

A FOUR-LETTER FAN

AFTER HE BEGAN teaching “An Uncensored Introduction to Language,” a profanity-themed linguistics course at the University of



California, San Diego, cognitive scientist **Benjamin K. Bergen** noticed that many English

swear words have a funny similarity: They contain just one syllable and end in a consonant. It’s a great example of the clustering that happens frequently in language, as with light-related terms like *glow*, *gleaming*, and *glimmer*. A wade through our forbidden vocabulary offers many other enlightening glimpses into how we use words, as Bergen details in his new book, *What the F*.

—MATT HUSTON

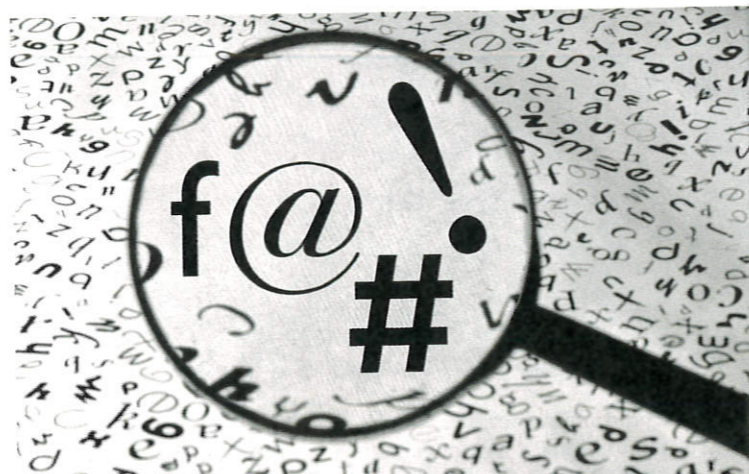
What can we learn from the way curse words change over time?

The word *dick* used to refer to a riding crop—then it became a metaphor for an anatomical part. A word gaining a new meaning is a normal process, but what’s interesting about profane terms is that they systematically lose their old meanings. You don’t use *dick* to refer to a riding crop anymore because of the trouble that can be caused by confusion.

What happens to a profane word in the long run?

It enters into the common vocabulary and loses its salaciousness. Curse words seem inefably powerful, but if we step back and compare them with words that did the same thing hundreds of years ago, we see that the words themselves don’t have any inherent power—just the power we give them.

Can you think of a once-



empowered curse word that is meaningless to us now?

In Shakespeare’s time, to *swive* would have been a more common way than the F-word to talk about sexual intercourse. Today, I don’t think it would have much purchase outside of a Renaissance fair.

Could you explain a major misconception Americans have about curse words?

There’s a pervasive belief that profanity is intrinsically harmful to children, but there’s really no evidence for it. Verbal abuse can be damaging, but that’s not the same as profanity. You can verbally abuse someone by saying that they’re stupid or worthless, and you can use profanity in very positive ways: “Your grades on that chemistry test were fan-f***ing-tastic! Let’s go get ice cream.”

MASTRELE KEEGAN IHL PHOTOGRAPHY (HEADSHOT)

Profanity, you explain, has also taught us about how the brain produces language.

People with damage to Broca’s area in their left cerebral hemisphere often have trouble articulating speech. Many of them, while they can’t say “There’s a cat,” can swear and often do. This has been known for 150 years, but people figured out only recently that spontaneous swearing uses a different brain pathway from the rest of language. It’s a totally different route to swear when you stub your toe. It’s evolutionarily much older and predates our capacity for intentional speech.

We curse when we’re angry or excited. Is it largely a way for us to spread those feelings?

That’s kind of what language does in general. Some language is really good at contaminating other people with your ideas. Other language has a more direct path to the emotions, and profanity is most definitely among the latter.

SOUNDS LIKE A GIRL

ALBUS. KATARA. OBERON.

Which one of these names belongs to a woman? You’d probably guess Katara, and you’d be correct. But how did you know? In some languages, including English and Spanish, feminine names often end in a “schwa” sound, such as the unstressed *ah* in Jessica or Maria. But a new paper published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* suggests there are further clues.

The way we pronounce the first syllable of a name, researchers argue, may influence whether it seems more fitting for a boy or a girl. Analyzing 270 names in the United States and India, psychologists Michael Slepian and Adam Galinsky found that names given to boys tend to begin with **voiced phonemes**—basic units of speech which, like the *n* sound in Nathan, are created by

TOP BOY AND GIRL NAMES, 2015

- GIRLS**
1. Emma
 2. Olivia
 3. Sophia
 4. Ava
 5. Isabella
 6. Mia
 7. Abigail
 8. Emily
 9. Charlotte
 10. Harper

- BOYS**
1. Noah
 2. Liam
 3. Mason
 4. Jacob
 5. William
 6. Ethan
 7. James
 8. Alexander
 9. Michael
 10. Benjamin

Source: Social Security Administration

vibrating the vocal cords. Girl’s names, however, are more likely to start with **unvoiced phonemes** (like the *k* in Katelin), which don’t require the vibration.

The researchers also found that voiced sounds struck listeners as “harder” than unvoiced ones. The divergent trends in male and female names may stem from ingrained associations of

men with hardness and women with softness, according to Slepian. The differences also support the concept of sound symbolism—the idea that the sounds of some words are connected to what they represent. Such links, he says, “help us answer the question of where our words come from and why they’ve been used the way they have.” —SHIRA POLAN

AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL AGENCY, INC.

PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY INSURANCE FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

- SOCIAL WORKERS
- PSYCHOLOGISTS
- ADDICTION PROFESSIONALS (Endorsed by NAADAC)
- SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS (Endorsed by NASP)
- MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS
- HYPNOTHERAPISTS (Association Membership Required)
- MARRIAGE & FAMILY THERAPISTS
- ALLIED HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS
- SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES
- STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS
- PSYCHIATRISTS
- PSYCHIATRIC NURSE PRACTITIONERS
- PSYCHIATRIC PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS
- PSYCHIATRIC APRN



www.AmericanProfessional.com
(800) 421-6694



EVER WISH YOU COULD PUT THIS FEELING IN A BOTTLE? ... WE DID IT.

RIDGECREST HERBALS
Anxiety Free
STRESS RELIEF COMPLEX

- Increase calm & well-being*
- Relieve stress & tension*
- Reduce fatigue & irritability*

Herbal & Nutritional Supplement
60 Vegan Capsules

Available at fine health food stores and at RCherbals.com.
Call for a **FREE** sample!

RIDGECREST HERBALS
1-800-242-4649 www.RCherbals.com