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Close Encounters Of The Third Euphemistic Kind

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Here's a Quiz for Our Times: Uttering which one of the following lines on air is most likely to get you fired from your TV hosting gig?

1. You're my favorite N-word.
2. Fo shizzle, my nizzle.
3. Yo greezle, it's da feezele.
4. No way, Jose

Barbie Bassett, a veteran news anchor with WLBT-TV in Jackson, Mississippi, learned on March 8 that the answer is #2. She was bantering with co-anchor Wilson Stribling at the end of a segment on the rapper Snoop Dog's introduction of a white wine to his Cali Wine Collection. Stribling suggested that another of their colleagues might get a Snoop Dogg-inspired tattoo, as had fellow wine purveyor Martha Stewart. Bassett rejoineded lightheartedly, "Fo shizzle, my nizzle,"

a catchphrase Snoop Dogg made famous earlier in his career.

Meteorologist Patrick Ellis, who is Black and was sitting at the table with Bassett and Stribling, appeared nonplussed. After the show, Bassett, who is white, disappeared from view, though there has been no official confirmation of her status. She has not been seen since on WLBT and her name has been dropped from the station's website. WLBT has refused to comment, offering the usual excuse about staying mum on personnel matters. A clip of Bassett's playfully delivered quotation surfaced in late March (just a few days ago as I write this). The story went viral, and various news sites concluded that Bassett had been fired.

What's It All Mean?

As someone once might have said, that depends on what "meaning" means. Am I sure of that? You bet your sweet bippy. Which is what "fo shizzle" means. Except

On the one hand, the phrases mean the same thing. Q: "You going out tonight?" A: Fo shizzle. Q: "Want another beer?" A. You bet your bippy. In other words: for sure, definitely, absolutely, you better believe it.

On the other hand, the derivations differ. Does that make a difference? Should it?

Near as I can make out from having webbled around, the substitution of "izzle" for the closing part of a word began as an adaptation by a rapper known as E-40, who borrowed it in turn from a 1981 song, "Double Dutch Bus" by Frankie Smith. The exact phrase is said to have originated in Snoop Dogg's 2000 single "Snoop Dogg (What's My Name Pt. 2)" and was widely adopted by rappers in the years to come.

“Fo shizzle” is thus an exuberant transformation of an ordinary, non-offensive word, no matter who is saying or hearing it. Drop the “ure” from “sure,” tack on an “h” to replicate the “sh” sound, and add “izzle.”

“Bippy,” though, might be another story. What’s a bippy? “A baby bip,” as Dick Martin jokingly explained on Rowan and Martin’s *Laugh-In*, the late 1960s NBC-TV mega-hit that invented and popularized the phrase. The 1987 second edition of the Random House Dictionary says “bippy” is a nonce word referring to “an unspecified part of the anatomy.” Recent online dictionaries suggest that it means “butt” or “ass,” though the more probable explanation is that it’s a nonsense word (as *Laugh-In*’s executive producer always claimed) that has become identified with the more vulgar terms simply because the independent phrase, “you bet your ass,” means the same thing.

Even if it somehow does derive from buttocks, it should be clear that bippy itself isn’t offensive, since it became a catchphrase heard all across America. No one ever scowled at it or thought of bleeping it, as many would have done had the word been “ass.” Which of course suggests that a later word can shed the offensive connotation of the word from which it was derived, even if, as used, both mean the same thing.

The Four N-Words

Which brings us to “my nizzle.” Wordwise, that’s a bizzle of a different fizzle, if you get my drift. The dictionaries are quite clear that the letters supplanted by “izzle” are “igga.” The underlying phrase is thus the snappy “for sure, my nigga.” That’s probably not a phrase a white TV anchor in Jackson, Mississippi, wants to say on camera.

But notice the transformation of the word in question. It begins with the most tabooed word in America, which most people these days refer to as the “N-word,” even when it’s unclear what’s being referred to. (Mystifyingly, in its first account of the Bassett incident, the *Daily Mail* could not bring itself to write “nizzle,” incorrectly euphemizing it as “the N-word” and “epithet,” rendering the story vacuous.) From the underlying taboo, “nizzle” has been transformed through at least three iterations, one of which is allowed (“N-word”) and another of which, “mah nigga,” is congenial within the Black community, at least if spoken by a member of that community. As one contributor to *Urban Dictionary* put it nearly 20 years ago:

“fo shizzle ma nizzle” is a bastardization of “fo’ sheezy mah neezy” which is a bastardization of “for sure mah nigga” which is a bastardization of “I concur with you whole heartedly my African American brother.”

The sentiment is friendly, ebullient, inoffensive.

In other words, the connotation of an earlier word may be altered or wholly changed as it morphs into its descendant form. By the time we reach “nizzle,” the underlying ugliness of the root term has been scrubbed several times. The only remaining claim that its use is offensive comes from the more contested domain of “cultural appropriation”—the illegitimacy (or not), in this case, of a white person using a term coined by and for members of the Black community, even when

the meaning is uplifting and the motivation is not malign.

In Barbie Bassett's case, I think it's reasonable to suppose that she had no idea what the phrase means and was mouthing it just to show her familiarity with a cultural icon (though the brief accounts of her career do bring us news that last fall she apologized for referring on air to a Black colleague's grandmother as "grandmammy").

A number of commentators, including well-known Black TV hosts, condemned Bassett's firing and have called for her reinstatement, among them Charlamagne Tha God, co-host of the syndicated radio show, *The Breakfast Club*, and Whoopi Goldberg, who has had her own problems with on-air gaffes that have led to apologies and at least one brief suspension, in my view mistakenly imposed, from her hosting role on ABC-TV's *The View*.

Did the punishment fit the crime here? First you have to believe the injury committed was of Hurricane 4 or 5 proportions. Then you have to believe that Bassett knew that what she was doing was wrong (or perhaps was grossly reckless in doing it). It won't do to say "she should have known." There are lots of things each of us should know but remain ignorant of. I don't mean to exonerate Bassett entirely. Her glibness was careless, especially in view of her demonstrated tendency to speak first, think later. But that, of course, is what producers want and viewers value from TV banter.

As it is, though, Station WLBT has left its viewers hanging, not explaining the absence of a longtime anchor, all traces of Bassett having been expunged the way the old Soviet masters scissored personae non grata from photographs without comment, as if they had never existed. In this case, that's the offensive

act, in large part because it's cowardly. When Roseanne Barr was fired five years ago for maligning Valerie Jarrett, ABC didn't hide behind "because personnel matter." If, as in Bassett's case, we're to be fired for making lighthearted, off-the-cuff remarks, without malice aforethought, about trivial and wholly forgettable matters, we will become a silent community, without prospects for progress or prosperity. You can bet your sweet bippy. Fo shizzle.