

As commonly used expressions go, “I love you” is up there with “okay”, “ohmigod” and a popular but unprintable utterance rhyming with “duck trough”. Were some recently scorned despot to banish it from our lives in a moment of Orwellian madness, it would do to the romance-literature and pop-music canons what the Luftwaffe did to the London skyline.

It’s also the most loaded phrase in the history of humanity – a heady, life-affirming gem to most of us; a worn, haggard lie to a scarred, cynical few. It can be a confession, a plea, an apology, a demand, a test, an avowal – or any combination of the above. Yet, in its pure, unadulterated form, “I love you” is the ultimate statement of devotion, offered with amorous abandon (in different languages) in cultures all around the world.

Which is why men – the more commitment-phobic sex – are far more reluctant to say it than women. Or so we thought. A new study in America’s *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* suggests that

blokes are twice as likely as their female counterparts to drop the L-Bomb first – in many cases, up to six weeks before their ladies. The same study found that 64 per cent of people assume women are usually the first to profess their love.

However, sex therapist Dr Laura Berman smells a rat when it comes to men and the First-Time Proclamation (FTP). “Some men might realise that professing their love will make a woman more likely to engage in sex with them,” she says, “so they confess their emotions to illustrate their commitment and ‘seal the deal’.”

This view certainly has a whiff of Darwinian truth about it: boy meets girl, then resorts to any means necessary to plant his seed before clearing off to look for another flower bed; girl meets boy, has sexual relations, faces the possibility of motherhood, then wants to draw up a contract for long-term association.

I don’t buy Berman’s argument, though. Firstly, it assumes that modern blokes – or enough of us to affect a comprehensive study – are so cynical, calculating and selfish that we’ll detonate an emotional time bomb just for a bit of instant gratification. Moreover, in the modern dating landscape, sex before/without love is de rigueur anyway. If anything, I would suggest that those three words can, in the early stages of a relationship, put a lot of women off getting jiggy with it.

No, it’s far more likely (in my admittedly amateur opinion) that men are more eager to issue the FTP because we are more impulsive, women more circumspect – a disparity also reflected in the way the genders drive, eat and drink. Men also have a stronger need to control, and propel, their destinies –

including their relationships. Which is fine. Because really, there is no “correct” time to utter this phrase. The only cast-iron rule is this: say it when it’s right. Which is when it’s true. And you’ll know when it’s true because the feeling resembles waking up during an appendectomy and yet, perversely, revelling in the sheer bliss of it ...

So the knottier question is not so much *when* to say it but *how*. I would suggest there are certain golden rules that apply to both genders, whoever takes the plunge first. Firstly, do say it. With your lips and tongue. Texting or emailing the FTP is cowardly and cold – and forget skywriting, lipstick on mirrors and plastic toast stamps, too. Unless you do something very, very special – commission God to project the phrase across the face of the moon using pink neon celestial beams, for example – the written word is not acceptable. Not the first time, anyway.

Another faux pas is making the FTP under the influence of anything other than oxytocin, the body’s natural love chemical. There’s nothing wrong with alcohol oiling the wheels of courtship, but a slurred declaration will have a false ring to it.

And always say it when the two of you are alone – no one wants to hear their beloved utter that life-affirming *bijou* in the presence of a fiddling waiter, fellow bathers on a packed beach or – God forbid! – the speaker’s grinning, glass-raising family.

Still, you might decide to take my advice with a pinch of salt once you hear my own most recent issuing of the FTP. I said those immortal words to my now fiancée not while treading water in a Balinese infinity pool, or tossing coins merrily into Rome’s Trevi Fountain, but naked, in the throes of our first-ever glorious bout between the sheets. In my defence, I didn’t even know this was frowned upon until I researched this article. (I’d been wondering why, for five chilling seconds, mid-coitus, my beloved had glared at me as if I’d just peed in her handbag.) “Talking with his tackle” is one disgruntled female message-board wag’s take on this approach.

To my relief, I know of far worse FTP stories – a friend of a friend, for example, who felt the splatter of seagull poop on his bald pate a second after “the moment”.

But really, the worst that can happen is you find out the other party doesn’t feel the same. And perfect timing won’t change that – you’re never going to be Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin effortlessly causing each other to orgasm by purring, “*Je t’aime*” over a baroque

keyboard riff – so the best you can do is keep it real.

In an unintentionally rhyming nutshell: always mean it, never demean it, be gentle but bold and don’t withhold. Oh, and maybe keep a sick bag in your back pocket in case your partner reacts like I just did after rereading that last sentence. ●

IF MEN ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO SAY “I LOVE YOU” FIRST, Nick Scott THINKS IT’S TIME TO OFFER THEM A LITTLE ADVICE.

THE L WORD



THERE IS NO CORRECT TIME TO UTTER THIS PHRASE. THE ONLY CAST-IRON RULE IS, SAY IT WHEN IT’S RIGHT. WHICH IS WHEN IT’S TRUE.