A FOUR-LETTER FAN

What can we learn from the way swear words change over time? The word dick used to refer to a riding crop—thus the metaphor of anatomical parts. A word gaining a new meaning is a normal process, but what’s interesting about profanity is that it systematically loses its older meanings. You don’t need to walk to a riding crop anymore because of the trouble that can be caused by confusion.

What happens to a profane word in the long run? It enters into the common vocabulary and loses its salaciousness. Caesar was often indubitably powerful, but if we step back and compare him with other words that did the same thing hundreds of years ago, we see that the words themselves don’t have any inherent power—just the power we give them.

Can you think of a once-empowered curse word that is meaningless now? There’s a pervasive belief that profanity is magically harmful to children, but there’s really no evidence for it. Verbal abuse can be damaging, but that’s not the same as profanity. You can verbally abuse someone by saying that they’re stupid or worthless, and you can use profanity in very positive ways. “Your garden-variety chemistry test were flamin’ hot!” Let’s go get the cream.

In Shakespeare’s time, to swear would have been a more common way than the F-word to talk about sexual intercourse. Today, I don’t think it would have much purchase outside of a Renaissance fair.

Could you explain a major misperception Americans have about curse words?

Profanity, you explain, has also taught us about how the brain produces language. People with damage to Broca’s area in their left cerebral hemisphere often have trouble articulating speech. Many of them, while they can’t say “there’s a cat,” can swear and often do. This has been known for thirty years, but people figured it was only recently that spontaneous swearing was a different brain pathway from the rest of language. It’s a totally different route to swear when you stub your toe. It’s evolutionarily much older and predates our capacity for intentional speech.

We curse when we’re angry or excited. It’s largely a way for us to spread those feelings. That’s a kind of what language does in general. Some language is really good at crowdfunding, expressing other people with your ideas. Other language has more direct path to the emotions, and profanity is most definitely among the latter.

SOUNDS LIKE A GIRL

AERIN, KATEA, OBERON, Which one of these names belongs to a woman? You’d probably guess Aerin, and you’d be correct. But did you know in some languages, including English and Spanish, feminine names often end in a “-ness” sound, such as the unpronounced in Jessica or Maria? But a new paper published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology suggests there are further clues.

The way we pronounce the first syllable of a name, researchers argue, may influence whether it seems more fitting for a boy or a girl. Analyzing 200 names in the United States and India, psychologists Michael Sipan and Adam Gaskin found that names given to boys tend to begin with “weak phonemes”-basic units of speech which, like their sound in Nathan, are created by vibrating the vocal cords. Girl names, however, are more likely to start with strong phonemes like the in Kristen, which don’t require the vibration. The researchers also found that weak sounds stuck longer as “harder” than unmarked ones. The divergent trends in male and female names may stem from ingrained associations of men with hardness and women with softness, according to Sipan. The differences also support the concept of sound symbolism—the idea that the sounds of some words are connected to what they represent. Such lists, they say, “help us answer the question of where our words come from and why they’ve been used the way they have.”

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