

The Impact of Taboo on Vocabulary

"Did he just say Cnut?"

Anyone on this side of the channel who knows their stuff when it comes to the line of Britain's monarchs will know who King Cnut was; the only Viking ever to be crowned King of England. However, if, like me, you went to school in England, the name Cnut may be a little strange and the cause of much embarrassed giggling. After all, in England we know his name was King Canute... wasn't it?

In actual fact, the name was Knut, but the English preferring the letter 'c', the name was written Cnut. So why, oh why, was the spelling changed to Canute?

The answer is: taboo!

It was Captain Cook who introduced the word 'taboo' into English from his explorations through Polynesia, Melanesia and New Zealand. Back then the word was used to denote items, words or actions that were considered the sole region of the gods and were therefore forbidden to the masses. The meaning of this word later extended to politics and Kingly matters, and eventually also to certain words that were considered impolite in civilised society.

It was during the Victorian era that this concept of rude and impolite language really gained momentum and it was probably at this time that Cnut, which could easily be mistaken for one of the forbidden four-letter words, was changed to Canute to make it less offensive to 'persons of quality'.

Like Cnut, many other words were either adapted or changed completely to make them more acceptable. In American English, for example, one no longer owned *asses* but had *donkeys* and a *rooster* woke us up in the morning, not a *cock*. One no longer referred to the *toilet* or the *bathroom* but rather excused oneself to visit the *WC* or the *powder room*.

Not only these but, in some cases, entire lexical groupings were shunned. Any word that could be interpreted to have even the slightest sexual connotation was effectively banned from the language. You not only avoided talking about the anatomy of a human being but you couldn't even refer to a chicken's breasts, legs or thighs without raising eyebrows at Sunday lunch. I imagine the Victorians were probably not great fans of Chaucer.

Linguistically, the impact of all these changes was a thorough cleansing of many words from 'polite' English that had been in the language since the days of Old English.

Luckily, the average working class man in the street had taken very little notice of these changes and words once considered taboo have regained popularity and usage in today's Standard English, but the notion of taboo words has not disappeared completely. One specific four letter word was not published in the O.E.D. until 1965 and was included in the 1972 supplement with the following note, 'For centuries, and still by the great majority, regarded as a taboo-word; until recent times not often recorded in print but frequent in coarse speech'.

Its publication caused quite a furore amongst the more sensitive members of the English-speaking world back then and is still regarded as a vulgar word but today it has also gained acceptance in popculture as censorship becomes more and more relaxed.

At the end of the day, the impact of taboo has been more beneficial than damaging. Most words once considered taboo are no longer thought of as such and we are still left with a wealth of euphemisms as a consequence.

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