

JALT PRAGMATICS SIG NEWSLETTER 8 (3), [serial 26], Fall 2007

Message from the Newsletter Editor

It's one of those exciting weeks when pragmatics makes the news. (When was the last time, exactly? Maybe the "Yo, Blair" incident?). The news that swearing promotes "team spirit" at work has apparently made a big splash, judging from the number of people who have forwarded the article to me. It's so exciting to find out something you've been doing all along is actually good for you. The authors caution us to not to go wild with the potty talk, though, but to know when such language is "appropriate."

If you're like me, you found yourself thinking: Oh, um, phooey. It's not that I have a huge problem with swearing—the warm rapport I share with my colleagues speaks for itself. It's that, although a lot of pragmatics questions are tricky to explain to students, this one is a minefield. As one of my linguistics students told me, "Sometimes we use bad language without knowing it's bad, and this pisses people off."

They do need someone to explain it to them. An ambitious and polite former student of mine unfortunately served as an illustrative example of this. While he was applying to a graduate school he had occasion to talk on the phone in my presence to the head of the department he was applying to. On being told that they had not received some application materials, he used a four letter expression of disappointment one usually doesn't say to the head of a department. He had no idea it was inappropriate, and really, where could we expect him to learn this? Movies? The Internet? His classmates?

My school sends students on study abroad all over the English-speaking world, which makes the issue a bit complex. There are words that are completely innocuous in the U.S. that are obscene in the U.K. and Australia. There's at least one word that is fairly offensive in the U.K. but really, really offensive in the U.S. The big problem,

however, is that most teachers feel uncomfortable dealing with this in the classroom. My own approach can be summed up as: "That word you just used? Don't say it to your host mother." When they make mistakes, at least that gives us something to talk about in linguistics class when they get back.

Baruch, Y. & Jenkins, S. (2007). Swearing at work and permissive leadership culture: When anti-social becomes social and incivility is acceptable. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28, 6. pp 492-507.

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