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Frelling Shtako!
A Review of *Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing* and Its Applications for Conlanging

by
Don Boozer

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DISCLAIMER: **The following essay includes topics not suitable for all ages and language not-suitable-for-work. Reader discretion is advised. As the author of the book under review states: "If you haven't already been offended by this book, chances are you will be. I can only apologize in advance."**

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Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing. Melissa Mohr. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013. 316 p. index. $24.95.

The Review

Although swearing has probably existed since humans began using language to communicate, it remains largely a taboo subject of discussion in "polite circles" let alone an acceptable mode of speech. However, swearing has been shown to alleviate the sensation of pain[1], and (according to some research) swearwords "even occupy a different part of the brain" than other words. This form of language is powerful, demands attention, and can evoke visceral reactions in both speakers and listeners. This makes swearing an important and interesting facet of language, and scholars such as Pinker[2], Jay[3], Stephens[4] and now Melissa Mohr have delved into this under-explored area of expression.

Mohr's fascinating *Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing* joins a growing corpus of works examining taboo language such as Geoffrey Hughes' *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), Tony McEnery's *Swearing in English: Bad Language, Purity and Power from 1586 to the Present* (Routledge, 2006), and Pete Silverton's *Filthy English: The How, Why, When, and What of Everyday Swearing* (Portobello Books, 2009). Like these, Mohr primarily examines swearing's colorful history and development within the English-speaking world (with context provided by a look at ancient Rome and the Bible).

Mohr's title comes from her thesis that obscenities come predominantly from two spheres of human experience: the religious and the sexual/excremental, hence the Holy and the

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[1] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8147170.stm
[2] http://tinyurl.com/3dvwld
[3] http://www.mcla.edu/Undergraduate/majors/psychology/timothyjay/
[4] http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=why-do-we-swear

Shit. One reviewer[5] made the observation that these should be considered three separate domains, and the book should have been entitled *Holy Fucking Shit*. In any case, the title is a clever and succinct summary of the topics covered.

In a helpful introductory section, Mohr points out that English has a wealth of ways in which to refer to swearing:
- *Obscenities*: "our worst, most offensive words" including racial slurs
- *Cursing*: "in its most literal sense invokes a deity to make something bad happen"
- *Profanity*: although "profane is the opposite of sacred"... "That these words now pick out obscene language is vocabularial testimony that religious swearing is not as powerful as it once was."
- *Expletives*: "originally words or phrases that didn't add anything to the meaning of a sentence"..."came to refer to swearwords because they likewise often contribute little literal meaning"
- *Vulgar language*: "makes a class distinction... 'the common people'" have been suspected of swearing more than the upper classes (although Mohr shows that this has not been true)
- More terms include *blasphemy*, *abusive language*, *dirty language*, and *bad language*.

All of these provide different shades of meaning and expand what one could consider swearing.

Ancient Rome provides the foundation on which Mohr's history of swearwords is built. If there are no ancient Romans currently alive, how can scholars determine what was an obscenity from that time? Mohr lays out the accepted methodology by explaining the "hierarchy of genres":
1. Graffito and epigram
2. Satire
3. Oratory and elegy
4. Epic

By examining the word choices in each of these (and which ones only appear in the "lower" levels of the hierarchy), researchers can be fairly certain what was considered simply "Roman plainness" and what was obscene or vulgar. It should also be pointed out (as Mohr does) that only a minority of Romans were literate enough to even write graffiti, so obscenity in that genre does not imply that only "lower classes" wrote crude things on the walls of ancient Roman cities and towns.

The ancient Romans did have some swearwords similar in function to modern English: *merda* "shit" - *Merda fuit!* "It [i.e., a piece of food] was shit!"; *futuo* "to fuck" - *Hic ego puellas multas futui.* "Here I have fucked many girls." However, Mohr explains that they had a completely different idea of sexuality and didn't think "in terms of homosexual or

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[5] http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/23/holy-shit-history-swearing-mohr

heterosexual -- they divided people up by whether they were active or passive during sex." For example, women (to the ancient Romans) were considered *de facto* passive. Sex was also a way to show dominance. Romans could see a man who had active, dominant sex with other men, boys, and women as the most masculine of men. Likewise, a man who exclusively had sex with women could be seen as degenerate in some way. There were various pejorative terms for passive sexual partners including *fellator*, *cinaedus* and *catamitus*. So, *Holy Shit* reminds one that ancient peoples did not simply speak a different language but could have completely different cultural perspectives from which to describe the world around them.

From ancient Rome, Mohr takes a detour through the Bible. This seminal document of Western civilization provided the basis on which literal swearing came to be so prominent in the Middle Ages. The Bible provides examples on how and when to swear by God and what this meant for the one swearing.

Whereas the Shit took center stage in ancient Rome, the Holy came to prominence in the Middle Ages. Mohr provides an intriguing and entertaining romp through the swearing of contemporaries of the Anglo-Saxons up through the 1400s. Just as with the Romans, the Middle Ages were filled with ideas wholly unfamiliar to modern sensibilities. Swearing by God was extremely serious business during this time period. It was not uncommon for people to swear oaths to the veracity of their statements "by the blood of Christ" or "by God's arms" or "by God's nails" or any number of other body parts or attributes of the divine presence. Breaking one's oath sworn in this way would, they believed, literally rend the body of God/Christ asunder. This is one reason why "vain swearing -- swearing habitually and/or for trifles--" was looked down upon so vehemently during this time. Mohr uses Chaucer's work for examples of this vain type of swearing: "Chaucer's characters can barely start a sentence without prefacing it with 'By God's soul,' 'For Christ's passion,' or 'By God's precious heart.'"

Another interesting point that Mohr makes about language in the Middle Ages is that words modern society would consider vulgar (at best) were commonplace in earlier times. For example, the common name of the birds which would nowadays be called herons were known as *schiterowys* [shitrows] and dandelions were *pissabeds*. Streets were also designated with names like *Schetewellwey* [Shitwell Way] and Gropecunt Lane [the street of prostitutes in a particular town or village]. This downgrading of the status of terms from the Middle Ages to the present, Mohr shows, was not at all uncommon.

The Renaissance became a transitional period between the predominance of the Holy and the resurgence of the Shit. One of the interesting points Mohr makes in her chapter on this is the fact that "words such as *fuck*, *arse*, and *swive* [were included in dictionaries] because people used them in everyday life, despite the growing sixteenth-century sense that these words were obscene." However, by and large, "*fuck* wasn't any worse than *lie with*, *have to*

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do with, or *adulteravit*. By the sixteenth century, *fucking* was becoming a more powerful word [with which to wound people verbally]." The Renaissance also brought about the invention of the concept of privacy which would, in turn, bring about new attitudes in the realm of swearing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This new attitude also gave way to more euphemistic modes of languages to get around uncomfortable subjects. In the early days of this era, according to Mohr, it was felt that one should use plain language including profane speech when one wanted to display "the naked truth." However, this bold use of swearwords gave way to the "Age of Euphemism." Mohr explains that even the word *trousers* was too much sometimes and often this article of clothing was referred to as "*inexpressibles* (1793), *indescribables* (1794)...*inexplicables* (1836), and *continuations* (mid-nineteenth century)." *Legs* were also off-limits, referred to as simply the *lower extremity*. Interestingly enough, Mohr explains that this was also the age that gave rise to words like *bloody* and *bugger*, the rising popularity of *fuck*, and various vulgar words for various and sundry sexual practices.

The last chapter of the book begins to sound familiar to modern readers with appearances by Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and even mention of Norman Mailer's 1948 novel *The Naked and the Dead* set in World War II where he "famously substituted *fug* and *fugging*, leading Tallulah Bankhead to quip upon meeting him, 'So, you're the young man who can't spell *fuck*'."

Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing takes the reader on an engrossing and eye-opening tour of one of the most expressive aspects of language from ancient Rome to modern times. Mohr does an excellent job in balancing scholarship and readability and does not shy away from uncomfortable topics although with a good dose of humor along the way. Highly recommended!

Applications of *Holy Shit* for Conlanging
and a Brief Survey of Profanity in Existing Conlangs

As Mohr's book clearly demonstrates, profanity/swearing/obscenity is a natural and powerful part of human communication. Many conlangers (and artlangers specifically) often speak of wanting to create a conlang that emulates natural language. Including profanity within one's created language, especially if the conlang is meant to be spoken by inhabitants of a con-culture, would be yet another way to provide the verisimilitude for which many artlangers strive.

As many readers will already know, the title of this review/essay is taken from two well-known science fiction television series: *Frelling* is taken from *Farscape*[6], and *shtako* is

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from Syfy's *Defiance*[7]. *Frell/frelling* was simply a relexification of *fuck/fucking,* used to get "profanity" past the censors. *Shtako* is a word in Castithan, a conlang created by David J. Peterson, although it too could be considered a stand-in for *shit* (especially due to its constituent phonemes)[8]. Wikipedia actually has a nice summary of profanity in science fiction[9] which also mentions *Farscape*'s *frell.*

The idea of using substitutes for well-known English profanities has been used in such diverse ways as Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*'s *fug, Farscape*'s *frell, Battlestar Galactica*'s *frak,* and even *Recess*'s *womps*[10]. This also becomes a common strategy in naming languages and full-blown conlangs: provide an all-purpose swearword but not specifically define it. This provides the verisimilitude of having speakers of the language swear without having to go out on a limb and say "This word means *fuck/shit/damn/etc.* [or fill in the blank within the con-culture]." However, as Mohr's work points out, swearwords can have a rich etymology even though eventually they may indeed be semantically empty (e.g., the various functions *fuck* can fill in any given English phrase). Likewise, the conlanger can provide a multi-function swearword but should be able to provide the route by which this was achieved.

Roger Mills[11], creator of Kash[12], is one conlanger who has investigated vulgarisms within his conworld and shared terms and their derivations by email with the author of this review/essay. One of the most imaginative is his "*mepu e ka* 'to make the K' after the Kash letter *ka*" referring, of course, to "intercourse where the bottom's legs are thrown up in the air and spread." The letter *ka* can be seen on the Cinduworld site's Alphabet page[13]. Mills has also done an excellent job in determining the etymology of several in-world variations on the English *fuck* and not simply relexifying it:
- *trok* (means 'to prick' or 'fork' in other dialects, not mine)
- *~cakatrok, troki, icitrok* (with *ici ~icoñ* "a vulgar word for penis")
- *tupatup* "sexual intercourse" (mf or MM) < *tup* 'bounce'

David J. Peterson has probably done the most to popularize the idea of conlang swearing[14] in recent years with his Dothraki and Valyrian (for HBO's *Game of Thrones*) and Irathient and Castithan (for *Defiance*). The unofficial *Dothraki Language Dictionary*[15] provides

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[7] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2189221/

[8] According to Peterson, he originally defined *shtako* as "idiot"; however, the producers of *Defiance* liked it better as the word for "shit". So, Peterson (as the conlanger) did not originally intend the similarity in sound between *shtako* and "shit".

[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Profanity_in_science_fiction

[10] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0684063/

[11] http://fiatlingua.org/tag/roger-f-mills/

[12] http://cinduworld.tripod.com/contents.htm

[13] http://cinduworld.tripod.com/alphabet.htm

[14] To see Peterson discussing curse words in the planning process for *Defiance*, see (starting at 2:11) http://www.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/showbiz/2012/04/09/the-next-list-peterson-part-2.cnn.html

[15] http://docs.dothraki.org/Dothraki.pdf

definitions for *govak* "fucker" and *graddakh* "shit", and Peterson's Valyrian-speakers[16] can say things like *J'aspo eza zya azantyr* "The bitch has her army" and *Si kizy vasko v'uvar ez zya gundja yn hilas* "And this because I like the curve of her ass." However, other conlangs have also included (or evolved) the ability to swear including arguably the most well-known of any: Esperanto.

Hektor Alos and Kiril Velkov have written a pamphlet entitled *Tabuaj Vortoj en Esperanto*[17] that outlines profanity, insults, and bawdy songs and poems in that conlang. Wikipedia again also has some summaries of profanity[18] [19] in Esperanto.

Klingon, another well-known conlang, has an extenstive list of possible curses[20] and the alien warriors have (supposedly) a healthy respect for one who curses well.

Conlangers who want to evolve a proto-language into daughter languages or who would like to play with diachronic linguistics for their creations have a fertile field in which to play when it comes to profanity. Determining how innocuous, everyday words came to be vulgar or vice versa could be an entertaining facet of language creation.

Mohr's work also provides clear indication of the variety of cultural phenomenon that can give rise to swearing. The chapters on ancient Rome and the Middle Ages in particular provide completely foreign concepts that have held sway in our own human history. Consider what could be done if the speakers of one's conlang were not even Earth-based or from an alternative history. How would ancient Rome's vulgarisms have evolved if the Roman Empire had held sway for centuries longer than it did?

Holy Shit also shows that, although *fuck* and *shit* are common swearwords across time and culture, simply providing relexifications of these within one's conlang sells both oneself and the "speakers" of one's conlang short. There are most likely infinite shades of meaning and origins for expressive profanity for one's con-culture. Mohr's various terms (e.g., obscenities, profanities, vulgar language, etc.) provide a wide spectrum from which one's con-swearwords can be gleaned.

Even the "hierarchy of genres" could be used to provide inspiration for different levels of vocabulary within one's creations. These in turn may give rise to synonyms for different things, acts, or concepts used by various levels of society within those con-cultures. These do not necessarily have to all be profanity but may get one considering alternative ways of expressing concepts for con-cultural inhabitants at different levels of society.

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[16] http://wiki.dothraki.org/Astapori_Valyrian_Vocabulary
[17] http://i-espero.info/files/elibroj/eo%20-%20alos%20&%20velkov%20-%20tabuaj%20vortoj%20en%20esperanto.pdf
[18] http://eo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakro
[19] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esperanto_profanity
[20] http://www.khemorex-klinzhai.de/Hol/mix/curses.html

In addition to Mills and Peterson mentioned above, many other modern artlangers have incorporated some profanity within their creations. A recent thread on Conlang-L[21] asked for conlangers to share their creations' vulgarities. One of the more complex responses to that thread concerns the Sefdaanians[22] who appear to have a unique system for cursing.

Finally, the *Conlangery Podcast* #13[23] was entitled "Profanity, Insults, and Taboo Words (NSFW)" and is well worth a listen. The podcast begins with an emphatic disclaimer which gives similar warnings to those Mohr provides in her book.

In summary, Melissa Mohr has given conlangers a wealth of ideas with which to experiment and has opened up a whole facet of language that often gets overlooked in the process of conlanging.

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[21] Conlang-L "Conlang Profanity" thread link
[22] Conlang-L Sefdaanian post in "Conlang Profanity" thread link
[23] http://conlangery.com/2011/08/29/conlangery-13-profanity-insults-and-taboo-words-nsfw/