

***Fuck* as a metaphor for male sexual aggression**

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Abstract

In contemporary American society, the relaxation of social prohibitions on vulgar language, together with what some have noted to be an advertising culture that appears to demand hyperbole, combine to create an environment where much language that was formerly impermissible is now allowed. Nevertheless, a small number of words have retained their taboo status, most notably the word fuck. The word displays our cultural ambivalence about sexual expressions and sexual activity, not only because it is considered to be obscene, but because of the question that was memorably expanded upon by comedian Lenny Bruce: If fucking is so great, then why is Fuck you one of the most offensive retorts in the English language? This paper will provide an answer to that question. I argue that the word fuck functions as a metaphor for male sexual aggression, and that, notwithstanding its increasing public use, enduring cultural models that inform our beliefs about the nature of sexuality and sexual acts preserve its status as a vile utterance that continues to inspire moral outrage.

KEYWORDS: OBSCENITIES; VERBAL AGGRESSION; SEX DIFFERENCES; METAPHORS; MALES

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Those entering the public parking lot across the street from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art late last year were confronted with a billboard-sized advertisement on the side of an adjacent building that displayed the provocative message, ‘The best nights start with a little Effen.’ The ad, for Effen® Vodka, capitalized upon a brand name that is a homophone for a hyper-colloquial form of the present participle of a common euphemism for the word *fuck* to create an attention-grabbing *double entendre* that elaborates the well-attested association between alcohol and casual sex.

Although exceedingly brief and economical, the text of the ad creates a cascade of associations, some of which are likely be directly (although unconsciously) accessed by readers, while others will in all probability occur only to linguistic scholars like this reader of the ad. The played-upon word, like the brand name, is usually rendered as *eff*, as in, e.g., *Eff off!* or *Shut the eff up*, and derives from the initial letter of the obscene word that it stands in for, which, being unprintable, is represented commonly in print as *F--- off!* or *Shut the f--- up!*¹ Of course, these uses are figurative, while the ad references the literal meaning of the sexual expletive. As such, it seems to project a male point of view (cf. Stapleton 2010:292–293), pronouncing the product to be the makings of a pleasurable occasion, and thus providing an incentive for its purchase through an appeal that is based on the (not even thinly disguised) assumption that men like ‘to fuck’. But the word also displays our cultural ambivalence about sexual expressions and sexual activity, not only because the word *fuck* is considered to be obscene, but because of the question that was memorably expanded upon by comedian Lenny Bruce: if fucking is so great, then why is *Fuck you* one of the most offensive retorts in the English language? (see Gregersen 1977:261; Pinker 2007a:27).

This paper will provide an answer to that question. I present a theoretical analysis of the word *fuck* that examines its history and usage in order to identify the cultural and linguistic sources of its obscene nature. The arguments and analysis that I present are unique and innovative. To date virtually all of the scholarly books and articles that have focused specifically on the word *fuck* have been written by men (see, e.g., Read 1934; Gregersen 1977; Lass 1995; Sheidlower 1995; McEnery and Xiao 2004; Fairman 2006; but see Murphy 2009). This article seeks to remedy this gender imbalance in the belief that a feminine perspective can add something new. I argue that the word *fuck* functions as a metaphor for male sexual aggression and that, notwithstanding its increased public use, enduring cultural models that inform our beliefs about the nature of sexuality and sexual acts preserve its status as a vile utterance that continues to inspire moral outrage.

Methodology

My analysis draws upon and applies Agha's (2007) model of the social meaning of language. Agha notes that, in every human society, certain uses of language convey very specific information about social roles and relationships, such as the speaker's relationship to the person(s) spoken to or about, or membership in an identifiable social or occupational group (2007:14). As a result, speakers often use labels like 'polite speech,' 'scientific [or technical] speech,' 'obscene speech,' or 'slang' to categorize, and implicitly evaluate, their own and others' speech (Agha 2007:145). These metalinguistic labels index widely accepted associations between speech registers and social judgments about status and role (Agha 2007:15); thus the forms of a register's repertoires may be linked to stereotypical social identities that are invoked by the use of these forms (Agha 2007:82).

Like other cultural models, registers are the product of group-relative processes of interaction that exhibit change in both form and value over time (Agha 2007:148). Accordingly, the goals of a social theory of language are to explain how specific uses of speech are interpreted in light of such value systems and, in so doing, to explain how these systems emerge and exist as cultural phenomena during a given period (Agha 2007:14–15). In the following analysis, I apply this model to what is arguably the most obscene word in the English language. I examine the sources and nature of linguistic taboo, the origin and meaning of the word *fuck*, the meaning of *Fuck you*, derivative forms of *fuck*, the taboo nature of the word, taboo and denotative meaning, and present a comparative analysis of *fuck* and its near synonyms, in order to identify the specific features of the word that result in its obscene quality.

Taboo language

The word *taboo* is of Polynesian origin, and denotes anything (linguistic or nonlinguistic) that is prohibited or forbidden (Andrews 1996:394, citing Adler 1978:34). Definitions of taboo language vary considerably; however, in general the term refers to the set of words and expressions whose use is culturally or socially proscribed (Murphy 2009:86). Moreover, although shifting social values may lessen or increase the taboo status of a particular word or phrase, there is a distinct regularity in taboo categories, both cross culturally and historically (Stapleton 2010:289–290). In English, the most common taboo categories are epithets, profanity (religious swearing), and the related categories of vulgarity and obscenity (Battistella 2005:72; see also Andrews 1996: 394; Murphy 2009:86; Stapleton 2010:289–290); the use of one or more these categories is often referred to colloquially

as ‘cursing’ (see, e.g., Gregersen 1977; Crozier 1989; Jay 1992; Battistella 2005:68) or ‘swearing’ (see, e.g., Montagu 1967; Dooling 1996; Rassin and Muris 2005:1670; Stapleton 2010:289)

Battistella notes that the terms ‘vulgarity’ and ‘obscenity’ both refer to crude terms for sexual anatomy (e.g. *prick, cunt*) and sexual or excretory functions (e.g. *fuck, shit*), ‘with the distinction between vulgarity and obscenity being primarily a matter of degree and prurience’ (2005:72). Historically, the ‘degree and prurience’ of the word *fuck* was such that Read’s (1934) article, which appears to have been the first scholarly analysis of the word *fuck* published in the United States (see Fairman 2006:16), omits any mention of the word itself (Andrews 1996:396), and refers to it obliquely as ‘the most disreputable of all English words—the colloquial verb and noun, universally known by speakers of English, designating the sex act’ (Read 1934:267). And although the present article bears witness to the fact that the word *fuck* may now be used in academic journals, it still not printed in US newspapers, which historically have refused to reproduce obscene words as a matter of journalistic policy (see Napoli and Hoeksema 2009:615).²

Given such intense social stigma, the survival and continued use of the word *fuck* may appear to be surprising (Fairman 2006:9); however, Stapleton argues that the forbidden nature of taboo language endows it with a force and potency that serve a variety of social, psychological and interpersonal functions (2010:290). It thus appears that the word continues to be used ‘not in spite of the taboo but because of it’ (Fairman 2006:18).

Evidence for the origin of the word *fuck*

The word *fuck* is a verb whose prototypical expression is exemplified by the phrases *He fucked her*, which uses it literally, and *Fuck you*, which uses it figuratively. The origin of the word is unclear. Some etymologists trace its derivation to Germanic languages, citing words like Old Dutch *ficken*, Middle High German *vicken* and German *ficken*, with meanings of ‘to knock’, ‘to strike’ and ‘to thrust’ (see discussions in Read 1934:268, n. 15; Lass 1995:99–101; Sheidlower 1995:xxiv; Fairman 2006:7). Others posit an origin in the Latin *futuere*, ‘to copulate with’, or its derivative, the French *foutre*³ (see Fairman 2006:7–8); both words were considered to be obscene (Adams 1982:188; Richlin 1992:25; Miller 2001:507). Thus identity of meaning, when combined with a strong similarity in form and the robust tradition of Latin and French loanwords in English (see, e.g., Barber *et al.* 2009:155–160, 187–191), would appear to give precedence to this view. Yet because the rules governing phonological change provide no basis to explain the shift from the ‘t’ of *futuere* and *foutre* to the ‘k’ of *fuck*,

most scholars favor the Germanic hypothesis (see Read 1934:268; Lass 1995:101–104; Sheidlower 1995:xxiv).

This view assumes that form trumps meaning, while failing to explain the mechanism by which a (not sexually specific) verb like ‘knock’ or ‘thrust’ is transformed into a gross obscenity.⁴ Moreover, while *fuck* indeed would appear to conform to the stereotype of an ‘Anglo-Saxon four-letter word’ (see Sagarin 1962:137), its relatively late appearance makes such origins less certain (see generally Ekwall 1903:XVIII): Sheidlower notes that scholars have not been able to discover a single example of *fuck* or any of its reputed Germanic cognates dated before the fifteenth century, and although he asserts that the word may have been too taboo to be recorded in the Middle Ages (1995:xxv), the literature of the period depicts a society that had little use for euphemisms. Chaucer’s (ca.1340–1400) exuberantly satirical treatment of sexuality in *The Canterbury Tales* (see commentary by Pearsall 1992:xxii--xxiii) does not stint on bawdy language, and many of the tales make use of the most enduring vulgarities in the English language, including *ers* (‘ass’), *fart*, *pisse* and *toord*, as well as a number of ‘low’ terms for sexual intercourse that are now either obsolete (*swyve*, *throng*) or have shifted their reference from sexual intromission to the organ that performs it (*prike*). Nor does he hesitate to use the word that most present-day English speakers consider to be on a par, in terms of its obscenity, with *fuck*: the word *queynte* (‘cunt’) appears in both *The Miller’s Tale* and *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*. Given the subject matter and vocabulary of *The Canterbury Tales*, the complete omission of the word *fuck* from its extended text suggests, not prudery, but the word’s nonexistence.

Of course, such evidence is at best indirect, and accordingly cannot be considered to be dispositive; thus early recorded uses of the word *fuck* may cast additional light on its origin and meaning. Some have cited as its first appearance a poem written in a mixture of Latin and English, dating to before 1500 (see, e.g., Sheidlower 1995:101; Fairman 2006:6–7). The poem satirizes the practices of the Carmelite friars of Cambridge, and contains the following line, a portion of which uses a substitution code to disguise its meaning:

Non sunt in coeli, quia gxddbov xxkxzt pg ifmk.

The decoding of the last four words by replacing each letter with the preceding letter of the alphabet⁵ yields the phrase ‘fuccant wivys of heli’; the entire sentence, when translated, reads, ‘They are not in heaven, since they fuck the wives of Ely’ (a town near Cambridge). However, the claim that this passage represents the first recorded use of *fuck* is complicated by the fact that the word actually used is a Latin or pseudo-Latin form.⁶

A similar problem plagues the competing candidate for this claim, a poem written by the Scottish poet William Dunbar and first published in 1503 (see, e.g., Read 1934:268; Montagu 1967:307–308; Allen and Burridge 1991:93–94; Lass 1995:99). The poem, entitled, ‘Ane brash of wowing’ (‘A bout of wooing’), includes the following lines:

He clappit fast, he kist, he chukkit,
 As with the glakkis [foolishness] he wer ourgane [overcome]—
 Yet be his feiris [behavior] he wald have fuckkit:
 Ye brek my hairt, my bony ane [one].

The language of the poem is Middle Scots (Lass 1995:99), which appears to be a variety of Middle English, but actually functioned as an independent national language until the end of the sixteenth century (see Görlach 1991:18; Jumperz-Schwab 1998:2–3). A number of the earliest attested uses of the word *fuck* appear in Scots texts, including the works of Sir David Lindsay of the Mount (1490–1555), usher and later chief heraldic officer to James V of Scotland, who was the best-known Scottish poet of his period (see generally Edington 1994). A line from his play, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estatis*, ‘Bischops...may fuck their fill and be unmaryit’, is occasionally cited (e.g. Lass 1995:99); however, the more popular exemplar of his use of the word appears in the following passage from his poem, ‘The Answer quhilk Schir Dauid Lindesay Maid to the Kingis Flyting’, in which he reproved his monarch’s lusty behavior:

For, lyke boisterous Bull, he rin [run] and ryde
 Royatouslie lyke ane rude Rubeatour [libertine],
 Ay fukkand lyke ane furious Fornicatour.
 (cited by Montagu 1967:308; see also Read 1934:268; Sheidlower 1995:101.)⁷

The word *fuck* also appears in the (chronologically later) works of that most famous of Scottish poets, Robert Burns (Montagu 1967:308).

The use of the word *fuck* by Scotland’s foremost literary authors has led scholars to surmise that either the word was not considered to be obscene, or the Scots were more inclined than the English to use coarse language (see, e.g., Read 1934:268; Montagu 1967:308; Sheidlower 1995:xxv). This could explain the appearance of the word in texts written in Scots but not in English; however, the argument that I advance is that the word *fuck* was borrowed into English from Middle Scots. Yet if this were the case, what explains its transformation from an acceptable, though vulgar, term to a gross obscenity?

The accession of James VI of Scotland (thereafter James I) to the English throne in 1603 brought Scots speakers, including the king, to the English court (see Görlach 1991:20), resulting in the commingling of speakers of English and Scots.⁸ This occurred at a time when French was

the preferred language of conversation and correspondence among royalty and the nobility, and when Latin was widely studied and taught (Lambley 1920:259–265, 292–298; Orme 1989:16; Barber *et al.* 2009:185). Therefore speakers newly introduced to the word *fuck* would have automatically associated it with the French and Latin words having the same definition, thus resulting in the transfer of their obscene meaning to the vulgar, but acceptable, Scots word (see Allen and Burridge 1991:22; Trask 1996:45). Indeed, the pedagogical approach of the period, which placed an emphasis on double translation (translating from English into the target language and then back again into English) was designed to promote such associations (see Watson 1903:42; Lambley 1920:179–185). This analysis accords with Partridge's view that *fuck* is related to, although not derivative of, the French and Latin words (1959:239), and lends support to the argument that cultural attitudes originating in ancient Rome are the source of the word's obscenity.

The meaning of the word *fuck*

Merriam-Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (11th Edition) lists the following definitions for the word *fuck*:

1 *usu obscene*: COPULATE 2 *usu vulgar*: MESS 3 –used with *with* ~ vt 1 *usu obscene*: to engage in coitus with – sometimes used interjectionally with an object (as a personal or reflexive pronoun) to express anger, contempt, or disgust 2 *usu vulgar*: to deal with unfairly or harshly: CHEAT, SCREW

Similarly, Fairman states that *fuck* means 'to copulate' or, figuratively, 'to deceive' (2006:11). However, Baker proposes a more specific meaning of the word *fuck*, based on cultural conceptions of sex and the structuring of sexual identifications. He begins by noting that, although a number of verbs—including *ball*, *bang*, *do it with/to*, *fuck*, *have*, *hump*, *lay*, *make love to*, *screw* and *sleep with*—appear to bear the common meaning of 'to have sexual intercourse with,' a significant number of these verbs, including *fuck*, require a male subject in active constructions: 'Dick bangs Jane, Jane does not bang Dick; Dick humps Jane, Jane does not hump Dick' (1974:175; see also Pinker 2007b:354).⁹ Moreover, these same verbs are used metaphorically to denote someone who has been deceived or taken advantage of; thus, depending on the circumstances, 'Derek screwed Brittany' could mean either that Derek had sex with Brittany or that he treated her badly (Baker 1974:177). Similarly, passive constructions of these verbs, e.g., 'Brittany was fucked' can be used to mean either that someone had sex with Brittany, or that she was dealt with (extremely) unfairly (Baker 1974:177).

Yet Baker also points out that the verbs for sexual intercourse that do *not* require a male subject, but accept either gender in the active role, e.g., ‘Brittany slept with Derek’ or ‘Brittany did it with Derek’, lack the metaphorical sense borne by their supposed synonyms; thus ‘Derek slept with Brittany’ cannot be used to indicate that Derek cheated or deceived Brittany (Baker 1974:177–178), and passive constructions of these verbal idioms (e.g. *‘Brittany was slept with’) do not exist. Baker argues persuasively that, because metaphors operate analogically, this analysis demonstrates that ‘*we conceive of a person who plays the female sexual role as someone who is being harmed*’ (Baker 1974:177; emphasis in original; cf. Pinker 2007b:356–357).

Baker’s analysis reveals two different versions of sex, one of which is inclusive, allowing either or both parties to be (grammatically and therefore physically) active participants, while the other is exclusively masculine and entails negative consequences for the recipient (see Pinker 2007b:356–357); I will label these the ‘mutual’ and ‘assaultive’ versions of sexual intercourse. Moreover, in reviewing Baker’s list of verbs, it is immediately noticeable that those which construct the assaultive version of sex are vulgar or obscene, while those which construct the mutual version of sex are not. It thus appears that the offensive nature of these words is attributable to their assaultive connotations. Accordingly, I argue that the word *fuck* is obscene because it presents a penetrative version of sexual intercourse that is both hostile and demeaning.

The Latin *futuere* displays identical patterns of meaning. *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary* provides the following definition: ‘to have intercourse with a woman’; this definition requires a male subject (Adams 1982:118). In fact, Latin verbs for sexual intercourse display a high degree of anatomical specificity, with distinct terms for vaginal (*futuere*), anal (*pedicare*) and oral (*irrumare*) penetration (Parker 1997:48). These terms equate sexual intercourse with penile penetration (Skinner 1997:3; Walters 1997:30), in which the active role is definitionally male (Parker 1997:48). Sex was the prerogative of the freeborn adult male citizen (Walters 1997:30–31), who was privileged to penetrate any body he chose – that of a woman, a boy, or even an adult male, e.g., a slave (Parker 1997:54; Skinner 1997:3). Thus the fact that a man engaged in sex with another man did not determine his sexual category; what was determinative was his sexual role (Parker 1997:47). Only the active role was masculine (Parker 1997:50); a man who was penetrated was feminized and humiliated (Parker 1997:53; Skinner 1997:3; Walters 1997:31; Balmer 2004:17), and sexual penetration could be inflicted on an enemy as a form of punishment (Adams 1982:6; Parker 1997:57). Moreover, the normal female role was equally demeaning,

since the woman was 'primarily there for the use of the penetrating man' (Walters 1997:31).

This model of male sexuality is deeply engrained in Western culture, and contemporary models of (gendered) sexuality and (mutual, reciprocal) sexual relationships overlies but do not eradicate this ancient model. As a result, the attitudes motivated by this model, although often unrecognized, remain. Thus while the accepted definition of the word *fuck* ('to have sexual intercourse with') conveys no part of its obscene meaning, the more specific definition of 'to penetrate', with its assaultive and demeaning connotations of sexual threat, does much to explain its offensive force. This is particularly true in the case of the prototypical use of *Fuck you* as a male-to-male insult, as will be discussed in detail below.

The meaning of *Fuck you*

The specific connotations of the word *fuck* may be fruitfully explored by considering its use in the most common obscene insult in the English language, *Fuck you* (Pinker 2007a:354). Scholars who have attempted to identify the source of the extreme offensiveness of this phrase have focused upon the fact that it constructs an image of male-on-male sexual assault. Thus Baker (1974:178), after demonstrating that passive constructions of *fuck* denote both the female role in sexual intercourse and someone who is being harmed, concludes:

If the subjects of the passive construction are being harmed, presumably the subjects of the active construction are doing harm, and, indeed, we do conceive of these subjects in precisely the same way. Suppose one is angry at someone and wishes to express malevolence as forcefully as possible without actually committing an act of physical violence. If one is inclined to be vulgar one can make the sign of the erect male cock by clenching one's fist while raising one's middle finger, or by clenching one's fist and raising one's arm and shouting such things as 'screw you,' 'up yours,' or 'fuck you.' In other words, one of the strongest possible ways of telling someone that you wish to harm him is to tell him to assume the female sexual role relative to you.

Similarly, Gregersen (1977:262), citing comments by linguist James McCawley in a television interview, states that

one of the components of the phrase [*Fuck you*] that makes it plausible as an insult is the macho notion that to be the passive partner is degrading. More specifically, I think, we must remember that the phrase has usually been hurled at men, for whom being a vagina substitute has traditionally constituted the most degrading possible role.¹⁰

Others advance a more anatomically specific analysis. Gass (1978:50) provides this anecdotal exploration of what motivated him to mutter the phrase *Fuck you* at the receding figure of a police officer who had issued him a traffic citation:

Since I do not want to fuck the cop I must want someone else to, and since the ubiquitous 'you' is almost certainly another male (as it is in this instance), I can only desire your sodomization. To be entered as a woman is to be demeaned and reduced and degraded: for us gaucho males, what could be worse?

Dooling cites this passage and endorses Gass' reasoning, noting that '[a]lmost all dirty-word antiquarians agree... that "Fuck you!" has very little to do with cupidity or heterosexual copulation, and indeed probably has much more to do with the abject humiliation of enforced buggery' (1996:12).

These analyses support my argument that *Fuck you* is a metaphorical expression of male sexual aggression that reproduces both the verbal forms and the cultural constructions of sexuality of the Roman model, thus demonstrating that these attitudes persist, although covertly, making them resistant to change. As such, the phrase constructs the relationship of speaker and recipient as an asymmetrical power relationship in which the speaker is dominant and the recipient is feminized and degraded. It thus functions as a sexual threat, comparable to the obscene abuse used by the Roman poet Catullus to attack his erstwhile friends Furius and Aurelius, in response to remarks perceived to have questioned his manliness, in an oft-cited poem (*Cat.* 16, reprinted in Quinn 1973:11; see also Sullivan 1991:189) which opens with the line '*Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*' (I will sodomize you and force you to fellate me).

Sexual threats in Catullus' day were uttered in a cultural context in which human rights were limited to adult male citizens, and in which sexual violation as a form of punishment was a grim reality (see Adams 1982:6). Today, *Fuck you* does not prefigure the possibility of a physical sexual attack; instead, the attack takes the form of words.

With its explicit sexual meaning and specific negative connotations, the phrase is a literal (albeit symbolic) use of words to inflict humiliation and degradation; it thus functions as a 'performative utterance' in which the uttering of the words is 'a, or even *the* leading incident in the performance of the act' that is the object of the utterance (Austin 1962:8; emphasis in original). Its force as an insult stems from its use of the metaphor of sexual assault.

The metaphorical structure of *fuck*

Metaphors operate by a process of analogical inferencing (Musolff 2004:36–38) in which knowledge about the source domain is carried over into the target domain (Lakoff 1987:384), so that the attributes of the former are used to characterize the latter, creating an identification between the two (see Hobbs 2007:40). For example, the expressions *His claims were indefensible* and *Their criticisms were right on target* draw upon and elaborate the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, thus characterizing arguing as doing battle (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980:4–5, 7). The metaphor equates two activities (argument and war) which are different in kind, but what can we make of the example AN ARGUMENT IS A FIGHT? Is *fight* a metaphor for *argument*, or merely a subcategory, that is, a specific type of argument? According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980:84):

The issue here is whether fighting and arguing are the same kind of activity. This is not a simple issue.... If your concept FIGHT includes psychological dominance and psychological pain on a par with physical dominance and pain, then you may see AN ARGUMENT IS A FIGHT as a subcategorization rather than a metaphor. On this view an argument would be a kind of fight, structured in the form of a conversation. If, on the other hand, you conceive of FIGHT as purely physical, and if you view psychological pain only as pain taken metaphorically, then you might view AN ARGUMENT IS A FIGHT as metaphorical.

This discussion bears directly upon the analysis presented here. I argue that in phrases such as *Fuck you*, *They fucked him over* and *They were fucking with me*, the word *fuck* is being used metaphorically to describe domination: the concept of sexual penetration is used to structure the concept of domination as an essentially male relationship of power in which to fuck is to dominate. This raises the question: is penetration a subcategory of dominance? According to the Roman model, the answer is yes. However, our contemporary model constructs sex as a mutual, voluntary activity; thus *fuck* can function metaphorically, because we do not view sexual intercourse and ritualized subjugation as the same or similar activities – at least, not overtly. Moreover, even if sexual intercourse can sometimes function as a subcategory of domination, the use of the word *fuck* is metaphorical in these constructions, because there is no actual sex act that is being referred to; rather, the aspects of the Roman model of passive sex are being mapped onto other situations and experiences.

The attributes of the Roman model – being violated, being overpowered, being victimized, being humiliated, being dehumanized, used and objectified – explain the denotative meaning(s) of the metaphorical use of *fuck*, but cannot completely explain its connotative meaning(s), which are

produced by combining the direct quality of metaphor (cf. Fawcett 1970:52) with the dysphemism of taboo (cf. Pinker 2007b:350). Taboo terms call to mind the most offensive aspects of the concepts to which they refer (Pinker 2007b:350), while metaphor's equation of source with target creates a vivid identification (Fawcett 1970:53). Thus the core meaning of sexual assault infuses all uses of the word, producing an instantaneous mental image (Musolff 2004:38), as aptly illustrated by the above-referenced analyses of *Fuck you*. Descriptive uses of the word *fuck*, e.g., *They were fucking with me*; *They fucked him over*, are similar: by equating situations such as being deceived, used or cheated with hostile penile penetration, they graphically communicate the egregiousness of the imposition and the degree of outrage that it inspires.

Derivative forms of *fuck*

The word *fuck* has been prolific in spawning derivative forms representing nearly every part of speech, but the meanings of these derivative forms must be analysed with reference to the prototype verbal form. *Fuck you* and *Don't fuck with me* rely on the core meaning of the verb to convey their message of sex, anger and violence. Similarly, victim-oriented constructions of penetration as harm creating negative results are elaborated in phrases such as *The whole brake system is all fucked up*. However, the equation of penetration with domination and harm does not explain the meanings of *fuck's* derivative forms. *(Oh) fuck!* would appear to be an imprecation, uttered solely for the sake of its offensiveness, as would *I don't give a fuck*; thus Pinker notes the interchangeability of phrases such as *What the hell?* and *What the fuck?* (2007a:27). What is common to both of these usages is their expression of something that is very bad; this can also be seen in adverbial uses such as *That's fucking awful*. But *fucking* can be used in positive expressions as well (cf. Murphy 2009:96), as in *That's fucking brilliant*.¹¹ Such usages display an apparent reversal of meaning that is analogous to religious swearing: the use of 'good' words (*God! Jesus!*) as expletives is analogous to the use of 'bad' words (*goddamned, fucking*) as tokens of appreciation. How can these apparent contradictions be resolved?

Scholars who have addressed the issue have argued that taboo status is not a function of the meaning of the word, but is arbitrarily assigned. Thus Crozier proposes that the status of a term as a 'dirty word' depends 'less on the thing [referred to] and its associations and more on the offensive nature of the word itself' (1989:120). In so doing, he cites an oft-referenced article by Quang (a pseudonym adopted by linguist James McCawley, see Pinker 2007b:355, 359), who maintains that *fuck* actually consists of two homonymous words, the first of which means 'to copulate with' and,

figuratively, 'to deceive', while the second 'has no intrinsic meaning, but has an offensive force which means it can be freely used in oaths and maledictions' (Crozier 1989:122, citing Quang 1969:46). Fairman cites Crozier to the same effect (2006:11), and also cites a number of Title VII harassment cases in which various federal appellate courts held that insults and epithets such as *motherfucker*, *suck my dick*, *fuck me*, *go fuck yourself*, etc., did not constitute sexual harassment because they had no connection with the sex acts being referenced (Fairman 2006:56–59).

It is clear that such explanations are inadequate to account for the extreme offensiveness of these terms, and that these uses are in fact metaphorical. However, the model of sexual intercourse that they draw upon is not the Roman model, but our own contemporary model of sexual activity and sexual relationships. These derivative forms of the verb *fuck* use our knowledge of this source domain to map attributes of sexual experience onto a wide variety of non-sexual human experiences. They do so by invoking the physiological and emotional intensity of sexual experience; thus our knowledge that sexual experience may be either intensely positive (willing participant; achieving orgasm) or intensely negative (unwilling or coerced participant; failure to achieve orgasm) is transferred into other domains, where it is used to characterize situations, activities and experiences as intensely good or intensely bad. This is best exemplified by the use of *fucking* as a modifier to express both negative and positive meanings (*That's fucking awful* versus *That's fucking brilliant!*).

The taboo nature of the word *fuck*

The study of obscene language has historically been treated as outside the field of legitimate scholarly investigation (Rothwell 1971:231); as a result, linguistic analysis of obscenities has been sparse (Van Lancker and Cummings 1999: 85; see also McEnery and Xiao 2004:235; Rassin and Muris 2005:1670; Fairman 2006:6, 13; Murphy 2009). Nevertheless, over the past several decades, a number of scholars have examined the word *fuck*. Studies of the word have focused on its etymology (Read 1934; Lass 1995) and patterns of usage (Sheidlower 1995; McEnery and Xiao 2004; Murphy 2009), the social and legal consequences of its classification as obscene (Fairman 2006; Pinker 2007a), why obscenity relates to certain topics (e.g. sex, excretion) and not others (Sagarin 1962; Pinker 2007a, b), and the intense emotional response evoked by the use of obscene terms (Pinker 2007b); the majority of these studies contain little or no analysis of the connotative meaning(s) of the word (but see Pinker 2007b:353–357). Others examine its assaultive content, with particular attention to the use of *Fuck you* (see Baker 1974; Gregersen 1977; Gass 1978; Dooling

1996, discussed above), but do not squarely address its taboo nature. Thus although the word's status as one of the most vulgar, offensive and obscene words in the English language is the reason it has been subject to analysis, existing analyses do not explore *why* it is so taboo, a question that demands an answer where there are non-taboo words for the same act (e.g. *frig*, *screw*) that are used in the same ways. Accordingly, my analysis will examine both the denotative meaning of the word *fuck* and how its use as an 'act of referring' creates emergent alignments among participants (cf. Agha 2007:86–87) that construct prohibited characterizations, resulting in its taboo status.

Taboo and denotative meaning

Pinker states that taboo words are different from their more polite synonyms because taboo words are dysphemistic (2007b:350), but this begs the question of why they are dysphemistic: what is it about them that creates this response? Part of the effect of the use of an obscene word is its inclusion in the membership category of obscenity (Crozier 1989:120). Moreover, even within the register, some words are judged to be more (or less) obscene than others, and thus vary in their degree of offensiveness (Crozier 1989:121). In addition, in the case of obscene terms for sexual anatomy and sexual acts, while some speakers may use them preferentially in sexual encounters (cf. Jay 2009:154) in order to express intimacy or abandon, historically the use of obscenity in non-intimate situations has been associated with anger, aggression and hostility, and the intent to threaten, insult or demean (see, e.g., Rothwell 1971; Crozier 1989; Jay 1992:103; Corrigan 1993; Pinker 2007b:348–349).

Nevertheless, while acknowledging their extreme offensiveness and prohibited status, scholars who have explored the issue have largely taken the position that taboo words lack specific reference. Indeed, as noted above, a number of scholars appear to assume that, at least in expletive usage, obscenities become divorced from their denotative meanings (see, e.g. Crozier 1989, and compare Fairman 2006:56–59). Thus Jay states that the expletive use of obscenities 'is linked to expression of emotion, not denoting a specific property of the person in question', and asks whether they are devoid of denotative meaning in actual usage (1977:244–245). He cites Foote and Woodward (1973:270), who note that

it is recognized that in actual usage the meaning of obscenity is much more related to expletive, emotional release through epithet and is probably rarely connected to the denotative referential domain of the obscenity being used. It is unlikely that when one is called a 'bastard,' for example, that one

would seriously consider that the individual addressing him had evidence regarding the legitimacy of his birth.

This analysis is clearly flawed, for the whole reason that the word is used in this way is to transfer its highly-negative meanings (shame, stigma, social inferiority) to the person who is the object of the imprecation. Thus although the word is not used literally, its literal meaning is exploited: to call someone a *bastard* is to label him as stigmatized; the denotative meaning ('obscene word for illegitimate offspring') is used metaphorically to imply its associated characterization. In fact, the word *bastard* is today used *only* metaphorically and is technically a dead metaphor (see Billig and Macmillan 2005:460; Chilton 2005:24), since its use does not evoke its literal application; rather, it is used as a pejorative term based on the negative social judgments historically associated with the literal meaning (Crozier 1989:119). This accords with the foregoing analyses of metaphorical uses of the word *fuck*, in which the literal meaning ('to sexually penetrate') is exploited to construct characterizations based on either the Roman or contemporary model of sexual activity and sexual relationships.

The fact that the denotative meaning is being indexed in metaphorical uses of the word explains its ability to produce the visceral reaction of cultural taboo (cf. Fairman 2006:5) even where it does not refer to sexual acts. It thus remains to identify the specific properties of the word that create this response. This will involve comparing the word *fuck* to its conceptual synonyms, in order to identify the specific features of the word that result in its obscene character.

A comparative analysis of *fuck* and its near synonyms

True synonyms – words that can be freely substituted for one another with no resulting change in meaning – are rare; near synonyms, however, are pervasive (Edmonds and Hirst 2000:1). That formally synonymous words may display subtle differences in meaning is evidenced by the Preface to *Webster's New Thesaurus of the English Language*, which begins: 'This book is based on the idea that people use a thesaurus to find a more appropriate word for the meaning they want to express' (2001:3a).

Near synonyms can differ with respect to any aspect of their meaning; thus Cruse's (1986) analysis suggests the following possible axes of variation: collocational, syntactic, stylistic, expressive, and denotational (cited by Edmonds and Hirst 2000:1). Denotational variation can involve differences in emphasis, directness and/or specificity; Edmonds and Hirst observe that '[t]here appears to be a continuum of indirectness from "suggestion" to "implication" to "denotation"' (2000:2). With this in mind,

and using Baker's analysis as a starting point, we can now examine *fuck* and its near synonyms, in order to determine how they stand in contrast with one another (cf. Saussure 1916/1983:114).

As noted above, Baker examined a list of common colloquial terms for 'to have sexual intercourse with' – *ball, bang, do it with, fuck, have, hump, lay, make love to, screw* and *sleep with* – and noted that some, but not all, require a male subject in active constructions; these verbs thus represent the feminine role in sexual intercourse as intrinsically passive (1974:174–176). He then pointed out that passive constructions of these same verbs are commonly used to describe someone who is being harmed (Baker 1974:177). Baker's analysis reveals that one feature of dysphemistic verbs for sexual intercourse (*ball, bang, fuck, have, hump, lay, screw*) is that they are semantically non-reversible (see, e.g., Slobin 1966), requiring a male subject in active constructions and thus reducing the female to a passive participant (i.e. a *sex object*), while those that are not dysphemistic (*do it with, make love to, sleep with*) are semantically reversible.

More recently, this analysis has been elaborated by Pinker, who provides his own list of vulgar colloquialisms for sexual intercourse – *fuck, screw, hump, ball, dick, bonk, bang, shag, pork* and *shtup* – which he contrasts with the following more 'polite' terms for the sexual act: *have sex, make love, sleep together, go to bed, have relations, have intercourse, be intimate, mate* and *copulate* (2007b:354). Pinker notes that all of the vulgar verbs are transitive, while all of the more polite verbs are intransitive (Pinker 2007b:354). In describing the intransitive verbs, he notes that

The word for sexual partner is always introduced by a preposition: to have sex *with*, make love *to*, and so on. Indeed, most of them aren't even verbs of their own, but idioms that join a noun or an adjective to an insubstantial "light verb" like *have, be, or make* (Pinker 2007b:354; italics original).

He then provides a general definition of transitive verbs that describes them as denoting 'an agent that deliberately carries out an action that impinges on an entity, or affects the entity, or both', and notes that the transitive verbs for sex imply that the direct object is *negatively* affected, by being exploited or grievously damaged (Pinker 2007b:355–356). His analysis concludes that

The syntax of the verbs for sex uncovers two very different mental models of sexuality. The first is reminiscent of sex-education curricula, marriage manuals, and other sanctioned views: Sex is a joint activity, details unspecified, which is mutually engaged in by two equal partners. The second is a darker view, somewhere between mammalian sociobiology and Dworkin-style feminism: Sex is a forceful act, instigated by an active male and impinging on a passive female, exploiting her or damaging

her. Both models capture human sexuality in its full range of manifestations, and if language is our guide, the first model is approved for public discourse, while the second is taboo, though widely recognized in private (Pinker 2007b:356–357).

It thus appears that a second feature of dysphemistic verbs for sexual intercourse is their transitive nature. Moreover, the combination of transitivity and semantic non-reversibility constructs an anatomically specific ‘insertive’ model of sexual intercourse (Baker 1977:176; and compare Parker’s (1997) discussion of Roman sexual categories), whereas, as Pinker notes, the more polite verbs construct sexual intercourse as ‘a joint activity, details unspecified’ (Pinker 2007b:356–357). However, while this appears to explain the difference between vulgar and non-vulgar verbs for sexual intercourse by demonstrating that all of the vulgar verbs share these characteristics while none of the non-vulgar verbs do, it still does not explain why *fuck* is obscene and the other dysphemistic verbs are only vulgar (although some are more vulgar than others). Thus additional analysis is necessary.

As noted above, Battistella states that what distinguishes obscene words from their non-obscene synonyms is ‘primarily a matter of degree and prurience’ (2005:72). This may be analysed using Farina’s (1973) model of expressivity. According to this model, expressivity consists of two components: affectivity and concreteness (Farina 1973:315). Affectivity is the degree or quantity of the expressive content of a word, its emotional intensity; concreteness produces a reaction in the senses (sight, hearing, touch, odor, etc.) and imagination (Farina 1973:315–316). Thus the more affective and concrete the word, the more expressive it is, and the less affective and concrete it is, the less expressive it is (Farina 1973:315). The applicability of this model to obscenity is clear, since the hallmark of obscenity is its affective quality, the intense emotional response that is triggered by the graphic (i.e. concrete) nature of the word.

With respect to the element of concreteness, a review of the entries included in Baker’s and Pinker’s listings of the vulgar synonyms for *fuck* (alphabetically *ball*, *bang*, *bonk*, *dick*, *have*, *hump*, *lay*, *pork*, *screw*, *shag* and *shutup*) reveals that they are all either metaphorical or (in the case of *dick*) metonymic – that is, not involving any actual description of penile penetration; thus no literal concrete meaning is evoked. Nevertheless, two of these require further consideration.

The first, *dick*, when used as a noun, is a vulgar word for ‘penis’; accordingly, when used as a verb, it acts to construct sexual intercourse as a male act.¹² However, the insertive nature of the act is not expressed, but is implied from the meaning of the word (cf. Dirven 1999:277).¹³ As a result, most speakers would probably consider *dick* to be less offensive than *screw* which, although clearly metaphorical, is quite specific as to the nature of

the activity performed. Thus *screw* is arguably more concrete than any of the other vulgar terms, a conclusion that is supported by the fact that *screw* alone can be used to construct an insult that is identical in form, and only slightly less aggravated than, *Fuck you!*:

Screw you!

**Bang you!*

**Dick you!*

**Shag you!*

This in turn serves to demonstrate that what is central to the offensiveness of both words is their reference to the insertive quality of the act denoted. Yet although *screw* is concrete, it is still metaphorical: penile penetration is described by analogy, as ‘screwing’. Nonetheless, it is quite offensive (although not obscene), due to its highly aggressive message, which is a function of the clarity of its description of the activity involved.

By contrast, *fuck* is not metaphorical, but is both concrete and highly specific: it constructs sexual intercourse as penile penetration, that is, as a (unilateral) male act. In addition, as demonstrated by Baker and Pinker, this construction of sexual intercourse entails (a) that the person who is penetrated is female or feminized, (b) that the person who is penetrated does not take part in the act but, rather, it is done to her (or him), and (c) that the (male) act of penetration is harmful/damaging to the (female/feminized) person who is penetrated.¹⁴ It thus functions as a graphic description of harmful and demeaning penile penetration.

Moreover, it is clear, as noted above, that the classification of a word as vulgar or obscene has real effects, not only on the social acceptability of its use, but on the meanings that are assigned to it (cf. Crozier 1989:120; Agha 2007:79–80).¹⁵ Because obscenity acts to index anger, aggression, contempt, disrespect, etc., it is commonly used to convey hostility or threats (cf. Stapleton 2010:292). It is also strongly associated with male speech communities (Stapleton 2010:292), including the military (Allen and Burrige 1991:119; Andrews 1996:395; and see, e.g., Bay 2007), and its use by women is less acceptable (Stapleton 2010:293). As a result, it appears to express a male point of view regardless of the gender of the speaker who uses it (cf. Stapleton 2010:292). This is particularly significant in the case of the word *fuck*, where the action denoted is (anatomically) male. For if *fuck* is defined as ‘to penetrate with the penis’ and depicts sex as a unilateral male act that is harmful/damaging to the feminine (or feminized) recipient, it then follows that what is penetrated is the vagina (or is ‘a vagina substitute’) of a person who does not take part in the act and who is harmed/damaged – which aptly explains the offensive force of the word *cunt* when applied to a woman (in US usage) or man (in UK usage).

This accords with the analyses of *Fuck you* cited above, most notably of Gregersen (1977:262) (to be the passive partner – a ‘vagina substitute’ – is degrading); Gass (1978:50) (‘to be entered as a woman is to be demeaned and reduced and degraded’); and Dooling (1996:12) (‘the object humiliation of enforced buggery’).

It can thus be seen that the obscenity of the word lies in the stigmatized gendered identity that it acts to assign.

Factors motivating diverging attitudes about the use of the word *fuck*

One question that remains is the continuing taboo status of the word *fuck* in a period which has witnessed a massive shift in cultural attitudes about sexuality and sexual topics. At a time when sexual relationships are no longer hidden or denied, but are openly acknowledged and discussed, and when motion pictures and television series are filled with sex scenes and sexual language, why do certain selected terms remain ‘off limits’? I propose that the reason that *fuck* and its derivative forms have retained their taboo status is that the cultural shift that has taken place over the past several decades has succeeded in establishing a different, but equally powerful, sociocultural basis for the taboo as that which existed previously.

In the immediate post-World War II era, when sex was widely seen as something that was ‘dirty’, words that denoted sexual activities were literally unspeakable, and crude vernacular forms were particularly offensive, as is plainly illustrated by the extreme vagueness of the terms that were used in the 1950s to describe the various stages of sexual intimacy: a couple who ‘dated’ exclusively was said to be ‘going steady’, in which case they might engage in ‘making out’; however, it was recognized that if they were to ‘go all the way’, this would violate strong social, moral and religious prohibitions and, if by chance the girl were to get ‘in trouble’,¹⁶ would result in irreparable harm. In such a social milieu, the prevailing puritanical attitudes, coupled with the word’s historic status as an obscene vulgarity, acted to perpetuate its taboo status.

However, as times changed, and as attitudes towards both talking about and engaging in sexual activity relaxed considerably (see Trask 1996:39–40), the reasons motivating the evaluation of *fuck* as a taboo word shifted from a focus on its ‘dirtiness’ *per se* (although some people still think this way) to a focus on its connotative meaning which, as a consequence of the alterations in social attitudes resulting from feminism, constructs a conception of sexual intercourse that is now itself taboo. In this respect, the offensive force of the word *fuck* is analogous to that of what is now referred to as *the n-word*, due to the prohibited nature of the characterization that

it constructs (Logue 1976; cf. Pinker 2007a:25). Such words are disturbing because they access attitudes of the speaker and/or hearer that are intensely shameful (cf. Read 1934:277; Pinker 2007a:28), creating a highly negative emotional response that is experienced as profound offence. Moreover, it is precisely *because* they are so taboo that they have come to be used increasingly, for they function to fill the linguistic gap that emerged as the weakening of religious authority marked the demise of religious swearing (see Pinker 2007a:26), but not the need for some form of words that would serve the same purpose (to express anger, dominance, etc.); this resulted in recourse to the vocabulary of even more ancient forms of hierarchy: those of race and of sex.

Yet while a significant proportion of language users view *fuck* and its derivatives as inherently offensive and obscene, another significant proportion do not. The locus of these disagreements is whether there is a meaningful distinction between the literal and metaphorical uses of the word. Moreover, the absence of a consensus is not limited to individual language users, but extends to the courts and government agencies that have considered the issue, and even to linguists who have attempted to analyse them. It is thus apparent that any meaningful analysis of this issue must address, not categories of *usage*, but categories of *users*, for it is users' interpretations that determine the offensiveness of the word. I submit that the differing responses to metaphorical uses of the word *fuck* arise from the fact that there are two categories of recipients: the first category consists of people who find the word *fuck* (and its derivatives) vulgar and offensive, who do not (willingly) tolerate its use in their presence, and who do not use it themselves, or do so only in extreme circumstances or when strongly provoked; I will call this category 'non-users'. For this category of recipients, the word belongs to a set of taboo words, the very utterance of which constitutes an affront, and any use of the word, regardless of its form (verb, adjective, adverb, etc.) or meaning (literal or metaphorical) evokes the core sexual meanings and associated sexual imagery that motivate the taboo.

The second category of recipients consists of frequent or casual users of vulgar language, who distinguish between literal and figurative uses, and who rely on contextual factors to assign offensive or inoffensive meanings to the word in its various forms; I will call this category 'users'. For these recipients, metaphorical uses of the word *fuck* no more evoke images of sexual intercourse than does a ten-year-old's 'My mom'll kill me if she finds out' evoke images of murder. This is consistent with the observation that metaphors fade and become conventionalized with use, so that their literal meanings are no longer evoked (Billig and Macmillan 2005:460; Chilton 2005:24). It thus appears that for some people (users), *fuck* is a

dead metaphor that has become detached from its literal meaning, while for others (nonusers) it is not, and still evokes vivid sexual imagery.

In addition, speakers whose active vocabularies include the adjectival and adverbial form of the word (*fucking*) are clearly accessing the contemporary model of sexual intercourse, which focuses on the (positive or negative) intensity of sexual experience, rather than the Roman model, in using these terms. It is also possible that these speakers draw upon the contemporary model even in the use of *fuck* as a verb; for example:

They were fucking with me. = They were making me intensely angry/unhappy.

Fuck you. = I wish you intense anger/anguish.

The mapping of the contemporary model carries over to non-sexual situations, not sex-role identifications, but only the emotional responses associated with sexual experiences. However, this is not a prohibited subject for contemporary speakers. Yet in the absence of prohibited subjects or prohibited characterizations, the criteria of taboo are missing. This explains the extreme casualness with which many speakers now use a word that is still considered to be taboo to non-users. Moreover, the non-users' reactions are explained by extending the same train of reasoning. That is, while the vividness of metaphors becomes dulled through repetition (Billig and Macmillan 2005:462), those who view *fuck* and its derivatives as taboo do not themselves use these words and attempt to avoid being exposed to them, often requesting (or demanding) that others not use them in their presence. They thus insulate themselves from experiences that might serve to dull their sensibilities. Moreover, these non-users, when exposed to others' uses of the word, do not distinguish between literal and metaphorical usages, but view all uses of the word as inherently offensive and obscene. As a result, the metaphor of intensity that grounds the adjectival and adverbial uses of the word *fucking* is not apparent to these recipients, who hear only the present participle of an obscene verb meaning 'to sexually penetrate,' and bearing all of the negative connotations that the use of the term has historically evoked.

Conclusion

In contemporary American society, the relaxation of social prohibitions on vulgar language, together with what some have noted to be an advertising culture that appears to demand hyperbole, combine to create an environment where much language that was formerly impermissible is now allowed. Nevertheless, a small number of words have retained their taboo status. In the case of *fuck*, this paper has argued that the continuing taboo status of the word results from a combination of the residue of

historical associations that continue to shade the meaning of the word at a visceral level, and the directness and specificity of its reference to bodily penetration. The enduring taboo status of the word thus illustrates the largely unconscious processes by which language shapes cultural awareness (compare Hobbs 2008:31). Nevertheless, language change, like sociocultural change, is inevitable in human societies, and recent decades have witnessed what appears to be a weakening of this taboo, at least for some speakers. Yet although it is logical to assume that as time continues to erode the imprint of the Roman Empire on Western culture, the remaining connections will eventually break, it appears that it is linguistic creativity that is motivating this particular change. That is, the introduction of new meanings based on a contemporary model of sexuality and sexual activity has begun to change the definition of the word. This contemporary model draws on emotional and physiological responses to sexual intercourse, rather than on the (literal and figurative) positions of sexual actors. The meanings that this model elaborates thus differ from the meanings elaborated by the Roman model in one critical respect: they are not obscene. We may thus be witnessing the slow retirement of a longstanding linguistic taboo.

About the author

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Notes

- 1 The censored form is thus diluted but not disguised. As noted by Sagarin, 'When one sees a word written as *f* followed by a dash or some asterisks, as *f---* or *f****, one need not wonder whether the term refers to *fair* or *foul*, to *fame* or *folly*' (1962:137; and cf. Fairman 2006:21–22).
- 2 *The New York Times* recently commented upon its policy regarding vulgar and obscene words, stating in part:

... The Times virtually never prints obscene words, and it maintains a steep threshold for vulgar ones....

The argument that someone's use of a vulgar expression was surprising or politically dramatic, or revealing about art or the intensity of feelings, will not be compelling. Exceptions have been made only a handful of times, and they typify the standard. In 1974 *The Times* published transcripts of White House conversations that figured in

the Watergate scandal. Expressions highly objectionable by Times standards were printed because of the light they shed on a historic matter, the possibility of a presidential impeachment. The paper's top editors judged that in this situation, it was not enough to say merely that an obscenity or a vulgarism had been used.... (Editors 2011.)

It is notable that, in discussing the newspaper's decision to publish the unexpurgated transcripts of the Watergate Tapes, the editors avoid any mention of the specific 'vulgarism[s]' and 'obscenit[ies]'; including *shit* and *son of a bitch*, that the tapes showed Nixon to have used routinely.

- 3 The word *foutre* shed its literal meaning in the nineteenth century and survives as an extremely vulgar word meaning 'to take' or 'to do' (Miller 2001:508) – that is, it is used only metaphorically.
- 4 The metaphoric applicability of these verbs to (male) sexual activity is clear; what is not clear is what would motivate an obscene connotation.
- 5 The coding reflects the spelling conventions of the time: *i* was used for both *i* and *j*, *v* for both *u* and *v*, and *vv* for *w* (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th Ed.).
- 6 The American Heritage Dictions of the English Language, 4th Ed., labels *fuccant* 'a fake Latin form.' Since *-ant* is the third-person plural ending of the present active indicative of Latin verbs, the judgment that the form is 'fake' rests upon the fact that the stem of *futuere* is *fut-* rather than *fucc-*.
- 7 Jumperz-Schwab, who examined a corpus of Scots texts from the same period, identified *-and* as one of several variant spellings (including *-ande*, *-ing*, *-yng*, *-ind* and *-in*, of the participial suffix *-ing*, and noted that *-and* represented the Older Scots form (1998:112). This suggests that at the time of its use by Lindsay, the word had been in the language for some time.
- 8 The timing is significant: the only known occurrence of the word in an English text prior to 1603 is in Florio's Italian-English dictionary, published in 1598, which lists it among the meanings of *fóttete* (Allen and Burridge 1991:94). Florio was the tutor to Prince Henry, James I's eldest son, and in 1603 was appointed Reader in Italian to Queen Anne (Lambley 1920:260–261).
- 9 Baker takes care to point out that human anatomy cannot account for the assignment of the active role in sexual intercourse to the male, noting that a female-centered conception of sexual activity might construct sexual intercourse as 'engulfing' (1974:177).
- 10 This interpretation finds additional support in the fact that the word *cunt* is the strongest single-word insult targeting males in British usage (Crozier 1989:120). Crozier notes that *cunt* is an exclusively male insult in British usage; the strongest female-directed insult is *bitch* (1989:120).
- 11 A variation of this phrase was famously uttered by Bono, the lead singer of the group U-2, during a live broadcast of the Golden Globe Awards, resulting in hundreds of complaints from viewers. Accepting the award for Best Original Song in a Motion Picture, he elatedly exclaimed, 'This is really, really fucking brilliant' (Fairman 2006:38–39, citing Crabtree 2004:66; see also Pinker 2007a:25).

- 12 The verb *dick* is a member of the class of 'denominal verbs,' nouns that are used as verbs without changes to their form (Buck 1997:1). According to Clark and Clark, the meanings of denominal verbs 'bear at least an approximate relationship' to the nouns from which they are derived (1979:768).
- 13 That is, *dick* is a metonymy in which the instrument (*dick* [n.] = 'penis') stands for the event (*dick* [v.] = 'to [penetrate with the] penis').
- 14 The association between penetration and damage or harm is reflected in the historical construction of female (but not male) virginity and the effects of its loss, both socially and physically. A woman's virginity was equated with sexual 'purity' (she was 'untouched'), and was essential to her marriage-ability: in an unmarried woman, the loss of virginity resulted in social stigma, shaming and devaluing her by reducing her to 'damaged goods.' Physical descriptions of the female sexual anatomy mirror this attitude: virginity = an 'intact' hymen; loss of virginity = a 'torn' or 'broken' hymen, producing bleeding (injury).
- 15 This can best be seen when classifications change, due to shifts in social values (Stapleton 2010:289). Thus when religious swearing lost its force, the formerly taboo terms appeared to undergo semantic bleaching (cf. Allen and Burrige 1991:119; Murphy 2009:97), and either became acceptable or stopped being used because they no longer served the same purpose (see Battistella 2005:82–83). Thus people still say *God* or *Oh God*, but for many speakers this is no longer viewed as swearing, but as more akin to slang, while the use of *damned*, *damn it* and *Goddamned* (some of the most commonly used terms in religious swearing) has radically decreased. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the shift away from religious swearing has not stopped speakers from borrowing from the religious vocabulary to coin new words, for example, the slang term *hella*, a grammaticalization of *a hell of a*, widely used by speakers in their teens and twenties (see Bucholtz 2007).
- 16 That is, pregnant.

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