



**Ascent of
the A-Word:
Assholism,
the First
Sixty Years**

By Geoffrey
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Curse word's evolution chronicled

BY MICHAEL ERARD

In 2000, a live microphone caught one of the candidates for president, the one who was already famous for bad word choices, referring to a campaign journalist with a vulgar word. The letters can be rearranged to spell “has sloe.”

This word was probably first used by American GIs in World War II, and Norman Mailer received verisimilitude points from some critics for using it in “The Naked and the Dead” to describe the obtusely offensive Lieutenant Dove.

In the student movement of the 1960s, the word became a popular term of derision, and around 1970, it entered the everyday American lexicon, becoming an institution of public talk — the *New Yorker*, for example, has printed it 150 times in the last 15 years, and scholar of slang Paul Dickson wondered if there might be a law “that requires all movies made after 1965 to have the word ‘asshole’ in the dialogue.”

Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg’s book, “Ascent of the A-Word: Assholism, the First Sixty Years,” tells the public history of a word often restricted from print. Its history amounts to much more than a dictionary entry. Nunberg has bored out a core sample of American public life, and chattily parses it with insight and wit, as he does in his linguistic commentaries on public radio’s “Fresh Air.” It’s not much of a gamble that there are a lot of interesting things to say about the word and how we use it.

The person to whom this word typically is applied is deliberately offensive but doesn’t know (or care) that he or she is. We all know the type, who displays bad behavior that most of us try to avoid. In England, such a person would be called a “tosser” or a “git.” In French it’s *connard*, in Dutch *klootzak*, in German *Arschloch* and in Italian *stronzo*. But the version in American English has

the distinction of being a vulgarity though it doesn’t need to be so, because there’s no semantic association between that part of the human body and a person of that moral character. In fact, in this case, it’s the word that imparts its vulgarity to the person it names (“small, foul, noisome and low,” as Nunberg puts it), not the other way around. Yet using the word has long been a private remark, not a public one, because of that sloppy vulgarity, which ricochets onto the person who says it.

Nunberg elaborates the meaning of the word, not just in its dictionary sense, but in all the ways its used, and the importance of what it doesn’t mean. Along the way, he has some important reminders about swearing in all its forms. For instance, that it often has misplaced class overtones. “We still speak of someone swearing like a truck driver or longshoreman,” Nunberg writes, “even though the words have been thoroughly integrated in middle-class English for several generations.”

It’s also a word like “cool” — the behaviors the word refers to were around long before the word. Once people have a single word for it, the concept becomes more accessible, more coherent, and then grows into part of the way people see the world.

As Nunberg points out, this particular word is implicated in the rise of the phenomenon it describes. H.L. Mencken wrote about plenty of unaware people behaving badly and obtusely, but he didn’t call them assholes, and neither would he have if he had the word, which is speakable only in a more relaxed age. That there’s now a book about it, no matter how dispassionate, is a symptom of those same times.

One of the pleasures of the book is that with a few exceptions, such as the title, it’s refreshingly uneuphemistic. Much of this analysis you could never hear on the radio. Nunberg demurely confesses to shying from swearing in the classes he teaches because (and this is a great line) “vulgar words like these tend to bleed through quotation marks; they jerk and quiver even on the dissection table.” It’s also admirably up-to-date, filled with recent examples and incidents. It’s as if he started typing as soon as the GOP

primaries wrapped up.

In America, we don’t have royalty. We do however, have a deep bench of public figures whose job it is to play a character who is deliberately offensive and seems not to know (or care) that he or she is. The airwaves are full of people who do things like “accuse someone else of incivility knowing full well that no neutral observer would interpret his behavior that way.” In other words, an asshole.

Perhaps the most acute pleasure of “Ascent of the A-Word” is having people labeled as they really are. Nunberg cites numerous examples of the contemporary a-hole: Ann Coulter, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Simon Cowell, the Mark Zuckerberg of “The Social Network,” Donald Trump, Herman Cain, Tiger Woods and Steve Jobs, along with Rush Limbaugh and Stephen Colbert, whose “genius ... lies in their remarkable ability to convey the pure joy they take in being assholes without suggesting they suffer even the slightest pangs of conscience.” This list goes on and on.

Nunberg gets the balance between dispassionate observer and public critic mostly right, though there are moments of forced balance, in which every mention of Limbaugh’s behavior is obliged to be paired with one of Michael Moore. Reading along, I began to fear that he was going to play what’s been called “high broderism” (a sort of “pox on both their houses” critique) all the way to the end.

Never fear: Nunberg compliments the right for its professional achievements in incivility, and warns that “political assholism” is a good tactic for building media audiences but may be less successful as an electoral strategy. I hope that media commentators of all stripes will go to town evaluating that last point, but I wonder if they’ll have the courage to take on the whole book, which holds up a mirror to the business of politics: small, foul, noisome, and low.

Michael Erard is the author of “Babel No More: The Search for the World’s Most Extraordinary Language Learners.”