

“We didn't realize that lite beer was supposed to suck!": The Putative Vulgarly of “X sucks” in American English

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We didn't realize," says the voice-over in a memorable 1999 Amstel beer television commercial, "that lite beer was supposed to suck!" As anyone familiar with contemporary American English will recognize, that commercial's creators intended the audience to infer that all other "lite" beers are terrible (the meaning of *suck* in this context): only Amstel's naive but honest brewers, used to the production of excellent products, make a flavorful and satisfying "lite" beer in defiance of a jaded public's cynical expectations.

The colloquial general pejorative use of the verb *suck* has been increasingly popular in American English during the past 30 years. According to the most recent edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (AHD4), *suck*, defined as "to be disgustingly disagreeable" is vulgar slang. *X sucks!* has in fact largely replaced an earlier generation's *X stinks!* as a colloquial way of saying that X is "of an extremely low or bad quality" (AHD4 s.v. *stink*). There is, however, an important difference between *X sucks!* and *X stinks!* according to AHD4: *X stinks!* is merely "Slang," whereas *X sucks!* is not merely "Slang," it is "Vulgar," as well, a label that AHD4 assigns to entries to warn dictionary users that there are "social taboos attached to a word; ... [these are] words that violate accepted standards of decency" (2000, xxxiii). AHD4 is scarcely alone in its belief in the putative offensiveness of *X sucks!* This most recent of authoritative American dictionaries merely echoes earlier dictionary makers of the 1980s and 1990s.

How can dictionary makers plausibly maintain that *X sucks!* is "vul-

gar," given the fact that the idiom is extremely widespread in American culture, heard commonly and widely in contexts (e.g., television commercials) where violations of "accepted standards of decency" by "taboo" words are uncommon? Why would they ever have concluded that it was a "taboo" word in the first place? In brief, the answer is that *X sucks!* might be seen as an offensive idiom because it can call to mind the use of the word *suck* to refer to fellatio, a sexual practice about which many people seem to have mixed emotions. Even speakers who do not find *X sucks!* offensive still may feel that the idiom somehow refers to fellatio, whether or not they have positive or negative feelings towards fellation itself. For example, the gay-friendly columnist Blanche Poubelle notes in commenting on an oral version of this paper (presented on 6 January 2000 at the American Dialect Society meeting), that "many listeners had strong intuitions that it [*X sucks!*] originates in a reference to oral sex" (2000, 8).

The connection with 'fellatio' must of course somehow be accounted for in the lexical analysis of *suck*, even if, as I believe, the fellatio connotations of *X sucks!* are a matter of significant post-facto etymologizing. More important, however, is the question of how an idiom that might be offensive to many people could have become so widespread, particularly if the offensiveness relates to the associations of the idiom with fellatio. For some speakers, fellatio is in itself distasteful or even immoral, a forbidden topic for conversation, or even allusion. For others, referring to fellatio in other than a clinical or intimate setting would be impolite. For still others, to refer to fellatio in a disparaging way would in itself be semantically or socially inappropriate, since, for many people, fellatio is highly pleasurable, and those who engage therein, whether as fellator or fellatee, ought not to be the object of the scorn implied by connecting pejorative *X sucks!* to fellatio. Clearly, speakers attach connotations of fellatio and vulgarity to *X sucks!* for the most part only when the specific issue of putative etymology is raised; most of the time, for most speakers, fellatio and vulgarity are not a part of the foregrounded semantic range of the idiom. Only in this way could speakers accept a phrase that they would otherwise find inappropriate.

The etymology of *X sucks!*

Dictionary Evidence

Etymologically, *suck* and its derivatives have been used in American English for generations in terms of disapproval. One can argue

plausibly that some of these have had what might loosely be termed "vulgar" connotations and some have not; for example, AHD4 does not even label *sucker* 'a dupe' as "slang," let alone "vulgar" (it is merely "informal"). None except (12) in the following list, however, summoned up images of fellation for earlier generations (and even [12] does not appear in such earlier slang dictionaries as Farmer and Henley [1890–1904] or Berry and Van den Bark [1942], an absence that is not entirely owing to prudery: *cocksucker*, defined as 'fellatrix', appears in Farmer and Henley). Linguists know that the history of a term is not necessarily relevant to its current meaning, yet it is important to note that a list of earlier pejorative uses such as the following presents a rich set of possible sources for the phrase *X sucks!*; the examples shown here draw extensively (but not exclusively) upon Robert L. Chapman's *New Dictionary of American Slang* (1986):¹

1. 'curry favor; one who curries favor in a demeaning fashion' (cf. *suck ass*, *suck up to*)
2. 'lose, finish last' (< *suck hind teat*)
3. 'get something for nothing' (< *suck on the teats of*)
4. 'act in an obsequious manner' (*come sucking around*, *suck ass*)
5. 'eat or drink greedily' (*suck up*, *suck down*)
6. 'fool; victim' (cf. *sucker punch*, "Never give a sucker an even break" < ?*sucker* 'kind of fish')
7. 'take advantage of, swindle' (*suck in*)
8. 'debilitate, weaken, steal' (associated with leeches, ticks, vampires, and the like: *X sucks your blood!*; cf. the metaphorical use of the noun *blood-sucker*)
9. 'be afraid' (*suck air*)
10. 'be mean and irritable' (*suck eggs*)²
11. 'Do something demeaning or childish; be extremely worthless, objectionable' (*suck eggs*, *suck rope*, *suck wind*, *suck [one's] thumb*)
12. 'fellate' (cf. *suck cock*, *suck donkey dicks*, *suck a big one*, *suck off*)

¹Moreover, not all earlier slang senses of *suck* were necessarily pejorative, e.g., 'make an effort, become serious' (as *suck [it] up* < *suck in your gut*).

²Sucking eggs seems a particularly peculiar insult, though it apparently has agricultural roots, as the following e-mail message explains [Date: Wed, 1 Apr

Normally, an etymologist would seek the origin for the later *X sucks!* in this list of earlier, semantically related, uses of *suck*, as a clipping of the transitive construction *suck* + NOUN (*suck ass*, *suck hind teat*, *suck eggs*, *suck blood*, *suck rope*, etc.) or the even more amorphous *suck* + PARTICLE (*suck up*, *suck in*, etc.). The general pejorative force of *suck* in these twelve usages is so pervasive and widespread, and the contexts are so various, that the burden of etymological proof surely lies upon those who would privilege ANY particular source as primary. Basically, *suck* merely means 'bad' in both the earlier and later manifestations, and therefore, without further evidence, we can say no more than that *X sucks!* descends from a FAMILY of earlier pejorative senses of *suck*. To this I would add the influence of the syntactically parallel construction which *X Sucks!* has all but replaced by the 1990s: (again) *X stinks!*

In a series of e-mails to the American Dialect Society online discussion group, my friend, the late Thomas Creswell, argued for the primacy of the 'fellatio' origin. He wrote:

What was in the mind of the clever teenager(?) who first said, "This X sucks" cannot, of course, be known. But the frequency and currency of *cocksucker* and *to suck cock* are so

1998 10:28:26 -0600; From: charles fritz juengling <cjuengling@STCLOUD-STATE.EDU>; Subject: Re: THIS X SUCKS; To: ADS-L@UGA.CC.UGA.EDU]:

... going back to memories of a rural childhood on a small poultry farm (in Delaware) in the 1940s & 1950s, both dogs & snakes could be called egg suckers. With uncaged chickens, or other poultry for that matter, it was not unusual for range-fed (today's term) birds to lay an egg, or start a nest, outside of the chicken house. If a dog had found out what raw egg tasted like, the farmer had a problem. (Freshly laid eggs might be broken for a number of reasons, including: too many eggs in the nest; & the chicken hadn't consumed enough calcium to develop the 'proper' shell.) Egg-sucking dogs were those that had learned to intentionally crush the shell of an egg to get to the contents. Concurrently, such dogs might seek out nesting sites, even if in the chicken house, and eat eggs. A female dog might show pups how to do the same thing. If egg-sucking dogs couldn't be kept away from nesting areas, the farmer could think that it was best to get rid of the dog (in some way). Thus, egg-sucking dogs weren't appreciated.

In addition, sucking eggs (it seems to me) could be viewed as a fruitless and reckless enterprise, worthy of pejoration, since nothing would come of it (unless the egg breaks).

well established and widespread in 20th century male oral (please excuse) usage that the likelihood that any other source underlies the expression "This X sucks" is quite remote. (To: <ADS-L@UGA.CC.UGA.EDU>, Subject: Re: THIS X SUCKS and fellatio)

Creswell was surely right about the popularity of — and American obsession with — fellatio; as an insult, *Suck my dick!* (or the milder version, *Eat me!*), was perhaps nearly as commonplace at mid-century as *Eat shit!* as a term of personal insult and disapproval in informal adolescent male speech. But why must we assume that this originated among adolescent boys? Even if we decide that the psyches of adolescent males are crucial to the term's development, then we need to consider that unlearning thumb-sucking is something that adolescent boys have outgrown by only a few years. At any rate, to assume that all of the non-fellatio uses of *suck* (as well as *X stinks!*) played no part in the genesis of *X sucks!* ignores arbitrarily the rich complexity of the lexicographical source material. Granted that many people who heard *X sucks!* when it emerged in the late 1960s would sometimes have been reminded of fellatio: people expect to be shocked by slang, and they fear the worst when they hear new expressions from young people. But it seems to me nonetheless lexicographically arbitrary to assert that only one portion of the lexical record could possibly underlie *X sucks!*

To recapitulate, what we have historically is the following:

Stage 1 (1920s-1960s)

Does anyone want to suck my cock? [real question]

This X sucks eggs (wind, rope) [pejorative]

You suck eggs (wind, rope) [insult]

You sucker! [pejorative, but no relation to fellatio]

This stinks! [pejorative]

You stink! [insult]

Stage 2 (1960s→)

All of the above, as well as the entirely new *X sucks!* [pejorative] and *You suck!* [insult]

The etymologically important thing is that the dictionary examples do not record any intermediate stage in which the "full" utterance **You suck cock!* / *X sucks cock!* is recorded as a pejorative (except for the construction *X sucks big donkey dicks*). Furthermore, the earliest slang dictionaries do not record intransitive *suck* as indicating fellatio, unless it is followed by the particle *off*.

The Early Citation Record

The other place an etymologist is obliged to look is in the earliest record of the new usage. Here we find no particularly strong connection to fellatio in the written record (though, as in the list given above, hints of fellatio are not entirely missing, either). Moreover, though *suck cock* is certainly plentiful in the printed record in the 1960s and 1970s, when people started saying (*This*) *X sucks!*, they did NOT go through a period in which the full utterance *(*This*) *X sucks cock!* was in evidence, unlike (*This*) *X sucks eggs!* (or *wind* or *rope*).

The first example was furnished me by Jesse Sheidlower; the others are the earliest citations that I found in the Tamony collection (for which I thank the library of the University of Missouri, Columbia, for providing me with some of this material from the files of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection):

Who the hell is Consuela? — some fucking faggot — what a whole lot of shit this is. **Consuela sucks** and anybody who believes this crap is crazy. (1964 "Reading the horoscope ..." by Consuela in the *Daily News*, in H. Huncke *Huncke Reader* 327)

Polaroid sucks! For some time the Polaroid Corporation has been supplying the South African government with large photo systems ... to use for photographing blacks for the pass-books ... every black must carry. (*International Times*, June 2-16, 1971, page 3/2)

The writing that came out of the **Stones tour sucked**, on the whole. (Lucian K. Truscott IV, *Village Voice*, 1 Aug. 1974, 26)

And if you thought **The Shootist sucked**, that's just tough bananas. (John J. Wasserman, "On the Town," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 July 1976, [n.p.])

[In answer to the question — asked at the Giants' opening tailgate parties, "When was your sportsmanship really tested?"]: "Andy Haapanen, data processing manager, San Jose: 'I had a game of Pac-Man the other day that really put me to the limit. Video games are very competitive. You can really get into them, and **when you lose it sucks**. You tend to hate the machine. Some people hit the machine, but I just go have another beer and try again.' [¶] Kathleen Rowe, employment agency receptionist, Belmont: 'In high school we had inter-class swimming championships. Our class came in second this one time and I went up to congratulate the winners. They said they knew they were better and **I sucked**. ...' (Conti, "Question Man," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 April 1972, [n.p.]

These quotations in themselves compel no particular linking of *X sucks!* and fellation (despite the use of the slur term *faggot* 'homosexual' in the 1964 quote). Indeed, one might well argue that Kathleen Rowe's "I sucked" in the 1972 citation would not be very likely to have had connotations of fellatio for her. One particularly important early quotation is cited by Hugh Rawson in *Wicked Words* (1989, 375), who notes that, as late as 1978, the *New York Times*

would not print the term, although it was being widely used in public, by the newspaper's own account. Thus, in a column about the joys of being a Boston Red Sox fan at a ball game in New York's Yankee Stadium: "The enemy hordes chant in unison, 'The Red Sox stink!' ('Stink' is a word I've substituted for the one they actually use, which is forbidden in family newspapers.)" (Sydney H. Schanberg, *New York Times*, 6/26/78)

The *Times* is well-known for its linguistic conservatism; for example, they would not print the word *gay* in its 'homosexual' sense until it had long become established in American English. Nonetheless, one could argue that, at least for Schanberg, *X sucks!* had connotations of something not suitable for family reading, whether that something was merely a punctilious avoidance of a new slang expression, or whether Schanberg (and the Yankee fans) specifically had in mind such noun objects as ass, rope, eggs, or penises, it is not possible to say with any certainty. Moreover, it is certain that the *Times* did not originate intransitive slang *sucks*. If their early proscription of the term was based on some possible connection with 'fellatio' rather than their general distaste for the vernacular, it was obviously not out of etymological certainty or necessity but rather was an early example of nervously cautious foregrounding.

Let me conclude this section on early citations with an anecdote of personal experience. My own initiation into *X sucks!* is a circumstance that Tom Creswell would certainly described as "remote." One afternoon in about 1968, I found myself in a Duke University restroom that was known for the intellectual bent of its patrons, who inscribed lengthy philosophical arguments on the walls of the stalls. As I perused the witticisms, I noticed a fresh and original aphorism: someone had written simply, "The Universe Sucks!"

I was totally baffled. What could this mean? I concluded that the writer was sceptical about his chances in life — he felt he lived in a dangerous Universe. I recalled my father's expression, "That sucks

wind"; I recalled the expression, "That sucks eggs"; I imagined a vacuum cleaner devouring us all. I definitely knew about fellatio in 1968, and I suppose that in general I think of fellatio at least as much as the next person. I knew, also, that *You suck big donkey dicks* and the like were possible insults. But I honestly did not at that time mentally connect "The Universe Sucks!" with fellatio. How could a statement about the Universe be in any way related to oral stimulation of the penis (especially of a donkey)? The thought truly never entered my mind. (Nor did 'fellatio' enter my mind when Ross Perot use to talk about "the loud sucking sound of jobs" being drained off to Mexico, though I guess it is not impossible that Ross Perot had fellatio in mind.) At any rate, I can attest that, as early as 1968, *X sucks!* was used with little seeming intent at summoning up images of fellatio — and received by this reader in exactly the same vein.

In this sense, then, Creswell's etymology and my own are BOTH post-facto etymologies. There is little real hope of finding one "underlying" meaning because, as Eble notes, "sometimes more than one explanation of a word is plausible — multiple etymology. In other instances speakers make sense of an unfamiliar form by a plausible but incorrect guess at its etymology — mistaken etymology, traditionally called folk etymology" (1996, 46). Indeed, for many young people today, there are no real etymologies for *X sucks!*, at all. It is simply the antonymic expression for *X rules!*

The foregrounding of 'fellatio'

What comes to the minds of speakers today when they hear a phrase such as *X sucks!*? Obviously, that will depend very much on the individual and the context in which the phrase is used. From a linguistic point of view, all of the twelve usages cited earlier in this essay are available in the language, ready for association in conducive circumstances.

Speaking as a college teacher in a mainstream American university, I can report that the intuitions of students and colleagues whom I have informally consulted generally suggest that *X sucks!* has, for nearly a generation now, been no more strongly associated with fellatio than with thumb sucking, infant nursing, vampirism, or anything else, apart from a general sense that *suck* is a rather funny-sounding word (like *duck*, *fuck*, and *muck*, but maybe not *buck*, *pluck*, and *truck* — and certainly not *luck* — one must be careful not to read too much into

sounds themselves). When queried, John Harmon, a Duke student, gave me a typical response: "I remember when I first started using it I thought, 'This is another way to say *That really stinks!*'" (telephone conversation 30 June 1992, when he was age 20). Walt Wolfram, Professor of English at North Carolina State University, reports (personal conversation) that his wife objected strenuously to the phrase *X sucks!* in 1975 and asked their children not to use it. By 1990, however, she was using it herself in informal conversation, reporting that it no longer sounded "ugly" to her and that she found it properly and powerfully expressive.³ One important piece of evidence concerning contemporary adolescents and young adults is found in a study by Teresa Labov (1992, 348), who demonstrates empirically that *X sucks!* ~ *It sucks being X!* was the most highly recognized slang term in use among high school students at the time of her survey: 96% of the 261 college-age informants whom she questioned in the fall of 1987 recognized *sucks* as a pejorative slang term used in the high school they attended; this is higher than the recognition of *cool* (92%), *jocks* (90%), *stoned* (89%), *awesome* (85%), *bummer* (78%), and *wimp* (73%). *Suck* as a term of disapproval was found in all social groups, all regions of the country, and both sexes.

But not only is *X sucks!* pervasive; it is also not at all objectionable, at least for Labov and her informants. She explicitly says that she excluded terms which she felt had any sexual content; she did this so as not to create controversy in any high school to which she might give the questionnaire. She reports no complaints from the high schools. Also, she does not report that any students added written comments to

³Together with *X stinks!* as possible antecedent for *X sucks!* two other pejorative constructions should be mentioned, *X bites!* and *X blows!* Almost certainly, *X bites!* is later than *X sucks!* and would appear to be related to the non-fellatio expression *Bite my ass!* or (by extension) to *Eat shit!*, though *Bite the bone!*, a 1950s euphemism for fellatio may be related, as well. *X blows!*, however, appears to be as old or older than *X sucks!* (The *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* has a possible 1960 cite for *blow 9.c* 'be hateful, contemptible, inferior' and a 1964 cite for *suck* 'be of poor quality'.) *Blow*, moreover, has a sense related to fellatio (e.g., the noun *blowjob* 'act of fellatio' and *Blow me!* 'fellate me'). On the other hand, *blow*, like *suck*, has numerous pejorative connotations that are totally unrelated to fellatio, e.g., *blowhard*, *blow up*, *blow off*, *blow one's cover*, *blow money*, *blow smoke*, *blow your lines*, *blow your top*, *Go blow!*, *blow lunch* 'vomit', etc. And unlike *X stinks!*, which considerably predates *X sucks!*, the syntactic forms of earlier fellatio-related expressions in *suck*, *blow*, and *bite* are different from *X sucks!*

the effect that there was any sexual meaning or association for *sucks*, even though they were given space to do so and often made comments on other terms. Finally, Labov takes as evidence that *wimp* may be moving out of slang and into the respectable mainstream vocabulary the fact that its recognition percentage was 73%. If her reasoning holds, then *X sucks!* (with 96% recognition) was in 1987 even further along the way towards becoming a part of the mainstream vocabulary. Mainstream acceptability may not in itself suggest that *X sucks!* does not have latent significant connotations of 'fellatio', but it does suggest that, if such connotations are indeed significant, the cognitive dissonance must be explained in some way: are socially conservative persons really willing to accept the mentioning of fellatio in formal public contexts? Are socially liberal persons really willing to accept a usage that denigrates sexual variation?

The answer, I believe, is that speakers do not concern themselves with absurdly counterintuitive linguistic concerns unless they are forced to do so by social pressures. In the case of *X sucks!*, the normal linguistic intuition, that it is a pejorative term without any particular sexual connotations in normal usage, derives from everyday linguistic experience and can be overridden only by strenuous (often embarrassing) appeals.

For example, in at least two court cases, the potential connotations of *X sucks!* were of great importance. In one 1994 case, *Steckbeck v. Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles* (United States District Court, Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria Division), an automobile owner sued to win the right to a vanity license plate that read "GOVT SUX"; the plate had been denied to him on the grounds that it had sexual connotations. He won the case, arguing that the slogan is not vulgar, but that, even if it were of questionable taste, as political speech he should be given considerable latitude in vulgarity of expression. In an earlier case (1991), a twelve-year-old junior-high-school student in Norfolk, Virginia, was suspended from school for refusing to desist from wearing a t-shirt which had written on its front in large letters, "DRUGS SUCK!" School administrators argued that the inscription was "inappropriate for school attire" because it was "vulgar" and "deriving from a sexual connotation of oral-genital contact," hence potentially disruptive to the maintenance of order in the school (quotations are from the trial judge's Order and Opinion of 3 September 1992). The child's parents vehemently insisted that the shirt contained a valuable message of critical social importance and that the vernacular language was necessary to convey the message in a powerful fashion to a

resistant audience. The parents brought suit in federal court against the Norfolk School Board, claiming that the student's rights had been violated under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. They lost — not because the judge ruled in this case that *X sucks!* connoted 'fellatio', but only because he found it to be a slang expression which could be forbidden by the school as part of the teachers' job to educate students in the proper use of good English. (According to this ruling, a t-shirt that said "FELLATE YOUR BROTHER" would apparently have been acceptable.)

In both of these cases, fellatio comes to the foreground in circumstances where the potential for double-entendre is the subject of much vigilance on the part of officials for whom even the appearance of impropriety can lead to disastrous results.⁴ The Norfolk case brought forth a good deal of lexicographical discussion in the letters-to-the-editor section of the local newspaper, for example:

The message is "DRUGS SUCK." What is it that drugs suck? Eggs? Lemons? I think not. [¶] American speech is becoming harsh and very crude. (Marguerite Jones, letter to the editor, *Virginian-Pilot*, 2 February 1992, A6)

Marguerite Jones's letter, written at the height of public controversy concerning the case under discussion here, does not directly mention what harsh and crude direct object she imagines for "drugs suck," but, to her mind at least, it must be something more offensive than eggs or citrus (why, she does not say). In her own mind, she has highlighted more prurient readings. Of course, in doing so she has also made explicit the sexually innocuous readings — eggs, lemons — which semantically are no more implausible than prurient ones. Just as it is nonsensical to attempt to imagine drugs sucking lemons or eggs (or, though she does not mention it, thumbs), so too is it absurd to try to imagine drugs sucking a penis or a breast. If "DRUGS SUCK!" conjures up for Ms. Jones a salacious image, why doesn't *sucker punch* do likewise? (Or perhaps it does.) One is tempted to say here that harshness and crudity are very much in the mind of the beholder. I am reminded of the old joke about the woman who complained that she could see

⁴The North Carolina Motor Vehicles Department was criticized several years ago for allowing an aged priest and lover of singing to obtain a license plate that said "OREMUS"; the legend was viewed as a racial slur by motorists who did not understand Latin.

the man next door sunbathing naked in his backyard, so the man put up a higher fence. She then complained that, despite the new fence, she could still see the man "from my attic window, if I stand on tip-toes." Marguerite Jones, would-be guardian of purity in speech, stands here on her linguistic tip-toes, looking past the lemons and the eggs and finding, apparently, only human body parts (but not thumbs).

Other examples of 'fellatio' foregrounding occur in different environments. Let us examine a few of them.

NC State sucks ... But Carolina swallows!

This is a phrase, intended as humorous, found inscribed on t-shirts favored by Duke University students. It seems clear that, in this context, *NC State sucks* must certainly mean 'fellatio'. However, the t-shirt slogan in this case actually demonstrates the basic absence of INHERENT connotations of 'fellatio' in the idiom *X sucks!*, because the joke's effectiveness depends on reading *NC State sucks* (on the front of the t-shirt) in the general, nonsexual, disparaging sense, then realizing (after then seeing *Carolina swallows!* on the back of the shirt) that the phrase *NC State sucks* is in reality intended in a more specialized sense, and that here an unusual sense, 'fellatio', is the intended reading. Just as *Carolina swallows!* does not by itself signal the meaning 'fellatio', so too, by itself *NC State sucks* does not signal such a sense. The situation is akin to saying something like *NC State stinks!* ... *But Carolina rolls in it!*: one would not think, from reading *NC State stinks!* (or *Carolina rolls in it!*) That 'excrement' was specifically being associated with the rival school; *Carolina rolls in it!*, however, makes this unusual association explicit. If the actual t-shirt slogan *NC State sucks!* contained a primary and inevitable association of 'fellatio' — if it said, for example, *NC State Sucks Donkey Dicks!* on the front — the joke would not be effective: indeed, one could say, there would be no joke at all.

Also, it's a little too coincidental that the music that's popular with gay people should have the epithet "sucks" attached to it. (Frank Rose, *The Village Voice*, 12 November 1979, 37)

Frank Rose's comment likewise demonstrates how the speaker's state of mind can highlight particular connotations while ignoring others. In the 1970s, when Rose wrote this sentence, disco dancing was very popular in the United States. It was especially popular with gay men. A number of people who disliked disco dancing began wearing t-shirts with inscriptions that read, "DISCO SUCKS." Rose sees in this^a

subtle slur against gay men by way of the linking of the pejorative meaning of *sucks* with the 'fellatio' reading which one might associate with homosexuality (though, of course, fellatio is by no means an exclusively homosexual practice). But the fact that Rose created this particular reading in this particular context certainly does not mean that 'fellatio' is perforce intrinsically a reading for *X sucks!* Consider these examples:

Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Funny business, these vampire flicks. How fortunate the filmmaker who can say that his leading man is Count Dracula; yet how unfortunate when the script itself sucks. The screenplay for "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" — the cinematic debut of "Beverly Hills 90210" heart-throb Luke Perry — manages to be both simple and hard to fathom. ... (Charles Leerhsen, *Newsweek*, 10 August 1992, 52/3)

Neil Jordan ... went off and made "The Miracle" and "The Crying Game." Now here comes Mr. Jordan again: Geffen Pictures and Warner Bros. have given him the big-budget "Interview with a Vampire." Will he have a free hand? Perhaps. But if "Vampire" sucks, he may have two choices: flee to Ireland and invent another "Crying Game," or stick around and hope to land the remake of "The Love Bug." (David Ansen and Charles Fleming, *Newsweek*, 1 March 1993, 80)

Here *suck* is associated contextually with vampirism, but it would be a mistake to conclude therefore that the phrase *X sucks* is intrinsically associated with vampirism. In the same way, it would be a mistake to conclude, on the basis of the Rose quote, that *X sucks* must be inevitably associated with homosexuality and, hence, with fellatio.

Comments: This site has gotta be the coolest place in the world. If it was not for Beer.com my life would suck ass!!! (Jack Johnson, <wrillymean@hotmail.com> Saturday, August 08, 1998)

Though one might well argue that *My life would suck ass* is "vulgar slang," it is obvious that the writer of this website comment was not thinking of fellatio in his use of pejorative *X sucks*.

Here's what we've been hearing from you. We need to know how we are helping and where we suck. Write us: strange-brew@brewzone.com

If *X sucks!* contained an intrinsic connotation of 'fellatio' for the own-

ers of the <strangebrew> website, it seems highly unlikely that they would have used the idiom *we suck* for self-reference.

Conclusion

Little if any lexicographical evidence exists that privileges the etymological derivation of the idiom *X sucks!* from phrases involving fellatio. Certainly nothing rules out fellatio usages from playing a role in the evolution and interpretation of the idiom, but likewise nothing rules out the strong influence of the historically prominent term *sucker* 'dupe; leech', or associations with vampirism, obsequiousness (*suck up to*) or thumb sucking. Stands-to-reason arguments such as Creswell's are just that: conclusions based upon the assumption that slang terms can come into existence and be interpreted only in the most provocative way. At best, the connotations of fellatio that many speakers today sometimes assign to the *X sucks!* idiom arise post facto, when speakers are forced to speculate about the etymology of the idiom. Certainly current and past usage displays a remarkable productivity for the term in contexts in which fellatio cannot be an issue. Given the widespread use of the idiom, AHD4's label of "vulgar slang" does not seem justified.⁵

References

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⁵As this article was going to press, the following headline appeared in the Durham, North Carolina *Herald-Sun* (24 May 2001, C1): "Summer is the season for sucking." The article discussed the dangers of ticks, which the author, Jim Wise, described as a "sucky yucky population." Clearly, if *suck* were intrinsically associated with fellatio, the headline for Mr. Wise's article would never have been printed. The headline caused no stir because there was nothing in the context to foreground any offensive reading.

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Dictionary Etymologies of South Asian Loanwords into English: Some Suggestions for Improvement

Michael C. Shapiro

That the English language contains many loanwords of South Asian origin is hardly a well-kept secret. R. E. Hawkins, in *Common Indian Words in English* (1984), a publication compiled as a supplement to the Indian edition of the *Little Oxford Dictionary*, and which mines the OED, Yule and Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson* (1886, 1903), and Whitworth's *Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (1885) for material, contains some two thousand lexical entries, not all of which, however, if the truth be told, can be thought of as "common" English words (e.g., *husbulhookum* 'official order, passport' or *tindal* 'boatswain'). The Indian words in English are of diverse etymology, comprising words from Old¹ (*dharma*, *avatar*, *yoga*), Middle (*Theravada*), and New Indo-Aryan (NIA) (*shampoo*, *mongoose*, *thug*), Dravidian (*catamaran*, *pariah*, *chervot*), and Tibeto-Burman (*polo*, *lama*). In many cases South Asian languages have been the conduits through which words ultimately of non-South Asian pedigree (particularly of Turkic [*Udu*, *begum* (?)], Persian [*khaki*, *pardah*] or Arabic [*sahib*] origin) have made their way into English. Conversely, some words ultimately of South Asian origin have been borrowed into English via non-South Asian intermediaries (*mandarin* [fr. Sanskrit *mantrin/mantri* 'minister of state, advisor' via

¹In this paper the designation "Old Indo-Aryan" is used interchangeably with "Sanskrit," the most well-known exemplar of the Old Indo-Aryan stage of development of Indo-Aryan as a whole.

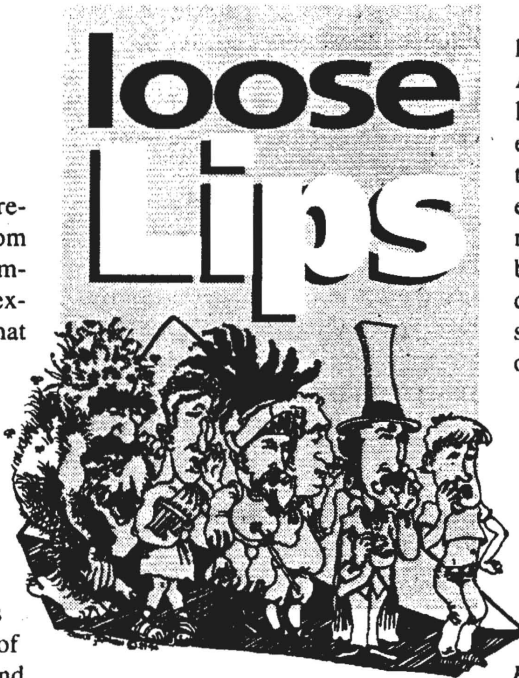
Homophobia sucks

But what does it suck?

Miss Poubelle recently received correspondence from a *Guide* reader who complained about the rampant use of the expression *it sucks*. This reader felt that the expression is basically homophobic and ought to be avoided, especially by gay people. Miss Poubelle's initial reaction was to agree. But as she found out more about the topic, she became less certain that we ought to object to this slang use of the word *suck*.

By a happy coincidence, she was in Chicago recently during a meeting of the American Dialect Society, and heard Professor Ronald Butters of Duke University give a paper focussed on the history and current usage of *sucks*. Butters tried to make two points in his talk. First, that it is not actually certain that *it sucks* originates in a reference to oral sex. Second, that for most current speakers of English, it has no particular sexual overtones.

Butters pointed out that the first attested non-sexual use of *it sucks* to mean 'it is worthless, bad, rotten' dates



only from 1971. In that year, a writer protesting Polaroid's involvement with the South African government included the phrase *Polaroid sucks!* in an article in the *International Times*.

When that author wrote *Polaroid sucks*, was that short for *Polaroid sucks dick*? This is something that Butters claims is unclear. At that time, there were several slang expressions involving *suck*. For example, *to suck eggs*, *to suck rope*, or *to suck air* means 'to be worthless, objectionable, childish' and *to suck ass* means 'to curry favor, act obsequiously'. How are we sure that *Polaroid sucks* was not intended to be understood as *Polaroid sucks eggs*?

Miss Poubelle found this argument less than convincing (as did many in the audience). The phrase is not so old, and many listeners had strong intuitions that it originates in a reference to oral sex. Something that supports this position is the taboo nature of *sucks* through much of the 1970s. *The New York Times*, for example, had a policy against the word as late as 1978, and would not use it in quotes. Since the phrase *to suck eggs* has never been considered obscene, the editors of the *Times* must have understood *it sucks* to be a shortened form of some other phrase, presumably *it sucks dick*. And to denigrate someone by saying *you suck* is in that respect either homophobic or sexist or both.

Butters was more convincing when he argued that for most speakers of American English in 2000, there is no longer any sexual connotation associated with *it sucks*. The best evidence is that the phrase is routinely used in places where a reference to oral sex makes no sense. A commercial for Amstel Lite beer says "Sorry! We're from Amsterdam. We didn't realize that lite beer was supposed to *suck*!" A review of a movie or a concert tells us that *the script sucked* or *the acoustics sucked*. Is there any way to construe these statements where they reasonably refer to oral sex? Beer, scripts, and acoustics hardly seem likely targets for homophobic abuse.

Now Miss Poubelle does not deny that in 1975 it was probably homophobic and/or sexist to say *the Red Sox suck*. But we know that words are always changing their meanings. And the simple fact seems to be that most people who now use the word *suck* don't understand it to have any sexual

To suck eggs, to suck rope, or to suck air means 'to be worthless, objectionable, childish' and to suck ass means 'to curry favor, act obsequiously.'

overtones and are not being consciously homophobic. It used to be homophobic, but it isn't anymore.

There are no doubt some readers out there who would argue that since the phrase has a homophobic past, it is now contaminated and should be avoided. Miss Poubelle won't try to dissuade them from this belief. But she believes this battle is lost. Language moves on, and it's better to fight real homophobia today than to spend our time on the frozen prejudice of thirty years ago. ▼

Dragnette

by Sue DeNimm

Dorothy Unknown
Step inside for Drag Queens
from **Bea Yond!**

Sue Pernatural
Crystal Bahl
Xena Ghost
Ellienne Abduction
Roz Well
Jana Ling
Drew Idz
Dee Zhahvoo
Claire Voyance
Rhea Carnation

Like Olivia says, ya hafta believe in
Madge Ick!

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Feeling a linguistic lack in your life? Vexed by an etymological mystery? Drop Blanche a note c/o *The Guide*, PO Box 990593, Boston, MA 02199, or theguide@guidemag.com (Be sure to mention "Blanche" in your "re:" box.)