CHAPTER EIGHT

Mind Your Language

Your visitor looks anxiously round the hall. *Where is the ... um ... the ...*, she begins. You smile understandingly and say *First door on the left*. She nods gratefully and disappears through the door; then emerges soon after, looking relieved. As we'd expect, since she has *relieved herself*.

Not many visitors, perhaps, are as coy as this one; she was probably a very nervous old lady, perhaps talking to a young man. But all the same, communication was perfectly efficient, though the conversation avoided naming either the room or what your visitor intended to do in it.

This chapter is about the language we use in such delicate situations, and is therefore a continuation of the discussion of register. We saw in the last chapter that our language is determined not only by what we are saying, but also by the company we are in. And there are some situations which can seem particularly delicate, and in which our choice of words can very easily shock or distress the listener, so that we might feel a strong need to tread carefully.

We can begin with two comments on the episode that we have just looked at. First, most visitors would not find the situation as agonisingly embarrassing as my imagined old lady did. They would not be afraid to name the room they were looking for: *the toilet, the loo* and *the lavatory* are the most likely terms in mixed company. But they would be much more hesitant about naming what they were going to do there, and the contrast in register between the various terms they could use is very striking. Whether the visitor says *relieve myself, have a wee* (or *a pee*), *urinate*, or *piss* – or none of these – will depend on the company, and on the visitor's normal habit; and on

most occasions they will not use – or need to use – any of them.

What are those situations – those, that is, when there is a danger of shocking our listeners? Let's make a list, to start with: bodily functions concerned with evacuation, as we've already seen; politics, especially racial and sexual politics; money; jobs; death; and – above all – sex. These are all topics about which we might have strong feelings, and in which we have a wide choice of terms, some of which might arouse equally strong feelings in the listener. They are all linguistic minefields, and the language has developed ways of treading carefully through them, so that the mines won't explode. Unless, of course, we want them to.

Never Say Die

Let us begin with death. We are all going to die, but unless we are ill or depressed we don't want to, and often we don't want others to die either; though we cannot avoid the subject, we might wish we could. So we need another, similar, area of vocabulary we can draw on instead, and for this there are three obvious candidates: sleep, journeys and religion. The parallel between dying and going to sleep is obvious, and can be comforting, since sleep is on the whole pleasurable, especially when we're tired or in pain; *fell asleep* is therefore especially apt for the death of someone who was in distress. It is often seen on gravestones, and is also, of course, appropriate when talking to children, explaining why a grandparent is no longer there: he's *fallen asleep and won't be waking up*.

There is also the parallel with a journey, death being a journey from which we do not return; so a child can be told that grandma has *gone away* and *won't be coming back*. In the case of religion, the expressions *gone to heaven, gone to God, gone to join his/her wife/husband, in Heaven, with Jesus,* and the now old-fashioned but rather charming *in Abraham's bosom* could be literally true for the Christian who believes them. But such phrases are often used by those who don't believe them to be true, and perhaps even more often by those who half-believe, or wish they could believe; and in such cases their function is to make an unpleasant reality more acceptable.

And should we use them? You will no doubt take your own decision on this. My advice (it's no more than advice) is that there's nothing wrong with the expressions, but there is no need for them to

drive out the words *death* and *dying*. To say to a child *Grandma died last week*; *I'm afraid that means she fell asleep, but in a way that means she won't wake up again* seems as good a way as any of saying what is, inevitably, hard to say.

There are other ways of not saying *death* or *died*, some of them belonging to particular situations. Condolence cards normally prefer terms like *sad loss* or *great sorrow* or (rather old-fashioned now) *great affliction*. Life insurance salesmen like to say *If you get knocked down by a bus*, which at first seems to serve the very opposite purpose, making death more, not less, unpleasant – but it has two advantages. First, it has the meaning of sudden death when still comparatively young, which is of course what life insurance is for; and second, it may well cause the listener to think how unlikely this is (*Bus drivers are careful, and I always look when crossing the road ...*) and so serve the purpose of removing any uncomfortable thought.

One of the commonest terms is, of course, *pass away*; everyone knows what it means, so using it is simply a way of avoiding the word *die*. Yet the word *die* is not indecent, and it is not easy to say why it is sometimes avoided. We are not avoiding mention of the fact that grandma is dead when we say that she *passed away*; it may be that there is something blunt about the monosyllable *die*, that a single short word doesn't sound gentle enough when we wish to be delicate. Less common than *pass away*, but somehow more interesting, are *pass over* or *pass over to the other side*. These sound religious, but are hardly Christian. Ancient Greek mythology had the dead person ferried across the river Styx by Charon, the boatman, and that must be the origin of this expression, which is sometimes used in all seriousness by Christians. This seems to tell us that religion is not just a matter of what you believe, but of a feeling of reverence that may not always take much notice of exactly what is being claimed. *He's passed over to the other side*, then, may express a reverence that is felt as religious, without too much concern with exactly what belief is being stated.

And are there, in contrast, deliberately blunt terms for dying, terms that could shock if used in the wrong circumstances? We say *kick the bucket, pop off* and (usually in the past tense) *snuffed it*, or *bought it*. None of these is likely to be used of someone we know (unless we disliked them!), and of course they could be out of place

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– not so much embarrassing as offensive – if wrongly used. What of *pushing up daisies*? (In French you *eat the dandelions by the roots*, in German you *bite into the grass*.) It is clearly not religious, and perhaps a touch irreverent; it indicates that death is a matter of bodily decay, and perhaps nothing else, and it may have had its origin in an attempt to be deliberately pagan and irreligious. My impression is that it's most likely to be used of one's own death when that isn't felt to be imminent. There is nothing softening about the expression itself, but to use such an expression in a relaxed or light-hearted way is clearly to imply that death is not an immediate problem.

Illness and death clearly belong together, so I will here add that there is a similar range of register about illness. You can have a *weak heart* or, more colloquially, a *dodgy ticker*. When would this colloquialism be used? Usually of your own weak heart, since its casualness seems to make light of the ailment, in a way that would sound insensitive if used of the person you are talking to – unless you knew them very well and knew that they often talked of their own illness in that light-hearted way. Perhaps the most interesting of the illness-evasions is the word *condition*. If our heart doesn't function properly, we have a *heart condition*; if we have difficulty breathing, we have a *lung condition*. Any of our organs can be in a healthy or unhealthy condition, of course, but we use the term only to mean 'unhealthy condition'. It is interestingly similar to the use of *problem*, as when we speak of having a *drink problem* or a *drug problem*, but with a difference. Troubles that are not under our control are *conditions*; those that are – or ought to be – become *problems*. To say you have *a drink problem* instead of saying that you – or others – drink too much is a way of shifting responsibility away from yourself, but not completely; we accept at least some responsibility for our problems, but none for our conditions.

Euphemism

We now need to introduce a term that will help in the discussion. *Euphemism* literally means 'speaking favourably' or 'fair speaking', using a favourable or at least neutral term because the usual term is considered offensive or denigrating. It can be described as the deodorant of language. Thus, as well as saying *fall asleep* for 'die', we say *bathroom* or *comfort station* for 'lavatory', *let someone go* for 'dismiss

them (from their job)', *hostess* or *call girl* or *sex worker* for 'prostitute' or 'whore', *with learning difficulties* for 'mentally retarded', *leave the room* or *use the bathroom* for 'defecate' or 'shit', and *liquidate* for 'kill'. (These examples are not all the same kind of euphemism, as the discussion will show.) Older books on English language paid little attention to euphemisms, but it has become clear nowadays that they are a politically sensitive way of dealing with politically sensitive issues. It's a hot topic, so there is much to say about them.

The opposite to euphemism is, strictly speaking, *dysphemism*: speaking foul as contrasted to speaking fair, using an unfavourable, hostile or contemptuous term. But hardly anyone except professional linguists uses the term *dysphemism*, or even knows what it means. This is not because we are all so good-natured that we seldom speak foul of one another; it is rather because 'speaking foul' is usually directed against people, people we don't like or feel hostile towards, and we have a familiar term to denote that: we insult them. So euphemisms and insults form a kind of balancing contrast. In between comes plain speaking.

Language is constantly changing; I have said that before, and it is now necessary to say it again, very emphatically. Much of what follows may be out of date in ten years, some of it may be going out even as I write. The principles are not likely to change much, but the examples will. Many euphemisms, and most insults, belong to the spoken language, and since spoken language changes much more rapidly than written, some of these examples look as if they won't keep still even long enough to be studied. This is especially true of insults, since insulting someone is often a way of showing off, and there are few better ways of showing off than displaying the richness and inventiveness – and the newness – of our vocabulary. There are many tales of colourful and flamboyant men who are able to insult their victim (often a hotel porter or train attendant, sometimes a sexual rival) for ten minutes – in extreme versions for half an hour! – without repeating themselves. These stories never include a list of the actual insults, and I feel sure that such speakers have cheated – most probably by switching from one language to another, or by inventing new insults as they go on. Inventing insults must, after all, be rather easy: just list all the things your victim is not able to do.

A common way to express contempt is to use the name of a

neighbouring nation. We take *French leave* or show *Dutch courage*; if we are mean with money we could be accused of being *Scottish* or a *Jew*; venereal disease was often called the *French malady*. It is difficult to separate the moral issues here (should we insult our neighbours?) from the linguistic. What makes this practice comparatively harmless, it seems to me, is the fact that it is mutual; we take *French leave*, the French say *filer à l'anglaise*; we use *French letters* (or we did until the term *condom* became universal), the French use a *capote anglaise*. This seems less offensive than racial abuse, where there is a more deep-seated assumption that the other group is inferior. For that reason I find it more offensive to associate financial meanness with Jews than with the Scots, since in the former case it invokes the long ugly history of anti-Semitism.

These national insults are very changeable. Sexual disease used to be associated with the Italians in the sixteenth century, then with the Spanish, then with the Dutch and the French, and no doubt by many of these nations with the English. This suggests that they are not based on any objective knowledge, but on who we happen to be at war with, or in the habit of visiting as tourists.

Euphemisms, too, tend to be unstable but for a rather different reason, which I shall call the euphemism trap. Suppose you have one leg shorter than the other, or some other physical injury that prevents you from walking properly. For a long time you were called a *cripple*; then when people began to feel offended at what they felt to be a contemptuous term, it became *disabled*; then that too was felt as offensive, so *physically challenged* was introduced. *Old* began to seem a rather blunt and uncomplimentary term and so was replaced by *elderly*, and *old-age pensioner* by *senior citizen*. After the Education Act of 1944, those pupils who failed the eleven-plus exam went to a *secondary modern* school; this was felt to be a more favourable term than the old *senior* school. But it too began to sound offensive, so was changed to *secondary school* – not a very accurate term, since the grammar schools were also secondary, but euphemisms sometimes sacrifice accuracy to sensitivity.

The euphemism trap is that if you replace an offensive term by a new and harmless one, the new one is very likely, before long, to acquire the same taint. This is very clear when it comes to racial terms. This topic is so sensitive that even finding the right language in which

to describe it is difficult. *Nigger* has always been an offensive term in America (as has *kaffir* in South Africa), and as open racism became less acceptable the word was replaced first by *Negro* or *coloured* (or, in South Africa, *African*), then later by *black* and most recently by *African-American*. If we are narrating this change, which words do we use? To write 'Negroes began to prefer the term *black*' means we are using a term (*Negro*) that is no longer acceptable. But to write 'African-Americans began to prefer the term *black*' is anachronistic, even misleading, since *African-American* was not in use at the time of that change. The linguistic traps seem inescapable.

The current preferred term, *African-American*, places those Americans on an equal status with all the other groups descended from immigrants (Italian-Americans, Swedish-Americans, etc.) For this reason, *African-American* is preferred to *Afro-American*, since the former appears to lay stress on cultural heritage rather than on race – though at the same time the more racially oriented term *people of colour* has become acceptable. The general movement – to root out offensive terminology – is clear; but total consistency is more than we can ever expect!

The person you employ to bury your dead relative is an *undertaker*, or rather it was; the term has now grown slightly old-fashioned. In America he became a *mortician*, and in both America and Britain he is now often a *funeral director*. I remember reading in my school textbook (many years ago!) that *mortician* is a euphemism, and we should not use it. This is odd, because it is actually less of a euphemism than *undertaker*; *mortician* does contain the Latin root for 'death' (found also in *mortal*), whereas *undertaker* simply meant someone who undertakes to do any task before it narrowed its meaning to the one task of burying. Clearly we have here another example of the euphemism trap: *undertaker* began as a euphemism but took on the associations it was trying to avoid, so had to be replaced by (in this case) a less evasive term.

So euphemisms are by their nature unstable; whatever word is substituted for the offensive term is likely to need replacing after a while. This may not be an argument against euphemisms – after all, we do not refrain from washing because we are going to get dirty again. But it does add yet another complication to language change, and even well-meaning people are likely to feel bewildered, or to find

they have inadvertently given offence. It is not easy, especially for older people, to keep changing one's language habits; but then we all know that to be well-meaning, in a delicate situation, is not easy.

So our list of subjects where we feel we need to be careful not to offend is a list of the areas in which we tend to use euphemisms. We began with death, and the next step can be killing, especially the form of organised killing which we call war. We looked at some of the vocabulary of war in our discussion of slang, and saw that the slang of soldiers can often serve the purpose of being euphemistic. So can the more official language of military reports and the more evasive language of politicians. A retreat can be a *strategic withdrawal*, killing all the insurgents can be *pacifying the region*, and Anthony Eden declared in 1956 'We are not at war with Egypt; we are in a state of armed conflict.' I called war a form of organised killing, but the many euphemisms it generates try to pretend that it isn't. So instead of enemy soldiers being killed, they are *taken out*; and the killing of civilians, in a euphemism that has become notorious recently, is *collateral damage*. Equally notorious is the euphemism *friendly fire*, which means being killed – or at any rate shot at – by your own troops or (more usually) the troops of your allies. To call your own troops or those of your allies your *friends*, given the rivalries that obtain among allies, may not be very accurate; but it is not altogether a misuse of the word. What is shocking, because it seems a kind of gruesome humour, is the suggestion that the shooting itself – the *fire* – is somehow 'friendly'.

War is of course not the only kind of organised killing; killing all members of a particular group – a racial or a religious group – can take place in peacetime. It used to be called a *pogrom*, a Russian word adopted into English, and most often used of the killing of Jews. The modern (and very recent) term is *ethnic cleansing*, which in a sense is not at all euphemistic, since it seems to accept the assumption that the minority who are being got rid of are unclean. But for me the most chilling euphemisms of recent times derive from the Nazi persecution of the Jews, and are therefore in German. Most notorious is *Endlösung*, literally translated as *final solution*, which meant 'killing all the Jews'; though the word I personally find most repulsive is the term used to denote a region where all the Jews had been removed or killed. This is *judenrein*, which literally means 'clean of Jews' or

'purified of Jews'; the ability of the German language to join two concepts in a single adjective seems to make the word particularly and horrifyingly matter-of-fact.

But perhaps the most striking thing about military and political euphemisms is how ineffective they are – once we have emerged from the assumptions that generated them. Is anyone deceived when a government *liquidates* its political enemies, or when an army *strategically withdraws* instead of retreating?

Employment

We live at a time when many people, especially professional people, are identified by the work they do; two strangers getting to know each other are likely to begin by finding out what their occupations are. We sometimes think of our job as the most important thing about us, and this means that it provides a rich field for euphemisms.

We can begin with the word *job* itself. No one knows the origin of the word, but we do know that its original meaning contained an element of condescension or even disapproval; a *job* was a small task and often one you would not stoop to do for yourself. The character in a play of 1627 by Thomas Middleton, who said 'I cannot read, I keep a clerk to do those jobs', clearly thought reading was a task beneath his dignity. This is, incidentally, the earliest recorded use of the term, and we still have this meaning in the expression *odd jobs*. In politics, a *job* used to – and still can – suggest corruption. Today the word has largely shed these negative associations; if a diplomat or a surgeon is asked what job she does, she will probably not feel insulted, though she herself would call it her profession.

Because our job, then, is so important to us, to lose it is not merely a financial loss; it can be a loss to our self-esteem. So we need a euphemism, and the usual one (American in origin) is to *let go*. Instead of *I'm dismissing you* (or, more familiarly and bluntly, *sacking* or *firing you*), the boss explains that he is *letting you go*, thus implying that the decision is yours and he is acquiescing in it – but it would be no use responding *I don't want to go*. *Your services are no longer required* is a little less euphemistic, since it contains no suggestion that the employee's own wishes are being consulted, but any expression which omits a direct verb for the employer's action – *fire, sack, dismiss, discharge, get rid of* – must contain an element of evasiveness.

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Nowadays with the growth of freelance work (by management consultants, computer specialists and troubleshooters), being dismissed may have become less traumatic; the consultant who is *let go* may even wish to go. But the profession where this is least likely to be the case is probably acting. It is in the nature of acting that employment is temporary, and because there are more actors than there are parts for them in the professional theatre, only the really successful will come to the end of a run without a certain amount of anxiety about what comes next. The euphemism that has developed to cover periods of forced unemployment is *resting*, and it has now become so familiar that it is as likely to be used jokingly as seriously.

Employment, like so much else in British life, is impregnated with class differences, and *letting someone go* applies mainly to white-collar work; the equivalent for manual occupations is *giving someone their cards*, which is perhaps already old-fashioned. It is a euphemism when the employer tells the worker that they can *get their cards*, but possibly a sign of independence when the worker defiantly demands them. But losing your job is not simply a matter between you and your employer, depending on how well you are doing the job; it is also dependent on the general economic situation, and the term that indicates this is *redundancy*. To be *made redundant* is to lose your job because of outside pressures – technological change (you have been replaced by a machine) or economic recession (the firm cannot afford to employ so many workers). The fact that *redundant* is now so widespread a term is perhaps an indication that we are all now aware of wider economic forces.

A few euphemisms current in the workplace include *brownie points*, for something that will earn you favour with the boss (suggesting that competitiveness in the workplace is as innocent as in a children's scout or guide troop) and *feather-bedding*, a rather more colourful term for a giving someone a *sinecure* (a position with rewards but no duties). A sinecure is more likely to be official or semi-official, while feather-bedding suggests that the firm is being indulgent towards the individual.

The euphemisms concerned with employment differ in one way from those concerned with bodily functions. As we shall see in a moment, the latter are intended to avoid embarrassment; but those concerned with employment are more concerned with anger. We might

be embarrassed by the bluntness of being *sacked* or *dismissed*, but we are more likely to be angry. And if – as often happens – a whole lot of employees have been *made redundant* together, the anger will be shared, and we may go on strike. When that happens, we may no longer care about the terminology.

Politics

Politicians have always had the reputation, justified or not, of telling lies, or at least (to use a now familiar euphemism) of being *economical with the truth*. So it is not surprising that political language is rich in euphemisms.

If you take a cynical view of politics, you will be pleased to learn that the original meaning of *politician* was 'a trickster, a clever and dishonest person'. Thomas Nashe wrote in 1592 that 'the Devil was so famous a politician in purchasing, that Hell, which in the beginning was a small village, is now become a large city' – a remark that one can easily imagine journalists gleefully seizing on and quoting today. In fairness, however, I must add that our modern, more neutral use of the word also dates from the sixteenth century, and *politics* (from much the same date) has usually been a more or less neutral term, as it is today – usually but not always, as we can see from the national anthem *God Save the Queen*. Not many people know the second stanza, which deals with the opponents of the monarch, and asks God to 'frustrate their politics, and confound their knavish tricks' – not much doubt about the unfavourable view of politics there! We must of course distinguish between taking a cynical view of the activity, and claiming that the word itself implies that view; to say today *Most politicians are corrupt* or *Politics is a nasty business* is to express an opinion, not just to explain the meaning of the word.

What are the politically sensitive issues in our society? First, there is the distribution of wealth – the fact that some are rich, others poor. Has this had any effect on the words *rich* and *poor*? We still freely use the word *poor* as an adjective, both literally (*My sister is so poor she can't afford a television*) and in a transferred sense (*He's a very poor tennis player*), but do we use it as a collective noun, speaking of *the poor*? We are more likely to say (if we think statistically) *the lower-income groups*, or (if we think politically) *deprived* or *disadvantaged*. If you are deprived of something, that seems to imply that you once

had it; if you are disadvantaged, that seems to assume that everyone ought to be on equal terms. So are *deprived* and *disadvantaged* attempts to smuggle in an egalitarian or left-wing agenda under cover of a concern for the language? You can be deprived not only of what you once had but of what you are entitled to have; and the view that everyone ought to have equal chances is – more or less – accepted in modern democratic societies. So there is certainly a case to be made for using terms such as *disadvantaged* or *deprived* instead of *poor*, but it is a political case, not a linguistic one. Since, as we have seen, one of the great virtues of language is that it can be neutral between warring parties, it seems more honest that this discussion should be conducted openly as a political discussion, not disguised as being only about language.

The same situation obtains when we turn to international politics. There are rich nations and poor nations, but they are not often called that. The more usual term is *developed* for the rich nations, or else the name of a grouping of rich countries they belong to (*the G8 group*); and we describe the poor nations as *developing* (which has replaced the earlier *underdeveloped*) or, occasionally, *deprived* or (similar to saying *the G8*) *the South* (since almost all the rich countries are in the northern hemisphere).

The most important thing about terminology is that it should be accepted, not that it should be accurate. Everyone knows what is meant by the *working class*, and no one really thinks it implies that teachers, bank managers and scientists don't work, so there is no need to wish that term changed; if *developed* and *developing* have now become accepted terms, then they must be accepted. I have to say, however, that terminology in this area is so volatile, it is easy to imagine these words giving way to others. So there may be a case for questioning them, and questionable they certainly are.

There is a small but troublesome problem in the fact that the words *developed* and *developing* are so similar: they differ only in their last syllable, which is unstressed. I have heard an excitable speaker (and international economics is a topic that generates excitement!) gabble the words so that it was very hard to make out when he said *developed* and when *developing*. More serious, perhaps, is the fact that most of the developed nations are on the whole developing economically much more rapidly than the *developing* ones; a really poor nation may not be developing at all.

The policy of this book is to set forth the arguments in controversial cases, but that does not mean that I shall never state a preference, and in this case my preference is very strongly for using the terms *rich* and *poor*. They are not value judgements: to be rich is not a virtue, to be poor is not a vice (nor is the opposite true). They are old words, to which the language is well accustomed, and they have equivalents in most other languages. To wish to eliminate them seems to me a form of mild linguistic paranoia, and I hope it will be resisted.

So much for wealth: next, to intelligence. There are great differences of intelligence in the human population, though how great they are, how far they are inherited, and how far they correlate with other abilities, are all hotly debated questions. Should we use intelligence tests in our society, and what should we use them for? Those are questions for psychologists, and perhaps for politicians; it is not a linguistic issue, but as long as we use such tests we shall need terms to describe the results. If they show some people to be of high intelligence, they will show others to be of low intelligence. In the more or less impersonal world of intelligence testing, the likely terms are *intelligent* and *unintelligent*, along with the variants on *high, low, quick, slow*, and even *good* or *bad*. Outside that world, the less formal terms will come in, and that is where the arguments begin. The usual words for those who are good at using their brains are *intelligent, brainy, gifted, clever, bright* and *able* – and there are plenty of others. And of course they have opposites: *unintelligent, backward, dull, stupid* and, more colloquially, *thick* are probably the commonest. What do you say to a group of children gathered together for a remedial class who ask *We're the thick ones, aren't we?* Do you rebuke them for their political incorrectness? Do you lie to them? Do you just correct their terminology? And if so, if you say *We don't use words like thick*, how do you answer the question *Well, what word do you use then?*

The least acceptable term is probably *stupid*; so let us ask when – if ever – it is acceptable to use that word. The most offensive use of *stupid* is to apply it to children. Differences of intelligence are as marked in childhood as they are among adults, so the objection to calling children stupid is not that it is inaccurate but that it is offensive: indeed, it is not so much the children who are likely to object as the sensitive adults who do not want to hear the children being put down. And can we then use it of adults? What are the more acceptable uses? The one adult it is perfectly acceptable to call stupid

is of course yourself. We use it when we are paying a compliment, as in *How clever of you to see that, and how stupid of me not to see it myself.* Or we say *I'm stupid at mathematics, I'm afraid.* People who say that seldom or never think that they actually are stupid: they are more likely to be admitting to a particular limitation that perhaps they are not particularly ashamed of, and they may even be implying that they are quite competent in other fields. And what about calling other adults stupid? We use it, of course, when we have lost our temper or are setting out to insult someone, as in *You stupid wally.* And apart from that? The interesting thing is that we seldom use it of people with really low intelligence. We say, for instance, *That was really stupid of you,* or *Professor X has written a really stupid book about that.* The first of these is of course a rebuke, and is most likely to be delivered to someone we think of as usually intelligent; the second is not actually claiming that Professor X is of low intelligence, but that he has adopted some very misguided theories. We might even claim that the theories, though we consider them stupid, are held by very clever people.

Perhaps this is the place to glance at one of the most widespread and controversial euphemisms, which is *challenged*: it is now quite common to say *mentally challenged* for the unintelligent, *physically challenged* for the handicapped. The motivation behind such variants is worthy, but here too they raise difficulties. The best example of someone being physically challenged is probably the Olympic athlete trying to knock a few seconds off his or her time; and of being mentally challenged would be, surely, the brilliant researcher solving a problem, or the poet trying to find the right words. But that is not what *mentally challenged* is meant to suggest.

To feel sympathetic towards those who are poor or unintelligent is certainly admirable, but the problems they face will not go away simply because we are careful about our language. We could draw a parallel here with a doctor who finds that a patient has cancer, or is likely to die within six months. There is a medical and scientific issue – is the diagnosis correct?; and there is an issue of language – how should he tell the patient? He will get the first right if he is a good doctor, and the second right if he has a good bedside manner and knows how to use the language sensitively. Of course one would like him to get both right, but they might not go together; the expres-

sion *bedside manner* was coined to denote a doctor who establishes a good relationship with his patient, and so would know how to break bad news. It denotes a quality quite distinct from being skilful at diagnosis and treatment, though of course it is quite compatible with such skill; but it is also possible to use *bedside manner* in a derogatory way, to indicate that a doctor is better at breaking bad news than he is on strictly medical matters – as one might say of a politician that he is a good speaker or a skilful debater. We might say that of politicians we admire, but also of those we don't!

In the same way, we need to distinguish the moral and political issues concerning poverty or intelligence – or other sensitive issues – from questions of language. To try and do away with the words that might cause distress to those who are disadvantaged is like improving one's bedside manner: an admirable aim, but it should not deceive us into thinking that we have actually tackled the substantive problems.

We have now entered on the subject of the next chapter: political correctness. The term is an interesting one, since it concerns not so much the questions that are obviously and traditionally political, but rather those (illness, intelligence, race relations, relations between the sexes) that have traditionally been seen as non-political, even as part of the natural order of things, but that we are now being urged to regard as political – and therefore subject to change. There will be much more to say about this; but for the rest of this chapter we shall take a long look at the areas in which minding your language has always been central and unavoidable.

Bodily Functions

Everything we do involves a bodily function, and bodily functions are of course natural. But the two expressions *bodily functions* and *natural functions* as usually employed are euphemisms, and refer to those bodily functions that cause embarrassment and even distaste, along with shame (and more pleasure than we often admit). Feeling a *call of nature* never refers to being hungry and wishing to eat; to call something *natural* is usually to defend it against the view that it is somehow improper, so there is little doubt which natural functions are being meant, and what nature is calling us to do. The neutral terms for them, accurate and a little stiff, are *urination* and

defecation (or *evacuation*), along with more or less medical terms for the products: *urine, faeces* and *excrement*. Of course we have what are often called the four-letter words or Anglo-Saxon monosyllables, blunt and indecent: *piss* and *shit*. What is perhaps most striking about this terminology is the lack of ordinary acceptable verbs; we find ourselves having to choose between rather stiff medical terminology and vulgarisms that in polite company might offend. The Anglo-Saxon monosyllables are of course more acceptable today than they used to be, but still embarrassing to many speakers, especially when both sexes are present. It is no doubt for this reason that, instead of naming the action, we prefer to name the place where it happens, and speak of *going to the lavatory* (or *the toilet* or *the loo*). The evacuation of wind also seems to have no 'respectable' term except for the roundabout *break wind*, and since there is no special room to which we go in order to *belch, burp* or *fart*, our usual policy is not to mention them at all.

Since we are much more at ease naming the place where we relieve ourselves than we are naming the action or the substance evacuated, we have several terms for it in current speech, and it is striking how many of them are euphemisms. Returning to euphemisms for *lavatory*, the old term was *privy*, which of course simply means a private place. It was then replaced by *lavatory*, which has been softened to *toilet*. I say 'softened', because *toilet* seems to be considered more euphemistic, even though *lavatory*, literally 'a place where one washes', was already a euphemism. In American English (and in the speech of guides and hotels catering for Americans) there is a rich crop of euphemisms for the euphemisms: *powder room* (only for women of course), *bathroom* (though it has no bath), *restroom* (though one does not go there when tired), and the perhaps more accurate though also more comic *comfort station*. (I once heard a Portuguese guide tell his party 'If you want comfort, it's round the corner to the right.') Euphemisms for the place lead naturally to corresponding euphemisms for the action, like *Do you want to wash your hands?* (This has produced the joke of the guest replying *No thanks, I've already washed my hands behind a tree.*)

Perhaps the only non-euphemism for *lavatory* in current speech is *bog*, a term that is likely to sound vulgar in mixed or polite company, but it can be freely used by a man who is talking to another man;

as is always the case with questions of register, the company we are in is crucial. In this as in other fields, there may be no term which will always cause embarrassment – even the Anglo-Saxon monosyllables are quite at home in a single-sex conversation and among people who feel themselves to be uninhibited.

The commonest colloquial term in Britain today is probably *loo*. No one is sure what its origin is. The two favourite theories are either that it comes from 'Waterloo' (presumably because of the link with *water*, though I like to think that successful evacuation is being thought of as a victory), or that it comes from the French. Even here there are two theories – that it is from *lieu*, 'place', or from *l'eau*, 'water' – and it is certainly the case that one French term for it is *le water*, pronounced like a French word.

Since *toilet training* (another euphemism) is important in bringing up children, there are of course lots and lots of childish expressions for both the action and the place: *number one* and *number two, perform, sit down, do a wee-wee* or *a poo*. Families often have their own terminology for this, and you will perhaps be able to add a few other terms, either well known or quaint. That is to say, if they were used in your family, they will seem well known; if they weren't, they must be quaint.

I was once in the men's lavatory in a university when a student came in with his three-year-old son. 'Do you want to shit or just piss?' the father asked; I forget what the son replied, but I remember being startled by the language. I feel sure that the young father thought he was being uninhibited, and was bringing up his son to speak openly and without embarrassment about bodily functions; he did not believe in 'family terminology', or in varying the language to suit the occasion. If I had said to him 'Mind your language', he would have thought me an old fuddy-duddy; I am not sure what he would have said if I had started to speak to him about register, but it seems likely that he wouldn't have thought the matter important. He was teaching the child – not explicitly but by example – to use only one register when talking about bodily functions. I would love to know whether that caused problems for the boy as he grew up.

To set against that student, here is a comment by Bertrand Russell which seems to me to show great sensitivity to register. He was once asked in an interview to what he attributed the fact that he was

a happy man, and he replied 'Defecating twice a day with unfailing regularity.' No doubt he believed this, but obviously he also wished to be mischievous, since the interviewer probably expected him to say how important philosophy was in his life. Setting out to shock by giving a very ordinary reason, he was careful not to shock by his language; his choice of the rather abstract, indeed medical, term seems a way of indicating that he meant what he was saying. He knew more about register than that student did.

The Language of Sex

One bodily function deserves – and needs – a section to itself. Sex is important in our lives, associated with great joy and, sometimes, with shame. It is inevitable that such intense emotions should develop a rich and emotionally charged vocabulary.

What terms do you use to speak about your sexual organs? Broadly speaking, you have four choices: nursery words (*willy, down there*, and – in at least one nursery – *cherub*), scientific terminology (*penis* and *vagina*), vulgarisms (*prick* and *cunt*), or metaphors (*the rod of life* and *love's channel*, his *tall pine* and her *Cyprian strait*). For the sexual act there is of course no nursery term, so the choice is threefold: scientific terms (*sexual intercourse, copulate*), vulgarisms (*fuck*, or the more recent and less offensive *bonk*), or metaphors like *make the beast with two backs*. Should we add a fourth possibility, straightforward and neutral terminology? The most neutral term is probably *have sex*, which can be used without embarrassment in a calm discussion; but when I once heard a young American discuss the question of date rape, and he spoke about the importance of telling your date that you'd like to 'have sex' that evening, I could not help wondering if that was the term he actually used – and if so whether it sounded so neutral that it killed all desire in the young woman.

In a subject so highly charged as sex, the question of register is unavoidable, and the use of the wrong register can produce awkward or embarrassing results. Scientific terminology is obviously appropriate when writing or speaking as a scientist, but can also be inserted into more casual conversation in order to amuse. Commenting on a likeable but very prim married couple, a friend once said to me 'One wonders whether they copulate', and the unexpected term

produced an odd mixture of amusement at them and amusement at the curiosity we were showing – a typical example of how a shift in register can produce very complex effects. The vulgarisms are, of course, mostly used in informal, uninhibited, usually single-sex conversations – and sometimes also in the bedroom. Metaphor can be used to express our joy and wonder at the richness of sexual experience, and so, inevitably, it is often found in love poetry. Getting the register right can bring great satisfaction, perhaps even enhancing the joy of the sexual act itself.

Linguists distinguish between metaphor and metonymy: the difference, to put it simply, is that a metaphor replaces what you are talking about with something else that is like it, while metonymy replaces it with something else that usually goes with it. So if you are talking about your car you may refer to it as your *chariot* (a metaphor), or as your *wheels* (metonymy). What is easily the commonest term for sexual intercourse in modern English is not metaphorical but metonymic: *to sleep with*, or *to go to bed with*. Sexual intercourse usually takes place in bed and is often followed by sleep, but of course it does not have to; hence the many jokes on the lines of *Did you sleep with her? – No, we didn't get a wink of sleep all night.* Bed is such a central metonymic device when speaking of sex that it has yielded several common adjectives (*good in bed, beddable, bedworthy*, the last two both recent, that had not yet found their way into the *Oxford Dictionary* by 1928) and one very old noun (*bedfellow*) that dates from the fifteenth century. *Going to bed with* and *sleeping with* are of course euphemisms in origin, since they replace a direct statement about sex with some innocent activity that goes with it; but since they are now by far the commonest terms for sex, they seem to most of us simply part of Standard English rather than euphemistic. An older term, now largely replaced by *sleep with*, was *lie with*, which was a touch less euphemistic (it is after all slightly more accurate – though sexual intercourse does not have to be lying down!) As for the very widespread term *make love*, which for many people is now the normal term, it is not widely realised just how recent this is: well into the twentieth century, a man who *made love* to a woman was merely talking to her – courting, flattering, declaring his feelings. The earliest recorded use in the *Oxford Dictionary* of *make love* to refer to sexual intercourse is dated 1950.

Let's go back to Sun English, which you may remember I tried to survey in the chapter on Standard English. As we'd expect, it offers a large number of terms for sexual activity and sexually attractive people. In the one issue, I found the verbs *romp, tumble, date, canoodle, pick up* (some of these can have milder meanings, depending on context, but they seem quite plain here); the nouns *nookie, fella,* and *babe magnet*; and the adjective *spicy*. I also found a striking use of *make love*, in a letter from a woman who described herself as 'addicted to sex', and gave an account of meeting a young man in a pub with whom she went into an outhouse full of empty beer barrels, and 'made love'. 'When it was over he grabbed his pint, went back into the pub and ignored me.' That is the most extreme example I can imagine of how this use of *make love* has nothing to do with love.

One rather old-fashioned way of describing what happened in that outhouse would be to say that the young woman was one of the man's *conquests* – though in this case she was so willing that the term is inappropriate. The sexual meaning of *conquest* is particularly interesting, for two reasons. First, because it is clearly based on the parallel between love and war; there are innumerable poems, going right back to ancient Greek and Latin, which see a sexual encounter as a battle. And second, because of the difference between how men and women have traditionally been seen. A man *makes a conquest* when he *enjoys* (*goes to bed with, seduces*) a woman; a woman makes a conquest when a man falls in love with her, and she is able to refuse to gratify his passion.

Since both human beings and animals have sexual intercourse, there are – inevitably – verbs that describe the sexual activity of animals, and others that emphasise the common element between animals and people. By far the commonest verb for animal sexual activity is *mate*, which is only rarely used of humans – though the noun is common enough. A man's *mate* could be another man, in which case it is his friend or a companion at work, or a woman, in which case it is probably his sexual partner. In the case of animals, *mating* sometimes involves a permanent partner and sometimes not – we must be the only species with such enormous variety of sexual practices, both between cultures and between individuals. We do not often use the verb *mate* for humans, and when we do we more often refer to a permanent union than to the sexual act itself. This would make us

like some animals but not others, but I doubt if any comparison with animals is intended when *mate* is used as a verb. The noun *mate*, however, is used both of humans and animals for a sexual partner, and does, I think, often suggest a resemblance between us and those species which stick to a single partner – as if we fit into nature, but into the nature of ravens rather than of sparrows or lions.

There are plenty of other verbs for sexual intercourse: *have, screw, enjoy, get laid,* and even more followed by prepositions: *have it off with, have one's way with, make it with* – many of them suggesting conquest, hostility, even violence as much as love. How do we guide anyone through this maze of terminology? Fortunately, we usually don't need to, for we usually don't need to tell people about register; if we are sensitive to the social situation we are in, we will use the right register. But – to revert to one of the ongoing themes of this book – register changes as society changes, and no field shows this more clearly than the language of sex. If this book were being written forty years ago, it would have been necessary to write *f*ck* or *pr*ck*; forty years before that, the words would have been written in Latin, using the decent obscurity of a dead language to avoid offending the reader, so that a discussion like the present one would not have been possible. Today many men above the age of 50 or so, and many women of all ages, still feel uncomfortable about using the words, and some (though fewer) about hearing them.

The difference between the spoken and the written language is crucial here, and is well illustrated by a moment in Graham Greene's novel *The Heart of the Matter*. Scobie, the middle-aged unhappy hero, is having an affair with a young and innocent war widow, Helen. When Helen learns that Scobie's wife is returning, she writes him a letter to say that she realises she has no claim upon him, though she loves him. One sentence runs 'My dear, my dear, leave me if you want to or have me as your hore if you want to.' Scobie then thinks to himself 'She's only heard the word, never seen it spelt: they cut it out of the school Shakespeare.' It is a touching moment, in which Helen's innocence is illustrated by the fact that she can't shift a word from the spoken into the written language without making a mistake. In 1948, when the book appeared, *whore* belonged almost entirely to the spoken language, and mostly to the informal spoken language; even Scobie, who no doubt used it freely among men, may

never have written it and seldom seen it written. How much has this changed today? Ask yourself how often you have heard the word, and how often seen it written.

Change of register usually causes a shock, since it is a signal either that the social situation has changed, or that the speaker has decided to treat it differently. And it can be a wonderful opportunity for a writer; exploring what can and cannot be said and in what circumstances provides one of literature's finest pleasures, and if the situation is changing the writer has more to explore. Here is an example from the American playwright Edward Albee. In his play *All Over*, a woman is telling her lover, in careful, languorous prose, that it was not their affair that hastened the death of his wife, but his divorcing her:

> *It wasn't* us *that did her in – our … late summer … arrangement: there had been others. Our … mercy to each other, by the lake, the city …* that *didn't send her spinning back into the animal brain; no, my dear; fucking – as it is called in public by everyone these days – is not what got at her; yours and mine, I mean.*

The whole play is written in these elaborate sentences, full of sophisticated language and carefully chosen abstract nouns to refer to their love affair (*arrangement, mercy to each other* – excellent examples of euphemism through abstraction), and into this elegant language the four-letter word intrudes with a shock. The shock, of course, corresponds to the contrast between their sophisticated lives and the directness of the sexual act. It is a triumph of style on Albee's part, and it could not have been written before the four-letter word could be spoken on stage. The character's claim that it is called *fucking* by everyone these days is of course not quite true; we are meant to feel a certain shock as we hear the blunt word crashing into the elegance of what the character says. In another fifty years that effect may no longer be possible.

It is foreigners learning English who need to be guided, just as we need to be guided when we learn a foreign language. Learners of French often need to be told to be careful of the word *baiser*, meaning 'kiss'. It can be used as a noun, and even as a verb in phrases like *baise-la-main*, 'kiss the hand'; but by itself as a verb it doesn't just mean 'to kiss'. They seldom have to be told this twice.

And what about the words *sex* and *sexy* themselves? A fascinating verbal development of the last ten years or so is the extension of these words into areas which have nothing to do with sex. A document can be *sexed up*, that is, 'made more interesting'; a report can be *sexy* if it catches our attention, and makes us want to read it. When the British government was accused of exaggerating the danger of Iraq's weapons in order to justify the invasion, the term that was regularly used was that they had *sexed up* the intelligence reports. This seems to me a sign of how completely the taboo on mentioning sex has now faded in our society. From a situation in which mention of sex had to be disguised as something else, we have moved to one in which discussion of something else can be made more interesting by being compared to sex – though we haven't dropped the first situation either. Films and television programmes dealing explicitly with sex are still called *adult*, while a lively discussion of some difficult political issue that only interests adults can now be called *sexy*.

Homosexuality

This chapter would be incomplete if we did not add a word about homosexuality. It is only about forty years since male homosexuality ceased to be illegal in England, and the transformation of attitudes in that time has been enormous – though most homosexuals will tell you that homophobia is by no means over. As long as hostility exists there will be a term for it, and *homophobia* seems to be established as the standard term, though it has an oddity. *Phobia* actually means 'fear of' rather than 'hostility to' or 'prejudice against', though it is easy to see how one drifts into the other; *francophobia* can mean either 'fear of the French' or 'intense dislike of the French'. As for the *homo* in *homosexual*, it does not come from the Latin word for 'man' (as in *homicide*), but from the Greek word for 'the same' (as in *homonym*, a word which sounds the same as another). So, strictly speaking, *homophobia* should mean 'fear of what is the same' – but no one speaks strictly in this area!

What about the person who is homosexual? The usual term for a homosexual female is *lesbian*, which dates from the nineteenth century and is now Standard English; and for a homosexual man the now more or less universal term is *gay*. Everyone knows that it means 'homosexual', and it has now almost completely displaced the

earlier *queer* – though *queer* seems to have had a revival recently. Since *gay* is used only of male homosexuality, instead of saying *gay and lesbian* it is possible to use a single word and speak of theoretical discussions of homosexuality as *queer theory*. This might at first look ambiguous: does it mean that the theory itself is queer, as a belief in witchcraft or in spontaneous combustion could be described as *a queer theory*? The indefinite article is important here: *a queer theory* is a theory which is queer, whereas *queer theory* is theory about homosexuality. I suspect that some fashionable queer theorists might be mischievously pleased at the possible ambiguity.

You will often hear complaints that the new meaning of *gay* has deprived us of a perfectly good, even a very valuable adjective; that we can no longer exhort the guests at a party to enjoy themselves and be gay, or refer to *gay Paris*. It is difficult to be sure if this complaint contains a touch of homophobia along with hostility to language change. If it comes from a poetry-lover, he may well quote Yeats' poem *Lapis Lazuli*, a passionate plea that art, including tragic art, should give pleasure, and which insists that 'Hamlet and Lear are gay', and that the 'ancient wrinkled eyes' of the old Chinese sages listening to 'mournful melodies' are gay. He may even claim that this poem has now been spoilt for him.

A sexual meaning for *gay* is not new. One of its original meanings was 'keen on social pleasures', and from this it easily came to mean 'sexually promiscuous'; in the nineteenth century a woman who was *gay* was a prostitute. This meaning died out before the twentieth century, and was presumably forgotten when the word came to mean 'homosexual' around the mid-twentieth century. The meaning 'homosexual' is now standard, and is understood by everyone; does that mean that *gay* can no longer be used with any other meaning?

Ambiguity exists in every language, and speakers and writers soon learn to handle it. You can be a *head of department*, a machine can build up a *head of steam*, a glass of beer can have a *good head* to it, you can walk at the *head of a procession*, you can have a *fine head of hair*, a boat can *be head of the river*, you can *keep your head* when others panic and lose theirs, discontent can *draw to a head*, and so on for page after page of the *Oxford Dictionary*. None of this troubles speakers of the language. Knowing a language means being able to negotiate our way through such ambiguity; poets and punsters enjoy

the opportunity for verbal suppleness that this gives them. When one of the meanings is sexual we are usually able to shut it out without difficulty, though the opportunity for suggestive wordplay is there; a girl's school can employ a French *mistress*, an injection can give you a little *prick*, a birdwatcher can invite us to look at her *great tits*, without fear of misunderstanding, until someone decides to snigger at it. Many of our commonest verbs, like *have* or *come*, can have a sexual meaning, and of course this offers an opportunity for jokes in doubtful taste (*Mary had a little lamb – and all the doctors were surprised*). But in ordinary speech and writing this does not worry us; if it did, we would hardly be able to speak without sniggering.

So why need there be a problem about *gay*? Why can't the meaning 'male homosexual' exist alongside its other meanings without intruding, as the sexual meanings of *come* or *have* do not intrude unless we invite them in? This is a fascinating and difficult question; the answer may be that the meaning is new and we are not yet quite comfortable with it. Homophobia, like all prejudices, dies only gradually, and plenty of people are not only upset by homosexuality, but also feel distressed at the fact that they feel upset. Here it can be informative to look at the term used when it is revealed, by someone else, that someone is homosexual: he or she has been *outed*. Using a preposition as a verb is not completely unknown in English (we encountered *up* meaning 'raise' in Sun English, and we can *down* a drink), but it is unusual enough to sound odd. So the fact that we do not *announce* or *reveal* or *betray* or *tell the world* about John Doe's homosexuality perhaps indicates that the act of revealing it is highly charged with complex and not fully understood emotion; an awkward action needs an awkward word. Is it not this awkwardness which has prevented us relaxing about the word *gay* as well? Only when most people feel quite relaxed about male homosexuality itself will they feel equally relaxed about the word *gay*. That, at any rate, is my explanation. Perhaps you have another?

Marriage – and Non-Marriage

The frontier between being married and not being married has grown fuzzier in our time, and this has, of course, had consequences for the language. A man and a woman who lived together as if married, but who had not been through the ceremony, were described,

until recently, as *cohabiting* (a more or less neutral term) or as *living in sin*. This latter expression clearly indicated moral disapproval, but was sometimes used by the couple themselves, either ironically or quite seriously, to show that they did not accept this moral prohibition.

An interesting example of how changing customs change the language is the disappearance of the concept of *conjugal rights* and the rise of the concept *marital rape*. *Conjugal rights* usually meant the right of a husband to demand sex from his wife: this right has now virtually disappeared from the law and the term in consequence has disappeared from the language. *Marital rape* is a term that until recently would have seemed like a contradiction, but is now gradually being recognised in law. *Demanding one's conjugal rights* and *committing marital rape* refer to much the same situation, and the change in terminology indicates very neatly the change in the moral and legal position.

As often happens when an important social change has taken place, especially when there has been strong resistance to it, some of the political struggle is displaced onto the language: conservatives object not only to the new practices but to new terminology, while radicals seek to change not only what happens but the language in which we talk about it. This is what lies behind most of the arguments about political correctness which will concern us in the next chapter.

In the case of marriage, the terms that have had to be rearranged are of course those for the practice and those for the two people. Some that have arisen in America sound quaint to British ears: *significant other, live together arrangement* (sometimes shortened to *LTA*), *spouse equivalent*. Sometimes it is difficult to be sure if these are still current, or already regarded as quaint; even, sometimes, whether they are being used seriously or in jest. The question *Are you (Is your son/daughter/sister, etc.) married?* has now become much more complicated than it was; the answer *No* might mean that the person is cohabiting or is single. *Are you attached/unattached?* seems to cover both possibilities, but if the person has old-fashioned sexual principles, they might be attached to someone they intend to marry but not be cohabiting or even sleeping with them.

Some of the ambiguity over marriage can also be seen in the use

of *affair* (a shortening, of course, of *love affair*). When two people are *having an affair* that always means that they are not married to each other, and almost always that it is being kept secret. Fifty years ago the expression could be used when both of them were single, but today it would almost certainly mean that one or both of them is married, since a permanent sexual relationship between two unmarried people no longer has any stigma attached.

But there is still a good deal of uncertainty about the terminology. The traditional words for a more or less permanent sexual partner to whom you are not married were *lover* and *mistress*. Perhaps the most famous of Shakespeare's songs is *It was a lover and his lass*, a simple celebration of young love 'in spring time, in spring time, the only pretty ring time'. The song does not tell us, and the word *lover* does not tell us, whether their love was consummated or not; but since the lover in this case has a lass, he is clearly male. A lover, in earlier centuries, was usually male (though one could speak of a pair of lovers, in which case the word applied to both sexes); today both man and woman can speak of *my lover*. Modern students writing about Elizabethan poetry often refer to the poet and his lover, an expression that would have puzzled the Elizabethans themselves; the poet is the lover, and addresses his love poems to his mistress. (And a *mistress* as the recipient of a love poem could be, but need not be, a mistress in the commoner sense. That is, she might or might not have slept with the lover.)

Those days are past; so what are the equivalent terms today for the person with whom you cohabit or have a regular sexual relationship? By far the commonest is *partner*, which seems by now to be displacing all the alternatives – *lover, mistress, friend, girlfriend, companion*. The problem (a typical one when social arrangements are changing and vocabulary has not yet caught up with them) is that every possible term has other meanings. *Partner, friend* and *companion* all have non-sexual meanings. This only poses a problem if those meanings are likely to intrude and cause confusion. A married woman who made furniture had a business partner, and at an exhibition of their work she was talking to a customer who remarked that he had just been talking to her husband about the furniture. 'That's not my husband, that's my partner', she responded, whereupon the customer gave a slightly embarrassed laugh and said 'Well, we don't worry

about these niceties nowadays, do we?' The example is a genuine one, but it is perhaps sufficiently unusual to be a story worth telling, which is to say that the danger of such confusion is very small. *Friend* is so likely to be ambiguous that it would cause endless confusion if used in this sense; but it is worth remarking that in German, where nouns denoting people often have gender-indicating terminations (so that the word for male friend is different from that for female friend), the term *Freundin* (female friend) used by a man is very likely to mean sexual companion. *Companion* has the attraction that it has a certain accuracy, since its literal meaning is 'someone who eats bread with you', but this will be noticed only by those who are sensitive to etymology. So *partner* it is likely to remain.

And since a sexual union can produce children, the term for your partner and children has also changed. The traditional term was of course *family* – which is ambiguous. In the narrow sense it means 'nuclear family', so the question *Has he a family?* meant *Has he any children?* But in the wider sense everyone has a family, because everyone has parents, ancestors, and (in most cases) aunts and cousins. Now the term often used is *loved ones*; in fire or flood or earthquake, survivors are anxious about the fate of their loved ones. Of course this gives an opportunity for cynicism (*Loved ones? I can't stand them!*) but that is an inevitable – and fortunately minor – consequence of the wider social shift we are looking at, using a term denoting the emotional rather than the legal relationship.

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To conclude this chapter, here is a rather speculative historical note. In exploring the language of sex we have, inevitably, looked at the way it can be used to shock or to be offensive. In earlier centuries, the most shocking terms belonged not to sex but to religion: people wrote *d**n* (or said *darn*) instead of *damn*, or *G*d* instead of *God*, because they took the Third Commandment seriously ('Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain'). Is it odd that the same area of meaning should provide what we revere and also what we use for cursing? It looks like an example of the paradox often pointed out by anthropologists, that the sacred is closely connected with the unclean. We can see the same paradox in ordinary language

if we look at the way we use the word *swear*: we *swear at* to express hostility, we *swear by* what we most revere.

But religious oaths have lost much of their power for many people; those who say *God* or *Christ* as swear words do not usually feel they are saying anything very shocking. Many would say that this is because religion no longer looms so large in our lives. If that is so, what has replaced it? If swearing is taken as evidence, it looks as if the answer is sex; the sexual terms now have more power to shock than have religious terms, and instead of writing *G*d* for *God*, we took to writing *f*ck* for *fuck*. Does that mean our feelings of reverence have been transferred from religion to sex?

But we have more or less lost our inhibitions about the sexual terms as well; we write them in full and, as I've tried to show, we use them much more freely. Does that mean we no longer have any terms whose use is inhibited by reverence? Because we have no reverence? Has our secular society begun to lose all feeling for the sacred?

Too big a question for a little book on usage to tackle. But you might like to think about it.