PHYS ORG

3Qs: The evolution of profanity

November 28 2012, by Linda Ogbevoen

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

#@&#! Profanity has long been a key element of American culture. We're profane when we're frustrated or telling a story or even when we're watching TV, but how do words get labeled as profane and where do they come from? Here, Heather Littlefield, associate academic specialist and head advisor of the linguistics program in the College of Science, weighs in on society's "bad words."

Words are considered empty symbols until we attach meanings to them. How and why do certain words get labeled as profanity?

There are a number of ways in which words become "bad" words, but it usually takes time for words to become taboo, or profane. I'll try to keep my examples clean in this discussion, but the process is the same for the really bad words, too.

For instance, many of our worst "four-letter words" in English stem from the differences between the French-speaking nobility who ruled England following the Norman Conquest of 1066. The English-speaking peasants absorbed some of the words that the nobles were using, but gave them a high-class spin. So while the French were referring to their houses ("maisons" in French), the English peasants adopted the word with the meaning of a very large, impressive house ("mansion"), and the English word "house" was left to mean something more basic. This happened with certain body parts, for example. So instead of saying "Pardon my French" when we curse, we should more rightly be saying, "Pardon my Old English."

One typical process is that the word gradually becomes contaminated, necessitating another euphemism to take its place. For example, the word "toilet," which originally referred to a dressing table covering, came to refer to the room where the chamber pot is kept. Then, gradually, the term came to feel dirty and people needed a new, clean way to refer to this same place. So they started to use "bathroom" (whether there is a bathtub or not). But then after time this, too, became more contaminated, and another euphemism was created: "ladies' room."

Do profane words carry special weight? Would curses lose their appeal if stigma were not attached to using

them?

Yes! If they weren't considered extremely bad or dirty, then they would have no power or emphatic force whatsoever. It would be like trying to swear with a word like "flower." Can you imagine, "Oh, flower! I broke the window!"? It sounds funny, because it doesn't have that extremely negative meaning for us. Similarly, second-language learners often get into trouble because they learn a few swear words in the language they are studying and then they use those words too casually when they are traveling or living abroad. While the words are very profane for the native speakers of the language, the learner doesn't feel that same sense of force—they don't feel as bad as the swear words in the learner's native language.

Is profanity becoming more accepted by society or is it still considered taboo?

Norms of using profanity really vary widely and depend on a range of factors. For example, regional dialects have different norms for the use of profanity. Now that I live in Boston, I've absorbed these local norms and I find that when I return to visit my home state of Idaho, I shock people with my casual and more frequent use of profanity. The speaker's gender and age can also play a role: Women generally use less and milder profanity than men, and there are times of life when speakers use more or less profanity. For example, people may make more use of profanity in their college years, but then reduce their rates of cursing as they take on professional roles and become parents.

And speakers often have different views of others' use of curse words. For instance, people are more likely to have negative views of women's cursing than men's cursing. And, of course, context plays a role: Think of telling a story to a group of friends at a bar on Friday night after work

and telling that same story to your grandmother. Odds are that your use of profanity will be greater in the former context.

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: 3Qs: The evolution of profanity (2012, November 28) retrieved 12 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2012-11-3qs-evolution-profanity.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.