The Other F Word

When is a homophobic insult not an insult? Stanford linguist Arnold Zwicky looks at a notoriously nasty epithet and comes up with some surprising answers.

It's not one of your hard-core taboo words. Larry Kramer used it in the title of his 1978 novel, Faggots. Until a few years ago, Dan Savage supplied "Hey, Faggot" as the salutation on each letter to him in his syndicated sex-advice column. Michael Thomas Ford titled his 1999 collection of (mostly) light comic essays on gay life That's Mr. Faggot to You. So faggot (along with its little brother, fag) is not a major-league "dirty word," not one of the seven George Carlin enumerated with such gusto in his comedy routine on words you weren't supposed to use on television. You can say or print faggot and fag in public. Sometimes.

Still, these words are "minor-league dirty," "rude," "not for polite company," and a fair number of gay men are offended by them on a visceral level. Kramer, never one to be polite for the sake of politeness, meant to shock. (The title apparently caught lots of people's eyes in bookstores.) Savage and Ford are being jokingly in-your-face; the word faggot, right there on the page, gets your attention.

So one of the things about faggot is that it's appropriate only in certain social contexts. This isn't surprising: many expressions that are connected somehow to our social lives are restricted this way as to who can use them, to whom, in what circumstances.

In contexts calling for more politeness, taboo vocabulary can usually be replaced by alternatives. Now, there are alternatives to faggot—for example, the now-neutral gay man—but if you try replacing instances of faggot with gay man, you'll see that there's a lot more to this story. A book titled Gay Man would not even be close to the book Kramer wrote, and the salutation "Hey, Gay Man" or the title That's Mr. Gay Man to You would just be bizarre.

It's not just the social context for expressions that's important. It's also what we can use those expressions to do. And faggot is a really interesting word here, because most of the time it does two things at once: It refers to gay men (if you don't quite agree with that, hang on, I'll get to your reservations), and it insults them (conveys that the speaker finds them bad, nasty, distasteful). The guys in the pickup truck who shouted "Faggot!" at me in front of the Palo Alto post office one day were saying, to rephrase it all in milder terms, that I was a gay man—I think the rainbow sticker on my car was what tipped them off, but maybe I was just having a particularly faggy day—and that they disapproved of gay
The guys in the pickup truck who shouted “Faggot!” at me in front of the Palo Alto post office were saying, to rephrase it all in milder terms, that I was a gay man and that they disapproved of gay men.
people to promote the negative connotations of *faggot* into plain of meaning, so that the word now actually means something like “bad gay man,” with what counts as bad versus good depending on the speaker’s beliefs and attitudes.

My reading of Larry Kramer is that this is what he meant by his novel’s title. For him, the bad gay guys are shallow, irresponsible sluts and party boys. They’re the faggots.

Other gay men believe that faggots are effeminate, swishy, flamboyant, as opposed to “regular guys.” In Tarzan talk, conventional masculinity good, deviation from it bad.

In a related development, at least one gay man—Greek active, French passive—maintained to me that faggots were bottoms, gay men who took the conventionally “feminine” role in anal sex. He wasn’t a faggot; I was.

Finally, since there are so many people who complain after gay pride events that the “bad” LGBT people, the “freaks,” are ruining the day for the great majority, who are just plain folks (except for what we do in the privacy of our bedrooms), I’d imagine that there are people who group together drag queens and guys in totally revealing leather (the standard male targets of these criticisms) as faggots, as opposed to those who march in everyday casual clothes and sensible shoes rather than high heels or work boots. I haven’t come across such people yet, but as a scholar of language use I still hope to find them. Maybe they’re in there with the 147,000 hits that Google turned up for this other f-word (and I didn’t even search newsgroups). It certainly looks like there’s a lot of talk going on about us faggots.

In this month’s *Out*, ARNOLD ZWICKY, professor of linguistics at Stanford University, navigates us through the fraught terrain of that special f-word—faggot—and encourages its reclamation. Growing up in eastern Pennsylvania, Zwicky was called “sissy,” “fairy,” and “faggot.” “I hated it all,” he recalls. But now, he says, “I am a public faggot.” When not publicly parading his wonderful faggotry, Zwicky works on writing and publishing his fiction and creating homoerotic collages in Palo Alto, Calif.