

On the Offensive: Prejudice in Language Past and Present

By Karen Stollznow (2020)

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Reviewed by Robert Maslen

If you have the capacity for language (as most human beings do) then you can hurt other people with your words. This potential is more-or-less universal. Even the most well-meaning among us have probably crossed that line on occasion, though perhaps inadvertently, through ignorance of a preferred term, or misled by the dulling effects of convention and frequent use. For people with less good intentions, or those provoked by circumstance, human languages provide plenty of material for incivility and linguistic violence. None of this is news, of course, but in the current era, the consequences of language's power to harm seem particularly evident, even as that power comes under more scrutiny, and so Karen Stollznow's book, *On the Offensive: Prejudice in Language Past and Present*, feels to have arrived at the right time. Stollznow surveys current usage in the Anglophone world 'in order to answer the questions "What is offensive?" and "Why is that offensive?"' (p.9). The result is a satisfyingly detailed account of where we are, in these terms, and how we got here.

The book is aimed at a general audience and Stollznow makes liberal use of scenes from history, popular culture and politics to illustrate her points and keep the narrative rolling along (Stanley Kubrick, Ricky Gervais, Mel Gibson and numerous other celebrities make an appearance, as do past and present occupants of Downing Street and the White House (one in particular)). The subject matter is up-to-date; there are references to 'woke', 'snowflake', 'cancel culture' and many other terms presently in frequent and contentious use. Stollznow sets out several leitmotifs in her introduction.

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For example: prejudices overlap (race and religion, for instance); they are also sometimes difficult to identify as prejudices at all, if you have not experienced them; offence can be deliberate or inadvertent; what is offensive – and what is not – changes with time, through the processes of amelioration, pejoration and what Stollznaw calls the ‘euphemism treadmill’, which turns well-meaning euphemisms into insults; and finally, ‘people who are discriminated against are the authorities on their own discrimination’ (p.3).

With those principles in place, each chapter addresses a specific area of discourse, surveying the social and historical background to offensive language currently in circulation. Chapter 1 deals with race. Stollznaw explores the assumptions that underlie offensive racial language – generalised group identity coupled with negative associations – which will become another general strand of her analysis, since these are characteristics that apply to virtually all prejudicial discourse. She looks at the role of colonialism and slavery in the development of current offensive language, and the process by which some language is reclaimed by its targets (the N-word being the key example). Stollznaw also examines linguicism (that is, prejudice against a language itself; see Jones *et al.* 2019 for an analysis of the consequences of such prejudice in the US court system).

Chapter 2 examines sexist language against a background that ranges from assumptions of male superiority in the Old Testament (OT) to more recent debates about default pronouns, toxic masculinity, gender identity and transphobia. This flows logically into language relating to sexual orientation (Chapter 3). After a customarily entertaining set-up concerning Oscar Wilde, Stollznaw considers the persisting hetero-normative background to pervasive homophobia. Again, there is reference to the OT, and familiar slurs are put in their respective historical contexts. There are brighter aspects to this chapter, particularly discussion of the reclamation of ‘queer’, the wit of polari, and the discovery (for this reviewer) that there was once such a group as ‘the lavender panthers.’ The discussion of one Native American culture’s conception of a person’s ‘two-spirit’ dual sexuality is also very affecting.

Chapter 4 looks at the language of anti-Semitism and anti-religious prejudice. Stollznaw outlines the history of scapegoating, generic slander and negative myths pertaining to Jewish people. This broadens into an account of offensive language against other religions, highlighting the role of visual caricatures, the pejorative use of stereotypical first names, the effect of the ‘war on terror’ on Muslims, the pressure on religious minorities to integrate, and the power of leaders to polarise their populations for political purposes.

Chapter 5, which addresses offensive language pertaining to mental illness, learning disabilities, physical disabilities and ill health, includes perhaps the clearest example of the ‘euphemism treadmill’: the slippage of ‘special’ from attempt to de-stigmatise to outright insult. Other points of note are linguistic ableism, the fluid nature of insulting/acceptable language, and the importance of allowing people to choose their own designations. Discussing appearance (Chapter 6), Stollznow observes the overlap between what we insult and what entertains us, that is, the ‘freak show’ element of ‘Lookism’. She makes the important point that appearance plays a part in many of the prejudices previously discussed. There is a moral aspect to the beauty-good/ugliness-bad assumption that also applies elsewhere, since to insult (deliberately) involves an intrinsically moral presumption. Thus, an overweight person might be presumed blameworthy, a thin one virtuous. The male gaze, clothing, social media and the tyrannous pressure society puts on us to conform, are also examined here.

Appropriately, Stollznow turns to age in her final chapter (7). She notes that the universality of ageing makes us underestimate ageism. Words like ‘old’, ‘elderly’, ‘retiree’, and so on, carry with them potentially prejudicial assumptions we might not sufficiently question. Older people, like other victims of prejudice, internalise negative stereotypes and come to see themselves as seen. They are patronised by benevolent ageism (think of Hannah and Nonno in *Night of the Iguana*) and hackneyed terms like ‘spry’, infantilised by elder speak, the royal ‘we’, and diminutives like ‘young lady’, resulting in a sense of isolation and powerlessness. In her conclusion, Stollznow returns to the importance of empathy, reminding us that this is not just a compendium of offensive language, but also a guide to help us recognise it when it is not so obvious, and give us alternatives, so we can choose better ways to talk.

This is a laudable aim, and though there are opposing views – that being insulted is part of life and you had better just toughen up and get used to it; that sensitivity to offensive language equates to infringement of freedom of speech – it surely keys into something universal, akin to what C.S. Lewis described as ‘some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behaviour or morality or what ever [sic] you like to call it’ (Lewis 2012/1942:4) about which people can broadly agree. That ‘Law or Rule’ may get mightily obscured by the hard business of living, but it is something any one of us can recognise, at least in the sense of how we would like things to be for ourselves. I would argue that the chief virtue of Stollznow’s book is not in its content per se, which is mostly familiar, but in the fact of her having collated it; the effect of reading *On the Offensive* is cumulative. Though most readers will know most of the language in it, to encounter it all in one

go is to experience a kind of critical mass of recognition – not just of the material, but of its significance – the effects of which dwell after reading. It equips its reader with an informed sensitivity not just to slurs and hate speech, but to the labels, stereotypes, myths and generalisations that, often without our noticing, institutionalise prejudice.

Metaphor provides perhaps the most striking example of the kind of language Stollznaw is hoping to make us sensitive to. Nothing stigmatises, others, dehumanises, or kills the potential for empathy like the right (or wrong) metaphor. And nothing does all those things more powerfully than an animal metaphor. Again and again in this book we see examples of human beings conceptualised as animals – a conceptualisation that we know, historically, leads to the most terrible consequences. ‘Pig’, ‘bitch’, ‘cockroach’ – these words no doubt carry sufficiently strong associations to need no further elucidation. There are other metaphors, of course, and some are positive. It is a matter, as Stollznaw says of our use of language more generally, of noticing, then choosing.

This book appears at a time when the theme of free speech is much debated, not least in academia, and in one sense it can be seen as a contribution to this debate (if not regarding the rights and wrongs of mutual left-right cancellings, safe spaces and so on, then certainly in terms of how debate itself should be conducted, and which lexicons it should and should not draw on). It is informed by the same ethical imperative that has recently driven a number of scholarly disciplines to put their houses in order on the subject of race and equality. (For a current example from linguistics, see Charity Hudley *et al.* (2020).) In terms of the field(s) it contributes to, *On the Offensive* is broadly a socio-linguistic text, but it is relevant to other subjects, too – historical linguistics, pragmatics, sociology, and social policy, for example. It would also be a useful addition to professional training aimed at speaking to or communicating with the public.

But *On the Offensive* is ultimately a ‘trade’ book; it is aimed above all at a popular audience. It encourages a sensitivity to language in those who do not think about that kind of thing for a living. And in an era of extreme demagoguery and a profoundly manipulated and degraded public discourse, it is to be hoped it finds the broadest audience possible. Among that audience – one can but dream – might be our politicians and their spin doctors, some of whom seem these days to rely almost exclusively on the jeer to get their point across. The degradation of language, Stollznaw reminds us, is at the root of mass murder, torture, segregation, war and genocide’ (p.254). She answers the voice of the macho bozo with a book that is, in effect, an exercise in goodwill. A poet cautioned us: ‘All wanderers and beggars come from Zeus; and there is something of that spirit in

Stollznow's conclusion, which turns to the good, not the bad, in language. Here are some words from that paragraph:

HEAL. COMFORT. RECONCILE. SOLIDARITY. COMMONALITY.
INCLUSIVE. ENCOURAGE. COMMUNITY. BELONGING. UNITE.
EMPOWERING. GIVING VOICE TO THE UNHEARD. FRIENDSHIP.
KINDNESS. COMPASSION. EMPATHY. ENLIGHTEN. INSPIRE. JUSTICE.
PEACE. HUMANITY. ACCEPTANCE. EQUALITY. LOVE.

I find this both a formidable way to end a book and an excellent recommendation for taking up the study of linguistics.

References

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