

## Discussion Questions for Obscenity

1. The lecture argued that language construed as offensive is largely a matter of social convention, though certain aspects of human existence are widespread sources of such language. What is it about those areas (sex, elimination, religion, blood and marriage relationships) that would cause them to so often be the source of terms judged offensive?

*Presumably these are areas that are private, considered sacred, or considered deserving of social respect. To make them public or to use them in a rude way carries shock value. To say “Oh, soil!” or “You novel-reader!” or “Bill Clinton!” as curses or as abuse just doesn’t make it!*

2. In languages you know, find the areas which seem to be the most fruitful source of offensive language.

### **Hausa:**

*The main sources of abuse and offensive language are (1) curses invoking Allah (many of which are phrases taken directly from Arabic), (2) reference to the abusee’s mother or father, (3) references to someone’s character or mental abilities. Examples:*

*(1) Allah ya tsine maka (albarka)! ‘May Allah extract from you (blessing)!; Allah wadanka! ‘Damn you!’ (lit: ‘Allah your wadai!’—wadai is used only in this expression); A’uzu bi-llahi! (< Arabic) ‘How shocking!’ (lit: ‘I take refuge in Allah!’)*

*(2) Uwaka! ‘Your mother!’; Dan bura’ uba! ‘Son of a father’s penis!’ (can be either as abuse or an exclamation of anger or disgust); Ba kuɗin uwaka ba ne! ‘This isn’t your damn money!’ (lit: ‘It’s not your mother’s money!’)*

*(3) Shege! ‘Bastard!’; Wawan banza! ‘Stupid ass!’ (lit: ‘Fool of uselessness!’)*

*Notably absent as terms of abuse and expressions of anger or dismay in Hausa are references to eliminatory processes and to sex or sex organs (except when incorporated into phrases with ‘mother’ or ‘father’ as in the 2nd example of (2) above).*

3. Why do all languages apparently have terms which are taken as offensive?

*Vocal aggression is clearly an inherited trait. Probably all species which communicate orally have calls of aggression or anger. It makes sense to think that this has adaptive value—it can substitute for physical aggression, which could leave both the aggressor and aggressee impaired and less prepared to stave off outside threats. One type of evidence that vocal aggression is part of our biological make up is the fact that curses can be (maybe always are?) stored in the limbic system in their linguistic form. In certain types of aphasia, the only “linguistic” responses are curses which seem to reside in the limbic system rather than the normal “language” areas of the brain.*

4. Languages not only have *offensive* words, they have *euphemisms* for those words. In languages you know, what are the sources for euphemisms? (It has been claimed that Basque has no *offensive* terms; all such terms come from Spanish, and it is the native Basque terms which are polite!)

### **Hausa**

*Euphemistic curses: In place of the abusive phrases invoking Allah (see #2), Hausa has euphemistic phrases that could be used in similar contexts, such as Allah ya isa! ‘Allah suffices!’*

*References to family: Because the basic words uba ‘father’ and uwa ‘mother’ are used in abuse, other words substitute for these in polite reference, e.g. baba (Lo-Hi tones) ‘dad’, baba (Hi-Lo tones) ‘mom’, mahaifi/mahaifiya ‘bearer, birth giver’, tsoho/tsohuwa ‘(lit: old man/old lady)’.*

*Eliminatory functions: The standard words for these in Hausa (kashi ‘excrement’, fitsari ‘urine’) are not offensive in the sense that they are in common use in most contexts, but there are euphemistic ways to refer to these, e.g. zan zaga ‘I’m going to make a circuit’ (= ‘I’m going to the toilet’).*

*Sex and sexual organs: Terms for sex and sexual organs are general used in abuse only when joined with other words, particularly reference to parents (ka ci burar ubaka ‘you ate your father’s penis’, and the like). One would not use these words alone to abuse someone, e.g. one would not abuse someone by calling him bura ‘penis, prick’. There are, however, polite or euphemistic terms to refer to sexual intercourse and sexual organs. For intercourse, one might say sadu da ‘meet up with’. For private parts, there are native Hausa euphemisms, such as gindi ‘base, bottom’ for ‘vagina’ or ‘penis’, wutsiya ‘tail’ for ‘penis’. Polite terms for private parts are also borrowed from Arabic, e.g. azzakar ‘penis’, farji ‘vagina’, dubura ‘anus’.*

### **Questions for**

#### **Seven Dirty Words That You Can’t Say on Television**

1. How does Carlin’s repetition of the word ‘tits’ affect its force as an “obscene” word?

*Focus shifts from the meaning to the sound of the word, and thence to other types of things tits sounds like or evokes (a nickname, a breakfast cereal). This juxtaposition of sound associations with the original meaning association creates the humor.*

2. Carlin talks about some words sounding “aggressive”. Can the sounds of words be aggressive? (Consider the words ‘puck’, ‘shuck’, ‘fit’, ‘sit’ or the phrase ‘another sucker’, ‘smoother talker’.)

*Seems unlikely that this is a major factor. The way a word is pronounced has a lot more to do with it (cf. first study question from Week 8 noting the universality of voice qualities associated with speaker attitude). On the other hand, a string of syllables with obstruent consonants clearly delineating the onsets seems more suitable for verbal attack than a comparable string of purely sonorant sounds, e.g. oral wallower.*

3. Carlin humorously suggest that two of the words became taboo because women didn’t like them. What social attitude does this reflect?

*Presumably women are less prone to speak of private acts in public contexts, i.e. women are less aggressive than men (?).*

4. Is Carlin's replacement of the word 'kill' by one of the seven words funny because of because of the "social value" of the particular word or because of the literal meaning?

*As for question #1, it is the repeated anomalous juxtaposition of the word, with its particular meaning, and the novel context that creates the humor. The juxtaposition causes the listener to shift back and forth between the literal meaning of the sentences and the context of aggression.*

5. What do Carlin's examples of "double meaning" words show us about words "sounding obscene"?

*Clearly, sound of a word has nothing to do with making it offensive. Moreover, literal meaning is not enough. To say, "Roberto Clemente has two balls on him," is funny because of the ambiguity of the particular item. To say, "Roberto Clemente has two testicles on him," is just a non-humorous statement of fact.*

6. What does Carlin's monologue suggest about answering the question of what makes words obscene?

*The humor of his monologue arises from the fact that exploits particular words, putting them in unusual contexts. The words themselves used in their regular contexts would be taken as offensive, or at least not forms to be used in any "polite" context. If he had used, instead, the words excrement, urine, copulate, vulva, oedipal son, fellatio, breasts or sit, kiss, chuck, punt, southern cracker, lock picker, pits, his monolog would have been nonsensical. Moreover, the monolog would be humorous only in a culture where the particular words were conventionally viewed as tabooed. In Hausa, for example, there are no tabooed words referring to excrement, urine, or breasts, and although some of the other meanings can be expressed by "impolite" words, they don't form a sort of "standard abuse" vocabulary.*