

RUNNING HEAD: TEACHING BAD LANGUAGE

Teaching “Bad Language”  
in a Serious and Systematic Manner

Terrence M. Doyle

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What should we tell our students when they ask us to teach them about “bad language”? How should a teacher “deal with” such language when using authentic movies? In a small survey I distributed to the teachers at my college about teaching “bad language” most teachers agree that we should “teach students how to understand “bad language” including “cursing,” “swearing,” “blasphemy,” “obscenity,” and “physical, ethnic and racial insults and slurs,” and also “suggest that students avoid it.” However, most teachers in this survey said that they do not regularly “teach students how to use it.” One teacher’s comment summarizes what the majority of teachers feel: “I think it is very important that ESL students know what is appropriate and what isn’t. It’s also important that they feel comfortable enough with their teachers to be able to ask what they hear around them.”

In this paper I want to explain why I agree with the teachers who completed this survey. Students need to understand “bad language” because it is both grammatically and pragmatically complex. Students are going to encounter all kinds of “bad language” in movies, in some written texts, and in their daily encounters. As one of my students said, “What are we supposed to do if someone uses bad language in anger with us? Just smile?” In this paper I would like to point out some of the linguistic and pragmatic complexities that accompany “bad language” in order to argue the case that this language should be taught to our students in a serious and systematic manner just as we teach other vocabulary and grammar structures.

### *Classification of “bad language”*

Sociolinguists have various classification systems for “bad language,” and although each is somewhat different, sociolinguists who have studied “bad language” agree in general about the need for various classes and also all agree that the relative “badness” of this language is constantly changing; what is previously thought to be “bad language” may later become “standard English” (Andersson and Trudgill, 1992). Here is the classification system given by Jay (1992):

Cursing: to call upon divine or supernatural power to send injury upon someone.

Profanity: to treat something sacred with abuse, irreverence, disrespect, or contempt;

Blasphemy: an intent to insult or show contempt for or lack of reverence for a religion

Taboo: a prohibition instituted for the protection of a cultural or religious group against supernatural reprisal

Obscenity: disgusting to the senses; repulsive; indecent; abhorrent to morality or virtue; designed to incite lust or depravity.

Vulgar: coarse; morally crude; lacking in cultivation; unsophisticated; under-educated; of or relating to common people; not necessarily obscene or taboo or bad or evil, but they just reflect the crudeness of “street language”.

Epithets: are usually brief but forceful bursts of emotional language.

Insults and slurs: to treat someone with insolence, indignity, or contempt; to make fun of because of their racial or ethnic background, sexual orientation, or physical characteristics, appearance, and disabilities

Scatology: the study of excrement; interest in or the treatment of obscene matters

Slang: very informal and sometimes offensive words that is used by a sub-groups of people, such as young people, drug dealers, baseball players, etc.

### *Grammatically complex structures with “bad language”*

Very important for understanding the various types of “bad language” are its grammatical and pragmatic complexities; these show that students cannot learn how to understand these words without conscious attention and also without instruction by a teacher and/or a book or dictionary. I will give two kinds of examples of grammatically complex structures involving “bad language.” A and E are mentioned by Andersson and Trudgill (1992).

1. The addition of “swear words” like “the hell” or “the fuck” in questions and imperatives such as
  - A. Who the hell has been here?

B. What in hell's name are you doing reading that kind of book?

C. Get the fuck out of my apartment.

D. Shut the fuck up.

That the following sentences are ungrammatical shows the grammatical complexity of the addition of these “bad” words to questions and imperatives.

E. \*Who in hell has been here?

F. \*What are you in hell's name doing reading that kind of book?

G. \*Come the fuck over to visit sometime, please.

H. \*Eat the fuck up and let's go.

2. Truncated complex sentences like the following:

A. Fuck if I'll help you do that. (from the movie *Erin Brockovich*)

B. Damned if I know where he's gone to.

It would be difficult for students to learn the grammar of “the hell” and “the fuck” without thinking about the structural environment in which they can occur. For truncated complex sentences like those in (2) students should think about the full sentences from which these sentences are derived. (B) no doubt comes from “I'll be damned if I know where he's gone to.” The original sentence for (A) is less clear, but it probably is somewhat similar in meaning to (B): “I'm fucked if I'll help you do that.”

*Pragmatic complexity and the importance of context*

Sociolinguists who study “bad language” hint at the great importance of context and also the identity of the speaker although they do not discuss these in detail. Andersson and Trudgill (1990) discuss the importance of slang words for finding “precision in expression, rather than in content.”(p.79) They go on to say,

The main reason for this is social. The language of a group functions as a kind of glue which maintains cohesion between the members of this group and acts as a wall between them and

outsiders. By choosing the right words you can show which group you belong to. You can probably even show that you are one of the core members of the group. (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990, p. 79)

Jay in his book *Cursing in America*, a book which mainly discusses bad language from a psycholinguistic point of view, spends at least a couple of pages discussing why “context is critical” (pages 12 - 14). Jay writes,

To understand the nature of literal versus emotional reference one has to look at sentences or utterances, not individual words. A pragmatic analysis demands recording “how” words are used in a particular context; one has to record how people swear at other people in the real world. (Jay, 1992, p. 12)

Erving Goffman’s concept of footing is important to what is going on when a person uses bad language. Goffman (1981) describes footing in this way: “a participant’s alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self is somehow at issue.” (p. 128) When we speak, we constantly change our footing as we want to indicate our changes in our relationship to our interlocutors and how they perceive us. According to Goffman, we do this by changes in our speech, such as through changes in our words but also even in changes in our “pitch, volume, rhythm, stress, tonal quality.” (Goffman, p. 128)

Although Goffman doesn’t mention “bad language,” I think that bad language is also an important way in which some people indicate changes in footing in their speech. As Andersson and Trudgill mention, a person is concerned with getting accepted by another group when s/he uses slang and other “bad language”, but also the person is concerned with his/her own identity and how others see him/her. Thus, as Goffman says, people are constantly realigning themselves vis-vis their interlocutors, and one way they do this is through the use of slang and bad words.

An analysis of the “bad language” that occurs in many recently produced movies has helped me to appreciate the significance of these “bad” words and in particular how they show us what the characters in these movies think about themselves, about other characters, and about their relationships with other characters in these movies. With this in mind, I had my video ESL class students analyze the “bad language” in some of the movies we watched including *Erin Brockovich*, *Losing Isaiah*, *Goodwill Hunting*, *Cider* and *Tiptoes*.

*A sample assignment for video class students*

The following is one question from an assignment for analyzing lines from movies we had viewed in my video ESL class for advanced adult ESL students. The following lines are from *Erin Brockovich*. We did this activity after watching the whole movie. For all of the idioms (including “bad language”) in the movies I gave students explanations and two of my own example sentences.

What does the language of the characters tell us about the characters’ feelings toward and relationships with each other?

- What are the slang and bad language in these scenes?
- What do slang and bad language tell about their stances toward each other and toward the topic of their conversation? Are the characters angry, joking, emphasizing, or just using formulaic expressions?
- Why is this slang and bad language appropriate in these situations?
- Would you feel comfortable to use such words? Why? or why not?

ED: That wasn’t an offer. A million would’ve been an offer. When they send a mail clerk to jerk me off, waste my time.

ERIN: Why would they do that?

ED: Because they can. You heard that kid - - they have twenty eight billion dollars at their disposal. They can afford to waste all the time in the world.

ERIN: And you can't?

ED: Do you think I'm made of money?

ERIN: What are you yelling at me for?

ED: Because I'm pissed off!

ERIN: Good

ED: Fuck you!

ERIN: Fuck you back!

ED: I hate you sometimes, you know that?

ERIN: Ah, you love me.

As I discussed with my students, in this scene Ed uses an obscene word when talking to Erin, but this word is not used in anger. This is the scene in which Erin and Ed really start to make a connection and realize that they can work well together. So their use of the obscene word is not only appropriate and comical, but in using the phrase "Fuck you" Ed lets Erin know that he wants to enter Erin's world and he wants to invite her into his world. By using this obscene word which Erin often uses and then laughing about it, he also changes his perception of himself and how he wants Erin to think of him. A student from Russia in my class also focused on the importance of the phrase "pissed off". She said that to her it is much stronger than "angry." She explained that in Russian there is a similar idiom which has both a literal and figurative meaning.

### *Conclusion*

My video class students pointed out that teaching "bad language" is necessary in order to understand movies more fully and also the "bad language" they hear in everyday conversations. Most teachers would agree, but most do not actually teach "bad language" in a systematic way. No doubt one of the reasons for this is that no textbooks contain this kind of language. While preparing idioms and vocabulary explanations for my video ESL class, I used the *Longman Advanced American*

*Dictionary* because it contains clear explanations and useful examples of many of the commonly used “bad” words. But unfortunately this dictionary is no longer published because it is used by high school students, and some people didn’t want to expose high school ESL students to this language. I strongly feel that it is better for students to learn about “bad language” when it is explained in a professional and systematic way; otherwise, students might not know when it is appropriate to use it.

References

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