

Cribb: Hey, man! Are you my bro, or merely a dude?

Man language tells the story of the modern male condition.

By: Robert Cribb Foreign, Published on Wed Jun 22 2011

We are dudes. We are bros. We may sometimes be players.

But look closer. Our gender-specific salutations, phrases and epithets contain insights into our brotherly relationships, our characters, our selves.

The modern language of maleness — let's dub it manguage — reveals us to be fraternal, protective, even verbally affectionate with our brothers while also establishing a position of staunch heterosexuality, a complex linguistic formula that delicately balances sensitivity with machismo.

While sociolinguists are divided on the nature or existence of a generalized language of men, there are definitely language markers that carry “manliness,” says Fern Johnson, a professor at Massachusetts-based Clark University and author of *Speaking Culturally*.

“Sociolinguists have long recognized that male speech is often more casual than female speech, especially in the use of vernacular and relaxed pronunciations. Apparently it's manly to be casual with language — leaving the more careful talk to women.”

“Dude” is perhaps the most common linguistic connector of contemporary men under the age of 50. The word's path to contemporary speech wandered organically from the 19th century — a reference at the time to nicely-clad city “dandies” — then re-entered the lexicon in the mid-20th century via the African American community.

From there, the path was well worn: What's cool for urban blacks soon becomes cool for white kids.

Stoners and surfers borrowed the term in the 1970s as a cool, ingratiating term, and the linguistic migration moved quickly into the generalized urban vernacular, says Johnson.

“Dude” encapsulates the core identity of modern masculinity: cool informality with an underlying sense of endearment and solidarity. Listen closely as it is uttered by you or those around you. The caring tone of voice it inspires is the sound of male social bonding.

“When you use a word like ‘dude,’ it isn't what it means, it's what it points to,” says David Heap, a linguist who teaches a language and gender course at the University of Western Ontario. “We recognize each other's sameness. I'm okay, you're okay, we're the same.”

While some women have attempted to adopt the term, “dude” doesn’t swap genders easily. There’s awkwardness in the execution, specifically because we’re not the same.

“Dudette” clearly doesn’t work. And the utterance of “dude” from a female mouth carries different subtext, says Heap.

A female “dude” utterer is subtly and perhaps unconsciously “indexing,” linguistically indicating she is one of boys, a cool chick, a pal. The take-away information here: If a woman calls you “dude” it means she has no interest in you as a sexual partner. High-fives are about as close as you’re going to get to her physically, say linguists.

Ditto for the words “man” and “guys.” The standard “hey, man” greeting between men exclaims, “We are one.”

Our mothers and grandmothers would have never used the words. Gender roles were more rigidly defined and forced a generation ago.

But contemporary women have “desemanticized” words like “dude,” “man” and “guys” to include “people” rather than men, says Heap.

“Bro” has maintained more gender exclusivity. Its etymology is obvious: A short form of “brother” that has its roots in jazz age African American culture, eventually co-opted into common contemporary male parlance (you see the pattern).

“Bro” raises the intimacy stakes, signalling a closeness between male speaker and recipient yet still maintaining a comfortable distance, says Heap. “Calling somebody bro, you’re saying, ‘I’m close to you but close in a safe way.’ ”

But there’s controversy here: Can white men use it amongst themselves? Can a white man call his black friend “bro”?

It’s done. But not without incident. I have been questioned on several occasions by white men who suggest the term amounts to inappropriate cultural appropriation. “I would say it still has a connotation of an ethnic variety of English,” says Heap. “Observationally people are using it. But almost anything in the wrong context could offend somebody.”

Proposition: Language can’t be held hostage like this. “Bro” must be set free.

When it comes to male put downs, the current slam of choice, “douche bag,” is almost entirely gender specific. The word’s literal reference to female hygiene equipment infuses the term with a potent emasculating nastiness.

Its colloquial definition is somewhat open to interpretation. But my survey of several women determined the word is commonly deployed to describe men who are loose of morals, gruff in nature and generally insensitive.

It can be used in a sentence this way: “The way Mike hit on those women at the bar while his girlfriend looked on was totally douchey.”

There are clear rules here.

The term “douche bag” must always be delivered by women in reference to men. Men cannot use it to describe a brother. Convention also holds that it is the role and responsibility of men to defend against any claims of douchebagginess against a brother.

There are two reasons: First, we are one in our dudeness and we understand that we will inevitably need the favour returned one day.

Of all the male put downs, “douche bag” is the most damaging because it contains a visceral punch of female contempt and dismissiveness that accomplishes the rare feat of finding and attacking male vulnerability.

Its use demands either immediate masculine retreat into shame or humility-filled pleas of innocence.

That said, it’s tough for lads to complain about being douche labelled when the number of female put downs far outnumber those invented for men. The kind of promiscuity for which men are tacitly celebrated, for example, is the source of a litany of female slams reaching into the double digits.

Inherent in the supercilious coolness of male communication is the “bros before hoes” code that conveys what one linguist calls our “reigning definition of masculinity,” or the need to prevent emasculation while simultaneously seeking deep male connection.

These complex, countervailing needs have given birth to our collective identities as dudes. And bros. And, reluctantly, douche bags.

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