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 he 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.
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.