

Grin and swear it

DAVID CRYSTAL

This year sees the 50th anniversary of the publication of Robert Graves' lovely little study, *The Future of Swearing*. 'Of recent years in England,' he begins, 'there has been a noticeable decline of swearing and foul language, and this, except at centres of industrial depression, shows every sign of continuing indefinitely until a new shock to our national nervous system – envisageable as war, pestilence, revolution, fire from Heaven, or whatever you please – may (or may not) revive the habit of swearing, simultaneously with that of praying.' Well, there's been plenty of all that since 1936, and the decline would seem to have been reversed, if Shirley

Peckham's report is anything to go by.

But why do people swear? 'There is no doubt,' says Graves, 'that swearing has a definite physiological function; for after childhood, relief in tears and wailing is rightly discouraged, and groans are considered a signal of extreme weakness. Silence under suffering is sometimes impossible. The nervous system demands an expression that does not confess a submissive acquiescence; and, as a nervous stimulant in a crisis, swearing is unequalled.'

It's a good point. Swearing, whether mild or strong, makes an excellent relief mechanism. It actually helps to turn on the inanimate object that has hurt you and berate it verbally, as John Cleese regularly did on television, in the character of Basil Fawlty. Or, if you would prefer a more literary allusion, swearing is a way to 'unclog the heart' (Volumnia, in *Coriolanus* IV:ii). And these days it is even possible to show something similar to unclogging actually taking place. In one experimental study in social psychology, soldiers were interviewed about army life. Those who accompanied their account with swearing were much less prone to

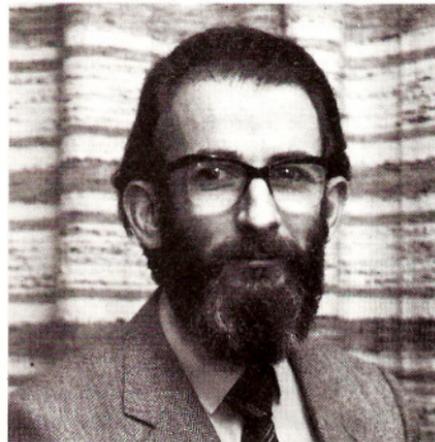
raised blood pressure!

When the object of antagonism is human, there's an even more obvious purpose in swearing. It releases nervous tension that otherwise would come out as violence. And which would you prefer? Two people roundly cursing each other in the street, or thumping each other? (I know we'd all rather have neither, but given that people are human, I say again, which would you prefer?) In some countries, there are even swearing contests, and insult battles, which make the same point.

A second function of swearing is to get a particular job done. A good example comes from Captain Marryat's *Peter Simple*. Simple asks Mr Chucks, the boatswain, why he swears so much at his men, to which he replies: 'There is one language for the pulpit, and another for on board ship, and, in either situation, a man must make use of those terms most likely to produce the necessary effect upon his listeners . . . Certain it is, that common parlancy won't do with a common seaman. It is not here as in the Scriptures, "Do this and he doeth it"; but it is this, "Do this, d-n your eyes", and then it is done directly. The order to *do* just carries the weight of a cannon-shot, but it wants the perPELLing power; the d-n is the gunpowder which sets it flying in the execution of its duty. Do you comprehend me, Mr Simple?'

But neither the physiological nor the occupational functions of swearing quite handle the cases Shirley Peckham reports on, of people using language in which every other word – or so it appears – is a swear-word. Here we have to consider a third function of swearing – its social function. In other words, swearing shows you belong. When you join a social group, you pick up the language of that group. If you don't, you remain an outsider. And if the group uses swearing as a marker of identity, then you must swear too – and the more swear-words you use, the stronger your affirmation of solidarity with the group.

The swear-words no longer mean anything, literally, of course. They are



not even there to shock (though that may have been their origins). They have become a mannerism. And they are especially used when the identity of the group is being threatened, or when the group feels it necessary to affirm its identity before an audience – linguistic showing off, if you like. It's very noticeable in teenage groups, therefore, but it's by no means restricted to them. In a famous psychological study in the 1950s, Helen Ross analysed the behaviour of a group of zoologists on an expedition to Arctic Norway. She found that when the group were relaxed there was a marked increase in the amount of swearing; and those who swore used more swear words when in the presence of other swearers than when talking to non-swearers. She reaches the same conclusion: swearing is contagious, and mutually reinforcing. It shows that people are 'one of the gang'.

Of course, it's always possible to express the different functions of swearing in other ways, and many people (and cultures) don't swear at all (at least, not in public), and strongly disapprove of it in others. But there's little anyone can do to halt the spread of such a deep-rooted habit, which can be traced back to the earliest recorded times. Indeed, it has been suggested that the origins of human language lie in swearing. Now, there's a thought.