Pardon My F\*?#$! French

Date: July 25, 2012

**Are bad language, swearing, cussing, profanity, impiety and blasphemy part of being Australian?**

IN HINDSIGHT, Craig Symes realised he shouldn't have gone to work that early summer day in 2011. Before he started his 5.30am shift at the Linfox Armaguard depot in Brisbane, Symes had a fight with his wife, and in his evidence to Fair Work Australia says he was feeling frustrated.

Symes, who worked on the security vans transporting cash to the city's ATMs, soon found himself attending a communications meeting, where operational matters were discussed with the road crews.

Political scientist Lauren Rosewarne: 'The biggest effect of the media would be normalising language, letting people know that it's actually OK.'

Things went quickly from bad to worse. Symes became aware he'd been allocated a vehicle with a faulty indicator, and left the room to get it fixed.

His manager told him to return to the meeting. What happened next is subject to debate, but one thing is certain: Craig Symes told his boss to ''get f---ed''.

There was some further heated discussion, but the end result was that Symes was dismissed. But as Fair Work Australia has ruled, telling his boss to ''get f---ed'' was not grounds for dismissal. Linfox Armguard was ordered to give Symes his job back.

The crux of the case involving Craig Symes revolves around what's regarded as acceptable in that particular workplace. Commissioner Helen Cargill found his use of swear words to his manager was ''totally inappropriate and unwarranted''.

But she also considered evidence that the workplace was one in which bad language was commonly used, and there were mixed messages given to employees about swearing.

The case has divided opinion, sparking a debate about not only what's tolerated in the workplace, but what counts as acceptable - or at least tolerable - in general society. Was the early morning encounter at the Armaguard depot in Brisbane part of a bigger phenomenon in Australian society, where once-taboo swearing is widespread?

Invariably, the incident inspired some wistful discussion among the general workforce. Who hasn't at some stage in a working life considered the appeal of telling a difficult boss those exact same words uttered by Craig Symes?

This kind of empowering fantasy usually has conditions attached - a Monday morning after a multimillion-dollar Tattslotto win. But in the case before Fair Work Australia, the worker was able to deliver the words because of the context in which they were used.

And there lies the nub of this debate: it's all about context and what's considered acceptable by different sections of society. Different workplaces have different standards. It's impossible to imagine that same exchange being acceptable in a suburban banking office, for example.

Yet it is clear that swearing can play an important part in the esprit de corps of some workplaces. Work done by researchers at New Zealand's Victoria University of Wellington has reinforced the fact that swearing can be part of the fabric of the workplace.

The 2004 study looked at a New Zealand soap factory, and found that ''f---'' was the most common swear word among a tight-knit group of workers nicknamed the Power Rangers. But in the context of a close-knit workforce, it wasn't considered offensive.

Based on extensive recordings of their daily conversations, the study found that strong expletives, and especially forms of f---, ''are extensively used within the Power Rangers as a positive politeness device''.

''Forms of f--- occur frequently in certain contexts and serve a range of functions, including the role of positive politeness strategy. F--- is regularly associated with expressions of solidarity, including friendly terms of address and speech acts which unambiguously serve the function of solidarity construction,'' the study found.

Language - good and bad - is a dynamic thing, always evolving. Swearing has a long and colourful history. Consider how the curses of Elizabethan England regularly found their way into Shakespeare's works. Blasphemy was, appropriately, the greatest sin. Shakespeare used ''minced'' curses such as ''zounds'' and ''sblood'' - contractions of God's wounds and God's blood.

Swearing has always been part of the Australian character. Think ''bloody'', the great Australian adjective. In a paper on swearing, Monash University's Kate Burridge and Keith Allan noted Australians have always regarded their colloquial idiom as being a significant part of their cultural identity.

''The standard language is more global in nature and many Australian English speakers see their colloquialisms, nicknames, diminutives, swearing, and insults to be important indicators of their Australianness and expressions of cherished ideals such as friendliness, nonchalance, mateship, egalitarianism, and anti-authoritarianism,'' they wrote.

And there is also evidence that swearing can make you feel better. Recent research by Britain's Keele University found that swearing can produce short-term pain relief - although the effect was greater for people who don't swear regularly. The findings replicated early research that showed people can withstand an ice-cold water challenge for longer by repeatedly swearing, compared with those who used neutral words.

There is clearly something deeply primal about the way we swear and how it makes us feel.

But there remains the wider question of when we can swear, and to whom.

Anecdotally, there appears to be a growing acceptance of public swearing, particularly the word ''f---''. Take the example of the FCUK trademark of fashion label French connection. The passage of time and familiarity means that initial shock value may be diminishing - at least for some.

Last year, lord mayor Robert Doyle was clearly offended by a billboard advertising the company as he drove towards the Bolte Bridge after a trip to Canberra.

''Do the advertisers think this is clever? That the transposition of two letters somehow makes this a sophisticated word play rather than a cheap obscenity?'' Doyle wrote in a newspaper column. ''It is not clever. It is not funny. It is an insulting and gratuitous blot on our urban landscape.''

But is Doyle part of a minority? There are signs that a significant liberalisation is occurring within society.

Television arguably remains one of the best barometers of social change; the extent of swearing is inextricably linked to those who view it.

Take as an historical benchmark American comedian George Carlin's 1972 routine about language and the seven words you could never say on television. They are, tidied up for this publication, shit, piss, f---, c---, c---sucker, motherf---er and tits.

These were the words, Carlin said, that will ''infect your soul, curve your spine and keep the country from winning the war''.

Following a performance in Milwaukee, Carlin was arrested and bailed on a charge of disturbing the peace. A judge found the monologue to be indecent, but he upheld the right to free speech, and found there was no evidence the peace had been disturbed.

Carlin's routine went to the Supreme Court after it was broadcast by a New York radio station. The end result was a ruling that authorities could set a ''watershed'' time before which obscenities could not be broadcast, with the aim of protecting children.

A few years later, Australia had its own obscenity controversy - although much tamer - that proved Carlin's case.

On his national tonight show in ''living colour'', Graham Kennedy uttered his infamous ''crow call'' in March 1975. In a live ad for Cedel hairspray, Kennedy said the word ''faark!''.

The station was inundated with protests, as burnt orange paint peeled from the walls of offended households and lava lamps bubbled to boiling point. Kennedy received a caution from the broadcasting control board.

In typical Kennedy fashion, he responded the following week by asking the audience to take part in a mass crow call. Kennedy was banned from live broadcasts.

Almost four decades on, the King's performance remains undeniably funny; it's certainly inoffensive. Today, we live in an era where the full-blown ''f---'' peppers everything from cooking shows to stand-up comedy routines to reality programs.

Political scientist Lauren Rosewarne from Melbourne University sees a clear connection between the acceptance of swearing and the influence of pay TV and exposure to networks that aren't available on free-to-air. She singles out US network HBO, and the series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

The show is the work of Larry David, the co-creator of *Seinfeld*, and is a largely improvised comedy that's notable for its swearing as well as its laughs.

''It's often mentioned in that show that they did everything they couldn't do on *Seinfeld* because *Seinfeld* was NBC and it was network television,'' she says. ''They use [swearing] gratuitously. I love that show, but they use it to an extent where sometimes it seems we're saying f--- for f---'s sake.''

The pivotal question is what came first: a classic chicken and the egg argument. Is the media shaping behaviour or simply reflecting its audience?

It may be a case of the media reassuring people about the swearing that's occurring.

''The biggest effect of the media would be normalising language, letting people know that's actually OK, that that kind of language is acceptable,'' says Rosewarne.

Rosewarne, who comments frequently on gender, the media and culture, looks back on the George Carlin list of seven words and finds it interesting how some now seem quite dated.

Rosewarne recently went to see the ''terrible'' film *Ted*, by *Family Guy* creator Seth MacFarlane. The plot revolves around John, who as a child had his teddy bear come to life. In adulthood, the bear is a foul-mouthed, hard-living bad influence on his 30-something, one-time owner. There is one particular scene where John's girlfriend describes someone as a ''c---''. John expresses shock at the use of the word.

''I think that's a good point; there are some words still that we haven't softened,'' says Rosewarne.

Germaine Greer was intent on erasing its shock value, publishing an 1971 essay *Lady, Love Your C--t*. Greer later explained that she was glad she didn't succeed. In 2006, an episode of the BBC's series on language *Balderdash and Piffle*, Greer explored the etymology of the word.

''I tried to take the malice out of it,'' she explained. ''I wanted women to be able to say it … It didn't work. And now, in a way, I'm sort of, perversely pleased, because it meant that it kept that power.''

There's also a gender aspect to swearing. Young women swearing more is tied up with young women drinking more and smoking more, says Rosewarne. She questions whether ''this is the kind of progress we want, or equality we want''.

Not being able to express yourself is a bad thing. ''But the flip side is gratuitous-type swearing for swearing's sake, and recasting that as somehow liberating.''

Such liberation may come with other costs. The Baillieu government, as part of its law and order agenda, has given police the power to issue on-the-spot fines of up to $240 for using language that's deemed to be indecent, disorderly, offensive or threatening.

While viewed as a crackdown, it's as much about freeing up police resources, allowing the offences to be dealt with immediately, rather than clogging up the court system.

So swearers, beware. Indeed, this very article has posed a dilemma for *The Age*, which maintains a conservative approach to publishing swear words. This journalist has never used ''---'' so frequently.

*The Age* has been brave, but only in certain circumstances. In 1979, then editor Michael Davie received a visit from the vice squad after publishing a court story: ''A magistrate found yesterday that a Skyhooks song with the refrain 'Why don't you all get fucked?' was not obscene.''

The foul language floodgates did not open in subsequent years, although clearly, a big shift is occurring of late.

But as Monash emeritus professor Keith Allan notes, while society is dropping formalities in some areas, it's gaining others.

''Taboos have changed,'' he says. ''Racist, and sexist and 'ist' taboos in general have grown. Those sorts of things are more unacceptable than words involving genitalia and their output.''

For those who give a f--- about the damage and pain that the diseases of racism and sexism can cause, that may be no bad thing.

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