

The Big One

Once taboo, the ultimate swear is everywhere, and losing its power to shock

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff, 2/12/2004

It might be the most explosive word in the English language, the nuclear weapon in the arsenal of expletives. To young Ralphie of the film "A Christmas Story," it was "*the* word, the Big One, the Queen Mother of dirty words," and when Ralphie said it within earshot of his father, it earned him a mouthful of soap. Having no appetite for a soap sandwich ourselves, we will not print it here. But you know the one we mean. It is the F-bomb -- and lately it is being detonated all over the place.

Once the ultimate taboo, the F-word has aggressively muscled its way into the wider culture, raising the distinct possibility that it could someday follow other once-verboden vulgarities into the realm of the permissible. "I think that might happen," remarks Time magazine essayist Lance Morrow. "Somehow, the whole sociology of [the word] has changed."

Others cannot envision a day when use of the F-word will elicit no more than a shrug. After all, it was once considered so shocking that it did not even appear in any dictionaries of the English language from 1795 to 1965, according to the etymological website www.wordorigins.org. But today this most versatile of Anglo-Saxonisms is pushing the cultural envelope from many different directions: as a transitive and intransitive verb, as a noun, an adjective, an adverb, and as a bellowed exclamation.

Consider some recent adventures in the life of this incendiary word:

- Momentarily casting gravitas to the wind, Democratic presidential frontrunner John F. Kerry used the word in a December interview with Rolling Stone magazine in which he castigated President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq. The White House primly suggested Kerry apologize; he did not. Meanwhile, in a development that would have curled the few remaining hairs on William Shawn's head, The New Yorker now permits the word to appear in its venerable pages.

- The word appears in the titles of popular songs by R&B singer Eamon and dance-pop singer Willa Ford, and is a prominent feature of tunes by hip-hop artists such as the Grammy-winning OutKast. Some disc jockeys have walked right up to the line of its use, draping the barest of euphemistic fig leaves over its adjectival form by saying "effing" or the like. Also playing cute with the word, in the view of some critics, is British fashion company French Connection United Kingdom, which triggered a controversy last year by promoting a new cologne with T-shirts emblazoned with the company's initials.

- No sports broadcast on television is complete nowadays without the sight (though usually not the sound) of baseball, football, or basketball players letting fly with the F-word after a strikeout, dropped pass, or botched layup.

- Recent plays by Suzan-Lori Parks and John Kuntz contain variants of the word in the titles. Many creative artists are drawn to it. In the right hands (David Mamet's, say), the word is a powerful intensifier; in the wrong hands, it is simply numbing. David Chase and the rest of the writers on HBO's "The Sopranos" make skillful and copious use of the word.

- Turning up the flame on the issue recently were two notorious uses of the F-word on live television: first by U2 lead singer Bono in accepting a Golden Globe a year ago, and then by "The Simple Life" star Nicole Richie on the Billboard Music Awards in December. As reality shows have become a dominant genre on television over the past few years, viewers have been treated to an increasing number of bleeped-out F-words on programs such as MTV's "The Osbournes."

Beyond all these media manifestations is the undeniable fact that, in the words of University of Colorado assistant research professor Lynn Schofield Clark: "It is becoming more common in everyday conversation."

So how has the F-word edged into the mainstream? Geoffrey Nunberg, a Stanford University linguist and usage editor of the American Heritage Dictionary, says it mirrors broader changes in the way we live, and

talk. "If you think about the world 100 years ago, people behaved very differently in public than they did in private," Nunberg says. "Public language was more ornate -- and much more different from private language -- than it is now. It's much more colloquial now than it would have been 100 years ago. And the inhibitions against doing in public the things we used to do in private are themselves relaxed."

Even using the word in private used to be a risky proposition, depending on who was within earshot. Social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead recalls her brother using the word in the 1950s and promptly suffering Ralphie's fate. But she says the word took a step toward more widespread usage in the 1960s, when it acquired a political context, as in "[Expletive] the pigs," to refer to police officers. "People used it not so much to shock as to protest. It was certainly part of the youth culture of the '60s," she says. "In a way, it's surprising it hasn't become as ordinary as white bread today, that we haven't become so desensitized that we use it like golly or gee or damn."

Some do use it that way. Morrow, for instance, says that last week he was walking down Lexington Avenue in New York, heading for the subway, when he found himself behind a group of girls who appeared to be about 14 years old and were dropping F-bombs left and right. "They got on the subway car with me and they kept this up," he recalls. "The air turned kind of rancid with all this. . . . Now, I use the word myself -- I'm not in any sense prudish or priggish about it -- but it seemed to me it was deliberately offensive. It was an aggressive act. Basically, what it was saying was: '[Expletive] you.' In filling the air with the word, it was an assertion of dominance. They were muscling us linguistically."

Morrow speculates that one reason the word may be less taboo today, especially among young people, is that the sexual activity to which it is linked is also less taboo. Schofield Clark believes that in an era when many Americans receive all TV programming via cable, the wider latitude enjoyed by cable TV channels has "put pressure" on broadcast channels, contributing to the word's spread.

"I wonder if there will be a replacement with other words, if it's true that the F-word is losing its shock value for younger people," she says.

If so, it will mark yet another twist in its storied and stormy history. A popular myth dismissed by etymologists holds that the word originated in medieval times as an acronym for "Fornication Under Consent (or Command) of the King," or "For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge." Nunberg says the word may have derived from a verb that meant "to strike" in "a remote ancestor of English and the other Germanic languages." The first known written use of the word occurred around the year 1500, in a satirical poem about the Carmelite friars of Cambridge, England, according to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.

Norman Mailer was forced to euphemize it as "fug" in his 1948 novel "The Naked and the Dead" (which later inspired the name for a 1960s folk-rock group, the Fugs). When Holden Caulfield comes across the word scrawled on a wall toward the end of "Catcher in the Rye," it fills him with despair (granted, his usual state) about the impossibility of preserving innocence in this flawed world.

It could be that a general backlash against obscenity will halt the word's proliferation. Indeed, just last week a 7-year-old girl was suspended from school in Pittsburgh for violating the profanity code. Her offense: admonishing a classmate -- who had said "I swear to God" -- that "You're going to go to hell for swearing to God."

So a child's linguistic misdemeanor prompts a crackdown while much of the culture turns a deaf ear to the growing din of F-words. It's enough to make you ask: What the, um, heck is going on here?

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