

What the Honk?

Steve Cuno



I am pleased to report that there are still a few considerate souls out there who give a rat's hindquarters about what the heck they say and whom the honk they offend. These good folks have managed to harness the power of cussing while sparing tender ears. This they accomplish through mastery of the pseudo-expletive.

You may wonder why they do not bleepity-bleep dispense with expletives altogether. The fact is, colorful words have their uses. A 2009 Keele University study suggests that unleashing the occasional blue streak has an analgesic effect. You can test this for yourself by (1) limiting your commentary to a mere "ouch" upon stubbing a toe; (2) re-stubbing the toe and giving utterance to the most blistering term in the depths of your lexicon; and then (3) noting how much better you feel in the second instance.

Pain management aside, were it not for pseudo-expletives, the righteous would often find themselves up Shoot Creek without a paddle. Pseudo-expletives provide a suitable outlet for those who are too righteous to swear, much in the same way that the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue and the Victoria's Secret catalog provide suitable entertainment for people who are too righteous to consume porn.

Legit uses for pseudo-expletives abound. The Hollywood highbrow epic *Vegas Vacation* would have suffered greatly without its classic Hoover Dam sequence, wherein a "dam guide" leads visitors on a "dam tour," authorizes them to take "dam pictures," and invites their "dam questions." Never mind that *dam* and the real thing are homophones. As any schoolchild giddily, pseudo-innocently quoting the film will tell you, *dam* is technically permissible.

Pseudo-expletives often come to the rescue when circumstance demands quoting the unquotable. Take one of my former employees, a devout church member charged, he often re-

minded the rest of us, with setting a good example for lesser beings. Once faced with conveying a message from one of our more eloquent clients, he used *doodoo*, with air-quotes, in place of a less subtle word. In moments of frustration, he contented himself with a mere, "Effin' A!" After I fired him—not because of his language but because he excelled at not doing his job—I discovered that the mothertrucker had been stealing from me. He had done so without uttering so much as one unseemly word, however, so his integrity remained intact.

I knew a religion instructor who enjoyed amusing students with turns of phrase such as *you're in a mell of a hess* and *you're nuckin' futs*. "I never swear," he assured me. I once heard him deliver a sermon in which, smiling mischievously, he praised a congregant for banning the use of "the s-word or the f-word in his home." After allowing the congregation a moment to squirm, he added, "In this case, the s-word is *stupid* and the f-word is *fart*." Har! If *shoot* and *fudge* popped into congregants' minds, it was their fault, not his.

Granted, not all resort to pseudo-expletives out of a sincere commitment to personal purity. When I hear expressions such as *simian evacuation psychotic* or *fecal cohesiveness*, I can't help but wonder if the speaker intends a bit of mockery. I'll be gol-derned if I know—I'm no flipping mind-reader—but those expressions sure as poop kick comedic trash.

As a teen, I tried inventing my own mock swearwords, not because I was too abashed to swear but because I thought it would be funny. They didn't have the desired effect. My dad, whose language could warp steel girders, threatened to ground me when he overheard me tell the kid across the street, "Knock it off or I'll rattle your nivvies." It was all I could do not to tell Dad that *rattle your nivvies* was a made-up expression and that if he

didn't appreciate my humor, he could kiss my grits.

Still, I suspect that most attempts at sanitized language are sincere. And some are quite creative. My favorites include *got-down-sat-on-a-bench*; *cheese-'n'-rice*; and *sonofabishop* or *son of a biscuit-eater*. Equally sincere, though by now painfully tiresome, are *freaking*, *fetching*, *fracking*, and *frigging*. Ever available are imports, such as *scheiss*, *caca*, and *merde*; and there's always spelling, if you get my D-R-I-F-T. My nomination for least-creative pseudo-expletive came from someone who had just dropped a bowl of eggs. "Oh-oh naughty words!" she blustered.

Surely some classics are due for a comeback. It's high time to breathe new life into *fiddlesticks*, *fiddle-dee-dee*, *jeepers*, *dad blast it*, and *shizzle*.

In any case, thank gosh for pseudo-expletives. Without them, self-expression might descend into one big clusterfudge. ☑

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