

Introduction

You Can't Say Anything These Days

You people . . .
She was asking for it . . .
That's so gay . . .
Don't be a Jew . . .
My ex-girlfriend is crazy . . .
You'd be pretty if you lost weight . . .
You look good . . . for your age . . .

These statements can be offensive to some people, but it is complicated to understand exactly why. It is often difficult to recognize the veiled racism, sexism, ableism, lookism, ageism, and other -isms that hide in our everyday language. From an early age, we learn and normalize many words and phrases that exclude groups of people and reinforce bias and social inequality. Our language expresses attitudes and beliefs that can reveal internalized discrimination, prejudice, and intolerance. Some words and phrases are considered to be offensive, even if we're not trying to be.

Disclaimers such as *It's not my intention to hurt your feelings*, and *I didn't mean to offend*, suggest that, as a rule, people do not want to be offensive. We can often assume kind intent behind the things that people say. But there is a paradox. It is also frowned upon to *be offended*. Phrases such as *don't be offended*, *don't take offence*, and *they are easily offended* tell us that being offended is viewed with disapproval in society. The responsibility for offense is then redirected from the offender to the offended. It is argued that *being offended is a choice*. That *offence is taken, not given*. It is said that in a free society people have *the right to offend* but *nobody has the right to not be offended*. If you are offended then that is your problem. Some people say that the offended should simply

toughen up and get over it. We are reminded of the childhood nursery rhyme: *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.*

And yet, when we talk about being offended we use the same metaphorical language to express emotional distress that we use to describe physical pain. According to figures of speech, we can suffer from a *broken heart* as much as a broken bone, we can nurse our *wounded pride* as much as a wounded leg, and we can talk about having *bruised feelings* as well as a bruised knee. To *offend* is to cause anger or annoyance, but it is also to make someone *feel* something bad. Contrary to the phrase *words will never hurt me*, words can indeed be said to *hurt*, *harm*, and *injure*. The upsetting things people say to us can *crush*, *burn*, *break*, *bruise*, *sting*, *sear*, *scar*, *tear*, and *cut like a knife*. An insult can be a *slap in the face* or a *kick in the teeth*. Hurtful language can *attack* and *abuse*, cause *damage*, and *destroy* or *traumatize* people. Words can inflict *pain* and *suffering*. Offensive language is something said to us that we find to be morally repulsive or personally insulting. It is language that strikes the core of our beliefs or identity and affects us on a fundamental level. We can say that insulting words and phrases *offend to the core*, *offend to the bone*, *deeply offend*, or make us feel *personally offended*.

Some people boast, *I don't get offended easily*, suggesting that this shows strength of character, while being offended shows weakness. Not being afraid to offend is also admired. Some purport to be impartial in their prejudice, that they *offend everyone equally*. Others claim their right or *license to offend* that gives them a “free pass” to be offensive or they excuse any offensiveness with *that's just how I talk*. It is said that *it's a person's right to speak their mind*. They are praised for not being *afraid to speak their mind*, for their *straight talk*, *truth-telling*, and for *telling it like it is*. Often, people rule that certain language is “not offensive,” simply because it is not offensive to *them*, thereby dismissing the possibility that it may be offensive to other people. It can be difficult to understand why something is offensive if we're not the one who has experienced prejudice, and therefore not an authority on what

is offensive or not. People who are discriminated against are the authorities on their own discrimination. Someone who is not a member of a marginalized group is said to be coming from a place of *privilege*. Privilege refers to the benefits, rights, advantages, and powers that are afforded to some people in society, simply because they do not belong to a stigmatized group. For people who've enjoyed this type of privilege their whole lives, social equality may seem scary or oppressive. Being confronted by one's own prejudices can lead to a state that has been described as *fragility*. Fragility is a resistance to acknowledging these prejudices, and it is often characterized by anger, guilt, argumentation, silence, denial, and defensiveness.

Some people are offended by people who are offended.

People who get offended are usually portrayed as emotional, vulnerable, and weak. We have a lot of popular labels to describe "the offended." It is said that offended people *take things to heart*, and they are *thin-skinned*, *too sensitive*, or *hypersensitive*. They are called *uptight*, *fragile*, and *delicate*. They are *snowflakes*. Offenses are minimized as *taunting*, *teasing*, a *slight*, an *insult*, or a just a *joke*. It is said that an offended person *can't take a joke*; they are *overreacting*, or *looking to be offended*. They need to *get a sense of humor*, simply *ignore it*, *suck it up*, or *toughen up* and *grow a thicker skin*. Offended people are accused of being self-obsessed and narcissistic. It is said they think themselves to be morally superior, educated, and "woke." They are accused of trying to look good in the eyes of others with their *virtue signaling*. They are ridiculed for their requests for *safe spaces*, *content notes*, and *trigger warnings* that allow them to choose whether or not to expose themselves to potentially distressing topics. (Although such warnings have been a feature of television for decades, from movie ratings and content warnings to cultural sensitivity warnings.)

People who get offended are said to be the products of *helicopter parenting*, that is, overprotective parents who, like helicopters, hover over their children overseeing every minute aspect of their lives. The offended are regarded as immature, or infantilized as

whining babies having tantrums. At Kent State University in October 2017, the conservative group Turning Point USA held a protest on campus in which they argued, “Safe spaces are for children.” Their publicity stunt featured students who dressed up in diapers, and drew in coloring books as they sucked on pacifiers in a playpen.¹ They displayed posters that read: “Your censorship offends me.” People who are offended are said to be part of today’s *outrage culture*.

Some people are outraged by people who are outraged.

Western society is thought to be in the midst of a “cultural war.” People who are concerned about social justice are framed as a kind of subculture believed to be in opposition to the rest of society. They are derisively labeled *Social Justice Warriors*, a slur that is usually abbreviated to *SJWs*. According to this rhetoric, they have their own *SJW culture* or *PC culture* that has gone “too far.” Social justice advocates are denounced as “progressives” who censor speech and disseminate *propaganda*. They are characterized as mobs with pitchforks on the Internet engaged in modern-day *witch hunts*. Ad hominem attacks are employed against them to shut down debate. They are delicate *snowflakes*, but also *rabid*, *radical*, *militant*, and *angry*. A popular adage on Twitter is, “What are we angry about today?” Their boycotting of celebrities who make offensive remarks is branded *cancel culture* (or *call-out culture*), and they are accused of ruining comedy, journalism, movies, books, and video games. Those who have been affected by prejudice, and survivors of harassment and abuse, are accused of casting themselves as tragic *victims*, and it is said that their *victim mentality* has created a *victimhood culture*. They are believed to be a culture of people who are offended by everything.

But we have always been offended.

Historically, people (usually men) were obliged to defend their honor by answering insults and affronts, often through the use of violence.² This kind of society was known as a “culture of honor.” Samuel Johnson, the author of the first dictionary of the English language, said to his biographer James Boswell in 1783, “A man may shoot the man who invades his character, as he may shoot

him who attempts to break into his house.”³ Ideas about what is considered to be offensive language change, sometimes dramatically, across culture, context, and time. Calling someone a *fopdoodle* or a *cumberworld* would probably be laughed at today, although in the past, besmirching someone’s good name offended their honor, and the offender might be challenged to a duel. Boswell’s son, Sir Alexander Boswell, would die in 1822 in such a duel with politician James Stewart after he called him a “bully”, a “coward”, a “dastard”, and a “sulky poltroon.” Stewart was cleared of murder charges, and the verdict of acquittal was received with loud cheers.⁴

Ideas about what is an appropriate response to offensive language also change across culture, context, and time. The New Testament of the Bible advocates nonviolence in the face of personal insult, “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (Matthew 5:38–40). But God didn’t always turn the other cheek. In the Old Testament it is said, “He that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death” (Leviticus 24:16). There were often harsh punishments for such heretics. Until the end of the seventeenth century, blasphemy was punishable in Britain by burning or hanging. *God, Lord, Jesus, Christ, hell, and damn* were banned in print, cinema, television, and radio until the twentieth century, when blasphemy was replaced in offensiveness by obscene words relating to sex.⁵

Today, religious profanity has lost its punch in English, although the devout may still take offense at the use of language that they perceive as disrespectful toward their religion. However, some Islamic countries still impose severe punishments for committing blasphemy. In Pakistan, blaspheming or desecrating the Qur’an can receive life imprisonment, while the death penalty is prescribed for insulting the prophet Muhammad.⁶ In February 1989, Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* was viewed as an insult toward Islam by Iranian clerical leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who issued

a fatwa calling for the British author's death.⁷ In January 2015, the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* were attacked because the newspaper published cartoons depicting Muhammad. The attackers killed 12 people and injured 11, in their mission to “avenge the prophet.”⁸

These are extreme cases of oppression, but they illustrate the importance of freedom of speech in Western society. However, in the United States, the First Amendment, which includes the right to free speech, is not absolute. Certain offensive words can be prohibited, such as *fighting words*, that is, vilifying language that is intended to incite hatred or violence against an individual or group of people. Language can be violent, and it can lead to violence.⁹ Today, taboos against blasphemy and swearing have relaxed and been replaced by social sanctions against language that shows prejudice against race, gender and sex, sexual orientation, appearance, disability, and religious affiliation. These kinds of offensive language criticize an immutable aspect of people, such as their age, sexuality, or the color of their skin. Nowadays, most people would agree that racist language is especially taboo and offensive.¹⁰ Language that attacks an individual or group on the basis of race, ethnicity, or nationality can constitute *hate speech*, which may have repercussions under criminal or civil law.

Unfortunately, the discussion of offensive language is often condemned as an *attack on free speech*. It is hyperbolized as *silencing*, *suppression*, and *censorship*. Social justice activists are branded the *language police* while polite, preferred, and inclusive terms are derided as *doublespeak*, *euphemisms*, or *political correctness*. Some people bemoan that they must tiptoe around certain hot button topics. They complain that so many words are offensive they *can't not offend*. They believe that language is such a minefield they *Can't say anything these days*. Of course, free speech is a vital part of a free society. The discussion of offensive language is not waging war on free speech, but is exercising the right to free speech. This book is not about censoring language. It does not prescribe language or tell people how to speak. It is a catalog of offensive language in Anglophone (predominately

English-speaking) countries, but is not intended to be a resource on “how to offend.” It does not provide ammunition to bigots, but instead describes the language of bigotry and bias. This book identifies language that is considered to be offensive in order to answer the questions: “*What* is offensive?” and “*Why* is that offensive?”

This book unpacks the meaning and usage of offensive language by exploring various semantic phenomena. (*Semantics* is a fancy linguistics term that means “meaning.”) Meaning is not always in the dictionary. Dictionary definitions can be obscure, circular, and outdated, while they do not always keep up with slang, but they can be a useful starting point, especially to uncover a word’s historical meaning. Language reflects social attitudes, beliefs, and values at a given point in time, but it can also reflect those of the societies that came before us. So, we often travel back to the etymology, to the original and former meanings of a word, to trace its history, which can reveal historical baggage that it can carry to this day. But meaning is not permanent, unchanging, or stable. Meaning is fluid. It shifts, changes, and evolves. Some words that were not offensive can develop offensive meanings. A popular defense to justify the use of an offensive word is that it *didn’t used to be offensive*, although it has become offensive over time. This historical process is known as *pejoration*. This occurs when a word with a neutral or positive sense develops negative connotations and becomes taboo. Taboos are powerful influencers of language, and a tabooed word often drops out of usage.

Once again, there is a paradox. We stop using tabooed words because we generally don’t want to offend. Some words are thought of as “dirty” and are dropped simply because they resemble offensive words. The animal name *donkey* has replaced *ass*, *rooster* is preferred over *cock*, while *rabbit* has supplanted *coney* (formerly pronounced similar to *cunny* which was a synonym of *cunt*).¹¹ The negative sense of a word usually supersedes its positive sense. Ayds appetite-suppressant candy was popular in the 1980s, until the public awareness of AIDS as a life-threatening condition sullied the brand’s name and led the company to

withdraw the product from the market. At the time of writing, the emergence of COVID-19, also known as the Coronavirus, was falsely linked by some to the Mexican beer Corona, because of the similarity of the two names. Even the word that denotes phonological similarity, *homophone* (used for words with different meanings that sound the same, like *pair* and *pear*), has been tarnished because it sounds similar to the word *homosexual*, even though the words have nothing to do with each other beyond their prefix *homo-*. In 2014, an English teacher who penned a blog post about homophones was fired when he was accused of creating the perception that the school promoted a gay agenda.¹² Occasionally, a word actually improves in its meaning or it loses its offensiveness. For example, in Middle English *nice* meant “foolish,” “silly,” or “simple” before it developed favorable connotations in the 1800s to mean “kind” and “friendly.”¹³ This historical process is known as *amelioration*, but it is far more rare.

The emergence of *euphemisms*, words substituted for others that are considered unpleasant or embarrassing, can be motivated by a desire to not offend. However, sometimes these good intentions can backfire. The so-called “euphemism treadmill” is when a word becomes pejorative because of its reference to offensive concepts, and so a polite word is introduced to replace it.¹⁴ As an example, *latrine* became *water closet*, which became *toilet*, which became *bathroom*, which became *restroom*. All related words will eventually stigmatize because the very subject matter is taboo. Over time, a euphemism becomes tainted by association and is also replaced. In the well-meaning search to find a stigma-free term, this cycle repeats itself. No matter how benign the euphemism appears at first, it will become offensive and be replaced by another word that in due course will also undergo the same process. However, relabeling a concept does not necessarily reduce its stigma or improve people’s attitudes. As we will see, the euphemism treadmill is common in the areas of language related to race and ethnicity, disability, and disease. The fluid nature of offensive language can lead some people to think this topic is a linguistic minefield. A common lament is, *I can’t keep up*

with what's offensive! But we can. At any given point there is terminology that is preferred by stakeholders, that is, the people to whom the terms refer. This book aims to favor the most preferred and inclusive terms at this time, to explain which terms have been chosen and why, and also to provide additional acceptable ones.

There are many different types of offensive language, which are of varying degrees of offensiveness. Some language is not intended to be offensive, but may be interpreted as offensive. Just because someone argues they didn't mean to be offensive by what they said, or insists that what they said wasn't offensive, doesn't mean it wasn't construed as offensive by the listener. This interpretation is based on the listener's personal circumstances and experiences, which may not be shared with or understood by the speaker. Language that can be interpreted as covertly racist, sexist, ableist, and so on, is colloquially described as *hidden*, *everyday*, *subtle*, or *casual*. This kind of offensive language includes outdated labels, microaggressions, stereotypes, preconceived beliefs, assumptions, tropes, and myths that may be accidentally or unintentionally insulting. Some language is intended to be offensive. Overtly or explicitly derogatory language includes insults, slurs, name-calling, abusive epithets, and terms of abuse. Unlike euphemisms that intend to protect, offensive language is dysphemistic, and is meant to hurt. Of course there are exceptions, and some insults are instead intended as playful banter, good-humored teasing, or joking. On the other hand, jokes can also disguise disparaging attitudes. A seemingly gentle phrase such as *Bless your heart* can be a genuine expression of sympathy, or wielded as cutting sarcasm. Many of the terms in this book have multiple meanings, which are dependent on context.

Reclamation demonstrates the importance of context in language, and shows that meaning is not singular, static, or universal. Reclaiming is a process by which controversial terms that were previously used to offend are appropriated by the discriminated group. In an effort to reshape language and attitudes, insults are rejected as stigmatizing labels previously imposed on the group,

but are then taken back and used by the people they had been used against. For example, the LGBTQ community reclaimed *gay*, while Australian Aboriginal people use *Abo*, *boong*, or *blackfella* among themselves. The offensive word is recast with a positive meaning within the group, as an expression of solidarity and pride in one's identity. These terms are used in defiance, and often employed in an ironic or satirical way. This can be empowering for some people, although others may continue to have strong negative associations to these words. Reclaimed words are also context-dependent, continuing to retain their negative connotations when used outside of the community that seeks to retain them.¹⁵ While it may be appropriate for members of this *in-group* to reclaim a word due to personal experiences that allow them to understand when, why, and how to use it, and the implications of using it the wrong way, it may not be appropriate for the *out-group* to use, that is, people outside of the group.

Over the past century, progress has been made toward obtaining human rights and equality for various groups, in particular, civil rights, women's rights, disability rights, and LGBTQ rights. Many of these advances are reflected in our language and the way we now talk about these groups of people. These improvements have been hard won, although the struggle for social justice is not over yet. Modern language continues to reveal discriminatory attitudes and beliefs. This book explores offensive language in our own words, both past and present; the exclusive language that offends and hurts, and the preferred terms that are inclusive of the people to whom they refer. This book is about understanding and empathizing with the life experiences and challenges of other people, through the lens of language. It is also about recognizing prejudice in language, both against other people and ourselves, because we will all be affected by prejudice.