# I

**ILLEGITIMACY.** *See:* Bastard

# IMPACT

Discussions of swearing and foul language have traditionally assumed that certain offending words have in themselves a general or universal impact. Likewise, notions of obscenity and pornography have been predicated on the simple presence of certain offensive words. Thus *The Times* wrote in 1960: "Having regard to the state of current writing, it seems that the prosecution against *Lady Chatterley's Lover* can only have been launched on the ground that the book contained the so-called four-letter words" (November 7). Similarly, *The New Dictionary of American Slang* (1986, ed. Robert L. Chapman) used symbolic triangles as usage indicators for words regarded as "offensive" and as "taboo."

This degree of impact is certainly true of words dealing with universal moral categories, such as *liar* or a *thief,* or conventional insults like *shit* or *cunt.* However, even this moral logic does not always hold, as can be seen in the following exchange:

*X:* Bastard!
*Y:* Terrorist!
*X:* Cretin!
*Y:* Rapist!
*X:* Turd!
*Y:* Pedophile!
*X:* Son of a bitch!
*Y:* Swindler!

Clearly, from a logical point of view, *Y* has the more seriously antisocial insults, but they do not have the impact deriving from the weight of tradition behind *X*'s more conventional epithets. The entry for **gender in swearing** considers the complexities of gender and impact.

The founding assumption of universal impact also derives from notions of a monolithic

culture, which has largely been the case in English-speaking society for most of its history, having been predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, and in latter centuries Protestant and imperialist. Consequently out-groups like Catholics and foreigners have been stigmatized by terms like *papist, frog,* and *wog.* Alien political systems have likewise introduced *fascist* and *communist* as terms of insult. However, as America and Britain have become more demographically diverse through immigration, so the balance of power between traditional in-groups and out-groups has changed.

Even within the mainstream culture, verbal impact is determined by a complex mixture of contextual social factors, including class, community, and family, as well as personal issues. Thus *cheat* has the greatest impact in the social context of in-groups such as schools and clubs of various kinds, sporting, gambling, and social. Similarly, *coward* has the greatest impact in the army and among the erstwhile aristocracy, where it was an insult certain to provoke a duel. The famous accusation that Oscar Wilde was a sodomite was especially insufferable because the Marquess of Queensberry published it in a note visible to the members of Wilde's London club.

In addition to the social context, the directness of the insult and personal factors form important determiners of the force of a term. Thus in British English to refer to someone as "a real shit" or "an absolute bastard" is generally more condemning than to use some of the more apparently taboo terms. The following views demonstrate the personal aspect: (A) "There is no worse word in the English language." (B) "It's the filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language." "A" is Lisa Nemrow, referring to *cunt* in an essay on "Dirty Words" (in Ricks and Michaels 1990, 436). "B" is Christopher Darden, a black lawyer, referring to *nigger* in the O.J. Simpson trial (*New York Times*, January 14, 1998, 7).

There are complications, however, in that some social contexts actually diminish or even neutralize the moral quality concerned. Thus *crook, thief,* and *gangster* are largely meaningless in the underworld of the mafia, but *informer* there takes on the moral aspect of *traitor.* Less predictable have been the vagaries undergone by *bastard* and *bugger,* which have developed very different impacts in British, American, and Australian English.

In modern times, impact has been further complicated by the phenomenon of **reclamation**, whereby a target or out-group community starts to use stigmatic terms such as *nigger, yid,* and *queer* ironically or even affectionately as an in-group term. However, this dynamic only works in one direction. Thus in the South African context, Archbishop Desmond Tutu does call himself, tongue in cheek, "a cheeky kaffir," accommodating the traditional insulting term, but he would be outraged if a white person were to use the phrase. On the other hand, former president Frederik Willem de Klerk cannot call himself "a white baas," even ironically, any more than former U.S. president Bill Clinton can say "I'm a honky cracker."

These complexities of the dynamic make simple assessments of impact very problematic. Thus the Third Edition of *Webster* (1961) was criticized for labeling ethnic slurs like *kike, dago, spick,* and *coon* as "usually taken to be offensive" rather than plain "offensive." One of the few reference works to include a useful contextual guide to offensiveness and impact is Richard A. Spears's *Forbidden American English* (1991).