

PENGUIN BOOKS

The Seven Words You Can't Say on Television

Steven Pinker is the Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. Until 2003, he taught in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT. He conducts research on language and cognition, writes for publications such as the *New York Times*, *Time* and *Slate*, and is the author of six books, including *The Language Instinct*, *How the Mind Works* and *The Blank Slate*.

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Freedom of speech is a foundation of democracy, because without it citizens can't share their observations on folly and injustice or collectively challenge the authority that maintains them. It's no coincidence that freedom of speech is enshrined in the first of the ten amendments to the Constitution that make up the Bill of Rights, and is given pride of place in other statements of basic freedoms such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Just as clearly, freedom of speech cannot be guaranteed in every circumstance. The U.S. Supreme Court recognizes five kinds of unprotected speech, and four of the exclusions are compatible with the rationale for enshrining free speech as a fundamental liberty. Fraud and libel are not protected, because they subvert the essence of speech that makes it worthy of protection, namely, to seek and share the truth. Also unprotected are advocacy of imminent lawless behavior and "fighting words," because they are intended to trigger behavior reflexively (as when someone shouts "Fire!" in a crowded theater) rather than to exchange ideas.

Yet the fifth category of unprotected speech—obscenity—seems to defy justification. Though some prurient words and images are protected, others cross a vague and contested boundary into the category of "obscenity," and the government is free to outlaw them. And in broadcast media, the state is granted even broader powers, and may ban sexual and scatological language that it classifies as mere "indecentcy." But why would a democracy sanction the use of government force to deter the uttering of words for two activities—sex and excretion—that harm no one and are inescapable parts of the human condition?

In practice as well as in theory, the prosecution of obscene speech is a puzzle. Throughout history people have been tortured and killed for criticizing their leadership, and that is the fate of freethinkers in many parts of the world today. But in liberal democracies the battle for free speech has mostly been won. Every night millions of people watch talk-show hosts freely ridiculing the intelligence and honesty of the leaders of their nation. Of course, eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, and civil libertarians are rightly concerned with potential abridgments of speech such as those in copyright law, university speech codes, and the USA Patriot Act. Yet for the past century the most famous legal battles over free speech have been joined not where history would lead us to expect them—in efforts to speak truth to power—but in the use of certain words for copulation, pudenda, orifices, and effluvia. Here are some prominent cases:

- In 1921, a magazine excerpt from James Joyce's *Ulysses* was declared obscene by an American court, and the book was banned in the United States until 1933.
- D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, written in 1928, was not published in the United Kingdom until 1960, whereupon Penguin Books was prosecuted (unsuccessfully) under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959.
- *Lady Chatterley* was also banned from the United States, together with Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*. In a series of court decisions reflecting the changing sexual mores of the 1960s, the bans were overturned, culminating in a Supreme Court ruling in 1973
- Between 1961 and 1964, the comedian Lenny Bruce was repeatedly arrested for

obscenity and banned from performing in many cities. Bruce died in 1966 while appealing a four-month sentence imposed by a New York court, and was finally pardoned by Governor George Pataki thirty-seven years after his death.

- The Pacifica Radio Network was fined in 1973 by the Federal Communications Commission for broadcasting George Carlin's monologue "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." The Supreme Court upheld the action, ruling that the FCC could prohibit "indecent" language during hours when children might stumble upon a broadcast.
- The FCC fined Howard Stern's popular radio program repeatedly, prompting Stern to leave broadcast radio in 2006 for the freedom of satellite radio. Many media experts predicted that it would be a tipping point in the popularity of that medium.

Other targets of sanctions include Kenneth Tynan, John Lennon, Bono, 2 Live Crew, Bernard Malamud, Eldridge Cleaver, Kurt Vonnegut, Eric Idle, and the producers of *Hair* and *M*A*S*H*.¹

The persecution of swearers has a long history. The third commandment states, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain," and Leviticus 24:16 spells out the consequences: "He that blasphemeth the name of the Lord shall be put to death." To be sure, the past century has expanded the arenas in which people can swear. As early as 1934, Cole Porter could pen the lyric "Good authors, too, who once knew better words / Now only use four-letter words / Writing prose. Anything goes." Most of the celebrity swearers of the twentieth century prevailed (if only posthumously), and many recent entertainers, such as Richard Pryor, Eve Ensler, and the cast of *South Park*, have cussed with impunity. Yet it's still not the case that anything goes. In 2006 George W. Bush signed into law the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act, which increased the fines for indecent language tenfold and threatened repeat offenders with the loss of their license.

Taboo language, then, enters into a startling array of human concerns, from capital crimes in the Bible to the future of electronic media. It stakes out the frontier of free speech in liberal democracies, not only in government control of the media but in debates over hate speech, fighting words, and sexual harassment. And of course it figures in our everyday judgments of people's character and intentions.

Whether they are referred to as swearing, cursing, cussing, profanity, obscenity, indecency, vulgarity, blasphemy, expletives, oaths, or epithets; as dirty, four-letter, or taboo words; or as bad, coarse, crude, foul, salty, earthy, raunchy, or off-color language, these expressions raise many puzzles for anyone interested in language as a window into human nature. The fear and loathing are not triggered by the concepts themselves, because the organs and activities they name have hundreds of polite synonyms. Nor are they triggered by the words' sounds, since many of them have respectable homonyms in names for animals, actions, and even people. The unprintable can become printable with a hyphen or asterisk, and the unsayable sayable with the flip of a vowel or consonant. Something about the *pairing* of certain meanings and sounds has a potent effect on people's emotions.

Shakespeare wrote, "But words are words. I never yet did hear / That the bruised

heart was pierced through the ear.” Yet most people don’t see it that way. The FCC and network censors are not inveterate prudes; they are responding to a huge constituency of listeners who light up a station switchboard like a Christmas tree when an actor or guest lets slip an obscenity. To these guardians of decency, profanity is self-evidently corrupting, especially to the young. This argument is made in spite of the fact that everyone is familiar with the words, including most children, and that no one has ever spelled out how the mere hearing of a word could corrupt one’s morals.

To the libertines, what’s self-evident is that linguistic taboos are absurd. A true moralist, they say, should hold that it’s violence and inequality that are “obscene,” not sex and excretion. And the suppression of plain speaking about sex only leads to teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and the displacement of healthy sexual energy into destructive behavior. This air of progressive-ness helped to make Bruce a martyr among artists and intellectuals: “A moral conscience second to none,” wrote the critic Ralph J. Gleason; “Saint Lenny, I should call him; he died for our sins,” wrote the performance artist Eric Bogosian.²

Yet since the 1970s, some of the progressive constituencies that most admired Bruce have imposed linguistic taboos of their own. During the O. J. Simpson trial, the prosecutor Christopher Darden referred to the n-word as “the dirtiest, filthiest, nastiest word in the English language, and it has no place in a courtroom.” Yet it has repeatedly found its way into the courtroom, most famously in the Simpson trial to prove that a police officer was a racist, and in other trials to determine whether a person can be fired for using it, or excused for assaulting someone else who uses it.³ And in “the new Victorianism,” casual allusions to sex, even without identifiable sexism, may be treated as forms of sexual harassment, as in Clarence Thomas’s remarks about porn stars and pubic hair.⁴ So even people who revile the usual bluenoses can become gravely offended when they hear words on their own lists of taboos.

Another puzzle about swearing is the range of topics that are the targets of taboo.⁵ The seven words you can never say on television refer to sexuality and excretion: they are names for feces, urine, intercourse, the vagina, breasts, a person who engages in fellatio, and a person who acts out an Oedipal desire. But the capital crime in the Ten Commandments comes from a different subject, theology, and the taboo words in many languages refer to perdition, deities, messiahs, and their associated relics and body parts. Another semantic field that spawns taboo words across the world’s languages is death and disease, and still another is disfavored classes of people such as infidels, enemies, and subordinate ethnic groups. But what could these concepts—from mammaries to messiahs to maladies to minorities—possibly have in common?

A final puzzle about swearing is the crazy range of circumstances in which we do it. There is cathartic swearing, as when we hit our thumb with a hammer or knock over a glass of beer. There are imprecations, as when we suggest a label or offer advice to someone who has cut us off in traffic. There are vulgar terms for everyday things and activities, as when Bess Truman was asked to get the president to say *fertilizer* instead of *manure* and she replied, “You have no idea how long it took me to get him to say *manure*.” There are figures of speech that put obscene words to other uses, such as the

barnyard epithet for insincerity, the army acronym *snafu*, and the gynecological-flagellative term for uxorial dominance. And then there are the adjective-like expletives that salt the speech and split the words of soldiers, teenagers, Australians, and others affecting a breezy speech style.

This chapter is about the puzzle of swearing—the strange shock and appeal of words like *fuck*, *screw*, and *come*; *shit*, *piss*, and *fart*; *cunt*, *pussy*, *tits*, *prick*, *cock*, *dick*, and *asshole*; *bitch*, *slut*, and *whore*; *bastard*, *wanker*, *cocksucker*, and *motherfucker*; *hell*, *damn*, and *Jesus Christ*; *faggot*, *queer*, and *dyke*; and *spick*, *dago*, *kike*, *wog*, *mick*, *gook*, *kaffir*, and *nigger*. We will explore the biological roots of swearing, the areas of experience that spawn taboo words, and the occasions on which people put them to use. Finally I will ask why these words are felt to be not just unpleasant but taboo—why merely hearing or reading them is felt to be corrupting—before offering some reflections on what we should do about swearing.

Pottymouths

As with the rest of language, swearing can be called universal, though only with qualifications.⁶ Certainly the exact words and concepts considered taboo can vary across times and places. During the history of a language, we often see clean words turning and dirty words turning clean.⁷ Most English speakers today would be surprised to read in a medical textbook that “in women the neck of the bladder is short, and is made fast to the cunt,” yet the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites this from a fifteenth-century source. In documenting such changes the historian Geoffrey Hughes has noted, “The days when the dandelion could be called the *pissabed*, a heron could be called a *shitecrow* and the windhover could be called the *windfucker* have passed away with the exuberant phallic advertisement of the codpiece.”⁸ The changing fortunes of taboo words can buffet the reception of a work of literature. *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, has been the target of repeated bans in American schools because *nigger*, though never a respectful term, is far more incendiary today than it was in the time and place in which Mark Twain wrote.

Words can shed their taboos over time, too. When Eliza Doolittle chirped “Not bloody likely” at an upper-class tea in *Pygmalion*, she scandalized not only her fictional companions but the audiences who saw the play when it opened in 1914. Yet by the time it was adapted into the musical *My Fair Lady* in 1956, *bloody* had become so unexceptionable that the scriptwriters worried that the humor would be lost on the audience, and added the scene in which Eliza is taken to the Ascot races and shouts at a horse, “Move your bloomin’ arse!” Many parents today are horrified when their children come home from school innocently using the verbs *suck*, *bite*, and *blow*, unaware of their origin as words for fellatio. But those parents probably gave just as little thought to their own use of the now-innocuous *sucker* (from *cock-sucker*), *jerk* (from *jerk off*), and *scumbag* (a condom). Progressive comedians have tried to help this process along by repeating obscenities to the point of desensitization (a process that psycholinguists call semantic satiation) or by momentarily turning into linguistics professors and calling attention to the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign. Here is

an excerpt from one of Lenny Bruce's best-known routines:

Tooooooo is a preposition. To is a preposition. Commmmmme is a verb. To is a preposition. Come is a verb. To is a preposition. Come is a verb, the verb intransitive. To come. To come.... It's been like a big drum solo. To come to come, come too come too, to come to come uh uh uh uh uh urn urn urn urn urn uh uh uh uh uh uh—TO COME! TO COME! TO COME! TO COME! Did you come? Did you come? Good. Did you come good? Did you come good? Did you come? Good. To. Come. To. Come—Didyoucomegood? Didyouco megooddidyoucomegood?⁹

And this is from Carlin's monologue on the "Seven Words":

Shit, Piss, Fuck, Cunt, Cocksucker, Motherfucker, and Tits, wow. Tits doesn't even belong on the list, you know. It's such a friendly sounding word. It sounds like a nickname. "Hey, Tits, come here. Tits, meet Toots, Toots, Tits, Tits, Toots." It sounds like a snack, doesn't it? Yes, I know, it is, right. But I don't mean the sexist snack, I mean, New Nabisco Tits. The new Cheese Tits, and Corn Tits and Pizza Tits, Sesame Tits, Onion Tits, Tater Tits, yeah.

Tits is now clean enough to have been left out of the Clean Airwaves Act and to be printable in "The Gray Lady," the *New York Times*. But many words stay taboo for centuries, and which words become cleaner or dirtier is as capricious as the rise and fall of *Steve*.¹⁰

Similar desensitization campaigns have been aimed at epithets for women and minorities, who often try to "reclaim" the words by using them conspicuously among themselves. Thus we have NWA (Niggaz With Attitude, a hip-hop group); Queer Nation, queer studies, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*; Dykes on Bikes (a cycling group for lesbians) and www.classicydikes.com; and the Phunky Bitches, a "real-time community of women (and men) who are into live music, travel, and a host of other interests." I have never heard of a temple brotherhood meeting at which the attendees greet each other with "What's happenin', kike!" but in the 1970s the novelist Kinky Friedman led a country band called the Texas Jewboys, and there is a hip magazine for young Jewish readers called *Heeb*. At the same time, these terms have not been neutralized so much as flaunted as a sign of defiance and solidarity, precisely because they *are* still offensive in the language community at large. Woe betide the outsider who misunderstands this, like the Hong Kong detective played by Jackie Chan in *Rush Hour* who innocently follows the lead of his African American partner and greets the black patrons of a Los Angeles bar with "Whassup, my nigger," thereby starting a small riot.

The punch of specific words can vary even more from one language to another.¹¹ In Québécois French, *merde* (shit) is far milder than its English equivalent, a bit closer to *crap*, and most speakers are at best dimly aware that *con* (idiot) originally meant *cunt*. But some of the worst things you can say to someone are *Tabernac!* (tabernacle), *Calisse!* (chalice), and *Sacrement!* (sacrament). In 2006 the Catholic Church tried to

reclaim these words by splashing them on billboards with their original religious definitions underneath. (One columnist sighed, “Is nothing sacred?”) Religious profanity is common in other Catholic regions, as it was in England before the Reformation, when sexual and scatological terms started to take over.¹²

But despite the variation across time and space, it’s safe to say that most languages, probably all, have emotionally laden words that may not be used in polite conversation. Perhaps the most extreme example is Djirbal, an Aboriginal language of Australia, in which *every* word is taboo when spoken in the presence of mothers-in-law and certain cousins. Speakers have to use an entirely different vocabulary (though the same grammar) when those relatives are around. In most other languages, the taboo words are drawn from the same short list of topics from which English and French get their curses: sex, excretion, religion, death and infirmity, and disfavored groups.¹³

Claims that profanity is lacking altogether in a particular language have to be taken with a grain of salt. It’s true that in many places if you ask speakers to list their profanities, they may demur. But swearing and hypocrisy go hand in hand, to the extent that some personality questionnaires include items like “I sometimes swear” as a check for lying. In *Expletive Deleted: A Good Look at Bad Language*, the linguist Ruth Wajnryb reports:

One of my informants, an Englishman married to a Japanese woman, asked his wife the questions I was using to elicit data about Japanese. She told him she couldn’t help because she didn’t know any Japanese swear words. This she said, mind you, in wide-eyed innocence to a husband who was fully aware, as she was aware that he was, from firsthand experience of her skills in that department.¹⁴

A review in a periodical called *Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression* contains an extensive list of Japanese sexual insults and vulgar terms, and the other cross-cultural surveys appearing in that journal also have a familiar ring to them.¹⁵

Taboo speech is part of a larger phenomenon known as word magic.¹⁶ Though one of the foundations of linguistics is that the pairing between a sound and a meaning is arbitrary, most humans intuitively believe otherwise. They treat the name for an entity as part of its essence, so that the mere act of uttering a name is seen as a way to impinge on its referent. Incantations, spells, prayers, and curses are ways that people try to affect the world through words, and taboos and euphemisms are ways that people try *not* to affect it. Even hardheaded materialists find themselves knocking wood after mentioning a hoped-for event, or inserting *God forbid* after mentioning a feared one, perhaps for the same reason that Niels Bohr hung a horseshoe above his office door: “I hear that it works even if you don’t believe in it.”

The Blaspheming Brain

The ubiquity and power of swearing suggest that taboo words may tap into deep and

ancient parts of the emotional brain. Words have not just a denotation but a connotation: an emotional coloring distinct from what the word literally refers to, as in *principled* versus *stubborn* and *slender* versus *scrawny*. The difference is reminiscent of the way that taboo words and their synonyms differ, such as *shit* and *feces*, *cunt* and *vagina*, or *fucking* and *making love*. Long ago psycholinguistics identified the three main ways in which words' connotations vary: good versus bad, weak versus strong, and active versus passive.¹⁷ *Hero*, for example, is good, strong, and active; *coward* is bad, weak, and passive; and *traitor* is bad, weak, and active. Taboo words cluster at the very bad and very strong edges of the space, though there are surely other dimensions to connotation as well.

Are connotations and denotations stored in different parts of the brain? It's not implausible. The mammalian brain contains, among other things, the limbic system, an ancient network that regulates motivation and emotion, and the neocortex, the crinkled surface of the brain, which ballooned in human evolution and which is the seat of perception, knowledge, reason, and planning. The two systems are interconnected and work together, but it's not far-fetched to suppose that words' denotations are concentrated in the neocortex, especially in the left hemisphere, whereas their connotations are spread across connections between the neocortex and the limbic system, especially in the right hemisphere.¹⁸

A likely suspect within the limbic system is the amygdala, an almond-shaped organ buried at the front of the temporal lobe of the brain (one on each side), which helps invest memories with emotion.¹⁹ A monkey whose amygdalas have been removed can learn to recognize a new shape, like a striped triangle, but has trouble learning that the shape foreshadows an unpleasant event like an electric shock. In humans the amygdala "lights up"—it shows greater metabolic activity in brain scans—when the person sees an angry face or an unpleasant word, especially a taboo word.²⁰ Well before psychologists could scan the working brain, they could measure the emotional jolt from a fraught word by strapping an electrode on a person's finger and measuring the change in the skin conductance caused by the sudden wave of sweat. The skin response accompanies activity in the amygdala, and like the activity recorded from the amygdala itself, it can be triggered by taboo words.²¹ The emotional flavoring of words seems to be picked up in childhood: bilingual people often feel that their second language is not as piquant as their first, and their skin reacts more to hearing taboo words and reprimands in their first language than in their second.²²

The involuntary shudder set off by hearing or reading a taboo word comes from a basic feature of the language system: understanding the meaning of a word is automatic. It's not just that we don't have earlids to shut out unwanted sounds, but that once a word is seen or heard we are incapable of treating it as a squiggle or noise but reflexively look it up in memory and respond to its meaning, including its connotation. The classic demonstration is the Stroop effect, found in every introductory psychology textbook and the topic of more than four thousand scientific papers. People are asked to look through a list of letter strings and to say aloud the color of the ink in which each one is printed. Try it with this list, saying "black," "white," or "gray" for each item in turn from left to right:

word word word word **word** word

It should be pretty easy. Now this is even easier:

gray white **black** white **black** gray

But this is much, much harder:

white black gray black gray **white**

The explanation is that among literate adults, reading a word is such an overlearned skill that it has become mandatory: you can't will the process "off," even when you're trying to ignore the words so you can pay attention to the ink. That's why you're helped along when the experimenters arrange the ink into a word that also names its color, and slowed down when they arrange it into a name for a different color. A similar thing happens with *spoken* words. When people have to name color patches like this:



the task becomes much harder when a voice over headphones recites a sequence of distracting color words like "black, white, gray, white, gray, black."²³

Now, taboo words are especially effective at snatching a reader's attention. You can feel the effect yourself in a Stroop test. Try naming the color of the ink in each of these words:

cunt shit fuck **tits** piss asshole

The psychologist Don MacKay has done the experiment, and found that people are indeed slowed down by an involuntary boggle as soon as the eyes alight on each word.²⁴ The upshot is that a speaker or writer can use a taboo word to evoke an emotional response in an audience quite against their wishes.

Some companies have exploited this effect by giving their products names that are similar enough to a taboo word to grab people's attention, such as the restaurant chain called Fuddruckers, the clothing brand called FCUK (French Connection UK), and the movie called *Meet the Fockers*. Involuntary responses to taboo words can actually shape a language over the course of its history because of a linguistic version of Gresham's Law: bad words drive good words out of circulation. People often avoid using innocent terms that they fear might be misheard as profanity. *Coney*, an old name for "rabbit" that rhymes with *honey*, dropped out of use in the late nineteenth century, probably because it sounded too much like *cunt*.²⁵ The same is happening to the polite senses of words like *cock*, *prick*, *pussy*, *booty*, and *ass* (at least in America; in Britain the rude word is still *arse*). People named *Koch*, *Fuchs*, and *Lipschitz* often change their surnames, as did the family of Louisa May Alcott, formerly Alcox. In 1999, an aide to the mayor of Washington, D.C., resigned after describing his budget as *niggardly* at a staff meeting. A staffer had taken umbrage, even though *niggard* is a Middle English word meaning "miser" and has nothing to do with the epithet based on

negro, the Spanish word for black, which came into English centuries later.²⁶ Unfair though that may be, both to the aide and to the word, *niggardly* is doomed. So are the original senses of *queer* and *gay*.

Swearing aloud, like hearing the swear words of others, taps the deeper and older parts of the brain. Aphasia, a loss of articulate language, is typically caused by damage to the cortex and the underlying white matter along the horizontal cleft (the Sylvian fissure) in the brain's left hemisphere.²⁷ For almost as long as neurologists have studied aphasia, they have noticed that patients can retain the ability to swear.²⁸ A case study of a British aphasic recorded him as repeatedly saying "Bloody hell," "Fuck off," "Fucking fucking hell cor blimey," and "Oh you bugger." The neurologist Norman Geschwind studied an American patient whose entire left hemisphere had been surgically removed because of brain cancer. The patient couldn't name pictures, produce or understand sentences, or repeat polysyllabic words, yet in the course of a five-minute interview he said "Goddammit" seven times, and "God!" and "Shit" once apiece.²⁹

The survival of swearing in aphasia suggests that taboo epithets are stored as prefabricated formulas in the right hemisphere.³⁰ Such formulas lie at the opposite end of a continuum from propositional speech, in which combinations of words express combinations of ideas according to grammatical rules. It's not that the right hemisphere contains a profanity module, but that its linguistic abilities are confined to memorized formulas rather than rule-governed combinations. A word is the quintessential memorized chunk, and in many people the right hemisphere has a respectable vocabulary of words, at least in comprehension. The right hemisphere also can sometimes store idiosyncratic counterparts to rule-governed forms such as irregular verbs.³¹ Often it commands longer memorized formulas as well, such as song lyrics, prayers, conversation fillers like *um*, *boy*, and *well yes*, and sentence starters like *I think* and *You can't*.

The right hemisphere may be implicated in swearing for another reason: it is more heavily involved in emotion, especially negative emotion.³² Yet it may not be the cerebral cortex in the right hemisphere that initiates epithets but an evolutionarily older brain structure, the basal ganglia.³³ The basal ganglia are a set of clusters of neurons buried deep in the front half of the brain. Their circuitry receives inputs from many other parts of the brain, including the amygdala and other parts of the limbic system, and loops back to the cortex, primarily the frontal lobes. One of their functions is to package sequences of movements, or sequences of reasoning steps, into chunks that are available for further combining when we're learning a skill. Another is to inhibit the execution of the actions packaged into these chunks.³⁴ Components of the basal ganglia inhibit one another, so damage to different parts can have opposite effects. Degeneration of one part of the basal ganglia can cause Parkinson's disease, marked by tremors, rigidity, and difficulty initiating movement. Degeneration of another part can cause Huntington's disease, resulting in chorea or uncontrolled movements.

The basal ganglia, with their role as packagers and inhibitors of behavior, have been implicated in swearing by two trails of evidence. One is a case study of a man who

suffered a stroke in the right basal ganglia, leaving him with a syndrome that is the mirror image of classic aphasia.³⁵ He could converse fluently in grammatical sentences, but couldn't sing familiar songs, recite well-practiced prayers and blessings, or swear—even when the beginning of a curse was given to him and he only had to complete it.

The basal ganglia have a far more famous role in swearing, thanks to a syndrome that was obscure to most people until the 1980s, when it suddenly was featured in dozens of television plots: Gilles de la Tourette Syndrome, Tourette syndrome or Tourette's for short.³⁶ Tourette syndrome is a poorly understood neurological condition linked to abnormalities, partly hereditary, in the basal ganglia. As any couch potato knows, its most florid symptom is a vocal tic consisting of shouted obscenities, taboo ethnic terms, and other kinds of verbal abuse.³⁷ This symptom is called *coprolalia* (dung speech), from a Greek root also found in *coprophilous* (living in dung), *coprophagy* (feeding on dung), and *coprolite* (fossilized dinosaur poop). In fact coprolalia occurs in only a minority of people with Tourette syndrome; the more common tics are blinks, twitches, throat-clearing sounds, and repeated words or syllables.

Coprolalia shows off the full range of taboo terms, and embraces similar meanings in different languages, suggesting that swearing really is a coherent neurobio-logical phenomenon. A recent literature review lists the following words from American Tourette's patients, from most to least frequent:³⁸

fuck, shit, cunt, motherfucker, prick, dick, cock-sucker, nigger, cockey, bitch, pregnant-mother, bastard, tits, whore, doody, penis, queer, pussy, coitus, cock, ass, bowel movement, fangu (fuck in Italian), homosexual, screw, fag, faggot, schmuck, blow me, wop

Patients may also produce longer expressions like *Goddammit*, *You fucking idiot*, *Shit on you*, and *Fuck your fucking fucking cunt*. A list from Spanish-speaking patients includes *puta* (whore), *mierda* (shit), *cono* (cunt), *joder* (fuck), *maricon* (fag), *cojones* (balls), *hijo de puta* (son of a whore), and *hostia* (host, the wafer in a communion ceremony). A list from Japan includes *sukebe* (lecherous), *chin chin* (cock), *bakatara* (stupid), *dobusu* (ugly), *kusobaba* (shitty old woman), *chikusho* (son of a whore), and an empty space in the list discreetly identified as “female sexual parts.” There has even been a report of a deaf sufferer of Tourette's who produced “fuck” and “shit” in American Sign Language.

People with Tourette's experience their outbursts not as literally involuntary but as a response to an overpowering urge, much like an irresistible itch or a mounting desire to blink or yawn. This tug-of-war between an unwanted impulse and the forces of self-control is reminiscent of one of the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) called horrific temptations—the obsessive fear that one might do something awful such as shouting “Fire!” in a crowded theater or pushing someone off a subway platform. Like Tourette's, which it often accompanies, OCD seems to involve an imbalance between the brake pedal and accelerator circuits in the basal ganglia. It

suggests that one of the roles of the basal ganglia is to designate certain thoughts and desires as unthinkable—taboo—in order to keep them in check. By tagging, encapsulating, and inhibiting these thoughts, the basal ganglia solve the paradox that you have to think the unthinkable in order to know what you’re not supposed to be thinking—the reason that people have trouble following the instruction “Don’t think of a polar bear.”³⁹ Ordinarily the basal ganglia can hide our bad thoughts and actions with a Don’t-Go-There designation, but when they are weakened, the lockboxes and safety catches can break down, and the thoughts we tag as unthinkable or unsayable assert themselves.

In unimpaired people, the so-called executive systems of the brain (comprising the prefrontal cortex and another part of the limbic system, the anterior cingulate cortex) can monitor behavior emanating from the rest of the brain and override it in midstream. This may be the origin of the truncated profanities that we use in polite company and which serve as the strongest epithets that pass the lips of vicars and maiden aunts when they stub their toes. Every one of the standard obscenities offers a choice of bowdlerized alternatives:⁴⁰

For *God*: egad, gad, gadzooks, golly, good grief, goodness gracious, gosh, Great Caesar’s ghost, Great Scott

For *Jesus*: gee, gee whiz, gee willikers, geez, jeepers creepers, Jiminy Cricket, Judas Priest, Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat

For *Christ*: crikes, crikey, criminy, cripes, crumb

For *damn*: dang, darn, dash, dear, drat, tarnation (from *eternal damnation*)

For *goddam*: consarn, dadburn, dadgum, doggone, goldarn

For *shit*: shame, sheesh, shivers, shoot, shucks, squat, sugar

For *fuck* and *fucking*: fiddlesticks, fiddledeedee, foo, fudge, fug, fuzz; effing, flaming, flipping, freaking, frigging

For *bugger*: bother, boy, brother

For *bloody*: blanking, blasted, blazing, bleeding, bleeping, blessed, blighter, blinding, blinking, blooming, blow

In *Pygmalion*, Henry Higgins is admonished by his housekeeper not to swear in Eliza’s presence:

MRS. PEARCE: . . . there is a certain word I must ask you not to use. The girl has just used it herself because the bath was too hot. It begins with the same letter as *bath*. She knows no better: she learnt it at her mother’s knee. But she must not hear it from your lips.

HIGGINS [*loftily*]: I cannot charge myself with having ever uttered it, Mrs. Pearce. [*She looks at him steadfastly. He adds, hiding an uneasy conscience with a judicial air*] Except perhaps in a moment of extreme and justifiable excitement.

MRS. PEARCE: Only this morning, sir, you applied it to your boots, to the butter, and to the brown bread.

HIGGINS: Oh, that! Mere alliteration, Mrs. Pearce, natural to a poet.

The devices that are natural to a poet are the source of most of the euphemisms for taboo words. Alliteration and assonance figure in the rerouted profanities in the list we just saw. Rhyme gives us *ruddy* for *bloody*, *son of a gun* for *son of a bitch*, and the dozens of substitutions for taboo words in Cockney slang, like *raspberry* for *fart* (from *raspberry tart*) and *Friar* for *fuck* (from *Friar Tuck*). It also led to the stereotypical French expletive *Sacre bleu!* from *Sacre Dieu*.

Poetic devices generally repeat one of the mental structures that organize words in our minds, such as onsets, rimes, and codas.⁴¹ Phonologists have also identified structures that are more abstract than these. The syllables making up a word are attached to a skeleton that defines the word's rhythmic meter and its decomposition into morphemes.⁴² When parts of a linguistic skeleton are repeated in poetry or rhetoric, we have the device called structural parallelism (as in the Twenty-third Psalm's "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures / He leadeth me beside the still waters"). In the realm of swearing, we see structural parallelism in the numerous euphemisms for *bullshit* that share only its metrical and morphological structure. Many terms for insincerity are compounds made of two stressed words, either monosyllables or trochees, with primary stress on the first one:

applesauce, balderdash, blatherskite, claptrap, codswallop, flapdoodle, hogwash, horsefeathers, humbug, moonshine, poppycock, tommyrot

Another fertile ground for terms of abuse is phonetic symbolism. Imprecations tend to use sounds that are perceived as quick and harsh.⁴³ They tend to be monosyllables or trochees, and contain short vowels and stop consonants, especially *k* and *g*:

fuck, cock, prick, dick, dyke, suck, schmuck, dork, punk, spick, mick, chink,
kike, gook, wog, frog, fag
pecker, honky, cracker, nigger, bugger, faggot, dago, paki

(In the 1970s a friend of mine saw a bumper sticker reading NO NUKES, then an unfamiliar term, and thought it was a racist slogan!) Hughes notes, "While it may be objected, quite validly, that most swearing makes no attempt at originality, ... certain affinities with poetry can be observed. In both fields the language used is highly charged and very metaphorical; extreme, pointed effects are created by alliteration or by playing off different registers of the word-hoard against each other, and rhythm is very important."⁴⁴

*The Semantics of Swearing:
Thoughts about Gods, Disease, Filth, and Sex*

Now that we have taken a tour of the linguistic, psychological, and neurological

underpinnings of swearing, can we identify a common thread in its meaning and use? The most obvious thread is strong negative emotion. Thanks to the automatic nature of speech perception, a taboo word kidnaps our attention and forces us to consider its unpleasant connotations. That makes all of us vulnerable to a mental assault whenever we are in earshot of other speakers, as if we were strapped to a chair and could be given a punch or a shock at any time. To understand swearing, then, we have to examine what kinds of thoughts are upsetting to people, and why one person might want to inflict these thoughts on another.

The historical root of swearing in English and many other languages is, oddly enough, religion.⁴⁵ We see this in the third commandment, in the popularity of *hell*, *damn*, *God*, and *Jesus Christ*, and in many of the terms for taboo language itself: *profanity* (that which is not sacred), *blasphemy* (literally “evil speech” but in practice disrespect toward a deity), and *swearing*, *cursing*, and *oaths*, which were originally secured by the invocation of a deity or one of his symbols, like the tabernacle, chalice, and wafer incongruously found in Catholic maledicta.

In English-speaking countries today, religious swearing barely raises an eyebrow. Gone with the wind are the days when people could be titillated by a character in a movie saying, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” If a character today is offended by such language, it’s only to depict him as an old-fashioned prude. The defanging of religious taboo words is an obvious consequence of the secularization of Western culture. As G. K. Chesterton remarked, “Blasphemy itself could not survive religion; if anyone doubts that let him try to blaspheme Odin.” To understand religious vulgarity, then, we have to put ourselves in the shoes of our linguistic ancestors, to whom God and Hell were real presences.

Swearing and oaths, in the literal sense of guarantees of one’s promises, take us into the Strangelovian world of paradoxical tactics, where voluntary self-handicapping can work to one’s advantage.⁴⁶ Say you need to make a promise. You may want to borrow money, and so must promise to return it. You may want someone to bear or support your child and forsake all others, and so must promise to be faithful in kind. You may want to do business with someone, and so must promise to deliver goods or services in the future in exchange for something you receive today. Why should the promisee believe you, knowing that it may be to your advantage to renege? The answer is that you can submit to a contingency that would impose a penalty on you if you did renege, ideally one so certain and severe that you would always do better to keep the promise than to back out. That way your partner no longer has to take you at your word; he can rely on your self-interest.

Nowadays we secure our promises with legal contracts that make us liable if we back out. We mortgage our house, giving the bank permission to repossess it if we fail to repay the loan. We submit to marriage laws, giving our spouses the right to alimony and a division of property if we desert or mistreat them. We post a bond, which we forfeit if we fail to come through on our obligations. But before we could count on a commercial and legal apparatus to enforce our contracts, we had to do our own self-handicapping. Children still bind their oaths by saying, “I hope to die if I tell a lie.” Adults used to do the same by invoking the wrath of God, as in *May God strike me dead if I’m lying* and variations like *As God is my witness*, *Blow me down!*, *Shiver*

me timbers!, and *God blind me!*—the source of the British *blimey*.⁴⁷

Such oaths, of course, would have been more credible in an era in which people thought that God listened to their entreaties and had the power to carry them out. At the same time, every time someone reneges on an oath and is not punished by the big guy upstairs, it casts doubt on his existence, his potency, or at the very least how carefully he's paying attention. The earthly representatives of God would just as soon preserve the belief that he does listen and act in matters of importance, and so are unhappy about people diluting the brand by invoking God as the muscle behind their small-time deals. Hence the proscriptions against taking the name of the Lord in vain.

Short of literally asking God to serve as one's escrow agent, one can sanctify one's promises in a more tactful way, by bringing God into the discussion obliquely. One can link one's credibility to appurtenances of God in which he presumably takes a continuing interest, such as his name, his symbols, his writings, and his body parts. Thus we have the phenomenon of "swearing by" and "swearing on." Even today, witnesses in American court proceedings have to swear on the Bible, as if an act of perjury undetected by the legal system would be punished by an eavesdropping and easily offended God. In earlier times Englishmen swore by gruesome reminders of the crucifixion: God's blood (*'sblood*), his nails, his wounds (hence *zounds*), his hooks (*gadzooks*), and his body (*odsbodikins*).⁴⁸ They also swore by the cross, the source of children's "Cross my heart." Perhaps the most creative was Oliver Cromwell, who wrote to the Church of Scotland, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

Even if these oaths aren't seen as literally having the power to bring down divine penalties for noncompliance, they signal a distinction between everyday assurances on minor favors and solemn pledges on weightier matters. The holiness of a religious relic is a social construction that depends on its being treated with awe and reverence by everyone in a community. This requires a collective mind control in which one doesn't look at, think about, or talk about a sacred thing casually. To bring the sacred into the discussion when making a promise is to force listeners to think about something they don't casually think about and hence to indicate that one means business. By the same token, if people swear by a sacred entity too freely, its sacredness is threatened by semantic inflation, and authorities who base their power on that sacredness will take steps to prevent that from happening. Laws against "swearing" may even have popular support, since every individual wants to keep the linguistic powder dry for occasions on which *he* wants to bind an oath, and not allow others to spoil it through overuse.

Though the invocation of blood and bowels to bind an oath may seem archaic, the psychology behind it is still with us. Even a parent without an iota of superstition would not say "I swear on the life of my child" lightly. The mere *thought* of murdering one's child for ulterior gain is not just unpleasant; it should be unthinkable if one is a true parent, and every neuron of one's brain should be programmed against it. Voluntarily thinking the thought is no small matter, and it's a kind of self-threat that can enhance the credibility of a promise. The literal unthinkability of betraying an intimate or ally is the basis of the psychology of taboo in general, and this is the mindset that is tapped in swearing on something sacred, whether it be a religious

trapping or a child's life.⁴⁹ And thanks to the automatic nature of speech processing, the same sacred words that consecrate promises—the “oath binding” sense of *swearing*—may be used to attract attention, to shock, or to inflict psychic pain on a listener—the “dirty word” sense of *swearing*.

Religion also figures in the other ambiguous verb for taboo language, *cursing*. As we shall see, just about any misfortune or indignity can be wished upon someone in a curse, but Christianity has furnished execrators with a particularly disagreeable thought to inflict on their targets: the possibility that they might spend eternity in Hell. Today, *Go to hell!* and *Damn you!* are among our milder epithets, but they would have packed more of a wallop in an era in which people actually feared they might be sentenced forever to searing flames, agonizing thirst, terrifying ghouls, and blood-curdling shrieks and groans. Perhaps the closest we can come to appreciating the original impact of wishes of damnation is to imagine someone looking us in the eye and saying, “I hope you are convicted of tax fraud and sentenced to twenty years in prison. I hope your cell is hot and humid and is crawling with roaches and reeks of urine and excrement. I hope you have three vicious cellmates who beat and sodomize you every night.” And so on. When we consider how brutal cursing *could* be, and how brutal it must have been when most people believed in Hell, we should be grateful that most hotheads today confine themselves to a small lexicon of hackneyed scatological and sexual imprecations that were drained of their imagery long ago.

Another semantic field that has lost its sting is disease and pestilence, as in *A plague on both your houses!* (from *Romeo and Juliet*), *A pox on you!*, and the Polish-Yiddish *Cholerya!* (cholera). In an era of sanitation and antibiotics, it's hard to appreciate the power of these allusions. It helps to visualize the “Bring out your dead!” scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, or to read in a medical textbook about the pustules, hemorrhaging, eye ulcers, diarrhea, and other grisly symptoms of these diseases. The equivalent today might be “I hope you are trapped in a fire and get third-degree burns all over your body. I hope you suffer a stroke and spend your life drooling and twisted in a wheelchair. I hope you get bone cancer and waste away in front of your loved ones.” Once again, cultural critics who see swearing as a sign of the coarsening of our culture should consider how mild our curses are by the standards of history. Tellingly, there is a hint of taboo in the name of our most dreaded malady, *cancer*. It has spawned euphemisms like *the big C*, *malignancy*, *neoplasm*, *mitotic figure*, and one that is still seen in many obituaries, *a long illness*.

Though we no longer swear about disease, we do swear about bodily effluvia and their orifices and acts of excretion. *Shit*, *piss*, and *asshole* are still unspeakable on network television and unprintable in most newspapers. The *New York Times*, for example, currently identifies a bestseller by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt as “*On Bull----*.” *Fart* is barely more acceptable: the *Times* will print it as part of the ageist epithet *old fart* but not as the vernacular term for flatulence. *Ass* (or *arse*), *bum*, *snot*, and *turd* are also on the border of respectability.

Bloody is another word that calls to mind a bodily fluid. As with many taboo terms, no one really knows where it came from, because people tend not to set down their profanities in print. That has not stood in the way of people concocting various folk

etymologies. Hughes notes, “I am sure that I am not the first logo-phile to have been informed (on several occasions and with complete assurance) that the origin of *bloody* lies in the religious ejaculation *By our lady!*”⁵⁰ Not bloody likely, say the historians. Nor is *God’s blood* the source. *Bloody* is probably another word that became taboo because it refers to an icky bodily substance, perhaps the blood that oozes from a wound, perhaps menstrual blood. Menstruation is the target of several Judeo-Christian taboos. An Orthodox Jew, for example, may not shake hands with a woman on the off chance that she is “unclean.”

Some people have been puzzled about why *cunt* should be taboo. It is not just an unprintable word for the vagina but the most offensive epithet for a woman in America and a not-too-polite term for a man in Britain and the Commonwealth. One might have thought that in the male-dominated world of swearing the vagina would be revered, not reviled. After all, it has been said that no sooner does a boy come out of it than he spends the rest of his life trying to get back in. The puzzle becomes less mysterious if one imagines the connotations in an age before tampons, toilet paper, regular bathing, and antifungal drugs.

On the whole, the acceptability of taboo words is only loosely tied to the acceptability of what they refer to, but in the case of taboo terms for effluvia the correlation is fairly good. *Shit* is less acceptable than *piss*, which in turn is less acceptable than *fart*, which is less acceptable than *snot*, which is less acceptable than *spit* (which is not taboo at all). That’s the same order as the acceptability of eliminating these substances from the body in public.⁵¹

The linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge tried to expand this observation by administering a Revoltingness Questionnaire to staff and students at their Australian universities.⁵² Tied for first place were feces and vomit. Menstrual blood (among men) came next, followed by urine and semen. Then, in decreasing order of revoltingness, there was a three-way tie among flatulence, pus, and nasal mucus, followed by menstrual blood (among women), belched breath, skin parings, sweat, nail parings, breath, blood from a wound, hair clippings, breast milk, and tears. The correlation with vulgarity is far from perfect: though vomit and pus are decidedly revolting, they have no taboo terms in English. Nonetheless, the vulgar words for effluvia do cluster at the top end of the scale, including the taboo terms for semen such as *cum*, *spunk*, *gizzum*, *jizz*, and *cream*.

Words for effluvia are taboo in many cultures, and so are the effluvia themselves. The biologists Valerie Curtis and Adam Biran summarize the results of questionnaires given in Europe, India, and Africa: “Bodily secretions are the most widely reported elicitors of the disgust emotion. Feces appear on all of the lists, while vomit, sweat, spittle, blood, pus, and sexual fluids appear frequently.”⁵³ Effluvia have an emotional charge that makes them figure prominently in voodoo, sorcery, and other kinds of sympathetic magic.⁵⁴ People in many cultures believe that a person can be harmed by mutilating or casting spells on his feces, saliva, blood, nails, and hair, and that a person can be protected from harm if those substances are cursed, buried, drowned, or otherwise ostentatiously discarded. The potency of these substances in people’s minds also leads them to be used in medicines or charms, often in homeopathic or purified doses. The emotion of disgust and the psychology of sympathetic magic are entwined.

The psychologists Paul Rozin and April Fallon have shown that modern Westerners respect the laws of voodoo in their own disgust reactions, such as recoiling from an object if it merely looks like a disgusting substance or has been in contact with one in the past.⁵⁵ Word magic simply extends this chain of associations by one link, and gives the *words* for effluvia a dreadful power as well.

The dread of effluvia, of course, can also be modulated, as it must be in sex, medicine, nursing, and the care of animals and babies. As we shall see, this desensitization is sometimes helped along with the use of euphemisms that play down the repellence of the effluvia.

The big deal that people ordinarily make out of effluvia—both the words and the substances—has puzzled many observers. As the religion scholar A. K. Reinhart puts it, “Pus, vomit, urination, menstruation, sexual fluids, and so on [are] all substances and acts that, for some reason, many cultures tend to see as repellent and, despite their constant presence in human life, as abnormal.”⁵⁶ Curtis and Biran identify the reason.⁵⁷ It can’t be a coincidence, they note, that the most disgusting substances are also the most dangerous vectors for disease. Feces are a route of transmission for the viruses, bacteria, and protozoans that cause at least twenty intestinal diseases, as well as ascariasis, hepatitis A and E, polio, amoebiasis, hookworm, pinworm, whipworm, cholera, and tetanus. Blood, vomit, mucus, pus, and sexual fluids are also attractive to pathogens as vehicles for getting from one body into another. In modern countries, flush toilets and garbage removal quickly separate us from our effluvia, but in the rest of the world they transmit millions of cases of disease every year. Even citizens of industrial countries may be quickly threatened with cholera and typhoid in times of war or natural disasters, such as the flooding in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The strongest component of the disgust reaction is a desire not to eat or touch the offending substance.⁵⁸ But it’s also disgusting to *think* about effluvia, together with the body parts and activities that excrete them, and because of the involuntariness of speech perception, it’s unpleasant to hear the words for them. The effluvia that evoke the strongest disgust reaction are viscous ones, but urine is also mildly disgusting, and the word *piss* is mildly taboo. Urine is not generally infectious, but it is, of course, a waste product that carries away metabolites and toxins that the body doesn’t want, and thus it should not be appealing. Vermin make up a major class of disease vectors, and are widely considered disgusting.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, they lend their names in English to verbal imprecations such as *rat*, *louse*, *worm*, *cockroach*, *insect*, and *slug*, though the words don’t rise to the level of taboo. Why some of the words for unpleasant things are taboo in a particular culture and era, while others are not, is something of a mystery. Perhaps taboo terms have to be acquired in emotion-tinged settings in childhood. Or perhaps they are self-perpetuating, and remain taboo for as long as people treat them as taboo.

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The other major source of taboo words is sexuality. Since the 1960s, many progressive thinkers have found these taboos to be utterly risible. Sex is a source of mutual