

# DANGEROUS ENGLISH 2000!

3rd  
Edition

An Indispensable Guide  
for Language Learners and Others

by Elizabeth Claire 

# **DANGEROUS ENGLISH 2000!** includes

Pronunciation tips to avoid embarrassment

Common words and dangerous double meanings you need to know

Dangerous body language and gestures

A guide to six different levels of language:

Formal, informal, slang, vulgar, children's words, euphemisms

The safest way to talk about «dangerous» topics in the doctor's office

New taboos in English



**Sexual  
terms**



**Fighting  
words**



**Toilet  
expressions**



**Pronunciation  
disasters**

«...intelligently written  
and illustrated»  
*The Los Angeles Herald Examiner*

Please note:  
**DANGEROUS ENGLISH 2000!**  
is explicit.

Teacher's precautions  
and suggestions  
are included

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## To the Reader

In every culture there are topics and words that are dangerous. That means that educated people do not talk about these taboo topics and do not use these taboos in polite company.

Are you a new speaker of English? Do you worry about being embarrassed for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time?

Are you curious about the way Americans speak outside of the office or the classroom?

*Dangerous English 2000!* was written to help you!



*An Indispensible Guide to Dangerous English 2000*



## What Makes Some Words Dangerous?

Words are just combinations of sounds. But parents, teachers, religious leaders, and sacred books teach us not to say some of those combinations. This censorship makes these words emotionally charged. The taboo is usually passed down from generation to generation. New words are invented to take the place of the forbidden ones. Sometimes these new words become taboo, too.

In the past thirty years, there have been many social changes in the United States. Taboo words are now often accepted where they were never heard before—in many social groups, among women, and in the media. But there still are places where the words are generally *not* welcome: in school and houses of worship, in many offices, in formal meetings and parties of mixed ages and genders, and in the presence of older people or children.

### What topics are taboo for Americans?

Among the topics that Americans don't talk about in formal situations (except at the doctor's office) are:

- sexual parts of our bodies
- sexual activities
- bathroom functions
- excrement
- disgusting things such as vomit and nose picking
- upsetting things such as cancer, death, and dying

Americans also advise each other to avoid discussing religion, politics, and racial issues because these may lead to arguments over differences of opinion.

## **What words are taboo?**

Dr. Reinhold Aman, an expert on "maledicta" (bad words), explains three kinds of taboo words: obscenities, blasphemies, and slurs.

*Obscenities* are vulgar words for sexual body parts, sexual acts, and excrement. A few hundred years ago, these words were used freely, and were not taboo. Examples: *cock, fuck, shit*.

Blasphemy is language that religious teachings say are taboo: *God damn it; go to Hell; Jesus Christ!* These words may be used in a religious context, but not for other reasons.

Slurs are insulting words about someone's nationality or race. Some words for racial or national groups are among the most dangerous words in the language: *kike, wop, nigger*.

## **Why are these topics and words taboo in the U.S.?**

Taboos have beginnings (and in some cases, endings). At some point in history, a group of people declared that a word or a topic was taboo. If the group was influential, the taboo was circulated and passed on to the rest of the society.

English-speaking society in America began in the early 1600's. Immigrants from England came here in order to have freedom to practice their own form of religion. These Puritans, Separatists, and other fundamental Christians had very strict ideas about sex: Sex was for creating children. Sex for other reasons was a sin (a crime against God). The churches taught that anything that reminded people of sex should be covered, both from their eyes and from their ears. The words that people used for physical acts became taboo.

Today, almost four hundred years later, Americans are still influenced by this early history. In general, Americans are the most puritanical people in the world when it comes to talking about naked bodies, sex, and bathroom activities. These topics make most of them uncomfortable.

The Bible is the Christian holy book. Part of it is based on Jewish Scriptures. It teaches that God forbids people to say His name "in vain" or for a worthless reason. It is a sin to blaspheme—to insult God.

America has had a long history of cruel race relations. From 1619 to 1863, many white landowners (especially in the southern states) kept Africans as slaves. The slaves were freed following a bloody civil war between the North and the South. A hundred years after the war black people were just beginning to gain full civil rights, including the right to vote in all states.

During the same time, Native Americans (Indians) lost many battles with Americans and with the U.S. government. Their populations died from disease and hunger as well as in battle.

Relations between the white and black, and the white and red, races have improved; however, there are still many areas of pain, distrust, and dislike. Many of the names that people call people of another group are derogatory and offensive. The terms are taboo among thoughtful people who don't want to hurt others. The word *nigger* recalls great cruelty and oppression. Among white people, it is perhaps the most taboo word in American English.

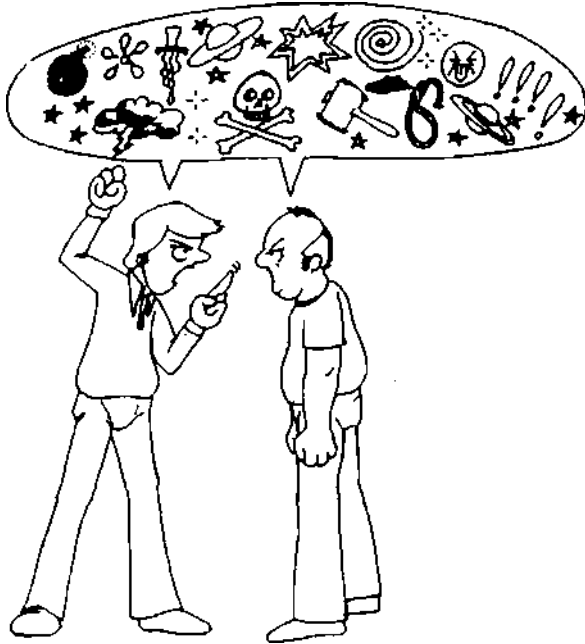
People from many ethnic groups have immigrated to the United States. Groups could not understand each other because of different languages. Many of the names that people in one group called other groups were derogatory.

People who are different from the people in power often have fewer legal rights and fewer social opportunities. In addition to people of other races, this includes: women, homosexuals, disabled people, people with different physical features, children, the elderly, fat, short, and poor people. Many of the names for them are derogatory,



## What is the power of taboo words?

When a word may not be said in most ordinary, everyday situations (school, business or family life), it acquires a special and mysterious power.



Teenagers use taboo words to sound "cool," and to rebel against parents and school rules. Shouting a taboo word or two helps people to express pain and release anger.

Male groups use taboo social words to create bonds of friendship. Lovers use taboo sex terms to stimulate passion, and comedians use all sorts of taboo words to make people laugh.

## Why are there so many words for sex and other taboo topics?

Whatever is taboo is interesting. People spend a good amount of time thinking about and talking about taboo things. In many cases, *euphemisms* (polite words) and *slang* terms (clever, "off-color" words) are substituted for the taboo words. There is only one English common word for shoulder, ear, or knee. But there are hundreds of words for each of our sexual body parts.

## How can I recognize that a word is dangerous or taboo?

You can't, unless someone tells you. That's why you need this book.

It is not the *meaning* of the word that makes it dangerous. *Buttocks*, *behind*, and *ass* all mean the same part of the body. *Buttocks* is a "clean" word, used in formal situations; *behind* is a "cleaner" word, used in general conversation; and *ass* is a "dirty" word, used in informal situations, but *avoided* in school, writing, and business. You might ask, what made "*ass*" a bad word, if it is all right to say "*buttocks*" or "*behind*?"

It is not the *sound* of a word that makes it dangerous. For example, *Dick* is a very common name for a man. It is a nickname for Richard. *Dick* (spelled with a small *d*) is also a very common word for penis (the male sex organ). We may talk about a person named *Dick*. But we cannot, in polite company, talk about a penis or a *dick*. *Dick* is a taboo word when it means penis. It is not taboo when it is a person's name.

### **What if I use taboo words without knowing it?**

A good friend will warn you and explain. If you are among strangers-some will smile because they understand that English is new to you. It will make a funny story to tell their friends. Others may think you are uneducated, lower-class, insensitive, immoral, mean, or rude.



Dangerous English can be *very* dangerous. People have even been killed for insults, slurs, and angry foul language they have used.

*Dangerous English 2000!* will save you from many embarrassing situations. It will help you to understand a very interesting part of American culture. It will keep you safe (in many cases) from other people's disapproval and anger. You need this book. We hope you enjoy it!

## Is Your Pronunciation Dangerous?

### Do you have trouble pronouncing some English sounds?

If you are a new speaker of English, this is not surprising. English has forty-four sounds, while many other languages have only twenty-five or thirty sounds. English words may have two or three consonants in a row, while languages such as Spanish, Italian, and Japanese have vowels between each consonant. Our tongues have difficulty pronouncing sounds that they did not learn before the age of thirteen.

Sometimes these difficulties can be embarrassing. A mispronunciation can change an innocent word into a dangerous word!

There are twenty-three different vowel sounds. Almost all new speakers have *some* difficulty hearing and pronouncing many of them. For example, it's difficult for speakers of Chinese, French, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Spanish and many other languages to hear a difference between *l* and *l* ("long e"), as in *heat*, from *l* ("short i"), as in *hit*. They may pronounce both words nearly the same.

When someone says, "I'm going to hit the water," we may not be sure of what he or she means.



"I'm going to hit the water."

## Test your pronunciation

Have a native English speaker read the following pairs of words to you. Can you hear the difference, or do they sound the same? Next, have the English speaker listen *as you* say the words. Do *you* say them correctly?

sick, seek

did, deed

fill, feel

pill, peel

sin, seen

chip, cheap

lip, leap

still, steal

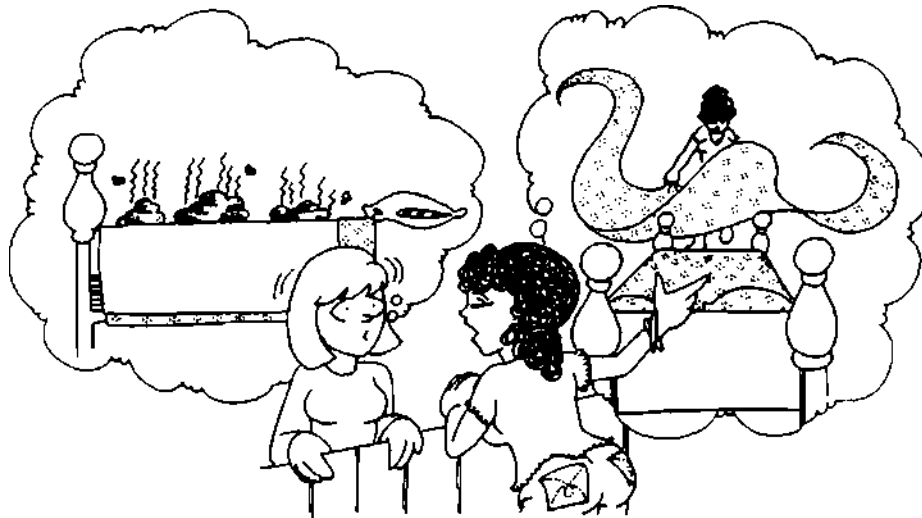
ship, sheep

If you had trouble with these pairs of words, watch out!

This pronunciation problem means that when you want to say *sheet* (a cloth covering for a bed), you may be saying *shit* (a vulgar word for feces).

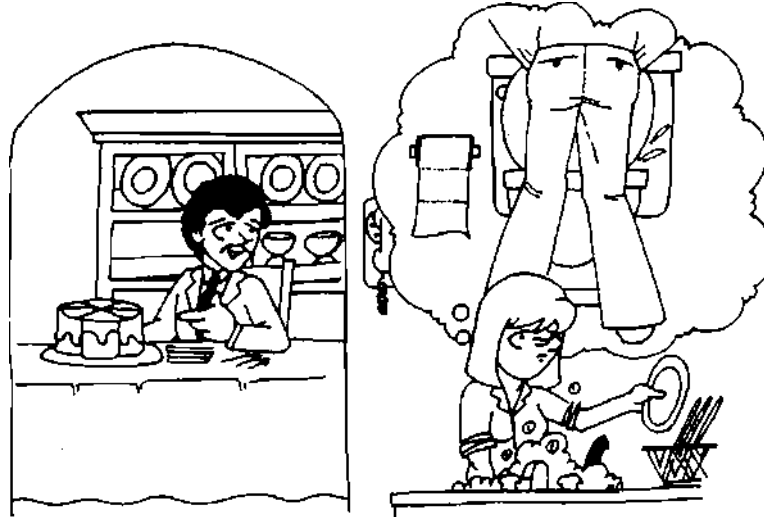
When you want to say *piece* (a part of), it may sound like *piss* (passing urine into the toilet).

This mispronunciation can sound very funny to Americans, and may be embarrassing to you.



"I put some clean shits on the bed."

<b>you want to say this:</b>		<b>Don't say this!</b>	
beach	(bi:tf)	bitch	(bit/)
piece	(pi:s)	piss	(pis)
sheet	(fi:t)	shit	(Jit)



"Da you mind if I take a piss?"

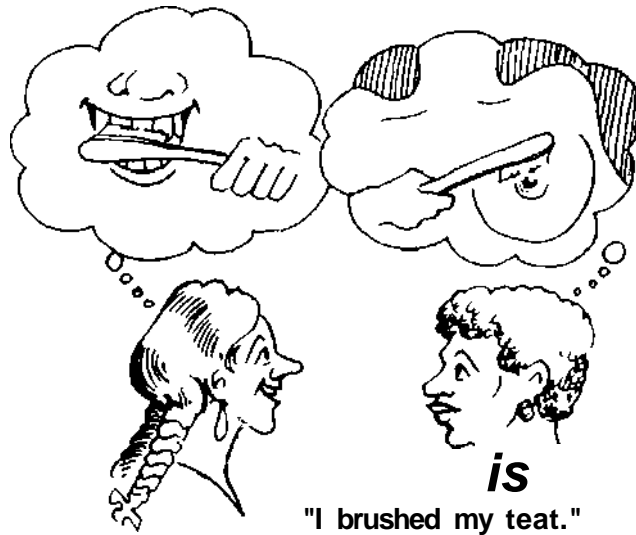
Other vowel sounds can cause troubles, too:

<b>If you want to say this:</b>		<b>Don't say this!</b>	
six	(siks)	sex	(seks)
fork	(foirk)	fuck	(fAk)
folks	(fouks)	fucks	(fAks)
fox	(faks)	fucks	(fAks)
slot	(slat)	slut	(slAt)
Kirk	(ka:rk)	cock	(kak)
her	(ha:r)	whore	(ho:r)
can't	(kaent)	cunt	(kAnt)

Do you have trouble with the /th/ sounds (0) and (3)? They are difficult for almost all people who learn English after the age of thirteen. This is because the sounds do not exist in most other languages.

Here's how to pronounce /θ/ correctly: Stick out your tongue just a little bit between your upper teeth and your lower teeth. Gently force air from your mouth out between your tongue and your upper teeth. For /ð/ do the same, but use your vocal cords at the same time.

<b>you want to say this:</b>		<b>Don't say this!</b>	
third	(θsrd)	turd	(tsrd)
farther	('faɪ θɑː)	farter	('fuːrt ɔː)
teeth	(tiːθ)	teat	(tiːt)
theses	(θiː sɪs)	feces	(fiː siːz)



Are you from Japan or China? Or some other place in Asia? Some Asian languages have only one sound where English has two: /θ/ and /ð/.

This makes it very hard for you to make an English /θ/ or /ð/ that sounds right to Americans.

<b>If you want to say this:</b>		<b>Don't say this!</b>	
ray	(reɪ)	lay	(leɪ)
rust	(rʌst)	lust	(lʌst)
rude	(ruːd)	lewd	(luːd)
lump	(lʌmp)	rump	(rʌmp)
clap	(klaep)	crap	(kraep)
elect	(ə 'lekt)	erect	(ə 'rekt)
election	(ə 'lek Jan)	erection	(ə 'rek Jan)
blessed	(blest)	breast	(brest)



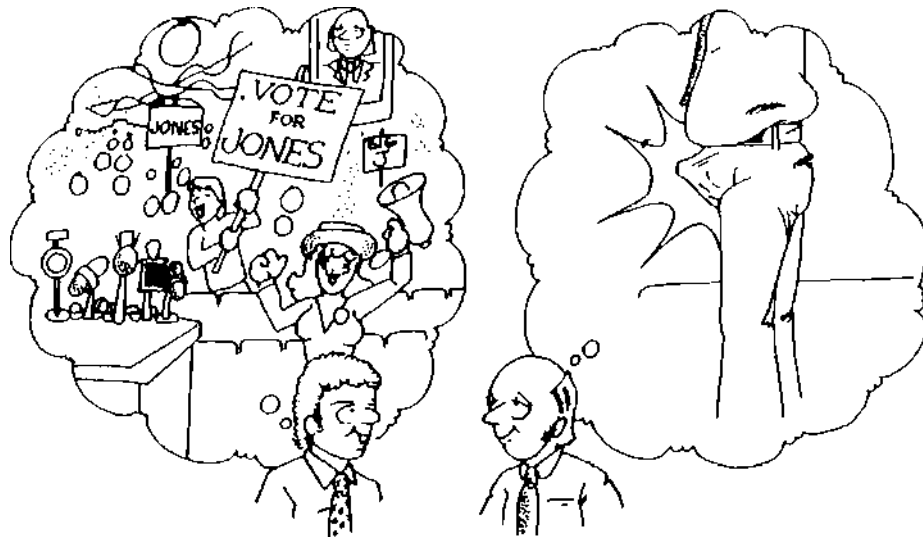
There are many jokes about the way that Asians pronounce English l's and r's. This isn't polite, of course, but the mistakes just sound funny to American ears. Especially when dangerous words result.

A common thing to say to a friend who is running for election to any club office or public office: "Lots of luck on your coming election." But to make a joke, the well-wisher will fold his hands in front of him and bow, as though he were Japanese. He will imitate a Japanese accent. Then

he will say this: "Rots of ruck on your coming erection." The deliberate mispronunciation usually makes people smile.



**"The audience crapped for a long time after the concert."**



**"Rots of ruck on your coming erection."**