

# The incredible explosive word

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It's the one word that truly remains taboo in Western society. *Illustration by John Shakespeare*

**As profanity moves into prime time, it's the last linguistic taboo. But, asks Jacqueline Maley, is "the C-word" now going mainstream?**

Inga muscio would like to live in a world where the words, "Wow, that is so c...y!" constitute a genuine and heartfelt expression of approval.

She is waiting for the day when the sentence "You are such a c..." is one anyone would be overjoyed to hear, a day when the most offensive word in the English language, the most abused of words, the word largely censored out of television and print and shunned by polite society, has been rehabilitated and embraced.

But Muscio, a 45-year-old feminist and author from Seattle (who, admittedly, has a vested interest, having authored a book called *C...: A Declaration of Independence*) allows that day probably isn't coming any time soon.



That word ... how can four letters mean so much? *Illustration by John Shakespeare*

Muscio believes the word, a mere four letters but so powerful (as she says, "There is something about it ... it's just so base; it's like, it means business, you know?") is a metaphor for the status of

women. While they are oppressed, the word will be oppressed, too.

But as much as Muscio wants to reclaim, reshape and empower women to use "c...", much in the way the gay community has adopted "queer" and African-Americans have taken back "nigger", even she says that she sometimes uses the word for ill.

"Once in a while, when someone makes me really, really angry, I will call them that," she admits. "I am not immune. It feels good sometimes."

It is as though the word - coyly known as the C-word, the C-bomb, the Anglo-Saxon swear word, tncuc or C U Next Tuesday - has a life of its own. Unlike other words in our lexicon, which we marshal and deploy to suit us, "c..." seems to exist outside and beyond us, with a mysterious and plosive power belonging only to it.

It is a word even the most liberal of swearers hesitate to use and is arguably the most notorious in the English language, so taboo it's heard less often than the N-word.

Feminists hate it, most comedians avoid it, grown men are punished for saying it. It has caused sackings and scandals, bannings and banishment. When pronounced, it sounds hard and violent.

Even Germaine Greer admits it is shocking.

How can one syllable cause so much offence? And why, in a world where even the most offensive terms such as "nigger" are being reclaimed, does the C-word remain singularly ostracised?

Why can't we tame "c..."?

In *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, british lexicographer Jonathon Green details examples and citations of slang drawn from the past five centuries. The entry on "c..." runs to more than 12 pages and includes inventive variations. Most of the citations, which come from a variety of sources -

centuries-old private letters, blue literature, bawdy ballads and modern novels - are deeply offensive to women, base slurs in which they are referred to as genitalia and nothing more.

"Slang is from a male sensibility and a male point of view," Green says. "I have not, in 30 years of doing this, come across a discernible set-aside lexicon of female slang, and the role of women in slang is almost invariably derogatory - parts of bodies, women seen as sexual or not sexual, old or plain."

Until relatively recently, Green argues, respectable women didn't use slang, and as a lexicon it was developed in typically male environments: bars, warehouses, dockyards and streets. Green says the offensive meaning of the word "c..." is just another example of a male-dominated lexicon casting women in the role of sex objects, at once loathed, feared, desired and repugnant.

But it may not always have been thus. The etymology of the word is not clear, but it is probably ancient, with roots in the Greek *konnos* and the Latin *cunnus* (vulva).

In English, "c..." was probably never respectable, but it was not always offensive. The earliest documented mention of the word is from the 13th century. *Street Names of the City of London*, a rather prosaic book authored by Eilert Ekwall and published in 1954, lists a "Gropec...elane" as one of the streets that made up the "stews" (brothels) of Cheapside in east London, circa 1230. The fact that it appeared as a street name implies the word had some measure of acceptability.

"It would also appear," writes Green in his slang dictionary, "from subsequent early citations, that the term, while vulgar, was descriptive rather than obscene." For example, it features in an English translation of a tome by the noted 13th-century Italian surgeon Lanfranc, purely as a term for the female anatomy. But at some point between the 13th century and the late 15th century, the word's reputation was besmirched. No one seems to know what happened.

Two centuries later it was legally obscene, and to print the word was to risk prosecution. The 1811 edition of the *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* by Francis Grose described it as "a nasty name for a nasty thing".

Such objections might seem quaintly historic until you consider that it was in the recent past, just 1960, when the publishing house Penguin was tried under British obscenity laws for publishing the unexpurgated version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence.

The book was deemed objectionable for frequent use of the word "f...", but considered even more scandalous was its bold and constant reference to the heroine's ... well, yes, her c....

In Australia, we went one better. Not only was the original book banned, but a book about the obscenity trial was banned, too.

Australians are less prudish than they used to be, but we seem to have a double standard for the C-word. Linguists note that in Australian and New Zealand conversation, "c..." can be used affectionately, as in: "Ahh, you're a daft c..." or "He's a good c..., that bloke."

But when the word pops up in the public discourse, it is almost always retracted or punished, sometimes both. We thwack it down as if we're playing the linguistic equivalent of Whac-a-Mole.

Australia's Classification Board generally applies a MA15+ rating to films and video games containing "strong coarse language".

*The Sydney Morning Herald's* editorial policy is generally to print it only if it's a report of direct speech, and even then it is printed "c..." (as it is throughout this article). The same goes for other Australian newspapers.

The ABC doesn't have a list of proscribed words, but its editorial policy states that while creating innovative content may take risks and offend some viewers, a public broadcaster "should never gratuitously harm or offend, and accordingly any content which is likely to harm or offend must have a clear editorial purpose".

A 2011 report commissioned by the ABC, entitled *Community Attitudes Towards Coarse Language in the Media*, found the coarse words people found least offensive were those relating to anatomy and bodily functions or sexual acts - with the noted exception of "motherf...er" and "c...".

It found women more likely to find coarse words unacceptable than men.

The report cited previous research that concluded: "The upshot today is that the C-word is in a category of its own."

Occasionally, it just pops out. In February, Liberal Party pollster Mark Textor tweeted: "peter brents continuing sleazy attacks on the liberal party are a f...ing disgrace. why do the oz [newspaper] carry this lightweight c...?" The post was swiftly removed and followed up by, "I apologize for the language in the previous tweet it was uncalled for." And, a while later: "and wrong".

Earlier this year, BBC weatherman Alex Deakin accidentally dropped the C-bomb when he described the forecast thus: "It is simply a lovely winter's day tomorrow, bucket loads of c..., er, sunshine". He later tweeted he had accidentally used "not A naughty word THE naughty word".

He was in esteemed company at the BBC. In 2010 the delightfully named radio host James Naughtie introduced on air the culture secretary Jeremy Hunt as, well, you can guess what. The incident, though a mistake, caused a small storm in the British press.

In 2010, former rugby league player Andrew Johns was forced to quit as assistant coach for the NSW State of Origin team after it emerged he had referred to the Queensland player Greg Inglis as a "black c..." during a team meeting. This so offended Timana Tahu, a player of Aboriginal and Maori descent, that he walked out of the team.

Interestingly, the epithet was considered beyond the pale because of its racist overtone, not its misogynistic one.

**In the year 2000, I was 23 years old** and in my last year of law school. My favourite subject, predictably enough for a middle-class girl from the suburbs, was Feminist Legal Theory. We studied Julia Kristeva and Catherine MacKinnon, took sides in the second-wave versus third-wave feminism wars, and raged against the way language had been used to oppress women.

At the uni bar one night, my buddies and I got to talking about the C-word (which, for all the liberation our education provided, none of us liked to say) and we decided we would do our bit for the sisterhood by reclaiming it.

We came up with the term "c...puncher", which we decided we would employ as the worst possible insult for our enemies (who consisted, at that time, mostly of members of the Law Society debating club; we were anti-prejudice, but only on our own terms). "C...puncher", we decided, was the best kind of insult because it sounded harsh. We used the term enthusiastically for a few weeks but it never caught on.

Later, working as a journalist, I became used to hearing the noun used more freely, newsrooms being places where words of all kinds are thrown around, fast and loose. My traditional resistance to the word broke down and it became normalised, albeit in particular contexts. But I would never say it in front of my mother.

**In 2001, I saw *The Vagina Monologues*** in London's West End. The famous Eve Ensler play about violence towards women was produced throughout the world and became a cult hit. In one scene, the women of the audience are incited to chant "C...!" over and over, to reclaim the word.

I cringed with embarrassment as my male companion gleefully urged me on.

The reclamation didn't work. In 2008, actor Jane Fonda starred in one of the play's many productions, and appeared on America's *Today Show* to promote the performance. "I was asked to do a monologue called C...", she explained to the show's host. Nervous laughter ensued, and following a commercial break, another of the show's presenters appeared and apologised. "Jane Fonda inadvertently said a word from the play that you don't say on television," she said. "It was a slip and obviously she apologises, and so do we. We would do nothing to offend the audience, so please accept that apology."

As journalist Zoe Williams pointed out in a piece for *The Guardian* in 2006, if Ensler really wanted women to reclaim the word, why didn't she name her play *The C... Monologues*? "People who hate women, or find us disgusting or terrifying, do not use 'vagina' casually as an insult," she wrote.

Perhaps "c..." is absent from public discourse because vaginas generally are. Watch any movie, television show or listen to any comedy skit, and chances are there will be more references, overt and implied, to the male genitalia than you can count. It is commonplace, for example, to refer to someone gutsy as having "balls". But the vagina is not talked about so freely.

The popular Australian women's website mamamia.com.au last year posted an item about an art project by British sculptor Jamie McCartney. He took 400 individual casts of women's vaginas and mounted them in 10 panels of 40 along a wall. He called the piece *The Great Wall of Vagina*.

Some of those who commented on the post (the women, not the men) were disgusted by it, but the majority were intrigued. Most women don't know what other vaginas look like. They're not talked about and, outside porn, they're not seen.

**A 35-year-old lawyer buddy**, who prefers not to be named, says during his university days it was common to praise someone as a "good c...". When he left university, he worked briefly for a corporate law firm. "I applied the same description to a new colleague and it went down like a ton of cold sick," he recounts. He still loves the word and uses it freely, just not at work.

"It starts hard and ends hard and there's no mucking about in the middle," he says. "For me, it has absolutely no relationship with the vagina, despite its heritage. I don't associate the two.

"It's the only word left with any impact. 'F...' has become what 'bloody' used to be. It's not as flexible as 'f...', but as a noun, it gets your point across."

Pete, a 31-year-old aid worker based in Afghanistan, sends me a long email in response to my questions about the word. ("Wow, I really like waxing lyrical about c..." he remarks in closing). Pete speaks Pashto, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and French, and in all those languages, he says, it is the worst insult you can muster.

"The word for 'c...' in Pashto and Dari is *cous*. So imagine how funny the cooks find it when Arabs come on a mission and ask them to prepare couscous," he writes. "The word for snake in Pashto is *mar*. So Markus becomes 'snake c...'. And a lot of [aid workers] are called Markus."

Pete, who has a history of relationships with stridently feminist women, used to get busted by his ex-girlfriend for using the word. "It really confused me because she and all of her hippie friends would say 'c...' all the time, but in a good way. When they asked each other, 'What's up, c...?' it was fine; when I said, 'I've had a c... of a day', I'd get into a whole heap of trouble."

Pete likes to use the word, usually when he's trying to shock people who are good friends. "It always seems to make people giggle. It feels naughty, and kind of liberating. Like when you start saying 'shit' and 'f...' when you're a teenager and you're testing the boundaries of what you can get away with at school or at home. What word will we use when 'c...' becomes blasé?"

A 35-year-old magazine editor friend says she used it liberally at work when she worked in newspaper offices, but not now she works in a more refined environment. "Now I only use it to describe people who are truly awful, in the company of people I know use it, too," she says. "I don't find it offensive and don't subscribe to the view that it is disrespectful to vaginas. It is just a word. I use it interchangeably with 'cock'."

Justin, a 35-year-old writer, peppers his conversation with it. "It feels good on the tongue, because it's a short, monosyllabic word that ends with a plosive consonant," he says. "With some male friends, I occasionally use 'c...' as a term of endearment, like, 'Hey c..., while you're up at the bar, get us a beer, would ya?'"

Asked why he thinks the word is considered so rude, he says, "I suspect I'm meant to say something about how the offensive power of the word is a product of entrenched misogyny in cultural discourse, of male disgust for femininity and the vagina itself, of male fear of the vagina as a symbol of castration. Or something. I don't know."

My unscientific survey led me to conclude that my friends either have exceptionally foul mouths, or that the younger generations, at least, live in a post-c... world.

**As a lexicographer, Green** is often asked on radio to talk about the C-word when it occasionally pops up in the public discourse and causes a scandal. But before going on air, he says, he is always instructed by the producer: "You know you can't say it, don't you?"

"I would say unequivocally that 'c...' isn't about to come back into standard English any time soon," he concludes.

Perhaps not standard English. But as new forms of social media contribute to the casualisation - some would say the coarsification - of public discourse, "c..." continues to stalk the sidelines of polite conversation and of the collective consciousness, occasionally breaking in.

As Muscio says: "Whatever people do around the word c..., c... is okay. C... is gonna live."

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«« »»

*»I think, at least in Australian society the word is being reclaimed and the meaning changed. Personally I think that words only have meaning when given context, and in my opinion there can be no such thing as a "swear word" as I can come up with much more offensive sentences without involving "swear words". To give some perspective, my girlfriend will get a thousand times more upset if i call someone a bitch or an idiot than if i say the word "tnuc", I guess that means it's losing it's power, which is a very good thing.«*

»«

dan | sydney March 26, 2012, 11:03AM

«« »»

*»I never understood why the word was so shocking. It's just another word to me. I actually didn't think it any worse than the rest of the swear words. Maybe because there's a lot of swearing in my workplace, and I never caught on that it was 'the most taboo' in the first place. I don't swear much in normal conversation, because I have often found it more cutting if I can express my displeasure without swearing, but as a reflexive expletive when you're angry? Why is the 'c' word any worse than the 'f' word, or the 'd' word for that matter?«*

*»I think when most people are swearing, it's nothing to do with the meaning of the word and everything to do with how you can spit it out. I tend to think of them as industrial-strength punctuation marks.«*

»«

Ree | March 26, 2012, 11:05AM

«« »»

*»I hate to break this to you but its as common as any other swear word if your a tradie you will hear it every other day thats because its just another meaningless word if people get offended i say who gives a f\*\*\*«*

»«

c.b | March 26, 2012, 11:12AM

«« »»

*»Derek and Clive: "This bloke came up to me..."«*

*»I guess not all comics avoid the word. ;-)"«*

»«

Aqualung | Sitting on a park bench..... March 26, 2012, 11:25AM

«« »»

*»"I guess not all comics avoid the word. ;-)"«*

*»Neither does Russell Peters :)«*

*»<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tHdYxIHAdk&feature=fvwrel>«*

»«

C | March 26, 2012, 12:21PM

«« »»

*»Tony Newley?«*

*»Ricky Gervais also uses the word in his stand up shows continuously.«*

»«

Neil | March 26, 2012, 12:45PM

«« »»

*»When a so called comic uses the word he gets a laugh from the moronic as he was not a bit funny.*

*Should watch dean martin roasts for clever comedians,todays use of fuck and cunt are expletives ,but see nothing funny at all.«*

»«

Hooble | Melbourne March 26, 2012, 7:32PM

«« »»

*»Why is it any worse than 'cock'? Both have four letters, begin with a 'c', have a vowel sound in the middle have a sharp ending and in addition to being used to express disgust/dislike etc are applied to human genitalia. The only difference is that the unprintable one refers to female bits and the printable to the appendage of the male - are we suggesting that women are inherently more dirty or repulsive?«*

»«

Mick | March 26, 2012, 11:35AM

“ »«

»Well that's the entire point isn't it? The 'c' word has historically been used as an insult because of a deeply ingrained attitude that women's bodies are dirty and filthy. That's precisely why it's considered an insult. «

»Sadly this attitude still exists today. You only have to look at the average porno to see that we're still deeply mired in misogynist, retrograde attitudes that posit women a filthy, dirty 'sluts', 'whores' and 'c\*\*\*\*'. Thus the 'c' word remains deeply offensive to a lot of women. It's simply not the same as being called a 'cock' because there's no historical, social and political baggage associated with the word 'cock' that even comes close to the 'c' word.«

»«

Mel | March 26, 2012, 12:06PM

“ »«

»Well said Mel -«

»«

aussie\_girl62 | Brisbane March 26, 2012, 1:41PM

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