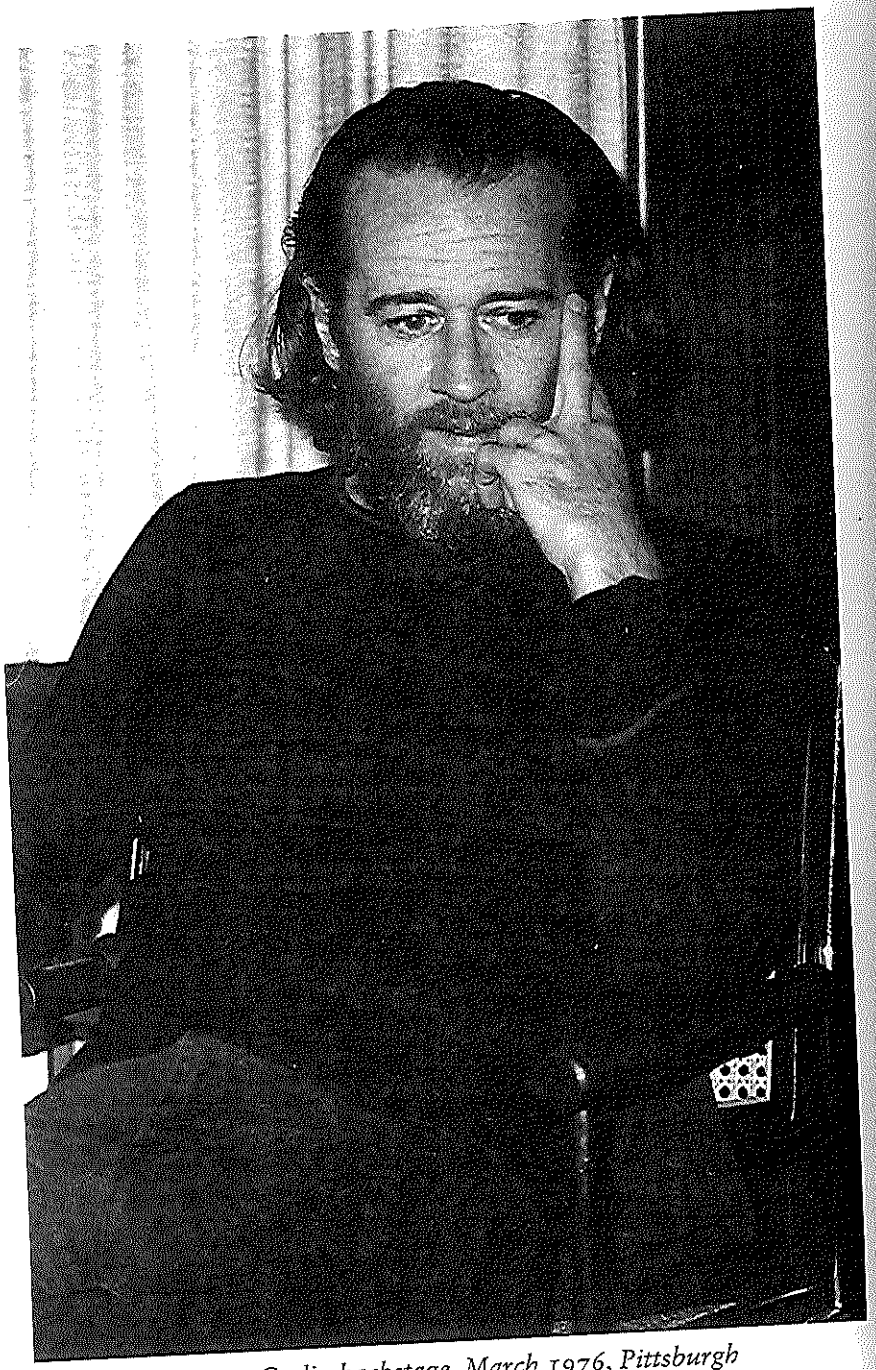
CHAPTER 3

Uses and Abuses

Language is the most versatile of tools, far exceeding the uses for which it was first designed. We humans probably began to talk to each other about the best places to hunt or which plants to avoid eating as a means of survival, but the way we use words has evolved into something much more complex. Our language can be playful and shocking and witty and dangerous. It allows us to express our anger verbally rather than physically, with expletives, and to profane the sacred or confront taboos; we hide behind the language of doublespeak to conceal truths, and cover our embarrassment with euphemisms; groups create secret codes for their protection or disguise or uniqueness; professions develop their own language for efficiency and accuracy; sometimes we use language simply to cover up the fact that we haven't a clue what we're talking about.

Like all complex tools, language can go wrong. It's when words erupt from us wildly, uncontrollably or don't come at all that we are given tiny insights into the mystery of how language works.



George Carlin backstage, March 1976, Pittsburgh

The Seven Words

Those of you with a sensitive disposition might like to skip the next few pages, for this is a chapter about bad language – whether it's jargon, slang, terms of abuse or, of course, swear words. If you choose to read on, be warned. The most offensive words in the English language are about to get an airing.

Let's cut to the chase and get the words down on the page. American comedian George Carlin was the first to list the Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television in a radio monologue in 1972. He reckoned they were: *shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker* and *tits*. 'Those are the heavy seven. Those are the ones that'll infect your soul, curve your spine and keep the country from winning the war.'

According to linguist Steven Pinker there are five swearing distinctions: dysphemistic (*I have to take a shit*); abusive (*Fuck you!*); idiomatic (*I was pretty fucked up last night*); emphatic (*I'm not going to do a fucking thing*); and cathartic (*Fuck, I've spilt my coffee!*).

The fact is, lots of us swear. It's become part of everyday life for more and more people, especially those under the age of thirty. People who count such things estimate we swear anything between fourteen and ninety times a day and half the times we use *fuck* and *shit*. So should we be bothered that it's now okay to repeat these most offensive of oaths on air and in print without retribution? Was Oscar Wilde right when he said, 'The expletive is a refuge of the semi-literate'? Or did Shakespeare get it right when he wrote: 'But words are words. I never did hear / That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear'? Is there such a thing as good or bad language, and is it advisable, or even possible, to control it?

Taboo or not taboo, that is the question.

Taboos

The word *taboo* derives from the Tongan word *tabu*, meaning 'set apart' or 'forbidden', and was first used in English back in 1777 by the explorer Captain James Cook. After observing the eating habits of the people of the South Pacific islands, he wrote:

> *Not one of them would sit down, or eat a bit of any thing . . . On expressing my surprise at this, they were all taboo, as they said; which word has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden . . . When any thing is forbidden to be eaten, or made use of, they say, that it is taboo.*

Hunters with their dogs corner a bear in its cave: the first taboo

And so *taboo* entered the English language, meaning something forbidden. Taboo subjects in almost all societies tend to involve religion, sex, death and bodily functions; things that frighten us or make us uneasy. The first taboo word in the Proto-Indo-European language was apparently for the animal we call the bear. It was so ferocious, so feared that people were scared to give it a name. It was referred to as the honey-eater or the licker or the brown one (*bruin* in Old English, from which we get bear).

Societies have developed a raft of words and expressions to deal with taboo subjects in contrasting ways: either to avoid mentioning the taboo subjects at all or deliberately to use the taboo words to inflame, to hurt, offend and shock. Sometimes it's simply for emotional release.

Take the subject of death. Given that it's the only certain thing in life (apart from, perhaps, taxes), we're remarkably coy about using the d-word. Instead, we say he's *passed away*, *passed on*, *given up the ghost*, *gone to meet his maker*, *shuffled off this mortal coil* or *joined the choir invisible*; we use euphemisms (from the Greek word meaning 'use of good words') to sweeten the harsh reality. If we want to laugh at death or be brazen about it, we use dysphemisms (Greek for 'non-word'). He's *croaked*, *pegged out*, *pushing up the daisies*, *bitten the dust*, *popped his clogs*, *cashed in his chips*, *kicked the bucket*, *called it quits* or (quite awful) *taking a dirt nap*.

We do the same for bodily functions. We *fart*, *break wind*, *pass gas*, *let rip*, *toot*, *poot*, *pop*, *parp* or *trumpet*; rather than defecate, we poo or *do a number two*, *have a shit* or a *dump*, *shed a load*, *test the plumbing* or – if you're in the medical profession – *have a bowel movement*. As for urinating, our replacement expressions are endless: we *pee*, *piddle*, *piss*, *slash*, *wee*, *widdle*, *have a jimmy riddle*, *go for a tinkle*, *take a leak*, *spend a penny*, *strain the potatoes*, *water the garden/tulips/tomatoes*, and, if you're a man, *point Percy at the porcelain* or *shake hands with an old friend*.

There's a lovely expression: to mince one's words, to *mince* meaning to soften or moderate. The way society has got round the problem of using outright profanities is to express a minced oath. We take a four-letter expletive, add a bit of rhyme or alliteration and come up with a softer, inoffensive version. *Flipping*, *frigging*,

fecking, *sugar*, *shoot* and *shucks* – so innocent-sounding and yet so not. And if you thought you were being mild calling someone a *berk* instead of an idiot, think again: it's from the rhyming slang 'Berkeley Hunt'.

In our more pious past, words were altered to avoid blasphemy. Some of the euphemisms – *zounds* (God's wounds), *gadzooks* (meaning God's hooks, perhaps from the nails of the cross) and *God's bodkins* (God's body) – have fallen out of use. But our language today is still littered with expressions originally used to avoid taking God's name in vain. We say *good gracious*, *golly*, *gosh*, *by gum*, *begorrah*, *strewth* (God's truth) or *cor blimey* (God blind me). We make a detour round Christ or Jesus by uttering *cripes*, *crikey*, *for crying out loud* (for Christ's sake), *gee*, *jeepers* or *Jiminy Cricket* (did anyone tell Walt Disney?). Instead of hell and damn, we say *heck* and *darn* or *darnation*, *dang* or *doggone*. And *what the Dickens!* isn't alluding to the author but substituting the devil with a minced oath.

Why We Love to Swear

Professor Timothy Jay is a naughty words expert (what a great line to put in your CV). He's a psychologist at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and for the past thirty years he's been studying the role of dirty words in linguistics. Jay himself was exposed to swearing from an early age. His father was a carpenter, and the young Timothy would visit him at work on the building sites. 'I would hear things. The carpenters were planing a piece of wood, and the guy would say, "Take a few more cunt hairs off of that," or "I gotta cut that tit off there." So I would hear this language. If these guys came over to the house and they were with their families, you wouldn't hear any of it. But on the job – constant.'

Professor Jay calls swear words *emotional intensifiers*. 'It's like using the horn on your car, which can be used to signify a number of emotions,' he says. 'Like anger, frustration, joy or surprise.'

Swearing is so deeply rooted in the brain – both literally and

metaphorically – that it stays with us longer. Jay claims that children learn swear words at a very early age and also learn the taboos that society places on them. 'As soon as kids can speak, they're using swear words,' says Jay. 'That doesn't mean they know what adults know, but they do repeat the words they hear.' His team's research revealed that children learn and use swear words as young as two or three. Because they're learned so early, they're deeply ingrained and like nursery rhymes are retained longer than other language forms.

Children learn that swear words are powerful; they often hear them during arguments when people's emotions are running high, and when the child repeats the word, they get an emotional response. It's the emotional link of swear words that gives them their psychological potency. Anything that is forbidden is powerful.

Jay sees an evolutionary advantage to swearing as well. 'We're the only animal that can express these emotions symbolically, so we can say "fuck you" instead of hitting you or biting you. Three-year-olds, before they really learn how to say "I hate you" or "fuck you", will bite you and scratch you. But when we learn how to use language to express that emotion, that primitive animal anger goes away.'

The idea that swearing is both evolutionarily and developmentally primitive is also being explored by linguist Steven Pinker. He argues that swearing and linguistic taboos tap into the workings of the deepest, most ancient part of our brains. He likens these deep brain responses to that of, say, a dog's brain: bumping your head and yelling out an expletive is the same as a dog yelping suddenly when you step on its tail – a sort of canine curse. 'Cathartic swearing,' he says, 'comes from a primal rage circuit, in which an animal that is frustrated, confined or hurt erupts in a furious struggle accompanied by an angry noise, presumably to startle and intimidate an attacker. Some neuroscientists have even revived Darwin's suggestion that verbalised outbursts were the evolutionary missing link between primate calls and human languages.'

Coprolalia

Clearly many of us like to swear, even if we disguise it as a minced oath. But there are some people who have no choice in the matter – they have to swear. Uncontrollable, often foul words erupt from them; the urge to speak the unspeakable impossible to deny. They have a condition called coprolalia (from the Greek *kopros* – faeces – and *lalia* – talk), a disorder which we probably associate most with Tourette's syndrome – although only around 15 per cent of Tourette's sufferers have involuntary coprolalia.

The inappropriate language seems to vary from culture to culture, depending on the different taboos. So in Catholic Brazil you'll get references to the Holy Mother; in Asian cultures, where the family is honoured, you get outbursts like 'shitty grandma' or 'aunt fucker'. Most English-speaking Touretter's say the same sort of things – 'fuck, shit, hell, cunt' – and they don't usually use euphemisms. It's the socially inappropriate words that they can't put a brake on.

Jess Thom has suffered physical and verbal 'ticks' since she was a small girl. The physical ticks are unpredictable and exhausting; the verbal ones involuntary and socially difficult. It's a bit like having a jack-in-the-box in the brain, on such a strong spring that it's forever breaking its latch and popping out at the most inopportune moments. Jess goes through phases with words – swear ones as well as random day-to-day ones. Today her recurring involuntary word – apart from 'fuck' – is 'biscuit', with the occasional 'Happy Christmas' thrown in. She describes her earliest memories of having Tourette's.

'I had noises. The first fuck noise I can remember was a squeaky one when I was about six. My ticks when I was younger and all through my childhood were much more motor and also much more mild fuck than they are now. Fuck. For lots of people Tourette's gets better as they get older. Fuck. For me in adulthood and in my early twenties my ticks got much more noticeable to other people fuck, although the sensation for me biscuit didn't change that much. Fuck.'

Jess's sentence construction is almost perfect – despite the constant involuntary interruptions. Listening to her, it's clear that the considered sentence is coming from one part of her brain and the

'biscuits' and 'fucks' from another part. It's as if there's another person in the room, butting in on the conversation.

'It's going all the time biscuit, and my thoughts are clear. It doesn't very often interrupt my thoughts . . . Sometimes my sort of thinking fuck sometimes it does. Sometimes I'll be put off my train of thought by ticks. But very unusual though. Ha biscuit. Mostly I sort of know what I'm saying fuck fuck. What I don't know that I'm saying, what I'm not choosing to say, is all the fuck, all the ticks which just sort of frustratingly interrupt. They're not communicative. It's sort of eighty per cent biscuit of the language I use doesn't have a communicative purpose or intent. Fuck. Happy Christmas.'

Jess's family and friends have learned to pick their way through her sentences, zoning out the random words. She says they're even able to distinguish an intended expletive from an involuntary one.

'I was speaking to my dad on the phone fuck the other day, and he's used to very rude swearing in our conversations constantly peppered with ticks but sort of understands them for what they are. Fuck. But then I used fuck to describe something. I said something was fucking something and he knew instantly and told me off and told me to mind my language. Fuck. And it really made me laugh 'cos it was like he hadn't heard all the offensive words because he knew they were ticks and had no meaning, but as soon as I'd used something deliberately, he pulled me up on it.'

Proof, if ever it was needed, that it's not the words themselves that matter but where they come from.

'Absolutely,' agrees Jess. 'I think lots of people misunderstand Tourette's and say, "I wish I had Tourette's, it could mean I could get away with swearing or it means I could say whatever I biscuit biscuit I could say whatever I wanted to." The whole point is I can't say whatever I want to. Lots of what I say I don't want to say. It's just there fuck and it's biscuit biscuit biscuit Happy Christmas, but you know that doesn't mean that I can't articulate my thoughts and make myself understood. Fuck. Biscuit.'

Deaf Tourette's

A fascinating addendum to verbal ticks is that there have been cases of deaf Tourette's patients who swear compulsively in sign language. The medical journal *Movement Disorders* reported a case study from 2001 of a thirty-one-year-old man who was deaf from birth and who had motor and vocal tics as well as coprolalia.

> *He would feel a compulsion to use the sign for 'cunt' (see Fig. 1) in contexts (grammatical and social) that were not appropriate. This is essentially the sign for the medical term 'vagina' except that the sign is pushed toward the person at whom it is aimed and accompanied by threatening body language and facial expression. The patient would then feel embarrassed about the compulsion and aim to disguise it as another sign. Commonly, this would be the sign for 'petrol pump' (see Fig. 2). This can also be used to symbolise a small watering can.*

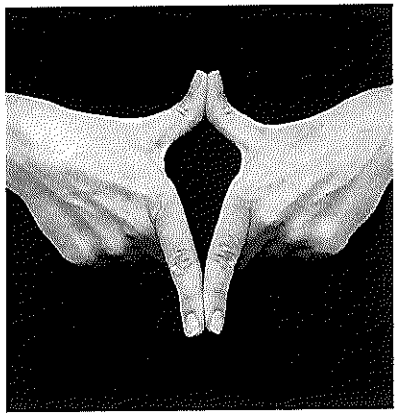


Fig. 1

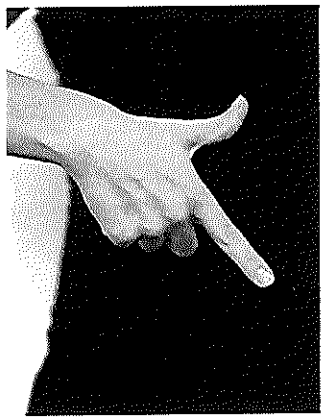


Fig. 2

This single case illustrates clearly that coprolalia in deaf and hearing people with GTS [Tourette's] is not just a random utterance or gesture but one that conveys meaning and purpose.

The Mechanics of Swearing

The study of Jess and other Tourette's patients is providing fascinating insights for neurologists trying to identify the mechanics of why we curse. Time for a bit of science.

Around the edge of the brain's cortex is the limbic system, a complex network of deep brain structures which is thought to control our motivation and our emotions. Interestingly the same structures can be found in the brains of evolutionary ancient animals like the alligator.

On the outer layer of the brain is the neocortex, made up of folds of grey matter, which is responsible for higher functions like knowledge, conscious thought and reasoning. We process most of our language in the neocortex, but there are some words – curses and taboo words – which have strong emotional connotations (Timothy Jay's *emotional intensifiers*), and these are processed in a part of the limbic system called the amygdale. The amygdale is an almond-shaped mass of neurons at the front of the temporal lobe of the brain that appears to gives our memories emotion. Studies have shown that, if the amygdale is stimulated electrically, animals respond with aggression. If it's removed, the animals become tamer and don't react to things that would normally have angered or frightened them. In humans, brain scans show the amygdale light up, i.e. become active, when the person is shown a card with an unpleasant word, especially a taboo word, written on it.

'The response is not only emotional but involuntary,' writes Steven Pinker in his article 'Why We Curse. What the F***?' 'It's not just that we don't have earlids to shut out unwanted sounds. Once a word is seen or heard, we are incapable of treating it as a squiggle or noise; we reflexively look it up in memory and respond to its meaning, including its emotional colouring.'

As Timothy Jay argues, once we've seen or heard these emotional intensifiers, we can't erase them. And when things go wrong in the left hemisphere of the brain, where we process language, it's those emotional words lodged in the deeper limbic system which we are still able to access.

Possessed by the Devil

The French poet Charles Baudelaire was visiting the ornate carved confessionals of a Belgian church when he felt dizzy, staggered and fell. By the time he had reached his carriage, the forty-five-year-old poet's language had become confused – he asked for the window to be opened when he meant shut. 'One of mankind's greatest-ever language centres had started to die, for ever,' as Peter Silverton put it in *Filthy English*. Baudelaire's rich linguistic repository was cleared out. Within the month he could not speak at all – apart from one expression which, to the horror of the nuns who were looking after him, was the blasphemous curse *cré nom* (*sacré nom de Dieu*) – damn! The nuns thought Baudelaire had been possessed by the devil.

One hundred and fifty years later we know that Baudelaire had suffered a stroke. The blood flow to his brain had been cut off, causing damage to the language centres in the left hemisphere. This impairment of speech after a stroke is a condition known as aphasia. And the shouting of a single blasphemy, *cré nom*? Well, around 15 per cent of people who have aphasia have verbal automatisms, brief unconscious utterings which are often, although not always, swear words.

Les Duhigg suffered a stroke fourteen years ago, aged forty-one. When he came round in hospital, the first thing he said was, 'Where am I?' Except that he didn't actually say it. As Les recounts: 'In my mind I'd say that, but nothing could come out and I was . . . dumbfounded, not able to speak for the first time in my life.'

He was, literally, dumbfounded. And then, a few days later, he uttered his first word, 'FUCK!', when he heard the doctors discussing moving him to a side ward in which another stroke victim had just died. It gave the doctors – and Les – quite a shock. Les hadn't been much of a swearer before his stroke. It wasn't that he was now putting swearing into normal speech but that swearing was the only word he could generate. It wasn't 'Pass the fucking cup of tea', it was simply 'fuck'.

For a while he used the f-word for everything, much to the embarrassment of his wife, Marion. 'I was always apologizing for him,

especially to the physiotherapist. But she'd worked with stroke people before and said it was a common thing.'

Les was unconsciously pulling out those emotional memorized words from the undamaged right side of his brain. He and Marion saw something similar happening with other patients.

Marion remembers: 'We had a chap in the stroke group. He couldn't speak, but if someone started singing a song and he knew it, he'd just join in with them. And we couldn't make it out because he couldn't speak properly and then all of a sudden he'd come out with singing.'

Singing songs learned as a child – like counting and nursery rhymes and swearing – is often automatic, and the patient can still produce the motor movements associated with a sequence, even though afterwards they can't retrieve the appropriate words to say what it was they were singing.

Les had to learn to speak all over again. The involuntary cursing has stopped and, fourteen years later, speech therapy is helping his brain learn new pathways to reinvent language. 'It's like being born again,' he says 'starting off as a little kid.'

Les is a patient of Professor Cathy Price at University College London. To help explain what is happening in the brains of aphasia sufferers like Les she suggests performing an experiment on a guinea pig, Mr Stephen Fry. She wants to show that Les's involuntary swearing wasn't a grasping on to the only emotional, automatic words he could access; rather, the mechanism which allows people to inhibit words and actions in social situations had been damaged

Cathy's plan is to wheel Stephen into an MRI scanner and record his brain patterns while he performs a *Just a Minute* routine – exactly like the long-running panel show on BBC radio, in which contributors have to speak for a minute on any given subject without hesitation, deviation or repetition. He is asked first of all to speak freely on various subjects that force him to use the left side of his brain, where information is stored. Sure enough, the scan shows the frontal lobes in the left hemisphere activating. Then he is given a variety of subjects to speak about without repetition, interspersed with bouts of counting. These scans are fascinatingly different. Although Stephen is still using the frontal lobes for the factual knowledge, a tiny little structure

deep in the grey matter of his brain is flashing away. Cathy explains that this is called the left head of cordate within the basal ganglia structure, and one of its functions is as an inhibitor. The scans show it working hard as Stephen tries not to repeat his 'taboo' *Just a Minute* words – exactly as it does when one tries not to swear in front of children and old ladies.

Cathy compares this with what happens when someone who is bilingual is speaking – they have to focus on one language while suppressing the other one. Then she contrasts the MRI scan of Stephen's brain during the *Just a Minute* routine with Les Duhigg's brain scan. While the left head of cordate in the basal ganglia area – the inhibitor – lit up in Stephen's scan, in Les's it remained dark, damaged irreversibly during his stroke.

Brian Blessed's Swear Box

Actor Brian Blessed is a prolific swearer. Turning the air blue comes as naturally to him as breathing; he makes Gordon Ramsay seem like a choir boy.

Brian agrees to join Stephen in an experiment conducted by Dr Richard Stephens, one of whose specialities is the connection between swearing and pain. He devised this test after noticing how his wife seemed to get natural pain relief from swearing during childbirth.

In the middle of the room is a fish tank, filled with ice. The point of the experiment is to plunge a hand into the icy water and see how long they can keep it in. The first time they are only allowed to repeat a single word that could be used to describe a table; Stephen's is 'functional'. The experiment begins:

Richard: So, Stephen, when you put your hand in the water, I'd like you to repeat that word at an even, steady pace. Keep your hand in as long as you can and take it out when you're ready.

Stephen: That is cold actually. Functional. Functional.

Functional. It's beginning to hurt. Functional. Functional. It begins with the right leg. Functional. Oh fuck.

Richard: Don't swear.

Stephen: I'm not to swear, I'm sorry. Functional. Functional. Functional. This really hurts. Oh this is not funny any more. Functional. I'm going to get hypothermia. Functional. Oh God, I can't take it, I'm sorry.

Richard: Right. OK I'd like you to do that again. This time I'd like you to tell me a word you might say if you hit your finger with a hammer.

Stephen: Well, I'm afraid I'll be dull and it would be 'fuck'. That would be the first one that would come, and then the many others would stream afterwards . . . And here we go. Oh yes. Good. Fuck. Ah ha. It's all right for the moment.

Brian: Is it worse this time?

Stephen: It's still cold and my hand . . . Oh fuck me. Oh fuck this for a game of fucking soldiers. Fuck. Fuck the fuck.

Brian: Terrible language.

Stephen: I'm so fucking sorry. Fuck it.

Brian: This is going to go all over the world. You're going to lose your reputation as an elegant person.

Stephen: Oh fuck, fuck, fuckedy fuck. Ooh. It feels better actually saying fuck. It actually doesn't feel so bad. Fuckedy. Ooh. Ooh. Very tingly. I think I'm ready to bring it out at any fucking point now but . . . you know I can keep it in here in a way that I couldn't before. I genuinely mean that. That's quite extraordinary. It just lets you. It does, doesn't it? I think I'm ready to take it out now.

Richard: Brian, you've seen the procedure; we'll do the same thing again. So we'll start with the word that you might use to describe a table.

Brian: Wooden.

Richard: Wooden. That's a good choice.

Stephen: And no swearing. No swearing.

Brian: Right. Oh, it's lovely and warm. Wooden. Wooden. Wooden. It is cold, isn't it? Mustn't swear. Oh, wooden. This is horrible, isn't it? Wooden. Wooden. Wooden. Oh, fuck.

Stephen: No.

Brian: Oh no, no wooden . . . Wooden. Wooden. Wooden . . . I'll take it out.

Richard: OK, Brian, and so this time I'd like you to use a word that you might use if you hit yourself on the thumb with a hammer. Can you give me your word that you might use?

Brian: Yes, I'd say bollocks. Fuck it.

Richard: Just one word.

Brian: Bollocks . . . Here we go. I always get terrible fucking wind. I'll be all right in a minute. I don't know why the fuck I do that. I get terrible wind. Here we go. Right. Oh bollocks. Oh bollocks. Bollocks. Bollocks. Bollocks. Oh bollocks. Is that all I can say is bollocks?

Richard: Steady, even pace please.

Brian: A steady even . . . Fucking hell, man. Bollocks. Bollocks. Bollocks. Bollocks. Oh fuck it.

Richard: That's great. Thank you . . . This couldn't have really gone any better.

The results of the experiment are revealing. Stephen is not an inveterate swearer, so, like the majority of people who have taken part in the test, he tolerated pain better when he swore. He kept his hand in the icy water for thirty-eight seconds with his neutral word

but for two minutes and twenty-nine seconds with his swear word. Brian, on the other hand, is an habitual swearer, so swearing appeared to have no effect on his pain threshold at all. In fact, he kept his hand in for five seconds longer when he shouted 'wooden' than when he swore.

TV Humour and the Curse

When uttered at the right moment, a rude word can suddenly bring an otherwise dull and lifeless sentence dramatically to life. In the rather dry world of humour research, this is known as a 'jab line'. It adds emphasis and a touch of the unexpected, a necessary component of humour. It is often particularly funny when coming from an unlikely source, such as the mouth of a sweet old lady or a seemingly innocent child.

One of the best-loved comedy sketches on British television is *The Two Ronnies* 'The Swear Box', a masterpiece of innuendo, in which the anticipated expletives from two men in a pub were bleeped out by a volley of increasingly strident beeps. That was in 1980, when swearing on television was still uncommon. There had been a sprinkling of 'bloodies' and 'damns', including the forty-four 'bloodies' repeated in an episode of *Til Death Us Do Part* in 1967, after which the broadcast standards campaigner Mary Whitehouse declared 'This is the end of civilization as we know it.' And, of course, there was the famous late-night 'fuck' uttered by Kenneth Tynan on live TV two years earlier, which caused a national uproar and prompted one Tory MP to suggest Tynan should be hanged.

Today the use of expletives on television after the 9 p.m. watershed is widespread. Nowhere has swearing been taken to such operatic levels as in the BBC's satirical political sitcom *The Thick of It*, with its foul-mouthed Downing Street spin-doctor Malcolm Tucker. *The Thick of It* has been described as the twenty-first century's answer to *Yes, Minister*, the gentler but equally witty sitcom of the 1980s. Both programmes satirized the inner workings of British government; their language is very different. 'Gibbering idiot' is about the most

Mary Whitehouse, campaigner for broadcast standards

extreme form of abuse used by hapless MP Jim Hacker in *Yes, Minster*, whereas 'Please could you take this note, ram it up his hairy inbox and pin it to his fucking prostate' is a typical 'Tuckerism' from *The Thick of It*.

Armando Iannucci is the show's creator, writer and producer. He says he is simply reflecting the language of the government's inner circle in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

'There was that world which lived off a twenty-four-hour news cycle, it lived off a "we've got to control every media outlet possible" and therefore every second was a battle, which is why the language started getting more hot-tempered. But it's different for different factions. I've done a bit of swearing research and [Prime Minister] Cameron's troops don't swear as much as Gordon Brown's troops. When we were doing *In the Loop* [the film version shot in USA], I established that the State Department didn't really swear that much, but the Pentagon swore like dockers, they were absolutely filthy, so we injected that into it. So it's really there to reflect the reality . . . There is something enjoyably childish about it . . . it does feel like

Smooth-talking Permenant Secretary Sir Humphrey, Private Secretary Bernard and hapless Jim Hacker

you're breaking a rule somewhere, but nobody's dying as a result, you're not causing any physical harm.'

Jesuit-educated Iannucci shares the concerns of those who worry that the overuse of expletives devalues the language of comedy.

'The last thing I want is every programme I watch to be like that; that would be boring apart from anything else . . . I'm not a swearer although I do find swearing funny; I see the funny side of it but I do find it quite tiring. If I'm watching a stand-up who is just f-ing and blinding every other one, I find it a little bit dull because it just becomes sort of incessant and numbing . . . so I like the creative use of swearing.'

The Thick of It, *with spin doctor Malcolm Tucker, played by Peter Capaldi, and its creator, Armando Iannucci*

Euphemisms

If cathartic swearing – the expletive shouted when you stub your toe – is primal, then what about the rest of our taboo language, the euphemisms and minced oaths, the carefully crafted word used to replace the blaspheme or the improper?

There's a school of thought which says that it was our very need to find ways of avoiding taboo subjects which propelled humans into developing complex language. 'Euphemism is such a pervasive human phenomenon,' wrote linguist Joseph Williams, 'so deeply woven into virtually every known culture, that one is tempted to claim that every human has been pre-programmed to find ways to talk around tabooed subjects.'

Euphemisms have been described as a barometer of changing attitudes. In more religious times, the need to avoid open blasphemes was strong, and yet subjects like sex and bodily functions were often not taboo at all. Look at Chaucer's language – full of vulgar, bawdy expressions. And the earthy richness of Shakespeare. His patron, Queen Elizabeth I, was said to swear like a man and enjoy dirty jokes. In his *Brief Lives*, the seventeenth-century diarist John Aubrey recounted the story of Edward de Vere and his unfortunate deep bow to the Queen.

> *This Earl of Oxford making his low obeisance to Queen Elizabeth, happened to let a Fart, at which he was so abashed and ashamed that he went to Travel, seven years. On his return the Queen welcomed him home, and said, 'My Lord, I had forgot the Fart.'*

Restrictions on blasphemous language reached a peak under the Puritans. Oliver Cromwell warned his armies that 'Not a man swears but pays his twelve pence.' A quartermaster called Boutholmey was condemned to have his tongue bored with a red-hot iron for uttering impieties; one William Harding, of Chittlehampton, was found guilty for saying 'upon my life', and Thomas Buttand was fined for exclaiming 'on my troth!' The Puritans who left England to settle in

Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, made a rather embarrassing faux pas in front of his Queen

America took with them similar strictures. A blasphemer could be put in the pillory, whipped or have his tongue bored out with a hot iron.

As society became less religious, it began to lose its horror of impious language. But one fear was soon matched and then overtaken by another – that of impropriety. Words to do with body parts, body functions and especially anything to do with sex became increasingly euphemized. The American writer H. L. Mencken dubbed the early nineteenth century a 'Golden Age of Euphemism' – on both sides of the Atlantic. The middle classes in particular went to extraordinary lengths to 'purify' their language so as to avoid the slightest chance of an improper thought.

This was the era of the prude, when *leg* became *limb*, *breast* became *bosom* and *belly* went from *stomach* (an old Latin word) to *tummy* or *midriff*. Ladies didn't *sweat*, they *perspired*; they weren't

pregnant but *in a delicate condition*; and people didn't *go to bed*, they *retired*. *Trousers* were called *unmentionables* or *inexpressibles*; *underwear* was *linen*.

The Americans seemed to be particularly squeamish, changing *haycock* to *haystack* and *weather cock* to *weather vane*. In the farmyard, *cockerels* were now *roosters* and *bulls* – symbols of sexually potency – were *male cows*, *gentlemen cows* or *cow brutes*. Even the English word *titbit* became *tidbit*.

The author of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, was the descendant of settlers who arrived in America in 1635 with the surname Alcock. Through the next few generations, as embarrassment over the improper connotations of the name grew, the family changed it to Alcocke and then Alcox. Louisa May's father went the whole hog in the 1820s and changed his name to Alcott.

Even a cooked chicken on the dinner plate didn't escape the prudes. A chicken *drumstick* replaced the simple chicken *leg*. Chicken *breast* was, of course, far too rude to say, so it became *white meat*, while the sexy *thigh* transformed into *dark meat*.

Winston Churchill fell victim to southern American modesty when he attended a dinner in Richmond, Virginia. The butler came round with a plate of chicken and asked Churchill which piece of the bird he'd like, to which Churchill replied, 'I'd like breast.' The hostess sitting next to him blanched and said, 'Mr Churchill, in this country we say white meat or dark meat.' The next day he sent her a corsage of flowers with the message 'I would be most obliged if you would pin this on your "white meat".'

Medicine and Euphemism

Medicine and euphemisms have long been bedfellows. For centuries doctors and nurses have referred to parts of the body using Latin technical terms that are themselves euphemisms borrowed from another culture. The word *penis* is actually a Latin word meaning 'tail', and *vagina* is a Roman synonym for 'sheath' or 'scabbard'. Doctors insist that the Latin terms are necessary for precision. So they

talk of *mammary* (breast), *cranium* (head), *metacarpal* (wrist) and *phalanges* (fingers). A British soldier shot in the buttocks during the First World War was asked by a visitor where he'd been wounded. 'I can't say,' he replied. 'I never studied Latin.'

Diseases have always been euphemized – indeed the word itself, *dis-ease*, is a gentler substitute for sickness. Consumption sounded much more romantic, if no less deadly, than tuberculosis. Early terms for syphilis deflected fear by insulting the enemy instead. To the English it was *Spanish pox*, *Neapolitan bone ache* or *malady of France*. The Poles called it *German disease*, whilst the Russians called it *Polish disease*. The Turks preferred *Christian disease*. And it's only recently that people have felt comfortable saying the word *cancer* instead of *Big C*. Or not mentioning it at all.

One of the most euphemized places is a hospital. We get terribly embarrassed talking to strangers about what our bodies should be doing quite naturally; instead we prefer to say things like *private parts* or *down there* or *waterworks* or, heaven help us, *the doings*. This can cause all sorts of problems for the nursing staff, especially for foreign nurses.

The Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn, Norfolk, runs a course to help disambiguate its new staff. Today's trainee nurses are all Portuguese with excellent English. Perfect English may not be enough, warns Staff Nurse Julia Saunders, and she illustrates the problems of our euphemism-laden language with stories from the ward.

'We had an auxiliary who was Portuguese. He was on the ward one day, and a lady called him over and says, "I need to spend a penny." And he said, "That's fine, I'll be with you in a moment, I'll just finish what I'm doing." So she again called him over and said, "I need to spend a penny," and he said, "I truly will be with you, madam, in a moment," being very polite, and then the third time he went over and said, "My dear, the paper lady's in the next bay and you can spend as many pennies as you like when she comes." Then the Staff Nurse came in and said, "George, she needs to go to the toilet." And he was mortified, he said he felt so silly, he really didn't understand, he wouldn't have made her wait if he'd realized what that phrase meant.'

'People will ask for a bottle, and I've had people running around

giving them bottles of lemonade, bottles of juice, bottles of water and actually what they want is a urinal, but it's the common terminology – a gentleman will ask for a bottle.

'"Rose Cottage" is a terminology that we use for the morgue or the mortuary here. It's kind of going out of fashion, but it's a word that's used throughout the NHS, and people tend to think it's a nicer terminology. If you're standing at the desk and you ring the porter and say, "I have a gentleman for Rose Cottage," well, that tends to sound better than "One for the morgue", doesn't it? And in Paediatrics, they sometimes say, "I've got a little one for the Rainbow's End."

'I've had a lady come in and she's said, "You've lost him, what d'you mean you've lost him, have you got a search party out, where is he?" And we're going, "No, no, no." And the nurse was getting herself more and more in a pickle, simply because she thought she'd know what she meant. So I said, "I need you to sit down," and I said, "Your husband has actually died." And when I said that word, although it was very harsh perhaps, she actually understood what I meant.

'I had a reasonably junior doctor and I think it was probably his first time breaking some bad news to the patient. He sat down with the lady, and I was there obviously to comfort. I knew what the bad news was. And he told her that she'd got a malignant tumour, and I remember, as a young nurse, thinking, oh, this lady's taking it very well. She asked a couple of questions about treatment, and he said there's not really any at this stage (I'm talking twenty-five years ago), and he quickly left the room, and I thought, gosh, if I'd been told that news and I was only thirty or thirty-five, I don't think I'd be sitting there like she is. So I said, "Did you understand what the doctor said?" She said, "Oh, d'you know, I was really worried when he brought me in here that he was going to tell me I'd got cancer." And I said, "Well, what do you think?" "Well, I've only got a malignant tumour." And I suddenly realized that the key word for her was *cancer*. Because cancer hadn't been heard . . . that's what she needed, she needed to hear that exact word.'

Innuendo

Euphemisms, innuendo and double entendres have long been a mainstay of British humour. In the world of entertainment, they've allowed performers to keep their acts clean enough to escape censorship and everyone in the family to enjoy the comedy. While younger members take the statement at face value, older members can enjoy the more risqué meanings. Be it a Golden Classic – 'A woman walks into a bar and asks for a double entendre, so the barman gives her one' – or the unintentional bloomer – 'Ah, isn't that nice. The wife of the Cambridge president is kissing the cox of the Oxford crew' (commentator Harry Carpenter at the 1977 Oxford–Cambridge boat race), innuendo does seem to be a particularly British obsession.

Shakespeare frequently used innuendos in his plays. Hamlet taunts Ophelia with sexual puns, referring to 'country matters' and Sir Toby in *Twelfth Night*, describing Sir Andrew's hair, says 'it hangs like flax on a distaff; and I hope to see a housewife take thee between her legs and spin it off'.

From the mid nineteenth century onwards, the music hall kept innuendo alive through an age of Victorian prudery. Queen of the music hall and the double entendre was Marie Lloyd, whose delivery of a song or a line ('She'd never had her ticket punched before') was accompanied by saucy winks and gestures. If her trademark parasol failed to open, she'd quip, 'I haven't had it up for ages.' Lloyd locked horns with a Mrs Ormiston Chant of the Purity Party, who made a public protest against her from the stalls of the Empire music hall in London's Leicester Square. In 1896, Lloyd was summoned to appear before the Vigilance Committee so that it could decide whether her songs were a threat to public morality. She sang two of her most famous songs – 'Oh Mr Porter' and 'A Little of What You Fancy' – without her usual winks and gestures, and the committee had to acquit her. The story goes that, after the demure performances, Lloyd stunned the room with a rendition of 'Come into the Garden, Maud', accompanied by an array of obscene gestures. Another story has Marie getting into trouble with her song

Marie Lloyd accompanied her songs with saucy winks and gestures

'She Sits among the Cabbages and Peas'. She continued to sing it but merely changed the lyric to 'She sits among the cabbages and leeks.'

On a visit to the United States, Lloyd explained her style in an interview with the *New York Telegraph*: 'They don't pay their sixpences and shillings at a music hall to hear the Salvation Army. If I was to try to sing highly moral songs, they would fire ginger beer bottles and beer mugs at me. I can't help it if people want to turn and twist my meanings.'

More than 100,000 people attended Lloyd's funeral in London. One of her fans, the poet T. S. Eliot, described her death as 'a significant moment in English history'. As London correspondent of the *Dial* magazine, he wrote: 'No other comedian succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of the music hall audience, raising it to a kind of art. It was, I think, this capacity for expressing the soul of the people that made Marie Lloyd unique.'

Cheekie Chappie Max Miller dominated the music halls from the 1930s to the 1950s, at a time when the office of the Lord Chamberlain was busy censoring plays and scripts for lewdness. Max Miller never swore on stage or told a dirty joke but he took innuendo to new heights of vulgarity. He got round the censors by carrying two pocket books on stage with him, one white and one blue. He'd explain to the audience that they were joke books and asked them to choose which one they'd like. If they chose the blue one, the one with all the risqué jokes, it was their own choice. He'd look off stage as if checking to see if the manager was there today, then he'd beckon to the audience and get on with the rude stuff.

Miller often used 'mind rhymes', which left the audiences to fill in the blanks.

When roses are red
They're ready for plucking;
When a girl turns sixteen
She's ready for . . . 'ere!

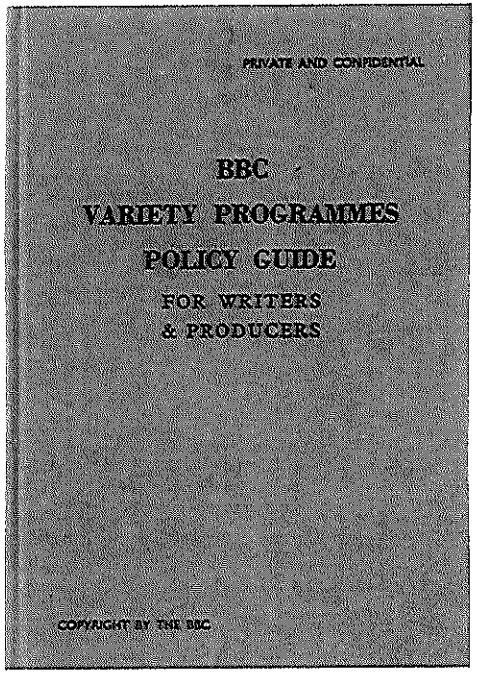
He'd then say, 'I know exactly what you are saying to yourself, you're wrong, I know what you're saying. You wicked lot. You're the sort of people that get me a bad name!'

Max eventually got into trouble with his live BBC radio broadcasts. He was taken off air in 1944 during an unscripted gag about a mountain pass, a girl and a blocked passage and banned for five years.

Cheeky Chappie Max Miller, dominated the music halls of the 1930s–1950s, taking innuendo to new heights

In 1949, the BBC produced 'The Little Green Book', a guide for comedy writers, performers and producers about what was off limits. Under the heading 'Vulgarity', it announced: 'Programmes must at all cost be kept free of crudities, coarseness and innuendo . . . There is an absolute ban on the following: jokes about lavatories, effeminacy in men [and] immorality of any kind.' Also forbidden were 'suggestive references to honeymoon couples, chambermaids, fig leaves, prostitution, ladies' underwear (e.g. winter draws on), animal habits (e.g. rabbits), lodgers and commercial travellers'. 'Extreme care' should be taken with jokes about 'pre-natal influences (e.g. his mother was frightened by a donkey)'. Expletives such as 'God, Good

God, My God, Blast, Hell, Damn, Bloody, Gorblimey and Ruddy' were to be deleted from scripts and 'innocuous expressions substituted'. Chinese laundry jokes 'may be offensive' and jokes like 'enough to make a Maltese Cross' were of 'doubtful value'. Derogatory references to 'Negroes as Niggers' was not allowed but 'Nigger Minstrels is allowed'.



The BBC's 'Little Green Book'

The BBC had arguably lost the battle to protect its listeners even before 'The Little Green Book' was issued. The bawdy banter of the barracks had influenced a generation of servicemen and a new wave of comedians – the likes of Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan and Kenneth Williams – began to write and perform on radio. *The Goon Show*'s Spike Milligan remarked that much of the show's innuendo came from servicemen's jokes, which were understood by most of the cast who had all served as enlisted soldiers and many of the audience, but not by the BBC managers, who were mostly 'officer class'.

The most infamous hotbed of double entendre was the 1960s Radio 2 series *Round the Horne*, in which Kenneth Williams and fellow performers served up a half hour of wordplay, sexual innuendo and nonsense verse every Sunday afternoon. One of the regular characters was an English folk singer, Rambling Syd Rumpo, played by Williams, whose suggestive songs were filled with nonsense words like 'grossets' and 'grommets' and 'nadgers' and 'moolies'.

> *In Hackney Wick there lives a lass*
> *whose grummets would I woggle*
> *Her ganderparts none can surpass*
> *her possett makes me boggle!'*

Music-hall entertainment died out with the success of television, but from the *Carry On* films to TV's *Morecambe and Wise* and *The Two Ronnies*, the format of double entendre family entertainment continued through to the 1970s. The following extract from an episode of *Are You Being Served?*, the BBC department store sitcom, wouldn't have felt out of place in a nineteenth-century musical hall.

Mrs Slocombe: Before we go any further, Mr Rumbold, Miss Brahms and I would like to complain about the state of our drawers. They're a positive disgrace.

Mr Rumbold: Your what, Mrs Slocombe?

Mrs Slocombe: Our drawers. They're sticking. And it's always the same in damp weather.

Mr Rumbold: Really.

Mrs Slocombe: Miss Brahms could hardly shift hers at all just now.

Mr Lucas: No wonder she was late.

Mrs Slocombe: They sent a man who put beeswax on them, but that made them worse.

Mr Rumbold: I'm not surprised.

Miss Brahms: I think they need sandpapering.

There was a defining moment in TV comedy in the early 1980s when the *Not the Nine O'Clock News* team satirized a *Two Ronnies* sketch. Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett's trademark were their innuendo-laden songs.

> *The twittering of the birds all day, the bumblebees at play.*
> *The twit! The twit! The twit! The twit! The twittering of the birds all day;*
> *The bum! The bum! The bum! The bum! The bumblebees at play . . .*

The *Not the Nine O'Clock News* sketch 'The Two Ninnies' sent up the whole double entendre genre by singing the intended word – or worse. It was knowingly clever in a very 80s way – what would now be called postmodern. It was basically calling the bluff of double entendre.

> *I spend all day just crawling through the grass*
> *Thistles in me hair and bracken up me anus*
> *I'm thrilled to bits to see a pair of tits*
> *And I love to watch the sun go down*
> *Oh vagina oh vagina over Chinatown*

Nowadays, explicit sexual humour raises barely an eyebrow. As the comic writer and performer David Baddiel observes, 'When, twenty years ago, Molly Sugden from *Are You Being Served?* would come on TV and say that it had been raining in the garden and her pussy was soaking wet, it was taken to mean "cat", with a slight overtone of "vagina". Today, it would mean "vagina", with just a tiny undercurrent of "cat".' For the most part, the double entendre has been consigned to early-evening TV sitcoms and that great bastion of bawdy jokes, the pantomime. Stand-up, observational humour is the comedy of choice these days.

And yet . . . living as we do in a society which now talks so openly and frankly about sex, it is odd that we still rather hanker after our double entendres. The BBC Radio 4 programme *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue* has been on air since 1972. It's delightfully daft, full of wordplay and puns and absolutely heaving with innuendo – most of it aimed at Samantha, the show's fictional scorer. Of a builder, 'She was pleased to see his tender won but was startled when it suddenly grew to twice its size.'

From office humour to best men's speeches, it seems we still like a bit of innuendo. Long may it continue.

Politeness

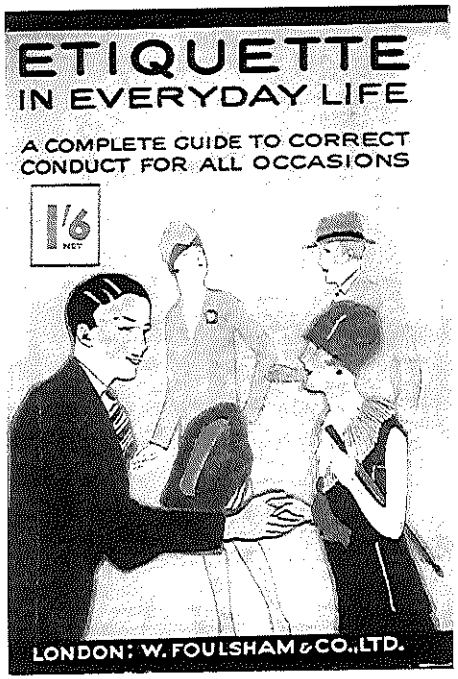
Innuendo is one way cultures regulate social behaviour. The language of politeness is another way.

There's an etiquette in grammar which anyone who's learned a foreign language will probably have come across. Most of the Indo-European languages have two levels of grammatical politeness when addressing people. French has the less formal *tu* for children and friends and the formal *vous* for anyone else; Spanish has *tu* and *Usted*, German *du* and *Sie*, Russian *ты* and Вы. English used to have two levels – *you* and the formal *thou*. *Thou*, *thee* and *thine* have virtually disappeared from day-to-day speech, although they can still be heard in some northern dialects and in a religious setting.

The Japanese language is famous for an extensive grammatical system which is used to express politeness and formality, depending on age, job and experience. There are three levels of politeness, all expressed through different verb endings and alternative expressions. These levels are colloquial, polite and honorific or *keigo* (literally *respectful language*). There are two types of *keigo*: the polite honorific used when addressing someone of higher social status, like the boss at work, teachers or elders, and the humble one when you refer to yourself or family. Forms of *keigo* are found in Korean, Chinese and other Asian languages.

The three golden words of politeness in the English language are *please*, *thank you* and *sorry* and the English – the stereotypical English at least – are the world champions when it comes to using them. We are masters in the arts of supplication, gratitude and

apology. 'Sorry to bother you . . . Sorry, but can you help me please? Terribly sorry . . . Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.'



The 1920s guide to proper and correct conduct

Generations of children have been told to 'mind your manners' or 'mind your Ps and Qs'. We presume the 'Ps and Qs' stand for 'pleases and thank yous', although I rather like the theory that the phrase comes from the days of the early printing presses, where mistakes were often made with the typesetting of the lower-case *p*s and *q*s. Anyway, the English are renowned for minding them. We're also rather keen on the matter of table manners, queuing and the art of polite small talk. Discussing the weather is a speciality, as is the avoidance of the contentious subjects of politics, sex and religion.

Other nations have politeness encoded deep into their language and traditions. Iranian/Persian culture has a rather mystifying code of etiquette called *taarof*, which basically means to pay respect to someone. It involves elaborate compliments and praises and requires

that you treat your guests and friends better than your own family. *Taarof* is a verbal dance between the person who is offering and the one who is receiving, a volley of insistence and refusal until one of them agrees. *Taarof* governs all levels of daily life, formal and informal – in the market place, shops, restaurants, offices and when entertaining guests at home.

Comedian Omid Djalili was born in London to Iranian parents. Over coffee in his favourite Persian restaurant, he explains how *taarof* works.

'I know, for example, that the lovely Farad here, who owns this restaurant, if I was to come in here, there'd be a little dance where he would give me the best food, and I will say, "Thank you so much, can I have the bill?" And he will say, "My food's not really worth you paying anything." "Please," I say. "No, please, I must pay." He goes, "No, no, no, no, you are a huge person in our community." And I say, "I will, I must pay," and he'll go, "But really, you mustn't pay." And I say, "I really, really must pay." And he'll go, "I'll get the bill then." So he has every intention of charging me, I have every intention of paying, and yet we have this wonderful dance of giving eulogies.'

The same code of politeness operates at home between the host and a guest. Let's imagine your grandmother invites you to her house for dinner. You clear your plate, and she offers you seconds. You're still hungry and you'd love another plateful but you refuse. You've just *taarofed*. The ritual continues, and your grandma offers a second time – you refuse – and then a third time. At this point you accept. It's a laborious, often frustrating, ritual for, of course, you may not have wanted another plateful. You were actually being honest rather than *taarofing*. Some people get round this by asking the guest not to *taarof* ('*taarof nakonid*').

Taarof only works when both sides understand the rules; problems occur when one side doesn't play the game. Omid recalls how his parents were keen to share their *taarofing* culture when they arrived in England from Iran.

'My parents often had English people around, and I'll never forget a very sweet accountant who came to our house around four o'clock and was clearly not hungry. My parents said, "Please, you must have

food." And he said, "Oh, I'm not hungry at all." They said, "No, you must eat," and they bring kebabs, they bring rice, and the English person then felt, All right then, I'll have a little bit, just not to appear racist. So he had a little bit to eat, and then my parents said, "Well, take some home," and he did. And as soon as he left, they said, "What a greedy bastard. He took everything. Can you believe it? Doesn't he eat?"'

In *taroof* – unlike some codes of courtesy in countries with caste systems or hierarchical class systems – everyone uses the same ceremony and language with each other, whether they happen to be a prince from the Peacock Throne or a van driver. The aim is to seem as humble as possible, and the language used to achieve this is wonderfully lavish – as Omid demonstrates when the restaurant owner refills his coffee cup.

'I just said thank you very much to Farad,' Omid explains. '*Ghorbanet beram* – which means "May my life be a sacrifice to you." I don't even know him, but I want to sacrifice my life for him! But it's also about humility: like we say *Ghadamet ro Cheshm* – literally, "May you walk on my eyeballs." It means I'm bowing, I want to get as low as I possibly can so you can walk over my brow. It's a way of giving a compliment, you see.'

This emotional, excessive language is not exactly British. E. M. Forster wrote an essay on the character of the English in which he described the reaction of an Indian friend at the end of a week's holiday together. The friend was thoroughly miserable – all happiness, he despaired, had ended. Forster reminded him that they'd be meeting up in a month or two and told him to 'Buck up'. When the two met again, Forster accused his friend of having reacted inappropriately. To this his friend cried, 'What? Do you measure out emotions as if they were potatoes?' Forster explained he was worried that if he poured out his emotions on small occasions, he would have nothing left for the big ones. Emotion, replied his friend, has nothing to do with appropriateness. He was being sincere, he felt deeply and he showed it.

A waiter is clearing away the coffee cups now, and he and Omid are engaging in another round of compliments and counter-compliments. It seems that *taarof* is basically about people feeling good about themselves and at ease in the company of a stranger. It's a way of

eroding all the sharp edges and the difficulties of age and gender and education and wealth differences that are bound to arise in any society. But Omid points out that there's a downside to this full-on politeness.

'My wife, who's British, said, "You know, it's very nice, you use such lavish language, you're always complimenting people, but I don't know what's true. You compliment too many people." And you know Iranian culture can be very blunt at the same time; Iranians can't stop themselves. I know if my aunty hasn't seen me for a while, she goes, "Oh my God, you're fat, you've put on so much weight, look at that, oh my God, what are you doing?"'

Perhaps the bluntness is part of the same ritual of establishing an equal footing. Omid isn't convinced. 'To be called a bald, fat fart to your face. That's a bit difficult to take . . .'

Jargon

Anyone who has worked on a filmset will be familiar with the technical language surrounding the actual nuts and bolts of filming which, to an outsider, sounds like coded nonsense. *Sparks, best boys, gaffers, greensmen, grips* and *dolly grips* all have a specialized job to do; their tools are *apple boxes, arcs, bazookas, whips* and *swan necks*. Gobbledegook to most people, but all these words actually allow for a short-hand communication and a very precise use of language. Nearly all professional groups involved in specialized activities, whether they are doctors, lawyers, soldiers or sailors, have their own jargon or terminology.

From film crew to boat crew (it's interesting how film and TV have kept the naval terminology), ocean-racing yachtsman Matt Allen gives a crash course in sailing jargon and its quite bamboozling lexicon for ropes. For starters, a rope on board a yacht is never called simply a rope. Once it's got a designated purpose it's a *line* or, if it's very thick, a *cable*. Lines which are attached to sails to control their shapes are called *sheets*. Stationary lines which support masts are called *standing rigging*; individually they're *shrouds* or *stays*.

Movable lines that control the sails are called *running rigging*. Lines that raise sails are called *halyards*, and those which bring them down are *downhauls*. The bit of rope used to hold the boom down is a *kicker* or a *fall guy*, and a *topping lift* holds the boom up. Clearly, shouting to someone to 'Grab that rope!' could be disastrous.

Matt Allen explains: 'You couldn't operate on a yacht – cruising or racing – without that sort of terminology. Your crew need to know exactly what you mean, which piece of rope to pull or to let off, especially in the heat of the moment. That way they know exactly what you're talking about and there's no confusion.'

We landlubbers try to simplify sailing terminology, to talk about the left side or right side of a boat instead of *port* and *starboard*, but it doesn't work. What we mean by left and right is a position in relation to our bodies (most of us think about which hand we write with). Port and starboard are in relation to the boat itself, so port is the left side of the boat facing forwards and starboard the right side. In fact the word *port* is a good example of how jargon itself changes if it's not clear enough. Sailors used to talk of *starboard* and *larboard*. There must have been frequent misheard shouts in a strong wind, because sailors replaced *larboard* with *port*, as they moored ships on that side at ports.

Nautical terms have permeated our everyday language. Some of the expressions are to do with the technical side of sailing – *ship shape, know the ropes, keel over, be on an even keel, sail close to the wind, take the wind out of someone's sails, make heavy weather, try a different tack, give someone leeway, make headway, give someone a wide berth, trail in someone's wake.*

Other naval phrases are hidden and need some unpicking. To feel *groggy* comes from *grog*, the sailor's daily ration of watered-down rum. If you've drunk too much and you're *three sheets to the wind*, then you're in the same condition as a ship whose lines holding the sails in place are loose – you shudder and roll. *Down the hatch* is another drinking term which comes from the cargo being lowered through the hatch into the ship's hold. *Pipe down*, meaning to be quiet, was the signal at the end of the day for lights out on board. The phrase *no room to swing a cat* is thought to refer to naval floggings using a cat (cat o'nine tails) in the cramped spaces of the old

sail ships. Someone in low spirits, who's *in the doldrums*, is experiencing what sailors called the windless, becalming area near the equator. And when the barefooted sailors were called on deck for inspection, they had to line up in neat rows along the seams of the wooden planks and *toe the line*.

The problem with jargon is when it leaves the confines of a particular profession or expertise and is used to communicate with the wider world. That's when the definition of jargon changes.

Chaucer used the word to mean the twittering or chattering of birds, and that's exactly how specialized language of the expert sounds to the punter – a meaningless twitter.

Medical and Legal Jargon

Doctors need to be able to communicate quickly and effectively with other medical professionals. But unlike sailors on a boat or a sparks in a film crew, they have to talk to people outside their specialized group – their patients. It may be a bilateral probital haematoma to them; to us, it's a black eye. Myocardial infarction? That's a heart attack.

Most medical terminology derives from Latin or Greek, so unless you've studied the Classics, jargon 'clues' like *cardio* for heart, *haema* for blood, *tachy* for fast, *hypo* for low and *hyper* for high are meaningless.

In our more patient-centred world, doctors have got much better at dropping the medical jargon and speaking to patients in a language they can understand. They're learning to be more bilingual, shifting from *seborrhoeic dermatitis* to *a touch of dandruff*.

Many of the complicated medical terms have been replaced by another form of jargon – the medical acronym. It's clearer and quicker to use abbreviations for long-worded conditions. DVT is much simpler than deep vein thrombosis or URI for upper respiratory infection; sometimes an abbreviation is used to avoid upset, as in DNR for 'do not resuscitate'. The acronym is also used as a secret code between doctors to talk candidly about the patient, although

legislation allowing patients access to their own medical notes may curtail the practice. These acronyms, however, show no evidence of a cramping of style.

FLK: funny-looking kid
ABITHAD: another blithering idiot – thinks he's a doctor
ART: assuming room temperature (recently deceased)
FFFF: female, fat, forty and flatulent
GOK: God only knows
GLM: good-looking mum
TTGA: told to go away
MFC: measure for coffin
NFWP: not for *War and Peace* (dying so no point in starting a long book)

Lawyers too are renowned for baffling their clients with *a prioris*, *ibids*, *idems* and obscure case references. The critic A. P. Rossiter wrote in *Our Living Language* in 1953: 'It strikes everyone as an extreme case of the evils of jargon when a man is tried by a law he can't read, in a court which uses a language he can't understand.'

In English civil courts, attempts have been made to demystify the language with the abolition of some of the most archaic legal jargon and Latin maxims. Since 1999, people bringing cases to court are *claimants*, not *plaintiffs*, a *writ* is called a *claim form*, and *minors* are *children*. The new legal terms are designed to help people understand the law, so *in camera* has become *private*, a *subpoena* is a *witness summons*, and an *Anton Piller*, named after the plaintiff (sorry, claimant) in a court case in the 1970s, is now simply a search and seizure order.

Legalese, the term for legal writing that's designed to be difficult for the layman to read or understand, may be harder to eradicate. The long-winded sentences, countless modifying clauses and complex and often unnecessary vocabulary have been annoying non-lawyers for centuries. Four hundred years ago, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* had this to say about legalese: 'But do not give it to a lawyer's clerk to write, for they use a legal hand that Satan himself will not understand.'

Lawyers are renowned for baffling their clients

Lawyers want to write contracts which are legally binding and cover all possible contingencies but even they often have trouble decoding the legalese. Documents are peppered with *subsequent to* and *forthwith* and double-barrelled *keep and maintain* and *goods and chattels*. Campaigners for the use of plain language give this example of legalese:

> *Upon any such default, and at any time thereafter, Secured Party may declare the entire balance of the indebtedness secured hereby, plus any other sums owed hereunder, immediately due and payable without demand or notice, less any refund due, and Secured Party shall have all the remedies of the Uniform Commercial Code.*

The plain-language alternative? 'If I break any of the promises in this document, you can demand that I immediately pay all that I owe.'

Plain English in the Workplace

The battle for plain English in the world of politics and government has been raging longer than you might think. In 1948, a British civil servant, Sir Ernest Gowers, was invited by HM Treasury to produce a manual for government officials on how to avoid over-elaborate writing. *Plain Words, a Guide to the Use of English* was so successful that Gowers followed it with *The ABC of Plain Words* and *The Complete Plain Words*.

Sir Ernest cites the example of a circular sent from a government department to its regional offices which began: 'The physical progressing of building cases should be confined to . . . ' Sir Ernest writes:

> *Nobody could say what meaning this was intended to convey unless he held the key. It is not English, except in the sense that the words are English words. They are a group of symbols used in conventional senses known only to the parties to the convention.*

A member of the department explained to him that the phrase meant going to a building site to see how many bricks had been laid since the last visit. 'It may be said that no harm is done,' continues Sir Ernest,

> *because the instruction is not meant to be read by anyone unfamiliar with the departmental jargon. But using jargon is a dangerous habit; it is easy to forget that the public do not understand it, and to slip into the use of it in explaining things to them. If that is done, those seeking enlightenment will find themselves plunged in even deeper obscurity.*

He included a list of 'overworked' words, which he described as 'good and useful . . . when properly used; my worry is only against

the temptation to prefer them over other words which would convey better the meaning you want to express'.

More than half a century later, most of the words contained in the list remain firmly entrenched in government-speak: *utilize, envisage, implement, viable, visualize, rendition* . . . But these overworked words are nothing compared to a deluge of non-words which has gripped the English language. This jargon, according to the American poet David Lehman, 'is the verbal sleight of hand that makes the old hat seem newly fashionable; it gives an air of novelty and specious profundity to ideas that, if stated directly, would seem superficial, stale, frivolous, or false'. It's called, variously, corporate-speak or bureaucratese or offlish (for office English), and its terminology of *blue-sky thinking* and *benchmarking* and *thinking outside the box* and *synergizing* and *conditionality* has spread throughout the world of corporations and government departments and offices. Our language thrives on innovation, but the baffling phrases, power words, tortured verbs and pointless adages of corporate jargon have little to recommend them. This jargon appears to be neither inclusive nor humorous nor very clever.

A wadge of gung-ho transitive verbs are favoured: *to action, to incentivize, to leverage, to strategize, to downsize*. Everything is upbeat. Problems aren't problems, they're *challenges*; commitment is *110 per cent*; anything done in the future is on a *go-forward basis*. Other monstrosities include *I don't have the bandwidth to deal with the situation* rather than 'I don't have the time'; *end-user perspective* instead of 'what the customer thinks'; *cascade down information* for simply sending a memo.

A new office pastime has been created. Employees play Buzzword – or Bullshit – Bingo in the boardroom, ticking off a predetermined list of jargon words uttered during the meeting. The first person to have a full card is supposed to yell 'Bingo!'

Corporate-speak is inveigling itself into every corner of officialdom. The jobs section in a British newspaper had the following advert: 'Proactive, self-starting facilitator required to empower cohorts of students and enable them to access the curriculum.' That's a teacher, to you and me.

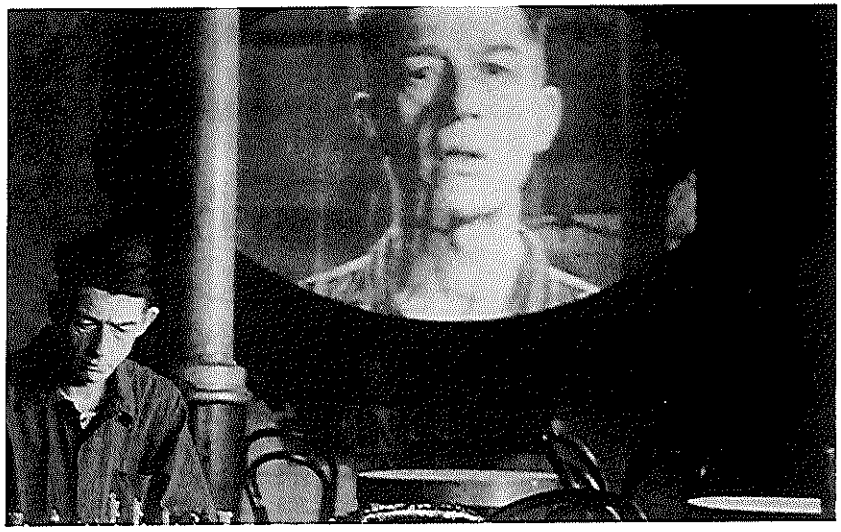
There's no British institution that has ridiculed pretentious or obfuscatory language more than *Private Eye*, the satirical magazine. The magazine's editor, Ian Hislop, has tracked and excoriated the rise and rise of business and political jargon since he took the job in 1986.

> *Using language as a way of obscuring the truth rather than revealing the truth is always dangerous, and so I think that's part of the point of attempting always to monitor these excesses. And English is a very precise language. It can be used to convey anything beautifully but it's also very amenable to nonsense . . . The British are obsessed with their own language, and* Private Eye *gives them a way of monitoring it. So a lot of these columns were actually started by readers just saying, 'Have you noticed that everybody is using the word "solutions"?' You can't get your windows replaced now, someone does 'window solutions'. You can't get a garden hose, you have 'water irrigation domestic solutions'.*

Hislop has a theory on how management-speak has spread like a virus through institutions like the BBC, the NHS, the civil service and local government.

> *It starts in management consultancies, which are firms designed to make a science out of what used to be an art or common sense – management, dealing with people. Management consultants make this into a science. You hire management consultants usually for two reasons. One is you want to sack people and you don't do it yourself or, two, you want to create verbiage to describe non-existent jobs. So you're either getting rid of people who do a real job or you're inventing non-jobs. And the jargon does perfectly for both of those. So the people in non-jobs can send each other memos about rolling out milestones and delivery and competence, and the people who are being sacked are told that they've been restructured.*

The language of management seems to have deteriorated at such a breakneck speed in terms of its warmth and emotional directness that it's hard to imagine it getting any more impersonal. Ian Hislop says companies are aware of the problems.



John Hurt as Winston Smith in the film version of 1984

> *What amuses me is the same management who basically are bringing in systems to make sure people fall apart then are told there's no bonding going on. So they have to organize paintballing weekends and start bringing in members of the SAS to give talks about getting across bridges without using rope and forcing people to socialize because they've become so disparate inside the office.*

In the brave new world of management speak, harsh realities get hidden. This is the language of doublespeak, deliberately euphemistic, ambiguous or obscure. In some cases it actually reverses the meanings of words. 'Doublespeak' is a term which can be traced back to George Orwell, who invented the words *doublethink* and *newspeak* for his novel *1984*.

American linguist William Lutz writes:

> *Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but doesn't. It is language which makes the bad seem good, the negative seem positive, the unpleasant seem unattractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids, shifts or denies responsibility; language which is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought. ('Doubts about Doublespeak',* State Government News, *1993)*

Doublespeak with Political Intent

The uglier side of doublespeak is its use as camouflage to hide the reality. In the world of business, euphemisms are bald: workers aren't sacked, they're *down-* or *right-sized*, *derecruited* or *involuntarily terminated*. Companies don't suffer losses, they have *negative cash flows* or *downward adjustments* or *negative growths*.

Most disturbing of all is how the doublespeak of business and management has been adopted by governments and politicians who use deliberately ambiguous phrases to make us feel better about politically sensitive subjects like war or killings or torture. To kill becomes to *take down*, *take out* or *neutralize*, or the 'unlawful and arbitrary deprivation of life' (US State Department annual report 1984). Civilian casualties are *collateral damage*; an escalation in fighting is a *surge*; state kidnapping for the purposes of torture becomes *rendition*; a terrorist furthering state interests is a *freedom fighter*; genocide is changed to *ethnic cleansing*. Weapons are *assets*; nuclear weapons are *nuclear deterrents*. Torture is *enhanced coercion interrogation technique*.

Political doublespeak isn't a new phenomenon. It's most infamous use is the terminology of the Nazis to describe the systematic extermination of Jews – *the Final Solution*. Hitler used

euphemisms to dehumanize and make the unacceptable acceptable. He spoke about the need to *purify* and *cleanse*, to rid the Reich of the Jewish *vermin* and to *decontaminate* or *disinfect* the Reich of the Jewish *bacillus*. Instead of kill or murder, expressions like *special treatment, evacuation, resettlement* or *conveyed to special measure* were used. The planned killing of handicapped people was *euthanasia* or *mercy death*. Poland, with its death camps, was called the *Jewish resettlement region*; gas chambers were *bathhouses*, and mobile gas chambers were *auxiliary equipment* or *delousing vans*.

Victor Klamperer, a German Jewish Professor of Literature, documented in his book *LTI, Lingua Tertii Imperii* (The Language of the Third Reich) the daily mental corruption of the German people through language. Klamperer escaped the gas chambers because his wife was Aryan.

> *Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures which were imposed on them in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously . . . Language does not simply write and think for me, it also increasingly dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being the more unquestioningly and unconsciously I abandon myself to it. And what happens if the cultivated language is made up of poisonous elements or has been made the bearer of poisons? Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.*

The city of Leipzig lies in what we used to call East Germany. This part of Germany suffered two extreme regimes in the last century – the fascist Nazis and then the communists, who controlled what was then called the GDR (German Democratic Republic) from the end of the Second World War until 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Like the Nazis, the communists were expert at using language to control and subdue, changing words and changing

the meaning of words to suit their political purposes. In the former headquarters of the notorious Staatssicherheit – the Stasi, probably the most famous secret police after the KGB – political satirist Gunter Böhnke recalls that party officials called the secret police 'die Sicherheit' – the security. Ordinary people nicknamed it 'die Stasi', making it sound feminine – a bit like us calling the police 'the She Police', he says. It was the public's small way of showing defiance, making the Stasi seem less frightening.

The Berlin Wall was officially called the 'Anti-Fascist Barrier' by the GDR authorities, but, as Gunter recalls, 'the barbed wire was not facing the West but to the East. Everybody could see that the enemies could come in. But you were not allowed to go out.'

The GDR was nothing like the Nazi regime in terms of terror and murder. This was a much more insidious tyranny in which all conversations were monitored by an army of citizen spies – some estimates say as many as one for every six and a half members of the population. Gunter describes it as a sort of mind control where even telling a joke was dangerous.

'My mother lost her purse with a number of Ulbricht [Walter Ulbricht, GDR leader] jokes in it, and for months on end with every ringing of the bell, we thought the Stasi will come and take our mother because of these jokes. It was enough just to tell a joke. There was a teacher of Russian who told a joke to his colleagues about Krushchev. Somebody reported him to the Stasi, and he was sacked from school and had to work in a chemical factory. Very hard, very dirty work. This was in 1962.'

Gunter himself was allowed to perform comedy cabaret shows as a 'steam valve' as long as the jokes didn't attack senior party officials. George Orwell wrote: 'Every joke is a tiny revolution,' and despite the danger from informants, political jokes thrived. Some of the more critical ones were known as 'five-year jokes' – three years in prison for the person telling it and two years for everyone else who listened and laughed.

In the 1970s and 80s the GDR leader, Erich Honecker, was the target of a number of jokes. This one features in the 2006 Oscar-winning film *The Lives of Others*:

Erich Honecker arrives at his office early one morning. Opening his window he sees the sun and says, 'Good morning, dear sun.'

The sun replies, 'Good morning, dear Erich!'

Honecker gets on with his work and at noon he opens the window and says 'Good day, dear sun.'

And the sun replies, 'Good day, dear Erich.'

In the evening, as he heads out of his office, Erich goes again to the window and says, 'Good evening, dear sun.' The sun is silent. Honecker says again, 'Good evening, dear sun! What's the matter?'

The sun replies, 'Kiss my arse! I'm in the West now.'

Modern Taboos

Given the atrocities in our history perpetrated by one group against another, it's not surprising that many governments and institutions have tried to legislate against so-called hate speech – disparaging remarks about religions, ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities and genders. But who defines hate speech? Can we prevent hate speech without encroaching on freedom of speech? And does making something taboo merely give it more power?

This chapter began with the Seven Words You Cannot Say – swear words which our forefathers would physically recoil at but whose power to offend this generation is waning. Today, old taboos have been replaced by new ones, which language and humour have to negotiate. These are the taboos of homosexuality and disability and – the issue which probably makes us most uncomfortable and which hardly bothered previous generations – race. When we joke about race we tread on eggshells. There are words we just don't use. And the most offensive one is probably the word *nigger*. F-words and c-words cause only mild ripples these days, but the n-word is extremely loaded.

It wasn't always like this. Older readers may remember merrily reciting a children's counting rhyme:

Eeny, meeny, miney, mo,
Catch a nigger by the toe;
If he squeals let him go,
Eeny, meeny, miney, mo.

It was acceptable right into the 1970s, just as collecting the Golliwog stickers off the back of jars of Robertson's jam and sending them off for a Golliwog badge seemed an innocent hobby. There was little fuss when Agatha Christie published her bestselling detective thriller *Ten Little Niggers* in 1939 – although the Americans brought it out as *And Then There Were None* the following year. British publishers didn't change the title until 1985.

A proposed remake of the 1955 film *The Dam Busters* has stepped into a quagmire of political correctness. One of the film's main characters was Guy Gibson, the RAF commander of the British mission that destroyed German dams with 'bouncing' bombs in the Second World War Two. Gibson had a black Labrador called Nigger – a common enough name for a black dog in those days; it was also the radio codeword used to report the success of Gibson's squadron on one of the targets. ITV broadcast a censored version of the original film in 1999 with all 'Nigger' utterances deleted; the Americans dubbed over 'Nigger' to make it 'Trigger'. So should the film-makers stick to the facts or alter history, changing a name that was perfectly acceptable in the 1940s and 50s so as not to offend people today? As the director of the remake, Peter Jackson, notes, 'We're in a no-win, damned if you do and damned if you don't scenario.'

A much more objectionable rewriting of history in the name of political correctness was the publication of an edition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* in 2011 with every mention of 'nigger' excised and replaced – over 200 times – with the word *slave*. It's been described as a kind of ethnic cleansing, a whitewashing of the fact that black people in the American South in the mid nineteenth century were referred to as 'niggers'. And a complete failure to understand that *Huckleberry Finn* is actually anti-racist.

The Americans are acutely sensitive about the n-word; it makes them linguistically twitchy. In 1999, David Howard, a white aide to the black mayor of Washington, DC, was having a financial discussion

RAF crew and Guy Gibson making a fuss of their black Labrador dog, Nigger, who is wearing an Iron Cross

with a black colleague when he talked about being 'niggardly' with the budget. Now *niggardly* means 'miserly', probably from the Old Norse *hnøgger* for stingy. But it's an uncommon word and it sounds like *nigger*, so was interpreted as a racial slur. A complaint was lodged, and Howard tendered his resignation. It was accepted with alacrity by the mayor. A national debate on political correctness ensued, with the chairman of the African-American civil rights group Julian Bond, opining: 'David Howard should not have quit. Mayor Williams should bring him back – and order dictionaries issued to all staff who need them . . . Seems to me the mayor has been niggardly in his judgment on the issue.' David Howard was brought back to work in the mayor's office.

Racial linguistic sensibility is clearly not so acute in Britain, where society was largely white until the 1940s. Mass Afro-Caribbean immigration began after the Second World War, but it took decades before the word *nigger* was generally accepted as a racial slur. *Love Thy*

Neighbour was a sitcom on ITV in the 1970s about a white family and a black family who lived next door to each other. Eddie, the white male character, talked about 'sambos' and 'nig-nogs'. The script-writers claimed that *Love Thy Neighbour* was an attempt to address some of the issues raised by a growing immigrant population in Britain. The characters may have been racist, they argued, but the show wasn't.

Black and gay stand-up comedian Stephen K. Amos was a school-boy in south London when *Love Thy Neighbour* was broadcast. 'I'd go to school on the Monday and be called a nig-nog because they'd see it on the show . . . I didn't know I was a nig-nog until my class-mates told me I was.'

The interesting thing about today's taboo words is that it's seen as okay to use them if you're part of the particular community. So Jews are allowed to say *kyke*; Stephen Amos is gay and feels comfortable about using the word *queer*. A lot of black comedians like the American Chris Rock use the n-word quite freely, and there's even a group called NWA, Niggers with Attitude. Stephen says he doesn't use the n-word personally but understands why

Love Thy Neighbour, *1972*

others might want to reclaim the word. What's more important for him is that taboo words cause comedians to think before they speak.

'When people say political correctness has gone mad, I really get offended by that term because I don't think it's being politically correct if you have to think before you speak, if you have to think before offending people. If you're a clever comedian and you want to upset the apple cart then, yes, do that, but do it in a way which makes us all think, not just by throwing in a word or having a go at a community or at disabled kids. If there isn't a purpose or a point, there's no point, because we could all do that.'

Slang

Language is in a constant state of change and reinvention, and slang plays a vital role in this evolution. Slang is described in early editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the 'language of a low and vulgar type . . . consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense'. The origin of the word *slang* is unknown. It doesn't show up until the middle of the eighteenth century, when it was used to refer to the 'special vocabulary of tramps or thieves'. Before then it was called *cant* or *vulgar language*.

Street slang, rhyming slang, back slang, teenage slang, text slang – there's an abundance of slang in the English language, and the strong feelings it generates are nothing new. From the sixteenth century onwards, people were railing against use of the vulgar tongue. In 1621, John Milton's headmaster, Alexander Gil, wrote about the cant speech of 'the dirtiest dregs of the wandering beggars'. In his study of grammar and dialects, *Logonomia Anglica*, he described cant as 'that poisonous and most stinking ulcer of our state'.

The satirist Jonathan Swift was a passionate advocate of the need to purify the English language. In an article published in the *Tatler* in 1710 he attacked what he called 'the continual corruption of our

English tongue', not by the common people but by the writers and poets of the age. Swift denounced the use of abbreviations, in which only the first part of a word was used, and also:

> *the choice of certain words invented by some pretty fellows: such as banter, bamboozle, country put, and kidney, as it is there applied; some of which are now struggling for the vogue, and others are in possession of it. I have done my utmost for some years past to stop the progress of mobb and banter, but have been plainly borne down by numbers, and betrayed by those who promised to assist me.*

Swift clearly failed to stop the entry of words like *mob* (from *mobile vulgus*, the Latin for fickle crowd) and *banter* into our everyday language.

The first substantial dictionary of slang, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, was published in 1785 by Francis Grose. He was a former soldier, innkeeper and champion drinker who collected slang from all corners of society – sailors, tradesmen, prostitutes, pickpockets and craftsmen. He and his assistant are said to have walked the slums of London at night, noting down the cant words spoken in the drinking dens and brothels. His dictionary included over 3,000 entries. Some of them are familiar – *hen-pecked*, *topsy-turvey*, *brat*, *sheepish* (for bashful) and *carrots* (for red hair). Others are, rather sadly, obsolete. Words like *circumbendibus* (a wandering path or story) or *scandalbroth* (tea).

What Grose calls vulgar, we would probably call slang. His dictionary meaning for *devilish*, for instance, reads: 'an epithet which in the English vulgar language is made to agree with every quality or thing; as, devilish bad, devilish good; devilish sick, devilish well; devilish sweet, devilish sour; devilish hot, devilish cold, &c. &c.' Many of the words reflected the seamier side of life. A *covent garden nun* was a prostitute, and the delightful-sounding *scotch warming pan* was a word for 'a wench, also a fart'. There are plenty of rude words. *Shag*, *hump* and *screw* are all there for copulation. Less familiar are *bum fodder* for toilet paper and *double jugg* for a man's bottom. And there's one listed simply as 'c—t: a nasty name for a nasty thing'; elsewhere he refers to it as 'the monosyllable'.

CAPTAIN FRANCIS GROSE
BY HIMSELF

Francis Grose created the first dictionary of slang in 1785

Unlike Swift, Grose believed that the rich abundance of slang words in the English language was something to be celebrated: 'The freedom of thought and speech, arising from, and privileged by, our constitution, gives a force and poignancy to the expressions of our common people, not to be found under arbitrary governments.'

There's a fascinating postscript to this larger-than-life character. Grose met the Scottish poet Robert Burns when he was in Scotland, drawing sketches and collecting material for a book on local antiquities. They got on famously – Burns wrote: 'I have never seen a man of more original observation, anecdote and remark' – and Grose agreed to include a drawing of Alloway Kirk in his forthcoming volume, if Burns would provide a witch tale to accompany it. In 1790 Burns sent him the rhyming tale of 'Tam O'Shanter' – arguably one of the best examples of narrative poetry in the English language.

Back-slang

The 'secret tongue' of the costermongers, the mobile fruit and veg sellers, was back-slang – essentially pronouncing a word backwards. There were tens of thousands of 'costers' in Victorian London, with a reputation, according to a book published in 1859 by John Camden Hotton entitled *A Dictionary of Slang, Cant and Vulgar Words*, of 'low habits, general improvidence and their use of a peculiar slang language'. They were a tight-knit community with a common enemy – the police – and seemed to have developed back-slang, a private language which the punters and non-locals couldn't understand. The back-slang was used mostly for words involved in their trade and everyday life – coins, vegetables, fruit and police. So *dunop* was a pound, *yennep* a penny, *rape* a pear, *storrac* carrots, *spinsrap* parsnips, *slop* a policeman. A costermonger told Henry

Costermongers loved to use the secret language of back-slang

Mayhew, author of the study *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851): 'I likes a top o' reeb.' Almost all the words have become obsolete, except *yob*, which is, of course, 'boy' backwards.

Back-slang was gradually abandoned by the costers and replaced by rhyming slang. The butchers took it up, and by the twentieth century back-slang was regarded as entirely their secret language.

What is it about butchers that makes them so secretive? Butchers in Paris and Lyon developed their own secret language in the mid nineteenth century as well. It was a much more complicated slang called *loucherbem*, closer to Pig Latin than back-slang. The first consonant of each word is moved to the end, a suffix such as -em is added and the letter L is added to the start of the new word. Thus *boucher* (butcher in French) becomes *loucherbem*.

Cockney Rhyming Slang

Secret languages are the stuff of childhood. Generations of schoolboys have thrilled to the mystery of writing notes in invisible ink and speaking in a code which no one outside their inner circle of chums understood. Pig Latin was a language game beloved of schoolchildren. It wasn't really Latin (just sounded a bit like it) and involved putting the first letter of a word at the end and then adding -ay. 'Owhay oday ouyay oday?' (How do you do?'). Pig Greek – or ubbi dubbi – is another one; also aigy paigy, Double Dutch and gibberish.

These secret languages are essentially games, abandoned in adulthood. But there are other ingenious, covert languages which have developed within a group or a community, often to hide illicit practices or allow coded talk about others without them knowing; in some instances, they've spread to become part of the general vocabulary. The argot which we are all most familiar with – especially through TV shows like *Minder*, *Only Fools and Horses* and *EastEnders* – is Cockney rhyming slang.

Del Boy carrying on the Cockney tradition

Much more fun than Pig Latin, rhyming slang is a glorious feast of linguistic gymnastics, peculiar to the English language and prevalent in the East End of London in the second half of the nineteenth century. The construction involves replacing a word (let's say 'feet') with a rhyming phrase ('plates of meat') and then dropping the rhyming part of the phrase ('meat' goes, 'plates' stays). In practical terms it means that 'feet' become 'plates' and unless you're familiar with the rhyme, the original word is hidden.

Have a go at translating this:

I had a Jane down the frog with a septic, his trouble and their dustbin lid. Would you Adam and Eve it? My old china was wearing a syrup under his titfer, a whistle, a Peckham and a pair of churches.

Translation: I had a wander (*Jane Fonda*) down the road (*frog and toad*) with an American (*septic tank* – Yank), his wife (*trouble and strife*) and their kid (*dustbin lid*). Would you believe (*Adam and Eve*) it? My old mate (*china plate*) was wearing a wig (*syrup of fig*) under his hat (*tit for tat*), a suit (*whistle and flute*), a tie (*Peckham Rye*) and a pair of shoes (*church pews*).

No one knows for sure when and where rhyming slang originated, but it was certainly flourishing in early Victorian England. Henry Mayhew noted: 'The new style of cadgers' [street sellers'] cant is all done on the rhyming principle.' John Camden Hotton informs us that rhyming slang originated in the 1840s with 'the wandering tribes of London'. Hotton is adamant that the rhyming wasn't invented by costermongers – who took up the rhyming slang later – but by two other types of street traders.

> *There exists in London a singular tribe of men, known amongst the 'fraternity of vagabonds' as Chaunters and Patterers. Both classes are great talkers. The first sing or chaunt through the public thoroughfare ballads – political and humorous – carols, dying speeches, and the various other kinds of gallows and street literature. The second deliver street orations on grease-removing compounds, plating powders, high polishing blacking, and the thousand and more wonderful pennyworths that are retailed to gaping mobs from a London kerb stone.*
>
> *They are quite a distinct tribe from the costermongers; indeed, amongst tramps, they term themselves the 'harristocrats of the streets,' and boast that they live by their intellects. Like the costermongers, however, they have a secret tongue or Cant speech, known only to each other.*
>
> *This cant . . . is known in Seven Dials [a notoriously disreputable part of London] as the Rhyming Slang, or the substitution of words and sentences which rhyme with other words intended to be kept secret.*

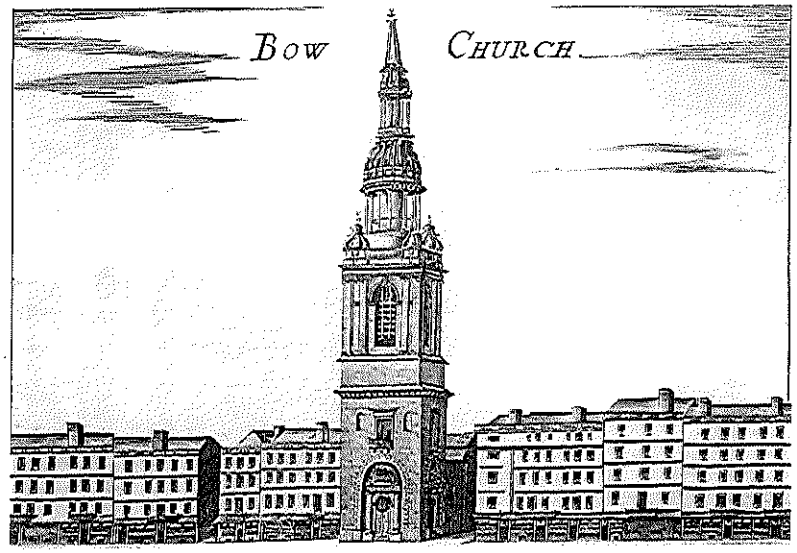
Hotton's *Glossary* included rhyming slang still in currency today: *apples and pairs* – stairs; *elephant's trunk* – drunk; *pen and ink* – stink; *mince pies* – eyes; *macaroni* – a pony; *sugar and honey*

– money; other ones, like *Duke of York* – take a walk; and *Top of Rome* – home, have disappeared.

It was called Cockney rhyming slang but really it was a Londoners' slang and especially working-class Londoners. The word Cockney is thought to have derived from *cockeney*, a fourteenth-century word used to describe both a misshapen egg (hence a cock's egg) and a spoilt, 'cockered' child. By the early seventeenth century, the two meanings of being odd and being spoilt appear to have merged into a contemptuous name used by country folk for a soft, puny townsperson, typically a Londoner. Another derivation for the word was suggested by Frances Grose in his *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*:

> *A citizen of London, being in the country, and hearing a horse neigh, exclaimed, Lord! how that horse laughs! A by-stander telling him that noise was called Neighing, the next morning, when the cock crowed, the citizen to shew he had not forgot what was told him, cried out, Do you hear how the Cock Neighs?*

So a Cockney was a Londoner in general, or more specifically, according to John Minsheu in his *Ductor in linguas* (Guide into Tongues) dictionary in 1617, 'one born within the sound of Bow bell, that is in the City of London'. The Bow Bells were in the church of St Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside, an area that today is largely non-residential. The bombing of the East End of London during the Second World War meant the migration of huge numbers of traditional Cockneys to the new towns on the outskirts of Greater London. You're more likely to hear old-style Cockney rhyming slang in Basildon or Harlow in Essex and in parts of Hertfordshire than in Cheapside or Whitechapel. In turn, waves of immigration into London's East End – most recently Bengali – have provided a melting pot mixture of different languages. East end teenagers today talk about *skets* not *eggs and kippers* (slippers) or *creps* rather than *Gloria Gaynors* (trainers). And life isn't so much *Robin Hood* (good) as *Nang!* Years before the traditional Cockney-speakers were displaced to the London outskirts, Cockney rhyming slang was



Born within the sound of Bow Bells and you are officially a Cockney

spreading itself throughout Britain and beyond. Observers commented on how the language of the first convict settlers to Australia was that of Cockney London, and the exuberance of today's Australian slang has undoubtedly been influenced by it. In Britain, some of the words and phrases have lodged so firmly in our everyday language that we'd be hard put to recognize them as original rhyming slang.

Rabbit on (*rabbit and pork* – talk)

Use your loaf (*loaf of bread* – head)

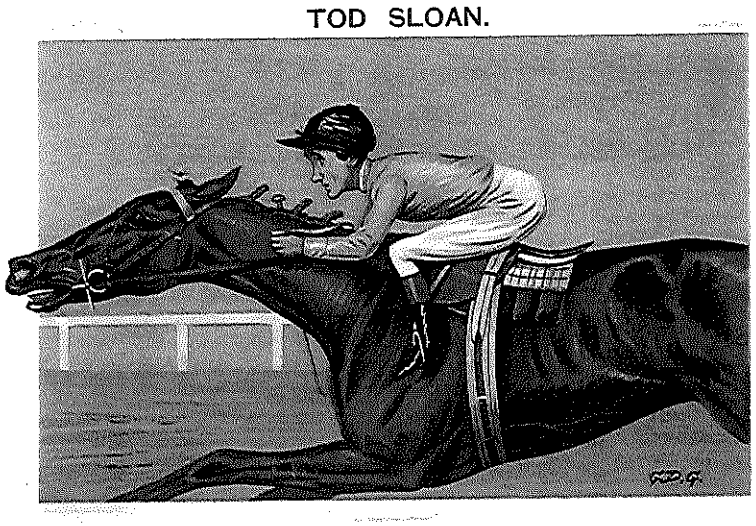
Have a butchers (*butcher's hook* – look)

Don't say a dicky bird (word)

Blow a raspberry (*raspberry tart* – fart)

Tell a porky (*pork pie* – lie)

On your tod (*Tod Sloan* – alone)



Tod Sloan, the American jockey, introduced the 'monkey crouch'

There are snippets of social history hidden in some of these phrases. Tod Sloan was an American jockey who became an international celebrity at the turn of the twentieth century. He introduced the 'monkey crouch' forward seat riding position to horse racing and rode British winners at Newmarket and Ascot. The Broadway hit song 'Yankee Doodle Boy' was about him: 'Yankee Doodle came to London, just to ride the ponies . . .'

Sometimes with slang, the more people that understand it, the more you have to change it. If they work out that *china plate* means 'mate', you drop the rhyme word and just say *china*. Or if they unravel what to kick someone in the *cobblers awls* means, then you shorten it to *cobblers*. Or the *orchestras* (stalls). Or the *Niagras* (Falls). The rhyming slang for 'arse' is especially confusing. The first rhyme was *bottle and glass*, then simply *bottle*, then *Aristotle* and finally *aris*. This is occasionally extended further to *April* (in Paris) and you're left with a sentence like 'She fell on her *April*.'

Rhyming slang words can be passed down through the generations or they might be hugely popular for a few years and then be overtaken by the next fad. Some words depended on knowledge of

London. If someone threatened to kick you in the *Hampsteads*, you had to be familiar with Hampstead Heath to know it meant teeth. People still talk about going to the barbers to get their *barnet* cut. This word for hair has been around since at least the 1850s and comes from the popular Barnet Fair in north London. *Hampton Wick* (near Teddington) is rhyming slang for prick or dick and is often just *Hampton* or *wick*. *He gets on my wick* – meaning he's annoying – is one of those innocuous phrases that's actually rather rude. Spike Milligan managed to introduce a character called Captain Hugh Jampton into a *Goon Show* episode in 1958. The BBC banned a further appearance when they worked it out. The *Carry On* films had a field day. *Lord Hampton of Wick* appeared in *Carry on Henry*, and the nurse and doctor *Carry On* films were based at Long Hampton Hospital. And the first of the serials within *The Two Ronnies* TV show was called 'Hampton Wick'.

By the mid twentieth century many rhyming slang expressions used the names of contemporary personalities, especially actors and performers. Ruby Murray was a Belfast-born singer, popular in the 1950s at the same time as Indian restraurants were becoming widespread. So today her name *Ruby* lives on as rhyming slang for a curry. 'I'm going for a *Ruby*.' One of the rhyming slangs for deaf is *Mutt and Jeff* or simply *mutton*. I wonder how many people using the phrase know it comes from characters in an American comic strip created by Bud Fisher in 1907. Your grandmother might have got new *Teds* or *Ted Heaths* (false teeth). Or, referring to a more recent personality, you could say she's got a nice pair of *Penelopes* (Keith). A pair of knickers are *Alan Whickers* or simply *Alans*, as in the film *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*: 'All right, all right, keep your Alans on!'

Rhyming slang can evolve more than one meaning. Woe betide if you have a name that rhymes easily. Actor Gregory Peck's name was both 'neck' – get that down your *Gregory* (or as characters in the *Minder* TV show were constantly urging ,'Let's get a Ruby down your Gregory'), and 'cheque' – I'm going to cash a *Gregory*. It can also be used in the plural, as in wearing my *gregs* – 'specs'. A *Melvyn*, from the arts broadcaster Melvyn Bragg, has been used at various times to mean 'shag', 'fag' and 'slag'. A *Melvyn* is not to be confused with a *melvin*, which, according to the *Historical Dictionary of American*

Slang, means 'pulling someone's pants up sharply to wedge them between the buttocks'.

Television and films, the internet, texting and tweeting, together with a much greater racial and cultural mixing pot, ensure that most of the new rhyming slangs are ephemeral, discarded as quickly as the next celebrity or fad comes around. And yet, to mix a metaphor, amidst the chaff there are some gems. A market stall holder in London's Soho was heard to say, 'Oh, it's the tourists . . . I'm not Listerine but they get on my goat.' Rhyming slang for American is *septic* (from septic tank – Yank). So if you're *Listerine* (a mouth-wash), you're *anti-septic*, i.e. anti-American.

Some Cockney cabbies talk about how the Cockney they grew up speaking is gradually fading away.

'Well, we're losing it, aren't we? But then, our way of life is changing, isn't it? See, we used to have stall holders, in the markets, and their children would come up and they would learn the patter, and that was handed down. Well, now them children are going to university or whatever because they always try and do better for their children. You've only gotta look at your kids. Your kids are picking up the hip-hop type of language. As much as you try, when they're at school they're picking up the various patters. In the same way we used to, 'cos it was always Cockney that was spoken.'

One cabbie says his children still recognize some Cockney rhyming words but, as all slang does, they've evolved. So instead of asking his daughter whether she's having a *tin*, meaning laugh (tin bath), he'll ask her whether she's having a *bubble*. The old tin bath isn't around any more.

These cabbies reckon their rhyming acts as a sort of safety valve, helping to take the edge off offensive or racist labelling. They describe their fares as *seppos* (Yanks) or *tiddly winks* (Chinks), or *fourbytwos*, *tinlids* or *front wheel skids* (Jews and Yids).

'A Cockney has got a cheerful way about him. So when he's saying it, it's not in an offensive manner, it's in good fun, it's always with a good humour. It's always with a smile on his face.'

Rhyming slang is a bit like one of those minced oaths. We know we can't say the taboo word so we come up with a cheerful alternative which makes us smile. Most of the time.

Polari

In rhyming slang a gay man might be a *ginger* (beer – queer) or *King Lear* (queer again) or *iron* (hoof – poof). But gay men know all about secret codes themselves. Back in the 1960s, homosexuality was still a crime, and gay men in London used a secret language to identity and secretly communicate with each other. The language was called Polari and it had a vocabulary of about twenty key words, mainly describing people's looks, clothes and sexual availability: *bona* for good; *omi* man; *palone* woman; *omi-palone* gay man; *eek* face (from back-slang *ecaf*); *fabulosa* wonderful; *riah* hair (back-slang); *vada* to look; *naff* not available for fucking; *camp* effeminate (also from Kamp, acronym for 'known as male prostitute'); *zhoosh* to fix or tidy.

Gay journalist Peter Burton included an example of Polari in his autoboigraphy *Parallel Lives*.

> *As feely ommes . . . we would zhoosh our riah, powder our eeks, climb into our bona new drag, don our batts and troll off to some bona bijou bar. In the bar we would stand around with our sisters, vada the bona cartes on the butch omme ajax who, if we fluttered our ogle riahs at him sweetly, might just troll over to offer a light for the unlit vogue clenched between our teeth.*
>
> *(As young men . . . we would style our hair, powder our faces, climb into our fabulous new clothes, don our shoes and wander/walk off to some fabulous little bar. In the bar we would stand around with our gay companions, look at the fabulous genitals on the butch man near by who, if we fluttered our eyelashes at him sweetly, might just wander/walk over to offer a light for the unlit cigarette clenched between our teeth.)*

The origins of Polari are unclear. It's a linguistic mongrel, borrowing words from Occitan, Romany, Shelta (the cant of the Irish tinkers), Yiddish, back-slang and rhyming slang – all interspersed with words of Italian origin. One theory is that Polari – from the

Italian *parlare*, to talk – was the lingua franca of seafarers and traders around the Mediterranean ports in the Middle Ages. It made its way to Britain via travelling circuses and fairgrounds and was used widely on board British Merchant Navy ships.

Between the 1930s and 1970s, Polari was used in theatres and private gay drinking clubs, especially in London. In 1965, Polari came to the attention of a much wider audience with the arrival of a new BBC radio comedy programme, *Round the Horne*. More than 9 million people tuned in every Sunday afternoon to listen to the sketches, one of which featured two camp out-of work actors called Julian and Sandy, played by Hugh Paddick and Kenneth Williams. Their torrent of double entendre and innuendo included Polari terms which would have sounded like gibberish to most people but which regular listeners learned to decipher. The host, Kenneth Horne, would visit a new enterprise each week – Bona Pets or Bona Ballet or Bona Books or something – and enter saying, 'Hello, is there anybody here?' He'd be greeted by the camp duo. 'Hello, I'm Julian, and this is my friend Sandy.' 'Oh, Mr Horne, how *bona* [good] to *vada* [see] your *dolly* [pretty] old *eek* [face].'

In the sketch 'Bona Law', Barry Took and Marty Feldman included the line: 'Omes and palones of the jury, vada well at the eek of the poor ome who stands before you, his lallies trembling' ('Men and women of the jury, look well at the face of the poor man who stands before you, his legs trembling'). Barry Took explained later that he had learned some of the Polari words during his time as a music-hall comic in the West End. He said Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddick were always speaking Polari to one another and would sometimes adlib the sketches to include more Polari.

Some of the material was really quite risqué. In one episode Sandy refers to Julian's skill at the piano as 'a miracle of dexterity at the cottage upright'. Only the Polari cognoscenti were likely to have known that a *cottage* was the term for a public toilet where men met for sex and *upright* meant an erection.

By the end of the 1960s, Polari was in decline – partly as a result of the decriminalization of homosexuality and the advent of gay liberation and in part, no doubt, to the success of *Round the Horne*. The secret language was no longer secret. Indeed, some Polari and

words have entered into mainstream language: *butch*, *naff*, *queen*, *mince*, *camp*, *drag*, *fab*, *dishy*, *butch*, *bijou*, *savvy*, *scarper*, *tat* and *bevvy*.

Polari may not be used as a secret language by the gay community any more but it is seen as playing an important part in gay cultural history. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an order of gay and lesbian nuns and monks, translated the King James Bible into Polari in 2003 and posted it on the internet.

> *In the beginning Gloria created the heaven and the earth.*
>
> *And the earth was nanti form, and void; and munge was upon the eke of the deep. And the fairy of Gloria trolled upon the eke of the aquas.*
>
> *And Gloria cackled, Let there be sparkle: and there was sparkle*
>
> *And Gloria vardad the sparkle, that it was bona: and Gloria medzered the sparkle from the munge.*

Round the Horne, *full of risqué Polari and double entendre*

Aussie Slang

It's impossible to write about the uses and abuses of language without mentioning Australia – for it is here we find some of the most playful, colourful, sometimes vulgar uses of the English language. If Shakespeare walked this earth today, he'd feel a lot more at home in Streaky Bay, South Australia, than Stratford-upon-Avon. From *budgie smugglers* (brief swimming trunks) to *liquid laughs* (vomit), the Australians do seem to have an awful lot of fun with their words.

When the first Europeans set foot on the island, there were perhaps 300 native Aboriginal languages. Today, that stands at around seventy, and most of them are endangered. English is the dominant language, spoken by 99.8 per cent of the population. From the moment in 1770 when Captain Cook and his botanist Sir Joseph Banks asked the local Aborigines for the name of that strange hopping animal, the Australian language has been lending, borrowing, developing and inventing words. The animal was noted down as '*gangurru*'; the myth that the *gangurru* reply in fact meant 'I don't understand you' has, alas, been debunked. The locals were simply describing a particular species of kangaroo.

Captain Cook claimed Australia for the British Crown and almost immediately this outpost on the other side of the world was turned into a penal colony. Around 160,000 male and female convicts from England and Ireland were shipped to Australia between 1788 and 1868 (when transportation ended); their numbers were swelled by the wool and gold rushes of the 1850s.

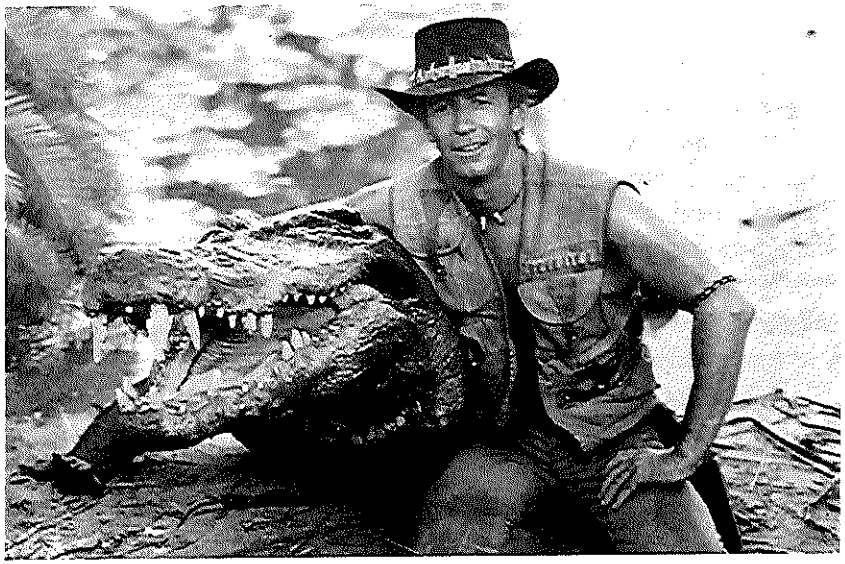
Author Kathy Lette grew up a surfer girl in Sydney but moved to London in her twenties. She points out that the Australians have spent years suffering the jibes of being a nation of convicts.

'A lot of English people see Australians as a recessive gene, sort of the Irish of the Pacific. They can't believe that they sent all the convicts out to the sun while they stayed there in the rain. My grandmother told me something fantastic when I was leaving for England, because sometimes the English can have a condescension chromosome about Australians. She said to me, "Ah Kath, you can't possibly go and live in London, that's where all those terrible convicts come from."'

Soon after the arrival of the first immigrants, a distinct accent began to emerge. One theory about the lack of lip movement in Aussie-speak is that the European arrivistes had to learn to open their mouths as little as possible when they talked to keep the flies out.

Observers described the language of the early nineteenth century as being heavily influenced by the rhyming slang of the Cockney London convicts. In 1827 Peter Cunningham, a Scottish convict ship surgeon, reported in his book *Two Years in New South Wales* that the native white Australians spoke with a distinctive accent and vocabulary: 'This is accounted for by the number of individuals from London and its vicinity . . . that have become residents in the colony and thus stamped the language of the rising generation with their unenviable peculiarity.'

Today there are three broad layers of social accents. Cultivated British English, which is spoken by around 10 per cent of the population (think actor Geoffrey Rush); a broad working-class accent (Steve Irwin); and general Australian, spoken by the majority (Kylie Minogue, Russell Crowe).



Paul Hogan in Crocodile Dundee, *1986*

There's some debate about how much of the Australian language derives from the convict immigrants and how much evolved later. The word *Pom* or *Pommie*, which the Australians use to describe the English (as in *whinging Pommie bastard*) was thought to have derived from POM – Prisoners of Her/His Majesty or Port of Melbourne, where the immigrant ships docked – or from POME – Prisoner of Mother England. Current thinking is that *Pommie* is a more recent word – as described by D. H. Lawrence in his 1923 novel *Kangaroo*.

> *Pommy is supposed to be short for pomegranate. Pomegranate, pronounced invariably pommygranate, is a near enough rhyme to immigrant, in a naturally rhyming country. Furthermore, immigrants are known in their first months, before their blood 'thins down', by their round and ruddy cheeks. So we are told.*

'Naturally rhyming country' is a most apt description, for the Australians love to play with their words: have a *Captain's* (look – from Captain James Cook); *steak and kidney* – Sydney; *dead horse* – tomato sauce. As with Cockney slang, Americans are *septic* or *seppo*. Many of the rhymes are based on popular culture. *Grundies* and *Reginalds* are undies or underpants, named after TV mogul Reg Grundy. To do a *Harold Holt* is to bolt or run away, after the Australian prime minister who disappeared while swimming. If something's a shocker, i.e. dreadfully bad, it's a *Barry Crocker* or simply a *Barry* (Barry Crocker is a popular Australian singer who sang the original *Neighbours* theme on TV).

Rhyming slang apart, some of the words and phrases are delightfully visual. Kathy Lette has made her name with her irreverent wordplay.

'I think it's something to do with our Irish heritage, because it's a love of language, there's an irreverence there, but it's often quite loquacious too.'

A beer belly becomes a *veranda*, sandwiches are a *cut lunch*, and vomit is a *technicolor yawn*. As the English reputedly don't wash, deodorant is *Pommie shower*, and if something is completely dry

it's *as dry as a Pommie's bath-towel*. If you give an *Aussie salute*, you're brushing flies away; an *ankle biter* is a small child; and *don't come the raw prawn* means 'don't play the fool with me'. Someone who is mentally unbalanced has got *candles in their top hat* or *kangaroos mad in the top paddock*. A novice surfer is a *shark biscuit*, and if something's in short supply it's *scarce as rocking-horse manure*.

And then there's the unique set of diminutives Australians use – putting *ie* or *o* at the end of a shortened word. 'We shorten everything,' says Kathy Lette, 'like *cozzie*, *mozzie*, *truckie*, *sickie*, *quickie*. It's not just because it's too hot to say the whole word, it's also because it's a way of being informal and friendly. It keeps us a bit like children . . . we haven't quite grown up.'

Other popular diminutives are *arvo* – afternoon; *smoko* – tea break; *blowie* – blowfly; *sunnies* – sunglasses; *coldie* – a beer; *snag sanga* – sausage sandwich.

The Anglo-Saxon earthiness of the language reflects a deep-seated loathing of pomposity. There's a story about the Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who was at a dinner party with a self-regarding broadsheet editor. The English editor announced to his fellow diners: 'I've met six British prime ministers, four French presidents, four American presidents and three popes and, do you know, not one of them struck me as having a first-class mind.' There was a pause around the dinner table, and then Murdoch said, 'Did it ever occur to you that they probably thought you were a bit of a dick too?'

It seems to be a defining quality of Australians that they can't let a remark like that go unchallenged. There's a characteristic which Australians call the Tall Poppy Syndrome – slang for someone with a big ego who needs to be brought back to the level of his peers through put-downs. It can be seen as a reasonable way of keeping inflated egos in check or evidence of an inferiority complex, a desire to punish anyone who sticks their head above the rest and is flamboyant or high-achieving or successful. The instinct to cut people down to size finds its most natural home among Australia's politicians, whose level of insult hurling can be breathtaking. Mark Latham, when he was leader of the opposition, called Prime Minister John

Howard an 'arselicker' and described the members of the Liberal Party front bench as a 'conga line of suckholes'.

The master of the colourful insult was former Prime Minister Paul Keating, whom Kathy Lette describes as 'having a black belt in tongue-fu'. Nicknamed the Lizard of Oz, he called his opponents, variously, 'gutless spivs', 'foul-mouthed grubs', 'painted, perfumed gigolos' and 'simply a shiver looking for a spine to run up'. Many of his insults were directed at John Howard, then leader of the opposition, whom he dubbed 'brain-damaged', 'mangy maggot' and 'the little desiccated coconut'. It makes Denis Healey's 'like being savaged by a dead sheep' seem quite tame.

Some of the most well known of the Australian euphemisms – the ones that have entered the British English language – flow from the pen of one particular Aussie – satirist and actor Barry Humphries. Humphries, who achieved worldwide fame with his alter ego, Dame Edna Everage, travelled to London in the 1960s and wrote a comic strip for the satirical magazine *Private Eye*. 'The Adventures of Barry McKenzie', illustrated by Nicholas Garland, chronicled the exploits in London of Bazza, an uncouth, loud-mouthed, beer-swilling 'ocker'. Bazza, writes Humphries, initiated readers 'into the mysteries of Australian colloquial speech'. He spoke a 'synthetic Australian compounded of schoolboy, Service, old-fashioned proletarian and even made-up slang'.

In fact, Humphries created so many of his own made-up euphemisms that have entered the vernacular that it's almost impossible to say what's invented and what isn't. Most of the expressions relate to bodily functions and sex. *Multicoloured yawn, pointing Percy at the porcelain, siphoning the python, one-eyed trouser snake, dining at the* Y, *shaking hands with the wife's best friend, sinking the sausage.* Some phrases, like *chunder* (to vomit) and *up shit creek*, were dying out until Humphries resurrected them.

Political satirist John Clarke explains: 'Barry is hugely observant but he's much more creative than your normal observer. So what he's done is enriched this series of observations by making the story better than he actually heard. So he's a Shakespeare, he's added to the language.'

The comic strip was banned in Australia as, according to Customs

Barry Humphries and Barry Crocker in The Adventures of Barry McKenzie, *1972*

and Excise, it 'relied on indecency for its humour'. Subsequent made-in-Australia feature films based on the book – with Barry 'Shocker' Crocker playing the lead – were, however, supported by the Australian government. In fact, the prime minster, Gough Whitlam, made an appearance in the 1974 film *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*, where he granted a damehood to McKenzie's aunt, Edna Everage.

Barry Humphries and a new generation of Australian writers and comics continue to keep the language alive with colourful imagery, but there is a sense that – bit by bit – Australian slang is under threat.

John Clarke agrees.

'It's very seldom that someone like Barry Humphries comes along, and I think somebody who can infuse the language with an enormous amount of imaginative metaphor and imagery that people will pick up is pretty unusual. My impressions of young people is that they are using the language of the internet and the social networking sites

a lot more, and that language is a kind of shorthand in some respects.'

It's a case of Save our Slang, says Kathy Lette.

'The American influence is huge, because all the kids are watching the American programmes. So they've suddenly started talking like they're in the New York ghetto – "see you later, dude" and all that stuff. It's a real push to protect our slang, because we've actually realized that it is something quite precious and colourful and historic.'

I ♥ Slang

Thousands of new words are added to the English language every year. No one knows just how many, but according to the word-tracking Global Language Monitor, a new word is created every ninety-eight minutes. It's an extraordinary thought, especially since whole minority languages are disappearing at a similar breathtaking pace. What's undoubtedly true is that the influence of television and films, computers and social networking in the last decade has meant

The first graphical symbol to enter the Oxford English Dictionary

the greatest explosion of vocabulary since Shakespeare. *Texting, Twitter, blog, memory stick, download, carbon footprint, 24/7* and *9/11, ground zero, bling, chav, credit crunch* . . . there's a seemingly endless list of words which we use on a daily basis today which simply did not exist a decade or so ago. Our language is evolving and expanding on a global scale like never before.

New entries to the 2011 online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* include: ♥ to heart – meaning to love (e.g. I ♥ New York) – the first graphical symbol in the OED's history; *cream-crackered* – rhyming slang for knackered, i.e. exhausted, *lashed* for drunk, *fnarr fnarr* for a lecherous snigger, *dot-bomb* meaning a failed internet company and *couch surfing*, 'the practice of spending the night on other people's couches in lieu of permanent housing'. *Tragic* has a new, twenty-first-century meaning: 'a boring or socially inept person, especially a person who pursues a solitary interest with obsessive dedication'. The new entry *wag* is defined as an acronym for 'the wives and girlfriends of any group of men, especially celebrities or sportsmen', first mentioned in a *Sunday Telegraph* report in 2002 about the England football team's partners; according to the *OED*, '*Wag* is notable for the extremely fast journey from its introductions to the language to its use as usual English vocabulary.' *Muffin top* enters the dictionary as 'a protuberance of flesh about the waistband of a tight pair of trousers'. Although many of the words are computer and social networking jargon, television has influenced our everyday language as well. One TV programme in particular, *The Simpsons*, has created a raft of popular words and phrases. This hugely popular animated series about a dysfunctional American family has been on air since 1989 and, according to Mark Libermann, director of the Linguistic Data Consortium at the University of Pennsylvania, 'has apparently taken over from Shakespeare and the Bible as our culture's greatest source of idioms, catchphrases and sundry other textual allusions'.

D'oh, the grunt uttered by Homer Simpson, is the cartoon's most popular neologism. *Doh* without the apostrophe entered the *OED* in 2001 as 'expressing frustrations at the realisation that things have turned out badly or not as planned or that one has just said or done something foolish'. *Meh*, meaning 'whatever' or 'boring', is another

Is Homer Simpson the new Shakespeare?

Simpsons expression that has become particularly popular in the lexicon of web conversations. The *Collins English Dictionary* included it in 2008, giving as an example 'The Canadian election was so *meh*'; it's not in the *OED* – the dictionary's new words editor says it hasn't quite yet passed into 'widespread unselfconscious usage' – but he's keeping a 'meh' file. Other popular expressions include *lupper* (a calorie-laden meal in between lunch and supper) and the insult *eat my shorts!* In one episode the writers included two nonsense words, *embiggen* – to enlarge – and *cromulent*, meaning fine. 'He's embiggened that role with his cromulent performance,' says Principal Skinner. Both words were so convincing that *cromulent* has been included in various slang dictionaries and *embiggen* was used in a scientific paper on string theory: 'there is a competing effect which can overcome the desire of the antiD3s to embiggen, namely their attraction towards the wrapped D5s'. Most cromulent.

Textese

The mobile phone and Facebook have become so much a part of personal communication that a whole new shorthand language has developed. Purists dismiss it as a sort of viral disease of *GR8*s and *4U*s which is wrecking language with its lazy spellings and impenetrable acronyms. Yet language needs to be expedient, and abbreviations or acronyms can be jolly useful. We happily talk about *ASAP* or *DIY* or *BYOB* (bring your own bottle). So the texter or the Twitterer or the Facebooker, who needs to be speedy and save money by using as few letters as possible and avoid finger strain, abbreviates words – often in highly ingenuous ways.

Some of these abbreviations are fairly functional: *GR8* (great), *BRB* (be right back), *ATB* (all the best) and *HRU* (how are you?). Some bits of textese have become so widespread that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* they've officially entered the English language. New entries for 2011 are *OMG* (Oh my God) and *LOL* (laughing out loud), joining *IMHO* (in my humble opinion), *TMI* (too much information) and *BFF* (best friends forever). Textese can be playful, personal – *MWAH* to suggest the sound of sending a kiss and *RME* for 'rolling my eyes'. The really interesting words are those which are stepping out of the text zone and entering spoken language. *LOL* is now used as a noun for laugh – *lol* – or a verb – *to lol. JK* for 'just joking' is added at the end a sentence: 'I forgot your birthday . . . JK!'. *Soz!* has become a lighthearted 'sorry'.

Keypad symbols can portray moods in texts – although they do require a certain repositioning of the mobile phone to get the full effect:

:) (happy),
:((sad)
:-D (laughing)

If you want to describe your reaction to something funny, you might send a text combining symbol and abbreviation :)E2E, meaning 'grinning ear to ear'.

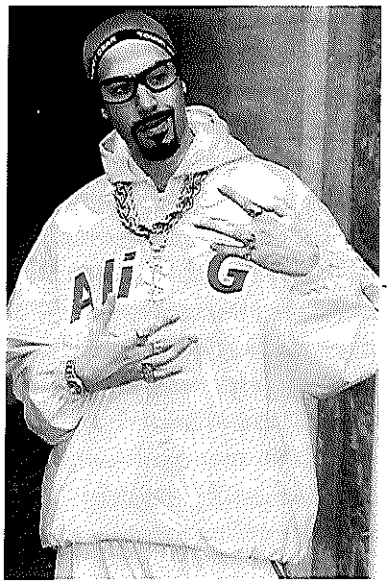
Textese isn't limited to youth – after all, everyone is looking for ways to send messages as quickly and cheaply as possible. A competition for a texting Poet Laureate awarded second prize to this love poem:

O hart tht sorz
My luv adorz
He mAks me liv
He mAks me giv
Myslf 2 him
As my luv porz

The ode to her husband was texted by a sixty-eight-year-old grandmother from Lancashire.

Teenglish (or Romeo and His Fit Bitch Jules)

What's fascinating about the way language evolves is the increasing influence young people have on it. Just as from the 1960s onwards a youth culture has dominated music and fashion, so playfulness and experimentation in language has become the preserve of the young. In today's multicultural Britain, the language of the school and the street is influenced by West African, Afro-Caribbean, Asian and black American as well as urban British. Take the word *bling* (or sometimes *bling-bling*), which originated in American hip-hop culture to mean ostentatious clothing or jewellery, possibly imitating the clashing sound of jewellery or light reflecting off it. *Bling* was taken up by young people in the UK at the beginning of the twenty-first century, adopted by an older generation within a few years and is being dropped now as old hat by the younger generation. Or *nang*, a word meaning excellent or great, which seems to have spread in the last decade from Bangladeshi communities in the East End of London to other ethnic groups. It's thought to be from a Bengali expression for a naked woman.



Ali G: 'voice of da yoof'

The opening line of *Romeo and Juliet* was translated into London slang by satirical author Martin Baum in *Romeo and His Fit Bitch Jules*: 'Verona was de turf of de feuding Montagues and de Capulet families. And coz they was always brawling and stuff, de prince of Verona told them to cool it or else they was gonna get well mashed if they carried on larging it with each other.' Baum, like the fictional TV character Ali G (hip-hop obsessed 'voice of da yoof'), uses Jafaican, a mixture of Jamaican, Asian and Cockney. Linguists refer to it as multicultural London English, a patios which is increasingly the language of young, inner-London, working-class people and has introduced words like *bare* for 'very' ('I'm bare hungry'), *peng* for 'attractive' or 'hot', *yoot* for child or children and *yard* for home.

Many of these words spread out from London to the rest of the country via television or music or Facebook, although a recent unscientific but revealing BBC survey of teenage slang around Britain showed huge regional variations. Teenagers were given the following sentences to translate into their own local slang:

John's girlfriend is really pretty. But she got mad with him the other day because he wanted to hang out with his friends rather than take her to the cinema. She got really angry and stormed off. It was very funny.

Teenagers from a school in west London put it into their own street slang:

John's chick is proper buff but she switched on her man the other day cos he wanted to jam with his bred'rins instead of taking her out to the cinema. She was proper vexed and dust out. It was bare jokes.

Compare the London slang with that of a school in Keighley, West Yorkshire:

Jonny's bird is proper fit and she got in a right beef the other day cos he'd rather chill with his mates than go to the cinema. She got stressed and did one. It was quality haha.

And a school in Swansea in Wales:

John's missus is flat out bangin'. But she was tampin' the other day 'cause he bombed her out for the boys instead of going to the cinema. She started mouthing. It was hilarious.

Use of the word *innit* – probably British Asian in origin – is increasingly commonplace amongst young people. In its simplest form it means 'isn't it?' – 'That's right, innit?' – but its usage is being expanded in a rather interesting way. In linguistics, phrases like 'isn't it?' at the end of statements are called tag questions. English has lots of them. 'You'd better go now, hadn't you?' 'Oh I must, must I?' 'That's quite a wind blowing, isn't it?' Other languages often have just one fixed phrase or invariant tag. In French, it's *n'est-ce pas*?, in German, *nicht wahr*?, in Spanish, *¿verdad? Innit*, according to some linguists, is being used by young people as an invariant tag and may end up providing English with the *n'est-ce* pas it lacks. It's quite a thought, innit?

Ins and Outs

Slang and jargon serve a similar purpose – to separate the 'in' from the 'out' group. And nowhere are these definitions more important than in school. Berkeley High is a state school in the San Francisco Bay Area with over 3,000 students. It's unusual in having a large, educated, middle-class catchment mainly from Berkeley University as well as many lower-paid immigrant families. It's a melting pot of races – white, Afro-American, Latino, Asian and lots of mixes in between; a veritable Tower of Babel. So the desire to establish a common but exclusive slang vocabulary is strong. The students even compiled their own dictionary of slang, which, when published in 2004, became a local bestseller. Much of the language comes from African-American hip-hop, but Chicano (Mexican English), Jewish, Hindi, punk and sports cultures also contribute words and expressions.

One of the students, Connor, explains: 'Berkeley is one of the most diverse places you'll ever be. We have so much slang because we have every ethnic group, we have every social class. It's the only public school in Berkeley, so everybody that's not in a private school is here in Berkeley High. So the slang is different, and that's why there's so much of it . . . We have all the language and we use it all.'

The current students dismiss the 2004 dictionary as being already outdated; school slang has moved on. One girl describes with great excitement how words change overnight; a random expression appears, and suddenly everyone's using it.

'It can change in one day. Like one hour to the next, it can be just a new word . . . Someone can know someone and says, "Oh this isn't new," and then someone else says, "I've never heard that before in my life." That's how weird it is because it's such a huge range of people.'

'But eventually it will become nationwide.'

'Yeah, it becomes big. So it just travels.'

'I know people who go to St Mary's [College High School in Albany, California], and I was with them when they started a word and then like a month later I heard it at Berkeley High. So they made

up the word, they spread it around St Mary's, someone hung out with someone at St Mary's, heard it and started saying it here.'

Changing schools can be like moving to a foreign country, 'literally like trying to learn a new language'.

Social networking – Facebook and Twitter – can speed up the process: slang can spread like a disease.

'Yeah, but slang's not a disease!' shouts one.

'It's a positive thing,' says another. 'It's like language is gonna evolve one way or another.'

'Language does not have a right and wrong. Language is just how people communicate.'

These teenagers derive real pleasure from their language, constantly creating or borrowing new words, rejecting old ones. The students give a quick run-down on current school slang.

'When some people say you're cool, they say, "you got swag".'

'If I say "swag points", it means that you just said something hella cool.'

Hella puts emphasis on everything – that girl's *hella* pretty. *Hella* has become so much part of North Californian vocabulary that scientists have been lobbying for it to join the likes of *mega* and *giga* as an internationally accepted prefix for a number with twenty-seven zeros.

Arkotalko, apparently, is a brand new word for awkward. A *scrub* is a loser and a *cuddy* is a friend, as is *cuzzo*, *homie* and *dog*. And if you go *hypi*, you go crazy.

The students talk about the role played by music and dance moves in the spread of slang words.

'There are certain words used in certain areas because there are certain dances and certain movements going off in different areas. Like when you say a "hyfi" in Oakland, they call it "the hyfi woman" and then in LA, it was a dance called "jerking". And that was a major thing in LA. People still did it in different areas but it's major areas where things start and where they're most popular.'

'It can start anywhere. Even if it's started in some weird town in Ohio, it's all about the song. 'Cos when you put a song on iTunes, everyone in the world can hear it. So that's kind of just how it spreads.'

Hip-hop and Rap

Pop culture from the early twentieth century onwards has injected countless new words and expressions into our language. As the students from Berkeley High point out, music acts as a vector for words; one of the most influential forms these days is hip-hop and rap.

Hip-hop is a style of music which started in the 1970s in the United States amongst the African-American and Jamaican-American communities of the big cities. It began with disc jockeys creating rhythmic beats by repeating small portions of songs on two turntables. This was later accompanied by rap, which is the lyrical part of hip hop, a sort of verbal rhyming chanted over the beats. Rapping is also called *MCing* or *emceeing*, short for Master of Ceremonies.

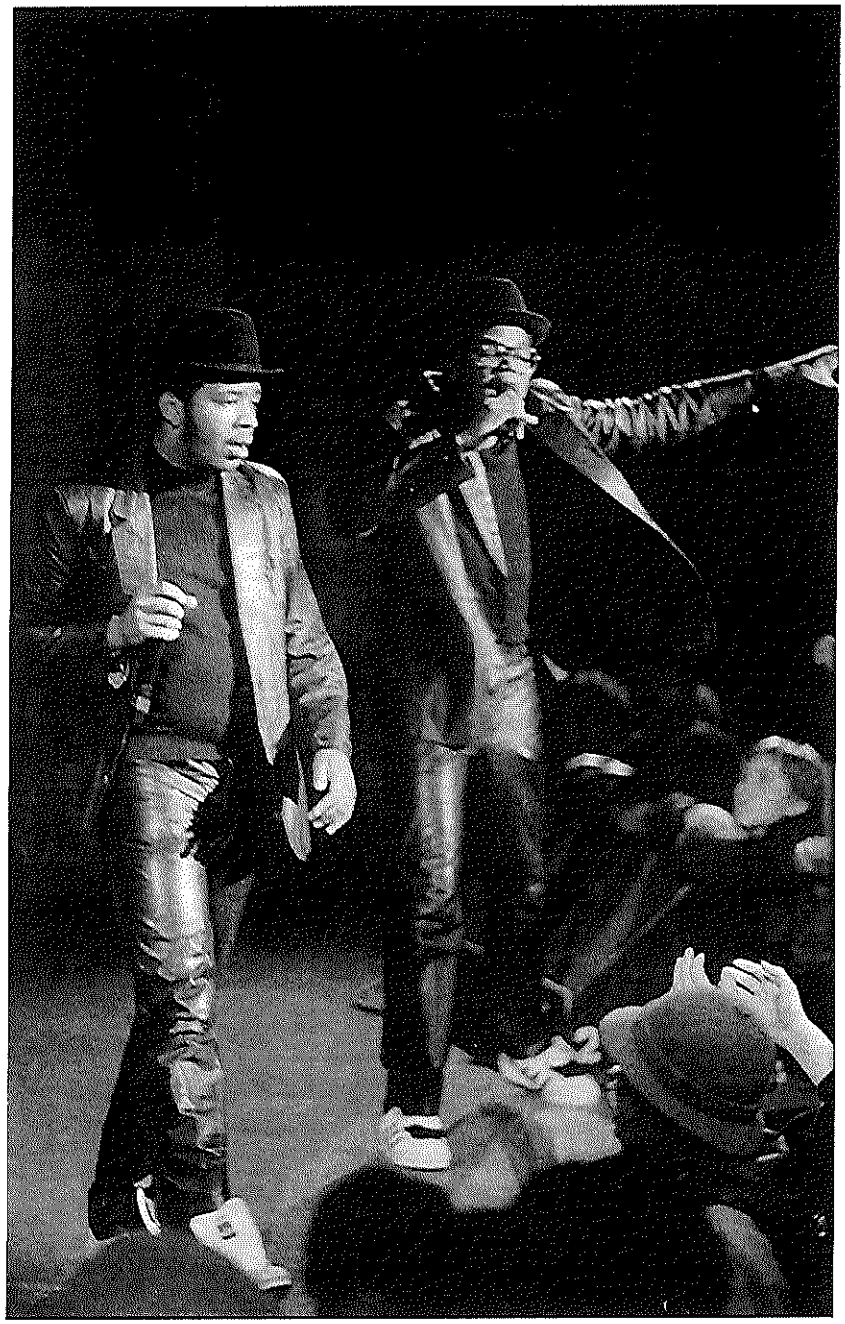
H. Samy Alim, a professor of linguistic anthropology at California's Stanford University, specializes in black language and hip-hop culture. In the company of rapping DJ Kenard 'K2' Karter, he discusses how rapping can be seen as an extension of an African-American oral tradition that stretches back through the passionate oratory of the black preachers to the generation-to-generation story-telling of the slaves.

'The word rap,' says Professor Alim, 'was used in the black community long before it was associated with music. If you could rap, that was your talking ability . . . The gift of the gab.'

'It's metaphors,' adds 'K2'. 'The hip-hoppers we see today aren't just describing their own experiences; they're describing the experiences of others.'

Professor Alim is excited by the linguistic daring of rap: 'The MCing or rapping is a verbal art form that depends on your delivery, your lyrical inventiveness, your ability to create new rhyming structures. It's something that really speaks the truth to you – a punchline that could be funny and makes people want to rewind and hear it again or a story that's really powerful and moving and gives you goose bumps and the hair on your neck stands up.'

Rappers have different styles of what's called 'flow', the rhymes and rhythms of their lyrics, with names like 'The Chant' and 'The



Hip-hop, one of the most influential music forms

Syncopated Bounce' and 'Straight Forward'. Staying on the beat is crucial as, of course, is not stumbling mid-flow; the smallest falter would ruin the whole effect. For rapping to work, it's got to be perfect, and as in most things practice makes perfect. So how does a rapper practise his art? Clearly not alone in the bedroom.

'You step up into the cipher,' explains Professor Alim. 'A cipher is like this: we're having a little cipher right now, we've got a circular group. We're talking together, we're building together. As an MC you're in a cipher of MCs, you're building on each other, sharpening your skills. It's like a lyrical testing ground, a battling ground, a stomping ground.'

Ragtime, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, soul – African-American music has always crossed over into the broader American culture, bringing with it the language of *cat* and *hip* and *funky* and *hot* and *cool* and *chill*. Clearly hip-hop has travelled the same route, its music and slang adopted by people throughout American society. Professor Alim gives an example of how a phrase which seems to start in the music world gets taken up by the broader culture and then gets degraded.

'I was in the locker room, working out in the gym, and there's a white gentleman of about sixty talking on his cellphone. He ended his conversation and he said, "All right, hit me back later." And I thought, "What? Since when . . . ?"'

It's an example of cultural appropriation which these rap experts have mixed feelings about. Here's 'K2':

'From a language perspective, hip-hop becomes the reward for describing social linguistic differences in culture or describing the experience. It's the modern-day expression for saying, "It's okay for us to have differences and we can share our experiences, and I don't have to totally get it."'

'And that,' adds Professor Alim, 'is what some people view as cultural theft. Where it's a positive borrowing, it could be a building of relationships across racial lines. But it can also be viewed within a context of racial discrimination that goes back decades and decades – I can borrow your language but I'm sure as hell not going to borrow your experience.'

Professor Alim thinks that rap's short, to-the-point sentences make

it an ideal language for Twitter and Facebook. It's one of the reasons why, from Tokyo to Timbuktu, rap has such widespread youth appeal and why, in 2011, this verbal art form is having such a profound affect on social movements around the world.

Rapping and Revolution

A rap by a twenty-one-year-old is thought to have helped bring down the Arab dictatorship of Tunisia. Hamada Ben Amor – aka El General – was arrested after he recorded and uploaded a rap protest song on to Facebook. 'Rais Le Bled' ('President, Your People') is an extraordinarily brave personal message to the now former President Ben Ali: 'My president, your country is dead / People eat garbage / Look at what is happening / Misery everywhere / Nowhere to sleep / I'm speaking for the people who suffer / Ground under feet.'

Crucially, it was recorded in Arabic, so it spread like wildfire on the social networks, from Casablanca to Cairo and beyond. Ben Amor's arrest seems to have inflamed the protests, with even more young Tunisians taking to the streets. Within a week, Ben Amor had been released, President Ben Ali had fled the country and the protest rap was being listened to throughout the Arab region.

As another Tunisian rapper, Balti, commented after the overthrow of the old regime: 'The revolution is a social movement, and rap is always talking about social issues. We come from very tough neighbourhoods and we talk in our songs about social problems such as unemployment. We feel like our voices didn't get to the regime, to the top officials, but thank God our voices were heard by the people, so we were the fuel of our revolution.'

El General, Ben Amor, emerged from jail a star. He immediately put out a new rap – an 'ode to Arab revolution' – with the lyrics 'Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, all must be liberated / Long live free Tunisia.'

As El General proves, language is a powerful tool. It should

be used with care but it shouldn't be restricted. In fact it's impossible to put a lid on language, and, by making words or expressions taboo, you give them even more power. Language should be left to grow and evolve into more colourful and creative forms for future generations.