Context the key in use of f-word

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

Janet Holmes

WHY the f ... do we swear? In Auckland recently I needed to send an e-mail so I found an Internet venue on Queen St.

The room was full of young men playing a violent Internet game and shouting loudly as they chased and killed characters.

What struck me most forcibly was the frequency with which they used the word "f ...", a four-letter word which, despite its increasing use in television drama (such as *The Sopranos*) and film, can still cause offence or, at the least, raised eyebrows in many contexts.

Circa's recent brilliant production of Conor McPherson's *Shining City* also included repeated use of the f-word, this time in the form "f ... ing". Despite such exposure, this swear word still packs a punch for me, and I suspect it had a similar effect on others in the mainly middle-class, middle-aged audience at Circa.

These experiences highlight the different impact that swear words have in different contexts for different speakers.

One important function of swear words or expletives (as linguists call them) is to express anger or frustration. This is perhaps the core function, with which everyone is familiar. Few can resist a strong expletive when they trap a finger in the car door or when someone treats them with contempt or derision.

Strong language is an appropriate way of expressing strong emotions and feelings, such as pain or anger, in such circumstances. But such occasions are relatively rare, and listeners are usually tolerant of expletives in such contexts.

So it is the extensive use of swear words in more familiar contexts that raise hackles and cause prescriptivists like Lynne Truss (who lambasts swearing as exceptionally rude behaviour) to sharpen their knives.

A recent American advice column warned that while "mild words like 'shit' and 'bitch' may or may not create a negative impact within your particular group, the f-word never has a place at work. The continued use of words like these can be grounds for discipline, beginning with reprimands, letters, suspensions and ultimately termination".

But our research shows this is simply not true in all workplaces.

People don't always use swear words to cause offence, and nor can one state categorically that the use of any particular word will always cause offence. For many people a swear word is simply a familiar emphatic form like "really" in phrases such as "it was really amazing" or "very" in "she was very aggressive".

Edwin Battistella recounts in his book *Bad Language* how during World War I "get your f ... ing rifles" was the routine way of delivering this order. If the sergeant said "get your rifles" the

soldiers knew things were urgent and dangerous. In my schooldays we were constantly advised to avoid over-using nice in our stories. The teachers claimed that it was a bland word with not much meaning and exhorted us to choose more colourful and semantically rich adjectives instead. We could make the same argument about "f ... ing" in contexts like Internet venues, building sites and military groups.

Over-use means its edge is likely to be dulled. But it is unlikely that anyone will take notice of such appeals, since expressing oneself with originality and creativity is not the main function of talk in an Internet café.

USING the odd swear word in some workplaces can provoke laughter and tension relief because it is unexpected. Saying "not f ... ing likely" rather than "no, I am afraid not", generated a gale of laughter in one professional group.

The shock value of the swear words ameliorated the bluntness of the refusal, and maintained good rapport between the people involved.

In our Language in the Workplace project, we found that swear words could be a way of building solidarity or team spirit between members of a team.

Some workplace teams used everyday exchanges of swear words as a sign that they got along well together and trusted each other. They used abusive address terms such as "f ... er" and in a friendly way — as others might use terms like "mate" and "bro".

It is difficult for people who are unused to such language to understand the positive social meaning swear words may convey in different work contexts. The context is what matters, not the words per se; it is the context of the talk which affects whether a swear word is interpreted as a term of abuse or a friendly address term.

"Never say never" is a good rule when discussing language.

■ *Janet Holmes teaches sociolinguistics at Victoria University.*

■ *Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz*