**Bad Language**

Autumn 2018

First-Year Seminar: ARTSCI 1137.xx

1 Credit

Day, Time, Place

**Professor**: Dr. Lauren Squires, squires.41@osu.edu **Office hours**: By appointment

There are some people that aren't into all the words.

There are some that would have you not use certain words.

Yeah, there are 400,000 words in the English language and there are 7 of them that you can't say on television. What a ratio that is!

–George Carlin, *The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television*

Better yet dialect dirty like a subway

Freak a funky loop and I make it go the other way

In a vocabulary scrimmage

But cursing in my village ain't good for my image

So Big Daddy, you know it's time to kick a verse

But do your man a favor: don't curse

-C.L. Smooth on Heavy D’s “Don’t Curse”

At 70 years old, if I could give my younger self one piece of advice, it would be to use the words ‘fuck off’ much more frequently.

-Helen Mirren

**Course Description**: This class will explore “bad language”—swearing and other forms of language considered “taboo.” What counts as “bad” is not absolute, but is determined by social and cultural norms, situational expectations, and individual preferences, habits, and personalities. Indeed, some of the language considered offensive in American society even two decades ago is now considered utterly mundane—and vice versa. The goal of this class is to use taboo language as an inherently interesting lens through which to learn about human beings and the language they use. We will approach “bad words” from the viewpoint of multiple disciplines that concern themselves with the study of language, including linguistics, anthropology, psychology, literature, rhetoric, and the law.

You should not take this course is you are offended by the discussion of taboo language.

You should also not take this course if you are only interested in the “shock value” of taboo language.

You should take this course if you think language is interesting and want to learn more about it; if you are ready for frank and mature discussions about sometimes-controversial topics; and if you have a mind open to reconsidering your ideas about language and society.

**Course Objectives**

1. To explore fundamental principles of language, social and cultural organization, and linguistic and social change, using “bad language” as an entry point

2. To learn about how multiple intellectual traditions approach taboo language

3. To learn about methods for undertaking research about language and society

4. To practice reading, writing, and presenting original research

**Required Texts**

Readings will be available via the course Carmen site.

**Required Activities and Grading**

Grading: S/U

**Content Note and Community Expectations**

We will be dealing with cultural material that may at times prove sensitive or difficult. Our goal is to treat all material analytically, using the tools of scholarship to better understand both the material and the society it comes from. I ask that we try to acknowledge the complexities of culture, while also considering the multiple ways in which content can be received, which often differs by different types of audiences. If you ever feel you need to step out from a class discussion, please do so. If anything is keeping you from benefiting fully from the class, please talk to me about it. Finally, we will talk plenty *about* all kinds of words, but we will not *use* words that carry prejudicial content. Please take care in making your own linguistic choices in this class. **Hateful speech towards any individual or group will not be tolerated**.

**1. Readings and discussion – 40%**

You are expected to do the readings. There can be no “seminar” without students coming prepared to ask questions and engage. To facilitate discussion, you will bring 3 questions with you to each class, prompted by the reading for the day. I will call on people at random each class to provide us with a question as a starting point. I will collect your questions at the end of class.

**2. Short paper and presentation – 20%**

You will perform an investigation of a “bad word” of your choice, examining its linguistic and social histories, and write a 3-page report. Due week 6.

**3. Data collection exercise and write-up – 40%**

We will work together in the first weeks of class to decide on a word/phrase that we want to collect data about. Each student will be responsible for collecting some data (i.e. documenting the word in use). We will use this to create a group dataset. Each student will then conduct their own analysis of the data, writing up results in a 3-4-page paper. Data collection due week 10; write-up due during finals.

**Tentative Course Outline**

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| **Week** | **Topic** | **Readings due** |
| 1 | Introduction/groundwork | Allan & Burridge, “Taboos and their origins” |
| 2 | Types/categories of taboo words | Eggert, “If you say ‘Jehovah’ once more…’ the Use/Mention distinction”  Ljung, “A typology of swearing” |
| 3 | “Bad language” beyond “bad words” | Andersson & Trudgill, “Slang”  State of Oklahoma 1997 House Bill No. 1810 |
| 4 | Linguistic constraints on bad language, p1 | Jones, “Linguists have been discussing ‘shit gibbon’”  Burton, “Abso-fuckin’-lutely: English expletive infixation.” |
| 5 | Linguistic constraints on bad language, p2 | McCulloch, “The syntax of ‘fuck’” |
| 6 | Swearing in social context | Beers Fagersten, “Spontaneous swearing in context” |
| 7 | Historical perspective | Neima, “Why we started swearing”  Mohr, “The modern history of swearing” |
| 8 | The media and censorship | Sheidlower, “The case for profanity in print”  Stamper, “Down the ‘shithole’: Why lexicographers need your profanity” |
| 9 | Taboo language and the law | Jay, “Do offensive words harm people?” |
| 10 | Slurs and reclamations | Coates, “Politics and the African American human language” |
| 11 | Political correctness | This American Life, “Words You Can’t Say”  Taub, “The truth about ‘political correctness’ is that it doesn’t exist” |
| 12 | Psychology of swearing | Van Lancker and Cummings, “Expletives” |
| 13 | The development of swearing | Jay and Jay, “A child's garden of curses” |
| 14 | Sociology/sociolinguistics of swearing | Cameron, “Call the fishwife” |
| 15 | Cross-cultural approach | Eggert, “Tabernacles, names, menses, animals, and mothers-in-law. Cross-cultural taboos” |

**Bibliography**

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Cameron, Deborah. (2018) “Call the fishwife: thoughts on sex, class and swearing.” *Language: A Feminist Guide*. https://debuk.wordpress.com/2018/01/27/call-the-fishwife-thoughts-on-sex-class-and-swearing/

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Jay, Kristin L. and Timothy Jay. (2013) “A child's garden of curses: A gender, historical, and age-related evaluation of the taboo lexicon.” *American Journal of Psychology*, 126.4: 459-475.

Jay, Timothy. (2009) “Do offensive words harm people?” Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 15: 81-101.

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**Other Course Policies**

**Technology.** Take a break from your screens! Trust me—you’ll get more out of the class if you are an active participant. While you are distracting yourself from the class, you are also distracting me and your classmates. Please just don’t.

**Email.** I will respond to email during regular business hours (9-5, Monday through Friday). *If you have a logistical question about the course, check the syllabus and/or Carmen before emailing me.* If you have a question that requires a lengthy response, meet with me.

**Academic Misconduct.** *Plagiarism* is the unauthorized use of the words or ideas of another person. It is a serious academic offense that can result in referral to the Committee on Academic Misconduct. Please remember that at no point during the writing process should the work of others be presented as your own. It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term "academic misconduct" includes all forms of student academic misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations. Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the Code of Student Conduct.

**Accommodations.** The University strives to make all learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers based on your disability (including mental health, chronic or temporary medical conditions), please let me know immediately so that we can privately discuss options. To establish reasonable accommodations, I may request that you register with **Student Life Disability Services**. After registration, make arrangements with me as soon as possible to discuss your accommodations so that they may be implemented in a timely fashion. SLDS contact information: [slds@osu.edu](mailto:slds@osu.edu); 614-292-3307; <http://slds.osu.edu>; 098 Baker Hall, 113 W. 12th Avenue.

**Campus Resources**

**Student Advocacy Center.** Empowers students to overcome obstacles to their growth both inside and outside the classroom, and to help them maximize their educational experience while pursuing their degrees at The Ohio State University. The SAC is open Monday-Friday from 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM. 001 Dracket Tower 614-292-1111 advocacy@osu.edu, or <http://studentlife.osu.edu/advocacy/>

**Counseling and Consultation Services.** Offers a wide range of resources for undergraduate students. For more information call 614-292-5766. <https://ccs.osu.edu>

**Buckeye Food Alliance Food Pantry.** Lincoln Tower, Suite 150. Open from 6pm-8pm on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Sundays. <http://buckeyefoodalliance.org>

Resources

**Lauren Squires**

**Biographical Statement**

I have been a professor in the English department at Ohio State since 2012. Before that, I taught for one year at University of North Carolina-Wilmington; before that, I received my PhD in linguistics from University of Michigan (I know, I know) and my MA in linguistics from University of Virginia. As a linguist, I am most interested in how language intersects with society: how language reflects social differences like race, class, and gender; how language is adapted to environments like social media; and, how language figures into pop culture in areas like politics and the news media. I am also interested in how people’s brains store and activate knowledge of the links between language and social identity, so I conduct experiments designed to test that. The courses under my purview include English 3271: Structure of the English Language, English 4570: English Grammar and Usage, English 4571: Language and Media, English/Linguistics 5804: Analyzing Language in Social Media, and English 4570: Introduction to the History of English. I am the recipient of a 2017 Ronald and Deborah Ratner Distinguished Teaching Award, a 2016 Affordable Learning Book Launch Grant, and a 2016 Arts & Sciences Interdisciplinary Team Teaching Grant.