

While many are concerned with both violence and obscenity in the media, PETER BENTLEY argues that not much attention is given to the connection between the two.

I'm going to kill you, mother-fucker.

It's a line we have all heard at some time. It may have been in real life, but the words were more likely to have been shouted in an action-packed film drama.

Often 'obscene' language is connected to violent actions. It reinforces physical violence. The vehemence of language can perhaps illustrate the psychological dimension of violence. Words can be used to cut, slash and drill, just like the infamous chainsaw.

Society in general, through its representatives and lawful agents, determines what is obscene language and what is not. Many Christians would argue that there are moral aspects to language which do not evolve like society itself. An obscene word may be thought to be intrinsically obscene, rather than merely offensive to prevailing concepts of morality. The obscenity is found in the word itself.

Organisations and bodies which determine the acceptable level of obscenity for society usually follow a line of argument which emphasises that language and meaning evolve and reflect a changing society. What is regarded as obscene today may not be obscene in a hundred years. In this line of argument, the context is an important factor in determining the level of obscenity in a word.

Actually, context does seem to be a determining factor in public perception. In 1989, two advertisements used the word 'bloody'. One was for a computer, the other for the anti-drink driving campaign. The advertisement for the computer received ten times the number

of complaints at the (then) Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT). In fact, in the same year, the cause of the most number of individual complaints (and something which was regarded by many people as 'obscene') was the infamous MEDS commercial!

Generally the Australian media are quite conservative in their use of what is commonly regarded as offensive language. The print media receive little feedback about offensive language. Of course, the context is important here. The use of a certain four-letter word in the *Sydney Morning Herald* would raise quite a few hackles, while its use in a magazine like *Penthouse* would be expected and even welcomed.

Still, many Christians, particularly conservative ones, believe that the 'rot has set in'.

The Violent Verb

Some words now appear with regularity and, it appears, little complaint. Television, a traditionally conservative area in language terms, has been opened up by comedy. Shows like the *Big Gig*, *Blah Blah Blah* and *Fast Forward* introduced words which were regarded as taboo. Andrew Denton even led a discussion about the use of the main four-letter word, holding that, if the purpose was academic or even semi-intellectual, then any word could be

justifiably proclaimed. Perhaps the public who watch these shows do not perceive any problem. After all, they may use these so-called 'offensive' words regularly themselves.

A big issue has been the retention of certain words in films broadcast on commercial media. Recently a commercial television station allowed the use of the main four-letter word in a film (the first was in *Risky Business* and then in April in



Basic Instinct — a film destined for the new rating time of a 9pm start). The television station's guidelines dictate that the use of certain words should be non-gratuitous, which means not just for the sake of swearing. The language needs to be related to the dialogue context, for example, as the actual colloquial description of the sex act.

Public and commercial radio also show a decreasing discipline over language. Radio Station JJJ has broadcast songs which commercial stations would not have been game to, but their claim is that they reflect the culture of the audience and promote 'public interest'. Other public radio stations are receiving more complaints about the alleged use of obscene words. Commercial stations with 'personalities' are the main offenders.

Films and videos still provide the locus for most obscene and offensive language. In particular, films which have restricted audiences are allowed certain levels of language. For example, in the 1989 Australian Institute of Criminology study *Sex, Violence and 'Family' Entertainment: an analysis of popular videos*, three levels of language were examined.

Level One, the most offensive, contained words like 'fuck'. No PG-rated films recorded any Level One words, while X-rated films recorded an average of 15.8 'fucks' per film (though some people may point out that this is what X-rated films are all about!).

Level Two words included 'shit/crap' and 'bastard', and Level Three words included 'damn', 'bloody', 'bitch' and various blasphemies. Though all rating categories may have been affected by perhaps a one-off 'concentrated' language film, some conclusions can be drawn. R-rated films contain a

number of words from all levels. Given that R-films are usually the most violent, it is probable that the use of these words is connected to the violence. There was also a significant statistical degree of Level Three words used in X-rated films — an average of 3.1 words compared to R-rated films at 10.3.

Still, the real difficulty lies in trying to establish a link between verbal and physical aggression. There has been little research on this aspect. Most people are now concerned with the overtly physical or with the overtly obscene. While verbal aggression can be a classical form, it is unlikely that the mass culture of today would appreciate it. Very few people are able to use wit, charm and intelligence to abuse someone verbally. Usually our paucity of verbal knowledge forces us to fall back on the 'old faithfuls'. Indeed, some people, and characters in some films, seem unable to say anything without adding an expletive to each 'ordinary' word.

Because today there is more interest in the amount of physical violence on the screen, there has been a move to examine the amount of violent language. Some of this has been fostered by examinations of community violence and the search for a reasonable definition of violence itself.

One important study of American television between 1975 and 1978 found that verbal aggression was the largest category of anti-social behaviour (P.S. Greenburg & others, 1980). In a study of the South African Broadcasting Commission between 1976 and 1981, researchers found that the most

significant increase in televised violence occurred in the area of verbal aggression (Conradie, D.P. and Malan, J.C., 1983).

In Australia, one television station (Network 10) actually provided a note about language in its guidelines on *Violence in Television Programming*. The guidelines note that "there are viewers who feel violence can extend towards language ... although perhaps subjective. Threatening words have the potential to produce a reaction of fear and concern and therefore should be considered in this context quite separately from elements of offensiveness — such as expressions with religious associations which might, in themselves, require a decision as to how they air on Network Ten, or if, indeed, this is justified."

Threatening words have the potential to produce fear.

The BBC has long noted the importance of guidelines for violence on television, mainly in relation to children's programs. Adults-only programs are not screened before 9pm. The Evening News is so adult and violent that it is screened after the 9pm 'watershed' (hence, *The 9 O'Clock News*). BBC Production Staff Guidelines for 1987 state that "Care should be taken with such situations, particularly violence, physical and verbal, in the home". The sensitivities of children form the basis of many arguments for those opposed to the use of obscene language in public spheres.

The whole debate about language in the public arena is ripe and ready to become a greater issue of concern. Given the prominence of physical violence in the media as well, it is likely that there will be greater interest in any relationship between violence and obscene language in the media and in the community. ■

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