

The sanity of profanity

Do you struggle to mind your language? Don't try too hard, writes **Tanya Jackson** – there are times when only a good blast of swearing will do

Hearing my friend Lisa recount the story, I couldn't help but smile. 'Nucking thanker!' she substituted desperately. She had been driving her little boy to school when a car pulled out in front of her. Lisa braked in time, but lost her composure. Harry asked her straight away what she meant. 'Ha ha!' she chimed. 'Mummy is being silly today! Clucking manker! Tucking chanker!'

It happens to all of us. We do our best to moderate our language all the time, because politeness is at the heart of being British. And not just in those moments when we have to plaster on a smile, such as conversations with bank staff, work meetings or anything to do with our children. To curse openly feels like a moment of weakness, a sign that we cannot really cope. Let fly, and you start to feel like

that crazy lady on the bus. But, in fact, swearing is a natural instinct, a remnant from a time when we relied on our instincts. We may aspire to be pious Ned Flanders, but inside we are wired to be more Homer Simpson.

You may have heard people say, 'Swearing is a sign of ignorance', 'swearing is just unnecessary', and, 'people who swear have a poor vocabulary'. Aside from the fact that none of those statements is true, they are rather missing the point. Swear words are much more than simply verbal decoration.

Dirty words

For example, imagine a sexy weekend away with your partner. The children are staying with friends and you've been released from the drudgery of work and domestic boredom. You meet for dinner – looking fabulous –

and the wine is flowing, the fire is crackling, and you feel about 10 years younger. The chemistry is sizzling, so, when you finally get upstairs, what really pushes your buttons? A slightly forced, 'Darling, let's make love...' (you've been together a long time), or something a little more animalistic, preferably involving the F-word?

OK, try this one at the other end of the scale: your best friend finds out her husband has been cheating on her for five years. You flock to her aid with a box of tissues and a bottle of wine. Chances are, you're going to turn the air blue. In the circumstances, words like 'rascal' and 'darn' are, quite frankly, insulting. Your friend needs strength. She needs to hear the language of war.

It's a language that's familiar to midwives. In 2002, psychology lecturer Dr Richard Stephens was at his wife's

PHOTOGRAPH: GEORGE MARKS/GETTY IMAGES

>>>



>>> side while she delivered their second baby. With each contraction came a set of curses, for which she apologised profusely to the medical staff (this was Britain, after all). Hearing their reaction – that it was all perfectly normal in childbirth – gave him the idea that swearing may actually have a physical effect on the body.

Five years later, he proved it. Along with his team at Keele University, Stephens conducted a study in which 67 students plunged their hands into a bucket of ice-cold water, consistently repeating first a neutral word, and then a curse, to see how long they could withstand the cold temperature. Swearing triumphed: students held their hands in for much longer and perceived the experience as being less painful – women especially. It all comes down to physiology: swearing shocks your body into fight-or-flight mode, and the adrenaline rush gives you a little dose of anaesthetic.

Shock factor

Isn't that marvellous? It's a built-in defence against pain – and anyone can do it. Even hearing a rude word produces that little tummy butterfly. Of course, if you already have a sailor mouth, you won't get much of a shock. When Stephen Fry re-enacted the experiment with Brian Blessed for the 2011 TV series *Planet Word*, he proved another of Dr Stephens' theories: that swearing only provokes a response if you find it shocking. When habitual swearer Blessed stuck his hand into the bucket, he lasted just 1.22 minutes saying 'bugger'. The more-prudish Fry held out for 2.29, using the F-word.

'But what about the vocabulary?' you cry. Well, it's easy to see how this theory came about: swearing is undeniably basic. Peter Cook and Dudley Moore made a meal of this in

“With each contraction came a set of curses, for which she apologised profusely to the staff (this was Britain, after all)”

the banal conversations of 'Derek and Clive', two toilet attendants, in their improvised *This Bloke Came Up To Me* recording, where every other word is the C-word. Indeed, the funniest moment is at the end, when Moore says, 'You rotter'.

But, in fact, vocabulary uses an entirely different part of the brain to swearing. In his book *Black Sheep: The Hidden Benefits Of Being Bad* (John Murray Learning, £8.99), Stephens cites a number of studies that indicate this. One found that aphasic people – those with speech impediments caused by brain damage – could still swear fluently.

Another is a study done at Lancaster University, which found the highest frequency of swearing occurs at opposite ends of the social scale. It seems that non-working and unskilled

people swear 85 per cent more than the lower-middle class, which seems to point to a lack of education and IQ. But this is soon disproved, as it turns out that the *upper*-middle class (professionals and those in higher management) swear like troopers – with the F-word increasing by 300 per cent. As high-net-worth people do not tend to suffer from a lack of vocabulary nor education, the likelihood is that those who have more secure life circumstances, having fewer social codes to adhere to, don't need to moderate their language. As Stephens puts it, 'They just don't give a f'ck'.

Strictly taboo

Sadly, most of us don't have this liberty. And, regardless of the research, no one really likes a potty mouth: we're not going to start raising our children to vent their frustrations by swearing at their classmates and teachers. Indeed, why dampen the cathartic effects of strong language by overusing it? My friend Lisa is a caring, polite woman who combines a professional job with a calm, holistic approach to parenting. That's a lot of holding back. If screaming, 'F'cking w'nker!' stopped her crashing into that idiotic driver in front, it was the best thing she could have done.

THE SWEAR BOX

Try our tips for the correct way to curse

- You can boost your credibility by saying 'damn it' when giving a speech, researchers found. In a lecture hall, an audience were more convinced by a speaker's passion and authenticity when he used mild swearing.*
- A recent study found 'witty uses of coarse, casual profanity' boosted mood in the office and lowered workers' stress.*
- But it's best not to swear in meetings. In an experiment, participants said they would perceive a co-worker who swore in a formal meeting to be incompetent.**

*SCHERER AND SAGARIN, 2006; BARUCH AND JENKINS, 'SWEARING AT WORK AND PERMISSIVE LEADERSHIP CULTURE', 'LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT JOURNAL', 2007