

UNSPEAKABLY ABSURD (A IS FOR, WELL, APPLE...)

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What the hell do you mean by the 'H-word,' Papa? —William Safire

The use of “the _-word” in place of the unspeakable or unprintable crashed through a threshold during the 1988 presidential race. Candidate Bush—not W, but G.H.W.—famously leveled and fired both barrels at opponent Mike Dukakis, accusing him of a willingness to raise the T-word (taxes), as well as labeling him with the dreaded L-word (liberal). The press corps gushed oceans of ink documenting the usage, decoding the former CIA chief’s meanings and speculating on how these jibed with his political V-word, vision.

Soon scribes and headline writers across the land were riffing their own variations on the theme, cleverly, *oh so darn cleverly*, putting M or B or A or O in front of -word to birth their very own unutterables. It was a copycat crime wave, a fast-moving linguistic epidemic. Finally, language doctor William Safire of the New York Times stepped in, calling the B-word on this highly contagious strain of vox pox. His diagnosis was that “the _-word construction is used to express mock horror at a plain word too blunt for the pusillanimous to allow to pass their lips.” The usage is also a case of what Sir James Frazer identified in *The Golden Bough* as homeopathic magic; here, an attempt to supercharge mundane words and ideas by association with the earth-quivering power of the A-bomb of all _-word formations, the F-word (later joined by the H-bomb of the N-word).

While Safire incisively diagnosed this linguistic cancer, his prognosis badly missed the mark: “This vogue will probably peter out in a few years, after we go through the alphabet and begin to get confused about what a given letter is supposed to signify.”

Not so. _-words and the circumlocution, euphemism and innuendo boxed and ribboned within them are more widespread today than ever. Overuse has not led to the predicted extinction; rather, the formation has evolved, found ever more diverse environments in which to thrive. It has morphed into the verbal equivalent of a lazy speaker’s favorite device: setting off a word—*any old word*—by extending two fingers from each hand and scratching quotation marks in the air.

Unfortunately, examples abound. Mined from a variety of sources but primarily the Internet, the list below shows euphemisms 15-deep for each letter of the alphabet—and these entries by no means exhaust the lode. In the resulting Babel, even so venerable a fig leaf as F-word has lost its unambiguous identity, becoming dependent on context for meanings as foursquare wholesome as “farms” and as flip-chart insipid as “franchise.”

Oh for the G-word’s sake!

A
Apple (computer), asbestos, applique, anarchy, anger,
atheist, alleluia, accident, apologies, AIDS, Alzheimer’s,
Augusta (golf club), abortion, adoption, art.

B

budget, bias, biodiversity, bankruptcy, boundaries, breakthrough, burnout, breakup, bastard, boycott, bored, busy, babies, bottom (stock market), bran.

C

ensorship, credibility, cancer, commitment, communities, clinic, cult, conservative, can't, conservation, content, convergence, consultant, cholesterol, closure.

D

diet, documentary, democracy, dynasty, discourse, decommissioning, discipline, deregulation, diversity, diversion, delete, divorce, dyke, diva, death.

E

Eskimo, evangelism, evolution, exam, elitist, exercise, entrepreneur, economy, expansion (sports team), education, employment, empower/ment, ethnic, eugenics, euphemism.

F

flirting, Fellini, frustration, fascism, feminist, fetus, family, farms, failure, fear, franchise, free, fat, fun, feedback.

G

God, gourmet, grammar, globalization, gun, genocide, Gaia, girlfriend, gentlemen, grandmother, grunge, gimp, geek, groovy, gentrification.

H

hypocrisy, hysteria, hate, horror (fiction), hostage, hope, humility, honesty, harmony, hype, Hindu, hacker, HDTV, hootenanny, hatchback.

I

intellectual, idiot, inflation, intimacy, impeach, inspiration, immigration, integration, isolationist, ignorance, Indie, Indian, integrity, immortality, I.

J

Jesus, judgment, jihad, jogging Java, junk, jazz, Jets (NY), Jew, justice, jump (basketball), jitter (video), jitterbug, jealousy, journalist.

K

Kashmir, kundalini, kiosk, Kraftwerk, Klan, Kyoto, Kmart, keyboard, kid, knitting, kitsch, Kwanzaa, kibble, kabobs, knowledge.

L

love, labor, Linux, library, leadership, layoff, lazy, Lebanon, lesbian, libertarian, Lutheran, lobbyist, liability, Lewinsky, leprosy.

M

money, murder, music, mildew, menopause, mommy, marriage, marathon, masturbate, magic, modernism, minority, mime, multiculturalism, management.

N

non-custodial (parent), niggard, niggardly, nuclear (power), negativity, nepotism, novella, noun, nerd, Nazi, newbie, no, never, need, nobody.

O

oil, opportunity, obese, orgy, outsourcing, overhead, obstruction (of justice), obedience, orphanage, ontology, occult, opera, Oriental, organic, old.

P

perjury, posture, politician, pedophile, privatization, productivity, process, planning, parity, provider (medical), privacy, passion, peace, pregnant, potty.

Q

queen, quotas, qualifications, quantum, quagmire, quiet, quit, quality, quarantine, quack/ery, quadraphonic, quake, question, quirky, queer.

R

royalties, retail, recession, rationing, revolution, responsibility, restructure, reform, repeat (as champions), reputation, retirement, reunion, retard/ation, race, religion.

S

sales, sex, synergy, spirituality, socialization, security, strike, sell (stock rating), submission, sovereignty, socialism, suburb, squaw, slavery, sorry.

T

truth, tolerance, try, treaty, tofu, touching, tithing, training, tired, Taiwan, teenybopper, thesis, terrorist, telemarketing, turds.

U

UNIX, unsubscribe, understanding, unions, unity, unfortunately, ugly, unemployment, unilateralist/ism, undefeated, uranium, universe, university, urinate, upholstering.

V

vampire, vagina, Valentine's Day, vasectomy, vouchers, vulnerability, verb, virtual, vocational, volunteer, vitalistic, variability, vision, validation, Velcro.

W

work, welfare, women, witch, Whitewater, wilderness, war, weapons, wedding, won't, walk, wog, wombats, Windows, Whitey.

X

Xena, Xerox, xylophone, X-Files, Xmas (also Christmas), Christian, xenophobia, Xen (alien land in a computer game), Xymox (Clan of, a goth rock band), X-cellent, X-treme, X-Men, xeriscape, X-acto, exercise.

Y

Y2K, yeah, Yankees, y'all, yarns, young, yuppie, yes, yadda, Yale, Yeats, Yahoo, Yugoslavia, yearnings, youth.

Z

zoning, zone (in the), Zimbabwe, Zambesi, zebra, zoo, zucchini, zit, Zen, zoot suit, zydeco, zombie, zealot, Zionist, zero.