

## It's Not What is Said but what Isn't Said

As English speaking people, we enjoy the largest and most diverse vocabulary in the world. It is so massive that we take it for granted. The English Dictionary is relatively young compared the language as a whole: Noah Webster published the first unabridged dictionary for American English in 1828 A.D., not quite 200 years ago. Old English, in contrast, was believed to have been spoken since 450 A.D., more than a millennia and a half ago. But what makes English so unique to other world languages is its history.

The original language of the English Isles was primarily Celtic in origin, but a massive immigration of Germanic invaders in the 4th Century A.D. paved the way for the two to blend into what is now known as Old English. In the 11th Century, the Normans invaded. These invaders, unlike the Anglo and Saxons, did not colonize the islands and had little impact on English for the entire duration of Norman rule. But the trading that took place in the centuries that followed between the islands and the continent brought many foreign goods to England, and with the goods came words with French, Spanish, and Italian origins.

While all languages are to some degree influenced by foreign words (primarily through trade, not conquest), what makes English stand out is how well its users embraced the foreign words, especially in the United States. The French are perhaps the most well known for updating their vocabulary with "French" equivalents of foreign words, but they are not alone. In the German language, which originally did not have the letter "C," uses that letter in lieu of "K" to help identify words of foreign origin. But English is different.

For example, the African word "Bantu mbanza" represents a stringed instrument. It was shortened to "banjo" in the 18th Century United States, whereas most other languages call this same instrument the equivalent of "little guitar." In fact, we are so interested in foreign words, we even accept foreignized adaptations of our own words. When customs officials asked Spanish speaking people for their "green card" as they entered the United States, the immigrants came to associate the officials as "gringos." Today, this word is used in English as a derogatory term for "white person." But we don't need to do a word study to prove this point. Let's see where this really matters.

Almost every English speaking college student has at least one English dictionary on their desk. Those who make a living writing (such as authors and editors) may have a small collection of dictionaries (although the internet is changing this dynamic). In foreign lands this is not the case. Many students will dispense with a dictionary altogether while those who write for a living rarely have more than one. And while the Thesaurus is indispensable for those who are serious about writing in English speaking lands, they are so rare in foreign lands that most people there don't even know what one is! There is simply no need. If one only has one way to express an idea, then there is no reason to search for alternative ways of saying it. So with such a rich vocabulary to draw from, it seems inevitable that the 8th Commandment (for Catholics, most Protestants place it as the 9th) is perhaps the easiest one to break (although there is a good argument to suggest the 2nd (3rd for Protestants) is, but please bear with me for this paper).

Because we can say the same thing in so many different ways with the English language, we often do. Sometimes, this is a good thing. It is better to say, "I think you could have thought this out better" than to say, "How can you be so stupid?" Of course, the very fact that one way is preferable to the other automatically makes it this a moral issue. Many people do choose the later over the former.

But we are not yet at deceit, only rudeness.

Yet it is the rudeness that our society focuses on, not deceit. I recently saw a video where a famous attorney, Charles R Lawrence III, wanted some words to not be protected by the 1st Amendment. This is a big deal, as it is not only a violation of our Constitution as it is written, but, by being the first of the Amendments, it was foremost of all freedoms the founding fathers wanted the new nation to have. And such an effort is ultimately futile. Controlling words does not stop rudeness, stopping rudeness controls words. There is a joke of boys harassing an Amish man because of the strict religious prohibition the Amish (and Mennonites) have against profanity as well as their non-violent lifestyle. The punch line is the man, after he had enough, finally turns around and says to the obnoxious boys, "when ye get home, may ye mother come out from under the porch and bite ye in the leg!" Banning certain words may lead to a more elegant (or at least creative) way of cursing, but it won't stop cursing.

The deceit I talk about invariably involves either choosing certain words to encourage one behavior or omitting words that would have encouraged another behavior. Quite frequently, both behaviors are used in tandem. Imagine a new guy at work who asks an old hand, "I finished this, what should I do next?" The old hand replies, "you *could* take a break." The new guy takes a break, is quickly discovered by management and written up for not going to the follow up station. When the new guy questions the old hand about this, the old guy says "I didn't say you *should* take a break, I only pointed it out as an option." From what I know about human nature, I'm willing to bet the old hand will even start to gossip about the "disrespectful" new guy is when the new guy stops listening to him!

But this is rather open and blatant. Most of the time, this very thing takes place with subtlety and frequently plays on emotion. Advertising companies are masters of this art, and they are doubly effective because most people think the "truth in advertising" laws protect them. How often have you, the gentle reader, ever attempted to use a Promotion Code for a company? Most of the time, the promotion clearly identifies that either certain restrictions apply or that it is for select items. Most of the time, one still gets what one expects. But I'm sure everyone who does this with any degree of regularity has had at least one experience where the only items that benefit from the promotion was junk no one wanted, even at discounted prices. But rather than shun this kind of behavior by society, it has been allowed to grow. Is it any wonder that the current generation of young adults is so disillusioned when it comes to any topic that is important?

We may not be able to stop others from being so deceitful, but we can call them out when they are. We can stop supporting such businesses instead of grumbling while buying the products anyway. We can stop addressing people who act anything but Christian as "fellow Christians." For what I hope is obvious given the forum I am presenting this, I am particularly concerned about this last one. To be a Christian is, by definition, to follow the Christ. While no one can do this perfectly, there should be some honest effort to do so, especially on the things we do that are the most un-Christ like. The Truth Christianity teaches is massive and can be adapted in many ways to address each unique situation. But for there to be a Truth, there must likewise be un-Truth. We can, and actually are Biblically directed to, be flexible in using the Truth in our lives. But this flexibility does not give us the right to give up the Truth for the un-Truth. Our younger generation desperately needs to be taught that.

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