

Why do we swear?

Swearing and Creativity

ADAM

Why do people swear? Where does it come from? How is it different across cultures? Can swear words be created? Can they have benefits to the human psyche?

ADAM

Comedian Sean Burke is well known for his YouTube sketches and as the host of Channel Four's Hollywood Hijack. He's here to tell us about the creative use of swearing and euphemism.

ADAM

So Sean, swearing can be funny and creative, and it can make you laugh as much as it can make you cry, why is that? Why do you think that is?

SEAN BURKE

There's so many different contexts really. F**k for example is so versatile. You could show anger with f**k, like oh for f**k's sake. But at the same time oh this is f**king brilliant! You know, at a very basic level as well a lot of swear words are based around genitals, which is, you know, quite childish humour but I still laugh at dick jokes. You know, so I think that on a very basic primitive level just will always be funny to humans.

ADAM

I think there's also like a rule of K in comedy. If you can say a synonym of a word that has a 'k' sound, a hard 'k', then it's usually funnier. When I think of words like f**k and c**t, and even like b****r that have that sort of glottal sort of thing.

SEAN BURKE

Yes it's just harsh. It's like pr**k as well like something like that, you know.

ADAM

D**khead.

SEAN BURKE

Yeah exactly. It's kind of the closest thing you can get to just like a verbal punch.

There's this Billy Connolly joke, talking about this vicar going back to his school and some eight-year-old telling him to f**k off. And he spends 10 minutes saying all the amazing achievements he did, like everything, became a priest, went to the Vatican, became a cardinal, preached with the Pope for 10 years, and then he says and you're telling me to f**k off, you f**k off! Like after that. It's just a kind of contrast of this wizened old man who's a man of God telling the kid to f**k off. It's a surprise as well. It's just like kind of basic humour. Like when you don't see something coming, it's all the funnier.

ADAM

So yeah I suppose it's the shock element, a lot of it...

SEAN BURKE

Yeah it's the shock and surprise of it. It just depends when it's used I guess.

ADAM

If we swear and say, you know, the set, however many words there are that we know to be curse words that would sort of be banned by, you know, a PG film for example, why is it different when you say a euphemism. Which is sort of flirting around the idea but you're basically saying the same thing, the intention is the same.

SEAN BURKE

Yeah, because it requires cooperation from the other person, so you're implying something filthy or offensive in this case but you're not outwardly saying it. So it relies on the other person to actually know what you're talking about. So they fill in the blanks. So you don't, because if you're not explicitly saying it, you don't get the same offence regarding it because they're putting it together in their head.

ADAM

So it's more playful because it's a sort of interaction.

SEAN BURKE

Yeah like if you know it, you know it. And that's partly on you, partly on me. But I didn't just call you a f**king pr**k, you know, which is...

ADAM

I called you a nuisance.

SEAN BURKE

Yeah.

ADAM

Which is nicer.

SEAN BURKE

But not as specific.

If you would say I don't give a s**t, no one physically thinks of an actual s**t most of the time, you know.

ADAM

But when you call someone a piece of s**t, which is smaller than an entire s**t, it sounds more offensive.

ADAM

I can draw a graph of bits of s**t that you are, and bits that you don't qualify as.

SEAN BURKE

I don't give a s**t, like you said is abstract in a way, but you are an actual piece of s**t is more specific.

ADAM

You are a physical item and that item is dung! Well thanks a lot Sean, that's been very informative, you little nuisance-

SEAN BURKE

Cheers.

ADAM

-and see you later.

SEAN BURKE

Take care.