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If It Looks Like a *uck: A Provocation on B*d Words

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If it's a p*ssy being grabbed, then even a serious journalist has to say: *the P word.* Though if it is a kitty being petted, it seems still to be fine to say, "…nice pussy…" Likewise, it's still okay to read the nursery rhyme, *Ding Dong Bell*, aloud. The word "pants" – as a part of the phrase "clown pants" – was not allowed in the title of an article we had published in the *Journal of Documentation* because of its naughty connotations with women's underwear; yet, removing the space to form "clownpants" was acceptable, though not to the spell checker in Microsoft Word.

For some decades, we've been considering (and using) "b*d" words. Such a large part of the document space is made up of words, it seems necessary, upon occasion, to explore the crooked little paths and messy gutters occupied by some words. We invite your company on such a little exploration now.

How can we say b*d words enhance the idea of a "turn to the functional?" Since all known languages have some form of b*d words or words that are deemed b*d, there must be some communicative function they hold. Linguists and neurologists are now studying b*d words and their various roles and functions. At least some of that research is in keeping with our suggestion that b*d words accompany and mark transition points – successes and failures – in difficult tasks, as illustrated by interviews with a submarine chaser and a bounty hunter. (O'Connor, Copeland, & Kearns, 2003).

At DOCAM'14 in Kent, Ohio, we did a presentation about b*d word blurting during reading and research. Bad word blurting could represent the behavioral correlate for the excitement – the entropic burst (Kearns & O'Connor, 2014) – of finding something interesting or useful in the documents one is reading. This is somewhat aligned to M. E. Maron's (1977) assertion that grabbing a book off a stack shelf upon seeing words on the spine is a behavioral correlate of what the book is about. Somewhere in the time between, it occurred to us that we ought to start thinking of b*d words and "ac*eptable" alternatives in a Shannonesque way.

As a catalyst, we made a basic, unserious post on Facebook asking for the b*d words that would get you into trouble as a kid, along with the ac*eptable alternatives that were okay to use. From this list of volunteered b*d words and ac*eptable alternatives posted in a public forum, there were about 100 English-language b*d word/ac*eptable alternative pairs received. Many of these were

duplicates. We also asked for geographic information, and selected for this little exploration only word pairs from across Canada and the United States.

Cover your eyes if you're easily off*nded by words, or scroll quickly past the text box, because here is a compilation of the most frequently occurring b*d words people volunteered and the ac*eptable alternatives they were allowed to use without punishment. Actually, if you find this offensive in part or whole, we would be interested in having you share with us just why that is the case. This is a selection from the full list and is presented here with the b*d words first in all c*ps and in *lphabetical order. Some ac*eptable alternatives follow in small letters.

A*S: arse, bum, butt
A*SHOLE: @$$hole, a-hole, butthead, jackhole, president zuma, turdface
B*TCH: be-atch, beach, female dog, jerk
D*MN: damp, dang, darn, doodle
F*CK: eff, fart, fiddle faddle, frick, frig, fuddle duddle, fudge, phuck
H*LL: hades, heck, heel, h-e-double-hockey-sticks
OH MY G*D: oh my golly, oh my goodness, oh my gosh, oh my land o'
        goodness, oh Mylanta, omg
P*SSED OFF: cheesed off, p'ed off, peeved off, t'ed off, ticked off
SH*T: #2, crap, poop, shiitake, shit-tauqua, shite, shoot

Phew! You made it. No big deal, right? But b*d words are a big deal to many. Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver's (1949) *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* provides a framework for thinking about ac*eptable alternatives to b*d words by looking entirely at the structure of b*d words as communicated messages. It's not at all that the content or actual word functions are unimportant. In fact, if we were interested in word functions, we might simply say that ac*eptable alternatives are surrogates for b*d words. That is, ac*eptable alternatives stand in place of b*d words. In the library world, we do this all the

time in practice. A cataloger selects an ac*eptable alternative, or surrogate, for whole works, such as a string of subject headings that stand for the original communicated message—a book—or an index term selected to use to point to the content of a scientific article. It's not unreasonable, then, to think about ac*eptable alternatives as surrogates in a way similar to that in which we think about surrogates in common indexing and abstracting practices.

If an utterer has already selected a surrogate that represents or stands for the original in the ac*eptable alternative selection process, let's say comparison of function of the b*d word and the ac*eptable alternative is obvious, and the word meanings or functions have been established as equivalent. Instead, let's consider structural comparisons, because, at this point, we're thinking that a duck is a duck, and we all know the old adage that tells us about duck structure: if it looks like a duck, and sounds like a duck, then it must be a duck. Could it be so simple to also say, if it looks and sounds like a b*d word, then it must be one too? Or in reverse, perhaps the b*d word isn't so b*d in the first place? [There is much to say, that we cannot right now, about the sociology of what makes a word b*d, so we're just, at this point, measuring for similarities and differences.]

Structurally speaking, we can think about metre, or rhythm, of b*d words, demonstrating that they frequently exactly match their ac*eptable alternatives. *Shut the f*ck up!* and *Shut the fr*nt door!* both look the same if one represents these phrases as stress syllables in poetry: ^ / ^ ^, when ^ represents a stressed sound and / an unstressed. *Sons of b*tches!* and *S*ns of peaches!* are also a metre match: ^ ^ ^ / . Edited for television censors of the 1990 blockbuster *Die Hard 2* turned *Yippee-ki-yay Mother F*ckers!* into *Yippee-ki-yay Mr. Falcon!*: both ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / .

We might also think about predictability of the next occurring letter as we break down words into basic letter units in sequence. How many S words are there in the English language? A lot. How many S-H words are there? Fewer. How many S-H-I? Fewer yet. Then we could compare these probabilities to letter occurrence likelihoods of the corresponding ac*eptable alternatives. We could and we will, but this is a math project for another day.

For now, the most useful way to begin our thinking about structural comparisons of b*d words and their ac*eptable alternatives is for us to classify the sorts of morphology that occurs in the transition from b*d word to ac*eptable alternative. Much of the b*d word to ac*eptable alternative morphology can be classified into four categories: acronymic, graphophonemic, homophonic, and orthographic.

> <u>Acronymic</u> transformation occurs when the b*d word becomes an ac*eptable alternative by creating a new word from the first letters of each word in the b*d word phrase. So, piece of *sh*t* becomes *POS*; *g*d d*mn* become *GD*; *son of a b*tch* becomes *SOB*; and *oh my g*d* becomes *OMG*.

> <u>Graphophonemic</u> transformation occurs when the b*d word and the ac*eptable alternative have similar physical appearance while making similar sounds, though neither is necessarily an exact match. An emergent reader might look at the word "horse" and read "house" because the words look physically similar and at first glance hold several of the same sounds. The reading error may be described as a graphophonemic error. In b*d word morphology, it may also be a graphophonemic strategy to use *shoot* in place of *sh*t*, or *truck* in place of *f*ck*.

> <u>Homophonic</u> (you said "homo!") transformation occurs when the b*d word and the ac*eptable alternative sound like the other without being the same word at all. This can be accomplished through rhymes: *p*ss off* becomes *kiss off*; *son of a b*tch* becomes *son of a witch*. And this can be accomplished with unrhyming words, but words that metre match: *son of a b*tch* becomes *summunabatch*; *for sh*t's sake* becomes *for pete's sake*; *shut the f*ck up* becomes *shut the front door*.

> <u>Orthographic</u> transformation happens when b*d words are spelled out in order to make an ac*eptable alternative. *Sh*t* becomes *S-H-I-T*; *f*ck you* becomes *eff you*; *h*ll* becomes *H-E-Double-Hockey-Sticks*; *c*nt* becomes *the c word*.

B*d word morphological categories give us some thinking space for considering just how alike b*d words are to their ac*eptable alternatives, edging us closer to being comfortable with our "if it looks like a *uck" hypothesis.

Further observations of the structures of the volunteered b*d words and ac*eptable alternatives indicate that where there are certainly ac*eptable alternatives that are nearly entirely dissimilar to the b*d words, such as *sh*t* becomes *sugar*—although we would entertain arguments about the beginning sound of these two words—and b*d word *fart* becomes ac*eptable alternative *toot; sh*t* becomes *golly;* and –a personal favorite among responses—*f*ck you* becomes *well bless your heart*. Ouch. Additionally, it seems that often foreign language b*d words can serve as ac*eptable alternatives, such as *sh*t* becomes *shite* or *merde*, and **ss* becomes *arse* or *dupa*. One last notable phenomenon in the volunteered list is that some utterers' ac*eptable alternatives are other utterers' b*d words. *Fart*, *frick*, *vagina*, and *penis* were all listed in both categories. Finally, one responder pointed out that whispering an uttered b*d word softens the blow causing parentally-enforced consequences also to be less severe.

In print, does the asterisk serve as the whisper?

If b*d words were simply, or even largely, a matter of assuring that children grew up to think wholesomely and cogently, discussions of such words would be of only passing int*rest. However, in a world where newscaster after newscaster struggles with finding a gloss for "p*ssy" and news producers wrestle with whether or not to bleep the word in the audio track of leaked (oh no, is that "like take a leak?") video, discussions of how w*rds are given meaning and authority and by whom are significant. One cannot add an asterisk to a sound recording. What if newscasters whispered the b*d word?

We might begin to make sense of these collected stories by bringing the conversation back around to *templates of understanding* (Kearns, O'Connor, & Moore, 2007), which are the entirely unique spaces occupied by message senders who communicate and receivers who aim to make meaning from a sent signal set. This space is made up of experiences, knowledge, influences, things learned, things understood and misunderstood, things imbibed. Naturally, it would be impossible for two templates of understanding to be identical, and spaces of intersection become muddled. B*d words for you are not b*d words for me, or ac*eptable alternatives can just as meaningfully be b*d. Since templates of meaning impact the way an author arranges tokens in a message and since others

impact individual decoders, we can trace relationships. This does not mean that we solve anything yet, but we could try to use Shannon to untangle some connective threads.

Our wanderings down crooked paths and through gutters here are not intended to resolve or model just how b*d words accomplish or participate in a turn to the functional; rather they are intended to cross the boundaries between comfort and discomfort and between use and prohibition. B*d words bespeak willingness to cross boundaries and b*d words often accompany physical expression of success or failure; they can affirm passion and the resolve to continue.

Singer songwriter Tom Rush recounts a tale of words not to be uttered. His tale makes an appropriate coda.

Words You Can't Say

Gang,

I was recently at a radio station getting ready to do an interview to promote an upcoming show. While I was tuning up, waiting for the show's host to appear, a young lady came in and handed me a piece of paper. "We'll need your signature on this before air-time," she said, and walked out again.

It was the FCC "Language Agreement," enumerating in excruciating detail all the words you're not supposed to say on the radio. My first thought was to jauntily tell them, "You missed a couple," but after a careful reading I honestly could not think of a single vulgarity they'd left out, and I have a pretty good vocabulary. (I'm not bragging or anything, but fifty years on the road with musicians, technicians and
 teamsters can be very educational.)

A couple of questions were raised by this. What if the person going on the air was as prudish as the FCC apparently thinks the listeners are? Wouldn't they be too shocked and offended to carry on? And what if the person was underage? Would not the FCC be contributing to the delinquency of a minor, teaching them words they're not supposed to know (but undoubtedly do)? And what if …

I was pondering these weighty matters when the young lady returned to retrieve the form. I told her I'd left my glasses in the car and asked if she'd please read the page to me. After all, I can't be expected to sign something if I don't know what it is, now can I? She looked at the paper, opened her mouth to speak, closed it again, looked at me, looked at the paper. She seemed a bit flushed (perhaps overwhelmed at being so close to a star of my magnitude?), and left the room hurriedly. Apparently it was determined that my signature was not necessary after all because I heard no more about it.

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Addendum

Most of the words examined here have to do with bodily functions or religious notions of a community. It is worth noting another class of b*d words: those that are ac*eptable within one community and not at all ac*eptable in another, such as racial and gender slurs.

"Under certain circumstances, profanity provides a relief denied even to prayer."
- Mark Twain

Finally: Here is Tom Rush's response when I asked if we could use his tale of words:

> Brian,
>
> Go ahead and use it, I'd be flattered.
>
> I've always thought it curious that words, which are just noises we make, can be so charged. One word for a particular thing, a body part perhaps, can be perfectly fine in polite conversation, but a different word for the same thing can be shocking and offensive. We are curious creatures, for sure!
>
> Tom Rush
> http://www.tomrush.com/

Tom Rush puts out a more or less monthly newsletter simply called Tom Rush. The tale of words appears in the February 16, 2014 issue. *In announcing his new website he notes:*

TomRush.com should not be used by people suffering from Humor Deficiency Disorder, low Joie de Vivre or an inclination to vote for Trump. If your tumescence should last more than five hours, don't come whining to me. Nor should this conversation between Brian and Jodi be.