

# Pragmatics, Blasphemy, and a Bloody Moose

Terry McLean

NOTICE: This is the author's version of the following article: McLean, T. (2017). Pragmatics, blasphemy, and a bloody moose. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 19(6), which has been published in final form at <http://hltmag.co.uk/dec17/sart08.htm>.

**Permanent link to this version** <http://roam.macewan.ca/islandora/object/gm:1535>

**License** All Rights Reserved

## Pragmatics, Blasphemy, and a Bloody Moose

Last week I saw a moose in my long johns. Have you ever endeavored to teach about dastardly dangling modifiers? I did so with this ripping yarn about my wild encounter with a moose while trekking in the wilderness of the Canadian Rockies. Sure, the majestic beast, suave to the antlers, was merely minding its own business; nevertheless, I felt the urge to let it know that I admired such a majestic gait, so I grabbed some beef jerky and affectionately tossed it to the gangly land leviathan. To my chagrin, however, the creature was so self-absorbed in its glory that it ignored my offering and gave me a patronizing wink-snort. Bloody moose. I believe that is the mot juste. I wish I had a Jeeves. Anyway, recently, after I shared this at-one-with-nature experience with my English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, one astute learner duly inquired, “Terry, what’s a bloody moose?”

This is what started happening in my EAL classes after seeing the Scottish iconic ne’re-do-well Billy Connolly regale a couple of times years ago. Billy does not really tell jokes; rather, he shares his musings and anecdotes with his audiences—a raconteur with a penchant for colourful language, bloody being a quite tame example, at which some prudes take umbrage. Then again, as Billy explains, it’s only a kind of verbal punctuation in the name of embellishment. Nonetheless, after listening to the likes of Billy Connolly or Ricky Gervais, one cannot help but fall victim to unintentionally spouting out the odd golf course word at work for the next few days.

That being said, one should never squander the opportunity to teach language learners a thing or two about developing pragmatic competence. For instance, according to Liyanage, Walker, Bartlett, and Guo (2015) “the term bloody, in the Australian setting, allows users to achieve social objectives across diverse genres and registers...[and] is considered essentially an expression of feelings that can range from the bad or unwelcome [like mine towards said moose] to those of truth, affirmation or sincerity” (p. 117). Yes, the term’s use in educational settings certainly retains taboo status; nevertheless, sometimes the introduction of a little knowledge of how to use a somewhat taboo term can expose learners to the emotional aspect of language use and meaning making (Liyanage, Walker, Bartlett, & Guo, 2015).

What do students make of this? Well, teacher cussing can have both positive and negative impacts on students. In a study of student perceptions of instructor swearing, Generous, Frei, and Houser (2015) concluded that while students reported teacher swearing as inappropriate if used too frequently and was part of the teacher’s personality, its use was more acceptable when used to promote student learning and comprehension (e.g., humour or emphasis). I suppose there is some wiggle room here.

Oh, but perhaps you have taken me wrong, dear colleague. No, I do not cuss in class. As a conscientious educator, I realize that I must refrain from using profanity in the classroom, but I admit that I have let slip the odd mild oopsy daisy whilst waxing poetic about compound-

complex sentences or the government. Am I evil? No. I am decidedly human, and my students know it. As long as language is managed in a respectful manner by all invested, we usually get along jim-dandy.

This brings me back to my EAL student's rather savvy use of the term bloody. On the odd occasion, students inadvertently (or not) swear in class, which can lead to either tension or laughter (fodder for another yarn). Now, believe you me, I have confounded many-a-listener with verbal felonies in my own language learning endeavours, so I am certainly not poking fun at any particular language learners. On the contrary, I am pointing out what can unexpectedly transpire in the classroom—rather than sweeping it under the carpet. Indeed, I have had mischievous learners try out newly-learned profanity in class, and I have verbally lambasted them for doing so. Yes, some ill-mannered students who commit socio-pragmatic or pragma-linguistic failure need someone to tell them that with a wee bit more awareness and communicative competence, one can better understand that there is a time and place for all forms of language—register counts. So, now I let my students know that I grew up in Canadian hockey rinks and am quite capable of letting loose a cannon of vulgarities, yet I choose not to do so. This usually silences the cheeky ones who feel like pushing classroom language boundaries.

Indeed, if we can agree that with regard to pragmatics in language learning, knowing the word alone is not sufficient (e.g. idioms) and that part of a language learner's pragmatics is acquired without explicit instruction (Cohen, 2012), then it seems to me that in order to give learners a fighting chance outside of the classroom, teachers should provide them with consciousness-raising opportunities that will help them to develop pragmatic awareness (McLean, 2004).

Thus, whether students dangle the odd modifier, trip on a curse, or spout out a completely inappropriate lyric or movie line, we must be aware that they are not all pitch perfect angels who have never had their delicate ears exposed to an English cuss. Students indeed know that language can be a tad peppery, but they also need to know that such language requires temperance in an educational setting. This is especially important for students in an EFL setting because they do not have as much authentic exposure (both positive and negative) to the target language. I do not condone swearing, but I do encourage instructors to tell students that they are going to hear a lot of profanity, frivolous and otherwise, most of which no doubt otherwise, outside of the classroom. Students and moose alike need to be aware of what folks are saying to them, be it friendly or not. Indeed, I cursed a majestic moose, it dangled a snort back in my general direction, and I heard blasphemy in my long johns.

Bloody moose.

## References

- Cohen, A.D. (2012). Comprehensible pragmatics: Where input and output come together. In M. Pawlak (Ed.), *New perspectives on individual differences in language learning and teaching*. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-642-20850-8\_16
- Generous, M. A., Frei, S.S., & Houser, M. L. (2015). When an instructor swears in class: Functions and targets of instructor swearing from college students' retrospective accounts. *Communication Reports*, 28 (2), 128-140. DOI: 10.1080/08934215.2014.927518
- Liyanage, I., Walker, T. Bartlett, B., & Guo, X. (2015) Accommodating taboo language in English language teaching: Issues of appropriacy and authenticity. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 28(2), 113-125. DOI: 10.1080/07908318.2015.1031675
- McLean, T. (2004). Giving students a fighting chance: Pragmatics in the language classroom. *TESL Canada Journal*, 21(2), 72-92. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v21i2.175>

### Terry McLean, Canada

Terence (Terry) McLean (MEd-TESL, BEd, BBA, BA) has been teaching English to learners for over 25 years. He currently teaches EAL at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Before that, he taught in Niigata, Japan. E-mail: [mcleant@macewan.ca](mailto:mcleant@macewan.ca)

