address, *nigger* has much in common with the British and Australian address term *mate* (see Rendle-Short 2009) or American *bud(dy)* – though *bud(dy)* and *mate* do not have the negative connotations of *nigger*. To this end, many (mostly male) African Americans have adopted the term *nigger*, often respelled *nigga* (which for most speakers remains homophonous), to use to or about their fellows. There is an example of this in President Obama's autobiography when, in an exchange of banter<sup>7</sup>, his friend Ray addresses him as 'nigger', see Obama 2004: 73. Another example.

So, Mr. President, if I'm going to keep it 100: Yo, Barry, you did it, my nigger. You did it.  
(Larry Wilmore to President Barack (= Barry) Obama at the 2016 White House)

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<sup>7</sup> Banter is a form of competitive verbal play and upmanship in which the agent needles a sparring partner with critical observations on their physical appearance, mental ability, character, behaviour, beliefs, and/or familial and social relations in circumstances where it is mutually understood that there is no serious attempt to wound or belittle the interlocutor.

Correspondents' Dinner, cited by black journalist Jonathan Capehart in the *Washington Post*, May 2, 2016, 'Why Larry Wilmore is not 'my n - - - -')<sup>8</sup>

Larry Wilmore's attribution was controversial. His use of 'nigger' was mostly referred to in the media as 'the N word' and otherwise written 'n—' or 'nigga'. Jonathan Capehart disapproved not because an African American was addressed as *nigger* by another African American, but because the addressee was the President of the United States whom Capehart believes should not be treated so familiarly on a public occasion. But it is clear that Wilmore was intending to be colloquial and familiar, witness 'keep it 100' and 'Yo, Barry'. It certainly didn't appear that Obama was offended. All these comments are tempered by the context in which *nigger/nigga* occurs and is spoken or written of. We have a classic example of polysemy and so, although one cannot say *Ordell is a nigger<sub>1</sub> and so is Beaumont [a nigger<sub>2</sub>]* because it violates the Q-principle of both Horn 1984 and Levinson 2000, it is perfectly possible for one African American to say to another *That honkey called me a nigger<sub>2</sub>, nigger<sub>1</sub>* (assuming *nigger<sub>2</sub>* is the slur and *nigger<sub>1</sub>* is not).

The same kind of argument goes when women or gay men address each other as *bitch* in amity. There is a meme widely distributed over the internet: 'My best friend can't stop being my best friend. The bitch knows too much.' Tongue in cheek it may be, but it clearly maintains the banter of camaraderie. Note the stance in Jo Freeman's *Bitch Manifesto* of 1970:

Bitches seek their identity strictly thru themselves and what they do. They are subjects, not objects. [...] It is a popular derogation to put down uppity women that was created by man and adopted by women. Like the term "nigger," "bitch" serves the social function of isolating and discrediting a class of people who do not conform to the socially accepted patterns of behavior.

(<http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/bitch.htm>)

## 7. Insulting slurs

There follow instances of *bitch* and also *cunt* used as insults:

[H]e called me a slut, cunt, worthless bitch, I slapped him at some point, then he followed me to the porch, where I'd gone to cry, to tell me how I spread my legs for anyone who walks by, and how I have no respect for myself because no one taught me to respect my body when I was a

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/05/02/why-larry-wilmore-is-not-my-n/>. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IDFt3BL7FA> ('my nigger' occurs at 22:04 minutes).

teenager. [...] This is not the first time he's called me a slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc. He accused me of cheating 2 weeks ago (I'm not, nor will I ever because of family history with cheating) with a coworker. [...] I put a hand out and said "If you lay one finger on me, I will scream and call the police." This is when he proceeded to call me a f\*cking cunt, bitch, and a piece of shit (he'd called me worthless earlier in the week, again not for the first time). (<http://forums.thenest.com/discussion/12002898/husband-called-me-a-c-t-b-ch-sl-t>, September 2013)<sup>9</sup>

The author slapped her husband because she was upset by the fact that he was insulting her: it was not only the perlocutionary effect of his words but, there can be no doubt from the wife's report and our own onlooker observation, it was the illocutionary intention of the husband to insult. Obscenities like 'slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc' reveal that the wife was being accused of sexual promiscuity, which she properly regards as insulting slurs.

Below is a report mentioning a slur by Barbara Bush, wife of Republican 41<sup>st</sup> US President George H. Bush, on the 1984 Democrat Vice Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro. Note that the topic of the article is the Bush pooch Millie ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millie\\_%28dog%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millie_%28dog%29)).

To borrow words Barbara Bush once used to describe Geraldine Ferraro, Millie Kerr Bush is something that rhymes with rich. (*Time Australia*, March 6, 1989: 62)

The original report of the slur reads, in part:

But if some people were surprised to hear white-haired, gentle-looking Barbara Bush calling Mrs. Ferraro a "four million dollar – I can't say it, but it rhymes with rich," some others were not so shocked. (Joyce 1984)

This is understood to mean that Barbara Bush called her husband's political opponent a bitch, thus slurring Ferraro. Obviously, the *Time Australia* reporter understood her to mean "bitch", otherwise it would make no sense to apply Bush's words to a female dog. However, Bush used a euphemistic dysphemism, because it would have reflected badly on her had she explicitly spelled out the slur. Joyce 1984 writes: 'Mrs. Bush later apologized for the remark'. Such an apology does not indicate that Barbara Bush revised her opinion of Geraldine Ferraro, only that she later regretted making the insult public, thereby staining her own character.

It is widely acknowledged that *cunt* is the most tabooed word in English. Interestingly, the same is not true of its cognates in closely related languages: French *con* and Spanish *coño* have the same origin – Latin *cunnus* "cunt, promiscuous woman" – but their extended uses are much less dysphemistic. For instance, French *Vieux con* (literally, "old cunt") is more likely to be

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<sup>9</sup> No longer available online, though thenest.com still exists.

jocular than insulting – comparable with British *old bugger*. (On Spanish *coño* see Allan and Burrige 2006). As with the other terms I have been discussing, *cunt* can be used orthophemistically in, for instance, academic essays like this one. And, of course, *cunt* may be used as an expression of bantering camaraderie – as can *silly*, *ass*, *idiot*, *bastard*, and *fucker*, as in ‘[laughs] you’re a gross cunt [laughs]’ (Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English J 2) and the following, from the novel *Trainspotting* (using the Leith dialect of Edinburgh, Scotland).

- Granty ... ye didnae hear? ... Coke looked straight at Lenny.
- Naw. Wha ...
- Deid. Potted heid.
- Yir jokin! Eh? Gies a fuckin brek ya cunt ...
- Gen up. Last night, likes.
- Whit the fuck happened ...
- Ticker. Boom. Coke snapped his fingers. — Dodgy hert, apparently. Nae cunt kent aboot it. Perr Granty wis workin wi Pete Gilleghan, oan the side likesay. It wis aboot five, n Granty wis helpin Pete tidy up, ready to shoot the craw n that likes, whin he jist hauds his chist n cowps ower. Gilly gits an ambulance, n they take the perr cunt tae the hospital, but he dies a couple of ooirs later. Perr Granty. Good cunt n aw. You play cairds wi the guy, eh?
- Eh ... aye ... one ay the nicest cunts ye could hope tae meet. That’s gutted us, that hus.

(Welsh 2001: 129)<sup>10</sup>

A newspaper report of Phil Grant’s fatal heart attack, even if equally sympathetic to the ‘perr cunt’, would – as a matter of social appropriateness – necessarily use very different language.

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<sup>10</sup> A translation for those who need it. ‘Granty [Phil Grant] ... did you not hear?’ Coke looked straight at Lenny. ‘No. What?’ ‘Dead. Stone dead. [*Potted head* is rhyming slang for “dead”, its literal meaning is “brawn”] ‘You’re joking! Eh? Give us a fucking break, you cunt ...’ ‘Honestly. Last night.’ [‘Likes’ = *like I say* approximately “I’m telling you”.] ‘What the fuck happened?’ ‘Ticker [heart]. Boom.’ Coke snapped his fingers. ‘Dodgy heart, apparently. No cunt knew about it. Poor Granty was working with Pete Gilleghan on the side [illegally]. It was about five and Granty was helping Pete tidy up, ready to go [*shoot the craw/crow* is rhyming slang for “go”] and that, when he just holds his chest and keels over. Gilly [Gilleghan] gets an ambulance, and they take the poor cunt to hospital, but he dies a couple of hours later. Poor Granty. Good cunt and all. You play[ed] cards with guy, didn’t you?’ ‘Eh ... Yes ... One of the nicest cunts you could hope to meet. That’s gutted me, that has.’

## 8. Conclusion: dysphemistic euphemism

The phenomenon of subversion of slurs is not so strange when we compare it with the existence of contronyms<sup>11</sup> in the vocabulary, e.g. *bound* “fastened to a spot” vs “heading for somewhere”; *cleave* “adhere to” vs “separate”; *consult* “offer advice” vs “seek advice”; *dust* “remove fine particles” vs “cover with fine particles”; *fast* “moving quickly” vs “fixed, unable to move”; *give out* “provide, supply” vs “stop for lack of supply”; *hold up* “support” vs “impede”; *overlook* “supervise” vs “neglect”; *sanction* “approve” vs “boycott”; *trim* “decorate” vs “remove excess from”; etc. There are many more, including some that are controversial, for instance *infer* is used to mean both “imply by saying” and “understand from what is said”; *rent* and *let*<sup>12</sup> can be ambiguous between “allow the use of something in return for being paid” and “use something in return for payment to the owner”. What contronyms show is that speakers and writers and their audiences can happily operate using a word or phrase with contrary meanings relying on context to disambiguate – which is exactly what normally applies with terms of abuse and their contronymic subversions.

All of *bitch*, *cunt*, and *nigger* are slurs: they are saliently dysphemistic even though each of them can be used in the spirit of camaraderie. What might motivate the choice of one rather than another where, say, black woman X has the potential to be labelled by any one of them? The principal difference is that *bitch* focuses on the target being female whereas *cunt* focuses on the target being a reviled object. If X were addressed by the insult *nigger*, it would most likely be because the focus is on her skin colour.

In this essay I have discussed taboos on obscenities and slurs used dysphemistically as insults and also offered reasons for them being reclaimed for use as dysphemistic euphemisms when they are markers of in-group solidarity and bantering. The differences are to be interpreted with reference to the particular context of use (see Allan 2018).

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<sup>11</sup> Also called *contronyms* and *autoantonyms*, among other things.

<sup>12</sup> There are also the verb *let* “allow” as in *Let me pay* and the noun *let* “hindrance” as in tennis (when during service a ball is hindered by the net cord).

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