



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 Men* 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

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men. Same thing if one of them had said to the other, “Sure are a lot of faggots on the street today.”

So *faggot* is often semantically double-barreled, reference and disparagement all in one. Most words, even taboo words like *piss* and *cock*, just refer to things or situations in the world, without a second use wrapped into them. *Faggot* is special.

Who, then, can use *faggot*, to whom, in what circumstances? Who besides someone who wants to refer to gay men and put them down at the same time? Quite a few people, as it turns out. (Including me.) People are always trying to bend language to their own needs and wants, after all.

One thing you can do is to try to “reclaim” *faggot*: Toss out the insult in the word and use it proudly and defiantly as a synonym for *gay man*. You have to be sensitive to the audience and the circumstances, of course, since you don’t want to be taken for a homophobe. Using the word to refer to yourself pretty much clarifies things, though: “Well, *this* faggot isn’t going to wear a unitard,” that sort of thing. Reclamation has worked in the past—*gay* itself has turned around, *queer* has come far enough that some universities have Queer Studies programs, and *dyke* is looking good. LGBT people can now sometimes use these words in front of outsiders and will sometimes accept them from outsiders. Not every put-down word expands this far, though; some—most famously, the *n* word—pretty much stop at the group boundary.

It could take a long, long time for the disparaging undertones of *faggot* to wear off, though. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. In the meantime the lingering nastiness in the word can be a source of power, even strength. Savage’s “Hey, Faggot” was, among other things, a small, defiant display of toughness: I can take it, you can’t hurt me with this word. At the very least, the word has a punch and vividness to it that *gay* or *gay man* doesn’t

(neutral words are, well, neutral); for me, the announcement “I’m a faggot” has a lot more emotion in it than “I’m gay.”

Put-down vocabulary can also be turned on its head to develop positive uses, as a sign of intimacy, even affection: By using a word like *asshole* or *faggot* to you or about you, I can convey that we’re so tight I can talk like this without a problem. Not fighting words, but buddy talk.

Or that lingering nastiness can be recruited for dirty talk during sex. (But some gay men absolutely, *absolutely* will not accept being called *faggot*, even as part of sex play.) On occasion, once I’d checked that the word *faggot* would be a turn-on, I have wielded it to considerable audience approval.

Start with double-barreled *faggot*, wear away the insult use, and you get reclaimed-word *faggot* with the same reference (but different undertones) as *gay man*. Or start with double-barreled *faggot* and wear away the referential use, getting something that’s little more than an insult—like *bastard* or *son of a bitch*. (The original literal meanings of these expressions are pretty much irrelevant now.) The path here is from the meaning “gay” to an extended meaning “not masculine” (insulting as applied to men) to a generalized insult. So you can get a straight guy saying, in a challenging way, to a bunch of straight guys, “C’mon, you faggots! Get to work!” You get right-wing politicians, who tend to believe that liberal politics is soft—lacking in masculine toughness—referring to people on the left (including Ted Kennedy) as “liberal communist faggots” or “pinko commie fags.” And, more controversially, you get Eminem, who says he calls guys “faggot” not because of their sexual orientation but because they’re weak, unmanly.

Back to double-barreled *faggot*. All is not sunshine in faggotland. Since *faggot* has a negative component to it—it’s a (mildly) dirty word and an insult—the way is always open for → (page 140)

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people to promote the negative connotations of *faggot* into plain ol' 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. ■

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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.