

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 9 : 11 November 2009

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around ‘Offensive’ Language

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Abstract

In the English language there are many expressions which may be considered ‘offensive’ by both native and non-native speakers because they refer to sexual activity, private parts of the body and human waste, in a very crude and unpleasant manner. They are insulting to fellow human beings, besides being distasteful in other ways.

Users may therefore find it repugnant to use such expressions in their discourse. The contemporary English language dictionaries which have included them often describe them as offensive, deeply offensive and sometimes even carry a warning not to use them.

In order not to give the impression that a speaker is rude, insensitive, vulgar or uncultured, which other alternative words can speakers use? It is especially important for people who live in a society or community which values politeness in language use to be aware of ‘bad’ language and know how to use words which may be considered free from language unpleasantness. This awareness is not only necessary for non-native speakers of English, but also for those to whom English is their dominant language of communication.

Introduction

Cameron (1995) popularized the term ‘verbal hygiene’. She uses the term to

refer to the language practice of improving or cleaning up language. Cameron (1995:1) cites the effort of a former mayor of New York city who ‘compiled a list vulgar New Yorkisms he wanted city teachers to eliminate from children’s speech ...’

The present researcher introduces the term ‘language hygiene’ specifically to the practice of substituting taboo usage which includes expletives, references to sex, private parts of the human anatomy and human waste in obnoxious ways. These terms are probably objectionable to people who are at the receiving end. Those who utter the obscenities cannot expect zero response or tolerance. As Cameron (1995: 186-7) observes ‘... most speakers of English, regardless of gender, would never remotely approach’ a degree of rudeness as this ‘ would probably backfire on them if they did’.

English today is used as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) by a very large number of people whose first language may be Arabic, Malay, Urdu, Mandarin, Spanish, Russian, etc. Not many ESL/EFL speakers share the equivalent lexical expressions in their native language. There are vulgar, non-vulgar and neutral expressions in all languages. Many ESL/EFL users profess religious and cultural beliefs which do not condone using vulgarities and obscenities in their first language, and by extension the other languages they may have to use. Language users, whichever language it may be, must respect the norms of the community they come from and live in. Norms and values may of course differ between communities and caution is therefore necessary. I have introduced the term ‘language hygiene’ to refer to expressions that are devoid of elements of vulgarity, obscenity and profanity in all types of communication, be they spoken, written or electronic.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around ‘Offensive’ Language

Language hygiene is aesthetically motivated language. It is based on the belief that certain universal values such as being polite, not hurting someone by the speakers' utterances, refraining from vulgarity and 'bad' language ought to prevail. It is also based on the belief of religious teachings and sheer commonsense that language users should not hurt others by their words as it is with deeds. In Islam, for example, a good Muslim is one who does not hurt another by his or her words or deeds. In Christianity, we have the common saying: 'Do unto others, what you would like them do unto you'. This may be interpreted to include the advice that we should speak to others in such a way as we would like them to speak to us.

Statement of Problem

Offensive vulgar words are heard on television programs and movies and can even be read in some creative writing materials. Bad language is heard on lyrics in rap songs. The internet and You Tube videos are also inadvertently contributing to this. It was recently reported that a rapper apologized for his bad language after he realized that he had a large fan base of young kids who looked up to him (*New Straits Times, December 19, 2008*). Such language has become fairly commonplace in public places and in the conversation of young people, some of whom may not even be aware of the semantics or the acute unpleasantness of the expressions involved. A study of such impolite words is beneficial to highlight which ones are very rude and what alternative expressions may be used which could be regarded as causing less hurt or offence. This study hopes to make a small contribution to the domain of polite discourse.

Justification for Study

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
9 : 11 November 2009
Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.
Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

The electronic medium is a very powerful and influential one. South Korean hip hop, for example, uses ‘such expressions as *fuck* and its variants (e.g. *fucker/fucka, fuckin, motherfucker/muthafucka, etc.*), as well as *bitch, ho* and *ass...*’ (Lee, 2007: 58). With the arrival of cable television into our homes with limited censorship of language use and/or scenes deemed inappropriate for certain categories of viewers, it is advisable for second and foreign language users to be presented with a guide regarding items they have to be careful about and what these mean. They should be familiar with alternative language items to stay out of trouble, avoid embarrassment or experience the potential of being misunderstood. All cultures and religions prioritize polite language, anyway.

Limitations of Study

Since this is a small-scale research project, it does not include every offensive vulgar expression. The study delimits itself to dealing with ones which may be heard on the electronic media, found in dictionaries and present in transcripts of authentic discourse.

The current research delimits itself to those lexical expressions that are repugnant in terms of referring to sex, certain parts of the body, human waste and a few others such as humiliating fellow humans who are disadvantaged intellectually and racist expressions.

Because of the scope of the research, only two dictionaries-namely Macmillan English Dictionary (2002) and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) have been used for this study. Both the dictionaries are British-based. However, they do mention American English usage where it is relevant. Alternative expressions which are deemed less offensive are provided for users who are more familiar with the offensive terms.

Target Words

A

arse/ass- one's bottom or buttocks

get off you arse – to tell someone off for being lazy or for not doing anything

Let's get some work done, shall we? *NOT* Get off your arse and do some work around here, we haven't got the whole day.

my **arse-** used for saying that one does not believe in something

I don't believe in supernatural beings. *NOT* My arse, there are ghosts. I'll believe in them when I see one.

pain in the arse- very annoying

Shamsul's neighbor is a real pain. *NOT* Shamsul'sis a pain in the arse.

kick someone's ass- to beat someone (in a game)

Brazil will beat Ghana tonight. *NOT* Brazil will kick Ghana's ass tonight.

kiss my ass- to say that you refuse to do what someone has asked you to

I am not going to do it. *NOT* You can kiss my ass.

kiss someone's ass- to be too nice to someone in authority

You don't have to be too pleasing to your superior as long as you do your job. *NOT* You don't have to kiss his ass as long ... job.

make an arse of oneself - to do something stupid

Don't be silly and spoil our plans. *NOT* Don't make an arse of yourself and spoil our plans.

move your arse- to tell somebody to hurry or get out of a person's way

Could you move aside? I'm in a hurry. *NOT* Move your arse, you are blocking my way.

arse around/about- to waste one's time

I was just idling away the time. *NOT* I was just arsing around/about.

worked my/his/her ass/butt off- worked very hard

Jaclyn has worked very hard to get this far in life. *NOT* Jaclyn has worked her ass/butt off to ... life.

arsehole/asshole - an annoying, stupid person

I can't stand Nathan. He's so slow. *NOT* I can't stand Nathan. He's an asshole.

arse-licker- someone who is too willing to please others in return for favors

Sue will not demean herself to please her boss. *NOT* Sue is not an arse-licker.

smart arse- someone who thinks he/she is clever, but is annoying

Why can't that smart alec just shut up. *NOT* Why can't the smart ass/arse just shut up.

.

B

balls- courage

He didn't have the courage to confront his colleague who badmouthed him. *NOT* You don't have the balls to face him.

One of the meanings of the word refers to the two round male sex organs behind the penis.

bastard- a very unpleasant man/boy

He's so annoying. *NOT* I can't stand that bastard.

The word also has the meaning of a person who was born out of wedlock, but this meaning is not in popular use anymore. However, since this was the popular meaning for a very long time, nobody would like to be described as a lucky/an unlucky or poor bastard, humorously or otherwise.

bitch- used for a woman/girl a person dislikes intensely

I hate Mrs. Chan, she's so insensitive. *NOT* I hate her, she's a real bitch.

One of the meanings of this word refers to a female dog.

blackie- used for a person of dark complexion

Many Indians have a dark complexion. *NOT* Many Indians are blackies.

black shit- this is a racist and offensive expression against a black person

Thierry Henry failed to score in Arsenal's match against Bolton. *NOT* The black shit didn't score against Bolton.

Thierry Henry is considered a black player. There are a lot of racist taunts and behavior in football matches.

bloody- used when someone is angry or annoyed with someone or something

Don't include expressions with 'bloody' in them, for example:

He can be bloody annoying at times.

Leave out this rude word in your speech. We can express our anger and annoyance by our intonation.

bugger- someone who is annoying

You've ruined my new shirt, you clumsy fellow. *NOT* You'veshirt, you clumsy bugger.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

bullshit- something that is stupid and completely untrue

Don't believe a word of what she says. It's all rubbish. *NOT* It's bullshit.

This compound word may evoke images of the large amount of shit left by bulls.

butthole- used for insulting someone

You've, stepped on my toes, man. *NOT* You've stepped on my toes you butthole.

The word literally means the anus.

C

chickenshit- a coward

You are not a coward, you just don't want any trouble.. *NOT* He's a chickenshit to walk away like that.

cock- penis

The patient complained that his penis (not *cock*) hurt when he urinated.

cock up- to spoil something by being stupid

The director's secretary messed up (*not* cocked up) his itinerary.

A taboo word for the male or female sex organ can make a person look uncouth.

cow- a woman you regard as foolish or unpleasant

Don't believe what she tells you. *NOT* Don't listen to that cow.

crap- nonsense

The stranger began to talk nonsense (*not* crap) and I left the scene immediately.

Her cooking is not very palatable. *NOT* Her cooking is crap *or* The food was crap.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

One of the meanings of the word refers to the human excreta.

D

darkie- a person of dark complexion

I would describe Miss Barnes as a person of dark complexion. *NOT* Miss Barnes is a darkie.

Black is beautiful. But ‘blackie’ and ‘darkie’ are not kind references to black people.

dick- a man’s penis.

Show them you are a man. *NOT* You don’t have a dick.

dickhead- a man who is not very clever

Bob isn’t that very smart. *NOT* Bob is a dickhead.

dipshit- an unintelligent person

The new employee is not smart at all. I wonder why they took him in. *NOT* The new employee is a dipshit ...

dog

The words ‘dog and ‘pig’ may cause offence if inappropriately used as they carry unpleasant connotations among speakers of many language backgrounds, though not all. To call someone a ‘dog’ for any reason can be the worst humiliation for the offended person and therefore very provocative, for example:

‘My neighbor is a dirty dog’. Indians are known to label a person who is ungrateful as an ‘ungrateful dog’.

dumbass- used to show annoyance for someone who is not intelligent

Well, I would describe Morgan as a person who does not have much intelligence. *NOT* Morgan is a dumbass.

The word 'ass' refers to a donkey, a stupid person as well as a person's anus. Nobody would like these descriptions attributed to them.

E

eff off- to tell someone to go away in a rude manner, this expression is used instead of the extremely offensive 'fuck off'.

Go away. This doesn't concern you. *NOT* Eff off. It's none of your business.

effing- used to avoid using the word 'fucking', when one is very upset.

Where's this damn place! We are going round in circles. *NOT* Where's the effing place!
How long is it going to take!

F

fart- an unpleasant person. To fart is to break wind loudly. This is considered very uncouth and uncivilized.

I don't like his company because he's not a very pleasant man. *NOT* I can't get along with that fart.

fuck- this four-letter f... word is deeply offensive and should be avoided. Wherever the f... word appears in other offensive expressions, alternative ones are much desirable.

Because of the severity of this word many examples are given below pertaining to the phrases as mentioned in the dictionaries.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

f... used as an interjection to express annoyance

Oh no! I've left my wallet at home again. *NOT* F...! I'veagain.

f... around- to waste time by doing silly things

Stop wasting time and do something useful. *NOT* Don't just f... around here.

f... me- used when one thinks something is impressive or surprising

Wow! What a bargain! *NOT* F... me! What low prices!

f... off - to tell someone very rudely to go away

Get lost. I have many important things to do. *NOT* F... off. I'm busy.

f... over- to treat a person badly

He will walk all over you if you do not stand up to him. *NOT* If you do not stand up to him, he'll f... you over.

f...ed up- in very bad condition

This is a very poorly maintained car. *NOT* This is a f...ed up car.

f... you - used for expressing anger with someone

I am very upset with you. *NOT* F... you.

f... someone about/around- to make someone very upset for wasting their time

I have other customers to attend to. Don't waste my time, okay?

NOT I have customers waiting, so don't f... me around, alright?

go f... yourself- to express anger and annoyance with someone

Why don't you just leave me alone. *NOT* I tell you what. Go f... yourself.

f... with- to mess with someone

You better watch out. He's not someone you can fuck with.

NOT You have to be very careful with him. He doesn't tolerate nonsense.

f... er- to angrily describe someone thought to be stupid or very annoying

The supervisor gets on my nerves. *NOT* I hate the f...er.

f...head/f...wit- someone whom you utterly dislike

I hate those people who spread malicious rumors in the workplace. *NOT* You see that

f...wit/f...head. He's one of the troublemakers here.

f...ing- used as an adjective to refer to someone or something you are unhappy with

There's a salesman at the gate. What does he want? *NOT* There's a f...ing salesman ...

not give a f... -not to bother whatever happens

I don't care what the manager will do to me. *NOT* I don't give a f... what he'll do to me.

the f...- when a person is very angry and wants to send a strong message

Don't trespass on my property. *NOT* Get the fuck off my house/land.

Lovemaking between married couples is something healthy. Using the f... word in all these ways is so degrading to the act of making legitimate love.

G

goddamn- to express your anger and annoyance

That's a very stupid thing to do. *NOT* That's a goddamn stupid thing to do.

To combine a word with a religious association with that of an exclamation of annoyance seems incompatible.

H

hell- an unpleasant situation

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

The word 'hell' is not liked by people from a religious background if it is used in an unrestricted way. There are many expressions which include 'hell'. They are not considered as polite, for example:

1. Where the hell were you? We were looking for you everywhere.
2. Don't think your idea is a hell of a good idea.
3. If you don't like my suggestion, you can go to hell.
4. She's been feeling like hell since the divorce.
5. Get the hell out of here. I don't want to see you again.
6. To hell with that lecturer. I'm going to drop his course.
7. The police surprised the hell out of the robbers.
8. The invading forces destroyed the infrastructure of the country for the hell of it.
9. The children were very noisy, but what the hell, it was festival time.
10. She ran like hell upon feeling someone was following her.
11. My mom was mad as hell for getting home late.
12. He didn't agree with his parents' choice, he gave his wife hell.
13. Oh hell! I've left the files at home.
14. Let's get the hell out of here. It's a trap.
15. The bullies beat the hell out of their victim.

All the above sentences may be expressed in the following way respectively without using the word 'hell' in them.

1. Where have you been all this while?

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

2. Don't think too highly of your idea only. Others too have brilliant suggestions.
3. If you're not happy with my idea, so be it. You are entitled to your opinion.
4. She's been feeling very miserable since getting divorced.
5. Please don't bother me. Leave me alone.
6. Who does he think he is? I am going to drop his course.
7. The police sprang a big surprise upon the robbers.
8. The invading forces derived wicked satisfaction by wrecking the country's infrastructure.
9. Let the children make as much noise as they want as it's festival time.
10. She ran as fast as she could as she felt that someone was pursuing her.
11. My mom was really mad at me for going home late.
12. Since he didn't agree with his parents' choice, he made her life miserable.
13. Oh no! I've left the files at home.
14. Let's get out of here quickly. They have set a trap for us.
15. The bullies traumatized their victim.

It is better to avoid using this word in an offensive way as illustrated from a religious and politeness of speech perspective. It has to be admitted that 'hell' is also used positively by native speakers as in 'We had a hell of a time' and 'The scenery looked majestic as hell'.

horseshit- nonsense

What you say doesn't make sense at all. *NOT* What you say is pure horseshit.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

The other offensive compound words which have ‘shit’ are ‘bullshit’ and ‘chickenshit’. One of the common meanings of ‘shit’ is feces. Thus, the caution here is to avoid using the word.

J

jackass- an annoying person

Mrs. Lee is a pain in the neck. *NOT* She is a jackass.

The word ‘ass’ does not have pleasant meanings, as has been explained earlier.

L

lardass- someone who is fat

Our new MD is a large person (*not* Our.....is a lardass).

‘Lardass’ refers to the white fat from a pig, this is used in cooking by those who do not mind using the pig fat.

low-born- from a low social class

Daniel comes from a family of lower working class background. *NOT* Daniel is a low-born person.

We can argue that human beings are only low or high in terms of their behavior and righteousness. If we want to show our unhappiness with a person’s meanness or roguishness, we may describe that person as a low class person, but not low born.

It is the belief held by most that we are born equal. The inequality in terms of social status comes later.

M

motherfucker- for a person someone is extremely disgusted with

I can't stand the sight of him. I really hate him. *NOT* Oh, that motherfucker is here.

NEVER EVER use this compound word. It is extremely offensive and disgusting. Just imagine what this word could be understood to mean if a learner or a non-native speaker of English tries to grasp the meaning literally!

mutt- for someone who behaves silly

Another meaning of this word is a mongrel, i.e. a dog which does not belong to any particular breed. So it is highly inappropriate to tell a fellow human being that he or she is a mutt because of their silly behavior.

O

old cow- an old woman a person finds annoying and stupid

That old woman must be looked after by her children, so that she won't lose her sanity.

NOT The children must look after that old cow before she goes crazy.

old maid- the word 'old' may not be appreciated by some, although we have expressions like 'Old is gold'. This expression may be interpreted as an insult to older single women.

Ms Sherry seems contented being a single woman because of the independence it gives her. So preferably, *not*, Ms Sherry is an old maid.

P

pig- for a person who eats too much, for example, 'greedy pig'

male chauvinist pig- for a man who thinks lowly of women

The word 'pig' will probably cause much discomfort when directed at a person as it

carries an unpleasant connotation among many speakers of various languages.

pigsty- a very dirty place

If someone's room or house is dirty, there is no need to describe the place as a pigsty, as if the place is fit enough for pigs to occupy, although it is not the literal meaning.

piss- the original meaning of this word is to urinate. Although urinating is a natural thing to do, there are many phrases with 'piss' as follows which are considered impolite.

piss away- to waste an opportunity

You have been short listed for the scholarship, so give all you've got to win it. *NOT*

Don't piss away the opportunity to win a scholarship.

piss off- go away

Can you leave me alone? *NOT* Piss off, I'm busy.

piss around- mess around

Stop messing around (*not* pissing around) and do something useful.

The word 'piss' also functions as a verb in the following way: piss- to rain heavily; to be annoyed. Let's say: It's raining heavily. *NOT* It's pissing here bad. Similarly let's not say: She was pissed when her neighbor parked her car in front of her house. Rather let us say: She was terribly annoyed when...house.

pussy- a man who is not brave and is weak

I wish you had more courage. *NOT* You are such a pussy.

The word is offensively used for a woman's reproductive sex organ.

S

screw- one of the meanings refers to a vulgar slang, meaning, having sex

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

screw you (similar to *fuck you*) – used to tell someone when the speaker is very angry.

I'm very upset with you guys. *NOT* Screw you guys.

shit- excrement of humans and animals

The word is used to show anger, annoyance, disappointment, fear or surprise. For example: Oh my goodness! I've forgotten to bring my purse. *NOT* Shit! I've forgotten to bring my purse again.

There are many expressions and compound words with 'shit'. They may offend. The following are some examples:

shit- low quality, very poor, bad (as a noun)

You've done a very poor job. *NOT* The job you've done is really shit.

shithead- for someone you think is very stupid or you are angry with

I just can't put up with Sam. He's an idiot (*not* He's a shithead).

shithole- a smelly, dirty place

His room is very untidy. *NOT* His room is a shithole.

shitty- of very inferior quality

The products sold there are of poor quality (*not* The products are shitty).

shitload- a lot

If you don't want to get into a great deal of trouble, better get the work done soon.

NOT If you don't want to be in a shitload of trouble, better.....soon.

shitstirrer- troublemaker

Keep him at an arm's length. He's a troublemaker (*not* He's a shitstirrer).

full of shit- nonsense

I don't believe a word of what he says. *NOT* He's full of shit.

in deep shit- in big trouble

Expressions with 'shit' ought to be avoided due to the unpleasantness associated with shit. For example, it is better to say 1. Men in some countries treat women very badly.

NOT Women are treated like shit in some countries. 2. I don't care a bit as to what you think. *NOT* I don't give a shit as to what you think. 3. If you want to continue working here, you have to be well organized. *NOT* If....., you have to get your shit together. 4. I have to go to the washroom. *NOT* I am going to have a shit.

5. Can we dine somewhere else? This place is just not suitable. *NOT* Let's go dine elsewhere. This place is shit. 6. I don't care who you are. Everybody must observe the rules. *NOT* I don't give a shit who you are. Everybody.....rules.

7. Don't let your neighbor take advantage of you. *NOT* You don't have to put up with his shit. 8. You mustn't appear untidy like this, especially with so many female employees around. *NOT* You look like shit. What will your female colleagues think of you. 9. The bullies badly beat up their victim. *NOT* The bullies beat the shit out of the victim. 10. When they meet us in the final, they will be scared. *NOT* They will shit in their pants when they meet us in the final.

son of a bitch- used for a man or boy who is considered very mean

You almost caused a nasty accident, you are a nuisance. *NOT* Why don't you drive carefully, you son of a bitch. This expression is an ultimate insult to a mother. A mother is someone who is adored in all cultures and religions. If it is an individual who has done wrong, it is the individual who should be castigated. The parents of the offending person

should never ever be the target of expletives.

T

Trash- used for people, someone thinks is poorly educated, dishonest or worthless.

We have to try to help people with social problems. They are not beyond help. *NOT*

You can't help them, they're trash. The common meaning of 'trash' refers to garbage. It may not be wholly justified to describe some of our fellow human beings as trash. But in some cases, there are individuals who stick to their ignominious ways and really are unable to be helped. The Malay language has the following expression for them which means society's garbage: *sampah masyarakat*.

W

white trash- for less educated and poor white people

The expression is almost just as offensive as 'black shit'. It is more likely to be uttered by someone who is non-white to vent their anger at white people who offend them through their unacceptable behavior.

whitey- this is the antonym of 'blackie', an offensive word to refer to a white person

It is not proper to refer to people with regard to the color of their skin, for example, 'the yellow peril', referring to the danger that may come from the people from China. The term 'colored people', was made popular during the apartheid regime in South Africa referring to children born of marriages between people of fair and dark complexion. The term has now been found to be less euphemistic and has been replaced by 'people of color'.

wrinkly- an old person (with wrinkles)

The item makes fun of senior citizens who deserve more respect and consideration.

Attend to the senior citizen (*or* gentleman) over there immediately. *NOT* Find out what that wrinkly wants.

Conclusion

The alternative expressions given here ought not to be misconstrued as linguistic prescriptivism, moralistic lexis or examples of language bigotry. These are choices made available to users of ESL. Acceptance of these alternatives is a matter of personal choice. Rejection is a language user's individual right. However, while under extreme provocation one may be tempted to use some of the expressions discussed in the paper. We cannot escape judgments people make of us based on our language use, especially choice of lexical expressions. Lexical usage often reflects the upbringing and background of the language user. It can be a marker of a person's identity, in terms of upbringing, membership of a social group, educational background, values, etc. Language hygiene is proposed as an alternative to those expressions which dictionaries themselves describe as insulting and offensive. In some cases the dictionaries carry the warning not to use the many words dealt here as they are categorized as being extremely offensive.

Getting around 'offensive' language is a kind of language variation. Milroy (1992:31-32) states that languages are after all "...naturally variable and changing Structures ...". Practicing language hygiene is therefore innovative and contributes to healthy interpersonal communication. The American Heritage Dictionary (1996: xxxvii)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around 'Offensive' Language

aply and succinctly describes that offensive expressions “are not only derogatory and insulting to the person to whom they are directed but also a discredit to the one using them”. So all the more reason there is for us to refrain from using vulgar and obscene language.

It would be appropriate to conclude this paper with some valuable quotes from Bridget Menezes (2006), a counselor for a spiritual organization from her weekly column ‘Inner Growth’ in the *New Straits Times*, a Malaysian daily:

‘We are surrounded by words, soothing words that give us pleasure and biting words that give pain.

‘... The vile language that is thrown between people is not exactly uplifting.

‘Some think that it is all right to use obscene language as everyone is using it.

‘Obviously we know that it is wrong ...

And so we should never abuse or misuse our gift of speech’.

Colophon:

The researcher would like to gratefully acknowledge the research grant made available by the Research Center of the International Islamic University Malaysia for this study.

References

American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Third Edition. 1996. New York. Houghton Mifflin Company.

Cambridge International Dictionary of English. 1995. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 11 November 2009

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.

Getting Around ‘Offensive’ Language

Cameron, D. 1995. *Verbal Hygiene*. New York: Routledge.

Lee, Jamie Shinhee. 2007. 'I'm the illest fucka'. In *English Today* 23: 2, pp.54-60.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. 2003. Harlow: Pearson.

Macmillan English Dictionary. 2002. Oxford: Macmillan.

Menezes, B. 2006. Words colour our behaviour. *New Straits Times*, July 18, 2006, p.64. Kuala Lumpur.

Milroy, J. 1992. *Language Variation and Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Soolija Boy apologizes for bad language. *New Straits Times*, December 19, 2008, p.34.

Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali, Ph.D.
Department of English Language & Literature
Faculty of Human Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia
P.O. Box 10
50728 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia.
deeneduc@hotmail.com