

**SWEAR!NG
IS G*OD
F*R YOU**

**THE AMAZ!NG
SC!ENCE OF
BAD LANGUAGE**

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Introduction: **What the Fuck is Swearing?**

Swearing draws upon such powerful and incongruous resonators as religion, sex, madness, excretion, and nationality, encompassing an extraordinary variety of attitudes including the violent, the amusing, the shocking, the absurd, the casual and the impossible.

Geoffrey Hughes¹

When I was about nine years old, I was smacked for calling my little brother a ‘twat’. I had no idea what a twat was – I thought it was just a silly way of saying ‘twit’ – but that smack taught me that some words are more powerful than others and that I had to be careful how I used them.

But, as you’ve no doubt gathered, that experience didn’t exactly cure me of swearing. In fact, it probably went some way towards piquing my fascination with profanity. Since then I’ve had a certain pride in my knack for colourful and well-timed swearing: being a woman in a male-dominated field, I rely on it to camouflage myself as one of the guys.

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Calling some equipment a fucking piece of shit is often a necessary rite of passage when I join a new team.

So when I discovered that other scientists have been taking swearing seriously for a long time – and that I’m not the only person who finds judicious profanity useful – I was fucking delighted! I first began to realise there was more to swearing than a bit of banter or blasphemy when I happened to read a study that involved sixty-seven brave volunteers, a bucket of ice water, a swear word and a stopwatch. I was working in a neuroscience lab at the time, and that study changed the course of my research. It set me on a quest to study swearing: why we do it, how we do it and what it tells us about ourselves.

But what is swearing and why is it special? Is it the way that it sounds? Or the way that it feels when we say it? Does every language have swearing? Why do we try to teach our children not to swear but always end up having to tell them not to swear? Thanks to a whole range of scientists from Victorian surgeons to modern neuroscientists, we know a lot more about swearing than we used to. But, because swearing is still seen as shocking (there was much agonising about the wisdom or otherwise of using a swear word in the title of this book), that information hasn’t made it into the mainstream. It’s a fucking shame that the fascinating facts about swearing are still largely locked up in journals and textbooks.

For example, I’m definitely not the only person who uses swearing as a way of fitting in at work. On the contrary, research shows that swearing can help build teams in the workplace. From the factory floor to the operating theatre, scientists have shown that teams who share a vulgar lexicon

tend to work more effectively together, feel closer and be more productive than those who don't. These same studies show that managing stress in the same way that we manage pain – with a fucking good swear – is more effective than any number of team building exercises.

Swearing has also helped to develop the field of neuroscience. By providing us with a useful emotional barometer, swearing has been used as a research tool for over 150 years. It has helped us to discover some fascinating things about the structure of the human brain, such as its division into left and right hemispheres, and the role of cerebral structures like the amygdala in the regulation of emotions.

Swearing has taught us a great deal about our minds, too. We know that people who learn a second language often find it less stressful to swear in their adopted tongue, which gives us an idea of the childhood developmental stages at which we learn emotions and taboos. Swearing also makes the heart beat faster and primes us to think aggressive thoughts while, paradoxically, making us less likely to be physically violent.

And swearing is a surprisingly flexible part of our linguistic repertoire. It reinvents itself from generation to generation as taboos shift. Profanity has even become part of the way we express positive feelings – we know that football fans use 'fuck' just as frequently when they're happy as when they are angry or frustrated.

That last finding is one of my own. With colleagues at City University, London, I've studied thousands of football fans and their bad language during big games. It's no great surprise that football fans swear, and that they are particularly fond of 'fuck' and 'shit'. But we noticed something

interesting about the ratio between these two swear words. The ‘fuck–shit’ ratio is a reliable indicator of which team has scored because it turns out that ‘shit’ is almost universally negative while ‘fuck’ can be a sign of something good or bad. Swearing among football fans also isn’t anywhere near as aggressive as you might think; fans on Twitter almost never swear about their opponents and reserve their outbursts for players on their own team.²

Publishing that research gave me an insight into the sort of public disapproval that swearing still attracts. We were contacted by a journalist from one of the UK’s most widely read newspapers. I won’t name it, but it’s well known for its thunderously moralising tone while at the same time printing long-lens photographs of women who are then accused of ‘flaunting’ some part of their bodies. We were asked (a) how much money had been spent (wasted) on the research and (b) whether we wouldn’t be better doing something useful (like curing cancer). I replied that the entire cost of the research – the £6.99 spent on a bottle of wine while we came up with the hypothesis – had been self-funded, and that my co-author and I were computer scientists with very limited understanding of oncology, so it was probably best if we stayed away from interfering with anyone suffering from cancer. We didn’t hear back. But this exchange brought home the fact that swearing is still a long way from being a respectable topic of research.

Swearing is one of those things that comes so naturally, and seems so frivolous, that you might be surprised by the number of scientists who are studying it. But neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists and historians have long taken an interest in bad language, and for good reason.

Although swearing might *seem* frivolous, it teaches us a lot about how our brains, our minds and even our societies work.

This book won't just look at swearing in isolation. One of the things that makes swearing so fucking amazing is the sheer breadth of connections it has with our lives. Throughout this book I'll cover many different topics, some of which might seem like digressions. There are plenty of pages that contain no profanity whatsoever but, from the indirectness of Japanese speech patterns to the unintended consequences of potty training chimpanzees, everything relates back to the way we use bad language.

Is this book simply an attempt to justify rudeness and aggression? Not at all. I certainly wouldn't want profanities to become commonplace: swearing needs to maintain its emotional impact in order to be effective. We only need to look at the way that swearing has changed over the last hundred years to see that, as some swear words become mild and ineffectual through overuse or shifting cultural values, we reach for other taboos to fill the gap. Where blasphemy was once the true obscenity, the modern unsayables include racist and sexist terms as swear words. Depending on your point of view this is either a lamentable shift towards political correctness or timely recognition that bigotry is ugly and damaging.

What is Swearing?

Historically, bad language consisted of swearing, oaths and curses. That's because such utterances were considered to

have a particular type of word magic. The power of an oath, a pledge or a curse was potentially enough to call down calamities or literally change the world.

These days, we don't really believe that swearing has the power to alter reality. No one expects the curse 'go fuck yourself' to result in any greater injury than a bit of hurt pride. Nevertheless, there is still a kind of word magic involved: swearing, cursing, bad language, profanity, obscenity – call it what you will – draws on taboos, and that's where the power lies.

That doesn't mean that swearing is always used as a vehicle for aggression or insult. In fact, study after study has shown that swearing is as likely to be used in frustration with oneself, or in solidarity, or to amuse someone, as it is to be used as 'fighting words'. That can be a problem: swearing and abuse are both slippery beasts to pin down, and without clear definitions of a phenomenon, how are we supposed to study it? Among the hundreds of studies I've read while writing this book, two common definitions appear over and over again: swear words are (a) words people use when they are highly emotional and (b) words that refer to something taboo. If you think about the words you class as swearing, you'll find that they tick both of these boxes.

More formally, several linguists have tried to pin down exactly what constitutes swearing. Among them is Professor Magnus Ljung of the University of Stockholm, a respected expert on swearing. In 2011 he published *Swearing: A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study*, in which he defines swearing, based upon his study of thousands of examples and what they had in common, as:

- the use of taboo words like ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’,
- which aren’t used literally,
- which are fairly formulaic,
- and which are emotive: swearing sends a signal about the speaker’s state of mind.

In his book *What the F*, Benjamin K. Bergen points out that, of the 7,000 known languages in the world, there is massive variation in the type, the use and even the number of swear words.³ Russian, for example, with its elaborate rules of inflection, has an almost infinite number of ways of swearing, most of them related to the moral standing of one’s interlocutor’s mother. In Japanese, where the excretory taboo is almost non-existent (hence the friendly poo emoji), there’s no equivalent to ‘shit’ or ‘piss’ but, contrary to popular belief, there are several swear words in the language. *Kichigai* loosely translates as ‘retard’ and is usually bleeped in the media, as is *kutabare* (‘drop dead’). And, as in so many languages, the queen of all swear words is *manko*, which refers to a body part so taboo that artist Megumi Igarashi was arrested in 2014 for making 3D models of her own *manko* for an installation in Tokyo.

Languages vary in their repertoire of swear words; it’s a natural consequence of the differences in our cultures. Bergen suggests that languages fall into one of four classes – what he calls the Holy Fucking Shit Nigger principle. Languages are dominated by either religious swearing, copulatory swearing or excretory swearing. The fourth category refers to slur-based swearing, but so far I haven’t come across any languages that are dominated by slurs. There are languages whose most frowned-upon taboos include

animal names. In Germany, for example, you can be fined anywhere from €300 to €600 for calling someone a daft cow, and up to €2,500 for ‘old pig’.⁴ Dutch, meanwhile, has a whole host of bad language to do with illness: calling a police officer a cancer sufferer (*Kankerlijer*) can net you two years’ incarceration.⁵

Bergen also investigates whether the characteristics of swear words set them apart. In American English, swear words do tend to be a bit shorter than average, but that’s not the case in French or Spanish. It’s unlikely to be the sound of the words either, as words that sound innocuous in one language can sound grossly offensive in another. This has been played for laughs since Shakespeare’s time, with the comedy ‘English lesson’ in *Henry V*. The French Princess Katherine wants to learn English from her maid, Alice. Having mastered ‘elbow’, ‘neck’ and ‘chin’ she asks how to say ‘pied’ and ‘robe’:

Katherine: ‘Ainsi dis-je! “D’elbow, de nick, et de sin”. Comment appelez-vous le pied et la robe?’

(‘That’s what I said! “D’elbow, de nick, et de sin”. How do you say *pied* and *robe*?’)

Alice: “‘Le foot”, Madame, et “le count”.’

Katherine proceeds to have hysterics, the gag being that *foot* sounds a little like *foutre* and *count* (Alice’s mangled pronunciation of ‘gown’) sounds a bit like *con*:

“‘Le foot” et “le count”. Ô Seigneur Dieu! Ils sont mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d’honneur d’user! Je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. Foh! “Le foot” et “le count”!’

(“‘Fuck” and “cunt”. Oh my Lord! Those are some awful, corrupted, coarse and rude words, not to be used by a lady

of virtue! I would not say those words before the Lords of France for the world! Foh! “Fuck” and “cunt”!)

If we can't judge by the length, the spelling or the sound of words to tell us what makes a swear word, what can we go on? Some linguists have tried to define swearing by the parts of the brain involved. In his book *Language, the Stuff of Thought*, linguist and psychologist Steven Pinker says that swearing is distinct from 'genuine' language and suggests that it is not generated by those parts of the brain responsible for 'higher thought' – the cortex, or the brain's outer layers. Instead, swearing comes from the subcortex – the part of the brain responsible for movement, emotions and bodily functions. It is, he suggests, more like an animal's cry than human language.

In the context of the latest scientific advances, I don't agree. Certainly, swearing is deeply engrained in our behaviour, but to read Pinker's definition, you might conclude that swearing is a vestigial, primitive part of our lexicon; something we should try to evolve ourselves away from. There's a vast body of other research that shows how important swearing is to us as individuals, and how it has developed alongside and even shaped our culture and society. Far from being a simple cry, swearing is a complex social signal that is laden with emotional and cultural significance.

!

If we want to define swearing, why isn't it as simple as looking it up in the dictionary? For a start, dictionaries can be incredibly coy about swearing. When he compiled his dictionary in 1538, Sir Thomas Elyot was in no doubt as to the kinds of people who look up dirty words and was having

none of it. 'If anyone wants obscene words with which to arouse dormant desire while reading, let him consult other dictionaries.'⁶ Dr Johnson, on being praised by two society ladies for having left 'naughty words' out of his dictionary, replied, 'What! My dears! Then you have been looking for them?'⁷ At the height of Victorian prudery, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offered 'ineffables' for trousers, and well into the twentieth century, while it included all of the religious and racial swear words, it left out fuck, cunt and 'the curse'. As a side note, I find it interesting that there are plentiful euphemisms for menstruation, including 'the curse', 'the crimson tide', 'Arsenal playing at home' and 'having the decorators in', but it has never spawned its own class of curse words. The only ones that I'm aware of are the 'bloodclaat' and 'rassclaat' in Jamaican patois. In the later part of the twentieth century, other lexicographers were still dropping words based on their acceptability in polite society. In 1976 the American *Webster's* dictionary dropped 'dago', 'kike', 'wop' and 'wog', with the foreword note: 'This dictionary could easily dispense with those true obscenities, the terms of racial or ethnic opprobrium that are, in any case, encountered with diminishing frequency these days.'

The editors of *Webster's* had good motives but were perhaps a little naive. Taking words out of the dictionary doesn't remove them from our language. And while they might have hoped that 1976 marked a new era in racial and ethnic harmony, from the vantage point of forty years on, this seems touchingly optimistic.

So who does get to decide what constitutes a true obscenity? The answer is that we all do. Within our social groups, our own tribes, we decide what is and is not taboo, and

which taboos are suitable for breaking for emotional or rhetorical purposes. Even within the same country, social class can have an effect on what constitutes swearing. According to Robert Graves, author of the 1927 essay *Lars Porsena or the Future of Swearing*, ‘bastard’ was unforgivable among the ‘governed classes’ whereas ‘bugger’ (which Graves can’t even bring himself to render in print, preferring to use ‘one addicted to an unnatural vice’ and the oddly xenophobic ‘Bulgarian heretic’) was a much deadlier insult among the ranks to which Graves himself belonged.

‘In the governing classes there is a far greater tolerance to bastards, who often have noble or even royal blood in their veins,’ he wrote. ‘Bugger’ was less offensive among the governed because they ‘are more free from the homosexual habit’, he rather artlessly theorised. But ‘when some thirty years ago the word was written nakedly up on a club noticeboard as a charge against one of its members’, and here Graves can’t even bring himself to name Oscar Wilde, ‘there followed a terrific social explosion, from which the dust has even now not yet settled’.

But, while swearing varies from group to group, it still manages to be surprisingly formulaic. So much of swearing, in English at least, uses the same few constructions. For example Geoffrey Hughes, author of *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*, points out that the nouns Christ, fuck, pity and shit have nothing in common except that they can be used in the construction for —’s sake.

I thought about the constructions I regularly use and hear and realise that there are many phrases that are grammatically correct but that are seldom used (and some that are

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grammatically incorrect, like ‘cock it’ and ‘oh do cock off’ that I use regularly). For example, ‘shit’ is a verb as well as a noun, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say ‘Shit it!’ or ‘Shit you,’ as a complete sentence. ‘Shit’ as a verb currently seems to have a very specific meaning: to wind up or lie to, as in ‘You’re shitting me!’ and the charmingly archaically formulaic reply ‘I shit you not.’ Meanwhile, the ever-flexible fucking and buggery can go in almost every swearing phrase.

Common Formulaic swearing constructions in British English

	You __	__you	__off	__it	__ing / __y
Cunt (noun)	*	o	o	o	*
Fuck (noun, verb)	*	*	*	*	*
Shit (noun, verb)	*	~	~	~	*
Cock (noun)	*	o	*	*	*
Arse (noun)	*	o	o	*	*
Piss (noun, verb)	~	~	*	~	*
Fart (noun, verb)	~	~	~	~	*
Bugger (noun, verb)	*	*	*	*	*
Damn (verb)	o	*	~	*	o

Key: * ‘used regularly’

~ ‘grammatically correct but seldom in use’

o ‘grammatically incorrect’

The British broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, recently carried out a survey of public attitudes to swearing on TV and radio, the results of which I have summarised diagrammatically in Figure 1.⁸ Of the ‘big four’ types of swearing in British

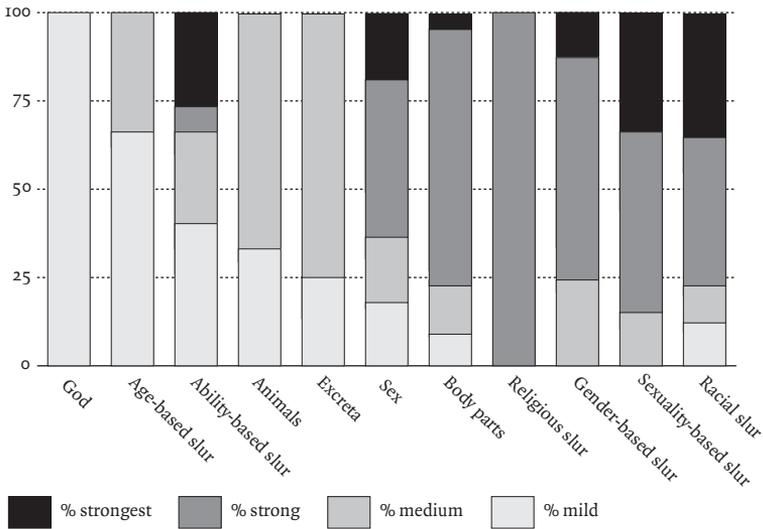


Figure 1: The proportions of strong and mild swearing by category

English (religious, copulatory, excretory and slur-based), religious swearing was considered the least offensive, while slurs – particularly race- or sexuality-based slurs – were considered most offensive. In fact, a soon-to-be-published study of over 10 million words of recorded speech, collected from 376 volunteers, found that many homophobic and racist slurs have disappeared from people’s everyday speech.

Familiar classics like ‘fuck you’ and ‘bugger off’ seem to have been around for ever, and they certainly don’t lack staying power. Nevertheless, I’m prepared to wager that these swear words will seem as quaint as ‘blast your eyes’ or archaic as ‘sblood’ in a few generations’ time. As our values change, swearing constantly reinvents itself.

How Swearing Changes Over Time

Swearing is a bellwether – a foul-beaked canary in the coalmine – that tells us what our societal taboos are. A ‘Jesus Christ!’ 150 years ago was as offensive then as a ‘fuck’ or ‘shit’ today. Conversely, there are words used by authors from Agatha Christie to Mark Twain – words that used to be sung in nursery rhymes – that these days would not pass muster in polite society.

The acceptability of swearing as a whole waxes and wanes over time. The seriously misnamed Master of the Revels, who presided over London theatre in Shakespeare’s day, banned all profanity from the stage. That’s why the original quarto editions of *Othello* and *Hamlet* contain oaths like ‘sblood’ (God’s blood) and ‘zounds’ (God’s wounds), both of which are cut completely from the later folio edition. By the time a few generations had passed, and ‘zounds’ was a fossil word found only on paper, the pronunciation shifted to ‘zaunds’ and the word lost all connection with its root thanks to the zealous weeding-out of the term from the popular culture of the time.

The censoring of Shakespeare isn’t the only evidence we have of changes in what counts as socially unacceptable language. Linguists and historians have studied trends over the years and identified a huge shift during the Renaissance in Europe. In the Middle Ages, privacy and modesty norms were very different. Talking of bodily parts and functions wasn’t automatically deemed obscene or offensive. But during the Renaissance, those bodily terms began to replace religious oaths and curses as the true obscenities of the time.

That evolution is still unfolding, with terms of abuse

that relate to race and sexuality taking on the mantle of the unsayable and disability following behind. That's partly because we're more aware of the effect of a mindset known as 'othering'. Othering is a powerful mental shortcut that we've inherited, way back from our earliest primate societies. We all have the subconscious tendency to identify the differences between ourselves and others and to divide the world into 'people like us' and 'people not like us'. We tend to be more generous towards – and more trusting of – the people who are most like ourselves. The problem is that for hundreds of years (at least) the more powerful groups have persecuted and exploited the less powerful. And the words we have for those people in the less powerful groups tend to reinforce those patterns of subjugation, leading to some incredibly powerful emotions. Steven Pinker (as a white male) writing in the *New Republic*, said: "To hear "nigger" is to try on, however briefly, the thought that there is something contemptible about African Americans."⁹

Your discomfort with the word will depend on your attitude to people based on their race, the same way that your discomfort with blasphemy depends on what you believe about deities. I know I'm the product of my age, class and upbringing (your average forty-something, middle-class *Guardian* reader), but I definitely find racist epithets and sexuality-based slurs far more uncomfortable than all of the shits and fucks in the world. I'd much prefer that bodily functions were the source of swearing's power, rather than somebody's race or sexuality. Without fucking, most of us wouldn't be here, and the scatological unites everybody: in the words of the Japanese author Tarō Gomi 'everybody poops'.

Who Swears and Why?

I confess that the swear words I do like, I use an awful lot. I've used them to make people laugh, to cement friendships and to show a side of myself that's 'tough' or 'ballsy'. And, like almost everyone, I've used swearing in pain and frustration, as a way of being funny or of sending a warning that I'm close to violence. Shortly after I started living in France in my early twenties a man cornered me on my way home one evening and decided to stick his hand up my skirt. Despite not having made any particular attempt to learn French swear words I was astounded with the fluency – and the fury – with which I told him to go fuck himself in the arse, the son of a whore. In just a few weeks of watching films and television in French I'd unconsciously picked up enough foul language to scare away a street harasser.

I'm by no means a special case. While there are some people who insist that they never swear, almost everyone can be pushed into a surprised outburst one way or another (except for a very specific group of stroke patients, whose total inability to swear has helped us to identify the role of emotion in the brain). We do know, however, that men tend to swear slightly more than women, though that the gap is narrowing. We also know that left-wingers are more likely to swear on social media than right-wingers,¹⁰ and that swearing really isn't a sign of a stunted vocabulary.¹¹

There are two distinct types of swearing that I'll be making reference to throughout this book. Scientists and linguists make the useful distinction between propositional and non-propositional swearing. Propositional swearing is deliberately chosen for effect, and processed mainly

in the left hemisphere for structure, sound and meaning. Non-propositional swearing is the unplanned, unintended outburst that comes when we're surprised or hurt, and draws more heavily on the emotion-processing parts of the brain. That's not to say that propositional swearing is 'left-brained' swearing and non-propositional swearing is 'right-brained' swearing: the various parts of the brain have to work together in complex ways that we're only just beginning to understand in order to produce and understand swearing of any kind.

Even those of us who like to avoid propositional swearing are likely to let out a little non-propositional swearing now and again, but lab conditions mean that propositional swearing is more usually studied. Not because it's unethical to shock someone into a bout of swearing (sometimes quite literally); it's just that propositional swearing is much easier to get volunteers to produce on demand.

The Case of the Disappearing Cock and Ass: Notes on Transatlantic Swearing

One of the difficulties I've encountered in writing this book has been the 'separated by a common language' factor. So many of the research studies come from North America, New Zealand and Australia. While some variant of English is spoken in each of these countries, there's no denying that their swearing habits can be quite different.

The UK, Australia, New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland have probably the closest affinity. In each of these countries a proud tradition of jocular abuse and a healthy

disrespect for authority combine to make for a robust approach to swearing. The USA and Canada, however, are much more uneven in their attitudes to bad language. There are large segments of society that find swearing of any kind deeply offensive, and who are likely to totally reject propositional swearing of all but the mildest kinds.

A Victorian-style sensibility still held sway throughout the English-speaking world well into the twentieth century. Winston Churchill claimed that he was rebuked by one American society hostess for asking for breast meat when offered chicken. According to Sir Winston she replied: 'In this country we ask for white meat or dark meat.' To make amends, he sent the offended lady an orchid. Being Winston Churchill, he attached a note that read, 'I would be obliged if you would pin this on your white meat.'¹²

That's not to say that the UK is without its history of prudery, but genetic drift between the two cultures means that dirty words don't always translate directly. In the UK, the request 'can I bum a fag' is nothing more outrageous than the request to scrounge a cigarette, but a fanny pack sounds positively gynaecological. Animal names, too, show a marked distinction. Our cockerels become 'roosters' in Canada and the USA; in the States, our cockroach is the emasculated roach. Here in the UK, however, an ill-treated ass is more likely to end up in a donkey sanctuary than an emergency department.

That said, the plentiful influence of US culture on the rest of the world has made American swearing familiar to most of us. The opposite is less often true. US audiences might appreciate *Downton Abbey* and *Doctor Who*, but neither provides much of a grounding in UK swearing. I've had to

explain some of the peculiarities of British English swearing to my North American colleagues on several occasions. Those most often eliciting a degree of bafflement are tosser, wanker and twat, so for the sake of any North Americans reading this, here's my handy guide:

In the UK, pub drinking is highly ritualised. Drinks are bought in 'rounds', where one person takes it upon themselves to go to the bar and order drinks for the whole group. Each member of the party is expected to take their turn in this reciprocal drink-buying, and to participate in drinking those rounds. This explains why Brits in large groups tend to get drunk enough to fall over on a regular basis: it's just our way of being polite. Not to participate is – well, I was going to say 'not to participate is to mark oneself as an outsider' – in reality, if you want to be thought of as polite not participating in round buying is unthinkable.* So with this in mind, let's meet Adam, Barry and Chris.

- Adam has forgotten his wallet tonight. He has to borrow some money so he can get a round in. Adam is a tosser.
- Barry has forgotten his wallet but makes no attempt to borrow money. He drinks but doesn't buy a round. Barry is a wanker.
- Chris always 'forgets' his wallet, accepts a drink at every round and then tries to cadge some money for a kebab on the way home. Chris is a twat.

* At least until the vomiting starts.