

SAY WHAT?

'Minding language' is, in fact, precisely what **Phil Beadle** does for a living. So he'd appreciate being allowed to get on with doing just that...

The powers that be at Radio 4 give you a talk before you go on The Today Programme: there are agglomerations of letters that are not to be employed on air. The 'F' word and 'C' word are taboo, the 'W' word also; the 'B' word that refers to testes also gets them in trouble. They would prefer you didn't use the 'B' word that refers to parentage, but the 'P' word, 'C' word and 'S' word, all of which refer to numbers one or two, are permissible. 'Cock' is never mentioned.

When in receipt of 'the talk' I'm reminded of the section in Gillian Evans' 'Educational Failure and White Working Class Children in Britain' where she outlines the pecking order of swearing in working class communities: "Swearwords have their own hierarchy, with 'C' being the most offensive and 'S' perhaps the least, but it is the feeling behind the word and the situation that matter, not so much the words themselves." Again, no mention of 'cock'.

For a few years, merely as a means of sparking some interest in punctuation, I've been informing classes of emotionally robust young adults that, in journalistic circles, the exclamation mark is referred to as a dog's cock. It is a mildly diverting aside; the students snigger a little. Present this information to teachers, however, and

there's always one for whom these two consonant sounds and one vowel automatically transform them in the direction of a spluttering purple fit. "I cannot believe he said the word 'cock'! I was offended! It was inappropriate!"

This strikes me as an over-emotional response to a syllable, and I'd like to enter into a briefly rebarbative counter-examination. For me, the expression 'inappropriate' is often employed in a mean spirited manner that empowers the utterer in the same way the epithet 'witch' would have empowered a scabby peasant in the Middle Ages. Reaching for this word in anything other than a satirical tone should condemn its user to a year of isolation in a library where he or she is forced to look up every swear word in a good dictionary, and from then to write a series of paragraphs setting out an intelligent rationalisation of the circumstances under which we might plausibly make disinterested use of each one in a classroom. 'Inappropriate' has become a device used to assert its user's moral superiority, and is the linguistic equivalent of an embittered, chintz-ridden citizen tutting at 'young people nowadays'.

'I was offended' is another phrase inhabitants of the Ship of Fools are inclined to use to place them above another, as its use infers that the process of 'taking offence' is somehow a spiritual journey. Over the last few months I've been informed that my using a barely subversive rap song that included the word 'moist' (admittedly, referring to something other than a Victoria Sponge) to show a group of eighteen year olds how internal rhyme and assonance combine "offended" an observing teacher.

There are several reasons why you shouldn't bother expressing offence at another professional's differing view of what is suitable in a classroom: first, your opinion isn't important to anyone other than you; the taking of offence is an indulgence and an exhibition of egotism on the part of the taker. It is also evidence that those who may wish to display their moral and linguistic cleanliness are, in fact, displaying their fear of ideas that sit outside of a petty-bourgeois worldview. Additionally, it is often obvious that the person taking offence enjoys doing so. 'I was offended' is, as comedian Stewart Lee writes, "A convenient peg to hang their hatred on," and the correct response to the phrase should be, "Well, don't be. It's your choice."

I am not advocating that teachers run eagerly into class dropping the C bomb all over the place, but surely a rather more intelligent, less nakedly classist discourse should take place as to whether these words can be examined, in the right circumstances, in a classroom. Otherwise, we run things at the level of moral simpletonism of Disgusted of Basingstoke.

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WHY ARE YOU SHOUTING AT US? BY PHIL BEADLE AND JOHN MURPHY (£16.99), WILL BE PUBLISHED BY BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION FROM JANUARY 2013

