EDITORIAL POLICY GUIDANCE NOTE

LANGUAGE

(Last updated: October 2010)

EDITORIAL GUIDELINES ISSUES

This guidance note should be considered in conjunction with the following Editorial Guidelines:

- **Harm and Offence**
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 5 Harm and Offence: Introduction, Audience Expectations, Content Information and Language

- **Re-use and Reversioning**
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 13 Re-use and Reversioning: Harm and Offence Issues

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Language is fluid, with new words and phrases regularly entering the public vocabulary. The power of established terms to offend may change over time The BBC does not ban words or phrases. The editorial justification of any language will depend on a series of considerations.

- Context is key to the acceptability of language. Content makers should consider what was said, where the language was used, why it was used, who said it and to whom, the tone and intent and the amount of strong language used.

- We must also consider audience expectations of strong language: what do audiences expect from a certain channel, time slot or particular personality? In general terms, television viewers are less tolerant of strong language on BBC1 as it appeals to a broader audience than other channels

- Slang, patois and regional words and phrases should be used carefully as the meaning or the degree of potential offence may differ according to different audiences.

- Care should be taken with classic content. In general such material should not be reformatted but, depending on the context in which it is re-used, a decision may have to be taken to re-version language that is out of step with popular sensibilities.

GUIDANCE IN FULL

Definition of 'Strong Language'

'Strong language' is language that has the potential to offend. It is not possible to compile a definitive list of strong words. Language is fluid, with new words and phrases regularly entering the public vocabulary. Also, the power of established terms to offend may change over time. For example, racist abuse or pejorative terms relating to physical or mental illness and sexual orientation have become increasingly unacceptable to audiences.

The BBC does not ban words or phrases. However, it is the responsibility of all content makers to ensure strong language is used only where it is editorially justified. The acceptability of language to intended audiences should be judged with care. If in doubt consult a senior editorial figure within your department or Editorial Policy.

The strongest language, with the potential to cause most offence, includes terms such as cunt, motherfucker and fuck (which are subject to mandatory referrals to Output Controllers); others such as cocksucker and nigger are also potentially extremely offensive to audiences.

Language that can cause moderate offence includes terms such as wanker, pussy, bastard, slag etc. Care should be taken with using such terms; they may generate complaints if used in pre-watershed programmes on television or in radio or online content and will require clear editorial justification if their use is to be supported.

Language that can cause mild offence includes crap, knob, prat, tart etc. These terms are unlikely to cause widespread offence when set against generally accepted standards if they are used sparingly and on their own. However, they should not be used indiscriminately.

Additionally, words or names associated with religion, such as Jesus Christ, may cause offence to some, but they are unlikely to cause widespread offence according to generally accepted standards. Again, we should still take care to avoid indiscriminate use.

Context

Along with audience expectations, context is key to the acceptability of language. What, where, why, who and how are the foundations of context. Content makers should bear in mind the following:

<u>What was said</u>

Is the language used one of the strongest words, requiring a mandatory referral to the relevant Output Controller? Is the language racist or is it a pejorative term about sexuality, mental health or disability?

<u>Where was the language used?</u>

On television, was it pre- or post-watershed? On radio and online there isn't a watershed but audience expectations will largely dictate reactions to strong language on all media platforms. For example, the use of words that can cause mild offence will have more impact on BBC1 in a 7.30pm soap such as EastEnders than it would in an 8.30pm comedy such as My Family.

<u>Why was the language used?</u>

Does it reveal something about the person speaking, does it make a joke more amusing, does it add to the power of a dramatic scene etc.? It is always advisable to think through the editorial justification for using strong language. Audiences are more tolerant of strong language if they can understand the reason for its usage; 'is it necessary?' is a vital question for audiences and content-makers alike.

<u>Who used the language?</u>

Our audiences are also influenced by who uses strong language. The public do not expect presenters or journalists to use strong expressions as a matter of course but they may extend more tolerance to guests and interviewees. Special care should be taken by those presenters or performers or characters that hold particular appeal for younger audiences. In drama, comedy and entertainment in particular, well-established series, characters and performers are usually afforded more leeway than those who are less well-known or who have less "heritage" with their audiences.

<u>Who is on the receiving end of the strong language?</u>

The impact of strong language, insults and pejorative terms also varies according to the recipient. For example, an abusive term directed at someone with a disability will have far greater impact than the same insult applied to the non-disabled.

<u>How was the language used, what was the tone and intent?</u>

Tone and intent are important to audiences. Language delivered in an aggressive or threatening manner has a far more negative impact than the same language

used in a humorous tone. A genuine exclamation of surprise or fear is more acceptable than the same language which has clearly been scripted.

<u>How much strong language was used?</u>

The amount of strong language used has a bearing on the reaction of our audiences. For example, a small number of words with the potential to cause mild or moderate offence is usually acceptable in a thirty minute pre-watershed programme, as long as it is line with the expectations of the audience. But a high proportion of such language throughout a programme or in a brief section of content will have a much more significant impact on the audience and is more likely to cause offence.

Similarly, whilst the strongest language can sometimes be broadcast post-watershed repeatedly and to great effect without causing widespread offence, audiences can be quick to spot when it serves no real editorial purpose or is designed merely to shock. For example, respondents to the 2009 *Taste, Standards and the BBC* research recognised the repeated strong language in *The Thick of It* as editorially justified – a comedy device, crucial to the bullying, manipulative role of a lead character – and had no objections to its broadcast. By contrast, respondents considered the very large number of examples of the strongest language in *Gordon Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* to be gratuitous.

Audience Expectations

Audiences have varying expectations of the different BBC platforms. In general terms, television viewers are less tolerant of strong language on BBC1 as it appeals to a broader audience than other channels, with different generations of the same family often watching together.

The vast majority of audiences understand that the 9pm television watershed signals a move to more adult content. Even though strong language – and the strongest language – is permissible after the watershed, audiences may feel it is inappropriate if it appears to be out of context, for example in charity appeals such as Comic Relief or Children in Need. Special consideration should also be given to post-watershed content which may appeal to younger audiences. And on BBC1, the broad nature of the channel's audience means the bar for the strongest language between 9pm and 10pm should remain significantly higher than on other BBC television channels.

In addition to their understanding and expectations of channels, audiences can have long-established expectations of some personalities, actors and fictional characters. If content may be stronger than the normal audience expectations for a particular performer or character, presentation information, listings and billings can all help tp signal a change of role or indicate that the content may be stronger than the audience would normally expect.

Even on radio, where there is no watershed, editorial teams should be conscious that certain slots are associated with particular types of content and appropriate scheduling is important for stronger content.

Online content connected to broadcast programmes should not exceed the expectations of the original audience; the "G for Guidance" system is available to provide informative labelling for other online content.

<div align="right">(See Editorial Guidelines Section 5 Harm and Offence: 5.4.4 – 5.4.5)</div>

Changing Language: Use and Acceptability

Careful judgements have to be made about the acceptability of certain terms. In particular, words relating to minority groups that suffer discrimination are increasingly unacceptable to audiences. For example, words such as 'faggot', 'poof' or 'queer' are sometimes used by members of the gay community to describe each other; but the same terms may be deemed offensive when used by a heterosexual, particularly if the terminology is used aggressively or in a clearly pejorative manner. The use of the word 'gay' to mean 'rubbish' or in a generally pejorative way is offensive to many members of the public.

In a ruling on this issue, the BBC Governors' Complaints Committee suggested that content-makers *"should think more carefully about using the word 'gay' in its derogatory sense in the future, given the multiple meanings of the word in modern usage and the potential to cause unintended offence."*

Reclamation of the language has led to the term 'nigger' being used by some in the black community and terms such as 'cripple' are sometimes used humorously or sarcastically by people with disabilities. But this usage may still cause distress within these communities and is also much more likely to cause offence when employed by someone who is not a member of the community in question.

Words associated with disability or mental illness, such as 'mong' or 'retard', have also increased in their potential to offend.

Slang

Slang, patois and regional words and phrases should be used carefully as the meaning or the degree of potential offence may differ according to different audiences. For example, 'twat' is a mild word to some people, to others it is another word for 'cunt' and hence one of the strongest terms.

Classic Content

Archive content frequently raises issues about the acceptability of language for a contemporary audience. Difficult decisions have to be made about whether or not

to re-version content which contains language that is now clearly out of step with popular tastes.

As with other instances of strong language, context, character and scheduling are important considerations. BBC7, for example, devotes much of its schedule to classic comedy and the station's audiences are less likely than others to be surprised by terminology which would not be acceptable in contemporary comedy. Presentation announcements also help to explain the original context of the broadcast. However, the station's editorial teams still have to make case by case judgements on whether dialogue goes beyond the bounds of acceptability and edit accordingly.

All BBC outlets should take great care if broadcasting un-edited archive programmes as straight-forward repeats in the normal schedules. Audiences will usually judge such content by contemporary standards and may take offence if terms now considered pejorative are retained in the repeat.

Bleeping and Dipping

Production teams may sometimes choose to bleep out or dip the sound on strong language rather than edit it out of a programme. In these cases, it's important to ensure the sound is completely removed and that television viewers cannot see the words being clearly mouthed by the speaker. Entertainment and factual programmes may want to suggest the existence of strong language by including the first and/or last syllables but this is not acceptable pre-watershed if audiences can easily understand what the word is intended to be.

Further Reading

This guidance is informed by the findings of the BBC's most exhaustive research into issues of taste and standards, contained in the 2009 report *Taste, Standards and the BBC: Public Attitudes to Morality, Values and Behaviour in UK Broadcasting*:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/pdf/taste_standards_june2009.pdf