

BO SELTÉN †

Forbidden Adjectives: Their Meaning and Function

Bo Seltén in memoriam. Bo Seltén blev fil.dr. och docent i Lund 1972. Redan 1967 utsågs han till universitetslektor i engelska vid den nystartade universitetsfilialen, sedermera Högskolan i Växjö, där han sedan dess tjänstgjort. Under en termin vistades han i Warrensburg, Missouri som gästprofessor. 1994 utnämndes han till biträdande professor vid Högskolan.

Hans avhandling om medeltida personnamn följdes av flera arbeten inom detta område. Senare studier om engelskans påverkan på svenskan av i dag resulterade i *Svensk Ordbok* (1987), som i följd kom ut i en andra upplaga. I samband med sin forskning om pidginengelska besökte han Papua Nya Guinea för att bedriva fältstudier i Tok Pisin. Under de senaste åren bedrev han, delvis tillsammans med sina studenter på 60- och 80-poängsnivå, ett projekt om svordomar på engelska. Denna artikel, där han diskuterar vissa vanliga engelska svordomsadjektiv mot bakgrund av moderna litterära belägg, är en bearbetning av ett föredrag vid ämneskonferensen för universitets- och högskolelärare i engelska i Växjö våren 1994.

Projektet om 'expletives' var avsett att publiceras i bokform. Tyvärr fick upphovsmannen inte lägga sista handen vid detta. Bo Seltén avled hastigt den 14 september 1994, 63 år gammal.

Professor Bo Seltén died unexpectedly while this article was in preparation for printing.

In this article, I shall discuss the meaning and function of certain high-frequency expletive adjectives in English. My analysis will be based on examples drawn from fourteen books – mainly novels – written in British English and published during the period 1959-1991 (see appendix). The text sample has been selected with a view to finding appropriate instances of expletives, and should not be regarded as statistically representative of written English in general.¹

Swearwords began to become really frequent in British English fiction in the late 1950's. In such novels as *Billy Liar* (1959) by Waterhouse and *A Kind of Loving* (1960) by Barstow, there are many instances of the adjective *bloody* – 47 in the former book – though not a single example of *fuck-ing*, obviously felt to be more offensive.² These two adjectives, *bloody* and *fuck-ing*, are about equally common in my British English material. However, one of the books, *The Burn* (1991) by the Scottish writer James Kel-

¹ The term *expletive* is used in linguistics (CGEL) as well as in ordinary language ('You ... you utter ...' he struggled for a fitting expletive '... turd.' G 176). The original meaning of *expletive* is 'serving to fill out', but the term is now used in a wider sense and does not necessarily mean 'superfluous' or 'empty of meaning'.

² In his "afterword" to the 1982 reissue of *Ginger, You're Barmy*, David Lodge states

that he completed the novel in the summer of 1961 and that the acquittal of Penguin Books in the *Lady Chatterley* trial (autumn 1960) was too late to affect the way obscene language was represented in the book. The strong impact of literary conventions in those days is shown by the fact that he felt obliged to print *fuck* and *fuck-ing*, an expedient adopted, Lodge says, from *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer.

³ *Bloody*, which is so common in Britain and Australia, is unusual in American English. It is not even mentioned in *Forbidden American English* (1990) by Richard A. Spears.

man, accounts for about two thirds of the occurrences of *fuck-ing*. Thus *bloody* is generally the preferred expletive adjective, except in such lower working-class settings as that of *The Burn*, where *fuck-ing* is three times as common as *bloody*. Among all the expletives in the corpus, these are the two most frequent words, closely followed by *God* and *hell*, all with more than 300 instances.

The origin of *bloody* is obscure. One plausible interpretation connects it with the obsolete oaths *God's blood* and *sblood*. Derivation from *by our Lady*, a popular misconception, seems impossible for phonological and other reasons.³ *Fuck-ing* is a sexual expletive probably related to a Norwegian dialect word meaning 'copulate'. The suffix *-ing* is often printed *-in*, which reflects a common development in pronunciation. Ljung (1980:118-19) has suggested derivation from the rather unusual suffix *-en* as in *wooden*.

As appears from the matrix below, certain criteria are important in describing expletives. There is normally, or at least has been, historically, an element of taboo concerning these words. What is taboo to one person is obviously not so to another. Generally, the sexual words are felt to be more 'dangerous' than the religious ones, but there are swearers who see things differently (Hughes 1992). Excretion is the third taboo area.

The sense of a typical expletive is non-literal, *fuck-ing* for example not meaning 'copulating', and normally the signification is rather vague. Swearwords usually have an emotive charge and are uttered in anger, frustration, pain, disgust etc. They can also express positive feelings like admiration, affection and pity. In habitual swearing the emotive charge is often non-existent. Moreover, expletives can have the function of giving emphasis to a statement.

Swearers can demonstrate disregard for normal conventions and by doing so they can show group solidarity. Habitual swearing in particular very often has a social and psychological function as a deliberate protest and an assertion of in-group identity. In this respect swearing is similar to such forms of language as British Black English. The social solidarity feature appears very prominently in a book like *The Burn* with its working-class settings.

There are certain syntactic restrictions on the use of expletive adjectives. Some adjectives, like *fucking*, are never used predicatively. *Bloody* is rarely used in that position in the present material.

	taboo			non-literal meaning	emotive charge	non-specific meaning	attributive use only
	rel.	sex.	excr.				
bloody	?			+	+	+	*
crappy			+	+	+	+	-
fucking		+		+	+	+	+
pissed			+	+	+ -	-	-
shitty			+	+	+	+	-

* exceptional in predicative use

Eight principal uses as regards meaning and function have been noted in the corpus. In some cases it is possible to apply multiple analysis and in some, more than one function seems to have been combined. The instances below are mostly unambiguous.

The expletive adjective often has a certain amount of semantic content of a negative kind (**type 1**) and is either used attributively, modifying its head in a direct, straightforward way, or is used predicatively in some cases. It can be used in a sense and function very similar to that of negative adjectives like *awful*, *detestable*, *foul*, *horrid*, *objectionable* and *unpleasant* with varying degrees of emotive charge, only to be fully perceived when actually heard.

(1) *It was given to you to post you bloody, idle little bastard.* BL 13

The comma, which is exceptional after an expletive adjective followed by another adjective, shows that *bloody* is not an adverb and puts *bloody* on a par with *idle*. In a case like *old, battered furniture* (CGEL 13.68), it is possible to replace the asyndetic construction by syndetic coordination: *old and battered furniture* meaning 'furniture which is both old and battered'. To judge from the present material it does not seem possible to use a coordinator between an expletive adjective and a non-expletive one or between two expletive adjectives. Further, *bloody*, like most adjectival expletives, does not normally occur in predicative position. Thus it would neither seem possible to say **a bloody and idle bastard* nor **a bastard who is both bloody and idle*. However, there are in the present material a couple of instances of *bloody* used predicatively. One runs like this:

(2) *I thought Flint was foul enough, but this one is even bloodier.* WoH 99

In this example *bloody* appears to be a close synonym of *foul*.

Obviously, *bloody* and other adjectives with similar meanings and functions like *blasted*, *bleeding*, *blinking*, *blooming*, *confounded*, *cruddy*, *damn*, *damned*, *fucking*, *poxy*, *ruddy* and *sodding* can modify nouns denoting people, places, things and phenomena e. g.

(3) *It's blasted eggheads like him who've ruined the country.* WA 146

(4) *It's no use you damned politicians being sorry.* WoH 69

Of these words, *blasted*, *bleeding*, *blinking* and *blooming* can be regarded as euphemisms for *bloody*. That is also true of *cruddy* and *ruddy*. The first four words have arisen through alliteration and the last two are due to rhyme.⁴

When used with names of persons, these words can almost have the character of a nickname as in

(5) *Charles fucking Lamb, that's who he read [...]* B 76

(6) *[...] don't come yelling at me that Mrs Bloody Wilt is a murderess.* WA 205

When the expletive is not similar to a nickname, it is placed before the title:

(7) *You're not going to believe this [...] but that bloody Mrs Wilt is demanding that we use the helicopter [...]* WA 185

Note the use of capital *B* in (6). The position in (7) may represent a temporary judgement while that in (6) seems to indicate a more lasting one. *Jesus fuckin Christ* (DB 23) is only superficially similar to (5). The entire expression constitutes an expletive which is particularly offensive as it combines religious and sexual taboo elements. The occurrence of expletive adjectives in positions not normally possible for ordinary adjectives can be termed **intrusion**. We even find them after classifying adjectives forming an otherwise indivisible unit with the head noun they precede e. g. *civil bloody liberties* (WoH 120) and *your native fuggin' language* (GYB 137). The reason for using expletives and breaking normal word order rules at the same time may be the swearer's wish to do something not otherwise allowed, socially and linguistically, for the sake of some kind of shock effect. For the use of a pseudo-infix as in *surfuckingprise* (B 198), the term **insertion** has been chosen.

⁴ *Effing* does not occur in the corpus, but has been found in books from the same period. The first three letters represent the *f* of *fucking*, for which the word is a euphemism.

One group of adjectives constitutes a special subgroup of type 1. These adjectives, *crappy*, *piddling*, *pissing* and *shitty*, all belong to the taboo area *excretion*. Dictionaries usually interpret the first three words as 'inferior', 'lousy', 'trivial' and 'worthless' and *shitty* as 'nasty', 'unpleasant', 'lousy', 'rotten' and 'insignificant'. In the present material *crappy* occurs in the following senses: 'inferior' or 'lousy' (8), 'awful' or 'horrible' (9), 'nasty' (10) and 'mad' (11).

(8) *It is certain that none of those who love and cherish the Moritz [...] would be seen dead in one of these crappy new Crappees.* G 202 [*Crappee* is the name of a new car model and *crappy* is of course used here as a kind of pun.]

(9) *The first bit of my life, which was full of crappy things, took place at Dawkin Street in the Scovill Road area of Cambridge [...]* S 25 [The things referred to are various gross forms of child abuse.]

(10) *Greg was to be crappier to Miranda than he was currently in the habit of being, reduce her to tears, then flounce out [...]* S 13

(11) [...] *whenever she suggests doing something impossible or incoherent or generally crappy [...]* then one or other of us enunciates that word tonto. S 148

Pissing does not occur in LDEL and DAS. In FAE the meanings 'worthless' and 'minimal' are given, the first of which applies in (12).

(12) *'Why did you keep on with those pissing sensate sessions?' asked Jake after a moment.* JT 273

In the examples below *shitty* means 'inferior' or 'lousy' (13), 'awful' (14) and possibly 'bad', 'conscious of behaving badly' (15).

(13) *I've seen some shitty pieces in my time but by Christ your — really takes the cake.* DB 52 [*Shitty pieces* refers to inferior contributions sent to a magazine.]

(14) *I hate that shitty word, humorous. I keep hearing it on the radio.* MBB 32

(15) *I [...] felt fairly flash and shitty throughout the meal [...]* S 145

The adjective *shitty* also occurs in the sense 'single' combined with a derogatory meaning. See type 6 below. The noun-phrase head and vocative *shitty* is used as a taunt in (16) where there is also some intentional ambiguity owing to association with the phrase *shit oneself* with its literal meaning and the expletive noun *shit* with its figurative one.

(16) *He's only shit himself [...]* *Go on, shitty. Go on, go on home and change your panties. Go on, shitty. Go on, you little shit.* S 199

The expletive adjectives *crappy* and *shitty* can both occur in predicative position as shown by instances (10) and (15) above. In example (11), *crappy* is postposed in relation to the pronoun *something*. Such a combination is of course equivalent to *something that is crappy*, *crappy* being a reduced relative clause.

Most of the adjectives treated in the previous section (type 1) have a certain amount of semantic content and they modify their heads in a direct way. However, premodifying expletives do not always strictly speaking modify the head that they seem to modify (**type 2**). From a semantic point of view they belong to the whole sentence. Their function is similar to that of a sentential relative clause and an expletive adjective like *bloody* in example (19) below can be "rendered" by the words *which is awful*, added finally. There is also some similarity with the so-called transferred negation that occurs in a sentence like *I don't think he is ill*. The negative particle, contracted in this case, is placed in the matrix clause although the negation applies to the subordinate clause. The meaning is 'I think that he isn't ill'. The expletive adjective could be said to have been moved from an imaginary sentential relative clause to a premodifying position. Perhaps the term **transferred modification** would make sense.

(17) *The chief warden [...] had tried to telephone the Governor. 'The blasted man must be out to dinner somewhere,' he said [...]* WoH 72

The fact that the Governor cannot be reached on the phone causes exasperation, since a mass escape from the prison seems imminent. There is nothing in the context to suggest that the man is perceived as awful. The awful thing is the fact that he cannot be reached.

(18) *I take the bloody dog for a walk [...]* W 148

In this case it is not the dog that is disliked, only the obligation to take it for a walk.

(19) *Must have left the bloody sugar out.* WoH 114

The sugar itself is not awful, but the fact that it may have been left out seems to have had awful consequences for the taste of the brew.

(20) *Where's the bloody corkscrew?* JT 18

The fact that this important implement cannot be found is experienced as awful.

Expletives are indeed extremely flexible. The adjectives belonging to type 1 have negative meanings like 'awful' and 'inferior' and express such feelings as anger, irritation, frustration or scorn. One expletive adjective in the present material, *fucking*, can be used (**type 3**) more or less as a synonym of *poor* in examples (21), (22), (23) and perhaps (24) or as a synonym of *dear* in (25) and (26), thus expressing self-pity, compassion or affection.

In examples (21) and (22) pain, anger and self-pity are mingled. Presumably only experienced swearers could use *fucking* in the purely positive manner seen in the last three instances.

(21) 'Aw my fuckin head!' roared Andy, as he sprang from the bed and stumbled out of the room. DB 23

(22) The zip ... got it ... aw, my fuckin snake! DB 85

(23) That was probably how she had been greeting, the woman, because of the fucking victims [...] B 12

(24) And that wee fucking lassie oh God man he just could never fucking handle it. B 243 [the speaker is talking about his little daughter, killed in an accident]

(25) Poor mum, poor fucking mum. B 220

(26) Poor old mum for christ sake poor old mum poor old fucking mum. B 204

Certain *-ed* participles constitute a separate group (**type 4**). The rather precise meanings of *fucked up*, *pissed* and *pissed off* make these expletives fairly marginal. The meaning of *fucked up* is 'ruined mentally or physically; 'insane', 'confused' and with inanimate nouns 'ruined', 'messed up'. *Pissed* means 'drunk' and can be used without any emotive charge. *Pissed off* signifies 'annoyed' or 'bored', 'fed up'. They all occur in predicative position.

(27) Nothing observable about Ursula [...] is in the slightest bit fucked up: looks, ability, background, advantages – all this is, on the contrary, notably unfucked up. S 147

(28) [...] everyone is always getting fucked up or going tonto. S 203

(29) Bob reckoned that he was a considerably better driver when pissed than most of the wankers on the road when sober. G 211

(30) I think she was a bit pissed off with him, actually. NW 261

The following four categories (types 5–8) have an emphasizing function in common. The function of the modifying adjective in **type 5** is very similar to that of an emphaser subjunct like *indeed*. By using the expletive in this way the swearer gives extra emphasis to the whole utterance and demonstrates at the same time his or her disregard for established rules of social behaviour. This type of swearing is particularly common in a book like *The Burn* with its lower working-class settings. The emotive force is less obvious in this category than in cases where the expletive is more or less synonymous with *awful*. Very often we are concerned with habitual swearing. There is frequently an element of irritation and frustration in the utterances.

(31) You're too young anyway so ye are: you wont understand. – I'm a bloody married man missis. B 176

(32) What was that bloody insect doing? Maybe [...] trying to find a way of escaping out through the damn wall. B 26

(33) 'Penny for the guy, mate.' 'Call that a guy?' he stopped to say. 'Of course it's a fucking guy.' MBB 44

(34) [...] he wanted to get away home for his fucking tea. B 12

(35 a) It doesn't matter about fucking sorry man you shouldn't have left the job. B 80

(35 b) It doesn't fucking matter about sorry, it's too late. B 81

(36) She's squatting there like a ruddy performing elephant ... WA 207

Examples (35a) and (35b) show great similarity as regards the function of the expletive adjective in the former and the corresponding expletive adverb in the latter. Polite rephrasing of (35 a) and (35 b) would yield something like this: *It is indeed not enough to say 'sorry' [...]*

The following category (**type 6**) is similar to type 5 since the expletives have an emphasizing function here as well. They are used together with words which have a quantitative meaning or the particle *not + a thing, a word* etc. and serve to reinforce these expressions. Sometimes the expletives are almost synonymous with *single* or *whatsoever* (cf. CGEL 6.47 and 6.62 Note c). Words co-occurring with expletive adjectives in the present material are for example: *all, any, enough, entire, every, half, many, no, whole* as well as numerals including general ordinals like *last* and *next*. The expletive has itself acquired a quantitative meaning in the last three examples, signifying 'many' in (44) and (45) and 'whole' in (46). There is normally an emotive element in the use described here. Example (42) differs from the rest as it seems to combine the sense 'single' with a derogatory meaning which is perhaps predominant.

(37) Every bloody piece of information that comes in seems to increase the number of variables. SEM 197

(38) They haven't found out a damn thing about him. SEM 170

(39) I was about five fucking years of age. B 95

(40) [...] you just had no fucking chance. B 242

(41) I'm talking about a first-year student, seventeen poxy fucking years of age [...] B 233

(42) [...] we will have every shitty little protest group in the country on to us. G 176

(43) [...] *this time I'm going to pull in the whole ruddy network.* WoH 142

(44) *Bloody miles away, you was.* SD 107

(45) *For Christ sake bloody years ago it was, bloody years ago.* B 243

(46) [...] *you've no seen her for how long? a week? a fortnight? a bloody month?* B 149

The participial forms *blowed*, *buggered*, *damned*, *dashed* and *fucked* followed by *if* are used in the present material to give extra emphasis to a denial as a sort of implied negation (**type 7**). The meaning is something like 'certainly not'. They can be preceded by *I'm*, *he was* etc. *Blowed* and *dashed* can be interpreted as euphemisms. To what extent the character of these *-ed* participles is adjectival or verbal is hard to ascertain but their function is that of emphatic negation.

(47) *Buggered if anyone's going to get me to have a vasectomy [...]* W 15

(48) [...] *then tell me how his bloody mind ticks. I'm damned if I know.* WA 52

(49) *He was fucked if he was going to feed Celia's pet.* DB 18

Expletive adjectives can have a special function when used together with degree nouns, especially pejorative ones used predicatively (**type 8**). Degree nouns are nouns that can be graded and the two words, the expletive adjective and the gradable noun, may seem to be similar in function to an intensifier like *very* followed by an adjective. Informants seem to favour that interpretation. If we accept it, *a bloody idiot* would be equivalent to *very idiotic* in the following sentence provided we disregard the emotive charge:

(50) *If you couldn't handle your booze then you were a bloody idiot to drink and drive [...]* G 210

However, as Ljung points out (1980:120), the expletive does not have heavy stress. He compares *an incredible idiot* with *a fucken idiot* to illustrate the difference in stress. Bolinger and Ljung (Ljung 1980:121, following Bolinger 1972:89) have suggested that adjectives like *bloody* and *damned* preceding degree nouns are true expletives i. e. words that add no new information to the utterance. It may be pointed out that intensifying adjectives do not always carry heavy stress. The non-inherent adjective *big* in *a big fool* (CGEL 7.34 Note) is normally unstressed and yet it has an intensifying function. Still, Bolinger and Ljung are probably right in saying that the function of *bloody*, *damn* and other expletive adjectives is not intensifying. It does not seem possible to say **This fellow is a bloodier idiot than his brother* although one could say *He is a bigger fool than his brother*. In my opinion, adjectives of type 8 are neither intensifying nor entirely empty in the sense that *a bloody idiot* is exactly the same as *an idiot*. *He is a bloody*

idiot is more or less equivalent to *he is indeed an idiot*. *Bloody* has an emphasizing function and some emotive charge. Other combinations in the present material are: *bleeding maniac*, *blithering idiot*, *damned fool*, *fuckin bastard* and *ruddy fool*. They are not only used in predicative position but also in apostrophizing e.g.

(51) *LEAVE HER ALONE YOU FÜCKIN BUM!* DB 101

(52) *This is a party conference you ruddy arse.* G 175

(53) *Harmless waffle! You ruddy fool.* G 175

Ljung points out (1980:124) that the degree noun following the expletive adjective need not be pejorative and the combination can express approval and respect. He gives the examples *He must be a goddamn genius* and *She's a fucken angel [...]*. In the present material there are only a few combinations where the noun is not pejorative.

(54) [...] *the Vicar made Polonius sound like a bloody genius [...]* WoH 181

(55) *Has it ever occurred to you that you've got genuine non video actual nasties [...] in those four daughters? Oh no, not them. They're special, they're unique, they're flipping geniuses.* WoH 137-138

(56) [...] *you want to try bending your knees and leaning forward at the same time [...]* *It's bloody agony.* WoH 143

In examples (54) and (55) the speaker is being scornful and *genius* does not exactly express admiration. The noun *agony* in (56) is neither pejorative nor appreciative but clearly gradable.

The remaining two cases are rather special. The adjectives *bloody* and *damn(ed)* occur in the intensifying noun phrases *a bloody sight* and *a damn(ed) sight* (CGEL 7.89) which are used in the same way as the adverb *much* followed by either a comparative like *easier* or a periphrasis like *more difficult* or a quantifier like *more*.

(57) [...] *she was going to a film about gypsies with Alcestis [...] if not a spiffing scheme in itself then a bloody sight better one than bringing Alcestis here.* JT 239

(58) *She'd have shown a damned sight more sense if she'd walked out on him [...]* W 105

In (57) the indefinite article seems to have a dual function belonging to the intensifier *a bloody sight* as well as to the phrase *a better one*.

Hell is not an adjective of course but the combination *hell of a* is probably acquiring the status of an adjective to judge from the nonstandard spelling *helluva* (cf. CGEL 17.47). Cases like *a hell of a crisis*, *one hell of a fellow* and *a hell of a sight worse* occur in the corpus.

I have identified eight principal uses as regards the meaning and function of expletive adjectives found in my text corpus. A certain degree of overlapping between the categories is inevitable. Hopefully, they are sufficiently clear-cut to form the basis for further discussion:

1. Adjective modifier or complement with clearly negative meaning: *that bloody Mrs Wilt*
2. Transferred modification: *where's the bloody corkscrew?*
3. Adjective expressing compassion, self-pity etc.: *poor fucking mum*
4. -ed forms with precise meanings: *pissed 'drunk'*
5. General emphasizer adjective in habitual swearing: *he wanted his fucking tea*
6. Emphasizer adjective with quantitative words like *entire, no* etc.: *no fucking chance*
7. -ed forms followed by *if*: *damned if I know*
8. Adjective used with degree nouns: *a bloody idiot*

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Assessment of Achievement in Foreign Languages in the Swedish Secondary School

What do pupils learn in the Swedish compulsory school? What skills and knowledge have they acquired by the time they leave school after nine years of study? What patterns of interrelationship between school variables and educational outcomes can be identified? These are some of the questions that are being investigated in a large-scale national assessment programme (*Nationell utvärdering av grundskolan, NU- och UG-projekten*) which was instigated in 1988 and which is now into its third round of measurements. The programme comprises more or less the entire range of subjects on the school curriculum. The assessments in foreign languages are made by the Department of Education, Göteborg University.

The latest study was launched in 1992 under the aegis of The National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*). A large representative sample of 10,000 pupils in grade 9 was investigated with respect to achievement in English (and many other subjects). The results of the English part of the investigation are reported in Oscarson, M. (1993), *Engelska i årskurs 9. Resultat från den nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan* (with a summary in English), Department of Education, Göteborg University.

The next field phase is due to take place in the spring of 1995, when English, German and French, will be studied. The latter languages are included for the first time and the results of the evaluation will hopefully answer some very salient questions. Do the levels of proficiency reached correspond to the goals set out in the curriculum? Do pupils learn more, or less, than expected? How do skills in French and German compare to those in English? The design of the study is such that it allows certain direct comparisons to be made. Tests of reading, listening, writing, and speaking will be administered in all three languages.

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