



Formal, or not so formal, use of language defines us



**Janet
Holmes**
**WATCH YOUR
LANGUAGE**

DID British Prime Minister David Cameron really put his foot in it with his directive to Angela Eagle, shadow Treasury chief secretary, to "calm down dear" during a heated exchange over hospital waiting lists?

An article by Philip Hensher in *The Independent* commented that he was decades out of date and that no-one currently uses "dear" as a term of address or endearment.

Most Brits would have recognised that Cameron was quoting an (irritating) insurance advert, featuring 75-year-old film director and *Sunday Times* food critic Michel Winner. But that did not stop feminist deputy Labour Party leader Harriet Harman, among others, from accusing him of sexist and patronising language. Angela Eagle simply retorted that she had been patronised by better people than the prime minister.

The exchange reminded me of Rob Muldoon's patronising and insulting comments to the veteran socialist, and activist on women's and peace issues, Sonja Davies, when she first joined Parliament in 1991 and hit back at his labelling her as "Granny".

"I'm proud of that," she said. "And it's something you will never achieve."

Infuriated, he responded: "Poor old soul. If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen, dear." There is no doubt, then, that "dear" had negative and patronising connotations in New Zealand in the 1990s and it is rarely heard these days.

Indeed, the only other context in

which I have noted the use of "dear" as a term of address recently was in a spam email which began "Hello Dear", prompting me to delete it immediately.

Terms of address tend to be regionally and socially variable. While Australasians use mate, in the north of England, where I was born, everyone was "love"; even the male bus conductor used "love" to male customers.

Knowing this, I especially enjoyed this exchange between a police constable and Helen Mirren in her character as Jane Tennison in the TV series *Prime Suspect*.

Arriving at her new police headquarters, Tennison was forced to stand waiting while the police constable finished what he was writing before paying attention to her. Then he said, "mornin' love". Her crushing response was, "Good morning, constable. And it's not love, it's sergeant". In the north "love" is not a gendered endearment term, but a friendly term of address which can be used to anyone – except perhaps your boss.

Choosing the appropriate term of address is thus loaded with socio-cultural dynamite. One episode of the American series *West Wing* showed the president's wife drinking and joking with office staff, who were happily calling her Abbie until someone stepped over an invisible line with a critical comment, at which point she "switched back to being First Lady" – and they reverted to calling her "Mrs President". The switch signals the status difference is always there in the background and





can only be suspended with her consent.

In their usual style, the Monty Python team takes this sociolinguistic rule to an extreme in a sketch where John Cleese interviews a film director, Sir Edward Ross, and gradually moves, initially with permission, but then with escalating discomfort from his interviewee, through a series of increasingly informal variations (Edward, Ed, Ted, Eddie-baby, sweetie, sugar plum etc) till his interviewee walks out.

Even though New Zealand is determinedly egalitarian and encourages the use of first names from the very beginning of a relationship, however institutionalised, many people are sensitive on this issue, with some versions of their names felt to be appropriate for general usage in public and others (nicknames) reserved for close friends or private contexts.

Chinese people have conventionalised this with a name for public use and a family name used only inside their family and with close friends. The formality of the context is also relevant.

In law courts, parliament and graduation ceremonies, we use formal titles and refer to people in relation to their roles: my respected colleague, your Honour, Mr Speaker, Chancellor. So the Vice Chancellor might be somewhat disconcerted by a student who accepted his congratulations at graduation with a casual "Thanks, Pat" – especially if it could be heard all over the auditorium on this unusually ritualistic occasion. Or maybe not – perhaps tolerance of informality has extended further than I think.

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