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Hip slang vs. obscenity: Is a b-word always bad?

By Megan K. Scott
The Associated Press

Call a woman the b-word, and most likely she's offended. Or does it depend who's using that little word that rhymes with witch?

- "Today" show anchor Meredith Vieira recently greeted her former co-hosts on "The View" with, "So how are you crazy bitches?"

- Comedian Mo'Nique told the "bitches" she loves them when she did a stand-up show at a prison.

- Republican presidential hopeful John McCain says he respects Hillary Rodham Clinton but was asked by a woman at a South Carolina event: "How do we beat the bitch?"

- During his sexual harassment trial, New York Knicks coach Isiah Thomas was videotaped saying that a white man calling a black woman the name would be more offensive than a black man calling her that name. (He later clarified that he found the term unacceptable in any case; he also denied calling the plaintiff the word at all.)



MARY ALTAFFER / AP

Actor/comedian Mo'Nique

History of the b-word

A bitch is a female dog.

But the term has been used to insult women since the 1400s and, since the 1500s, sometimes men, too, said John Baugh, a linguist at Washington University in St. Louis.

The word was "the most offensive appellation that can be given to an English woman, even more provoking than that of whore," according to the 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue.

By the 1700s, it was also a verb meaning "to complain," said Grant Barrett, co-host of the radio program "A Way with Words" and editor of Double-Tongued Dictionary.

And by the 1920s it had worked its way into prison culture, to refer to a sexually submissive male.

Then hip-hop came along and transformed the word's usage.

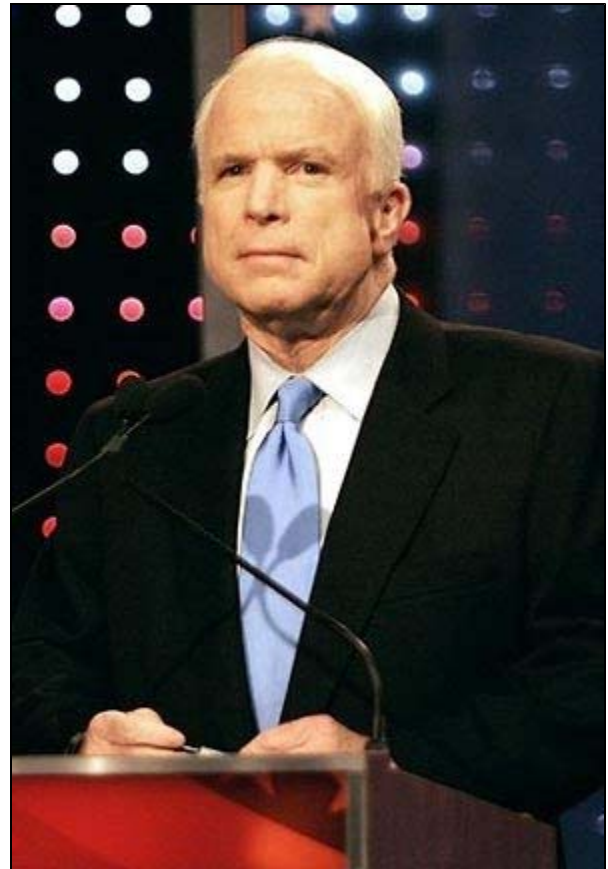
"Some rappers, of course, use the word to describe all women," said Todd Boyd, hip-hop professor at University of Southern California.

"Some rappers would use the word to describe a type of woman. You have female rappers who might call themselves 'bitch' ... "

And now the latest variant is "be-yotch," which David Fertig, a linguist at University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, suggests is a "tabooistic distortion" — something people do when a word is too vulgar to utter in certain situations.

Does race matter?

Thomas' comment that a black man calling a black woman "bitch" is different from a white man doing so brought together the volatile issues of race and gender. It also provoked an angry response from some black people.



JOHN RAOUX / AP

The Associated Press : Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz

While he has since said it is wrong for any man to use the word, many say the comment shows how much black women are devalued and disrespected in America — even by black men.

"If you look at the depiction of black women in hip-hop culture, which is the dominant culture of African-American youth, and American youth in general, their image is not the most positive," said Manny Otiko, 36, who works for WunderMarx PR in Southern California.

"He certainly isn't helping that image or the image of African-American men. What message does this send to mainstream America?"

damali ayo, author of "How to Rent a Negro," a satirical book about race relations, said the word "bitch" is a gender-based insult, separate from race.

But she acknowledged that the insult coming from a white man would be a double whammy, because of the history of white men in America oppressing or abusing women of color.

A black man calling a black woman the name comes with its own issues, said Cheryl Duncan, 40, a black public-relations counselor in New York.

"Given the history of discrimination faced by black men and women, it could even hurt more knowing that someone from your own race was using these words against you in the workplace," she said. "I

think this statement may have single-handedly destroyed Isiah's likability."

Woman to woman

Most people don't get upset when a woman playfully calls a female friend by the name.

"It is like a family affair," said Carl S. Taylor, an urban culture expert from Michigan State University. "Family members can talk about each other, but if someone outside the circle says the same thing, it's offensive."

"I think really it's a way of creating a source of identity as though you are part of a community that the rest of the world is not a member of," said Elayne Rapping, who teaches pop-culture courses at University at Buffalo, The State University of New York.

"Is it OK for outsiders to use these terms even though the insiders have adopted them? My answer is no."

Mo'Nique was not available for comment, according to her publicist. Vieira's publicist did not respond to a request for an interview.

Donna Coffee, a black marketing consultant in Dallas, says it's inappropriate for women to call each other that — regardless of the context.

"Women using the 'b-word' playfully goes to show how females have allowed the negative connotation to control who they really are," she said. "Why are we not all walking around here saying, 'Hey, Queen, what's up?' "

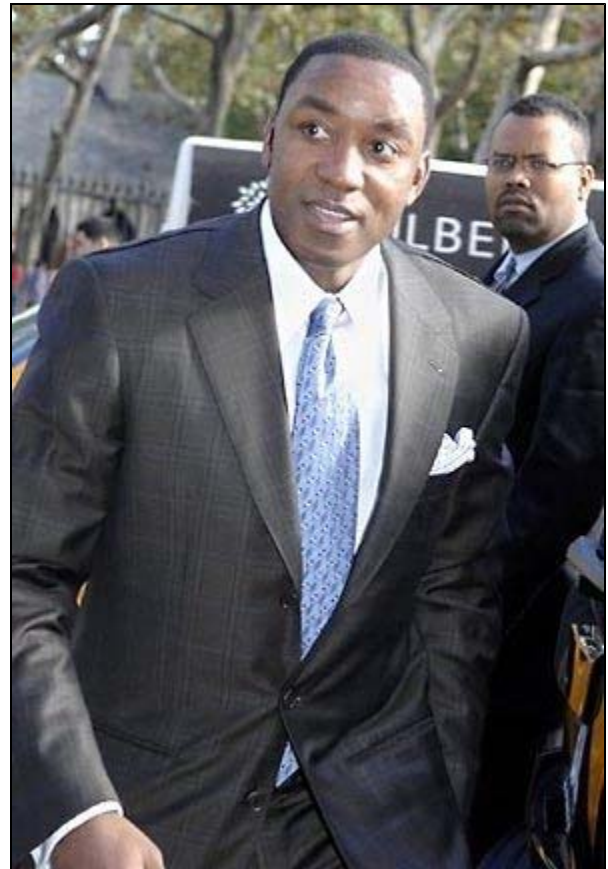
So who chooses?

The rules can be unclear on who is allowed to say what, as radio host Don Imus found out earlier this year when he was fired for calling members of the Rutgers basketball team "nappy headed hos." He argued that rappers "defame and demean black women" and call them "worse names than I ever did."

ayo said she was unsure whether those kinds of arguments are legitimate, but she said they are important to hear.

"If you don't want your child to say curse words, you don't curse around them," she said. "If you don't want those outside people to pick up on certain language, then why do we use it? You can't have this inside and outside thing and expect people to understand it."

"A lot of African-American men feel like it's OK for them to do something to us," said Coffee. "It



LOUIS LANZANO / AP
Knicks coach Isiah Thomas

doesn't become an issue until someone outside of our race does something to us."

Looking at hip-hop

Following Imus, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons called for a ban of three words: the n-word, "bitch" and "ho," from all so-called clean versions of rap songs and the airwaves, and panel discussions were held to discuss the role of hip-hop music in the degradation of women.

Veteran Rapper Master P, whose real name is Percy Miller, said earlier this year that he was cleaning up his music, launching a label that will feature clean performers.

Those efforts though are not nearly enough, said Cheryl Jackson, a black radio host in Dallas and mother of two sons, ages 18 and 19.

"If you allow the b-word to come in, then [other obscenities come in]," she said. "It's going to be normal everyday language. Somebody has got to stop and say, 'This isn't OK anymore.' "

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