



IN OUR NEW COLUMN, DEPUTY EDITOR LOTTE JEFFS TAKES **A SIDEWAYS LOOK** AT A WORD **THE FASHION WORLD** CAN'T STOP SAYING AND ASKS: 'WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?'

LEXICON

'FAT'

Adjective: Large in bulk or circumference

I have no time for people who tell me they feel fat because they just ate a burrito or they skipped their spin class that morning. They'll pinch the skin on their stomachs or puff air into their cheeks and say, 'Eugh, I'm so gross,' and wait for my reaction. But I've stopped telling my skinny friends they don't look fat and I've stopped telling my fat friends they don't look fat, because I just don't care. Come to me with what you really mean and I'll listen. Do you feel crap about your body because you've been too stressed to exercise? Are you just a bit low and lacking confidence? Is it depression? Do you wish you'd ordered the taco bowl rather than the burrito? All of these things are worthy of discussion – how fat you 'feel' is not.

If I didn't sound like such an embarrassing mum saying it, I'd use 'fat' – or should that be 'phat'? – as a positive adjective far more. 'That is a fat look you are in today, Lorraine,' I may say to my Editor-in-Chief, meaning she's wearing something big, or bold, or *excessively* cool. There might be an *abundance* to it, an overflowing of brilliance. The Urban Dictionary says 'phat' means 'awesome', but also advises, 'The word is no longer "in" really. It has kind of phased out and is mostly used by wannabes.' Noted.

People far more frequently use the word as a synonym for something negative, or a simple

insult. When I was at school, 'gay' was banded about in the same way. It was the worst possible thing kids could imagine being, so if you were useless at sport, wore the wrong trainers or were good at maths, you were automatically 'gay'. Then it wasn't just loser people who were gay: anything deemed unenjoyable or lame was afforded the same misnomer.

While working for a newspaper in the mid-Noughties, I caught an Oxford-educated reporter



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bashing the jammed photocopier in the office and calling it 'a gay piece of crap'. I asked him what he meant. 'Y'know, it's just really stupid and annoying,' he said. 'I'm gay,' I said, looking him square in the eyes. I'll never forget his face as he struggled to connect what he idiotically thought was a meaningless slang signifier with the reality of the signified.

Teenagers aren't bothered about being gay any more. In fact, anecdotally it seems that being

queer, pan, bi, ambi, poly or trans – or at least knowing someone who is – equates to the ultimate in cool. What is really anathema to these young women is fat. Be who you want to be – as long as you're skinny.

My colleague Billie knows what it's like to have her body type used carelessly as an insult. 'I never used to be comfortable with the word "fat,"' she tells me. 'It's the kind of word that makes you squirm whether you're saying it, or someone is saying it to you. But when you break it down, fat is just a physical adjective like thin, tall and short. It's the emotive connotations that people automatically assume when referring to me as fat that I am not OK with, such as lazy, unfit or ugly. I am fat, that is my body type, but it certainly doesn't make me who I am.'

There are enough great insults in the English language that it shouldn't be necessary to imbue words with such negative connotations. I vote for reinstating some Shakespearean disses: 'There's no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune'; 'You scullion, you rampallian, you fustilarian!' and my personal favourite, 'Thou art as loathsome as a toad.' But will body size stop being used as a marker of a woman's worth, or lack of it, any time soon? Fat chance.

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