

F\*\*K **PRIK** !!!  
BAS\*ARD

**ARSEHOLE** C \* \* T  
WAN\*ER  
CO\*KSU\*KER

S H \* T  
{TOSSER}  
BALLS

BOL \* \* CKS  
{TW\*T}

F \* \* K !!!  
\* \* T K  
{PI\*S OFF}



# Filthy English

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The How, Why, When and What of Everyday Swearing

Peter Silverton

*Portobello*  
BOOKS



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# Introduction

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## Foreplay†

It was early evening, a December Wednesday, a time of homework deferred and dinner (or tea or supper) made (or eaten or cleared). In a TV studio at the base of a glass and green granite tower on the northern edge of central London, Steve, then 21, faced his questioner and said to him: ‘You dirty sod you dirty old man.’ Then: ‘You dirty bastard.’ And: ‘You dirty fucker.’

In that moment – broadcast live on the first day of the last month of 1976 – things changed. Language – bad language, filthy English – jumped out of the shadows it had inhabited pretty much at its previous life and began its journey toward the light. It happened shortly before 6.30 p.m., on Thames Television’s *Today*, a commercial channel’s nightly magazine show, with all the usual local news items – weather reports, traffic updates, charity eating competitions, skateboarding ducks. It happened in a Britain in which there were only three TV channels and families did sit down together to their evening meal in front of the early evening local news.

Oh, there had been swearing on TV before. In sitcoms and kitchen sinkers, there had been bloody and damns and randy scouse gits. And famously, in 1965, Ken Tynan had said ‘fuck’. But he was a theatre critic, an intellectual, a great writer, a future director of the National Theatre. His fuck appeared with forethought and deliberation. It wasn’t swearing at all, really. It was a societal intervention. As Kenneth had become ‘Ken’, so Ken’s fuck was not fuck but ‘fuck’ – a symbol, a weapon in a war of liberation, part personal, part global. What it wasn’t was fuck.

Steve’s was. It was his own language, not a word on display like a brocade waistcoat. Steve Jones was a guitarist, in the Sex Pistols. He’d been a thief and still was sometimes. He was from Shepherd Bush – a short, unpleasant walk from the BBC studios in which, eleven years earlier, Ken had ‘fuck’ed a late night TV audience, but a world away really. Steve wasn’t making a point. This was how he talked. This was how lots of people talked. Had talked. Do talk.

Even then, even with a drink or two inside him, Steve saw the TV camera as a mother of sorts, not something to be sworn openly in front of. He had to be pushed into it by his questioner, Bill Grundy, from ‘sod’ to ‘bastard’ to ‘fucker’ – from male homosexuality via illegitimacy to sexual intercourse. Old walls don’t tumble that easily.

At a distance of thirty years, it’s an odd encounter. There’s a strange formality to it. It’s as if everyone involved is performing in a play they don’t quite understand but which takes them by the hand and walks them towards its conclusion with classical inexorability. They are players in a drama speaking their own words but someone else’s lines. Or rather, *something* else’s. These are the lines of social change. You rarely catch social change actually happening, let alone in a two-minute segment at the tail end of an early evening TV show hosted by an almost stereotypical male presenter of the period: regional accent, wide tie, big sideburns and a deft ability to charm and enfold just about anything into the pleasing simplicities of the local news magazine format. But social change in action it was.

When Ken Tynan said fuck, he thought it would change things – censorship, social relations, taboos. It did, a bit – although certainly not as much as he wished or dreamed for. When Steve said fucker, he wasn’t thinking of change or anything like it. He just said it. I knew Steve and was friends with Glen Matlock, the bassist in the Pistols. There was nothing considered about it. It just happened, the way things happen, particularly when they’re things waiting to happen. Which is why Steve’s television fuck changed things far more than Tynan’s did a decade earlier.

The immediate fuss about the Pistols’ tea-time swearing was splenetic and sweet in its details.

man named James Holmes, a forty-six-year-old lorry driver, kicked in his TV. Evangelical Christians marched and placarded against it. The *Daily Mirror* delighted in decrying it – with, of all things, reference to the final couplet of Macbeth’s despair at his wife’s suicide, his own vanities, the inevitability of life’s vicissitudes. ‘The filth and the fury’ boomed the *Mirror*’s headline, punning on *Macbeth*, Act 5 Scene 5 – ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’. Where again would a pop group, a tabloid newspaper and William Shakespeare so lusciously collide?

Less noticed, then and now, was the real and powerful process of change this brief burst of television swearing set underway. It was a first fuck – that phrase used by modern couples to date a relationship’s definitive start – that led to many, many more, on TV and in print. Like it or not, approve or not, those few words on a Friday tea-time were the starting point of a revolution in language, of real and profound change in the way we speak and the words we use. All kicked off by a sometime thief and future junkie from Shepherd’s Bush.

It’s a commonplace that swearing – in public, anyway – has increased since the Sex Pistols’ 1977 encounter with Bill Grundy. Nor is there any real argument with that statement. Nor can there be. The evidence is evident. Starting my researches in my kitchen, I found a mug with one phrase repeated all over it: ‘Fuck this fuck that’. Maybe I bought it. Maybe I was given it. Mostly, I don’t give it a thought. Occasionally, if I’m making someone a cup of tea, my hand will pause over it. Generally, I use it anyway. I’ve never had a complaint. In my office, I found a greeting card from a few years ago, hand-drawn and coloured by my elder son who is now in his twenties. ‘Happy fucking father’s day’, says. I laughed then and I laugh now. On my desk, there’s a badge which says, in many colours, ‘FUCK BOLLOCKS WANK ARSEHOLE SHIT BASTARD KNOB TOSSER’. My daughter, who is also in her twenties, gave it to me – though only because I was writing this book.

In the middle months of 2008, I kept a loose, informal swearing diary. On a Friday night BBC panel show, I heard a comic, David Mitchell, refer, quite casually, to a ‘fuck-up’ and his ‘pile-of-shit’ week. It was after the 9 p.m. watershed, the time when all good little boys and girls are meant to be in bed – if only in the archaic imagination of unworldly regulators and worldly TV executives who cynically, affect to believe what the regulators tell them about children’s bed-times. It was only just after that 9 p.m. curfew, though. Arbitrariness is always amusingly arbitrary. I find it hard to believe that, even a couple of years earlier, the comic wouldn’t have been edited out or bleeped.

On a Saturday morning, I read an interview with a Hollywood actress, Keira Knightley, in the *Guardian* Weekend colour supplement. The *Guardian*, not coincidentally, is the undisputed word leader when it comes to newspaper swearing. Most papers are extremely cagey about printing swear words, avoiding them if at all possible, asterisking or euphemising them if essential. The *Guardian*, though, prints the whole word, a lot of them, very often. ‘There must (surely) be occasional editions that are, so to speak, fuck-free,’ its reader’s editor, Ian Mayes, wrote, wearily, in 2002. ‘On average, however, each edition contains at least two articles in which the f-word is used.’

In the piece on Knightley, the *Guardian* journalist recorded that, in the course of their conversation she told him to ‘fuck off’ six times – four of these suggestions made it into the piece as printed. She also told him: ‘I’m a shit person and no-one likes me. I’m an absolute cunt.’ A joke, I assume. Even if it wasn’t, I doubt it would have hurt her career. She was, as she spoke, the second highest-paid actress in Hollywood – i.e. the world. I also doubt that an actress of similar stature from an earlier generation – a young Helena Bonham Carter, say – could have made that kind of comment without her career and earnings taking a serious hit.

It’s also possible that the actress thought that by using fucks and cunts she was using the ‘authenticity’ of swearing to dilute the public perception of her as some kind of hoity-toity princess.

among liberal-socialist newspaper readers anyway. It's certainly true that her swearing was more like Ken Tynan's – deliberate and knowing – than Steve Jones' – unconscious and ... natural, I suppose. The sons and daughters of the well-behaved English middle-class often try this 'authenticity' one or two. It's why Tony Blair – and many, many others – drop into Estuary English. They believe that if they talk the way that honest sons and daughters of toil talk – or rather, the way they believe the working class talk and swear – they will osmose some of their authenticity. It's true that class is a big factor in swearing – not just in England either. But it's not, as you'll see, that simple.

Nor is this rise in both swearing and its acceptability an exclusively Anglophone thing. In the spoken language of every western culture I know even a little about, swearing is not just more widespread but more open, too. Listen to Polish workers on a bus. Or the Australian judges who rule that 'fuck off' is not offensive and that a defendant calling the judge a 'wanker' was not in contempt of court.

But the British do seem to be leading the way. When Gordon Ramsay's cooking-and-swearing TV show *The F-Word* was shown on Australian TV, a local politician made quite a fuss. Jerry Springer, whose TV show is sometimes a mess of bleeped-out words, remarked on how much the British swear. A BBC poll in early 2009 found that 68 per cent of people felt swearing had increased in recent years.

But then the British have long been known for their swearing. Joan of Arc called them '*Goddens*' for the 'god damns' that laced their speech since c. 1300. (Damn is from the Latin word, *damnum*, meaning damage – the church had taken it over, giving it a religious twist by 1325.) In his 1784 play *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Beaumarchais states that goddamn is the basis of the English language. 'The English (it must be owned) are a rather foul-mouthed nation,' wrote William Hazlitt – philosopher, writer, Unitarian, grammarian – in 1821. The very same year, on his first day in the country, Don Juan learned that, too, in south-east London. The man from Seville was on Shooters Hill at the time. He stepped from his carriage for a view of the city and a little philosophising – on, amongst other things, Bishop Berkeley's view on the nature of reality. He was interrupted by four highwaymen (hence the name Shooters Hill). Unfortunately, 'Juan did not understand a word of English', except one phrase which the robbers used repeatedly – 'God damn!' At least, that's the way Byron tells it, in Canto XI of his epic poem on the Latin lover – which also introduced the idea that truth can be stranger than fiction.

Shooters Hill is, as it happens, just up the road from where I went to university. I studied psychology. Often, when you tell people you've studied psychology, they say something like: Oh, you can look right into my mind, can't you? Usually, I say: Yes, I can. Sometimes, though, I tell them the truth: academic psychology is a dry discipline, with lots of statistics, biology and sometimes brutal animal experiments. Not many jokes or even witticisms. I remember just two, in fact, and they provide a good marker for the shifts in offensive language over the past three decades or so.

The first gag was about the hypothalamus. In my memory, it came in a lecture by the head of the course, a professor of gathering years whose tutorials were enlivened with small glasses of sherry. The hypothalamus is a small thing, about the size of an almond, which sits pretty much in the middle of your head. The gag was about its function. 'What does the hypothalamus do?' the professor asked rhetorically. He answered his own question: 'It controls the four Fs.' Which are? 'Feeding, flight, fight and ... sexual behaviour.' I could barely believe I'd heard it. An ageing, crustyish professor had just alluded to fucking, in a lecture. Some of the younger, less worldly girls looked genuinely shocked. Remember this is a third of a century ago. A different world, even in New Cross. It's not the whole story of the hypothalamus. It has other tasks, too. But the gag stuck those four f-word functions in my memory.

The other gag concerned Mendelian genetic theory. It was a limerick:

There was a young woman from Tring

~~Who had an affair with a darkie~~

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The result of their fling

Was not one but four offspring:

One black, one white and two khaki

Which is how genetic inheritance works – in the case of skin colour and other things, though not everything: 50 per cent of children will be a mix of their parents' stuff and 50 per cent will be a copy of one or other of their parents. What was the reaction to this limerick, in particular to the word 'darkie'? Amusement, surprise and perhaps an acknowledgment that it was maybe a little racist, though not in a really bad way. Complaints or outrage? None.

How things have changed. I suspect that, today, any psychology or biology lecturer using this limerick to teach genetics would be sacked before the end of its third line. The hypothalamus gap, well, that can be found in *How Babies Think*, a parents' guide to the science of babies' cognitive and emotional development, published in 2001 and written – beautifully and excitingly – by eminent psychologists who probably learned the 4F mnemonic exactly the same way I did.

Like all language, bad language changes and evolves. Right now, it's changing and evolving at a new pace. In twenty-first century Britain, words which were, until very recently, only uttered in private or on football terraces, are regulars on reality TV and in broadsheet newspapers. Sometimes they're bleeped or asterisked. Sometimes not. Other words, meanwhile, have made the journey in the opposite direction. Words which were once staples of prime-time sitcoms are now relegated to the outer darkness, banished from TV altogether.

Swearing still isn't exactly unlimited, though. Even on television – no matter what some campaigners might say. It's true that American cable programmes can be extremely swearful. The neo-western HBO series *Deadwood*, which ran from 2004 to 2006, was clocked at a record-breaking 92.4 fph (fucks per hour). I think it's fair to say that HBO is to TV what the *Guardian* is to newspapers. It's always first with the dirty words – certainly in the US – and it uses more of them than any other station would dare. It was HBO's *The Larry Sanders Show* which introduced 'cunt' to US TV viewers.

Two other HBO shows, *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, would both be lesser affairs without the constant profanity, blasphemy and obscenity. *The Sopranos'* New Jersey mafiosi would barely be themselves without the word 'cocksucker', and the entire stoical philosophy of the Baltimore police in *The Wire* is contained in their loving embrace of 'clusterfuck'. It's a word, as it happens, which shows the perverse polymorphousness of meanings. Clusterfuck has been around since the 1960s. It's been a US swinger's term for an orgy. It's meant a gang-rape. It's referred to 'a group of indecisive people unable to decide what to do next'. And, it's taken on the deadly, random violence of its brother word, cluster bomb. A clusterfuck is something pointless, stupid, incompetently and uncaringly violent. It's what soldiers in Vietnam felt was being done to them or on their behalf. Baltimore police, too. Not just a swearword, more an entire worldview. It's not the only swear with that kind of back story, either. There are many words like that, as I found out.

Yet regular network TV in America is still as swearing-unfriendly as British TV was perhaps forty years ago – and beset by the same problems of line-drawing. As Steve Jones' swearing on tea-time TV was a turning point in British swearing – and attitudes to it – so the American equivalent took place in 1973 when a complaint was lodged by a radio listener about an uncensored lunchtime broadcast stand-up comic George Carlin's routine, 'Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television'. These words were shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, tits. 'The heavy seven', he called them. The shakedown from the complaint about Carlin's brief routine has been at the centre of modern

America's debates about obscenity, language and the media ever since. More than that, the actual rules and regulations which entangle those three have been primarily shaped by the succession of court cases about George's heavy seven – up to and beyond the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) case against Bono's language at the 2003 Golden Globes. 'This is really, really fucking brilliant!' the U2 singer said, live on TV, as he picked up his award. The case against this – non-sexual – use of 'fucking' took four years to make its way through various courts, with Carlin's 1973 routine always in the background.

The borderline of language acceptability has shifted, too. Where once 'bloody' was, well, bloody rude, now it's bloody not. This borderline is still shifting, of course. There are rules, though – just ever-changing ones. Rules and restraints, both overt and covert, public and private. Swearing is cultural and situational. What's fine in one country or language is not in another. Even regional differences remain. Vicky, a Yorkshirewoman in young middle-age, has lived and worked in London for a couple of decades or so. She told me she couldn't believe how many cunts and fucks there were in London English. 'Though somehow,' she said, dropping into imitatory Lahndan, 'fahk and cahk just don't seem as serious or hard as fook and coont.'

Perhaps even more significantly, what's acceptable in one dialogue is inappropriate at best in another. Any conversation always involves a tacit contract drawn up by the parties – a contract more weaker or less elaborate for never being written down. Figuring it out is one of the major cognitive and emotional tasks of our childhood. Even now, few, if any, would call their maiden aunt a cunt – or someone else's child, even if the child were behaving in a way that might drive anyone to that kind of word. Or consider our genitals. It's true that men often refer to their penis as a prick – or dick or cock – in public and all kinds of company. But women don't generally call their cunt a cunt – though, long ago, they did.

On the evening of Elvis Presley's 70th birthday (Saturday 8 January 2005), BBC TV showed *Jersey Springer: The Opera*. Its most famous and most offensive line is probably 'fucked up the arse with barbed wire'. The previous day, the BBC announced – perhaps disingenuously – that it had already received 47,000 complaints about the forthcoming show, a new British all-comers record. Mostly, the complaints came from organized Christians. Attitude to swearing is a cultural – and religious – thing across the world and within Britain. A 2008 Ofcom report showed what it called EMGs, ethnic minority groups – in this case, defined as Indian, Pakistani, Black Caribbean and Black African – to be more 'concerned about media than the UK population in general'. Pakistani and Black Caribbean adults, in particular, are worried by 'violence, bad language, sex/nakedness and people behaving badly' on TV. Almost certainly, this is because they are more likely to be religious – and more likely to be more religious – than the average citizen of an increasingly non-worshipping nation.

It's also true that some people – particularly religious ones – are always trying to stop others, particularly non-religious ones – swearing. It's been going on at least since Moses came down from the mountain with his commandments, including the one about not taking God's name in vain. The great Hebraic stricture has, somewhat ironically, made a comeback in the Gaza strip. 'Cursing God in public here – a fairly common event in this benighted and besieged strip of Palestinian land – can now lead to prison,' reported the *New York Times*. Anything that needs to be that prohibited is something mighty powerful.

So, do all cultures swear? Are dirty words a human constant? Well, swearing and dirty words are clearly both current global universals. You just have to watch a street argument. Wherever you are in the world, however little you know of the language, you'll soon start to hear certain sounds and phrases being repeated. You'll pick up the rhythm soon enough. Every language has its 'You calling me a cunt, cunt?' or 'Fuck the fuck off, right fucking now.' Not that its bad words necessarily refer to vaginas or sexual intercourse. If, for example, you wanted to insult someone in Yapese, a Micronesian

language, you could say: '*Dari ea keruw*'. Which means: 'You have no foreskin.'

Has humankind always sworn? Well, obviously, we can't be certain about our distant ancestors' reaction to discovering that they'd forgotten to put the left-over mammoth ribs in the ice cave before popping out to collect the morning's berries. We can only draw on written languages. We've been talking for perhaps 150,000 years but only writing for about 5,500. Many languages were exclusively spoken ones till very recently – so have left no trace of their cursing history. So what historic evidence there is comes exclusively from those languages that developed some kind of writing – very few, in world terms.

That evidence is there, though, and it's clear. Roman law explicitly set out the who, where and when of cursing. One expert calculated that the Romans had eight hundred 'dirty' words. Egyptian lawyers of the same period would seal documents with a hieroglyph which translates as: 'As for him who shall disregard it, may he be fucked by a donkey.' The actual hieroglyph? Two big penises, both erect. Not even earlier times, Socrates was a famously big swearer, though his favourite oath is extremely odd to our modern ears – 'by the cabbage'. By the cabbage? The explanation of this oddness is itself extremely odd. The reference is to a particular variety of cabbage, the *halymynis*, which grew to a notably high degree of perfection in the hinterland of the port of Rhodes. Traders brought these cabbages to Athens where they became a dinner party must-have – not for their taste but for their supposed anti-hangover properties. The idea behind Socrates' curse was that if something could combat the toxic effects of wine, then it must have some heavy mojo – something worth swearing by.

Nor is this the only swear which condenses and embodies a nation's culture and history – see the 'Around the World' chapter. While my focus is on English, I found many strangenesses in the world of dirty words. A popular Brazilian word for the vagina, for example, is *boceta*. I learned it from Tamara, a friend from Porto Alegre, a hard-working, very un-Brazilian city in the deep south of the country. I asked her what *boceta* originally meant. She told me: 'A common little receptacle, usually round and made of metal that people used to store *rape* – a sort of dust people sniff to make them sneeze.' A snuff-box as a vaginal metaphor? In the country which gave us the samba?

Swearing and language taboos certainly seem to be a constant across human time and space. Many if not most cultures have two (or more) different words for intimate body parts. It's certainly not just an English or even modern reticence. The same split was found amongst Cape York aborigines, an extremely isolated culture with a very ancient hunting-and-gathering lifestyle. Anthropologist Donald E. Brown took a global variety of ethnographic studies and distilled from them the constants of human behaviour, thought and culture. He came up with the idea of what he called the Universal People – i.e. all of us and what we all have in common. What we do, what we don't do, what we think about when we do, what we talk about, what we don't talk about. It's a long list. In it are some clear and obvious links to the whats, hows and whys of swearing. These human universals of Brown's include swearing as an essential, time-honoured choice of subject matter. According to Brown, among the ideas, attitudes and actions shared by all human beings are: great interest in the topic of sex; standards of sexual modesty; sex generally in private; 'Oedipal' feelings (possessiveness of mother, coolness towards her consort); avoidance of incest between mothers and sons; discreetness in elimination of bodily waste. Brown's human universals also include two linguistic essentials for swearing – the use of metaphors and humorous insults.

Language taboos do differ, though, and so do styles and manners of swearing. Religious curses were once dominant but as the world has, by and large, become more secular, they've gone into eclipse – not everywhere, as my world tour of swearing will show. The other central subject matters of swearing are, obviously, sexuality and the bits of our bodies that excrete stuff. Britain's favourite swear has over the years, involved all three topics successively. First it was 'damn'. Then it was 'bloody'. Next it was 'fuck', of course – while 'bloody' was marked as 'the great Australian adjective'. Now? Well

the power of fuck has definitely waned and cunt has certainly taken its place as the most offensive sexual swear words while racial slurs are increasingly coming to be seen as the worst of all language.

So what is so important about swearing? Or dirty words, cursing, bad language, profanity, obscenity, language taboo? Or BLWs, the experts' acronym for bad language words? Though there are differences, it's also all the same stuff really. It's all a particular kind of language that sits apart from regular speech, that offers something somehow quite different from normal communication. They're all the type of word that 'is endowed by the hearers with mysterious and uncanny meanings; it chills the blood and raises gooseflesh', as H. C. Wyld put it in *A History of Modern Colloquial English* (1920). The particular word – or kind of word – that will evoke that reaction varies, though. Over time and over land and across all our – invariably strange – brains. Whatever censors might like to think, it's never the word that counts. It's the thought that sits behind the word.

What are those thoughts that sit behind swearing? What is so powerfully driving about it that it's done by pre-literate hunter-gatherers and first rank Hollywood actresses? Why do we swear anyway? Was Oscar Wilde right when he wrote: 'The expletive is a refuge of the semi-literate'? Swearing is clearly significant to us, very significant. Anything that is ubiquitous must be deeply significant. Swearing is a route back into our collective psychic history, offering glimpses of the prehistoric beings that bounce around inside us all. It rifles through the underwear drawers of our minds. As a Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker put it, 'Swear words are a window on the domains of life that arouse the strongest emotions: bodily secretions, powerful deities, death, disease, hated people, groups and depraved sexual acts.'

Thirty years on from Steve Jones' swearing at Bill Grundy, fuck is mainstream, on TV, in print, not yet in the *Daily Mirror*. There, it is still asterisked out, that strange way of censoring not the thing itself (the word indicated is clear even to a child) but the viewer's gaze. It's as if we censor pornography by putting all the models in the same diaphanous uniform. Where is the offensiveness? In the act, the thought, the word, or the meaning? Can those three things always be separated?

As Carlin's seven little baddies have become more and more acceptable, though, other words, ones which were common a generation ago, are now forbidden, even on football terraces. A couple of years after the Sex Pistols–Bill Grundy encounter, what was left of the band recorded a version of an old and dirty folk song, 'Friggin' in the Rigging'. It includes such words as 'fuck' and 'fucking' and 'cock'. As with most songs, you can find the lyrics online. All those words are there, in full, on lyricsfreak.com. Another word in the song isn't though – the one the online lyric trove spells 'n--ger'. Nigger, paki: these are the kind of words that cause the fuss now. Some dictionaries have excluded nigger. There have been campaigns to ban it. When it was reported that one *Celebrity Big Brother* house guest had referred to another, an Indian actress, as a 'nigger', Channel 4 said: no, she hadn't, she'd called her a 'cunt'. Well, that's all right, then.

Fucks clearly ain't what they used to be. Cunts, either. Fucks themselves can't change, though. Cunts, neither. They can't, can they. Fucks are fucks and cunts are cunts. Always have been, always will be. Words are words, though, and they change all the time. Or, rather, what we make of words changes. It's us that changes, not them. So what's changed – and is still changing? Our fucks, our cunts, our fucking words? All of them. Sex has changed – maybe in the bedroom, maybe not, who can say for certain what happens in people's beds and heads? But it's the way it's talked about in public that's now definitely not the way it was when Steve Jones swore at tea-time.

Which is why swearing and dirty words have again become a focus for public debate – particularly when it comes to television. The pull is not in just one direction. The title sequence for Channel 4's *Shameless* features the sentence 'I'll come on your face for the price of a drink.' On the other hand, BBC1's *Panorama* despatched a comic, Frank Skinner, to investigate the rise of swearing on TV. He was commissioned on the basis of a newspaper article in which he announced he'd decided to cut back

on swearing in his act – because that meant the swears that he left in had more impact.

In 1997, fashion chain French Connection rebranded itself as FCUK, an obvious – if denied – anagram of fuck. In 2005, James Campbell, deputy editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, became so concerned by the ubiquity of fuck in print that he ‘founded’ – his word – The FCUK-ization of Everything. A running series in NB, his weekly column in the magazine, it’s mostly about swearing but also what he sees as ‘general coarsening of public discourse’. His evidence from bookshops includes a collection of amended road signs, *Fuck This Book* by Bodhi Oser and *Is It Just Me or Everything Shit?* by Steve Lowe and Alan McArthur. (I fully expect – hope, even – that this book, too, will make it into his *TLS* column.) As always, wrangles over bad language are also a coded battle over morals – or rather, views of morality.

Swearing and much about it is still a great unknown, though. What is and isn’t an offensive word? How do we tell? Why the eternal strangeness of sexual slang? Why are our words for breasts so often funny and child-like? What about the violence of swearing, both sexual and merely profane? Is it the sound of the words themselves that’s violent or just the thoughts behind them? What do psycholinguistics and psychoanalysts have to say? Why this terrible love of terrible language? What are its effects on our hearts and brains? What does it mean that we swear so much more than we did thirty years ago? How can words for such human universals as copulation, penises and anuses also somehow be so universally unacceptable? I looked for – and mostly found – answers to these questions in all kinds of places. In linguistics texts, dictionaries and scientific research, obviously. But also in the wider world. My wider world, anyway. If many of my references are from the worlds of pop music, football and psychoanalysis, that’s because those things have long been major parts of my life, experience and thought.

I don’t have a PhD in linguistics and I’m not a psychologist or a psychoanalyst – though I have done some studying time in each of those areas. I had to go looking for answers. I’m not an expert. I have talked to experts, though – read their books, too. I’ve phoned a friend or two, and a lot of family. I’ve spoken to swearers of various ages, nationalities and sensibilities, from an ageing Anglo-French author to a Taiwanese psychiatrist and an Argentinian intranet database builder. I do have one full and relevant qualification, though – probably the same one as you. I can and do swear. I’m only one of Brown’s Universal People, after all.

‡ Portuguese: *preliminares*. French: les *preliminaires*: ‘Sounds more exciting in English, unusually,’ said my Anglo-French friend Paul. Hebrew: when actually doing it, the English foreplay; in sex manuals and advice columns, the literal translation, *mischa* (game) *makdim* (fore).

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# Chapter One

# Sexual Intercourse and Masturbation

The first time I said fuck, my parents moved house. I was four years old, give or take<sup>±</sup>. I was in the garden of our ground-floor council flat in east London, just off Stoke Newington High Street, a couple of hundred metres from the art deco Simpsons factory in which, a few years later, a future Sex Pistol – the one who would become Sid Vicious – would have the only proper job he ever had, helping make Daks suits (ultra-light, very expensive).

These days, when I tell people I started life in Stoke Newington, they almost inevitably imagine quite a different place from the one of my childhood. They couldn't do otherwise. Now it's 'Stokey' – cool, edgy, multi-ethnic, lesbianized, with late-night Turkish triperies, a Sainsbury's that sells goat cheese, streets of young professional families and episodic outbreaks of intercommunal gun-play.

For most of my early life, people hadn't even heard of Stoke Newington. There's never been a tube station within a couple of miles so it wasn't even on most people's map of London. For all they knew with a name like that, it was a village in the Mendips. In fact, it's little more than a mile from the City of London – straight down the old Roman road which, in time and the other direction, will take you to Cambridge. In my early childhood, though, in the mid-1950s – and for a long time after – it was as remote in the way only inner city working-class areas can be. Commuters, drivers, bus and tube passengers pass through, around and under them every day, twice a day, mostly without ever quite noticing they're there.

My whole family lived within half a mile or so – and did so for many years, long after we moved out, returning only for visits. (As this was every weekend and every holiday, it didn't always feel like we'd actually moved.) My father's mother's lived a little to the north, with my father's sister, her husband, their daughter and a terrifyingly ancient all-wood thunderbox of a toilet. On the other side of Amherst Road (future base for Britain's most active if splendidly incompetent 1960s anarchist terrorists) lived my father's brother and his family. Round the corner from them lived my mother's family, mostly in a stretch of four-storey Victorian terraces that hadn't had a good war and were waiting, crumblingly, for the arrival of Farrow & Ball paint catalogues.

My mother's mother and my mother's stepfather lived at 99. One of my mother's half-brothers and his family lived at 101, another at 103. There was a cousin of some kind at 105 and various other relatives dotted around odd rooms in the family houses. Later, at number 97, lived 'Blonde Carol' with whom my grandmother was friendly. It was in Carol's flat that the Krays' associate Jack McVitie was killed. My grandmother always said she heard his body go thump in the middle of the night.

Upstairs from my grandmother lived a Jewish couple and their son – not the bearded, hat-wearing frummer kind you'd see up the road in Stamford Hill but the more typical Stoke Newington one, a communist who spent his Saturdays not at synagogue but trying to sell the *Daily Worker* in Ridley Road market. That was the area, then: Irish and Jewish, working class. Sunday mass and Saturday b'nai mitzvahs. Confession and bagels. Everyone had a job. Really. The sun shone every day. Well, no.

It was an exclusively white world, anglophone with a touch of Yiddish in the background. As a small child, I never heard the word 'nigger'. There were none around. The first coloured person – the one who was the polite, respectful phrase – I saw was probably my builder uncle's foreman, an early Jamaican immigrant to the area. Chalkie, my uncle called him. If he minded being called Chalkie – which I later found out he did, on his behalf – he didn't say. Another uncle was more direct. When large numbers of West Indians did move into the area, he decided there were too many of them and moved out. (What did he call them? He's dead now so I can't ask him. It wouldn't have been Afro-Caribbeans, that's for sur

Niggers? Perhaps. Wogs? Possibly. Nig-nogs? That's the most likely one.)

Sexual swearing, though, was not part of my early years. It's generally assumed that the working class are and always have been society's greatest swearers but that's not my childhood memory. There were – as there always are – finer social gradations. There were large – no, giant – Irish families with dirty, smelly children who no-one wanted sitting next to them at school. These were the poorest of the poor in what was, after all, a poor neighbourhood. And they swore like ... well, like poor Irish. I suspect that their taste for bad language was one of the reasons my mother kept herself and us well away from them.

The only swearing from my own family that has stuck in my memory is my maternal grandmother's. It was all religious, of course, deeply and repetitively Catholic. A God-fearing woman from the turfed flatlands of County Laois, her country Catholicism particularly focussed on St Anthony, patron saint of the lost and found. He and his powers were often invoked, as were the three members of the holy family. If I said that, as a small child, I thought JesusMaryAndJoseph and HolyMaryMotherOfGod were both one word, I'd be joking. But then again, maybe not. One or other of them was my grandmother's response to anything surprising and she was a woman who found herself regularly surprised – many times, most days. But fuck? No, not in my family. I don't remember ever hearing it, only saying it.

I had a hammer in one hand, a big nail in the other and a piece of two-by-one badly balanced on a low wall. I must have found them lying around and decided to imitate my father's DIYing. I attempted to hammer the nail into the wood. I missed, inevitably, and hit my thumb. 'Fuck!' I said, naturally and easily, the way you do if it's what your friends say in similar circumstances. I can't say for certain where I'd heard the word. My best guess is in the street. We played in large groups in the road right outside the flat. Small children, big children, boys, girls. It was far from idyllic – there were the usual fights, name-calling and accidents. But there were no cars and no adults.

My mother overheard. She told my father. 'Bugger that,' said my father. 'We're moving.' I wasn't there for their conversation, I'm just guessing what was said, but it's a fair guess. He said bugger a lot, somehow not finding the word for anal intercourse as offensive as the one for general sexual intercourse. But then language is random like that. People from Maidenhead never laugh when telling you where they live. My parents, for example, who were based there during the Second World War. Would my mother have been as comfortable telling me they'd spent a couple of very happy years in Maidenhead, Virginity, Berks, or Hymen-on-Thames?

If she heard the word fuck, she'd flinch like she'd been struck. Naturally, she felt even more strongly about cunt. As did my father. Both had a true horror of that kind of language. They associated it, I think, with the relentless poverty they'd grown up in, and escaped. For my mother, it reminded her of the slovenly, Irish coarseness of her early life. For my father, it recalled the Friday night slurring of his drunken coal-heaver of a stepfather.

Yet my father's language was sprinkled with Charlies, both right and proper, and with berks, both complete and utter. Charlie is shortened rhyming slang, from Charlie Hunt. (Who was Charlie Hunt? No-one knows.) Berk is a similar rhyme shortened, from Berkshire Hunt or perhaps Berkeley Hunt, as it's pronounced to rhyme with jerk, the latter seems more likely, even if fox-hunting with dogs seems a world or two away from rhyming slang's east London homeland. Did my father know the words' origins? Probably not. If he had, would he have still used them? Probably. His relationship with words was as odd and complex as the rest of ours. We're all quite happy to divorce a word from its roots and any other meanings or associations it might have. Otherwise, we'd all giggle like eight-year-olds whenever we talked about a prick on our finger or former England goalkeeper David Seaman.

We moved a few months later – because of my exclamatory 'fuck!' – twenty miles to the northwest to a Hertfordshire new town, full of East End overspill like us. The power of a word. No wonder

became a writer. We lived in a four-bedroom council house in a cul-de-sac with a big park at the end of the road. The buildings were all new. My primary school was a glass and metal wonder. The town centre was white concrete, with underpasses and ramps and fountains. It's a sad, decayed site these days but, as a pre-teen, I thought it was fabulous. I felt like I lived in the future.

That was where I learned a fuller vocabulary of swearing. The details of my development in swearing arc have long escaped my brain. I just remember learning the basic words: nothing special, just the usual kids' stuff. Pee, dick, shit, titties. Breasts and nipples, too. To me, neutralish words like that were as rude as any 'real' swear word. To all children, then and now, probably. Compared to adults, children's ideas of obscenity are far more rooted in real, concrete anatomy than in literary representation and lexicography.

If I've forgotten learning the words themselves, I do remember how we'd say the name of the Toy comic, Tony Hancock while pointing to each syllable's corresponding body part – toe, knee, hand, cock. Hours – no, months – of guaranteed small boy entertainment. I also remember the pain and delicacy of figuring out when and where this and that word could and couldn't be said. I remember, too, those archetypal childhood discussions with friends about the worst possible word in the world. We couldn't actually say the actual word aloud, of course. Like all youngish children, we still half-believed that words were really things. When your daily reading is King Arthur stories – or Harry Potter books – it's easy to think words actually can do magic. We were terrified that saying this word aloud would ... would what exactly? I suspect that what we were really scared of was not that it would turn us into frogs or the seas into deserts but the possibility that the word we thought so terrible was actually not so terrible at all. We'd be terrified that we'd say it aloud and discover that it rated really, really low on everyone else's swear chart – one family's bugger is another family's titty. Our nightmarish foreboding was that, as we said it aloud, the other children would point at us, laugh out loud and inform us that we were a spazz.

Spazz, that truly nasty word, was the big insult word of my middle childhood. I'm not sure how we understood it but I'm sure we realized it was short for 'spastic' and probably linked that word to the drawings of those poor despairing-looking children in callipers that were on the collection tins we were cajoled into helping fill with donations. We had no idea, of course, that these children might not think much of our metaphorical use of their condition. I doubt if we'd have cared much if we had. We were children.

I certainly have no memory of the word 'cunt' from my primary school years. That must have come along later. But I do remember knowing 'fuck' and using it – tentatively at first, of course, in case we got the context or intonation wrong. I never used it at home, though. I liked it there. I didn't want to move house again.

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The beginning, the very moment of creation, the starting point for both life and fun: fuck! Or perhaps sexual intercourse! We all do it. Well, most of us. Our ancestors did it, too – not when they were fishes perhaps but not long after. As Cole Porter pointed out, birds, bees and even educated fleas, they all do it. And yet the simplest, most direct and longest-serving English language word for this most ontologically essential of human acts has, for most of its life, been considered so rude, so disturbing, so nasty, so condemnably *yeeeurgh* that people have been arrested, tried and jailed for speaking it or writing it. The *OED* wouldn't even give it page room till 1972.

All I can say to that is: fuck! Or: fucking hell! Or: fuck me! Or: how fucking stupid! As words go, fuck has always had wonderfully polymorphous possibilities. It's been called 'plainly the most versatile word in the English language' – by Scott Capurro, gay stand-up, and 'unsavoury joke

specialist. There can be an almost poetic intensity in its repetition. As in something said, some three decades ago, on a building site, to a friend of a cousin: ‘Fuck, the fucking fucker’s fucked.’ As in the speech patterns of Martin Tucker, the government’s Director of Communications in the 2005 BBC sitcom, *The Thick of It*: ‘Come the fuck in or fuck the fuck off.’ As in Pete Townshend’s response to his first sight of New Orleans, its life, its smells, its music spilling out of every alley, every window. Writer Nik Cohn, who was with him at that moment, recalled The Who man’s response: “‘Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,’” said Townshend, and I could tell he meant every word.’

There is also a wonderful potential versatility to fuck. As in the insult thrown at the crowd by Feist singer and guitarist Lee Ving in Penelope Spheeris’ 1981 pop doc, *The Decline of Western Civilization*: ‘Eat my fuck!’ As in the forensic examination of a murder scene in episode four of the first series of *The Wire*. The (white) lead detective, Jimmy McNulty, and his (black) partner, Burkley Moreland, are examining an apartment in which a girl has been murdered. The scene is just over three minutes long, with constant dialogue but barely two words used – fuck and motherfucker in the many tonal and intonational varieties. ‘Fuck’ – this is unexpected. ‘Motherfucker’ – so that’s how it happened. ‘Fuckin’ A’ – I’ve found the bullet. ‘Motherfucker’ – here is the bullet. ‘Fuck me’ – so it is.

There is a lecture easily found online, in one form or another. Sometimes it begins: ‘When Friedrich Nietzsche declared God is dead, then fuck became the most important word in the English language.’ Sometimes it starts by stating that fuck ‘is one of the most beautiful words. The English language should be proud of it’. The voice is an Indian voice. The speaker goes on to cite research on this ‘magical word’ which can describe ‘pain, pleasure, hate and love’ and which can take all different forms – as a noun, an adjective etc. The grammatical analysis is, well, a bit fucked, actually. He doesn’t know the difference between an adjective and an adverb for a start. But it’s still a great riff on how many different ways you can use the word, from ‘John fucked Mary’ to ‘oh, fuck’ to ‘fuckin’ brilliant’ to ‘fuck you’. It winds up with a suggestion to his audience that every morning on rising they should say ‘Fuck you’ five times – as a mantra. And there’s the clue to the identity of the voice. It is not, as many assume, from an Indian university lecture. It’s an extract from ‘The Great Pilgrimage From Here To Here’, written and performed by Osho, also known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the leader of an international cult who dressed in orange, settled near Seattle and had a lot of semi-compulsory sex with each other – and Osho, of course. He died in 1990, some say of AIDS.

Non-English speakers regularly make good use of fuck’s plasticity. Jamaican English has the wonderful ‘fuckery’. Pronounced ‘fuck-ree’ and not considered bad language, it indicates injustice: ‘a fuckery dat’, for example. Russian immigrants to New York have a word for making things go wrong, *fakapirovat* – a creative, Slavic mangling of ‘fuck up’. In 2008, Sichelle topped the Norwegian charts with a song translated from the Danish original. The story of a bitter break up, it took its title from the chorus, ‘*Fuck Deg*’ – fuck you. Not that there aren’t limits to even fuck’s versatility. In *The Human Touch*, Michael Frayn quotes a foreigner’s mistake: ‘You think you know fuck all, actually, you know fuck nothing.’

For all its ubiquity and polymorphous possibilities, fuck is really something of a newcomer. It arrived in time for Shakespeare to play around with it but it only predates him by a hundred years. That’s in written English, of course. Which lags way behind the restless, driven movements of the spoken language.

The first fuck appeared around the turn of the fifteenth century, in a poem. The *OED* translates the line as ‘The monks are not in heaven because they fuck the wives of Ely.’ The actual word in the poem was ‘gxddbov’. As befits such a potent word, it’s in code. Each letter has been replaced with the next one in the (u-less) alphabet of the day. Decoded, this gobbleddegook becomes ‘*fuccant*’ – ‘they fuck’. Formed by taking the basic English fuck and adding a Latin third-person plural suffix. Which is not quite as odd as it might seem. The whole poem was written in English-Latin macaronic. A wonderful

word, macaronic. It may just be my favourite English word, even if it is essentially Italian. It refers ~~something in which two or more languages are mixed up – like a dish of macaroni *al burro formaggio*~~. (That's the word's genesis. Honest Italian.)

The first actual appearance of the actual word 'fuck' is in a 1513 poem, 'In a Secret Place', by the Scots courtier, William Dunbar. It's the tale of a young man who is 'townysche, peirt, and guki' (townish, bold, and foolish) and his attempts to enter what his girl refers to as her 'crowdie mowdi' (vagina). The actual line is: 'Be his feirris he wald haue fukkit'. Feirris means behaviour, fukkit means fucked. In modern English, very loosely: the way he was carrying on, you could tell he wanted to fuck her. Dunbar's work also contains the first use of the modern spelling of cunt and the first recorded use of it as insult. A good amount of his poetry was what is called flyting – a word which comes from an old Scots word for quarrel. Flyting was a kind of battle of the poets in which two versifiers would take turns to outdo each other with the splendour and power of their invective. 'The Flyting Of Dunbar And Kennedy' has been described as 'just over 500 lines of filth'.<sup>†</sup>

Saloon bar philologists and bloggerati to the contrary, fuck is not an acronym. It is not For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge or File Under Carnal Knowledge. It is not Fornication Under Consent of the King or Forbidden Under Charter of the King. They're recent inventions, all of them, possibly no older than the 1960s. Backronyms, experts call them. (By experts, I mean experts in linguistics. I'm not the first to be amused by the fact that there is no distinct English word for the people who study linguistics. I could be linguistcian, but it's not.)

The actual origins of fuck are a little obscure – perhaps inevitably given the veils all societies like to throw over the act it represents. The *OED* links it with the Dutch *fokken* – even though that word only acquired a sexual meaning 150 years after fuck entered English. The dictionary also points to possible links with other words: a couple of regional Scandinavian words for sexual intercourse, the Norwegian *fukka* and the Swedish *fokka*. It wonders about the similarity of *ficken*, an archaic German word that meant fuck. Peering further back into history, the *OED* sees in fuck the same proto-Indo-European root that means strike – a sound which is still there in the first syllable of pugnacity.

Proto-Indo-European? The tongue spoken by our ancestors before our western European languages split, broadly, into the Germanic ones (including English) and the Romance ones (French, Spanish, Italian etc). Proto-Indo-European has not been spoken by anyone for at least five thousand years, possibly longer. Who spoke it? Well, it's essentially a hypothetical language, reimagined backwards from current and recently dead languages. There are ideas about real people speaking it, though. The most widely accepted theory puts it in the Kurgan culture of the Pontic steppe – now the area to the north of the Black and Caspian Seas. Another theory puts it south of the Black Sea, in Anatolia, Turkey. Kurgan culture? Another construct, one linked to the emergence of new belief systems in the area about seven thousand years ago – which involved building burial mounds, kurgans. They're still there. What do we know about this reconstructed language? Quite a lot. It had words for horses, dogs, sheep and pigs and for a wheeled vehicle. It had numbers up to 100, at least. It had no words, though, for either palm tree or vine – which give strong indications of its geographical reach.

How do linguists work all that out? In particular, how do they get from fuck to this ancient imaginary language? They trace a route via a set of propositions about the way the sounds of bits of words change over the years. By studying live, dead and disappearing languages, they tease out regular, predictable patterns in the way these sounds change. This pattern is called Grimm's Law, after Jacob – German academic, linguistics expert, older of the two fairytale collecting brothers. In fact Jacob Grimm didn't actually create the law named after him, but he did extend it. Such is the nature of the game. The fame one, too.

So how did fuck finally arrive in English? Some have pointed north, to Old Norse and the fact that many of the word's early appearances are in Scottish texts. Others suggest it was brought to the

British Isles by Dutch sailors. The fact that the first record of it is as recent as the fifteenth century most simply explained by guessing that it had been around for many centuries but, because of its subject matter and power, had never been written down. It has always been concealed behind the curtainings of shame.

Much of its life has been spent in lexical purdah. It didn't appear in any of the canting dictionaries or the many guides to criminal and underworld jargon that were published in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and which were very much precursors of proper dictionaries.<sup>†</sup> It was then, though, in *A Worlde of Wordes or more copious and exact dictionarie in Italian and English* (1598) compiled by John Florio – Anglo-Italian writer, translator, royal language tutor, possibly the model for Holofernes in *Love's Labours Lost*, probably a friend of Shakespeare's, most likely the man from whom the playwright acquired the rich knowledge of Italian life and manners that's on show in *Romeo and Juliet*. Some even think Florio was Shakespeare.

Florio offers fuck as one of five alternative translations of *fottere*, the Italian cousin of the French *foutre*. In *Henry IV*, Pistol cries out, 'A *foutra* for the world.' A fuck for the world, the obscenity being euphemized by the use of a foreign language. In fact, according to swearing historian Geoffrey Hughes, *foutre* can still be found in English itself, buried away in the first syllable of the word 'footling', meaning 'of no consequence; silly'. The *OED* does not agree with him, though, preferring the derivative of *footele*: to potter around.

Florio's other four synonyms? Sard, jape, swive and occupy. Sard? It's there in the Lindisfarne Gospels (c. 950), at Matthew 5:27 – the bit about how we shouldn't sard other people's wives. But it had gone from the language by the seventeenth century. Swive? It's there in Chaucer. Derived from the Old English *swifan*, meaning to move or sweep, it was the standard, non-rude word for the act till about 1700. Then it disappeared. Jape? As in jolly japes? Sort of. Jape's sexual meaning faded around the time Florio noted it – to be replaced by another, less grown-up idea of fun. Why did swive and jape disappear while fuck thrived? While experts generally don't think that a successful swear word is dependent on particular mixes of consonants and vowels, at least one expert has suggested that fuck's success may – *may* – be explained by its phonological pattern, of consonant + vowel + hard consonant (CVC).

Occupy? Originally, it meant what it means now – to have possession of. But the obvious carnal possibilities of that meaning were irresistible. So occupation became a sex thing, a switch documented by Shakespeare, playfully, in *Henry IV Part 2*, where occupy is described as 'an excellent good word before it was ill sorted'. Because of these sexual connotations, occupy virtually disappeared from formal written English for the next two hundred years, re-emerging, fresh and desexualized, just in time for the industrial revolution. We have our own modern equivalent, perhaps, in one of the most masculine of sex verbs, 'have' – as in 'Djhava?' (did you have her?).

Fuck barely appeared in print for three centuries. Its modern ubiquity, though, is more probably a reflection of usage than an increased willingness to print it. Most likely, as ever, the written word is finally catching up with its older brother, the spoken language. Certainly, according to McEnery in his history of swearing in English, 'the word fuck surged in popularity during the Victorian era'. In Sheridan Le Fanu's 1864 thriller, *Uncle Silas*, one character says to another: 'And why the pucker don't you let her out?' There is more and earlier evidence in, of all places, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, which was published in 1847. Queen Victoria had been in power for a decade. The retreat from the relative bawdiness of Georgian England into the new industrial-age prudery was meant to be well underway. We know that Emily Brontë struggled with the raw facts of raw language. Two years after the author's death, in 1848, her sister Charlotte wrote about this in a preface to a new edition of the novel. 'The practice of hinting by single letters those expletives with which profane and violent people are wont to garnish their discourse, strikes me as a proceeding which, however well meant,

weak and futile. I cannot tell what good it does – what feeling it spares – what horror it conceals.’ It is an argument that still has force and meaning today. The *Guardian* uses this passage in its style guide to justify its preferring to print fuck rather than f--- or f\*\*\*.

There’s something more revelatory and interesting, though, in *Wuthering Heights* itself. There is a line in the novel which points indirectly but fairly obviously to a swear-filled world beyond the Brontës’ Yorkshire parsonage – a world that Emily was clearly familiar with. Familiar enough, anyway, to refer to it in her novel. The narrator, Lockwood, is recounting a pre-dawn encounter between Heathcliff (the anti-hero) and Catherine (the heroine). Heathcliff is caught speaking. “And you, you worthless ----” he broke out as I entered, turning to his daughter-in-law, and employing an epithet as harmless as duck, or sheep, but generally represented by a dash.’ It’s not really at all ambiguous, is it. Duck = fuck. Sheep = shit. Emily Brontë might not have written the actual words but she made clear what they were – and knew that her supposedly prudery-wracked readers would, too.

There are a great number of other swears in the novel, all shielded behind dashes but still clear and central to the book in general and Heathcliff’s character in particular. For example, the brooding anti-hero is reported as having promised that if the curate came into the house he would ‘have his ---- - teeth dashed down his ----- throat’. Damned teeth and throat probably but it could easily be ‘fucking’. He calls Isabella a ‘mere slut’ and Catherine an ‘insolent slut’. Isabella also recalls one of his threats: “‘You’d better open the door, you ----” he answered, addressing me by some elegant term that I don’t care to repeat.’ As the dashes can’t represent damn, it’s suggested that the dashed word indicated by the use of ‘elegant’ – a rhyme for cunt.

The lexicographical history of fuck is outlined, with wit and wryness, in the essential text on the subject, *The F-Word* by Jesse Sheidlower – who is also the man the *OED* puts you in touch with if you ask them, as I did, any kind of question about bad language. After its debut in Florio’s book, fuck was still there in *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721) compiled by Nathan Bailey. Like Dr Johnson, who nominated fucking as life’s greatest pleasure, Bailey was a lexicographer with a taste for the possibilities of life beyond the book. His church, a Seventh Day Baptist congregation, censured him for ‘frequent light and low conversation with two single women, he being a single man and a high professor ... and they in principle and practice being so unfit company for his diversion and pleasure’. His dictionary was more discrete than he was, though, using lexicographer’s Latin to define fuck as *Foeminam Subagitare* – to have illicit sexual intercourse with a woman. The most popular dictionary of its day, Bailey’s work was a major source for Dr Johnson’s far more famous – and shorter – *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), which didn’t include fuck (something of a hypocrisy given both Johnson’s own use of the word and opinion of the activity). It did appear, though, in Johnson’s *New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* (1795) – as did cunt. But it was excluded from Johnson’s transatlantic cousin, the *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), crafted by Noah Webster, a man of such worryingly delicate sensibilities that he would change stink to ‘offensive in smell’ and substitute buttocks with ‘hind-parts’.

Fuck’s first appearance in a modern reference work came in Farmer and Henley’s 1891/3 *Slang and Its Analogues* – cunt was also in it. But when the editors of the *OED* reached their fourth volume and the letter F in 1900, they too left it out. In 1934, philologist Allen Walker Read wrote an essay about it, ‘An Obscenity Symbol’, without once using the word itself. Even Eric Partridge, the great twentieth-century writer on non-mainstream English, asterisked it as f\*ck in his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1937). In 1961, it got as far as being typeset for *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* but was then removed, at the last moment, on the orders of the publishers, H. W. & C Merriman – though, oddly, cunt was included. It almost made it into the 1966 Random House printing, but didn’t quite, having to wait its turn till the 1987 edition.

As far as regular dictionaries were concerned, it only became a modern English word in 1965 when

it appeared, finally, in the *Penguin English Dictionary*. It made its official entrance into American English in 1969 when it was included in the *American Heritage Dictionary*. Cunt also debuted in both dictionaries. Both defined it with the same Latin word, though the English one favoured the plural (*pudenda*) and the American the singular (*pudendum*).

It first appeared in the *OED* – again along with cunt – in the 1972 revision. But the debate about its inclusion began many years earlier. The dictionary’s editor, New Zealand-born Robert Burchfield, told the story in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* when the word did finally appear. Burchfield recalls that, as early as 1933, lexicographer A. S. C. Ross wrote in a review of the *OED* that ‘it certainly seems regrettable that the perpetuation of a Victorian prudishness ... should have been allowed to lead to the omission of some of the commonest words in the English sexual language’. The review being in an academic publication, Ross used the actual words, too. When Burchfield took over at the *OED*, in 1957, he consulted his predecessor, C. T. Onions (the man whose lexicographic expertise is probably the source of the phrase ‘know your onions’, he once described the English language as ‘a rum go – but jolly good’). They agreed that ‘the time had not yet come’ for cunt and fuck’s inclusion in ‘general dictionaries of English’ – i.e. non-slang ones. Perhaps he was guided by the fact that two years earlier, in 1955, a British bookseller was sent to jail for two months for selling a book containing this word – D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

Five years later, when Penguin decided to publish *Lady Chatterley* – which had been banned in Britain since its first printing, in 1928 – the publisher ended up in court. It was the first book to be prosecuted under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act. In the words of Bernard Levin’s *The Pendulum Years*, a dryly mordant history of the decade, ‘the Sixties began with an attempt to stop the decade entirely and replace it with an earlier one’. As Burchfield himself acknowledged, the motor for the inclusion of fuck (and cunt) came with this trial – which introduced the word fuck to the British breakfast table.

The first fuck appeared in a British or American newspaper – knowingly, anyway – on 4 November 1960. Naturally, it was in the *Guardian*. The previous afternoon, a jury had decided that *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was not obscene and Penguin Books could therefore go ahead with its publication. This first ‘fuck’ appeared in an opinion piece written by Wayland Young, a writer, novelist and journalist. Young thought the jury had made the right decision, of course – ‘a triumph of common sense’. For him, the trial had turned on the evidence of defence witness Richard Hoggart, then a fast-rising academic and cultural commentator. ‘The hero’, Young called Hoggart. ‘I think he made history.’ A sentence that slyly prefigures Young’s own history-making in his very next sentence. ‘In his evidence, using the word in its correct and proper sense, he said the point Lawrence made was “Simply, this is what one does. One fucks.”’<sup>†</sup>

This put the paper’s editor, Alistair Hetherington, in a quandry that he’d successfully evaded throughout the trial. Though called as an expert witness, Hetherington had little in common with most of the book’s other defenders. His area of expertise was military – he’d written a monograph for tank warfare. His idea of a good time was fell-walking. He was something of an ascetic. If he was the night’s duty editor, he would not have cream with his lunchtime fruit salad – ‘to keep his head clear for the evening’. Throughout the trial, he’d ensured that the paper by and large avoided using either the words themselves or their asterisked versions. ‘This restriction created some difficulties,’ he recalled in his autobiography. ‘But it seemed the most expedient course.’

Like a medieval papacy, the *Guardian*’s editorial offices were then split between its historic base in Manchester, and its future base, London. Hetherington was in Manchester. Young filed his piece in London. It was teleprinted to Hetherington. There were just ninety minutes to go before the piece was due ‘off-stone’ – i.e. sent to press. Advice was sought from the paper’s London-based libel lawyer John Notcutt. His judgement was also telexed to Hetherington. Not unusually for a libel lawyer, he

expressed himself in the language of the race track. If, like *Lady Chatterley*, the paper was charged under the ~~Obscene Publications Act~~, he gave the chances of a guilty verdict as '6 to 4 against'. Unconvinced against the clock and disinclined to censor Young's copy, Hetherington took the bet – and laid it off a little by hastily composing a short leader headed 'Vulgar or not?' In it, he wrote: 'The short answer is not.'

There was not a single reader complaint about this first fuck but the Press Council was not amused. It 'rebuked' the *Guardian*, as well as the *Observer* (which also printed 'fuck', in a piece by Kenneth Tynan) and the *Spectator* (in a piece by Bernard Levin which didn't include 'fuck' but did have 'shit and arse' in the first sentence). 'Both objectionable and unnecessary', it harrumphed. *The Times* concurred with that sentiment. On the trial's outcome, it was suffocatingly itself: 'A decent reticence has been the practice in all classes of society and much will be lost by the destruction of it.' The *New Statesman* was similarly self-parodic, describing the verdict as 'a triumph for a working-class writer'.

In the aftermath of the trial, Burchfield wrote an internal report on the possibility of including fuck and cunt in the *OED*. He decided against but his reasons are weak: written evidence of usage was scanty and they were already in slang dictionaries. You can tell his heart isn't even in his own argument. At a 1928 dinner to celebrate the completion of the first edition of the *OED*, politician Stanley Baldwin said it laid bare the soul and the mind of England. But not completely – as Burchfield well knew – while it continued to leave out a couple of the nation's most central words (and thoughts).

So Burchfield did the sensible thing. By 1962, he'd started drafting the entry for cunt himself. Shortly after, he started on fuck. Philip Larkin, therefore, was quite correct – in his poem 'Annus Mirabilis' – in placing the arrival of sexual intercourse in the British Isles as somewhere between 11 November 1960 (the delivery of the verdict in the *Lady Chatterley* trial) and 11 February 1963 (the formal start of the recording sessions for the Beatles' first LP).<sup>‡</sup>

Five years later, on 5 January 1968, the Delegates of the Oxford University Press gathered to discuss the progress of the forthcoming supplement to the *OED*. In particular, they discussed fuck and they discussed cunt. They decided to include them. Or rather, in the way lexicographical academics do, they 'approved in principle the inclusion of these two four-letter words'.

In April 1969, someone from the underground magazine *Oz* wrote to the *OED* complaining that they'd paid £7.50 for a copy of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* and registered a complaint. 'It does not contain the word fuck. We would be interested to know the reason for this curious omission.' In November – such is the hurtling pace of lexicography – D. M. Davin replied on behalf of the Delegates. The question is 'a vexed one', he agreed and cited commercial and 'scholastic reasons' for omitting it – i.e. sales would be hit by some people's refusal to buy the dictionary. Mr Davin did conclude, though, by promising *Oz* that both fuck and cunt would appear in the next full *OED*.

When the two words finally made their way into the most authoritative record of written English, a *OED* press officer said: 'Standards of tolerance have changed and their omission has for many years and more frequently of late, excited critical comment'. Reviewing it, the *Guardian* noted the arrival of fuck – which it printed in full – but not cunt. *The Times* printed neither but noted their inclusion with fabulous periphrasis: 'very ancient, very popular words ... that fall between A and G are faithfully recorded.' They were joined by other sexual newcomers: come, condom, cunnilingus, fellatio, French letter, frig, frigging. Non-sexual arrivals included anorexia nervosa, goggle-box and 'the new use' of hopefully. (As in: 'Hopefully, now the *OED* includes fuck and cunt, people will stop accusing us of being out-of-date'.)

If, in retrospect, it seems extraordinary that it should have taken so long for words that had been central to the language for at least seven hundred years to make it into the English dictionary record, Burchfield himself provided a little perspective – and a correction to the suggestion that this was a result of English reserve. Equivalent words, he pointed out in his *Times Literary Supplement* article

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