Expletive Deleted

Things not going too well this holiday . . . ?

LAURA SPINNEY

“Fiddlessticks!” exclaimed Father Christmas as he over-shot the chimney and landed in a cabbage patch. He could have said fiddle-de-dee, foo, fudge or any of a dozen or so decorous corruptions of the f-word. Santa has to avoid bad language because of the children, but for the rest of us the choice of words we can use to vent our frustration when things go wrong is nothing short of dazzling.

Swearing “recruits our expressive faculties to the fullest”, writes Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker in his new book, The Stuff of Thought. Yet despite being a showcase for creativity, swear words are taboo in virtually all societies, even though their subject matter—usually sex or excretion—describes activities fundamental to human existence. So why are we such potty-mouths, and what gives certain words the power to shock?

One theory is that cussing is the form of language that comes closest to a physical act of aggression. When you swear at someone, you are forcing an unpleasant thought on them and, lacking earfids, they are helpless to repel this assault. “It’s a substitute for physical violence,” says Timothy Jay, a psychologist at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams. “From an evolutionary point of view, it’s an advantage for us to be able to say ‘fuck you’ from across the street,” while not having to worry about getting instantly punched or kicked by the disgruntled recipient.

The idea that swearing packs an emotional punch is supported by neurobiological investigations that show it to have a powerful effect on the brain’s emotional centre, the limbic system (see “Mind Your Language”). Most of us are able to restrain ourselves from launching these linguistic assaults—at least some of the time—but studies of people who lack this restraint are revealing.

Individuals with Tourette’s syndrome have characteristic tics such as blinks and throat clearing, and between 10 and 20 percent also exhibit involuntary swearing, otherwise known as coprolalia. Diana Van Lancker Siddis, a neurolinguist and speech pathologist at New York University, says that coprolalia can be regarded as a kind of vocal limbic tic. People with Tourette’s have damage to a part of the brain called the basal ganglia—clusters of neurons buried deep in the front half of the brain that are known to inhibit inappropriate behaviour. Without the basal ganglia to keep it in check, the limbic system is free to produce uncontrollable swearing, she says.

As Pinker sees it, the basal ganglia are responsible for tagging certain thoughts as taboo. When the “don’t-go-there” label is no longer applied, as with Tourette’s, taboo thoughts can reassert themselves and the urge to cuss becomes overwhelming. There is even one recorded case of a man with Tourette’s who was deaf from birth and expressed his coprolalia through sign language. In 2000, doctors at London’s National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery reported that his swearing was randomly interspersed within his signed speech, just as it is in other people with coprolalia. What’s more, rather than flipping the finger or making other obscene gestures that hearing people deploy, he used the recognised signs for rude words (Movement Disorders, vol 15, p 318).

Tourette’s aside, many people fear that bad language is on the increase. Most studies of the subject have found that men swear more than women. But a new survey by Mike Thelwall at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK now suggests that, among young British users of the social networking website MySpace, strong swear words are used by males and females about equally—and a lot. “Where once the only swear words young people wrote might have been furiously scribbled on the walls of public toilets, now they type them casually onto a computer screen,” says Thelwall. “And there, they never run out of space.”

Don’t Wear It Out

Over the past three decades Jay has recorded 10,000 people swearing spontaneously in public. Though it is difficult to assess overall levels of bad language, he thinks that women and possibly children are swearing more than they used to, and that profanity has become common in various situations where it was once rare, especially recreational ones. Jay believes the widespread use of expletives reflects another important function of swearing: to promote social bonding. Whether swearing is perceived as aggressive or as a social entrée depends on the context, he notes. “In the locker room, the guy who doesn’t swear is the weirdo.”

Jay’s survey reveals that “fuck” and “shit” between them account for about half of all swearing in the United States. In 2006, a contestant on the UK’s Big Brother TV show used the f-word 88 times in 20 minutes (all were bleeped out), leading
some pundits to lament that modern society was in danger of wearing it out. Their concern is misplaced, says Jay. He believes that the utter swear words retain their power because their usage is constantly changing as they are adopted by new kinds of users and as we create new domains in which to express them.

Linguist Tony McEnery at the University of Lancaster in the UK, author of Swearing in English, says that the sheer versatility of the f-word should guarantee its enduring appeal. Usually used to express a strong negative emotion, it can also be used positively or ironically, as in “fucking marvellous”, or to give emphasis, as in “abso-fucking-lutely”, a construction whose ingenuity places it in a linguistic category all its own.

“As long as we have institutions like the mass media and the government that forbid us to say these things in public, they’re going to retain their power,” Jay says. Yet the taboo nature of expletives also means that many of us are afraid to explore the full lexicon, which is why lay and others turned to people with coprolalia to plumb the depths of foul language.

“Tourette’s unleashes the most socially inappropriate words in a language,” says Jay. It is thanks to this work that we know that languages as far apart as Japanese and Dutch have swear words denoting faeces, the female genitals and incestuous sexual relations. It has also turned up some surprising items in the obscenity canon, such as the Italian rognoso (scabby) and the German verfaulthe Knochen (rotten bones).

By poring over this rich library of filth, researchers have been able to get a handle on just what makes a good swear word. It is not just its sound, says McEnery: after all, “shot”, “ship” and “spit” are not considered obscene, whereas “shit” is. Besides, the German and French equivalents sound quite different and still pack a very satisfactory punch. It cannot just be about semantic content either, because the use of words denoting faeces or sexual matters in a medical context remains acceptable. “Something about the pairing of certain meanings and sounds has a potent effect on people’s emotions,” Pinker says.

Swear words also go in and out of fashion in line with the taboos they breach. “Damm” was the indisputed king before ‘f**k’ arrived on the scene,” says McEnery, but lost its piquancy as the fear of burning in hell faded. “Posy”, “leprous”, “canker” and other disease related words went the same way as hygiene improved. From the 19th century on, English-speakers have mostly vented their frustration by reference to two different classes of taboo: the sexual and the scatological.

Today the f-word reigns supreme, but there is still room for innovation. So, what will be the next big thing in swearing? Most experts decline to predict any winners. “Paedophile” seems to be an especially offensive thing to call someone today, says McEnery, and therefore a good candidate, but there is no evidence it is gaining ground as a swear word. “Something is missing with that word,” he says. Pinker says the word “cancer”, while not yet obscene, is acquiring taboo characteristics; note how it is often referred to as “The Big C”.

**Mind Your Language**

Bad language is intrinsically different from other language. The strongest evidence for this comes from instances of stroke patients whose brain damage has left them unable to speak but who retain the ability to swear. A particularly sad case was the 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, who suffered a stroke at the age of 45. According to cognitive neuroscientist Sebastian Dieguez of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, who studied Baudelaire’s case this year, the only vaguely meaningful sound the great poet uttered from then on was a mere to the Sacre nom de Dieu! (something like “goddamn”), an expletive that in other cases might have meant something more.

Baudelaire’s stroke damaged the left hemisphere of his brain, a feature common to all mouthed but otherwise speechless stroke patients. This has prompted neurologists to speculate that swear words are stored in the brain’s right hemisphere. In fact, they suspect that all formulaic expressions, including other taboo words, prayers and song lyrics, reside in the right, while propositional language—i.e. words that are combined according to grammatical rules—is stored in the left.

That’s not all, though. Unlike most language, which is produced and processed in the cortex, the most recently evolved outer layer of the human brain, swearing involves the more ancient emotional network, the limbic system. Brain scans reveal that when people hear expletives, a structure that forms part of this system, known as the amygdala, is activated almost instantly. Intriguingly, when you stimulate the limbic system of a macaque monkey, it produces emotional vocalisations, a finding that has led Diana Van Lancker Siddis at New York University to argue that these angry grunts and shrieks share neurological underpinnings with human profanity. “An emotional impulse can structure a vocalisation with a large amount of energy and intensity, and in humans that is used communicatively,” she says. While monkeys appear to shriek, humans channel that energy through words.

Jay has road-tested a few contenders of his own. He once muttered “Expletive!” on a golf course, and got some strange looks. You can’t impose swear words on a language, he notes, they arise organically. So if you’re tempted to cry “Basting hell!” when you ruin the festive turkey, fine. Just don’t expect it to catch on.

**Laura Spinney** is a writer based in London and Paris, who can swear imaginatively in two languages.