

2021

## The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture

Stephen Chrisomalis

*Wayne State University*, [chrisomalis@wayne.edu](mailto:chrisomalis@wayne.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/anthrofrp>



Part of the [Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Discourse and Text Linguistics Commons](#), and the [Linguistic Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chrisomalis, Stephen (editor). 2021. The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture.  
<https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/anthrofrp/4/>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Research Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

# **The Lexiculture Papers**

## **English Words and Culture**

edited by Stephen Chrisomalis

Wayne State University  
2021

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Stephen Chrisomalis</i>	
<b>Lexiculture: A Student Perspective</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>Agata Borowiecki</i>	
<b>Akimbo</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Agata Borowiecki</i>	
<b>Anymore</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Jackie Lorey</i>	
<b>Artisanal</b>	<b>19</b>
<i>Emelyn Nyboer</i>	
<b>Aryan</b>	<b>23</b>
<i>David Prince</i>	
<b>Big-ass</b>	<b>28</b>
<i>Nicole Markovic</i>	
<b>Bromance</b>	<b>34</b>
<i>Alistair King</i>	
<b>Cafeteria</b>	<b>39</b>
<i>Deanna English</i>	
<b>Childfree</b>	<b>46</b>
<i>Virginia Nastase</i>	
<b>Chipotle</b>	<b>51</b>
<i>Gabriela Ortiz</i>	
<b>Cyber</b>	<b>56</b>
<i>Matthew Worpell</i>	
<b>Discotheque</b>	<b>60</b>
<i>Ashley Johnson</i>	
<b>Disinterested</b>	<b>66</b>
<i>Hope Kujawa</i>	
<b>Douche</b>	<b>71</b>
<i>Aila Kulkarni</i>	
<b>Dwarf</b>	<b>78</b>
<i>John Anderson</i>	
<b>Eleventy</b>	<b>84</b>
<i>Julia Connally</i>	
<b>Erectile Dysfunction</b>	<b>87</b>
<i>Corrinne Sanger</i>	
<b>Eskimo</b>	<b>93</b>
<i>Valerie Jaruzel</i>	

<b>Expat</b>	97
<i>Michelle Layton</i>	
<b>Feisty</b>	103
<i>Kathryn Horner</i>	
<b>Femme</b>	108
<i>Dana Paglia</i>	
<b>Gangbang</b>	113
<i>Michelle Gardner</i>	
<b>Giddy-up</b>	117
<i>William Pizzimenti</i>	
<b>Gnarly</b>	124
<i>Mallory Moore</i>	
<b>Guru</b>	129
<i>Kaitlin Carter</i>	
<b>Heavy Petting</b>	134
<i>Abigail Orzech</i>	
<b>Househusband</b>	139
<i>Lynn Charara</i>	
<b>Ixnay</b>	144
<i>Lisette Wittbrodt</i>	
<b>Judeo-Christian</b>	149
<i>Dominic Colaluca</i>	
<b>Kiki</b>	155
<i>Pierce Krolewski</i>	
<b>Lawl</b>	159
<i>Erica Preciado</i>	
<b>Make Out</b>	164
<i>Anna Khreizat</i>	
<b>Magick</b>	170
<i>Matthew Ashford</i>	
<b>MC</b>	175
<i>Travis Kruso</i>	
<b>Michigander</b>	180
<i>Jaime Baker</i>	
<b>Molly</b>	187
<i>Brianna LeBlanc</i>	
<b>Morph</b>	194
<i>Jack Marone</i>	



<b>Nirvana</b>	<b>199</b>
<i>Soni Qazim</i>	
<b>Nonzero</b>	<b>206</b>
<i>Gianna Eisele</i>	
<b>Nymphomaniac</b>	<b>212</b>
<i>Christen Helper</i>	
<b>Octopi</b>	<b>217</b>
<i>Kayla Niner</i>	
<b>Orgo</b>	<b>229</b>
<i>Emma Velasquez</i>	
<b>Penultimate</b>	<b>238</b>
<i>Asa Choate</i>	
<b>Pow</b>	<b>244</b>
<i>Justin Williams</i>	
<b>Punk</b>	<b>249</b>
<i>Mikey Elster</i>	
<b>Radical</b>	<b>258</b>
<i>Mohanned Darwish</i>	
<b>Ratchet</b>	<b>263</b>
<i>Jessica Hurst</i>	
<b>Realness</b>	<b>268</b>
<i>Samantha Hess</i>	
<b>Slaps</b>	<b>272</b>
<i>Cheyenne Boinais</i>	
<b>Soul Patch</b>	<b>279</b>
<i>Mikayla Swasey</i>	
<b>Spaniard</b>	<b>285</b>
<i>Eric Gresock</i>	
<b>Tarnation</b>	<b>289</b>
<i>Hannah Langsdorf</i>	
<b>Troll</b>	<b>298</b>
<i>Mary S. Cavanagh</i>	
<b>Undocumented</b>	<b>307</b>
<i>Issamar Camacho-Almaraz</i>	
<b>Uppity</b>	<b>314</b>
<i>Emily Lock-Lee</i>	
<b>Vanilla</b>	<b>321</b>
<i>Cecilia Murrell-Harvey</i>	

<b>Vape</b>	325
<i>Julia Hoelzle</i>	
<b>Vintage</b>	334
<i>Grace Fusani</i>	
<b>Winningest</b>	338
<i>Melissa Ashford</i>	
<b>Xerox</b>	350
<i>Sara Bugamelli</i>	
<b>Ye Olde</b>	359
<i>Gavin Redding</i>	
<b>Yoink</b>	365
<i>Jessica Beatty</i>	

# Introduction

Stephen Chrisomalis

Cite as: Chrisomalis, Stephen. 2021. Introduction. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 1-5.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## What is Lexiculture?

Lexiculture is an approach to language that studies how words and their meanings intersect with cultural and historical contexts. The term is not entirely of my own invention; after starting to use it independently, I discovered that Robert Galisson had originated it (in French) in 1988 and used it in several publications thereafter, in much the same sense that I am using it (Galisson 1988, 1999). The common point of interest in our approaches is that words are seen as discrete, analyzable aspects of culture, and thus provide an avenue for analyzing social change. However, to my knowledge, the term has not yet percolated into the English-language scholarship.

Of course, neither Galisson nor I are the first to reflect on the importance of individual words and their meanings for understanding social life. Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (1976) is perhaps the best-known and widest-cited book in this research lineage. In *Keywords*, Williams, an intellectual and social historian, sought to demonstrate complex interrelations and semantic shifts in the basic vocabulary of the humanities and social sciences, with a particular aim to support students and scholars for whom the expansion and variation of terminologies could (and can) be an obstacle to clear understanding. Similarly, the cognitive linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1997) takes a cross-cultural, cognitive, and linguistic approach to similar sorts of issues in her *Understanding Cultures through their Key Words* and other publications.

These books have the advantage of being supported by a substantial scholarly apparatus, and enjoy their well-deserved reputations. But for the student just taking the first steps into research of any kind, what they lack is a means to the joy of discovery in the social sciences of language, of collecting data on new words, important words, transformed words, and just plain weird words. Lexiculture is about taking that joy, transforming it into research questions, and then giving students the tools to arrive at satisfactory answers.

## What are the Lexiculture Papers?

The *Lexiculture Papers* are essays of undergraduate student scholarship in linguistics and anthropology, bearing on the relationship between individual English words and the social contexts in which they are coined, used, and transformed. In choosing a neologism for this concept and for this project, I am consciously rejecting other terms, some of great antiquity (*etymology*, *lexicography*) and some of great recency (*culturomics*). *Lexiculture* aims to carve out a distinct interdisciplinary space, using concepts from sociolinguistics, lexicography, and linguistic anthropology, to study the 'culture of words' from a perspective accessible to lay readers and scholarly audiences alike.

This project had its inception in 2010. As a professor of linguistic anthropology at Wayne State University, I teach a course each year entitled *Language and Culture*, which is required for all our undergraduate anthropology majors and is taken by many linguistics majors as well. Many of these students come into the class with a vague interest in language, but also significant trepidation or even

loathing at the sound of words like *grammar* and *linguistics*. Moreover, while some of my students have some knowledge of other languages, many of them do not, leaving English as the chief touchstone through which I can frame key concepts in the field. I developed a pilot project on the word *chairperson* (Chrisomalis 2010) followed by an experimental student project in my 2010 course, before putting it into full practice in the 2013 version of my course (Chrisomalis 2013), and run yearly since that time.

The papers in this volume thus all originated as individual student research conducted in the span of a one-semester intermediate-division undergraduate course. None of the students had extensive background in linguistics or linguistic anthropology prior to taking the course. Students chose words based on their personal interest from a long (~100 items) list that I developed and am constantly expanding and revising, or, if they wished, they could make a written proposal to analyze another word of interest to them. Some of the most interesting papers in the volume have come from student-chosen words (e.g., *ratchet*, *pow*, *nirvana*). The words on my prepared list were single English words or two-word phrases that I felt might be of interest, and had their primary area of historical interest between roughly 1800 and the present. This time delimitation is necessary because the datasets that are freely available to students largely cover this period, and because of the more specialized knowledge that would be required to cover more distant periods (or, for that matter, non-English words).

At the completion of the course, students who earned an A on their original term paper were invited to contribute to the published document you're now reading, submitting their essay to me after the end of term, making changes to their papers as needed. Around 20%-25% of each class normally is thus invited to participate, and around 90% of those invited do, eventually, submit their work. I have done some copyediting, fixed dead links, and organized and structured the papers consistently, but the work is their own. The first papers in the volume were written in 2013, and the last ones in 2020; inevitably, that means that some of them are the product of the time when they were written, but I have ensured that active, relevant web links, where needed (in 2021) work.

## How do you do it?

Given the wealth of tools available today, my entry into linguistic research for my students is through individual words, their histories, and their transformations. I probably could not have supported students in this project in 2000 or 2005 because so many of the tools we now have at our disposal did not exist then, or were available only to specialists. Linguistic corpora (such as COCA and COHA) and tools for massive textual analysis (most notably the Google Ngram Viewer) stand out among these. You'll see that influence throughout the chapters of this book. There are some exceptional pieces of principally corpus-based, quantitative analysis of single words among the essays in this book (e.g., *disinterested*, *anymore*, *xerox*, *nonzero*) that deserve considerable attention for their approach and the answers they reach. This kind of analysis is one that few anthropology and linguistics students get the opportunity to employ, especially as undergraduates.

But the *Lexiculture Papers* are not intended as a showcase for purely corpus-based or quantitative work. Even having regular access to the online searchable Oxford English Dictionary makes a huge difference for students who may come into the class thinking of 'the dictionary' as an abstract tome containing 'the language'. And as a tool for thinking about contemporary informal language from the perspective of users, the Urban Dictionary is as good a source as any. Using Elizabeth Knowles' (2010) *How to Read a Word* as a core text, I aim to get students first and foremost to think about words as aspects of social life, and only secondarily as subjects of quantitative research. Lots of great papers in this volume (e.g., *vape*, *soul patch*, *MC*, *realness*) have no charts, no graphs, nothing like that. They are simply exceptional qualitative, historical, and sociocultural analysis. And, of course, all sorts of truly exceptional papers use both forms of analysis in a complementary fashion. More than simply mastering linguistic tools, I encourage students to look at how words intersected

with social and historical trends at particular times, and how they changed over time. These are the tools of critical analysis of language that are, in many ways, the same as they were a century ago.

There are certainly parallels between lexiculture and the work done by proponents of *culturomics*, the quantitative analyses of texts, which is a sort of branch of corpus linguistics using data compiled by Google (Michel et al. 2011). *Culturomics*, and the Google Ngram Viewer that is its primary public analytical tool, is important, and as you will see in the papers collected here, lots of my students make use of Ngrams or other related tools of analysis. I share the conviction of the folks at the *Culturomics* project that “quantitative methods can be a great source of ideas that can then be explored further by studying primary texts” (*culturomics.org*). But the question is, how ought one to do that? What works well and what doesn’t? Rather than get into the (by now rather extensive) scholarly debate over whether these tools have any value (they clearly do), lexiculture seeks to actually use this approach in tandem with innovative theoretical and methodological approaches from the language and human sciences.

I use the concept of *lexiculture* as a way of making the linguistic joys of lexicography and etymology intersect with the intellectual interests of my students in the social sciences. In class, we watch and discuss Erin McKean’s wonderful TED talk, ‘The joy of lexicography’, to help students to think of themselves as fishers of words. But I also want them to think of themselves as capable of collecting and analyzing rich cultural content around words, not simply to find the earliest example. To be sure, an etymological puzzle can be amazingly fun, but antedating is not a substitute for analysis. And I think, in general, if lexiculture were solely etymology or lexicography, it wouldn’t be that interesting to students of linguistics or anthropology. It seems, at first glance, too removed from context – both from the context of other elements of language and from the context of broader social, historical, and political trends. Even a brief look at this volume will show that the study of words can be so much more. It builds on all sorts of work across historical pragmatics, sociolinguistics, conceptual metaphor theory, lexical semantics, and more. As this student-driven classroom project has progressed, I have learned a lot from exciting new scholarship in these fields on single words such as *jingo* (King 2014) and *bisexual* (Wilkinson 2019) and *lame* (Aaron 2010). And this work has also inspired my own scholarly work on English indefinite hyperbolic numerals like *umpteen* and *zillion* (Chrisomalis 2016).

Because I am a linguistic anthropologist (and not, principally, a dialectologist or a corpus linguist or a historical linguist, any of whose skills are sometimes applied here), my particular focus is to get junior scholars (and, indeed, senior scholars!) thinking about the language-culture intersection in new and productive ways. I want to get them to think about words not as individual inventions, but through their adoption into speech communities, through their transmission at particular historical moments, and through their transformations within social contexts. This sometimes brings in sociolinguistic and linguistic-anthropological theory and methods into the study of English words – concepts like metalinguistic awareness or indexicality. But because I don’t think that bombarding students with theory first is a good way to teach, the *Lexiculture Papers* should be accessible without any particular training on the reader’s part.

## Why do it?

The simplest answer is probably also the best one: we do it because it’s a lot of fun. It’s fun for me, as an instructor, to have undergraduates who choose (within parameters) their own research projects and see them through to completion. Autonomy is both personally empowering for the students and also affords opportunities for serendipity. Even when you think you know why a word is interesting, it’s enormously fun to see a student take a paper in an entirely surprising, but no less interesting, direction than what you expected. That kind of fun is synergistic – students and I feed off each others’ growing interest in the work we’re doing.

At the beginning of this essay, I alluded to the joy of discovery. My personal desire to convey the joy of conducting their own linguistic research to my students was the major impetus for the *Lexiculture* project. In a field like archaeology, my departmental colleagues introduce students to research through work on large, collaborative field and laboratory projects in which they can develop their skills over time and where they get to be part of research early on in their professional training. In contrast, linguistic research is frequently seen as the purview of the 'lone wolf' and to require a steep learning curve, which, before it is surmounted, nothing serious can be accomplished. This seemed to me to be a serious mistake – one that would lead students to be attracted to other fields. I'm not in the business of generating dozens of sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists out of my classroom teaching. But I am committed to making sure that the students in my classroom understand the sense of pleasure that I experience doing this sort of research, and hope that they do so as well. In the *Lexiculture Papers*, many of the authors have used their essays as an exploration of their own learning process, taking the reader through the stages of their research and personalizing the process of lexical investigation.

Of course, there are also professional benefits to the project for the students. From time to time, I've considered substituting some other assignment for the *Lexiculture* project, just to mix things up, or to provide some different sort of methodological training. But the number of students who I've seen use their paper as a springboard to something else, such as a McNair or other undergraduate research project, or a graduate school application essay, highlights that this sort of original research has tremendous value for many students. Putting these essays in print further expands that value, making them available permanently.

Finally, I think that this sort of investigation performs a broader service to an interested public. We are blessed, in linguistics, to have a host of popularizers who write essays, produce podcasts, or create other short-form content on English words. Specifically, I am thinking of folks like Nancy Friedman, James Harbeck, Gretchen McCulloch, Michael Quinion, Jesse Sheidlower, Helen Zaltzman, Kory Stamper, Ben Yagoda, and Ben Zimmer, among many others. And some of those authors' works end up as sources for the *Lexiculture Papers*. But we're not just reinventing the wheel in these essays; our contributors build on this research and then ask the next question(s). For any word, there is room for multiple essays from multiple perspectives. In any case, we also have far more words than we have word-slingers. I believe that well-written student scholarship ought to be accessible to the enormous, interested audience for this sort of writing. This document is open access and freely available to anyone because it falls within this tradition of public writing on words.

## Acknowledgements

The Department of Anthropology and the Linguistics Program at Wayne State University have supported my teaching and this project throughout its lifespan. Funding for this project was facilitated by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program through the Wayne State Provost's office, allowing for research assistance. My student assistant, Agata Borowiecki, has been of endless support in correcting errors, tracking down links and images, and the thankless work of formatting, as well as authoring the 'student perspective' essay that follows this one. Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of the hundreds of students who have been in my *Language and Culture* course at Wayne State University since the inception of the project. Not all of the papers submitted in my class could appear here, but every student contributed to classroom discussions about the relationship of words and culture that inform this book. It is truly a privilege to get to work alongside all of you in this scholarly endeavor.

## References

- Aaron, Jessi Elana. (2010). "An awkward companion: disability and the semantic landscape of English lame." *Journal of English Linguistics* 38 (1):25-55.
- Chrisomalis, Stephen. (2010). What do students want to know about lexicography?  
<https://glossographia.wordpress.com/2010/06/09/student-lexicography/>
- Chrisomalis, Stephen. (2013). Lexiculture redux: new adventures in teaching linguistic anthropology.  
<https://glossographia.wordpress.com/2013/06/17/lexiculture-redux-new-adventures-in-teaching-linguistic-anthropology/>
- Chrisomalis, Stephen. (2016). "Umpteen reflections on indefinite hyperbolic numerals." *American speech* 91 (1):3-33.
- Galisson, R. (1988). Cultures et lexicultures. Pour une approche dictionnaire de la culture partagée. *Cahiers d'Études Hispaniques Médiévales*, 7(1), 325-341.
- Galisson, Robert. (1999). La pragmatique lexiculturelle pour accéder autrement, à une autre culture, par un autre lexique. *Études de linguistique appliquée*, 116(Oct-Dec), 477-496.
- Google Books Ngram Viewer. <https://books.google.com/ngrams>
- King, Elliot. (2014). "The emergence of "jingo" and "jingoism" as political terms in public debate in Great Britain (1878-1880)." *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 15 (2):292-313.
- Knowles, Elizabeth. (2010). *How to Read a Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McKean, Erin. (2007). The joy of lexicography. TED2007.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/erin\\_mckean\\_the\\_joy\\_of\\_lexicography](https://www.ted.com/talks/erin_mckean_the_joy_of_lexicography)
- Michel, Jean-Baptiste, Shen, Yuan Kui, Aiden, Aviva Presser, Veres, Adrian, Gray, Matthew K, Pickett, Joseph P, Hoiberg, Dale, Clancy, Dan, Norvig, Peter, and Orwant, Jon. (2011). Quantitative analysis of culture using millions of digitized books. *Science*, 331 (6014), 176-182.
- Online Etymology Dictionary. <https://www.etymonline.com/>
- Oxford English Dictionary. OED Online. <https://oed.com/>
- Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/>
- Wierzbicka, Anna. (1997). *Understanding cultures through their key words : English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilkinson, Mark. (2019). "'Bisexual oysters': A diachronic corpus-based critical discourse analysis of bisexual representation in The Times between 1957 and 2017." *Discourse & Communication* 13 (2):249-267.
- Williams, Raymond. (1976). *Keywords : a vocabulary of culture and society*. New York: Oxford University Press.



# Lexiculture: A Student Perspective

Agata Borowiecki

Cite as: Borowiecki, Agata. 2021. Lexiculture: A Student Perspective. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 6-7.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

When I was first informed about such a project in Dr. Chrisomalis' class, I was beyond excited. We, as a wide variety of undergraduate students, were being given the chance to do original linguistic anthropology research on a word of our choice. This meant creativity would reign our decisions but also guide us in a process that was new to many. Personally, I had experience with such types of research through the Extended Essay process through the International Baccalaureate program back in high school, so I knew this would be similar in structure. Having a chance to do something similar but in my field of study was extraordinary, especially because the class was one which I was not quite sure what to expect. Most classes were lecture, quiz, and term paper based, then being given this opportunity was exciting. The class was made up of many different students, from all different majors. This project was the first taste of personal and original research many would embark on. Thankfully, with the guidance of Dr. Chrisomalis, it was easier and much better organized than complete free reign. He gave us a chance to choose something we would find interesting; a word from a curated list to research. The project itself was guided in a way that you would not fall too far behind if you followed the structure of the class as well as discussions based solely in a peer setting to help us find our way through the paper, as well as get other student's input on parts of the paper we were struggling with. The formatting of the class and the tireless work of the professor made the work not only less stressful on each of us, but made us really appreciate our own power to do research and fall more in love with the power of words over time.

My word came to me by surprise. I chose my word 'akimbo' from the list provided by closing my eyes and choosing blindly. I was surprised by the real history of the word because I never would have thought it came from where it did. Looking at it, I thought it would be based in some African or Asian languages with a strong CV-CV-CV word structure, but it turned out to be from Old Norse. This was just one of the surprises that came with the word and research on it. Before originally delving in, I asked my friends in the class what they thought of the word and to my surprise, none of them seemed to have ever heard of it. I had a faint inkling of the word, reading it in books or hearing it from older family members. I was shocked no one had heard it before. To any end, the research brought me deep into a new understanding of the word and how history tends to change what words we use. An interesting phenomenon occurs that erases some words common to a dialect in the past and changes the placement of it even. In my case, 'akimbo' was rather erased in common speech and writing and replaced with other phrases that gave the same meaning. Remarkably enough though, through more research, the word seemed to pop up more in different contexts. The original definition was something along the lines of "bowed or in a bent shape" while a secondary definition was closer to meaning "dual-wielding". This secondary definition is where the word stuck, in the most surprising part of the common lexicon that I never thought would be influenced: video games. It turned out that it was common for video games, specifically games that involved shooting or fighting with multiple weapons, as a word for when players would dual-wield such weapons, specifically guns or short-swords.



This understanding of how uncommon words wiggle their way into common language in different situational strata was something of a revelation to me. Of course, I knew that words would disappear and reappear into a lexicon throughout time, and the meanings could change, but the research I was doing on 'akimbo' changed my perspective on the flow of these occurrences. Knowing that one definition could be totally gone while another one overtook it in a specific sector of a language's lexical influence was interesting enough, but seeing it almost play out while looking into it was something different that re-ignited my love for the study of language, history, and how these aspects intertwined over time and even districts of life. Yes, I knew the word from books or family who had spoken it off-handedly, but knowing that it was in common use in something I enjoyed outside of work was incredible.

Although it was an arduous process, as research tends to be, I did not fall into many holes or face many troubles. The most interesting part was that my peers did not know of the word. This was something worth looking into, and maybe the social implications of the word as well. 'Akimbo' did not seem to be politically or racially charged like some other words I had found on the list, and did not drag negative connotations alongside either, as I saw other words do. This knowledge was interesting and meaningful in its own right. We must remember that words are strong, and "the pen is mightier than the sword" as the saying goes. Although my word and project did not push me into a charged hole, it was still changing in definition and usage like all words eventually do. I learned so much about my word in just the plainest sense, but knowing that it can turn into something charged was always in the back of my mind. In this time that we live in, and the near future, words have the power to push us to be motivated, emotional, and pass knowledge along in a way that is all too often forgotten by those who speak with and without meaning. The project itself is just a glimmer of light into a deeper tunnel that leads us to understanding the meaning of words, how we use words to push ourselves and others, but also in the power we, as people, possess to create something beautiful and meaningful in a time where the coming storm isn't often as clear in the line of vision as we had hoped. What I mean with all this is that the continuous journey of learning, pushing our limits, and growing in our understanding of words and their impact is just one small step into understanding more of ourselves and the world around us, a journey that never ends but is full of joyous mistakes and successes. In any case, we should continue to reach for what we are searching and a project like this one is a great way to start. Something small inevitably sparks a long string of events that leads us further; academically, personally, and as a species.

# Akimbo

Agata Borowiecki

Cite as: Borowiecki, Agata. 2021. Akimbo. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 8-13.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction: were we left ‘akimbo’?

Looking through the list of words to choose from at the beginning of October, there was a very low level of motivation that rolled over me. The words in the list (nothing against it) all just seemed rather boring, empty, un-historic words to me. I decided to see what my other classmates had chosen and strike them from my list. Once that was done, I counted them up, and went to google to generate a random number. This led me to the word “akimbo”, number 15 in my non-alphabetical list. Thinking back on it, I know that this was not the best way to choose, but it worked out the best for me. I know I had heard or read this word once or twice in the past, and I had a vague idea of what it meant.

What struck me most about it was the day we discussed the word for the first time in class, in groups. No one in my group had heard of the word, although we were a mix of ages and cultures, so that got me thinking. If I myself had a vague recollection of hearing or reading it, why didn’t they? I wanted to dig deeper, and thankfully the assignment pushed me in the right direction to do so. After a few arduous hours of wasting time, I sat down and organised my thoughts on this strange word. Was it historically based in African languages? Was it somehow on its transition out of the common English we speak in the United States? Then I finally settled on the following: How has the use of “akimbo” changed from 1800 (or earlier) to today and why has its use nearly disappeared?

## Definition

In terms of definitions there are two in modern dictionaries for the word “akimbo” (on its own) and generally one for the phrases associated each, such as “arms akimbo” or “legs akimbo”. Interestingly enough, these phrases hover alongside the first general definition of “akimbo” itself in general terms with some interesting differences.

The first general definition for “akimbo” alone has to do with a description of position. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) online defines this as “an adverb; with hands on hips and elbows turned outwards” c 1460-2007 (see Figure 1). It also gives a secondary definition being “with reference to limbs spread or flung out widely or haphazardly; askew, awry, in disorder” as well as a tertiary definition “crooked, bent,



Figure 1: Arms akimbo

or askew” reminiscent of the possible Old Norse origin meaning “bent into a curve”. Similarly, Wiktionary also holds similar definitions such as, “adj. With a crook or bend, with hand on hip and elbow turned outward” but also “adv. Into, in, or of the position where arms are akimbo”. Even Urban Dictionary, the source of less-than-expert definitions, though full of useful popular and colloquial definitions, seems to have similar definitions as the more refined dictionaries; “limbs bent, most often hands on hips; to cross/place hands on hips; spread out, wide open”. What all these definitions have in common is the understanding of something being bent, normally arms, in a sort of stance. This means that the use of the word seems to be the same for many people, and often calls for an action in the definition.

The secondary general definition has to do with something similar to dual-wielding. This is vastly different than the previous definition and raises the question as of where this new definition came from though no definition or foundation date is given. Urban Dictionary comes in with a new, or modern definition connected to the use of “akimbo” in popular culture, old Western and action movies, and video games; “to hold and fire two guns, one in each hand, most often handguns or sub-machine guns; to dual-wield firearms; to hold two pistols, one in each hand”, as well as a rather specific, “a belligerent stance with arms slightly bent and elbows facing outwards; a form of posturing”. In these situations, it is easy to connect the word to a modern action and tech-minded situation, especially in terms of old Western and action movies (outside of the last posturing-oriented definition).



**Figure 2: Ngram: akimbo vs. arms akimbo vs. legs akimbo**

Although mentioned on Urban Dictionary, the similar phrase “guns akimbo” does not show up on the Ngram Viewer at all, which is interesting, since that data ends at 2000 and action Western movies were popular beginning around the 1960s. Though it is possible that the rise in “akimbo” shooting in old Westerns and action films may have helped create spike B that we see in Figure 2. Though “dual-wielding” does not appear anywhere on the Ngram, we can see it in action in films such as *Dirty Harry* and in cartoons such as with Looney Toons’ character Yosemite Sam (who first appeared in 1944). Interestingly enough, if plugged into the Ngram, phrases such as “dual-wielding” or “guns akimbo” do not show up at all. The fault may lie in that the Ngram only has data from 1800–2000 and such phrasing is relatively new in such circumstances, as well as the lack of common knowledge of such words in the modern day although it is still used in such videos as are made by Ahoy claiming the first use of “akimbo” wielding in video games occurred in a game called “Sheriff” in 1979.

## Use

Overall, the word “akimbo” has been used in writing to some extent since 1800 according to the Google Ngram Viewer and had two peaks until 2000 (Figure 2). Sources indicate that it was in use before this, as early as 1460, though the word really began to rise in usage from 1800 until about 1895. During this time, the word “akimbo” was often used in patents, meaning professional documents, especially between 1890 and 1910 where we see the first spike (A) in Figure 2. Examples of this word in patents can be seen in a mirror-frame design patent from 1895 quoting “[a clown] whose arms are akimbo and rest upon the legs” (Figure 3). The second spike (B) comes later, from around 1920 to 1940. Of these, the use of “akimbo” still follows the most common definition of “arms on hips” but is now focused on describing artifacts such as that in an article on Female Fertility Figures for *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* by a Miss M. A. Murray quoting “the arms, unduly long, are passed under the legs, giving the akimbo effect seen in the Oxford figure” (Murray 97).

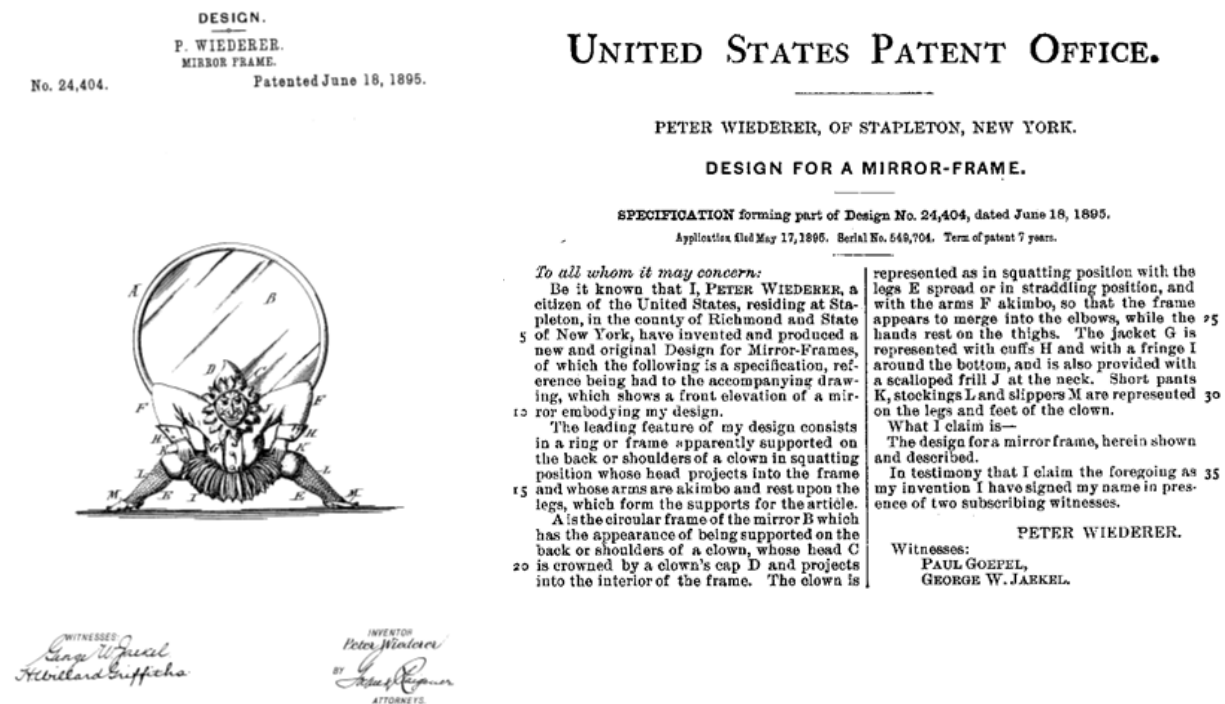


Figure 3: Wiederer's patent for a mirror-frame with arms "akimbo", 1895

Based on this evidence, we can see the spikes A and B come from two different situational uses of the word. In both instances, the definition stays the same for both situations, though the field in which they are used changes. Spike A is more-so linked with the patent or legal documentation, while spike B tends to lean towards the anthropological field and writings. Unfortunately, there is little to no evidence thus far as of how the word was used in spoken language in the past, and must be investigated further.

## Other Uses

Searching the word “akimbo” online lent itself to show other phrases which included the word such as “arms akimbo” or “legs akimbo”. Such phrases gained popularity over the years as well (as seen in Appendix 2) and give interesting insight into possible uses or new definitions of the words not mentioned previously. Both phrases also refer to parts of the human body (later discussed in *Disappearance and Unknown Origin*) rather than other nouns such as “guns akimbo” or something

similar. “Arms akimbo” is much less often used than “akimbo” on its own, while “arms akimbo” has similar definitions to the lonesome word. Phrases.org.uk gives one of the only definitions of the phrase as “a stance with hands on the hips and elbows directed outwards”. This gives little to be desired in terms of difference between the word and phrase, and the Ngram agrees. It shows the rise of both word and phrase as rising at almost the same exact rates over time, with spikes A and B appearing at the same time for both, and “akimbo” by itself taking the high road over the phrase. This makes perfect sense since the phrase itself has “akimbo” in it. Though their similar meanings lend nothing in terms of usage change.

On the flip side, “legs akimbo” leads us to believe that the change in body part mentioned also leads to a change in usage, and this is clear from the Ngram. The much lower percentage of usage of the word in English is obvious, and rather lacking. This phrase does not really appear anywhere else than Urban Dictionary, which we can infer is due to the use in colloquial language instead of professional or older writing/speech. Through the Ngram data in Figure 2, its use is much lesser than that of “arms akimbo” and “akimbo”, noting 1864 as its first appearance rather than sometime before 1800. Urban Dictionary defines it in three distinct ways: 1) “knees bent and spread widely apart, while feet stay close together”, 2) “a body position in which feet are kept together while knees are bent and widely spread apart. Adopted while a person is sitting, reclining, or lying on their back, can be sexually provocative” and 3) “a person bending their legs with their knees to the outside but feet together” also mentioning that the cartoonist Johnny Hart used it in a cartoon showing a nightclub dancer called Legs Akimbo, implying her act was risqué.

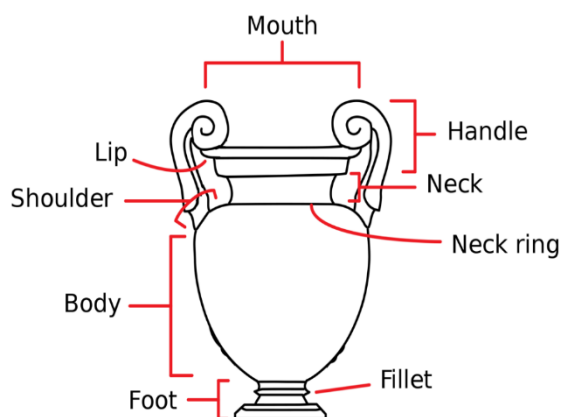
Here we see a switch from a stance with the arms on the hips and the elbows out, to something with a more of a greater meaning, or even something with a deeper cultural significance. Here “legs akimbo” is even mentioned to have a sexual, or at least, risqué meaning. Interestingly, the body part connected to the phrase has more impact on the definition than how it is used in a sentence, as it is still an adjective or adverb in usage. The word and phrase changes from something inertly neutral or negative (a stance and a “belligerent” stance respectively) to something sexual or risqué in nature. This change is clear but also understated, as “legs akimbo” does not gain popularity as “akimbo” or “arms akimbo” do over time.

Each of these definitions surface around the same time, though the percentage of usage is lower or higher for each. The meaning then must not have changed much, except for the general understanding that it is more common for arms to be “akimbo” than legs or any other part of the body, specifically those that cannot bend as the original definitions lead us to believe.

## **Disappearance and Unknown Origin**

Through my research over the past few weeks, I conducted a survey on 50 people total in the greater Detroit and Chicago areas. Only 9 of these people knew of this word or had heard it somewhere, while 4 of them knew either of the two main definitions discussed. None of them said that they used it in the past year, though other definitions were mentioned such as meaning “to be left high and dry” which truly stumped me further, so I had to dig some more.





**Figure 3: Jug with handles "akimbo"**

especially if you look at the relation from the actual physical form of a jug with handles on both sides and the similarity to how a person would stand with “arms akimbo” (see Figure 4). This connection to body parts can even be seen across languages. For example, the English “neck”, the Polish “szyjka”, and the French “cou” are all identical or derived from body parts. Wiktionary agrees partially, referencing Middle English (“in a keen bow”) and Old Norse (“bent, bow”). Though looking at the phrase “arms akimbo” [phrases.org.uk](http://phrases.org.uk) mentions the first known recording of the phrase in the Tale of Beryn of the Canterbury Tales around 1400, again giving its origin back to Middle English: “The hoost... set his hond in kenebowe” (“Hond” here meaning “hand” and “kenebowe” meaning “akimbo”). Recently, it was used more evidently in modern action movies and even was featured in the title of a 2019 film Guns Akimbo featuring stars such as Daniel Radcliffe and Samara Weaving.

So where did this “being left high and dry” definition come from? This definition may have come from an issue we often deal with from a young age, as we learn a language: hearing. It is common to hear the phrase “left in limbo” which came about around 1300 according to the Online Etymology Dictionary and was used according to Christian belief in terms of a region on the border of Hell. Later in the 1640s it was used in a more figurative sense of “condition of neglect or oblivion”. Mishearing “limbo” as “akimbo” or the rhyme of the words causing a ghost of a memory in those that answered my survey would be one of the possibilities. This would of course call for further research, and deeper research into how memories of hearing words operates, but that is far above my pay grade at the moment and must await further probing.

## Conclusion

As the title suggests, there is still another meaning to the word “akimbo” that I have personally heard. Similar to the definition given by the OED as “askew”, the word “akimbo” can be used to roughly mean something similar to “being left high and dry, or wanting”. In these terms, we are left wanting for a clearer understanding of why the word fell out of use, as people have not stopped putting their hands on their hips, playing FPS games, watching action films, or even conducting acts of a sexual or risqué nature. So, what happened?

The word “akimbo” has changed meaning over time mostly based on the greater context, surrounding words, or changes in popular culture. We have two general definitions for the word alone, and these change slightly with the addition of words in front of it. As we saw with “arms akimbo”, the definition focused more on the stance of a person, and with “legs akimbo” the inert meaning or cultural referencing of the word changed to mean something risqué or sexual in nature. The second

Looking at origin, each source of a definition seems to have a distinct view of where the word came from. In terms of the singular word “akimbo”, the OED gives a few possible origins to the word after noting the origin is still unidentified today. It mentions possible Anglo-Norman, Middle French, Old French, Middle English, or even Old Norse roots. The first three conjoining to mean similar things: “jug-handle, handle, or pitcher”, while from Middle English meaning “bent elbow” or Old Norse meaning “bent into a curve”. So far, this makes sense with our general definition for the word being “to hold hands on hips with elbows out”,

definition of the word rose later than the others with the rise of action movies and common gun knowledge over the years as well. The disappearance of the word though? This is something much more difficult to understand and explain. It is possible that there are better words or phrases such as “setting hands on hips” as well as using “dual-wielding” in the same sense instead of an otherwise foreign word. It may fall upon us, as people tend to use less “confusing” language in everyday life, and words people understand better in general. This leads us to the last question to answer: So, if this is true, why did people stop understanding the word then? This answer may come from the issue we are faced of missing data. The majority the data (excluding the YouTube video referenced) used in this study was, unfortunately, written. There was little to no statistics on the spoken use or popularity of the word “akimbo” from the 1400s where it began up until today. This is a common issue we are faced with and must work around. This is where I am left. I have no answer for this question, as of yet, warranting more time and research.

## References

- “Akimbo.” *Urban Dictionary*, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=akimbo](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=akimbo).
- “Akimbo.” *Wiktionary*, [en.wiktionary.org/wiki/akimbo](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/akimbo).
- “The Complete History Of First Person Shooters.” *Geek.com*, 11 Oct. 2017, [www.geek.com/games/the-complete-history-of-first-person-shooters-1713135/](http://www.geek.com/games/the-complete-history-of-first-person-shooters-1713135/).
- “Legs Akimbo.” *Urban Dictionary*, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=legs+akimbo](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=legs+akimbo).
- “Limbo”. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/word/limbo#etymonline\\_v\\_9526](http://www.etymonline.com/word/limbo#etymonline_v_9526).
- Martin, Gary. “Arms Akimbo' - the Meaning and Origin of This Phrase.” *Phrasefinder*, [www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/arms-akimbo.html](http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/arms-akimbo.html).
- Murray, M. A. “Female Fertility Figures.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 64, 1934, pp. 93–100. [www.jstor.org/stable/2843950](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2843950).
- “Which Video Game Introduced Dual Wielding?” *Ahoy*, YouTube, 31 Aug. 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-LKzUmgH0k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-LKzUmgH0k).
- Wiederer, Peter. *Design for a Mirror-Frame*. 18 June 1895.
- Images:
- [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Akimbo-photo\\_%28PSF%29.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Akimbo-photo_%28PSF%29.png)
- [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/cc/Attic\\_Volute\\_kraters-en.svg/220px-Attic\\_Volute\\_kraters-en.svg.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/cc/Attic_Volute_kraters-en.svg/220px-Attic_Volute_kraters-en.svg.png)
- <https://patents.google.com/patent/USD24404S/en?q=P.+WIEDERER.&oq=P.+WIEDERER>.

# Anymore

Jackie Lorey

Cite as: Lorey, Jackie. 2021. Anymore. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 14-18.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The idea of a word is foundational to the way language is often approached. When approaching choosing a word for this assignment, it occurred to me that many entries of the list of words had a space in them, in a sense separating the entry into two separate “words”. Making this observation, I noticed *anymore* appearing as one word. I chose it with the intention of investigating why and how this word might appear as one word, *anymore*, or as two-word phrase, *any more*.

## Defining *anymore*

The Oxford English Dictionary entry for *any more* has no immediate reference to another entry for *anymore* as a single word. The dictionary gives four possible word types for *any more* to be used as an adjective, a pronoun, a noun, or an adverb.

“...adj. Any further; any additional.  
pron. and n. Any greater or additional number or amount; anything more; anything further.  
adv. In negative, interrogative, or hypothetical contexts. In continuance of what has taken place up to a particular time; any further, any longer. Also occasionally (now rare): in repetition of what has taken place before; once more, a further time, again.” (Oxford English Dictionary)

The OED lists two specific word combinations that result in *anymore*. Both use *more* as a pronoun, and precede it with *any* as either an adverb or an adjective. There are two separate entries for *any* as an adverb. The first gives specific reference to *anymore* as a use for the adverb. The second entry is for *any*’s use as a colloquial U.S. and British phrase, with the operative meaning and use being the same.

“adv. Modifying comparative adjectives and adverbs: in any degree, to any extent, at all.”  
“adj. (determiner). In interrogative, hypothetical, and conditional contexts: (with singular count noun) used to refer to an unspecified member of a particular class; (with plural or mass noun) used to refer to an unspecified number or quantity of a thing or things, no matter how much or how many; some.” (Oxford English Dictionary)

In either scenario, whether an adverb or adjective, the same meaning of *more* is used, as a pronoun meaning “something greater” (Oxford English Dictionary).



## Historical Differences

In addition to the two entries for anymore that are already familiar, there is a separate path to an entry for “any mo”. It is said to have been chiefly Scottish before it became obsolete.

*“pron. and n. Any greater or additional number or amount; anything more; anything further.*

*adj., Any further; any additional.” (Oxford English Dictionary)*

This brings to mind that the difference might be temporal, with one form of *anymore* replacing the other either gradually or abruptly for whatever reason. To gather data on how the words have been used over time, we can look to the Corpus of Historical American English for the frequency of each word being published over the last century.

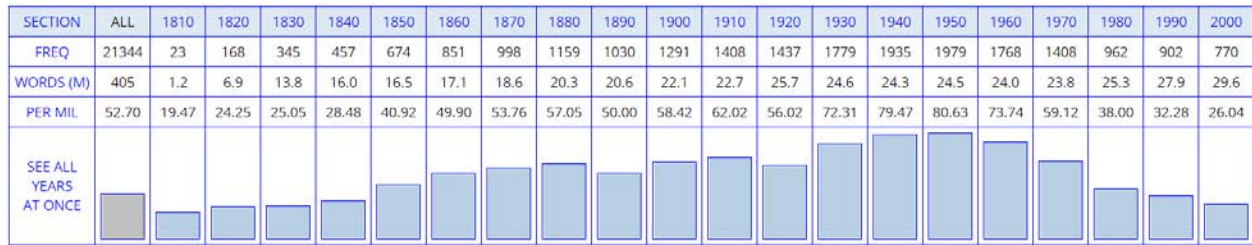


Figure 1: any more (COHA)

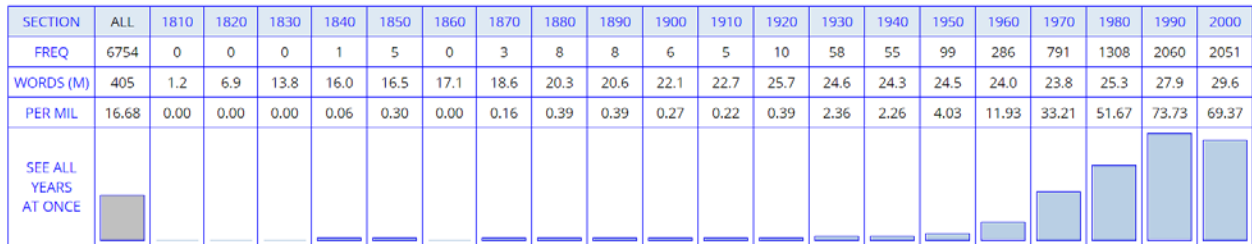


Figure 2: anymore (COHA)

We can see an apparent rise in use of a one-word form rising during the last few decades, while a two-word form seems to reach maximum popularity during the 1940s before falling to be almost one third as popular as the alternative. The information above being from the historic corpus, data was also gathered from the Corpus of Contemporary English. To the right on the following two graphs, we can see a slight corresponding rise and fall in both forms during the contemporary period that the second engine considers. We can also see that a one-word form is more commonly used in all of the listed forms of media, excepting academic texts, where a two-word form is marginally more common.

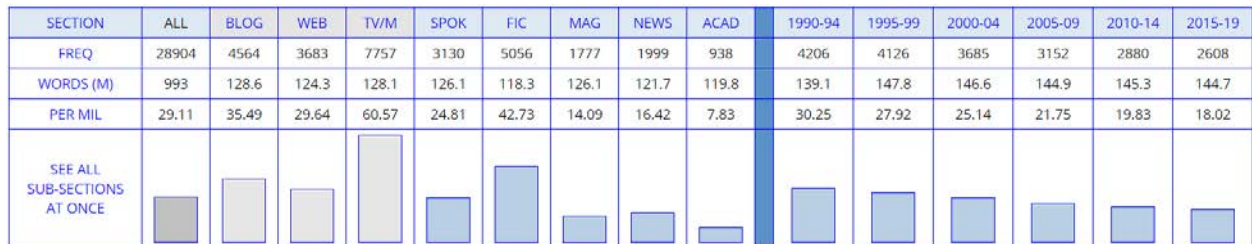


Figure 3: any more (COCA)

SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD	1990-94	1995-99	2000-04	2005-09	2010-14	2015-19
FREQ	76057	8989	7190	26391	10138	12417	5037	5067	828	8368	10259	9880	10373	10270	10728
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8	139.1	147.8	146.6	144.9	145.3	144.7
PER MIL	76.59	69.89	57.87	206.06	80.37	104.94	39.95	41.62	6.91	60.18	69.42	67.41	71.56	70.70	74.12
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE															

**Figure 4: anymore (COCA)**

When comparing both forms using Google’s Ngram Viewer, the one-word form slowly becomes more popular before overtaking the two-word form used previously.



**Figure 5: Anymore, any more (Google Ngram Viewer)**

All of this data together would imply that *anymore* has been gradually becoming a single word over the last century. In addition to the two-word form found in Old Scottish earlier, the Online Etymology Dictionary lists *anymore* in a one-word form, while putting forward that this form has been used since 1865 “...typically used with a negative, a custom as old as Middle English, where without any more is found late 14c.” (Online Etymology Dictionary)

At this point in the research process, I decided to investigate some other dictionary sources to see which form of *anymore* they used for an entry. In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *anymore* appears as in one-word form as an adverb, meaning “... any longer; at the present time.” Also included is an informational window labelled *Anymore vs. Any More: A Usage Guide*. The guide gives us some straightforward insight into the use of both forms, and gives us another reason to believe that the difference between these two forms is a temporal difference.

*“Although both anymore and any more are found in written use, in current writing anymore is the more common styling. Anymore is regularly used in negative, interrogative and conditional contexts and in certain positive constructions... In many regions of the U.S. the use of anymore in sense 2 is quite common in positive constructions, especially in speech... The positive use appears to have been of Midland origin, but it is now reported to be widespread in all speech areas of the U.S. except New England.” (Merriam-Webster)*

Now that we can see the path that *anymore* has come down, more questions can be asked and answered. Is this process of compound words becoming one-word forms universal, or is it something specific to *anymore*’s evolution? Can the same pattern be seen in other similar words? To get an idea

of what path similar words have come down, we can run them through the same Ngram viewer as both one-word and two-word forms.

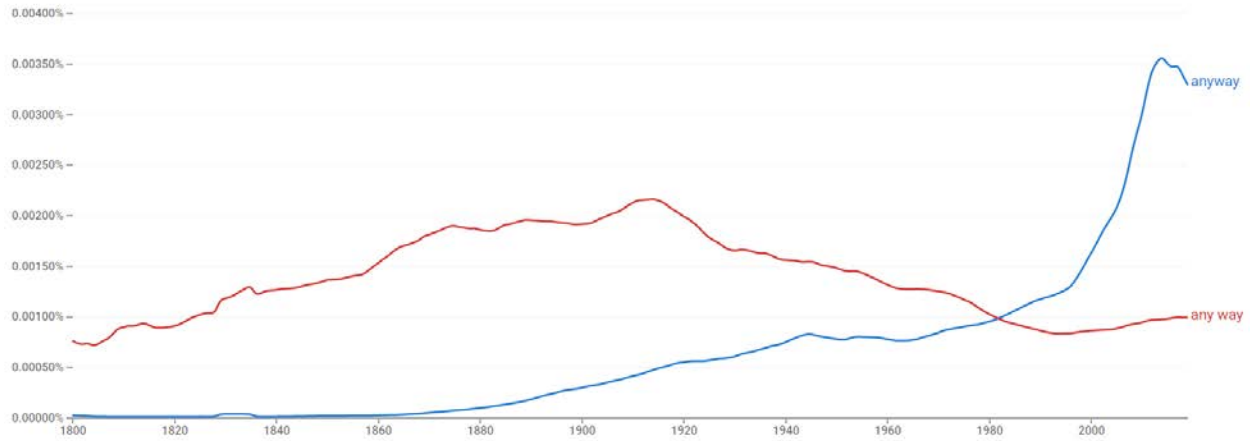


Figure 6: Anyway, any way (Google Ngram Viewer)

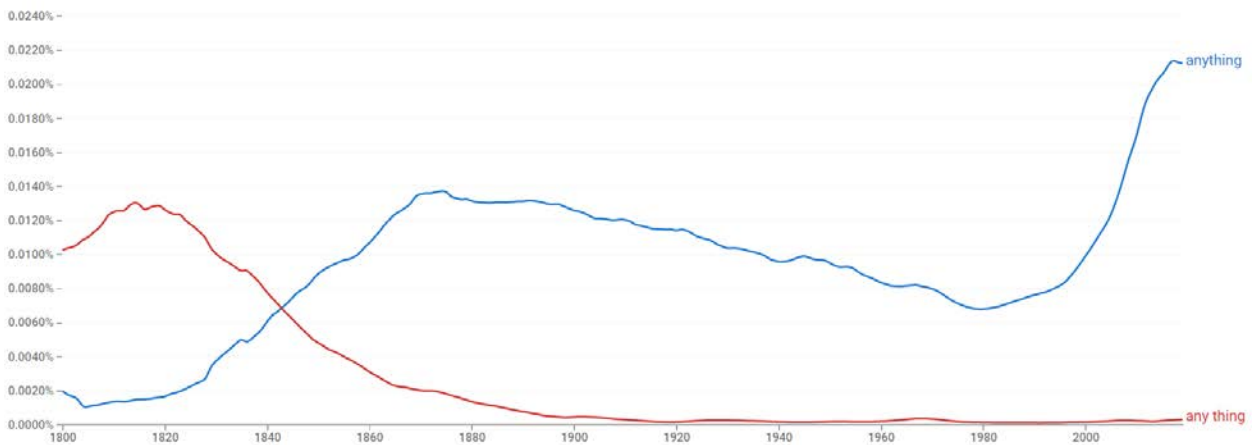


Figure 7: Anything, any thing (Google Ngram Viewer)

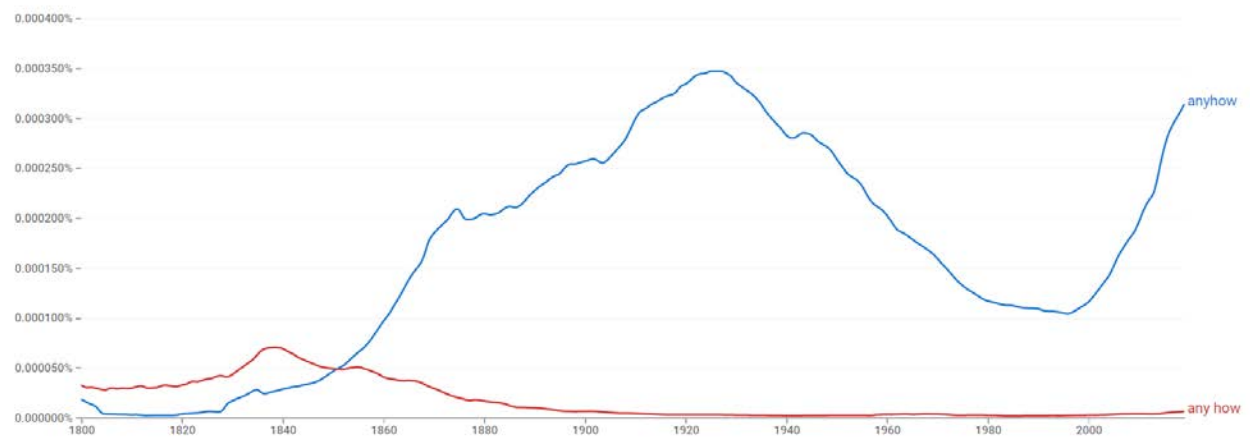


Figure 8: Anyhow, any how (Google Ngram Viewer)

These other words follow a similar path to the one we saw *anymore* take; gradually becoming stylized as one word as opposed to a two-word phrase. The first two shown follow the same structure of adjective and noun that *anymore* sometimes follows, structurally linking them in one other way. We see the three of them make this same movement at differing times, however, with *anyway* overtaking *any way* as recently as the 1980s, as opposed to the mid-1800s.

The base question about our word has been answered, with a one-word *anymore* being revealed as the more recently formed and better accepted of the two forms. Combined with our data surrounding other *any* words, more questions occur to me about basic properties of compound words. Do compound words tend to change entropically into one-word forms? Are there ever cases of words splitting from one-word into two-word phrases? Plenty of opportunity for more research and analysis is surely present, with the scale of these ideas going beyond the topic of *anymore* alone.

## References

OED Online. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com>

Corpus of Historical American English. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>.

Corpus of Contemporary American English. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

Online Etymology Dictionary. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/anymore>

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anymore>

# Artisanal

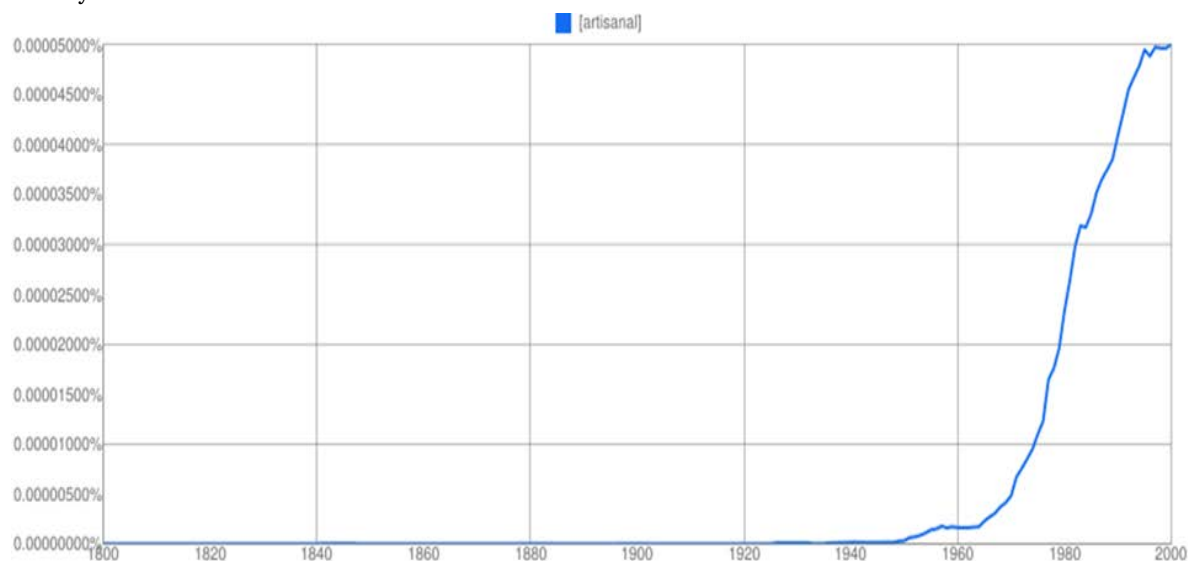
Emelyn Nyboer

Cite as: Nyboer, Emelyn. 2021. Artisanal. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 19-22.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Launching into my research on an empty stomach, fancy food items were the first things to come to my attention. There arose in my mind images of a glowing assortment of cheese wedges in many delectable flavors arranged on a platter, and loaves of freshly baked, still-floury bread that had been kneaded by loving hands. While the word *artisanal* is certainly not limited to describing food items, it is not surprising that my research has yielded so many results pertaining to the subject of food. “Artisanal” has developed into something of a trendy label over time to accompany terminology such as “natural” and “organic” as part of a movement driven by what seems to be a desire for simpler, healthier, or more personal goods. Since the first instance of the word *artisan* (and its adjectival counterpart), the meaning has more or less remained constant; however, the context in which it has been applied throughout its timeline has varied. The purpose of this essay is to investigate the history and usage of *artisanal* as a descriptive term applied to these different contexts.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *artisanal* is an adjective stemming from *artisan* and referring to the products, skills, or attributes of those artisans. Artisans are synonymous perhaps with *craftsmen*, professionals who hold great skill and pride over their specified line of work, whether their efforts are involved in making food or supplying other goods and services. Usage of the term dates to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries from Middle French *artisan* and Italian *artigiano*, referring to workers of skilled trades (www.oed.com). It is generally understood that the meaning of the adjective *artisanal* also heavily implies the use of small-scale production methods or items that are hand-made with traditional practices, opposite of factory-made mass production – today, essentially acting as an antonym of *industrial*.



I was curious about the beginnings of this word's popularity. When checking its rate of usage by simply searching the term on Google Ngram viewer, the results (shown above) indicated that *artisanal* began to steadily appear in print by the 1950s. This apparent activity then took off at a near 90-degree angle around the year 1970.

The most pertinent question to ask here is *why*? What could be a possible cause for this sudden and marked upswing? When searching through the list of books from around the 1970s, there are quite a few results concerning artisanal fisheries. According to an information page from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego, an artisanal fishery specifically refers to small-scale subsistence fishing that utilizes traditional methods, in contrast to commercial fishing. One likely explanation for the surge of material on this topic is due to the world food crisis which occurred during the 1970s. There was a considerable decrease in global food production early in the decade, and up until this era, conservation of marine ecosystems and the concept of over-fishing were rather neglected. The ocean was once thought to be a bountiful resource, but the collapse of Peruvian anchovy fisheries in the early '70s among other critical environmental issues resulted in a cause for alarm (FAO 2000). While artisanal fisheries lay some pressure on marine ecosystems as well, they were considered to be much more beneficial than commercial fishing in the long run for the sake of sustainability (Scripps Institution, 2015).

Further investigation revealed that this initial spike shown in the graph also happens to coincide with the beginnings of the counterculture movement in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. It was already addressed that during this time, the values of sustainability and environmental awareness were being recognized by even greater numbers of people. Concern arose as a response to such issues being brought to light as world hunger and poor agricultural practices. Fears of ecological collapse and overpopulation mingled with the social strife already taking place in America at the time with upset over the Vietnam War and the ongoing fight for civil rights. There emerged a significant desire to take control wherever it could be done, often starting at a grassroots level. The push for more natural, healthful foods was part of an overall anti-industry, anti-establishment mindset – adjustment in food production and consumption acting as agents for greater change (Belasco, 23).

Indeed, there was symbolism found in over-processed, mass-produced foods. The rejection of these also embodied rejection of the era's social mores as exemplified by the existence of pure, white Wonder Bread. For some people who could be considered diehards of the counterculture movement, continued consumption of such bleached, "white-washed" bread not only demonstrated apathy toward one's own health – it also showed an acceptance of the status quo. The popularity of white bread was regarded as a representation of white racial dominance and the epitome of every problem in the industrialized west (Bobrow-Strain, 64). As a reaction to this, "brown" foods like brown bread, brown rice, and the addition of dark, earthy spices were embraced and raised up as a high-quality alternative (Belasco 49). It seemed to become increasingly important to know where your food originated, who made it, and what was put in it. The less processed something was, the better. As a result, emphasis was placed on back-to-the-land, homemade, *artisanal* production.

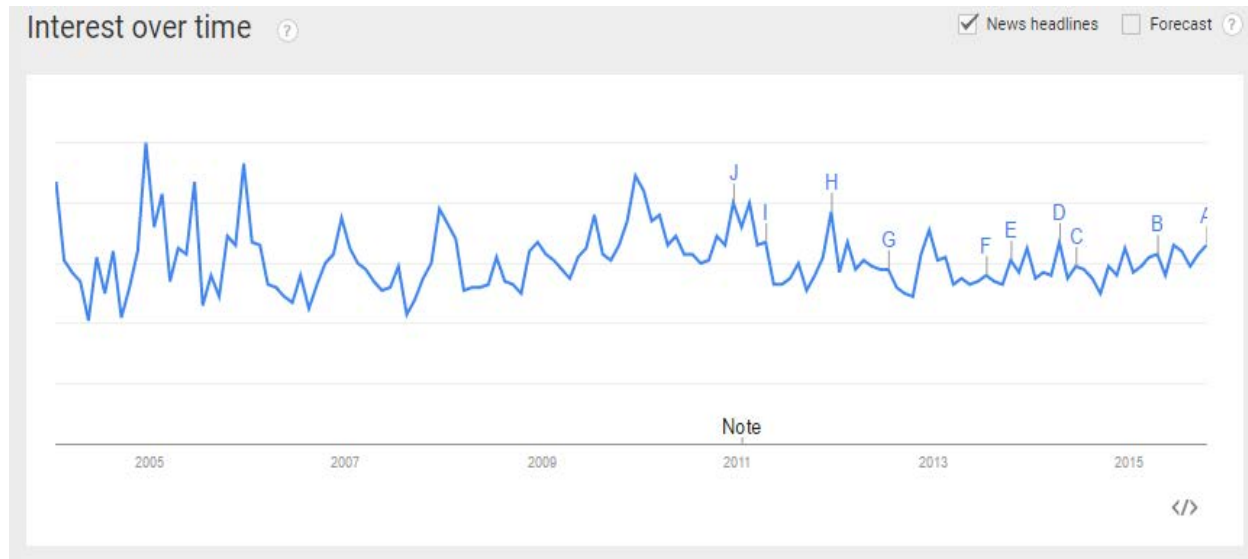
The rise in attraction for artisanal food and other commodities which began during the time of the counterculture movement only continued to rise from there. We can observe the effects of this launch in popularity in the culture of the present day. The chart below from Google Trends displays this seemingly steady rate of interest related to the word within the past decade.

One of the many appeals of artisanal goods is their perceived quality and authenticity. Many people covet products with humble or charming stories behind them, or products that may be customized for the individual. There is something special about owning things that were made specifically for you, or things that took considerable devotion and precision to create. Plenty of people are willing to spend the extra money it often takes to acquire goods like these. People desire the ability to truly decide where their products come from and who they are giving their money to. This allowed



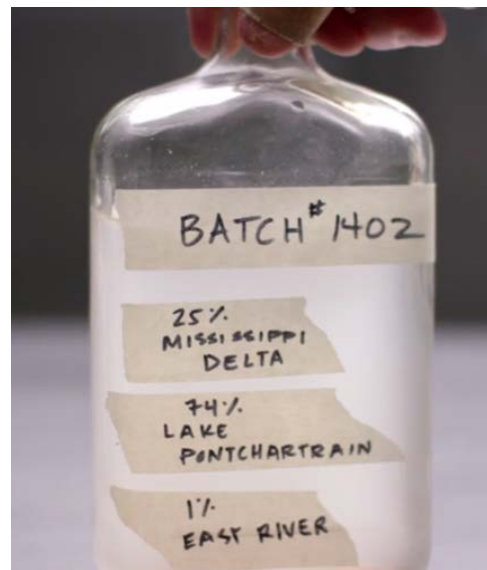
for the immense success of websites like Etsy to exist as havens for crafty do-it-yourself people to set up shop and sell their artisanal creations as a response to this demand.

Applying this reasoning back to food, it's no wonder that the term has been snatched up by multiple big-name brands in more recent years – but not without detection from the public. A simple Google search of the phrase “*the word artisanal*” pulls up a myriad of metalinguistic lamentations from blog posts and articles over the word’s perceived deterioration in meaning. USA Today reported in



2011 that the “artisan” label had been tagged onto at least 800 different food products within five years prior, noting its adoption by well-known companies such as Domino’s Pizza and Tostito’s corn chips (Horovitz 2011). In 2012, Dunkin Donuts drew the ire of Davidovich Bakery, a New York business which threatened legal action when the national coffeehouse chain introduced their line of artisan bagels. The offense, of course, was the use of “artisan” to describe a product that was neither hand-made nor produced in small quantities. It is evident that the company was merely taking advantage of a trend alongside many others (Grossman 2012).

The absurdity of *artisanal* being utilized by fast-food restaurants and popular brands might have reached its peak when McDonald’s extended their ever-reaching grasp onto the word to describe a chicken sandwich earlier this year. Despite the “special” seasoning and glistening golden bread, there is little doubt that these sandwiches are prepared much like the mundane beginnings of a typical cheeseburger – cooked and presented to the customer in greasy paper bags from the hands of teenagers standing at drive-thru windows. McDonald’s being the fast-food king that it is, some might say this was the moment in which the original meaning of the word *artisanal* has been laid in its grave. The obsession with authentic artisanal creations has certainly not gone unchecked either. When the wonders of artisanal ice and pencil sharpening were brought to public attention, it was difficult to comprehend it as something other than satire.



It is true that great value is placed on the often slow, meticulous methods of developing each unique product. It is precisely this amount of time, energy, and skill which is put into the process that deems these items worth having in the eyes of many people. They are special because their existence did not

begin on an assembly line in a drafty factory. Their shapes were cut and molded by human hands rather than cold and unfeeling machinery. Filmmaker Paul Riccio latched on to this trend for the subject of his recent video titled “The Timmy Brothers – Water Makers” (screenshot image: right), which exists to mock some of the more fervent folks behind the artisanal movement (Riccio). The video pokes fun at this fascination with the twee aspects of artisanal production when the Timmy brothers recount how their water is collected and subsequently strapped to burros to be delivered to them. “*Corporate water is soulless,*” said one of the brothers. “*Our water is about freedom.*”

It used to be the case that something being *artisanal* meant it was created by artisans and/or by a small-scale, painstaking, and traditional approach – the fascination for which climbed dramatically only a few decades ago. Today, *artisanal* can be considered a buzzword that has been bastardized through marketing to imply that a product is somehow more remarkable or of higher quality than its everyday run-of-the-mill counterpart, whether or not this is truly the case – and people are becoming aware of this phenomenon.

The other night I was watching a hockey game on television when my eyes and ears were assaulted by a new Dairy Queen commercial. It featured a few silly people singing about their love for DQ’s new “artisan-style” sandwiches. Before writing this paper, I likely would have overlooked this curious bit of advertising, let alone recognize the subtle inclusion of “-style” which was probably meant to ward off meddling, nitpicky folks like those at Davidovich Bakery. It was an enlightening experience to research a word I personally had not given much thought to before, and I will continue to be vigilant for occurrences of this word in my everyday life.

## References

- “About Artisanal Fisheries”. Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego, 2015.
- “Artisanal” Water Movement. 12 August 2015.  
<https://www.naturalchoicewater.com/blog/view/artisanal-water-movement>
- Belasco, Warren James. *Appetite For Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*. Pantheon Books, 2007.
- Bobrow-Strain, Aaron. *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-Bought Loaf*. Beacon Press, 2012.
- Horovitz, Bruce. “Marketers use artisan label to evoke more sales”. USA Today, 25 October 2011.
- Grossman, Samantha. “Holey War! New York Bakery Wants Dunkin’ Donuts to Take ‘Artisan’ out of Its Bagel Ads”. Time Inc., 19 April 2012.
- Riccio, Paul. “The Timmy Brothers – Water Makers.” Vimeo. 22 June 2015.  
<https://vimeo.com/131422396>
- The State of Food and Agriculture. 2000. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FOA), 2000.



# Aryan

David Prince

Cite as: Prince, David. 2021. Aryan. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 23-27.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The word 'Aryan' is a term that was popularized and most commonly thought of in modern society as being related to Nazi Germany and their views of white supremacy. Today we can find organizations that use the term 'Aryan' to define themselves and their ideologies. Such groups include but are not limited to Aryan Nations, Aryan Brotherhood, Aryan Guard, White Aryan Resistance, and Aryan League. These organizations have several traits in common with each other. They are focused around a common ideal of white supremacy, racial prejudices, and hatred. They are also often found being called 'Neo-Nazis'. Nazi Germany conducted massive genocides based on racist and ethnocentric ideologies which focused around the blond-haired blue-eyed ideal of the German Aryan. This term is today so strongly focused on this 20<sup>th</sup> century Nazi usage and carries a strong negative stigma, which has prevented its use in academic and many common social circles. The idea of the Aryan race in western culture was used as scientific terms and hypotheses in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, long before the rise of the Third Reich. Nazi Germany took many of the ideas that were prevalent at that time to support their racist views. These ideas were historical hypotheses about the evolution and origins of western language from India and Iran and their spread in and out of Europe. This raises the question: how did the word 'Aryan' change from an honorific adjective used thousands of years ago in Indo-Iranian languages to a word associated today with a Germanic blond-haired blue-eyed 'master race'?

## Where did the word 'Aryan' come from?

The original roots of the word 'Aryan' can be found in the Sanskrit and Avestan (the ancient Iranian language of the Zoroastrian scriptures) languages spoken in what are now India and Iran. The Sanskrit *ārya* and the Avestan/Zend form (*Airya*), are the roots to the word 'Aryan', meaning "belonging to the faithful, of one's own tribe; honourable, noble" (Sanskrit Dictionary). It is a name that the ancient Indians and Iranians applied to themselves in contrast to the outside world, who they considered "base-born and contemptible" (Dwight 30). It is also a word that they used to describe their language and is considered to be the oldest autonym within the Indo-European language family. The usage of the word 'ārya' (noble) to define themselves and their language is similar to the word *Слава* (*Slava*) in Slavonic languages. *Slava* means 'glory', and that root is used to define the Slavic people as the glorified people (Dwight 30). Usages of *ārya* can be found in *Āryāvarta*, or 'home of the Aryans' which is what ancient Sanskrit literature refers to as the Indian homeland (Sanskrit Dictionary).

## Why did the word move into the west?

The study of Sanskrit in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was driven by contemporary philologists. Philology is a discipline that tries to discover and explain "the origin, history and structure of the words composing the classical languages and those connected with them, whether cognate or derived" (Dwight 193). Philologists conducted earlier attempts to trace back languages such as Greek and Latin into Hebrew, which they viewed as the original language, according to Christian beliefs. The paradigm of language

having its root in Hebrew was contested by Gottfried Leibniz, a German philosopher, some time around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Leibniz wrote in a letter to Tenzel, "To call Hebrew the primitive language is like calling the branches of a tree primitive branches, or like imagining that in some country hewn trunks could grow instead of trees." He also asked, "If the primeval language existed even up to the time of Moses, whence came the Egyptian language?" (Müller 1866: 126). This was the beginning of doubt on the roots of language originating with Hebrew.

William Jones was a philologist who strived, like many if not most other philologists of his time, to trace the roots of language back to the Judeo-Christian myth of the destruction of the tower of Babel. He took an interest in Indian culture and founded the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, an organization that sought to study Indian and oriental cultures and languages. Until this point, knowledge about India was relatively limited in the West. Jones produced a lot of works about India and Sanskrit, and eventually hypothesized a common root to Sanskrit and other languages, such as Latin, Greek and Persian (Lamb & Mitchell 31). He summed up his beliefs in a famous statement he presented in his Third Anniversary Discourse to the Asiatic Society in 1786:

*"The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family, if this were the place for discussing any question concerning the antiquities of Persia."*

This began a new wave of research and a change of paradigm about the roots and development of Indo-European languages. The first concept of a Proto-Indo-European language started with Jones. Philologists, building on Jones' ideas, began to start searching for this hypothetical pre-language, and instead of turning to Hebrew, they began to focus their energies on Sanskrit.

## **How was 'Aryan' first interpreted in western culture?**

The first usage of 'Aryan', or rather 'Arian', in western culture was by a man named Friedrich Schlegel, a German poet and philologist. He had taken an interest in studying the Indo-European languages. He was the founder of the studies of comparative Indo-European philology (Bonfiglio 145). Comparative philology utilized the technique of comparing two different languages and inducting similarities from them in attempt to find common linguistic trends in order to search for a common root. He began to look at a comparison of people and their language in a nationalistic way, viewing a certain race of having a certain language. In his book *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier (On the Language and Wisdom of India)* (1808), he hypothesized that the Aryans of northern India came to Europe from India and the Aryan language they brought influenced the languages of the modern-day Europeans. He discovered similarities to the Ari- root and the German word "Ehre", which means honor. He also related Ari- to "Erben" (heirs) and "Wehren" (defenders). He made the point that they were similarly pronounced and that the German words drew directly from the "Arian language" and that Germans must have been descendants of the Arians. At this time, the view of the term 'Aryan' was purely linguistic. Philologists talked about 'Aryan' as group of people that spoke a certain language and the path and influence that language had over time. The Aryan people were none other than the speakers of the Aryan language.

## How did Aryan begin to be viewed as a race?

In 1855, Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau, a French aristocrat, wrote a book entitled *The inequality of the Human Races*, which was one of the first examples of scientific racism. His book describes characteristics of each of the human races, which he categorizes as three: white, black, and yellow. He holds Christian views to back up to some degree his argument and believes that “Adam is the ancestor of the white race” (de Gobineau 118). He states several characteristics of each of the races, and shows the white race to have the best qualities as well as “the monopoly on beauty, intelligence and strength” (de Gobineau 209). He says that all civilizations on earth today are derived from interracial mixing of white, black, and yellow races. He goes on to say that the German people are the original pure Aryans, or rather that the Aryans were ‘Les races germaniques’, and that most of the other civilizations all had Aryan blood in them, although they were polluted. The three races that he portrayed laid the basis for race analysis for the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was one of the first publications that went in depth about certain characteristics of certain races, as well as a hypothesis of a 3-root race system. His initial purpose for his work was to show why there was a degeneration of societies and what was causing it. His hypothesis was that the race of the people determined how successful they were (de Gobineau 26). Because of the belief of the Aryan success and power as the root of European languages, they were viewed as an example of the pure white race.

These ideas were supported alongside the contemporary ideology of unilineal cultural evolutionism that was perpetuated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by sociologists such as Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte, and Lewis Morgan. Unilineal cultural evolutionism was an ideology which was believed to be a universal succession of evolutionary stages that take place in societies, starting with savagery, progressing to barbarism, and eventually reaching the pinnacle which was contemporary Western civilization. De Gobineau’s work portrayed a link to the less civilized people in relation to their race, implying that there was something about their race that made them less civilized and unable to become as such. This added a dehumanizing and separating effect between white Europeans and those of a different race that were not, according to their ideologies, civilized.

## Where did the Aryans come from?

Philology has always believed that there must be a common root, a protolanguage, to modern European languages. Much of the philology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was still guided by Christian ideologies and beliefs, especially that of the Tower of Babel. They wanted to find the root of the language and assumed a certain type of people spoke the language. They believed that the closer they got to the original language, the closer they got to the original people. They saw that the Aryan influences in many languages were great so they sought after the Proto-Aryan language, and by doing so, searched for the Proto-Aryan people that spoke that language. This was the beginning of the blend of language and biology.

Max Müller, a German-born philologist, was the first to mention and talk about the “Aryan race” in English in his 1861 *Lectures on the Science of Language*. He hypothesizes that the roots of the Aryans were agricultural nomads and the term ‘AR-’ goes back to the original proto language and means “to till” or “open the soil” and he gives examples of similarities in several languages (239). However, this nomadic people grew larger, and in his book, *Biographies of words, and the home of the Aryas* (1888), he proposed that an Aryan invasion of India, in which the “dark aboriginal inhabitants” were invaded by “their more fair-skinned conquerors” took place (245). The Indian invasion theory led to a shift in people wondering where the Aryans hailed from. This theory is one which many later philologists will clutch on to and make it a main point of their research. In his book he talks at length about the concept of the Aryan ‘race’. He popularized the term, even though in his work he says that “Aryans are those who speak Aryan languages, whatever their colour, whatever their blood” (245). Müller’s idea of ‘race’ was that race was the language, culture, and religion not the physical appearance:

*“[I]n early history of the human intellect, there exists the most intimate relationship between language, religion and nationality- a relationship quite independent of those physical elements, the blood, the skill or the hair, on which ethnologists have attempted to found their classification of the human race”*

He viewed the Indians as being ‘Aryan brethren’ and that Europeans and Indians belonged to the same race. Müller’s ideas of race, however, were not regarded. Philologists would eventually use the term ‘race’ in context to have a meaning more biological than sociocultural, something that Müller was in part responsible for, but had not intended.

Robert G. Latham, an anthropologist, in the 1850s attacked Max Müller about his idea of the Aryans and their roots in India. Latham believed that race was innately biological and that the Aryans could not have been the Indians. He argues that the Indians had never conquered anything, but rather that European accomplishments far outshone the accomplishments of the Indians. Therefore, the Europeans were part of the white race, and the Indians were part of the yellow race (Arvidsson 47). Latham strongly opposed Müller’s ideas and instead proposed a radically repositioned theoretical homeland of the Aryans. Rather than being in or near India, he positioned it near Scandinavia, presenting an argument that the Lithuanian language has many of the archaic features that Sanskrit does. He also felt it was easier to explain that the Aryans emigrated from Europe than to believe that all the different groups and cultures in Europe found their way out of Asia. In *Elements of Comparative Philology* (1862) he says:

*“Has the Sanskrit reached India from Europe or have the Lithuanic, the Slavonic, the Latin, the Greek, and the German, reached Europe from India? If historical evidence be wanting, the a priori presumptions must be considered. I submit that history is silent, and that the presumptions are in favor of the smaller class having been deduced from the area of the larger rather than vice versa. If so, the situs of the Sanskrit is on the eastern, or south-eastern, frontier of the Lithuanic; and its origin is European” (611).*

Müller hypothesized that the Aryan invaders hailed from somewhere near Lithuania, and said that Lithuanian had as many archaic features as did Sanskrit (Arvidsson 142). This theory was well received and propagated among Europe; their sense of identity was changing. The locality of the Aryan homeland was brought to the Europeans, and the idea became very popular.

The shift that took place about the understanding of the Aryan birthplace developed within the mindset of the romantic nationalism that was taking place, especially in Germany after the Franco-Prussian War and the reunification of Germany. The idea of a European homeland went along with folklore’s focus on Germanic material (Arvidsson 142). It was not until Karl Penka, an Austrian philologist and anthropologist, made the proposal in his work, *Die Herkunft der Arier* (1886), that “the pure Aryans... are represented only by the North Germans and Scandinavians, a most prolific race, of great stature, muscular strength, energy and courage, whose splendid natural endowments enable it to conquer the feebler races to the East, the South and the West and to impose its language on the subject peoples” (46). The homeland of the Aryans, according to him was, as Latham thought, in Scandinavia. Theodore Pösche, in *Die Arier* (1878), laid the basis describing the appearance of the Aryans as being blond haired, blue eyed and fair skinned, and that the home of the Aryans must be where these traits would be most dominant (Arvidsson 142). The Aryans, the pure white race, still existed. There was a huge sense of national pride, especially in Germany, where scientists stressed the similarities of the Scandinavian and Germanic peoples. The ‘Nordic race’ became synonymous with the ‘Aryan race’ (Arvidsson 143). This pride of being the master race, the most perfect people, was in part main reason in why Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party were able to rise to power.

## What happened to this word? Why did this happen?

'Aryan' went from being a linguistic term defining a culture of people in India that spoke a hypothetical protolanguage, the Aryan language, to a term for a perfect biological master race that originated in Europe. Much of the history of this word is based off of misunderstandings and using contemporary science to fulfill one's own agenda. Many of these original assumptions, such as the connection Schlegel made between Sanskrit and German, were not viewed as nationalistic at first, just proof towards German having a direct descent from the original proto-language. Aryans were closer to the roots of the languages, but it was only cultural. There was no one people to whom this language belonged, only a shared area and linguistic roots. The concept of the Aryans as those that speak the Aryan language began to change when the Indian invasion theory was developed by Müller. Questions such as "Who were these invaders?" and "Where did these invaders come from?" started to be asked.

An Aryan homeland was envisioned. The Aryan language became fused to the Aryan people, and the view that the Aryan people came from someplace and were one nationality took over the idea that the Aryans were anyone that spoke the Aryan language. The Aryans were viewed as mighty conquerors, and philologists began to wonder where these people originated from. With racist ideologies beginning to develop and a strong sense of European nationalism growing, the Europeans theorized that they were the original Aryans, because only the white race could have been capable of doing that which the Aryans had done. The Europeans created this view of the Aryan race. There was no proof at this time that there even was a Proto-Indo-European language, but it was taken as fact. So as theories piled upon theories, the term Aryan got further and further away from the original theory. 'Aryan' started as a culture of shared linguistic history, becoming the language of a group of people who invaded India, and then the language of a nationality. European ethnocentrism pervaded the philologists' minds and research, and through them the Europeans created their own mythical Aryan race.

## References

- Review of *Les Origines Indo-Européennes, ou les Aryas Primitifs, Essai de Paleontologie Linguistique* by Adophe Pictet. *The Anthropological Review* 1(2): 232-246. 1863.
- Arvidsson, Stefan. *Aryan idols: Indo-European mythology as ideology and science*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Bonfiglio, Thomas Paul. *Mother tongues and nations: The invention of the native speaker*. Vol. 226. Walter de Gruyter, 2010.
- Dwight, Benjamin W. *Modern Philology: Its Discoveries, History, and Influence*. Scribner, 1864.
- de Gobineau, Joseph Arthur Comte. *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines (An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races)*. Didot, 1853.
- Jones, William. *The Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus*. *Asiatick Researches* 1: 415-431. 1786
- Lamb, Sydney M., & Mitchell, E. Douglas, *Sprung from Some Common Source: Investigations Into the Prehistory of Languages*, Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Latham, Robert G. *Elements of Comparative Philology*, Walton and Maberly, 1862.
- Müller, Friedrich Max. *Lectures on the science of language*, Volume 1, Longmans, Green, 1866.
- Müller, Friedrich Max. *Biographies of words and the home of the Aryas*, Longmans, Green, 1888.
- Penka, Karl. *Die Herkunft der Arier*, Prochaska, 1886.
- Sanskrit Dictionary. [https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/macdonell\\_query.py?qs=aryan&matchtype=default](https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/macdonell_query.py?qs=aryan&matchtype=default)
- Schlegel, Friedrich. *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, 1808.



# Big-ass

Nicole Markovic

Cite as: Markovic, Nicole. 2021. Big-ass. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 28-33.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

People love swearing. It is a chance to flaunt one's *big-ass* lexicon to the world. Language is a powerful tool to express thoughts with great intensity, quickly and efficiently convey feelings, and on occasion, be rebellious and vulgar. Swearing can be intense for some and perhaps inappropriate, but what is fascinating about these words is that they *are* so intense. When HVLS Fan Co. decided to change its name to Big Ass Fans, it was not because of an arbitrary, rebellious decision. The company made such high-quality industrial fans that when customers repeatedly called to ask whether or not they carried "those big-ass fans", they permanently changed their company name to reflect the language that many people were using offhand. The intentional vulgarity of these customers highlights a real-world case of a shift in the use of particular swear words in casual speech.

Simply put, customers wanted to know if HVLS Fan Co. carried some huge fans, and HVLS made a crucial business decision based on a language trend that is ongoing in American society. *Big-ass*, a somewhat nonsensical adjective, is a popular informal term people use in modern day English. One can divide the phrase and ascertain that *big* means *large*, and *ass* may mean a number of things, but the origin and meanings of *big-ass* is not so simple. This paper explores the origins of *big-ass* and its development throughout its history, as well as its use as an increasingly acceptable term in colloquial American English.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *big-ass* is a term originally and primarily of U.S. origin. By compounding the adjective *big* with the noun *ass*, *big-ass* serves as an adjective intensifier to refer to something extremely big, huge, or impressive. While the two words separately contain longer histories, the term *big-ass* originated in the 1930 or 1940's. One of the earliest journals with the term is a 1945 issue of *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, and the example provided reads, "A big white bastard stood up in front of the door, cop of course, hit me in my head with that *big-ass* nightstick, which really rocked my brains". Also from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is important to note that an extended use of this term had military origins. A plane with a large tail section in the 1940's was referred to as a "*big-assed* bird". *Urban Dictionary*, a crowdsourced online dictionary of slang terms, defines *big-ass* as an adjective for large in in size. An example provided by *Urban Dictionary* is, "That's a *big-ass* truck".

Elgersma (1998) examines the trend of *big-ass* in American English within the realm of her "anal-retentive hypothesis (ARH)". She states that, in general, *-ass* attaches to adjectives and therefore most adjectives are available to serve as a base (ex. *ugly-ass*, *crazy-ass*, *lame-ass*...). Most available adjectives are either mono- or bi-syllabic. In certain dialects of American English, these adjectives can transform into past participles. In the case of *half-ass*, one could say, "That was a total *half-assed* attempt at baking a cake".

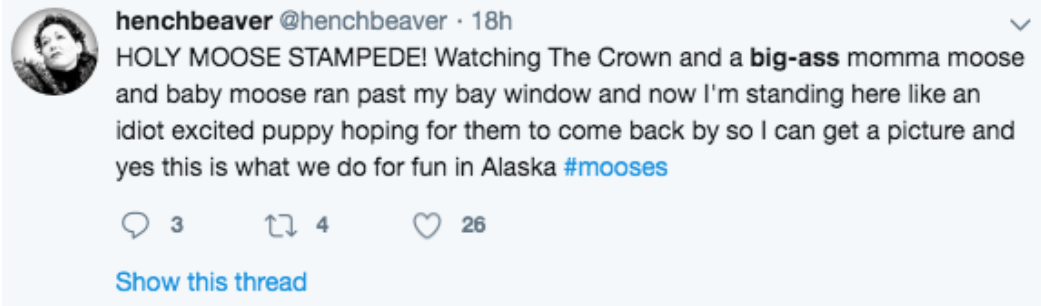


Figure 1: Twitter example

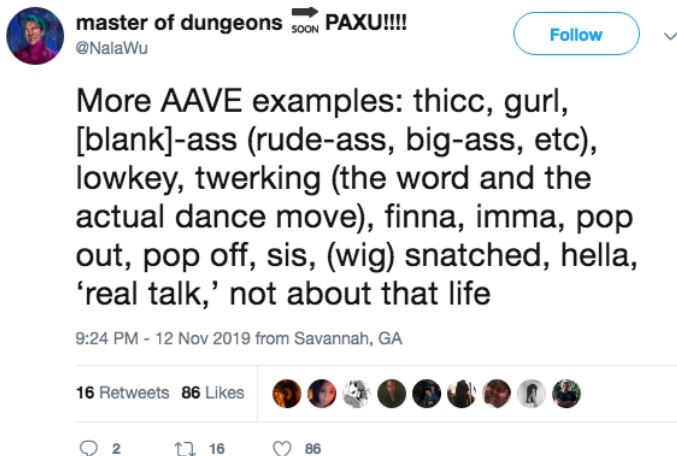
When examining *big-ass*, it is necessary to first review the varying definitions of *ass*, before investigating the more recently invented lexical intensifier *-ass*. An intensifier is a linguistic term for a modifier that does not give additional meaning to a clause, but instead enhances the word that it modifies. The word *ass* has two popular definitions in the Online Etymology Dictionary:

*A domesticated mammal kept in many parts of the world mainly as a draught and pack animal...in popular use the name now superseded by donkey. Can also be used as slang for a foolish person.*

*Slang for "backside."*

These two versions of *ass* are separate words and do not share the same background. The first is ultimately rooted from the Latin word *asinus*, but spread and developed into Old English: *assa*, Italian: *asino*, Old French: *asne*, Old High German: *esil*, and Old Church Slavonic: *osl*. The second version of *ass* emerged in the 1860's in nautical jargon and transferred into more popular use in the 1930s. It derives from the dialectal variant of *arse*, which was derived from Old English: *aers*, Greek: *orros*, and Proto-Germanic: *arsoz*. *Arse* is still commonly used in Britain.

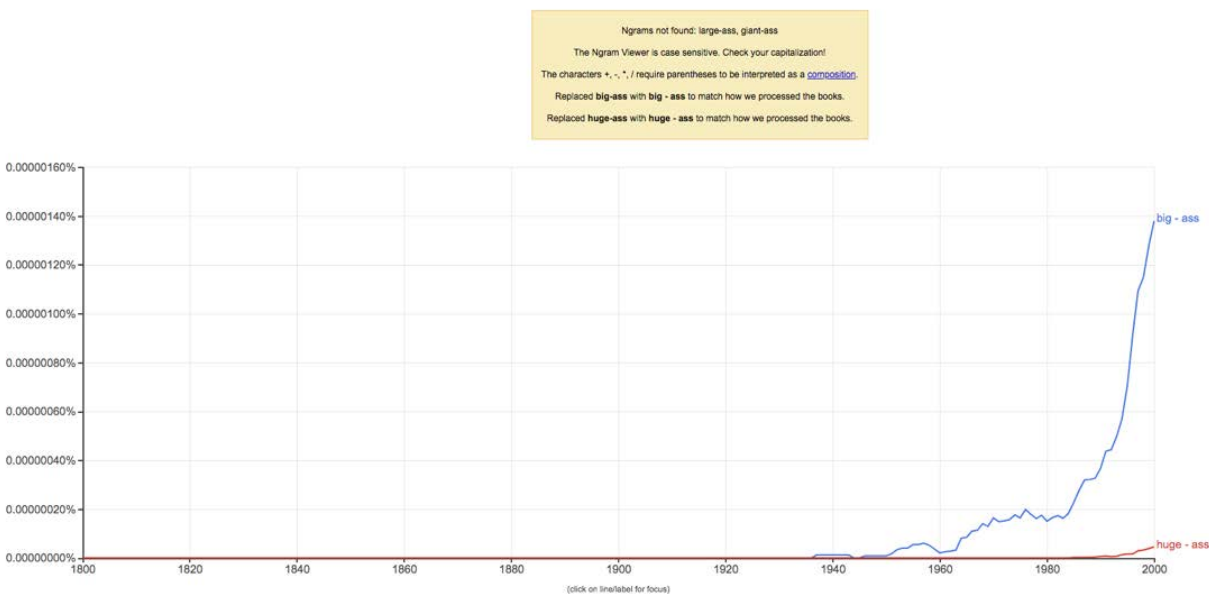
Siddiqi (2011) describes *-ass* as meaning something close to *very*. He generally views the *-ass* intensifier as an affix that attaches to an adjective as a suffix, but with certain linguistics constraints. For example, *-ass* must come between the adjective and its noun. The term *-ass* is a bound morpheme but does not act like other suffixes that attach to adjectives to intensify (*-ly*, *-er*, *-est*). A linguistic constraint on it is that *-ass* is placed to the right of the adjective that it is modifying and left of the head the adjective modifies. Ex. That is a **big-ass** chair. Although, it is unable to be phrase final, so there is no correct interpretation of "that chair is **big-ass**". As an intensifier, *-ass* needs syntactic heads in the same phrase to be on either side of it.



**Figure 2: Twitter example**

The *-ass* intensifier has been previously analyzed within the presence of AAE/AAVE. A large variety of slang terms and colloquialisms move freely from non-standard dialects. (Miller, 2017)

A Google Ngram of *big-ass* provides some data for its use, but at a low rate in printed English books (Figure 3). Similar patterns were analyzed for synonyms of *big/huge/large/giant*: *Giant-ass* and *large-ass* are not present, even though these are attested in contemporary spoken American English. The insignificant data on *big-ass* shows that it is a term that not widely accepted and perhaps viewed appropriate in literature. Yet there are many examples from popular culture that verify *big-ass* as a widely used term.



**Figure 3: Ngram: big-ass vs. huge-ass**

Data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English and Corpus of Historical American English show tokens of *big-ass* spread throughout time in film, television, and magazines. Provided below is a small sample from each corpus. As time passes, society has increasingly accepted inclusion of (some) swear words in media. Looking at the use of *big-ass* over time can help show how society changes over time. The United States is viewed as an individualistic society, constantly focused on how to set ourselves apart from others. This includes the ways we use language.



CLICK FOR MORE CONTEXT				[?]	SHOW DUPLICATES
1	1971	FIC	SeasonWitch	A B C	table with only three legs and made it over the fence, andp66there was this <b>big-ass</b> rat sniffing my boots. I swear, Witch, he was the size of
2	1989	FIC	Harpers	A B C	cursing under his breath, muttering darkly about the idiots on the freeway in their <b>big-ass</b> Mercedes, crowding him, about spies and niggers and junior high kids cu
3	1997	FIC	Essence	A B C	garden. I'm wearing a long white dress, and I've got this <b>big-ass</b> straw hat, and I'm holding my skirt so it won't get dirty. Eddie
4	1998	FIC	Mov:SiegeThe	A B C	the phone) Floyd, Hub. We need to put something together in a <b>big-ass</b> hurry.... Where's Frank --?.....
5	1998	FIC	SouthwestRev	A B C	altar. Andy took his keys and raided surgical supply. He brought back a <b>big-ass</b> saw, femur-grade, held the envelope on edge, and began to saw it
6	2000	FIC	Play:JesusHoppedA	A B C	' real movies! I'm a go to a spot, pick up a <b>big-ass</b> bag a some proper smoke, roll the most gigantic El you ever fuckin'
7	2000	FIC	Play:LaramieProject	A B C	have designed an angel outfit -- for our wings are huge -- they're like <b>big-ass</b> wings -- and there'll be ten to twenty of us that are angels --
8	2000	FIC	Play:LaramieProject	A B C	and because of our big wings -- we are gon na com-plete-ly block him.So this <b>big-ass</b> band of angels comes in, we don't say a fuckin' word,
9	2000	FIC	CloseRangeWyoming	A B C	I give him a look but when I went out I seen he had a <b>big-ass</b> pair a binoculars hangin off his rearview." He neglected to add that the
10	2002	FIC	Play:Faster	A B C	from the bowlin alley trailin behind her all slow and careful. Panama hat. <b>Big-ass</b> collar flappin in the wind. Tryin to be slick like he ain't goin

Figure 4: COHA

84	1998	FIC	SouthwestRev	A B C	altar. Andy took his keys and raided surgical supply. He brought back a <b>big-ass</b> saw, femur-grade, held the envelope on edge, and began to saw it
85	1998	FIC	BilingualRev	A B C	we were making love -- that he was Christopher Columbus or one of those other <b>big-ass</b> explorers and I was an Indian woman. And if I didn't go along
86	1998	FIC	Mov:Armageddon	A B C	That, my friends, was the work of the big Saddam. That was <b>big-ass</b> Iraqi missiles INT. MANHATTAN - SUBWAY - DAY F.B.I. AGENTS and N.A.S.A.
87	1997	FIC	Essence	A B C	garden. I'm wearing a long white dress, and I've got this <b>big-ass</b> straw hat, and I'm holding my skirt so it won't get dirty. Eddie
88	1997	FIC	Mov:GJane	A B C	wanted to be a Navy man. Wanted to fire them big guns on a <b>big-ass</b> battleship. But Navy said to him, " Oh, no. You can
89	1996	SPOK	CNN_News	A B C	ROBERT De NIRO, Actor: Like what? Like your house? Like your <b>big-ass</b> car? Like your \$40 million? Huh? WESLEY SNIPES: I care about
90	1996	FIC	ChicagoRev	A B C	he was a smashmouth runner a few years ago, one strong, determined, <b>big-ass</b> mother. Only he had one them defective hearts, see. Like that guy
91	1995	SPOK	Ind_Geraldo	A B C	businesswoman. You tell the cop, You... Unidentified Panelist:... a <b>big-ass</b> ... RIVERA:... take your cam -- chances; I take my chances.
92	1995	FIC	Mov:BadBoys	A B C	You gon na let every old motherfucker pass you? Or just the ones with <b>big-ass</b> trailers draggin' behind? A-c-el-er-ate. # # BURNETT # I don't have
93	1993	FIC	Mov:PoeticJustice	A B C	fuck out then, bitch! Walk your ass home! It'll do them <b>big-ass</b> thighs of yours some good anyway! Cottage cheese legs! Justice turns, fuming

Figure 5: COCA

Because the United States is highly individualistic, we are highly focused on ourselves and how to set ourselves apart. We are competing for attention, and for a lot of us, the idea of not setting ourselves apart and not being our own person is troubling. The irony is that we want to fit in, and we want to be accepted, but we also want to stand out. These are contradictory goals. One may occasionally think they are unique in language use and that swearing makes one cool, rebellious, or different. So, identity is expressed partly through language use. Utilizing language in the way we want to as a means of communication works to represent whom we are at any given moment. While factors outside our control affect our language, there are many ways we choose to express ourselves. Therefore, while some things may be considered unique, language forces us to look at how we share identical membership in a collective identity of language use. Utilizing terms like *big-ass* and talking about how you cannot wait to get a “*big-ass* coffee” in the morning is not a unique trait. Though, there is comfort in the fact that the media perpetuates the language of people, so it is possible to see your specific language use represented.

A great way the intensifier *-ass* has been represented on television is from the show *Parks and Recreation*. One scene occurs as follows: Tom is talking to Leslie and wants to know if he can obtain as many appetizers and desserts as possible by helping her out. He refers to them as “apps and zerts”. When Leslie appears confused, Tom takes time to explain his own specific language style:

*“Zerts are what I call desserts. Tray-trays are entrées. I call sandwiches ‘sammies’, ‘sandoozles’, or ‘Adam Sandler’s’. Air conditioners are ‘cool blasterz’. I call cakes ‘big ol’ cookies’. I call noodles ‘long-ass rice’. Fried chicken is ‘fry-fry chicky-chick’. Chicken parm is ‘chicky-chicky-parm-parm’. Chicken cacciatore? ‘Chicky-cach’. I call eggs ‘pre-birds’, or ‘future birds’. Root beer is ‘super water’. Tortillas are ‘bean blankets’. And I call forks ‘food rakes.’” (Episode 3.10, “Soulmates”)*

Here, Tom is using the intensifier *-ass* to describe noodles in his own way (Sharp 2013). Variations that also work with this model are “*big-ass* rice” and “*big-ass* noodles”. While Tom’s character is not necessarily one who swears frequently, a character who does swear frequently is Negan from *The Walking Dead*. His humor is snarky and dry. In a recent episode, Negan finally comes face to face with an adversary and what seems like a *big-ass* fight is about to happen. Negan says to his adversary,

“Alright you **big-ass** freak. Let’s do this”. In this situation Negan’s character is using a swear word for destructive purposes. The viewer needs to feel the intensity of the moment.

Now, Big Ass Fans has a fun new name and the business is doing well. A few other businesses have tried to exploit the once-taboo term *big-ass*, with accompanying legal issues. In 2019 in New Orleans, there was a dispute between two companies names Huge Ass Beer and Giant Ass Beer. Both aim to serve plus-size pours of beer along Bourbon Street and are especially popular during Mardi Gras. Huge Ass Beers sparked a federal lawsuit because they had trademarked their name and claimed that Giant Ass Beers caused a trademark infringement (McNulty 2019). The argument stems from the fact that “giant” is synonymous with both “huge” and “big.”

All in all, when your professor discusses Thanksgiving in class and refers to turkey as a *big-ass* turkey, that is reason enough to dive further into social and historical trends of *big-ass*. Like Big Ass Fans, it became another instance that makes you stop and wonder why people choose the words they do, and how that in turn influences our thinking and language use. Regarding terms such as *big-ass*, some think that Americans are contributing to the evolution of English in the most foolish way. Others may say that anyone from individuals, to mass media, to popular culture are ruining the English language. In *Language Myths*, Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill illustrate the falsehood of such myths: there is no “modern decadence” in media language use, and while Americans may be more innovative than the British when it comes to language use due to the factor of population size, this does not entail a decline (Bauer and Trudgill 1998). By creating and using words such as *big-ass*, people are helping to extend the English language to new people and regions. Identity is expressed partly through language use as well. It is also more likely that a word such as *ass* is easier to go through transformation because on a spectrum of vulgar words, it is milder and therefore more likely to evolve.

This paper has explored the origins of *big-ass*, its development throughout history, a deeper linguistic analysis of the term, and its use as an increasingly acceptable term in colloquial American English. For further inquiry, it is suggested to include the presence or absence of the hyphen in this and related words. The term *big-ass* has over seventy years of history, and like all words, it will continue to evolve.

## References

- “Ass, n.” OED Online. Oxford University Press
- “Ass, n.” Online Etymology Dictionary. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?page=1&q=big-ass>
- Bauer, L., & Trudgill, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Language myths*. Penguin UK.
- “Big-ass, adj.” OED Online. Oxford University Press.
- “Big-ass, adj.” Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=big%20ass>
- Big Ass Fans. <https://www.bigassfans.com/company/>
- Carter, F. E. “Unbreakable Glass for War Watches.” *Michigan Manufacturer & Financial Record*, [Detroit, Michigan], 1 July 1916, p. 16.
- Corpus of Contemporary American English. Brigham Young University. <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>
- Corpus of Historical American English. Brigham Young University. <http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>
- Elgersma, Diana. (1998). *Serious-ass morphology: The anal emphatic in English*. In mile 2 program. Available at: <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/myl/Elgersma1998.pdf>
- Henchbeaver. “HOLY MOOSE STAMPEDE! Watching The Crown and a big-ass momma moose and baby moose ran past my bay window and now I’m standing here like an idiot excited puppy hoping for them to come back by so I can get a picture and yes this Is what we do for fun in Alaska #mooses.” 17 November 2019. 5:11 P.M. Tweet.

- Luu, C. (2016, June 1). In which we get to the bottom of some crazy-ass language.  
<https://daily.jstor.org/in-which-we-get-to-the-bottom-of-some-crazy-ass-language/>
- McNulty, I. (2019, Feb 28). On Bourbon Street, battle of Huge Ass Beers vs. Giant Ass Beers lands in New Orleans Court. [https://www.nola.com/entertainment\\_life/eat-drink/article\\_3ced5a9a-961f-5597-aa93-6640eeeb0d9b.html](https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/eat-drink/article_3ced5a9a-961f-5597-aa93-6640eeeb0d9b.html)
- Miller, W. J. (2017). Grammaticalization in English: a diachronic and synchronic analysis of the " ass" intensifier. Doctoral dissertation, San Francisco State University.
- NalaWu. "More AAVE examples: thicc, gurl, [blank]-ass (ruse-ass, big-ass, etc), lowkey, twerking (the word and the actual dance move), finna, imma, pop off, sis, (wig) snatched, hella, 'real talk', not about that life". 13 November, 2019. 12:24 AM. Tweet.
- Siddiqi, Daniel. (2011). "The English intensifier ass". Snippets 23 (pp. 16-17). Carleton University, <http://www.ledonline.it/snippets/allegati/snippets23006.pdf>
- Sharp, S. (2013, Feb 7). The 25 best Tom Haverford quotes.  
<https://www.pastemagazine.com/blogs/lists/2013/02/the-best-tom-haverford-quotes.html?p=3>

# Bromance

## Alistair King

Cite as: King, Alistair. 2021. Bromance. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 34-38.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

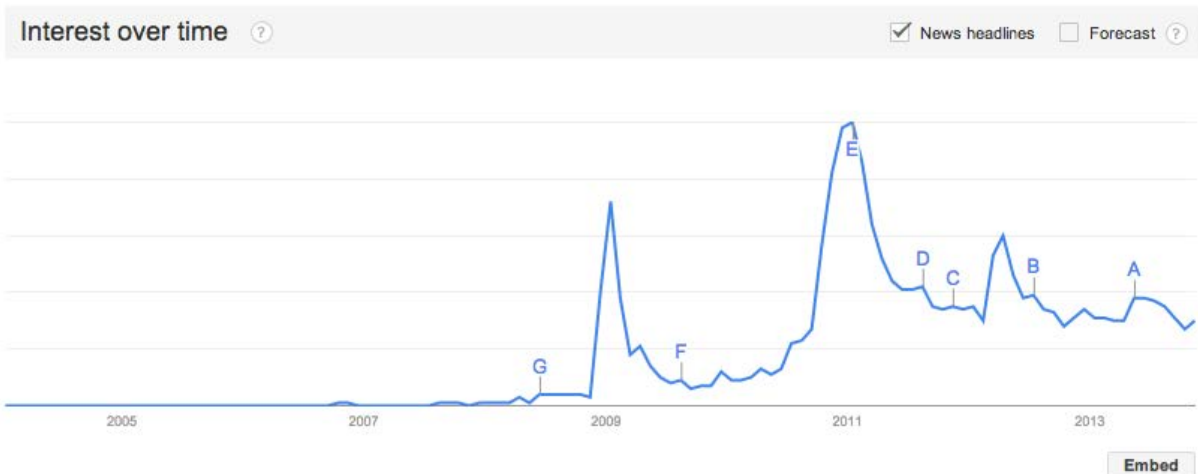
## Origins

It was not until late 2008 to early 2009 that the word “bromance” burst into the American consciousness. A combination of “bro” (a commonly used abbreviation of “brother,” used among male friends) and “romance”, the word was suddenly everywhere. Seemingly overnight, magazines, newspapers, and even nightly news programs were filled with articles and stories detailing this latest trend in friendship. It is a simple enough term, merely giving a specific, modern name to a pre-existing concept while simultaneously taking it to the next level. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), a bromance is an “intimate and affectionate friendship between men [or] a relationship between two men which is characterized by this”. The earliest quotation that the OED gives for the term is a more casual definition from the April 2001 edition of a publication called *TransWorld Surf* and says, “Bromance—Romance between bros. Example: ‘It looks like there’s a bit of bromance between Ryan and Matt.’” The *Times of London* claims the word goes back even further to skateboarding magazines in the 1990s, where it was used in a similar manner “to describe the affections of über-buddy boarders” (Maher 2009). Neither of these provide much further insight, but to put it all together very simply, a bromance is an especially close friendship between two men. The top definition on *Urban Dictionary*, from 2005: “Describes the complicated love and affection shared by two straight males,” goes a step further and claims a bromance is between two straight men, but that excludes the many non-heterosexual men who have been part of self-described bromances.

## Media

The main impetus behind bromance’s rise to fame was a slew of movies released in 2008 and 2009 with an emphasis on male homosocial friendship, similar to the buddy-cop genre. The film *I Love You, Man*, starring Paul Rudd and Jason Segal as bromance partners, in particular caused the term to skyrocket in popularity. The *Times* provides a brief summary of what makes their characters’ relationship so special: “The men go to the beach, the bar, and the park together. They talk for hours on the phone. They have self-described ‘man dates,’ and discuss fine food and weepy movies. Though both officially heterosexual, they are also, it seems, somehow in love.” Essentially, the two are best friends and are unafraid to proclaim their platonic love for each other.

It proved to be an appealing concept to men, because around the time of the movie's release in early 2009, worldwide Google searches for the term "bromance" suddenly spiked to their second highest point of all time, as seen in the Google Trends graph below, displaying relative search volumes and interest over time for the query "bromance."



Of course, *I Love You, Man* was just one of many bromance films that were released during that same time period. Once producers realized how much money there was to be made in buddy flicks, the theaters were soon full of them (Callaghan 2010). The television channel MTV even aired a reality



show called *Bromance* in which men compete to become best friends with TV personality Brody Jenner (Ogunnaiké 2009). The 'bromantic' attitude experienced a fast diffusion from screen to reality and men all across the nation were soon literally and figuratively embracing their closest male friends.





## Context

In the United States, 'bromance' was frequently advertised as the male equivalent to female best-friend relationships (Hubbard 2008). Previously, men who were perceived as being too close were sometimes ridiculed by bigots and accused of being homosexual. Men were encouraged to keep their emotions repressed and confessing even a platonic love to another man was taboo. The macho attitude was prevalent, and while men could be friends, it was considered unusual if two men were as close as two women were. However, the 'bromance' movement made these intimate, male homosocial relationships acceptable. Hugging, sharing of deep emotions, and spending extensive amounts of time together were no longer seen as strictly feminine activities. Two "bros" could have dinner together, go shopping, see a movie—anything. As long as it was under the title "bromance", all would be well. Deep connections were encouraged, being half of a bromance was considered "cool," and the situation allowed men to behave in what would usually be perceived as a "gay" manner. Not limited to closeness and hugging, many 'bromance' partners joked about marriage or being together for the rest of their lives. In a classic example, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck have publicly called themselves "hetero lifemates" (Donnelly 2011). When men in the media were open about their self-proclaimed 'bromances', it showed that not only was it acceptable to be that intimate with another man, but that you could still be manly and heterosexual while doing so—something that was of great importance to the more insecure of 'bromance' partners.

## Reaction

This is where the dark side of 'bromance' begins to emerge. While men were encouraged to be more open and caring towards their "bros", there tended to be an air of (to borrow a very "bro" colloquial phrase) "no homo" that pervaded all their interactions and the relationship in general. This was, of course, highly offensive to the LGBT community as it suggested that there was something wrong with homosexuality and that male-male intimacy was only acceptable if it was completely heterosexual and if that heterosexuality was regularly reinforced with the use of words like "bro". The fact that these 'bromantic' relationships were being lauded by the media and adopted by men all over the country was highly frustrating to some (Callaghan 2010). To experience such progress in the acceptance of homosocial relations and yet maintain such a backwards perception of homosexual relations, from which 'bromance' participants were perhaps ironically drawing much of their inspiration, was insulting. Although some men treated their 'bromance' with less of a "don't worry, it's not gay" attitude and more of a "so what if we are?" attitude, it was not as common as its homophobic counterpart.

## Today

As seen on the previous Google Trends graph, interest in the word 'bromance' has more or less leveled out. After years of constant use, the term has fallen out of vogue, and articles discussing the latest bromances are harder to come by. Such stories and articles do still exist, but the word does not carry the buzz it used to and is most often used by misguided older writers trying to connect with today's youth. One of the highest profile recent cases of a media-declared 'bromance' comes from around the time of the 2012 American elections when news outlets began reporting on President Barack Obama's supposed 'bromance' with Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey (Epstein 2012). Clearly, it is not quite the hip, young term it used to be when reporters are applying it to middle-aged politicians of opposing political parties.



## Conclusion

I began this project by asking what the usage of 'bromance' has to do with masculine ideals and male-male platonic relations. The emergence of the word 'bromance' prompted a wave of men to become closer than ever before to their "bros". While previously it was frowned upon and unusual for two men to be too personal and open with each other due to such behaviors being perceived as effeminate and thus supposedly inappropriate in our society, this new fad allowed them to be openly affectionate with their friends. It represented an interesting shift in societal expectations of masculinity. The spread of 'bromance' broke down some of the more rigid masculine ideals, but also brought further homophobia and exacerbated intolerance for homosexual relationships as bromance partners repeatedly emphasized that what they were doing was not gay. The fact that this was how bromances were sometimes interpreted—that the actions were "gayer" and not simply those of good friends—is troublesome. While it is lamentable that there had to be a special word to allow for the full acceptance of deeper male friendships and that it was something that could not develop on its own under the classic label of "best friends," it is even more lamentable that it was accompanied by cries of "don't worry, it's not gay," because apparently that is where the line has to be drawn. Bromances are acceptable, but they will never let you forget that that is all it is, and that anything more would be crossing the line. "I love you, man. But no homo."



## References

- "Bromance." Urban Dictionary. Urban Dictionary, 30 May 2005.  
<<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bromance>>.
- Callaghan, Greg. "A Fine Bromance - Trend Tracker." The Australian Magazine 4 Dec. 2010.
- Donnelly, Matt. "Matt Damon: Ben Affleck Is His 'Hetero Lifemate'" Los Angeles Times, 13 Dec. 2011.  
<<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/gossip/2011/12/matt-damon-ben-affleck-we-bought-a-zoo.html>>.
- Epstein, Reid J. "The Bromance Continues..." POLITICO. 1 Nov. 2012.  
<<https://www.politico.com/blogs/politico44/2012/11/the-bromance-continues-148036>>.
- "Google Trends: Bromance." Google Trends.  
<<https://www.google.com/trends/explore?q=bromance>>.
- Hubbard, Jeremy. "Sign Of The Times; The Bromance." Nightline. ABC. New York, New York, 9 Apr. 2008.
- Maher, Kevin. "Bromance Movies - It's a Guy Thing; Film I Love You, Man Is the Latest 'Romantic Comedy for Guys'. Kevin Maher Spots a Hollywood Trend." The Times [London] 28 Mar. 2009.
- Ogunnaike, Lola. "Are You and Best Buddy in a 'Bromance'?" CNN. Cable News Network, 15 Apr. 2009. <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/wayoflife/04/15/bromance/>>.

# Cafeteria

## Deanna English

Cite as: English, Deanna. 2021. Cafeteria. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 39-45.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Imagine you are planning a first date with the person you are interested in and are given three dining options to choose from: a restaurant, an old-fashioned home-cooked dinner, or a cafeteria. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I bet that a date to the cafeteria would be your absolute last resort - not because a cafeteria is an inadequate place to eat, but because of the negative connotations associated with the word. The first association that comes to mind when I hear *cafeteria* is high school. I think of the 35-40 minutes of "free time" between classes signifying that the school day is almost over, but more importantly, I also think of waiting in excessively long lines for subpar food. In relation to this, the word *cafeteria* has been reduced to becoming a term that is continuously swept under the rug. Usually found in educational systems, hospitals, major corporations, and even prisons, these institutions sometimes replace *cafeteria* with other phrases such as dining hall, buffet, lunchroom, or even food court; all words that are similar in meaning, but seem to sound "better" than simply calling the area a *cafeteria*. So, my question is why? Why does this word, cafeteria, not only have a negative connotation, but also an unpleasant stereotype that goes along with it?

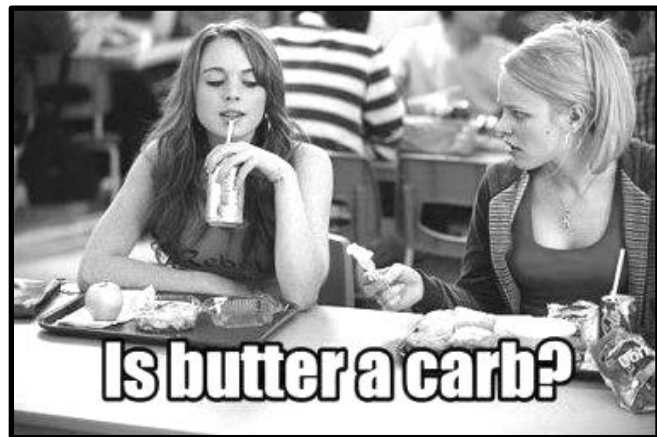
## History and Etymology

The term *cafeteria* is an Americanized version of the Spanish word *cafetería*, meaning coffee-house or coffee store. First appearing in the Spanish language during the latter part of the 1800's, *cafetería* was a combination of the word *café*, meaning "coffee," and the ending *-tería*, which translates as "a place where something is done" (Online Etymology Dictionary). In this context the word, at that time, was known as a gathering place for patrons to sit and discuss business or personal matters over a beverage, such as coffee. However, in 1923, the ending *-tería* took a shift in meaning and came to be understood as "help-yourself," changing the overall meaning of the word to be known as it is today - a "self-service restaurant." The actual context in which the U.S. adopted the word from Spanish in 1900 is unknown and has yet to be fully researched. However, in the journal *American Speech*, Phillips Barry gives a brief overview of his notes on the history and derivation of *cafeteria* (Barry 1927).

In summary, he discusses how the word has had a long history; beginning with the Greek word *καφενείο*, or "coffee-house," it migrated into Turkish, near East, and Arabic contexts between the 1600-1800's, before eventually reaching Spanish context in the mid to late 1800's, and then finally being adopted by American English in 1900. Discussing the term's uses and transformation over time, he adds that, unlike how the word is used today, the phrase "coffee shop" or "coffee house" referred to a "poor man's club," where coffee was actually used as a "stimulating drug." This use of the word was seen as early as the 1600's in Turkey, and eventually used in this same context in Mexico. Moving forward, Barry discusses the history surrounding the Spanish word *cafetería*. Dating back to 1862, the word appears in Cuban-Spanish as, *cafetería la tienda en que se vende café por menor*: "the shop where coffee is sold at retail." Since the word was not picked up or used by Americans until the early 1900's, there is no evidence to show its use outside of Cuba and Puerto Rico during the mid-1800's, however, Barry explains the formulation of the Spanish term *cafetería* as "an analogy of the cuban-spanish

*bisuteria*,” or jewelry store, which, coincidentally, was a loan word from the French word *bijouterie*. With an intricate and complicated history, Barry (1927) closes his piece with the notion that the “story” behind *cafeteria* and its association with self-service is not complete, leaving anticipation for further research to be done in the future.

Even though the context in which the cafeteria was adopted by American English is not known, we can still hypothesize until more work is done to find out. If we look at Spanish and American foreign relations during this time period of the mid 1800’s to early 1900’s, there are a few key events during which Americans may have discovered *cafetería*. For example, following the Mexican-American war in the 1860’s, the U.S. organized filibusters to go on armed expeditions to Mexico, Central America, and Cuba, in an attempt to acquire territorial gains. Also, in the latter 1890’s, the Spanish-American war broke out as a result of American intervention on Cuba’s War of independence. With the signing of The Treaty of Paris in 1898, America was granted indefinite control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine Islands, and temporary control of Cuba from Spain (US Department of State). With so much interaction between American English and Spanish speaking people in such a short time period, it is likely that *cafeteria* was borrowed and Americanized from *cafetería* in one of these contexts. However, this is only an assumption and, similar to Barry’s point, there is not enough research to prove so. This leads to my own personal research of *cafeteria* and, more specifically, how the word has shaped this idea of self-service, and how the negative connotation became associated with it. But before we begin, we must ask the question: what exactly is so bad about a self-service restaurant? Looking at this concept neutrally, it is an efficient and productive method of serving food for large quantities of people, and should be praised, not bashed. I mean, we all like to eat, and we need food to survive. So why are cafeterias acquiring such a terrible representation?

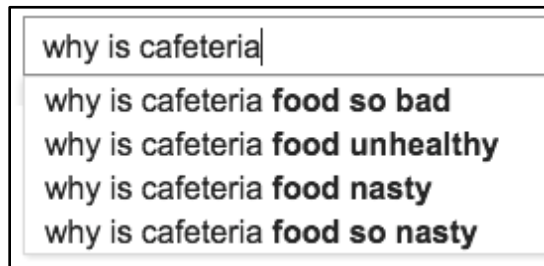


## Representation

Taking a closer look at how the media and the entertainment industry has transformed the way food, in itself, has been viewed over the last several decades, it can be easy to spot where cafeterias have been hindered with this terrible rep. From popular children’s television shows and movies like *Hey Arnold* and *Mean Girls* to documentaries such as *Cafeteria Man*, and *Lunch Hour*, the entertainment industry highlights how kids are being served daily doses of mystery meat and nutrition-less garbage in cafeteria settings. For example, the documentary *Lunch Hour* highlights how America’s National School Lunch Program essentially privatized the cafeteria system by establishing “factory farms,” a conventionalized system which makes it possible for schools across the nation to serve and feed roughly 17 million school children on as little as 90 cents per meal. By serving meals high in sugar, fats, dairy, and a side of “mystery meat,” this documentary shares how the world’s future generations are succumbing to eating lunch time meals that fail to administer any nutritional value. But these examples are just a taste of how our media culture visualizes, depicts, and showcases

cafeterias. To show this negative image from the music industry's standpoint, even "Weird" Al Yankovic expresses his opinion on the cafeteria in his two-version song "School Cafeteria." In both versions he writes:

*You know a school cafeteria believes in mass production  
They buy those lousy soy beans by the keg  
I don't like to complain, but in a school cafeteria  
You can get a taco and get bubonic plague*



Based on these few examples alone, the meals being served in cafeterias nationwide are definitely not going unnoticed; and just about everyone seems to have a negative comment about them. In fact, in addition to the documentaries that have profited off of bashing cafeterias and the TV shows or songs that add to the negative image, these headlines from Google News for November 11, 2014, show further the stigmatizing of the word cafeteria:

*Connecticut School Agrees to Changes After Students Boycott Cafeteria Food  
Texas A&M Galveston Students Take Cafeteria Lunch Complaints to Social Media  
Your lunchbox may be as unhealthy as the cafeteria*

A quick search of the cafeteria in the 'News' section of Google will bring up pages and pages of articles and news stories similar to these ones. The best part? These articles were not published during any crisis, but within the past 24 hours of the arbitrary time of my search. In my opinion, the media's insistence on consistently targeting the cafeteria and highlighting its not-so-great qualities seems useless after a certain point. Not to mention, as this problem of poor-quality cafeteria food has seemingly been going on for decades, you would think that a better solution would have been addressed, or the media would eventually find something else to discuss. What is interesting about the shows, documentaries, and news articles previously mentioned, however, is that they all seem to centralize their attention on one aspect of what the cafeteria's central purpose is: food. Meaning, what all of these different sources have in common is that they all seem to solely bash cafeteria food; more specifically, its variety and quality. By drawing back to the initial Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word, a cafeteria is supposed to represent a self-service restaurant; it does not promise a selection of the finest and most-nutritious meals, but rather a way for the customer to pick and choose as they please in an efficient and satisfying manner. The underlying issue here is that the cafeteria as a whole is not giving itself a bad representation, instead, it's the individual parts that make up the whole, such as the food, employees, etc. However, before we move on, since we have looked at what the media and popular culture think of the word, let's quickly look at what the average American thinks.

To add to this negative stigma surrounding the word, a quick hop over to Urban Dictionary will give further insight into what America really thinks about cafeteria (Urban Dictionary). One entry defines the word in this manner:

## cafeteria



A room or building often located on a school campus which purports to offer comestibles to the masses. However, one most often finds that the fare available in cafeterias does not truly resemble any known food substances. In fact, upon further investigation most knowledgeable people flee in horror and disgust from the so-called meals. Others, be they gluttons for punishment (both literal and figurative) or simply starved past the point of reason, choose to ignore the warnings that their senses of sight, smell, touch, and taste are screaming at them, and foolishly proceed to shovel the not-quite deadly toxins into their bodies. For these unlucky individuals a cafeteria can provide them with just enough energy to survive for a few more hours.

*I strapped for cash today so I'll have to eat at the cafeteria.*

*The cafeteria will be serving leftovers today.*

by a bibliophile July 14, 2006

To reiterate the point I previously made, judging that since this entry is from 2006, it can most likely be implied that the negatively viewed articles I highlighted about cafeterias that have been written during 2014 would be very similar to what was written about cafeterias almost a decade ago; and a quick search in Google will show that it is exactly the case. As the top result is an article from the NY Times entitled *A Cafeteria Food Fight Over Health*, it does not take much to show how little things have changed over the past decade in a media sense (Lombardi 2006). Back to what modern Americans think of *cafeteria*, it is interesting to see

how the term is automatically associated with schools or universities. Rarely is the word being represented negatively while it is in connection with a hospital or company – two other institutions who are not strangers to implementing a *cafeteria* style eating plan for its patrons. For example, referring back to the 'News' section of Google, searching the phrase "hospital cafeteria" will showcase articles such as, *Right place, right time: Thompson staff member's save life in cafeteria* (Henriette Post, Nov 10, 2014) and, *Fairview Hospitals Rolling Out New, Healthier Food Menu* (CBS Local, Nov 3, 2014). Whether it is because hospitals and companies need to maintain a positive reputation, or the fact that it is easier to point a finger at what could be behind child obesity, the reasoning behind the distinctively different representations of hospital and company cafeterias versus school cafeterias in our society remains to be unknown. Drawing on all examples mentioned, it is clear that the food being served in school cafeterias seems to be the contender to the negative representation of *cafeteria*. However, even in this context, the use of the term *cafeteria*, as I have come to find out, does not always have to be associated with food.



## Alternative Contextual Uses

Referring back to the *cafeteria* entry in the Urban Dictionary, on the bottom right-hand side of the page, a list of suggested words and phrases based on my search for “cafeteria” were shown, which definitely caught my attention. Ranging from “cafeteria lady,” “cafeteria nazi,” and “cafeteria syndrome,” these entries targeted stereotypical aspects of the school cafeteria such as the female cafeteria “lunch ladies,” and the craziness experienced when you frequent the cafeteria too much. My personal favorite, “cafeterria,” which was defined as: “Diarrhea induced by eating food from a cafeteria, particularly school or work cafeterias.” Similar to the prior examples by the media, these entries on Urban Dictionary aggregate the same sense of negative stigma towards *cafeteria* by either targeting its food or employees (Urban Dictionary).

Cafeteria Girlfriend/Boyfriend
cafeteria Jew
cafeteria lady
Cafeteria Man
Cafeterian
cafeteria nazi
Cafeteria Religion
cafeteria speed date
cafeteria syndrome
Cafeterria

However, if you take a closer look, the meanings of some cafeteria-related entries, such as “cafeteria religion,” “cafeteria speed date,” and “cafeterian”, are distinctly different from the ones just mentioned. Instead of defining the *cafeteria* as being a one-way ticket to encountering mean female workers, disgusting food, and a trip to the toilet, these phrases center around the behavioral aspect of picking and choosing, or refer to the act of “self-selection.” For example, take the phrase “Cafeteria Religion” which is defined as, “Selecting parts from a religion instead of accepting it as a whole with all its doctrines and customs”. We could even take this a step further and look at “cafeteria Catholicism,” which is, “[a] derogatory term referring to religious individuals who follow the Catholic faith and pick and choose which doctrines of the Church they wish to follow and which ones they don’t.” Are these uses of the word *cafeteria* referring to a “self-service restaurant?” Certainly not, but this new use of the term *cafeteria* as an adjective instead of a noun is definitely worth looking at. After conducting a little more research, I found that there are several other ‘cafeteria concepts’ that apply the notion of self-service to things other than the food industry: the cafeteria principle, cafeteria agile, and cafeteria insurance plans are just to name a few. What these concepts have in common is their dependence on selection, efficiency, and variety, words that correspond with the original definition of the word *cafeteria*.

Taking the first example, the *cafeteria principle*, we can see how the use of “self-service” or “selection” came into play. Coined by the American linguist J.L. Dillard, the term *cafeteria principle* refers to the concept of language mixing, which is the creation of a new language by “selecting” certain features from various other languages (Dillard 1970). *Cafeteria principle* can also be applied to the word *creole* or the term *creole language*, as both are similar in meaning. As we can see in this context, *cafeteria* is being utilized for its meaning of selection. And, in keeping with the negative connotation of the word *cafeteria*, creole languages are frequently and unfairly regarded as degenerate, and mainly associated with people of lower social classes. In a different context, the cafeteria principle can also be used in a business setting. For example, “cafeteria insurance policy” refers to a type of plan where customers can select certain benefits and policies that best fit their needs.

Building off of this idea on how *cafeteria* is being used in different contexts, we can also talk about how the word *cafeteria*, in itself, has inspired the creation of other words. Take the word *pizzeria* for example. Borrowed from Italy, the term *pizzeria* refers to a pizza restaurant where customers can

“self-select” what they want. As the Online Etymology Dictionary puts it, a *pizzeria* is a combination of the word *pizza* and ending in *-eria*, “as in *cafeteria*.” Another example of a word that shares a *-eria* ending is *grocery*. Commonly known as a grocery store or grocery, the word was first used in the mid-15th century, hundreds of years prior to the first appearance of *cafeteria*. The OED explains how “self-service groceries were a novelty in 1913 when a Montana, U.S., firm copyrighted the word *grocery* (with the ending from *cafeteria* used in an un-etymological sense) to name them [...] the term existed through the 1920s.” However, the usage of the word *cafeteria* can be defined as more than the Oxford English Dictionary’s single definition as a “self-service restaurant,” but rather, it can also be defined as a concept or modifier that stresses the sense of “self-service” or “selection” in other contexts outside of just food.

## Conclusion

Dining hall, buffet, lunchroom, automat, smorgasbord, canteen; whatever you want to call it, you are probably referring to the *cafeteria*. For a word that has been utilized in American English for a little over a century, it has a historical background, connotation, and underlying meaning that is more significant and complicated than I had originally anticipated. As I began my research looking at how *cafeteria* is negatively represented by our culture, I found numerous examples that fit the criteria I was searching for, however, I never truly found a distinct answer as to my question of *why*. There are numerous additional possibilities, such as the outcomes that stem from regularly eating food that is coherently “bad” for you, or even the fact that school cafeteria food has, in a sense, become an industry in itself. Despite this, I did manage to find some relevant and useful information pertaining to how *cafeteria* is used in other contexts. Showing the versatility of the word and how its use of the meaning “self-service” can be applied to linguistics and business in the sense that an entire language or dialect can be formed by selecting certain words from other languages, or a business can create a “cafeteria policy” to adhere to the wide “selection” of different needs and desires of its customers, I began to understand how *cafeteria* is more than just a noun, but an adjective as well; creating a *cafeteria* of knowledge about the word, *cafeteria*.

## References

- A Bibliophile. "Cafeteria." Urban Dictionary. 14 July 2006.  
<<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cafeteria>>
- Barry, Phillips. "Cafeteria." *American Speech* 3, no. 1 (1927): 35-37.
- Brason, Justine. "Annoying Things Your Hear From Cafeteria Catholics." *The Catholic Warrior*. 18 Feb. 2014. <<http://catholicworrier.blogspot.com/2014/02/10-annoying-things-your-hear-from.html>>.
- "Cafeteria." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cafeteria>>
- "Cafeteria Plan." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cafeteria\\_plan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cafeteria_plan)>
- Dillard, Joey Lee. "Principles in the history of American English: Paradox, virginity and cafeteria." *Florida FL Reporter* 8, no. 1-2 (1970): 32-33.
- Lombardi, Kate Stone. "A Cafeteria Food Fight Over Health". *New York Times*, February 26, 2006, p. 14.
- "Mel. "Cafeteria Catholicism." Urban Dictionary. 30 Nov. 2005.  
<<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cafeteria%20Catholicism>>
- Online Etymology Dictionary. <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php>>



Tobias, Michael C. "School Lunch Movie Says Unhealthy Cafeteria Fare Is Everyone's Problem." Forbes. 26 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/dadehayes/2014/03/12/school-lunch-movie-says-unhealthy-cafeteria-fare-is-everyones-problem/>>

Milestones: 1830-1860." U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian. Bureau of Public Affairs, <<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/territorial-expansion>>

Yankovic, Weird Al. ""School Cafeteria - Version 1" Lyrics." AZ Lyrics. MusixMatch, <<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/weirdalyankovic/schoolcafeteriaversion1.html>>

Ops. "Cafeterrhea." Urban Dictionary. <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cafeterrhea>>.

Images:

<https://topquotest.blogspot.com/2019/06/quotes-about-cafeteria-food.html>

<http://www.thoughtfulfoodnutrition.com/newsandfood/2016/9/23/is-butter-a-carb>

[https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cafeteria&utm\\_source=search-action](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cafeteria&utm_source=search-action)

# Childfree

## Virginia Nastase

Cite as: Nastase, Virginia. 2021. Childfree. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 46-50.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

“You’re not really mad that I’m not having children.  
In fact, I would probably love to one day.  
You’re mad that I’m expressing autonomy of choice.  
You’re mad that I’m considering other options.  
You’re mad that I don’t view that as my ultimate potential.  
You’re mad that I dare be selfish enough to make choices based on my best interest,  
something women are not supposed to do.  
You’re mad that I consider it a choice, and that I, a woman, am exercising choice.  
You’re not mad that I’m not having babies.  
You’re mad because I’m acting like a man.”

— Alice Minium

## Introduction

This paper will analyze the word *childfree*, what it means in a broader social context, and why women specifically choose to use it. These questions will be answered by exploring the semantic distinction between the words *childless* and *childfree* and why that distinction is important in a social context. Personal anecdotes as well as academic research will be highlighted in order to provide a more complete and well-rounded picture of the complex ideologies and social implications that accompany the use of the word *childfree* and the decision not to have children.

## Etymology

Some people may look at the words *childfree* and *childless* and assume they are interchangeable. Closer linguistic analysis, however, shows they are not. It is important to look at the linguistic differences between the words in order to understand why some women specifically use the term *childfree*. *Childfree* is a compound word made up of the noun *child*, meaning “a person between birth and puberty or full growth” and the adjective *free*, meaning “exempt from; not in bondage, acting of one’s own will” (Online Etymology Dictionary). *Childless* is made up of the noun *child*, which has the same definition here, and the derivational suffix *-less*, meaning “lacking, cannot be, does not” (Online Etymology Dictionary). Both words mean “without children” but in very differing ways, to paraphrase the definitions: free of children vs. lacking children.

One of the meanings of *free* is “acting of one’s own will”, this implies that the choice is voluntary and diverges slightly from the term *childless* which only implies the lack of children. I also found the root of the word *free* comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *\*pri* “to love” which carries a positive connotation (Online Etymology Dictionary). This distinction is extremely important to women who actively choose not to have children. “Free’ implies an active conscious decision of skipping something, like carefree or sugar free” (u/flabinella). Something can’t be “missing” from your life if you never saw it as a part in the first place.

Contrastingly, the suffix *-less* comes from the Old English *-leas*, meaning “free (from), devoid (of)”. The presence of *-less* at the end of the word *child* has a negative undertone and implies that a lack of children leaves one devoid of something or missing something. “It’s like saying I’m penniless or jobless. Like it’s something I should change to better myself. And I don’t agree with that” (u/biwomansayshelothere).

## The Lexiculture Surrounding “Childfree”

Differentiating between the terms *childfree* and *childless* wouldn’t matter if it weren’t for the social context and implications surrounding the idea of a woman being without children. “Non-mothers are often reduced to crippling stereotypes, in the same way that people are reduced to stereotypes because of their ethnicity, sexuality or disability” (Smith pg. 157). They are often deemed as “selfish, materialistic, abnormal, unnatural, unfeminine, and inadequate” (Desjardins pg. 31). These stereotypes and judgements can create internal conflict for women who want to remain childfree but feel pressured by society or family to make a different decision. Social judgements can also lead to a personal stigma or guilt that a woman may carry when her lifestyle choices don’t fit the accepted norm of having a family (Smith pg. 158).

The concept of “bingo-ing” is a great example how these stereotypes are often reinforced by a society. Urban Dictionary defines “bingo” in this context as a “put down or criticism of a life choice” (Pitbull Hugger 2005). While interacting with the r/childfree community I came across countless examples of women being “bingo’ed” by anyone from old ladies telling them they are missing out by not having a “family”, to male coworkers scoffing, surprised at the idea that they would never be mothers. These stereotypes and pressures are mirrored in the negative undertones of the word *childless* and that they play a big role in why women choose the word *childfree* instead, stressing the importance of its voluntary nature.

## The Childfree Movement

To further understand why women choose to use the term *childfree* it is essential to look back and see when the term came into use and see if there are any factors from that time that contributed to its adoption and use. Using Google’s Ngram Viewer I looked back from 1900- the present at the words *childfree* and *voluntarily childfree*.

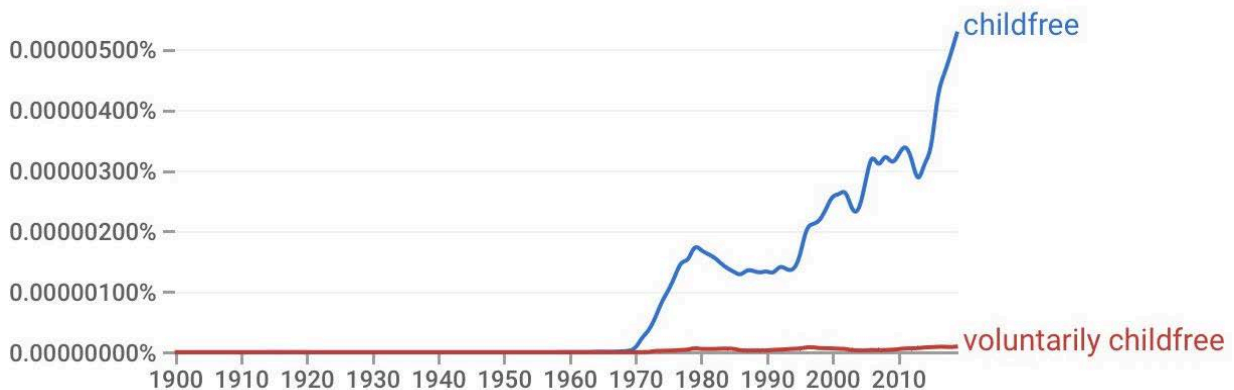


Figure 1: Google Ngram Viewer for the terms *childfree* and *voluntarily childfree*

The first published use of the word *childfree* occurred in 1970 and its use began to rise with the first noticeable peak being reached in 1979. Since then, the use of the term in publications has fluctuated a bit but has generally continued to rise until today when it is the most used it ever has

been. I included the term voluntarily childfree thinking I would see a similar pattern but it did not see as much published use. This data affirms the word *childfree* implies it being voluntary and does not require the prefacing term.

After checking out the Google Ngram Viewer, I looked on google scholar to find a connection between the 1970's and the emerging usage of the term childfree. I came across a 2015 article by Eliza Berman in Time Magazine that highlighted an article published in the 1970's discussing the formation of the National Organization for Non-Parents (NON). In 1972, in response to the socially constructed cultural biases against childfree women mentioned above, two activists, Ellen Peck and Shirley Radl formed the NON in Palo Alto California. Their work with the organization brought the idea of childfree living into the American stream of consciousness and promoted lifestyle choice as a positive option (Berman 2015). This response to the social stigmas faced by childfree women directly contributed to the new use of the word childfree and the beginnings of the childfree movement as an ideology.

The organization disbanded in 1982 but its ideals and the desire to sever womanhood from the grips of motherhood still remain strong among childfree women. Today, research shows that online communities like reddit are an important way for childfree people to connect, unify and provide support for one another (Blackstone 2014).

I came across a post written by an 85-year-old woman on r/childfree's "top posts of all time". She wrote about her choice to be childfree, the constant social stigma and judgement attached to her decision and, finally her continual personal validation (despite the stigma and judgement) that she made the right choice. She described how she and her late husband would tell people "we are trying", making their choice to be childfree "our personal secret. It was nobody's business"... "If we were honest and said 'we cannot have kids, because we just don't want them' the fallout with family and friends would have been tough for us" (u/widowchildfree).

This anecdote shows how powerful the social stigma is attached to being a childfree woman. It was considered so deviant from the social norms that she and her husband hid their true intentions from others. This stigma is a big part of why women want to reclaim the notion of not having children, starting with the language used to describe their choices. In the case of u/widowchildfree, the word childfree represents a modern community and provides a safe space and an opportunity for her to define happiness in her own terms.

## **Childless vs. Childfree**

I dug deeper into exploring the r/childfree subreddit and reading personal stories about why women use the word childfree. I posted to the community asking members about their opinions on the words *childfree* and *childless* and how they interpreted/used these words, these were some of the responses:

*"I don't like "childless", for anyone. The "less" suggests that we lack/are missing something. It's not nice language." (u/little\_biscuit)*

*"That's why we use childfree. Our lives aren't lacking anything." (u/GirlGamer7)*

*"To me childfree is in the same ballpark as smoke free or alcohol free. I have a choice of whether or not I want kids. And I choose not to. Whether or not it's the right choice should be up to me and it is with childfree. Childless on the other hand, has the connotation that the fact that I don't have kids and don't want to is a bad thing." (u/biwomansayshelothere)*

*"Child'less' seems so archaic to me, like it applies to sad old widows and barren old maids and spinsters. It speaks directly to lacking something that you should have,*

*and you are somehow “less-than” because you don’t have children. Child’free’ on the other hand, implies autonomy over your decision. ” (u/plantsncats128)*

*“For me personally, childless implies a lack of children, and a lack of agency in whether or not I have kids. But that’s not the case, because I don’t want to have kids, and I actively chose this lifestyle. Lots of people will say “free” in childfree is about being free of the burden of kids, and I agree– but to me, it’s even more about the freedom to make a choice not to have kids. ” (u/chavrilfreak)*

In reading many personal accounts online, it became clear that being able to have and make the choice to be childfree is extremely important in the community. In addition to talking about the importance of being able to choose to be childfree, all the community members touched on the negative implications that accompany the word childless in different ways and their determination to refer to their lifestyle choices in a more positive way. “‘They DON’T have children’, ‘they HAVEN’T got any children’, ‘NO kids’ which are all full of negatives. ‘I AM childFREE’ is just more positive” (u/plantsncats128). “Even the term ‘voluntary childlessness’ has been thought by some to perpetuate the stigma because it seems to point to a loss or absence, rather than a positive, well-considered stance”. (Smith pg. 157) Referring to themselves as childfree instead of childless, women use the power of language to take back control of socially constructed gender roles and validate their choice not to propagate.

## **Bigger Than Just a Word**

It is bigger than just having the choice; for these women, it’s about using the term childfree to change the narrative of how to have a fulfilling “good life”. There are many reasons women choose to be childfree: pursuing careers, environmental reasons or maybe they really just don’t like children. No matter the reason, the term childfree works as a reclamation, and identifying with it implies you have made the “well-considered” decision that you don’t need to have children to have a complete life. In this context childfree represents an identity, not just a choice.

Having the opportunity to explore one’s self, enjoy one’s sexuality, or to travel are all valid reasons for a man to stay childfree, but it is harder for a woman to be accepted forging that same path without the question of families or children being raised. Sometimes (as in the case of u/widowchildfree) women are forced to live in secrecy or double lives under the guise that they “can’t” have children instead of the truth--they don’t want them. The word childfree is a way for women to embrace their lifestyle choices and a tool for their reclamation of society's female narrative. Replacing childless with childfree allows women to choose what it means to them to have a fulfilling and “good life” -- without children.

## **Conclusion**

So, why do women use the term childfree? Clearly there is a desire by people in the childfree community to reshape the narrative around womanhood so that baby-making and child-rearing are no longer the gold standards. Childfree is more than a word; in this case, it is a community and a safe space for women to redefine themselves apart from societal norms and restrictions. The term childfree not only signifies life choices that one has made in a literal way, but it also represents an identity and works to bridge the gap between social acceptance and creating new gender pathways. Replacing childless with childfree helps to create a linguistic space in which women can freely exist as complete and purposeful individuals, living however they choose.

## References

- Matthews, Elise J., and Michel Desjardins. "Remaking our identities: Couples' experiences of voluntary childlessness." *The Family Journal* 25, no. 1 (2017): 31-39.
- Berman, Eliza. "Childless by Choice: The National Organization for Non-Parents." *Time* 8 Apr. 2015, <https://time.com/3813535/national-organization-for-non-parents/>
- Blackstone, Amy. "childless... or childfree?." *Contexts* 13, no. 4 (2014): 68-70.
- Healey, Jenna. "Rejecting reproduction: The national organization for non-parents and childfree activism in 1970s America." *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 1 (2016): 131-156.
- Minium, Alice. "Alice Minium Is on ClearVoice. Are You?" *ClearVoice*, <https://clearvoice.com/cv/AliceMinium>
- Pitbull Hugger. "B-I-N-G-O." *Urban Dictionary*, 24 Nov. 2005, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=B-I-N-G-O](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=B-I-N-G-O).
- Smith, Hazel. "Feisty and childfree: voluntary childlessness as an alternative to mothering." In Camilla Nelson and Rachel Robertson, eds., *Dangerous Ideas about Mothers* (2018), pp. 137-147. Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing

# Chipotle

Gabriela Ortiz

Cite as: Ortiz, Gabriela. 2021. Chipotle. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 51-55.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

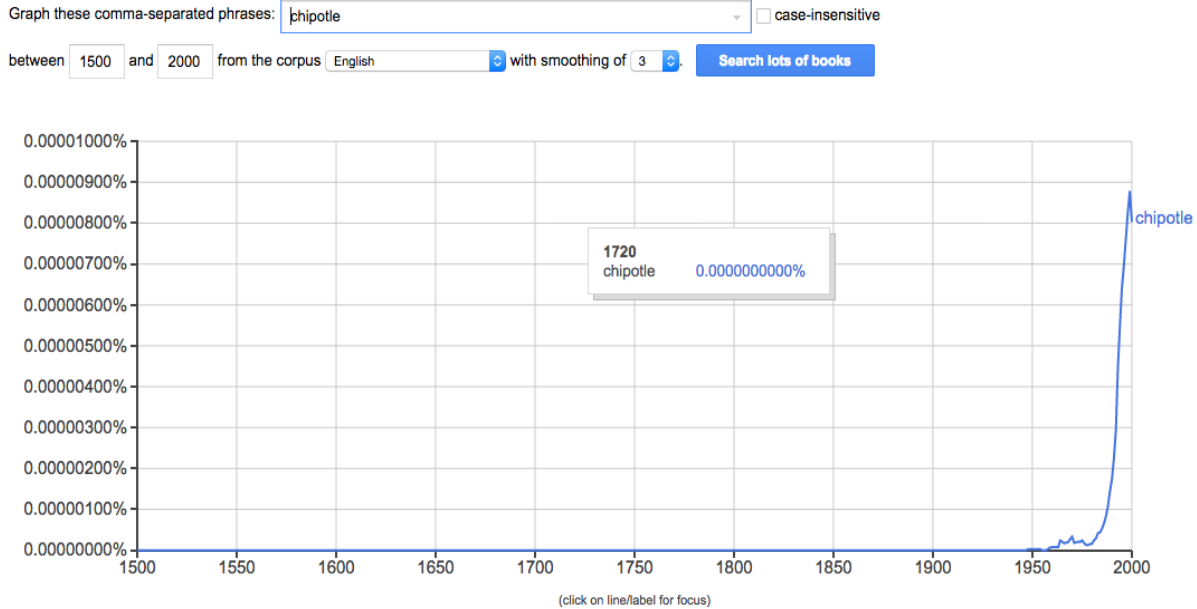
A quick Google web search for the word “chipotle” pulls up a never-ending string of information about the fast-food chain, *Chipotle Mexican Grill*. It is not until the second page of the search that one begins to find information about the smoke-dried jalapeño chile. This is quite interesting because the chipotle chile has existed for thousands of years – centuries’ longer than the Chipotle restaurant chain has been in business. Therefore, if the smoke-dried jalapeño chiles have been in existence for so long, why is it that the American owned chain restaurant dominates the Google search database? Branding and cultural appropriation comprise the primary explanation for this dissonance.

The term “chipotle” has distinct meanings to different people. For some, it automatically conjures up imagery of the smoke-dried chile. For others, chipotle simply means the name of the fast-food Mexican restaurant currently taking over the nearest college town, downtown corridor, or suburban strip mall. However, even before the proliferation of the chain restaurants bearing its name, the chipotle chile has a rich and long history in the Americas, as well as in Europe. But one would never know about this history unless they added “definition” to their Google search. The Chipotle franchise has managed to remove or conveniently omit any cultural factors of the word chipotle and its indigenous roots to the Mexican culture. In short, the restaurant has functionally sought to monopolize the term, “chipotle,” and unroot the term from its indigenous soil.

## Chilpochtli, Xipotli or Chipotle?

The chipotle chile gets its name from the Nahuatl, a people indigenous to modern-day Mexico. “Chilpochtli” or “xipotli”, meaning, “smoked chili,” or “humo de chile” in Spanish, is a word coined by the Nahautl (Leander 1972). There are alternative ways of spelling chipotle, as noted above. However, over time, the common spelling has become chipotle, dropping the “l” before the “p” replacing the “l” in favor of the “e”. No reasons were discovered for this preferred spelling, except for perhaps ease and convenience. Furthermore, the popular dictionaries do not often include each form of spelling, but most etymology references do, with Merriam-Webster including the year it was first used. The Merriam-Webster dictionary places chipotle to have first been used in the 1950’s, which corresponds with the Ngram viewer. The chart below illustrates that prior to 1948, there was no mention of the word chipotle, then a sudden spike in the 1980’s.





## Chipotle in Everyday Mexica Life

When we think of the staple foods of the Mexica, we think of maize, beans, and squash – the three sisters. But chiles were just as important to the Mexica’s cuisine as maize (Ortiz de Montellano, 1990, p. 113). Previously regarded by the Europeans as a useless addition in terms of caloric intake or nutritional value – or lack thereof, the chile pepper actually provides adequate quantities of vitamins A and C. But because the Mexica ate it on a daily basis, research demonstrates that the consumption of chile served as a supplement to the Mexica diet. The table below taken from Ortiz de Montello’s *Aztec Medicine, Health and Nutrition*, illustrates the possible total grams per serving in a typical Mexica diet with the supplemental nutrition of chiles and tomatoes (p. 101):

Diet	Cal	Protein	CA	Vit A	Thiamine	Riboflavin	Niacin	Vit C	FE
Corn (500g)	1,790	42	55	0.75	2,4	0.5	0.5	-	7.5
Beans (100g)	343	22.7	134	0.008	0.47	0.15	2.09	1	7.1
Squash (50g)	10	0.6	14	0.06	0.2	0.05	0.5	11	0.2
Chili (20g)	23	0.93	7.3	1.62	0.06	0.09	1.1	93	0.3
Tomato (50g)	11	0.6	7.0	0.13	0.03	0.02	0.4	12	0.3
Total	2,177	66.83	217	2.57	3.16	0.81	13.6	117	15.4

Note: Units are g for protein and International Unites (IU) for vitamin A. All others are mg.

Of particular relevance to a consideration of Aztec foods is the nutritional value of the staple diet of Mesoamerica—corn, beans, and squash, supplemented by chilies and tomatoes. This triad has been the basis of the Aztec diet since antiquity, and the addition of chili and tomato as condiments covered most culinary situations.

Chiles are arguably a staple of Mexica diet. However, the chipotle chile occupied a particular distinction. Due to the process by which the jalapeño pepper is transformed into a chipotle chile, the Mexica took advantage of the pungent and irritating qualities of the process to advance specific social and strategic aims. For instance, mothers would use the smoke of the chiles to punish their poorly behaved children, and there are even accounts of the Aztecs using the chipotle smoke as a form of chemical warfare against the Spanish, “chile smoke was used as fumigant, as well as a means of chemical warfare, and the Aztecs disciplined their recalcitrant offspring with it (Coe 1994 p. 63). Many Mexican mothers (mine included) continue this tradition of threatening with chiles as punishment for cursing or backtalk, or as a means to rid the child of a nail-biting habit or sucking of the thumb.



Picture shows parents punishing their children by placing their face near the smoke of chiles.

Without a doubt, the love of chipotle chiles, and chiles in general have been a part of Mexican cuisine since the pre-Columbian era, and that love has remained in the present.

## A Love Affair with Chiles

Mexicans love chile. Mexicans love chiles so much that the food is incorporated in popular songs, sprinkled on a diverse milieu of foods, and revered as if a national symbol. The many musical odes to the chile, however, illustrate the country's deep love affair with the pepper.

The Mexican group Banda Sinaloense includes the chile in the hook of their song “Cahuates Pistaches.” The lyrics include “con sal, limon y chile”, or “with salt, lemon and chili,” which is repeated a number of times throughout the song. The song also calls for a special dance to go along with the song—a quick thrust of the pelvis as the word “chile” is uttered. It is an interesting choice for a dance move given the phallic shape of the chile pepper. Esther Katz asserts that in Mexico, along with Hungary and Calabria, the chile pepper is a symbol of virility, which is why it is found that men in Mexico consume more chile peppers than women (2009 p. 222). In addition to its attractive shape, chiles also make you hot, with some cultures regarding the chile as an aphrodisiac (Katz, 2009, p. 222).

A trip to any part of Mexico will attest to the fact that Mexicans do love chile, especially chile chipotles. Mexican cuisine has been using these hot fruits since the pre-Columbian era, and have even retained some very indigenous dishes such as mole, atole, tamales, all of which may include the use

of chipotle chiles. So, to the Mexican culture, the chipotle chile is a symbol of national identity and marker of a very proud history. Although the use of chiles is pervasive throughout Latin America, non-Mexican dishes are not as spicy or hot. In other words, the chipotle chile is most prominent in, in frequency and degree, in Mexican cuisine. If a Mexican visited the countries beyond Guatemala, the food would not be spicy enough, even though pepper is consumed there in nearly the same manner (Katz, 2009, p. 223). Given the reverence for the chile in both Aztec and present-day Mexican life, it should come as no surprise on the mixed attitudes towards the fast-food franchise Chipotle Mexican Grill. In a world of globalization and instant-everything, the commodification of Mexican culture and history while ignoring and marginalizing the very people who hail from its country of origin is quite hypocritical.

## Appreciation or Appropriation?

Many would contend that until the emergence of the chain Chipotle, a great number of individuals did not know *what or who* a chipotle was. By virtue of Chipotle Mexican Grill using the word “chipotle” as the name of their restaurant, they single-handedly introduced – or reintroduced – the chipotle to the mainstream. Does Chipotle serve as a cultural bridge and push its consumers to “Google” chipotle? Perhaps, but a simple Google search only triggers pages upon pages of the restaurant and no word of the Aztecs. It would appear that Chipotle has “Columbused” a part of Mexican culture. To “Columbus” something implies that an individual or corporations “discover” something that has existed forever (not literally, that’s difficult to know for certain) *outside* of the dominant culture. Examples of “Columbusing” something would be the sudden hummus trend, coconut water, pita chips or yoga. While Mexican cuisine has existed in the United States for as long as the United States has been an independent nation-state, the near obsession with the restaurant Chipotle has taken the appreciation of Mexican food into the nefarious realm of appropriation. To be sure, I am not assuming the worst of the chain restaurant, I emailed the media office of Chipotle Mexican Grill and posed two questions:

“What led the corporation to choose this name? Is the company at all familiar with the historical significance of the chipotle chiles during the Aztec Empire?”

“Also, many restaurants contain large Maya figures as wall decoration. Is the company aware that the word ‘Chipotle’ is a Nahuatl word spoken by the Aztecs, and not the Maya?” This conflation of two distinct indigenous peoples was concerning.

Chipotle’s reply was prompt and concise:

*“We didn’t choose the name for any specific cultural origin. Much of our food is seasoned with this trusty little pepper, and we, in turn, decided it would be a great name for the restaurant. Our art comes from a close friend of our co-CEO, Steve Ells, and he designed the first decorations for the first restaurant, and has continued ever since. I hope this helps a little bit, and I’m sorry that there aren’t any specific ties to language or cultural significance here.”*

In essence, Chipotle has excluded Mexican history from their restaurant and deprived its consumers of a rich historical context while profiting from the culture. It should be noted that this is not the only example of appropriation and erasure. Recently, Chipotle came under fire for failing to include any Mexican or Mexican-American authors as part of their new campaign to include excerpts of literature on their cups. Actually, Chipotle failed to include any Latino authors. Further excluding Mexicans and Latinos from the dominant, mainstream formation of “chipotle,” and swinging the pendulum squarely toward appropriation.

## Conclusion

Despite the long history of the chipotle chile and its multiple usages, the word chipotle is now synonymous with the American owned fast-food restaurant, in turn stripping the word of its indigenous meaning, salience and significance. The Mexica have been colonized for the third time.

One can say that Chipotle is responsible for the millions of Americans who “Columbused” spicy Mexican food and made it trendy. So trendy, in fact, that Chipotle has taken over the microblogging and video service, *Vine* producing videos mostly satirical in nature. But all of this points to a larger issue, which American chef and television personality Anthony Bourdain so eloquently stated in one of his television episodes revolving around Mexican food. Bourdain asked why Americans love Mexican food, drugs, alcohol, and cheap labor but ignore the violence that happens across the border. "Despite our ridiculously hypocritical attitudes towards immigration...we demand that Mexicans cook a large percentage of the food we eat, grow the ingredients we need to make that food, clean our houses, mow our lawns, wash our dishes, look after our children." (Salinas, 2014).

Indeed, our food and labor are cheap, at least to the American economy, but our history is long, diverse, and rich. These are ingredients missing from the prevailing denotation of chipotle imposed by the chain restaurant. However, it only takes a few more Google searches to set aside the fatty ingredients, and uncover this rich and healthy history.

## References

- chipotle. Oxford Dictionaries. <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/chipotle>
- chipotle. Online Etymology Dictionary. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=chipotle>
- chipotle. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chipotle>
- Coe, Sophie. *America's First Cuisines*. University of Texas Press, 1994.
- Katz, Esther. *Chili Pepper, from Mexico to Europe: Food, Imaginary and Cultural Identity*. 213-232. <http://148.202.18.157/sitios/publicacionesite/ppperiod/esthom/esthompdf/esthom24/art13.pdf>
- Leander, Birgitta. *Herencia Cultural Del Mundo Nahuatl A Traves De La Lengua*. Secretaria de Educacion Publica, 1972.
- Ortiz de Montellano, Bernard R. *Aztec Medicine, Health, and Nutrition*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990.
- Salinas, Brenda. (2014, July 06). 'Columbusing': The Art Of Discovering Something That Is Not New, *National Public Radio*. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/07/06/328466757/columbusing-the-art-of-discovering-something-that-is-not-new>
- Soustelle, Jacques. *A Mexican's Day. Daily Life of The Aztecs*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1970.
- Townsend, Richard. *The Family and Education. The Aztecs*. New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1995.

# Cyber

Matthew Worpell

Cite as: Worpell, Matthew. 2021. Cyber. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 56-59.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Sex, bullying, and warfare are three vastly different concepts, but when the prefix “cyber-” is added in front of them they all share a common theme. “Cybersex”, “cyberbullying”, “cyberwarfare” and many more words all become interconnected by the internet. The prefix “cyber-” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as “forming terms relating to the internet” (“cyber-” OED). The internet is a relatively new invention. The modern form of the internet did not exist until the 1990s. When an invention or concept is developed, language needs to have a way to label and describe it. There are many ways new words enter language to solve this issue. A word can be borrowed from another language, it can be shortened from an already existing word, it can have its part of speech changed, it can be blended from two already existing words, it can be created by adding a prefix or suffix, or it can be a completely new word (Etymology FAQ). What about a prefix like “cyber-” which is added to words to denote their relation to a relatively new invention like the internet? When “cyber-” first entered the English language over 70 years ago, it wasn’t even a prefix. It first entered the English language as a part of the full word “cybernetics” which was used to describe “the field of study concerned with communication and control systems in living organisms and machines” (Cybernetics OED). “Cyber-” has had its meaning and part of speech transformed over the 70 years it has been in the English language. Which leads to the question: how did “cybernetics” evolve into “cyber-” and what cultural changes accompanied that transformation?

The prefix “cyber-” first appeared in the English language in the form of “Cybernetics”. In his 1948 book *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and Machine*, Norbert Wiener uses the term “Cybernetics” to describe his theory of how machines can operate on a system of feedback similar to how a human brain can operate on feedback from the eyes. Wiener wrote how he drew inspiration for the term “Cybernetics” from an 1868 paper by James Clerk Maxwell (Cybernetics Encyclopedia Britannica). In Maxwell’s paper, he described that the origin of the word “Govern” comes from the Greek word “κυβερνήτης” meaning “to steer or pilot [a ship]” or figuratively “to govern” (“Govern” Eytmonline). The word “Cybernetics” entered the English language as a combination of using a loanword from ancient Greek and attaching the suffix “-ic” to the end of it. In ancient Greek, the suffix “-ic” was attached to words to add a meaning that roughly translated to “pertaining to” or “the nature of” (“-ic” OED). Therefore, the new word that Wiener coined roughly translated to “pertaining to governing”. It was an appropriate word for the concept of how one system controls another through feedback (i.e., governing it). Wiener’s book was well received across multiple scientific disciplines. After the book’s release, “Cybernetics” and words containing the root “cyber-” began to appear in the English lexicon more regularly. It was in the 1960s that “cyber” began appearing as a blending element for words. Another way that new words enter language was utilized at this point to transform “Cybernetics”. The noun “cybernetics” experienced truncation, an omission of part of the original word to create a new one, to create the root word “cyber-”. The root word “cyber-” was then combined with suffixes to create new words. The first application of this transformation was in 1961 when a company called Raytheon developed a new computer that they called “Cybertron” (“New Machine”). In 1965, *The Avengers* television series released an episode called “The Cybernauts”. The episode focuses on a killer robot called a “Cybernaut” (Cybernauts). “Cybernaut” marked the first

usage of “cyber-” in a science fiction context. It was because of the science fiction genre that “cyber-” maintained its presence in the English language and developed the meaning that it has today.

In 1980, Bruce Bethke wrote a short story called “Cyberpunk”. The story focused on a group of teenagers that were able to hack into the computer network of their city in part by using personal computers. Bethke said that he wanted to create a new term for his short story – a synthesis of terms for advanced technology and the misfit main characters (Cyberpunk). The Oxford English Dictionary defines the prefix “cyber-” at this point in time as “forming words relating to computers, information technology, and virtual reality, or denoting futuristic concepts.” “Cyber-” underwent another functional shift in 1980. “Cyberpunk” marked the beginning of the trend of using “cyber-” as a true prefix and attaching it to other full words. The functional shift of “cyber” from a root word into a prefix greatly expanded the possibilities in terms of usage. A prefix is an affix that attaches to the beginning of a word and changes the meaning of the word without changing the part of speech (Crystal). Transforming “cyber-” into a prefix allows it to be added to almost any base word and alters the meaning of that word to include a technological context. Society was quickly becoming more technologically advanced at this point in time as well. 1980 was also the year Commodore released their version of the home computer with a price tag that was relatively accessible to consumers at \$299 (“Personal Computer”). (The buying power of \$299 in 1980 roughly equates to \$900 in 2018 (“Inflation Rate”).) It became fitting that “cyber-”, a prefix that is used to describe advanced technology, became used to create a new genre that explored the potential dystopian future that this rapidly developing technology could create. The short story “Cyberpunk” also signaled the start of a new trend in science fiction writing. Since it was one of the first works in the subgenre, the term “Cyberpunk” then went on to become the name of its own subgenre of science fiction.

The general consensus among authors is that the “Cyberpunk” subgenre saw its true debut with the release of a book called Neuromancer by William Gibson in 1984. However, Gibson did not associate “cyberpunk” with the new subgenre he spearheaded. Towards the end of 1984, Gardner Dozois began using the term “cyberpunk” in editorials for the Wall Street Journal to denote this new subgenre of science fiction (Dozois). Like the short story “Cyberpunk”, Neuromancer exists in a near futuristic world with technology that is plausible such as *cybernetically* modified mercenaries. One of the major world building pieces in the book is the existence of “Cyberspace”. However, “cyberspace” did not first appear in Neuromancer. Gibson wrote a short story in 1982 called “Burning Chrome” which is where the concept of “cyberspace” first appeared (Space Rogue). “Cyberspace” in both the book and short story is an interconnected network of computers that humans can enter – what would be called virtual reality today (Cumming). The year before Neuromancer’s release, 1983, a major advancement towards the modern-day internet was released. ARPANET (the precursor to the modern internet and world wide web) adopted TCP/IP protocols which greatly improved the ability for computers to communicate with each other (Andrews). Neuromancer along with the rest of “Cyberpunk” genre had several core themes to it. “Cyberpunk”, specifically in the 1980s, strongly played into the fears of dominance by East Asian businesses due to the popularity of their technological products. It always took place in a dystopian futuristic society where technology has advanced significantly. Generally, technology had advanced to the point where machines and humans were more or less indistinguishable from each other (“Cyber Punk”). Interestingly, this theme of “cybernetically” modified humans and artificial intelligence relates back to Wiener’s book in 1948. An oversimplified summary of his argument was that machines can be created to act on feedback the same way humans can. This meant that, if he was correct, there could potentially be integration between humans and machines and that computers could eventually get to the point that they operated like humans. It was the popularity of the “Cyberpunk” subgenre, along with newly created terms related to the subgenre like “cyberspace”, that kept the prefix “cyber-” at the forefront of people’s minds going into the 1990s.

In 1990, Sir Tim Berners-Lee released what is arguably one of the most important inventions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the World Wide Web (Andrews). The internet has become colloquially synonymous with the World Wide Web and as such, “internet” will be further used in that context. The 1990s is when the prefix “cyber-” truly exploded in popularity and gained its most commonly used definition today. It became attached to any word that had a related concept on the internet. It was at this point that “cyber-” developed its meaning of “forming terms relating to the internet”. “Cybersex” and “Cybersecurity” both were coined in 1989 but did not take off in popularity until the 1990s (Newitz). Procreation and aggression are two of the primary drives of humans according to Freud (“Chapter 4”) and Rudyard Kipling popularly referred to prostitution as “the world’s oldest profession” (Wickman). So, it is no surprise that innovations in sexual encounters accompanied a new technology that facilitated people’s ability to connect with one another. “Cybersex” exploded in popularity with the creation of internet chatrooms designed to connect people who would otherwise never meet. “Cybersex” generally consisted of describing over text sexual activities one party would do to themselves or to the other person. Describing these encounters in text form wasn’t a new concept either. Erotic fiction has existed since the late 1700s (Goldhill). The popularity of “Cybersex” led to another transformation of “cyber”. “Cybersex” was truncated and saw a functional shift into the verb “Cybering” or “to cyber”. In English-speaking societies, where sexual activities are not actively discussed in a positive context, “cyber” developed a negative connotation. Any term related to sexual activity becomes a taboo and dirty word. “Cyber” went from being used to denote things involving the internet to a slang term with a negative connotation for a form of sex. The popularity of the term “cybering” did not last very long and its negative connotation did not seem to harm the longevity of “cyber-” in the long run.

The Oxford English Dictionary lists over twenty separate terms that had “cyber” added to the front of them in the 1990s. All the words share one thing in common: they’re all related to the new major invention of the 90s – the internet. By the 1990s, “Cyber” had completed its evolution into the form and meaning it has today. The popularity of “cyber-” terms did not end in the 1990s, however, its meaning was simply solidified. According to Google Trends, “cyberbullying”, “cybersecurity”, and “cyberwarfare” are the “cyber-” terms that have been growing in popularity since the early 2000s (“Cyber Trends”). Aggression is defined as “any behavior intended to harm another person who does not want to be harmed” (Bushman). By that definition, “cyberbully”, “cybersecurity”, and “cyberwarfare” are all directly or indirectly related to aggression. The fact that these are the most pressing internet related concerns in today’s society gives a bit more weight to Freud’s theory about the two main drives of humans. It is interesting to note that following the change of definition in the 1990s of “cyber-” to be descriptive of the internet a change in the theme of the words happened as well. Looking back at the 1980s, words using “cyber-” were words like “cyberspace”, “cybercubicle” and “cyberpunk”. These words were more descriptive of the technology that came along with them. “Cyberbullying”, “Cybersex”, and “Cyberwarfare” all describe the medium used to conduct the activities. In other words, “cyber-” has also shifted how it’s used as a prefix. It has gone from being descriptive of *what* an object is, to being descriptive of *where* these things exist (i.e., on the internet).

The prefix “cyber-” had a complicated, but relatively short in the context of linguistics, path to get to the form it has today. It went from ancient Greek roughly meaning “to pilot or steer” to first appearing in English in 1948 as a part of “Cybernetics” meaning machine learning then turning into a prefix indicating advanced technology in the 1980s as a part of words like “Cyberpunk” and finally into a simple catchall prefix for the internet in the 1990s. The changes in meaning that “cyber-” went through accompanied the technological advancements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century relating to computers and the internet. Eventually, “cyber-” became a productive morpheme synonymous with the internet-related topics it developed alongside.



## References

- Andrews, Evan. "Who Invented the Internet?" History.com. A&E Television Networks, 18 Dec. 2013.  
<https://www.history.com/news/who-invented-the-internet>
- Bushman, Brad J. "Aggression and Violence." Noba. <https://nobaproject.com/textbooks/together-the-science-of-social-psychology/modules/aggression-and-violence>
- "Chapter 4: Section 2: Drives, Structural and Topographical Models." AllPsych.  
<https://allpsych.com/personality-theory/freud/drives>
- Culpepper, Jetta Carol. "Etymology FAQ." 4.1/2 (2000): 9-11. Merriam Webster.  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/help/faq-etymology>
- Cumming, Ed. "William Gibson and Neuromancer: The Man Who Saw Tomorrow." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 28 July 2014.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/28/william-gibson-neuromancer-cyberpunk-books>
- Crystal, David. Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008.
- "cyber-, comb. form." OED Online, Oxford University Press, September 2019,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/250879](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/250879).
- "Cyberonauts." The Avengers Forever: The Cyberonauts. <http://theavengers.tv/forever/peel1-3.htm>
- "Cybernetics." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 15 Jan. 2014.  
<https://www.britannica.com/science/cybernetics#ref828095>
- "cybernetics, n." OED Online, Oxford University Press, September 2019,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/46486](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46486).
- "Cyber Punk." TV Tropes. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Cyberpunk>
- Bethke, Bruce. "Cyberpunk." *Amazing Science Fiction* 57(4), 1983.  
<http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/stories/cpunk.htm>
- Dozois, Gardner. "Science Fiction in the Eighties." *Washington Post*, 30 Dec. 1984.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1984/12/30/science-fiction-in-the-eighties/526c3a06-f123-4668-9127-33e33f57e313/>
- Goldhill, Olivia. "The History of Erotic Fiction." *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 06 Mar. 2015.
- "Govern (v.)." Index. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/govern>
- "Inflation Rate between 1980-2018: Inflation Calculator." \$299 in 1980 → 2018 | Inflation Calculator.  
<http://www.in2013dollars.com/1980-dollars-in-2018?amount=299>
- "-ic, suffix." OED Online, Oxford University Press, September 2019,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/90756](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/90756).
- Newitz, Annalee. "The Bizarre Evolution of the Word "Cyber"." Io9. <https://io9.gizmodo.com/today-cyber-means-war-but-back-in-the-1990s-it-mean-1325671487>
- "New Machine Solves Problems without having been Told how: Raytheon Device Learns from Experience, can Find Subs, Tell Bad Berries from Good." *Wall Street Journal*, Aug 15, 1961, p. 8.
- "Personal Computer History: 1975-1984." Low End Mac. 06 Mar. 2018.  
<https://lowendmac.com/2014/personal-computer-history-the-first-25-years/>
- Space Rogue. "The Continuing Evolution of Cyber." SPACE ROGUE.  
<https://www.spacerogue.net/wordpress/?p=655>
- Wickman, Forrest. "Is Prostitution World's Oldest Profession?" RealClearHistory. Slate, 09 Mar. 2017.  
<[https://www.realclearhistory.com/2017/03/09/is\\_prostitution\\_world039s\\_oldest\\_profession\\_1750.html](https://www.realclearhistory.com/2017/03/09/is_prostitution_world039s_oldest_profession_1750.html)>.

# Discotheque

Ashley Johnson

Cite as: Johnson, Ashley. 2021. Discotheque. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 60-65.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

In an era of political turmoil and tyrant control, libraries went underground to provide the citizens of France, and eventually other countries, with a trendy place of refuge. As popular jazz musicians fled France due to orders from the government, more discreet and private clubs emerged. In the same time period, the word 'discotheque', which literally translates to the prefix *disque* (disc) and the suffix *thèque* (from Greek *theke* 'case'), referred to phonograph record libraries in France. During World War II, the word *discotheque* was used to replace the previous names for jazz clubs. A shift towards playing records versus live music arose and the collections of gramophone records were utilized in a new setting. Concurrently, American influence became a large factor in the changing life of the French. As a result of the combination of the political and cultural influence, the use of the word 'discotheque' shifted in meaning from libraries to lounges. A deeper look into the historical and cultural context may provide us with information on how the word transitioned from meaning a colloquially respected quiet space to a space where people go to act promiscuously. The era between the late 1930's to the early 1960's, in which World War II occurred, acted as an evolutionary time period for the use of the 'discotheque'; therefore, the focus of this study will remain on that time period.

In this study, multiple platforms were used to gather data. Primarily, information from articles was used as supporting evidence. To begin, this study utilized the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales* to discover the definitions and etymology of 'discotheque'. It is important to note that two different forms of the word were used in the research, including 'discotheque' and 'discothèque' due to the French language using an accent mark.

Continuing, three pieces of literature per country, including articles and advertisements are used as supporting data. For the study, literature from both societies was utilized to highlight the transformation that is occurring in both France and America of the word 'discotheque' and how they affect each other. The first articles demonstrate the use of the word 'discotheque' as denoting a library in both languages. The second articles indicate the word in transition. Finally, the third pieces of literature describe 'discotheque' as a nightclub or dance space.

As final supporting data, Google's Ngram Viewer was used to show the frequency of use of 'discotheque' and the phrase 'American influence'. It was important to include the phrase 'American influence' because it appears to play a prominent role in the transformation of the space, which is connected to the connotation of 'discotheque'. Unfortunately, it was discovered that some of the earlier claims of the appearance of 'discotheque' in literature are mistakes made within the program. The articles were mislabeled in either date or presence of the word. Unfortunately, this can be a common problem with the earlier literature data in the Ngram Viewer and should be taken into consideration.

Figure 1 is a chart that condenses the French and English definitions of the word 'discotheque' in both its forms, in accordance with the language. Both dictionaries included two definitions of the word and their earliest uses. Conflicting data indicates that their dates are inaccurate, and the words were used in earlier literature. Both of the definitions were nearly identical between the two languages, as well as being used in similar time periods.

**Figure 1**

<b>Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (French)</b>	<b>Oxford English Dictionary (English)</b>
<p>Salle, bâtiment où sont classés et conservés des disques que le public peut venir écouter, sous certaines conditions</p> <p>“Hall, building where are classified and preserved records that the public can come to listen, under certain conditions”</p> <p>1963</p>	<p>A library or collection of phonograph records</p> <p>1946</p>
<p>Établissement où l'on se rend le soir pour écouter des disques, de musique moderne en général, danser et boire</p> <p>“Institution where one goes in the evening to listen to records, modern music in general, dance and drink”</p> <p>1958</p>	<p>A dance hall, nightclub, or similar venue where recorded music is played for dancing, typically equipped with a large dance floor, an elaborate system of flashing coloured lights, and a powerful amplified sound system. Also: an event, party, etc., at which music and dancing take place in a similar environment.</p> <p>1952</p>

In 1937, an article published in the *Library Quarterly*, written in French, used the word ‘discotheque’ to describe a place that preserves gramophone discs. The article discusses the importance of preservation of books in libraries, then includes a short mention of ‘discotheques’ in the lines, “Les films photographiques et les disques gramophoniques sont des documents visuels et auditifs dont beaucoup meritent d’être conservés au même titre qu’imprimés et manuscrits, si bien qu’au-dessus des bibliothèques se créent des discothèques, et des filmothèques”. This translates to “Photographic films and gramophone discs are visual and auditory documents, many of which deserve to be preserved in the same way as printed and handwritten, so that, among libraries, discotheques and film libraries are being created”. The interaction between using French in a published American article reflects the interconnecting of language between the two countries. Further, it shows that both the countries were using this specific kind of definition at the time. (Godet 1937)

In 1939, a passage from a book called *Rapports et délibérations / Conseil général du Département de l’Aveyron* stated:

*“le nombre des phonographes augmente sensiblement. La valeur éducative du disque est de plus en plus reconnue par les maîtres. Dès octobre prochain, une discothèque de 300 disques environ sera mise à la disposition du personnel enseignant de nos écoles; un catalogue sera publié. Nous espérons que cette discothèque rendra les plus grands services.”*

“the number of phonographs is increasing significantly. The educational value of the disc is becoming more recognized by the masters. As of next October, a discotheque of about 300 records will be put at the disposal of teaching staff in our schools; a catalog will be published. We hope this discotheque will be of the highest value”. (Aveyron 1939)

This piece that was published in France exemplifies ‘discotheque’ as a library. Abruptly afterwards, in 1941, an advertisement in the L'Ouest-Éclair debuted the transition of the meaning of ‘discotheque’ to ‘club’, describing the opening of a westernized bar called “The Discotheque”:

*“nous passons dans le bar, un bar extraordinaire puisque rien n’y est payant, un bar qui rappelle par ses vieilles poutres et sa frise de nègres-musiciens de jazz un bar de Far-West, comme on en voit au cinéma... Dans des clartes de bougies électriques voici la Discothèque...”*

“We spend in the bar, an extraordinary bar because nothing is charged there, a bar that reminds us from its old beams and its frieze of Negro-jazz musicians a bar of the Far-West, as we see in the cinema ... In the sparkles of electric candles here is the Discotheque...” (Desgrées du Lou 1941)

Continuing along the timeline, an article (right) from the Chicago Daily Tribune from 1953, is slightly late on the timeline of the shifting definition but strongly reflects the transitional behavior of the word (Monique 1953). In this piece, a ‘discotheque’ is referred to as a club and a collection of phonograph records in one sentence. Further, this American piece is referencing a ‘discotheque’ that is in Paris, France, as indicated by the title of the piece. Therefore, in both France and the United States, there is a recognizable shift occurring in the use of the word ‘discotheque’.

Finally, in 1963, a newspaper article from the New York Times defines ‘discothèque’ and the excerpt articulates, “when Mr. Mann’s troupe is resting, the Vanguard becomes a discothèque, the first public example in New York of the dance-to-records salons that first flourished in France and have recently reached Manhattan in the form of two private clubs” (Wilson 1963). This literature serves as a strong example of not only how the community was defining the word, but also how it was used to describe a club in relationship to the use of records and space.

---

---

*Latest from Paris*  
A by MONIQUE

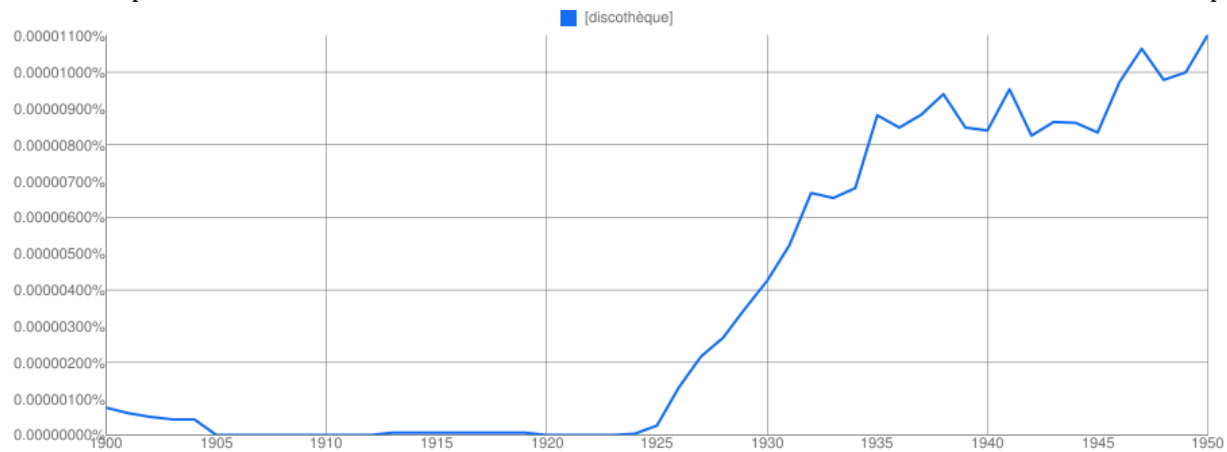
CONNOISSEURS will soon be able to chart a Parisienne’s night life by the keys she carries. The key habit has spread ever since the Discotheque—existentialist Saint Germain des Pres club boasting a collection of esoteric phonograph records—gave paid-up members a key each and dispensed with the doorman. Next in line were the Mannequins of Paris who gave out keys to founder members of their private club. Now comes the latest night spot—“Whisky Galore”—in answer to the slowly increasing popularity here of Highland brews. Each club member has a key to a private safe in which to store favorite brands.

\* \*

According to the French website for the modern club Caveau de la Huchette,

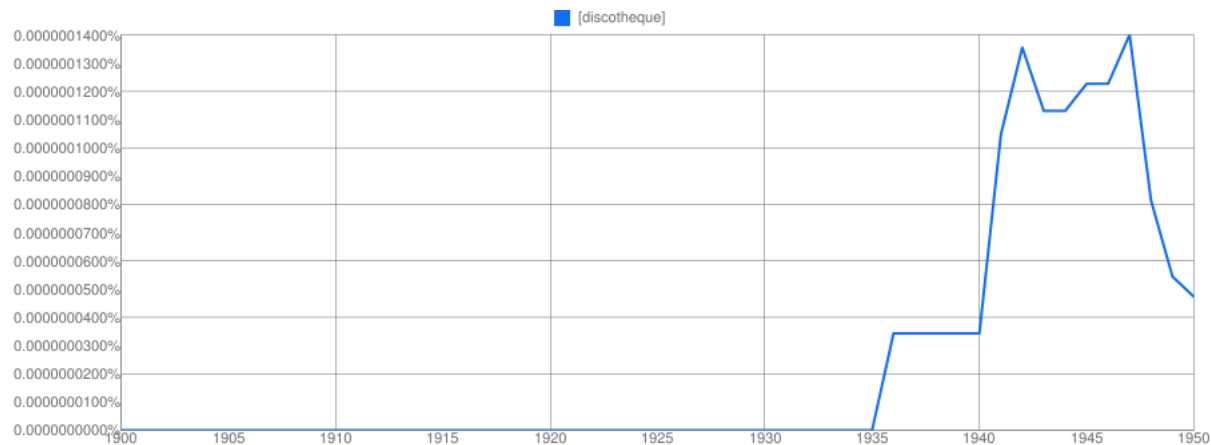
*“while Paris was celebrating its liberty once again after the war, a new kind of music from over the Atlantic settled in around Saint-Germain des Près : Jazz invaded the cellars and hot spots of Paris. The GI’s brought in swing and be-bop, and dance exploded on the scene, dance floor acrobatics complementing frenzied rhythms. Number 5 rue de la Huchette saw the opening of one of these small clubs, soon to become the temple of New-Orleans Jazz and be-bop in Paris. In fact, it was the first club in Paris where jazz was played. No one at the Caveau de la Huchette will ever forget Sidney Bechet’s colossal jam sessions! On May 1976, the Caveau celebrated its 30th birthday...”* (Caveau de la Huchette)

Despite being referred to as a ‘discotheque’ by multiple American articles, such as “Jazz liberates Paris” (Gourse 2000) the website nor other French literature available refers to these small clubs as ‘discotheques’. However, based off American evidence, this club was in fact defined as a ‘discotheque’.



**Figure 2: French**

Figure 2 indicates the frequency of use of the word ‘discotheque’ in French literature. As indicated by the blue line, previous to the 1920’s, the word was hardly used or absent, with the exception of the early 1900’s, which can likely be attributed to an error in the program. The word increased in frequency considerably beginning in the mid-1920’s. From there the word continued to increase in use into the 1950’s.



**Figure 3: American English**

Looking at Figure 3, indicating the word’s use in American literature, the highest frequency of use is during the 1940’s. There are nearly equal dual peaks in both the early and late 1940’s. Frequency starts to increase in the late 1930’s and then drastically proliferates and remains in high use during the mid-1940’s. As mentioned previously this is also the decade in which the word sees the sharpest change in definition.

The evolution of ‘discotheque’ is demonstrated through its dramatic transformation from connoting a place that is colloquially referred to as quiet space of study to one of promiscuity and deafening noise. Therefore, the use of the space significantly affects the use of language, as reflected in these juxtaposing definitions. ‘Discotheque’ originally meant only a library space for records. Eventually, clubs emerged in France around the 1940’s and the word was used simultaneously to describe both places. Subsequently, Americans imitated the French’s use of the word, but typically in

only denoting a nightclub atmosphere. Postwar use of 'discotheque' in France continued to colloquially define spaces where the French escaped day-to-day endeavors and surprisingly, was still used to define a record library, mostly in authoritative documents.

The context in which a word is utilized can provide support for the definitions that are implied. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales each give two roughly similar definitions of 'discotheque', implying that in both English and French, both definitions apply. These definitions set a standard for 'discotheque' to be compared to when seen in other supporting literature for this study. Interestingly, while in America, the word is a loanword from French, it appears that American influence may have caused the shift of the word's meaning towards a night club.

Correspondingly, from the literature, it was discovered that 'discotheque' evolved from meaning primarily library to primarily nightclub in American culture. Few American writers used the word 'discotheque' to continue to describe a record library from the mid-1950's onward, but instead, used the word to denote a night club. The word evolved because the space in which these records were held evolved. Collections of records went from being housed in library areas to underground spaces where people chose to dance. The word began its evolution in France and America paralleled the transformation despite the final divergence in the choice of how to use the word after the war. Backtracking to the French change in denotation, the ongoing World War was crucial because it sparked a French Resistance (Braunstein 1999). It could be said that jazz served as a soundtrack to the resistance during the war and the following years and 'discotheques', the underground clubs where they proudly played their anthem. The French resistance was inspired, in part, by American ideals. In correlation, American influence heavily participated in this transition of space. The French drew from the American influence, such as drinking hard liquor over wine and listening to American jazz music to fuel their Resistance efforts.

As a result, "...la Discothèque..." opened in France in 1941, during the political turmoil. This is a powerful example of a transformative moment for 'discotheque'. Previously used only to describe a collection of phonographic records, the word was openly used to describe not only a place where records were stored, but publicly played for dancing purposes. Further, the 'discotheque' was largely influenced by American culture, as it is described as "...de jazz un bar de Far-West..." (Degrées du Lou 1941). After 'discotheques' opened in France, America, the narcissistic country, was fond of the Americanized clubs and recreated them in their own country under the same term 'discotheque'. However, in France there was a decline in the use of the word to describe a club, due to their secrecy and exclusiveness, rooted in the French resistance. American works referred to French clubs as 'discotheques', while the French literature did not. Therefore, the word retreated in meaning to its original form during this period. The perseverance of 'discotheque's' duality in meaning for the French is exemplified in Figures 2 and 3. The French used the word 'discotheque' previous to Americans and steadily continued to use it beyond the American fad use.

Furthermore, American use of 'discotheque' experiences sharp increase and decrease within the 1940's, as illustrated in Fig 3. This can be explained by America's version of 'discotheque' being fairly limited in meaning to nightclubs and being imbedded in fad use. Further, the passage "Latest from Paris" directly acknowledges the transformation of the word to reflect the space in which it is used in finality. The sentence "The key habit has spread ever since the Discotheque--- existentialist Saint Germain des Pres club boasting a collection of esoteric phonograph records..." refers to a 'discotheque' as both a club and collection of records simultaneously (Degrées du Lou 1941). This transition acknowledges the French's persistent use of the original definition, but also represents the choice of Americans to diverge and use the alternative definition of nightclub. Again, this is deeply rooted in America's trend-focused use of 'discotheque'. As seen in the last American literature example, French influenced, yet Americanized clubs came to define a space where records were not only listened to but danced and drank to as well. Therefore, the word 'discotheque' definitively came



to connote a nightclub in America due to the dense history of the word cross-culturally. Further, 'discotheque' demonstrates the robust relationship between space and language.

While a library and a lounge can be vastly different, the connection between the culture of music-playing and where phonographic records were used can help scholars to understand their deep-rooted connection. The diversity in discotheque's definition can be attributed to political turmoil and the resulting cyclic reactions of different communities. World War II and the following years served as an era of linguistic change and migration for the 'discotheque'. Since the original definition of 'discotheque' colloquially evoked a concept of a safe place of contemplation - a library - it seems logical that the word would be chosen to represent underground Resistance clubs serving similar purposes and housing similar materials. However, the ongoing influences between France and America is what truly affected the word's interesting evolution.

There is clearly a connection between how people utilize space and how they define those spaces. As the space in which communities utilized phonographic records transformed, the meaning of the word 'discotheque' changed to reflect the use. In a cyclic sequence of long-term events, influences between France and American culture caused the meaning of the word to change from a library space to a space where people retreated at night to drink alcohol and dance. American influence in alcohol consumption choices, music preference, and promiscuous behavior helped to shape the 'discotheque' environment. Due to the change in atmosphere from the previous library space, the definition changed to reflect what is now referred to as a night club. As a result, American's adopted the word to describe their night clubs. 'Discotheque' has since declined in use but evokes connotations of night clubs in America when mentioned still.

In the future, investigating how 'discotheque', shortened to 'disco', impacted the next era of musical spaces in the post war world may be able to continue to help scholars understand the connection between spaces and the way people use language to discuss them. Further developing a better understanding of how war and political turmoil can inspire cultural shifts and changes may also provide insight into how language evolves as well.

## References

- Aveyron. Conseil général. Rapports et délibérations. Bibliothèque nationale de France. 1939.  
<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb34428939g>
- Braunstein, Peter. Disco. *American Heritage* 50(7) (Nov 1999): 43-57.
- Desgrées du Lou, Emmanuel. L'Ouest-Éclair. Quotidien d'Informations, Politique, Littéraire, Commercial. Bibliothèque nationale de France. 1941.
- Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales. <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/discotheque>
- Godet, Marcel. "Faits et Problemes d'Actualite: Discours Prononcé Par." *The Library Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1937): 26-35.
- Gourse, Leslie. Jazz liberates Paris. *American Heritage* 51(2) (2000): 42-51.
- Monique. Latest from Paris. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 28, 1953, p. A1.
- Oxford English Dictionary.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/53963?redirectedFrom=discotheque#eid>
- Wilson, John S. Village Vanguard Tries New Format. *New York Times*, December 14, 1963, p. 21.

# Disinterested

Hope Kujawa

Cite as: Kujawa, Hope. 2021. Disinterested. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 66-70.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Speakers' metalinguistic attitudes towards their own languages, while not always based in historical facts, can often provide insight into cultural beliefs and realities and how they change over time. One word whose history illustrates this well is "disinterested". It is perceived by some educated English speakers that the original meaning of the word "disinterested" was "impartial, not having a conflict of interest", and that the current usage of this word to mean "not interested" is incorrect or out of line with past usage. Instead, they claim, one should use the word "uninterested", which has always held the meaning "not interested". However, the actual history of the word does not align with this common belief. The question which drove my research is: how did this word, which has carried a dual meaning since at least the seventeenth century, develop this set of beliefs about its usage, with some even insisting that one definition of the word is entirely incorrect? In order to answer this question, I will first showcase the evidence that displays that this word has had two meanings since at least the seventeenth century. I will then provide evidence that today, this word's two meanings are indeed used in different contexts, and that using the "impartial" meaning is seen as appropriate in formal contexts, whereas "uninterested" is perceived as a "loose usage". Finally, I will present historical research to provide a range of time during which this perception that "disinterested" must only mean "impartial" became widespread. Most importantly, I am interested in the cultural causes and effects of this change and what it can tell us about how different speakers of English view their own language.

I first consulted the Oxford English Dictionary, and right away, I found evidence that conflicted with the commonly-held view of this word. The first definition of "disinterested" is given as follows: "Without interest or concern; not interested, unconcerned. (Often regarded as a loose use.)" (OED, "disinterested"). The fact that this is the first definition could be explained by the fact that maybe this "incorrect" or "modern" usage has become so popular that it's superseded the "correct" or "original" one, but it cannot explain why this entry has examples dating back to 1631. This is actually slightly earlier than the first example under the second definition, "Not influenced by interest; impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced; now always, Unbiased by personal interest; free from self-seeking," which is dated to 1659 (OED, "disinterested"). From this source alone, one can see that the word "disinterested" has always carried these two distinct meanings, rather than only gaining the "not interested" meaning within the past 100 years (although it does not tell us how frequently used each meaning was, or if one definition became more popular over time).

After diving into Google Books to investigate the history of this word, I made an interesting find in "A Dictionary of Modern English Usage" by the lexicographer H. W. Fowler, first published in 1926 (Fowler 2009). This is not an objective dictionary filled with etymologies like the OED, but rather an editorialized selection of words explaining not only how they are used, but how the author believes they ought to be used by those wishing to sound more well-read and speak with a better sense of subjective style. Not only that, but the end of the book also contains commentary by an editor David Crystal writing in 2010, who provides notes on Fowler's entries, including whether his opinion followed that of the majority of speakers, and how the use of the words has changed since the 1920s. Fowler himself does not comment on the dual meaning of the word. Crystal notes his lack of commentary as unusual, claiming that the first recorded use of the "uninterested" meaning was as far

back as 1612. This is even earlier than the OED's first citation and corroborates the idea that "uninterested" was, if not the earliest meaning of the word in Modern English, at least *an* early meaning.

My next stop was the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which I thought would be useful to gain an idea of how people use the different definitions of this word today. Do English users actually speak in a way that reflects the fact that one of the meanings is seen as "more proper" than the other? Using the chart search function, I found that the word was overall most popular in the sections "academic," "web-GL", and "blog", and least popular in "TV/movies", "spoken", and "newspaper". I chose three of these sections and counted the amount of uses for each definition of the word, in order to gain data showing in which type of writing or speech each definition is most popular. Aiming for variety, I counted the instances of "disinterested" in the sections "academic", "web-GL", and "TV/movies", hoping that this would provide a range of formal and informal written works, as well as informal speech, or TV's approximation of it. (I avoided the "spoken" category because I suspected that it would be likely to skew towards scripted shows, and not actually reflect how the word is used in more informal circumstances.) It should be noted that COCA only deals with American usage of the word; however, according to Google Ngram Viewer, the word has approximately had the same popularity here as in the UK since 1800, so I will assume that there are not large differences in its usage depending on country, unless further evidence shows differently.

There were 378 instances of "disinterested" in the "academic" category, 245 in the "web-GL" category, and just 33 in "TV/movies". The data followed my prediction, based on the common perception of the word, that formal texts would more heavily favor the "impartial" definition, while informal contexts would favor "not interested". Indeed, 79.1% of academic works in the COCA used the "impartial" definition, compared to 48.2% works across the Internet and just 18.2% TV and movie scripts. This is almost evenly reversed for instances of the "not interested" meaning. Below is a full chart of my findings.

	<b>"not interested"</b>	<b>"impartial"</b>	<b>other</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Academic</b>	75 (19.8%)	299 (79.1%)	1 (0.3%)	378
<b>Web-GL</b>	100 (40.8%)	118 (48.2%)	23 (9.4%)	245
<b>TV/Movies</b>	27 (81.8%)	6 (18.2%)	0 (0.0%)	33

**Figure 1**

What comprises the "other" category? The one instance of "other" in "academic" and four of the ones in "web-GL" were ones I was not able to categorize as one definition or the other due to a lack of context; either definition could have fit in the quotes the COCA provided. The other 19 in "web-GL" are more interesting; they represent instances where the meaning of the word itself was being discussed. This occurs once in "TV/movies" as well, though I counted these in the definition columns as the intended meaning of each occurrence is clear: "if you want to do business, I'm completely disinterested." "Uninterested. Disinterested means impartial". These data show that this myth around the word's meaning is not merely an obsolete rule found in grammar books, but has a real impact on the speech and writing of English speakers.

To answer the historical aspect of my question, I began to search for a possible start date for the myth that "not interested" was an incorrect usage of "disinterested", while also keeping an eye out for uses of "uninterested", a word which is often used in contrast with it. The first instance of the disinterested vs. uninterested debate occurs in a religious text from 1836, "The Harmony of Divine Truth" by American minister Seth Williston. While discussing the concept of "disinterested benevolence", he writes:

*“Some have confounded the word disinterested with uninterested, and so have made it signify the same as apathy. ... Let it be remembered that the word interested has two distinct significations. We say a man is interested, when he is governed by a selfish motive. We also say a man is interested when he does not view the thing in question with indifference ... [T]he word interested takes two different compounds, which mark the opposition to both its significations. That which serves as a contrast to the first signification, is disinterested; which is the reverse of selfish. The word used as a contrast to the other signification, is uninterested; which is the same as apathetic.” (Williston 271)*

This is the first written account I could find that discusses the meanings of the words “disinterested” and “uninterested” in contrast, and it provides a clear example that some speakers at this time held the belief that the word “disinterested” should only have one meaning. The next instance of this is *The Works of Leonard Woods, D.D.: Lectures, a collection of sermons* from 1850 which similarly defines the concept of “disinterested benevolence” by stating the following:

*“The word disinterested is sometimes thought to be of nearly the same import with uninterested. According to this, holiness would be a benevolence which takes no interest in its object, – which would be a contradiction. ... But the word is in good use, and, in its common acceptation, signifies the opposite of selfishness.” (Woods 60)*

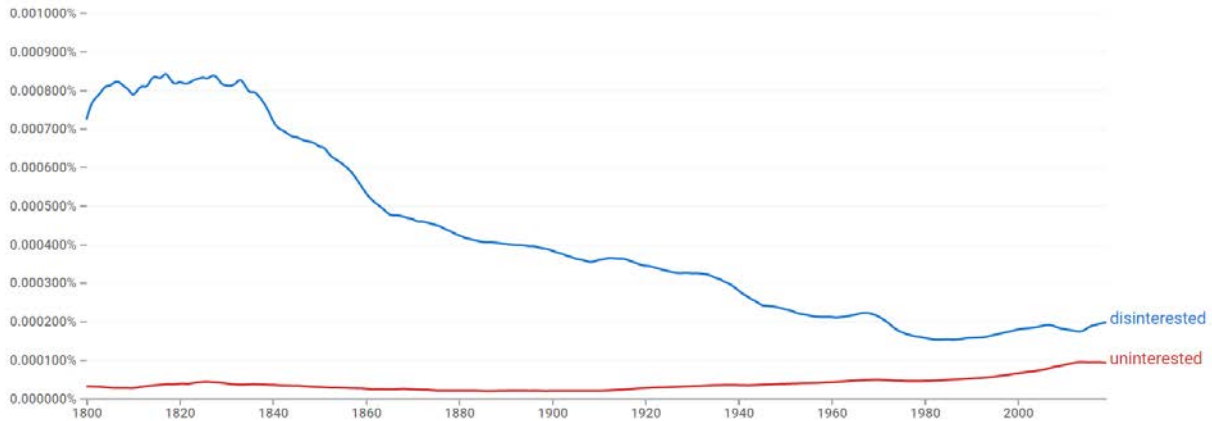
Here we see the attitude that “disinterested” must mean “impartial”, because if it had a meaning that differed from its “common acceptation”, the phrase “disinterested benevolence” would be a contradiction. Also occurring in 1850 is an instance in a novel called *Patronage* by Anglo-Irish author Maria Edgeworth, in which a character states, “I believe in disinterested affection, taking the word *disinterested* in its proper sense” (Edgeworth 207). Here we have more explicit evidence that sometime between the 1830s and 1850s, educated speakers of English began to believe that “impartial” was the more “proper” usage of the word “disinterested”, possibly influenced by the concept of “disinterested benevolence” or “disinterested affection”, that they believed that other speakers were using this word improperly, and began to vocalize this idea in various works of literature. Perhaps their logic was that since “uninterested benevolence” or “uninterested affection” would not make sense, and since this was the context in which they often encountered the word, using it to have a different meaning must be wrong and contradictory. This belief would later become generalized to all instances of the word (“if it can’t mean “uninterested” here, it must not be able to mean “uninterested” anywhere else”). In order to confirm this, the next question to ask is, did “impartial” become the primary meaning of the word during the 1800s, leading speakers to believe that the less-used definition of the word was actually incorrect?

The source I used to answer this was the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), counterpart to COCA, but with data ranging from the 1810s to the early 2000s. I wanted to gather some data on how the popularity of each definition of this word changed over time. Just searching for the word “disinterested” provided too many results to pore through, so I made use of collocates to simplify my research. I searched in COHA for collocates appearing directly after the word “disinterested”, and found that the majority of the results pointed to the word being used to mean “impartial”: for example, “disinterested love”, “observer”, or “motives”. In fact, the only collocates which would allow the word to be used to mean “not interested” were “shrug”, which appeared four times, “glance”, which appeared three times, and “students”, which appeared with this meaning once. Contrast this with the results of a collocate search in COCA, in which 12 out of 97 collocates showed that the word “disinterested” was being used to mean “not interested”; for example, “disinterested parents” (in the context of students doing poorly in school), “tone”, and “expression”. Though these searches don’t account for the meaning of the word when it is used on its own or at the end of a

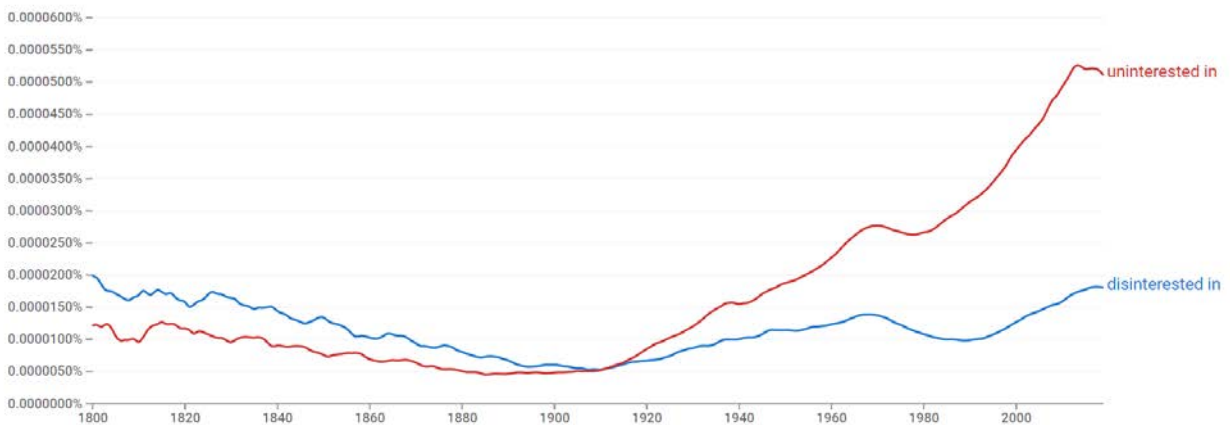
phrase, which is often the case, these data could show that the use of “disinterested” to mean “not interested” became more common from 1990 on as compared to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the other hand, it could also reflect that the “not interested” usage is more popular in speech and informal writing, since COCA contains more of this than COHA, which mostly draws from books, magazines, and the like.

Next, I specifically looked through the uses of the phrase “disinterested in” in COHA. I chose this phrase because when being used for its “impartial” meaning, “disinterested” tends to precede specific nouns, whereas I hypothesized that “disinterested *in*” would more often mark a use of the “not interested” meaning, by analogy with “uninterested in”. Overall, my guess was correct, but not by much. 50% of the uses of “disinterested in” in COHA made use of the “not interested” definition, compared to 44.6% meaning “impartial” and 5.4% ambiguous uses. However, importantly, this figure was not even across time. From 1800 to 1900, all instances of “disinterested in” except for two used the “impartial” definition – to give an example of how this looks, the phrase “I shall be impartial and *disinterested in* the decision that I make” is cited in 1828. By contrast, from 1900 to 2000, 24 instances of the phrase use the “not interested” meaning and five use the “impartial” meaning. This is a pretty drastic shift, and again, either demonstrates that the meaning “not interested” began to overtake the other meaning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or that the “not interested” usage has always been more popular in informal writing, and we are only seeing this now because more people have the ability to write their own novels and articles compared to in the 1800s. However, I am more inclined to believe that the preferred definition of the word really is shifting. I consider these data to be an argument against the idea that the word has always been more popular in informal works, because the 20<sup>th</sup> century sources COHA provided were not particularly more informal than the 19<sup>th</sup> century ones.

From the data I’ve gathered during my research we can conclude a couple of things about the history of “disinterested”. The idea that “disinterested” should only mean “impartial” is a myth that likely originated in religious contexts, and was reinforced by its frequent, specific use in legal contexts. Well-educated people heard these usages and concluded that “disinterested” must be a word reserved for these more formal occasions, and began to insist that this was the only correct definition. This word then enjoyed popularity with this definition throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (shown by COHA and by Google Ngram Viewer), while “not interested” remained as a less popular secondary meaning during the same time. Around the 1920s-30s (Google Ngram Viewer/COHA), much to the chagrin of pedants, the “not interested” meaning began to pick up steam once again, perhaps later aided by the average person’s increasing access to write. What these data have shown most clearly is that metalinguistic beliefs like these, while constructed by a certain subset of speakers without necessarily being based in reality, nonetheless do impact real speakers’ usage of the word. While they of course should not be taken at face value, they offer insight into cultural shifts and reflect the beliefs of those who adhere to them.



**Appendix A - Google Ngram graph showing the frequency of disinterested vs. uninterested from 1800-2020**



**Appendix B - Google Ngram graph showing the frequency of disinterested in vs. uninterested in from 1800-2020**

## References

- Davies, Mark. (2008-) *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): One billion words, 1990-2019*. Available online at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>.
- Davies, Mark. (2010-) *The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA): 400 million words, 1810-2009*. Available online at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>.
- Edgeworth, Maria. *Patronage*. Vol. 13, Harper and Brothers, 1850.
- Fowler, H. W. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Edited by David Crystal, Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Williston, Seth. *The Harmony of Divine Truth*. 1836,
- Woods, Leonard. *The Works of Leonard Woods*. Vol. 3, J.P. Jewett, 1850,



# Douche

Aila Kulkarni

Cite as: Kulkarni, Aila. 2021. Douche. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 71-77.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Language evolves to complement changing social norms; this is particularly true when it comes to the informal lexicon. By definition, slang “generally refers to words not included in formal discourse” that would “promote [the] ease of social interaction, to induce either friendliness or intimacy,” as well as the sense of belonging amongst groups of people (Labov 340). Slang is like swearing in that the “appropriateness of [both their usages] ... are highly contextually variable, dependent on speaker-listener relationship, social-physical context, and particular word used;” that is, both “are culturally and personally determined” (Jay). However, unlike swearing, “change is characteristic of slang” through linguistic creativity (Labov 339).

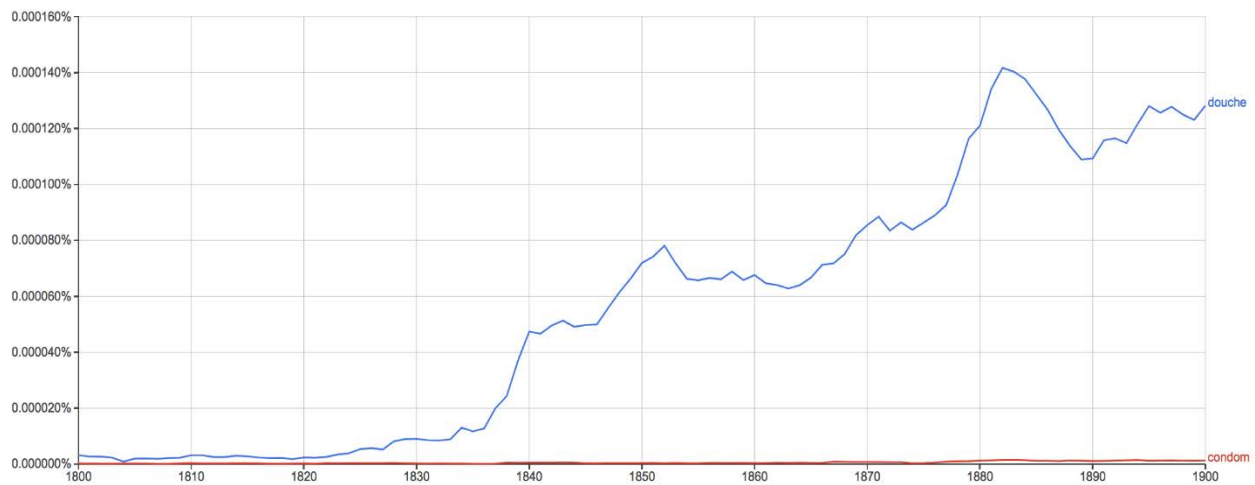
New words do not just pop up out of thin air, but rather, they often emerge when we play with the existing lexicon. Known as linguistic creativity, this process utilizes linguistic productivity to allow speakers to create new concepts through “using existing lexical items in a novel way” (Zawada 238). Linguistic creativity functions because of a speaker’s need to convey original ideas in a way that the existing lexicon cannot communicate. This process not only semantically expands the lexicon, but it also adjusts its deixis through the pragmatic motivation of informing “others about our beliefs in an indirect way” (Zawada 241).

The deixis of new terms is heavily influenced through both innovation and the media. Innovation is defined as the process of making change to improve something; this action can be applied to methods, products, etc. – one prominent innovation was the addition of emojis to texting – and innovation has the power to make a direct, long-lasting impact on society. Likewise, the media can make direct reverberations on society. Namely, mainstream media and social media can influence the “social and cultural identity” of society (Lanir). One term that has been impacted by both factors is ‘douche’. How did ‘douche’ evolve into becoming an epithet? How have historical innovations as well as modern media impacted the connotations of ‘douche’?

The connotation of the epithet ‘douche’ has evolved over many centuries. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘douche’ is originally derived from the Latin *ductiare*, which itself has roots in the Latin words *ductus*, which means “leading” or “conduit,” and *dūcere*, which means “to lead.” From Latin, *ductiare* evolved into the Italian verb *docciare*, its prefix *doccia*- describing a conduit-pipe; from there, *docciare* evolved into the French noun *douche*, meaning a stream of water. In 1766, English borrowed ‘douche’ to refer to “a jet or stream of water, or the like, applied to some part of the body, generally for medicinal purposes” (“Douche.” Oxford English Dictionary). At this time, the definition of ‘douche’ made a general categorization of the usage of this type of stream of water.

The definition of ‘douche’ changed with the modern breakthrough of contraceptives in the early nineteenth century. Contraceptives research was in its pioneer stages in the early 1800s; in 1832, American physician Charles Knowlton “officially sanctioned the douche ... as a contraceptive after sex” (Buck). In *A New Dictionary of Medical Science in Literature*, published in 1833, physician and medical writer Robley Dunglison specified douche as “a jet of water (or a solution of water and other substances) introduced into the vagina as a means of cleansing the uterus and cervix” (“Douche.”

Oxford English). In 1843, French obstetrician Maurice Éguisier invented “a self-acting douche in 1843, a porcelain pump and rubber hose that” was meant to flush the vagina clean after sex (Buck).



As the nineteenth century progressed, Éguisier’s invention gained in popularity, and the ‘douche’ was the leading contraceptive, compared to “rubber condoms [which were] first marketed in 1850” (Darroch 256). Thanks to the Lysol company, the connotations of ‘douche’ took a turn for the worse during the twentieth century. At the beginning of the 1900s, Lysol began to market its antiseptic soap to be used for ‘douching’. The product claimed to be promoting “‘feminine hygiene,’ ... a euphemism ... for birth control,” and that it was “safe and gentle” for douching (Eveleth). However, this proved to be opposite from the truth. While Lysol’s “antiseptic douche after intercourse was thought to kill any sperm,” “a 1933 study [found that] ... nearly half of the 507 women who used douching as a birth control method ended up pregnant” (Douching and Spermicides, Pasulka). Furthermore, Lysol’s ‘douche’ product contained “creosol, a phenol compound reported in some cases to cause inflammation, burning, and even death” (Eveleth). This toxic chemical in Lysol caused “193 poisonings and 5 deaths



**HOW I LOST MY HUSBAND**

I guess I was really to blame when Stan started paying attention to other women. It wasn't that I didn't know about feminine hygiene. I had become . . . well . . . forgetful. Yes, I found out the hard way that "now-and-then" cure isn't enough! My doctor finally set me right. "Never be a careless wife," he said. He advised Lysol disinfectant for douching always.



**AND WON HIM BACK AGAIN!**

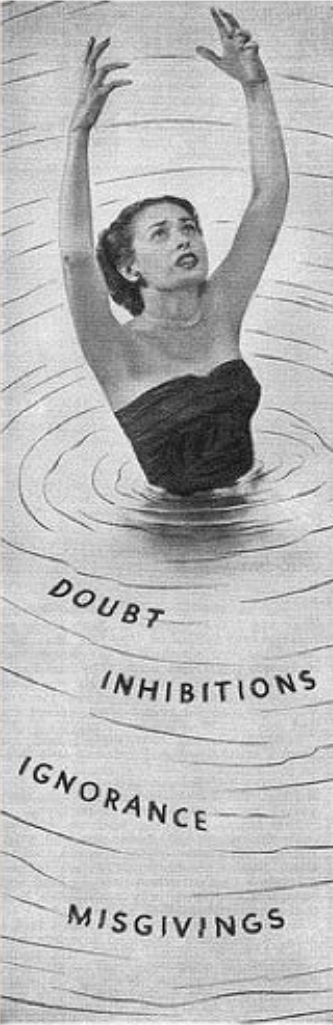
Our romance is so special again—now that I know about proper feminine hygiene care! Since I had that talk with the doctor, I use Lysol always for douching. As he said: "Lysol is a proved germ-killer . . . far more dependable than salt, soda or other homemade solutions." Lysol is easy to use and economical. But, most important, it really does the job!

**Check these facts with your Doctor**

Proper feminine hygiene care is important to the happiness and charm of every woman. So, douch thoroughly with correct Lysol solution . . . always! Powerful cleanser—Lysol's great spreading power means it reaches deeply into folds and crevices to smother and destroy germ-killers—antibacterial, made under scientific laboratory control . . . far more dependable than homemade solutions. **Non-caustic**—Lysol douching solution is non-irritating, not harmful to vaginal tissues. Follow your doctor's. **Cheerily use**—Easypouch after use! **Disinfects**. **Men** women use Lysol for feminine hygiene than any other method. **Free** feminine hygiene booklet, write Lohs & Fink, 122 Fifth Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Copyright, 1948, by Lohs & Fink, Patent Office.

For Feminine Hygiene use **Lysol** always!



**TOO LATE TO CRY OUT IN ANGUISH!**

*Beware of the one intimate neglect that can engulf you in marital grief*

**T**OO LATE, when love has gone, for a wife to plead that no one warned her of danger. Because a wise, considerate wife makes it her business to find out how to safeguard her daintiness in order to protect precious married love and happiness.

One of the soundest ways for a wife to keep married love in bloom is to achieve dainty allure by practicing effective feminine hygiene such as regular vaginal douches with reliable "Lysol."

**Germ destroyed swiftly**

"Lysol" has amazing, *proved* power to kill germ-life on contact . . . truly cleanses the vaginal canal even in the presence of mucous matter. Thus "Lysol" acts in a way that makeshifts like soap, salt or soda never can.

Appealing daintiness is assured, because the very source of objectionable odors is eliminated.

**Use whenever needed!**

Gentle, non-caustic "Lysol" will not harm delicate tissue. Easy directions give correct douching solution. Many doctors advise their patients to douche regularly with "Lysol" brand disinfectant, just to insure daintiness alone, and to use it as often as they need it. No greasy aftereffect.

For feminine hygiene, three times more women use "Lysol" than any other liquid preparation. No other is more reliable. Yes, too, can rely on "Lysol" to help protect your married happiness . . . keep you desirable!

For complete Feminine Hygiene rely on . . .

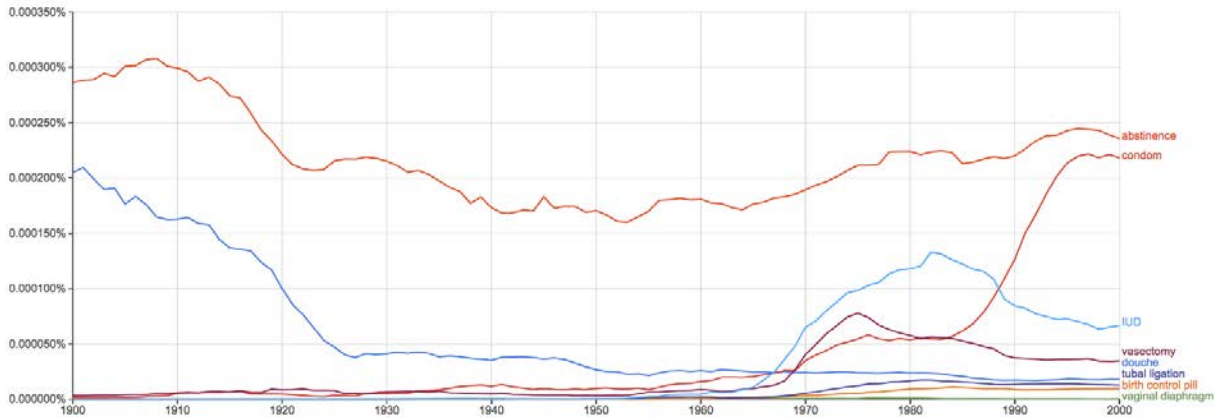
**"Lysol"**  
Brand Disinfectant



**NEW! . . . FEMININE HYGIENE FACTS!**

**FREE!** New booklet of information by leading gynecological authority. Mail coupon to Lohs & Fink, 192 Bloomfield Avenue, Bloomfield, N. J.

before 1911," and "women routinely complained of vaginal burning and blisters" (Buck). Nevertheless, 'douching' with Lysol was still practiced because it was "cheaper than condoms or [vaginal] diaphragms and [was] available over the counter in most drugstores" (Pasulka). However, the twentieth century brought about innovation for other contraceptives: the "development of latex and modern manufacturing methods ... made [condoms] ... both more durable and inexpensive;" vaginal diaphragms, which were first developed in Europe, "were smuggled into the United States in the early 1920s by Margaret Sanger because U.S. law banned importation of contraceptives" (Darroch 256). Furthermore, in 1937, one "year after the federal court ruling, in *United States v. One Package*, that doctors could legally distribute contraceptive information and supplies across state lines, the American Medical Association officially endorsed birth control" (Darroch 256). These social and innovative factors contributed to the increase in the use of condoms and other more effective contraceptives.



As the “availability and social acceptance of actual, effective contraception” became widespread, Lysol decided to remarket their ‘douching’ product by “making women feel horrible about their bodies” (Buck). The company released advertisements that preyed “on women’s insecurities around ‘freshness’ and sexual idealism”: For instance, “one Lysol ad” read, “A man marries a woman because he loves her .... So instead of blaming him if married love begins to cool, she should question herself” (Buck).

Because of Lysol’s sexist marketing campaign, ‘douche’ took on a misogynistic implication for several decades. According to the *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, ‘douche’ signifies “a despicable or offensive woman,” and, from 1942-1949, it was “a term of utmost contempt for a woman.” By the late 1960s, ‘douche’ took on its modern connotations. In 1967, ‘douche’ referred to “any individual whom the speaker desires to deprecate,” and, in 1968, the term indicated “a person who always does the wrong thing” (“Douchebag.” *Historical Dictionary*, “Douche.” *Historical Dictionary*).

Since the late 1960s, ‘douche’ has maintained its connotations as a person that is being labelled as despicable and/or idiotic. However, modern social forces, specifically the media, have shifted the term to not only be applied as a noun, but as other lexical categories, for example, as an adjective. This expansion of the lexicon, to allow terms to be versatile in use, is the result of contemporary television shows that utilize slang frequently. One case where the lexical abilities of douche are expanded is in “The ANTI-Social Network” from the comedy television series *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. In this episode, two of the main characters, Dennis and Charlie, utilize ‘douche’ in various ways to describe a stranger, that they met the prior night in a bar, to the bartender:

Dennis- “We’re looking for a guy.”

Charlie- “Yeah he’s a real douchebag.”

Dennis- “He was here the other night. Uh ...”

Charlie- “Yeah, douchy looking. Kind of douchey.”

Dennis- “Yeah. I wish we had a picture of the guy. Uh ...”

Charlie- “Oh, he’s a shusher.”

Dennis- “Oh, yes right. This is a douchebag who goes around shushing people that he doesn’t even know.”

In this scene, linguistic creativity is used various times to make productive forms of ‘douche’. Charlie and Dennis call the stranger a douchebag to establish that the person’s identity as a ‘douche’. Charlie uses the word as an adjective by describing the stranger as ‘douchy’ and ‘douchey’ to emphasize just how much of a ‘douche’ that person is. By using linguistic productivity, Dennis and Charlie are indicating, in this context, that being a ‘douche’ equates to being an asshole.



As a society that spends a significant amount of time online, social media has quickly become endemic in its users' social lives. As the internet is more accessible than ever through smartphones, it "is likely the most prevalent influence on our day-to-day dialogue", "language itself changes slowly, but the internet has sped up the process of those changes," in particular allowing "the transmission of slang terms to pass from one group to another much more quickly" (Kolowich). One facet of social media that has played a part in accelerating this process is the internet meme, "a piece of culture,



typically a joke, which gains influence through ... the speed of their transmission and the fidelity of their form" (Davison 122). Furthermore, "memes are deployed for social bonding rather than for sharing information," and the humor usually linked with them "has been theorized as a factor in maintaining social and institutional boundaries" (Zappavigna 101). One method of utilizing humor is through sarcasm, and this is often found in memes where 'douche' is connoted as an epithet.

Like in the scene from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, this meme uses 'douchebag' to explicitly identify that a person is a 'douche', in the strongest possible terms, by calling out this person's imprudent action to park his or her car in four lots and deprive others of available lots. In addition, it is imitating videogames in that that you can level up to attain higher statuses as a 'douche'. Through sarcasm, which is manifested in its parallel to videogames, this meme echoes a shared social contempt for people who behave like assholes just for the sake of irritating others. By reflecting a societal disdain for this type of provocative people, this meme establishes that there is a general social awareness of what it means to be a 'douche'. Furthermore, this meme illustrates a shared understanding that familiarity with the person is unnecessary for that person to be recognized as a 'douche'.

From contraception to epithet, 'douche' has a multi-dimensional etymology that was greatly impacted by societal changes, especially during the twentieth century, and by an increase in media activity, especially during the twenty-first century. The term 'douche' was first derived from Latin, then evolved into an Italian verb and then into a French noun, which was borrowed by English. The English connotation of the word changed in the 1800s with the invention of the 'douche' as a contraceptive. This form of birth control, while eventually proven to be ineffective, was frequently used by women because of its affordability and accessibility. One product that was popularly used for 'douching' was Lysol; however, it was found that using Lysol was toxic and resulted in poisonings and deaths. Furthermore, thanks to the Lysol's false and sexist marketing strategies during the twentieth century, 'douche' became slang for a contemptible woman; after several decades, the connotation of 'douche' changed to become the modern epithet of a despicable and/or idiotic person. Today, the

media, especially in television shows and social media memes, plays a significant role in utilizing linguistic creativity to expand the versatility of terms like 'douche'.

## References

- Buck, Stephanie. "The Sexist, Toxic History of Douching." Timeline, Medium, 14 Aug. 2016, [timeline.com/sexist-history-douching-bcc39f3d216c](https://www.timeline.com/sexist-history-douching-bcc39f3d216c).
- Darroch, Jacqueline E. "Family Planning: A Century of Change." *Silent Victories: The History and Practice of Public Health in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by John W. Ward and Christian Warren, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 484.
- Davison, Patrick. "The Language of Internet Memes." *The Social Media Reader*, Edited by Michael Mandiberg, pp. 120–134., [spring2016.veryinteractive.net/content/6-library/7-language-of-internet-memes/language-of-internet-memes\\_michaelmandiberg.pdf](http://spring2016.veryinteractive.net/content/6-library/7-language-of-internet-memes/language-of-internet-memes_michaelmandiberg.pdf).
- "Douche." *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, Edited by J. E. Lighter et al., 1st ed., vol. 1, Random House, 1994, p. 642.
- "Douche." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/57099?rsk=JSYsRj&result=1#eid](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57099?rsk=JSYsRj&result=1#eid).
- "Douchebag." *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, Edited by J. E. Lighter et al., 1st ed., vol. 1, Random House, 1994, p. 642.
- "Douching and Spermicides: Douching as a Birth Control Method." *Highlights of the Percy Skuy History of Contraception Gallery*, Case Western Reserve University, [case.edu/affil/skuyhistcontraception/online-2012/Douching-Spermicides.html](http://case.edu/affil/skuyhistcontraception/online-2012/Douching-Spermicides.html).
- Eveleth, Rose. "Lysol's Vintage Ads Subtly Pushed Women to Use Its Disinfectant as Birth Control." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 30 Sept. 2013, [www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/lysols-vintage-ads-subtly-pushed-women-to-use-its-disinfectant-as-birth-control-218734/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/lysols-vintage-ads-subtly-pushed-women-to-use-its-disinfectant-as-birth-control-218734/).
- "Éguisier Irrigator (Case Western Reserve University)." Timeline, Medium, Cleveland, 14 Aug. 2016, [timeline.com/sexist-history-douching-bcc39f3d216c](https://www.timeline.com/sexist-history-douching-bcc39f3d216c).
- Jay, Timothy, and Kristen Janschewitz. "The Pragmatics of Swearing." *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behavior, Culture*, [www.mcla.edu/Assets/MCLA-Files/Academics/Undergraduate/Psychology/Pragmaticsofswearing.pdf](http://www.mcla.edu/Assets/MCLA-Files/Academics/Undergraduate/Psychology/Pragmaticsofswearing.pdf).
- Kolowich, Lindsay. "The Evolution of Language: How Internet Slang Changes the Way We Speak." *HubSpot Blog*, HubSpot, 6 Oct. 2014, [blog.hubspot.com/marketing/how-internet-changes-language](http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/how-internet-changes-language).
- Labov, Teresa. "Social and Language Boundaries among Adolescents." *American Speech*, vol. 67, no. 4, 1992, pp. 339–340., doi:10.2307/455845.
- Lanir, Lesley. "Slang: Linguistic Creativity at Work, Not Linguistic Corruption?" *Decoded Science*, 20 May 2013, <https://decodedscience.org/slang-humans-linguistic-creativity-at-work-not-linguistic-corruption/>.
- Lysol. "Too Late To Cry Out In Anguish! ."
- Pasulka, Nicole. "When Women Used Lysol as Birth Control." *Mother Jones*, Foundation for National Progress, 8 Mar. 2012, 11:00 AM, [www.motherjones.com/media/2012/03/when-women-used-lysol-birth-control/#](http://www.motherjones.com/media/2012/03/when-women-used-lysol-birth-control/#). "Sarcastic Meme Utilizing Douche Epithet ."
- "The ANTI-Social Network ." *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, season 7, episode 8 I, FX.



Zappavigna, Michele. "Internet Memes." *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web*, A&C Black, 2012, pp. 100–126.

Zawada, Britta. "Linguistic Creativity from a Cognitive Perspective." *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1 July 2006, pp. 238–254.

Images:

<https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2013/09/27/the-secret-of-vintage-lysol-douche-ads/>

<https://me.me/i/achievement-unlocked-douchebag-level-veteran-car-memes-1974696>

# Dwarf

John Anderson

Cite as: Anderson, John. 2021. Dwarf. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 78-83.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The word “dwarf” has a long and intricate history. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) lists four different definitions for the noun form of the word. In order, they refer to humans of smaller than ordinary size, mythological creatures with skill in metalwork, small varieties of plants and animals, and stars with a small mass and a large density. Although each of these four definitions will be addressed on some level, the goal of this paper is to analyze the metalanguage surrounding the use of this word specifically in reference to people with one of the many medical conditions referred to as “dwarfism.” How do people feel about this word? What does it mean, and why do some find it offensive?

## Dwarfs, Dwarves, and Dwarrows

The English word “dwarf” comes etymologically from the Old English “dwergh.” It is possible that it came by way of the Old Norse “dvergr,” or that it comes directly from the Proto-Germanic “dwergoz” which derives from Proto-Indo-European “dhwérgʷhos” (OED Online). The meaning of this word is unclear, although it possibly comes from a root meaning “to deceive.” In Germanic mythology and legend, dwarfs have a reputation as tricksters (Battles). Although generally honest, they follow after a folkloric pattern of supernatural creatures that give people what they ask for, rather than what they mean to ask for.

There is also some disagreement as to whether the plural form should be “dwarfs,” as the plural of roof is roofs, or “dwarves,” as in wolf to wolves. A refined search of Google Ngram, using only those instances of “dwarves” and “dwarfs” used as nouns and including works of fiction, shows that while dwarfs is uniformly more popular, the numbers are not as far apart as one might think:



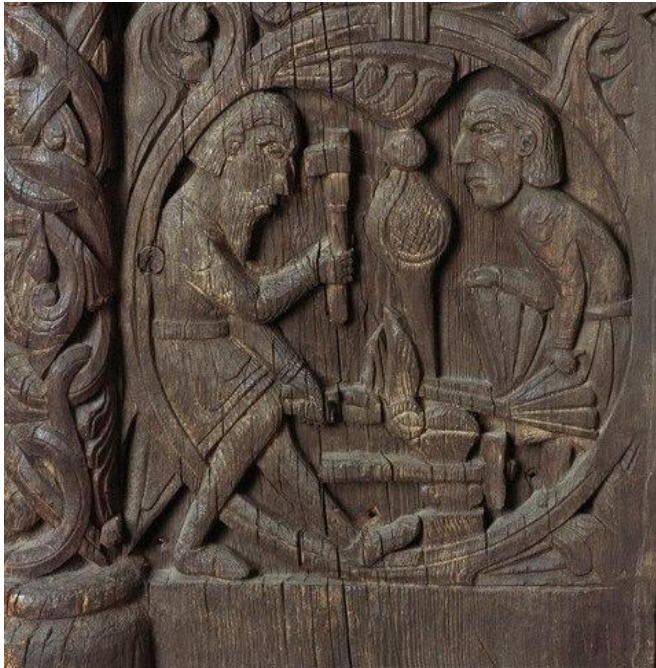
Many attribute the origin of “dwarves” to J.R.R. Tolkien, who used this spelling in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These charts show that, although he played an important role in entering

mainstream English, this spelling did not originate with him. Most of the usages of “dwarves” before 1940 are in books about Norse mythology, with a few references to human anatomy. In 1937, both *The Hobbit* and Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* were released. Based on this data, the influence of the Disney film was more successful in codifying the spelling, at least until around the 1960’s, when Tolkien’s works became more popular. The usages of “dwarves” after 1980 are more varied, but many are fantasies in the style of Tolkien (Google Ngram). Interestingly, Tolkien himself considered his use of “dwarves” in *The Hobbit* to be a misspelling. “The real historical plural of ‘dwarf,’” he wrote, “is dwarrows anyway: rather a nice word, but a bit too archaic. Still I rather wish I had used the word dwarrow” (Tolkien). The Oxford English Dictionary lists this as the actual Middle English form of the word, although it provides no examples of its use, nor does it show up on Google Ngram. Today, both “dwarfs” and “dwarves” are commonly used, but the latter is most often used for creatures of myth or fantasy, and the former for humans with dwarfism, though this is not a hard and fast rule.

## The Origin of Dwarfs

The concept of dwarfs originates in Germanic folklore. The dwarfs of mythology bear a basic resemblance to the dwarfs of fairy tales: they are small creatures that dwell within the earth and have skill in working metals. Additionally, they were seen as a race created before humanity and were associated with ancient megaliths. They bring diseases such as warts and fever, but also are masters of healing. They shun sunlight, may or may not be spirits of the dead, and are reckoned alongside the gods and elves (Battles 32-37). While sometimes portrayed as comic figures, the race of dwarfs was envied by humanity for their wealth and skill, and they may even have been worshipped during the Viking age (Battles 70).

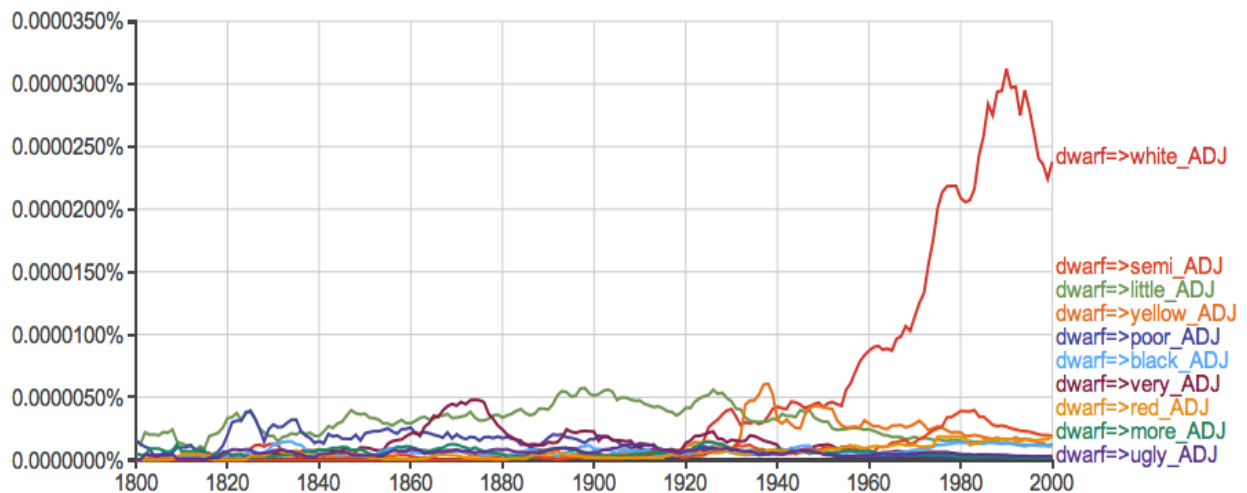
There actually seems to be some debate as to whether the Norse even thought of their dwarfs as small. This idea can be found in many places on the Internet, including Wikipedia (Talk:Dwarf). Proponents of the human-sized dwarf theory will call attention to the fact that dwarfs are never described as small until the thirteenth-century sagas. They also cite as evidence a carving in which the dwarf smith Reginn is shown next to the human hero Sigurd. However, there are two main pieces of evidence against this theory. First, while Reginn is a Norse dwarf name, the Reginn from this myth is not a dwarf at all. The Eddic poem “Reginmal,” believed to be older than the sagas, describes him as a man – a mortal human – and only “*dvergr of vox*”: a dwarf in stature (Battles 38). Why would the poem refer to Reginn’s dwarfish height unless it was unusual? Reginn’s dwarf height was probably understood as being smaller than average, as the alternative is that he was unusually tall. Of these two interpretations, it is most likely that the image of a short dwarf persisted into the thirteenth century, rather than dwarfs went from giants to small creatures. Secondly, the carvings in question come from the Hylestad Stave Church, which was built in the late twelfth century at the earliest, and, even then, is a Christian church that cannot be said to accurately reflect the beliefs of Norse traditional religion (Giles). While the oldest sources, of which there are few to begin with, may never specifically describe dwarfs as small, they never give any indication that they are not. So, it is safe to assume that when people used the word “dwarf,” they had a small creature in mind.



Reginn (left) and Sigurd (right); Hylestad stave church, 12th century Museum of Cultural History, Oslo University (Giles)

## “Dwarf” as a Scientific Term

According to the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), and Google Ngram, most of the collocates – that is, words used frequently along with the word in question – of “dwarf” are used in this sense. Some examples from COHA include “species” at number fifteen, “star” at number eight, “trees” at number two, and “white” in a clear first place. Google Ngram’s charts show that for more than fifty years, “white dwarf” has been two to ten times as common as the next runner up. It started to come into common usage in the early 1920’s. This makes sense, as the term “white dwarf star” was coined by astronomer Willem Luyten in 1922 (Holberg).



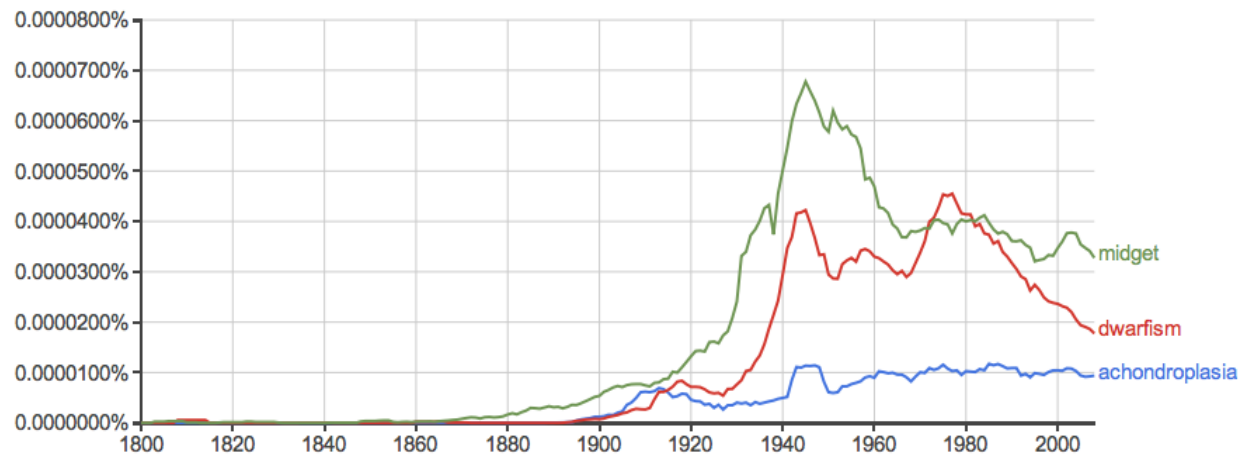
Medical dwarfism has been known since ancient times. Images and even remains of human dwarfs have been found in Egypt, dating as far back as 4500 BCE. However, this was not seen as a form of physical handicap, and did not preclude one from holding positions of authority (Kozma). Even some gods were depicted as dwarfs. However, not every society was as accepting as the ancient

Egyptians, and throughout much of history, people have alienated and persecuted those who are different. One of the ways this has happened is through the use of pejoratives and derogatory slurs. Could “dwarf” be considered such a word?

“Dwarfism” is the generally accepted common name for the group of over two hundred genetic disorders that cause an abnormal reduction of growth. The most common of these is achondroplasia, which prevents the long bones of the body such as those in the legs and arms from reaching their full size. This is what Google Ngram shows regarding the popularity of various terminologies for medical dwarfism:

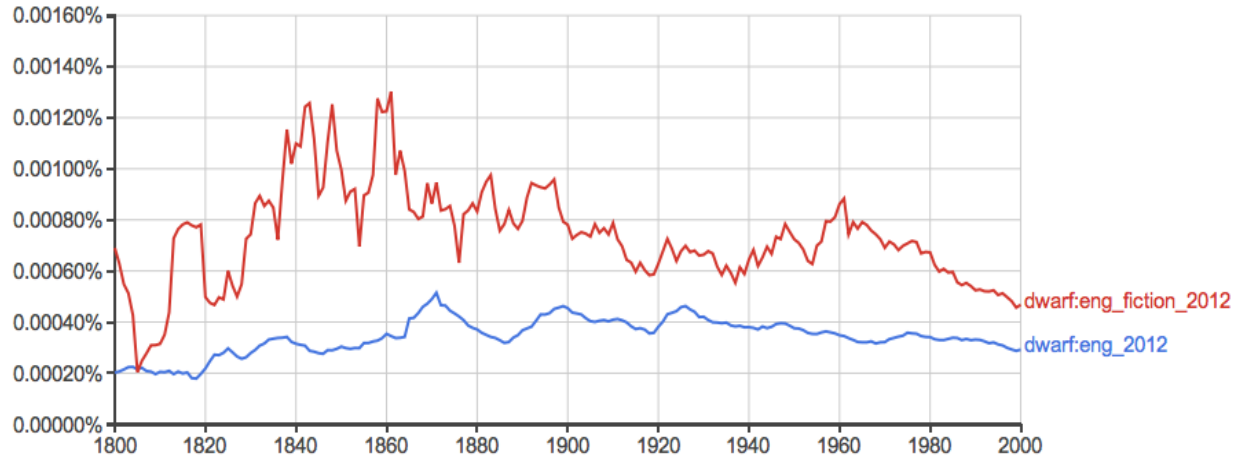
Achondroplasia entered the English vocabulary in the early 1900’s, and doesn’t gain or lose much popularity over the years. This is not surprising for a scientific medical term, which would be used in only certain contexts. Dwarfism is about the same age, although it has been used in writing much more commonly, though in the past forty years or so it has been on the decline. This may represent the effects of a modern desire for political correctness. However, the generally most common term, as well as the oldest of these three, is “midget.”

The root of the word is “midge,” a variety of small, marsh-dwelling fly with a short lifespan. Naturally, this word is seen as unpleasant by many. Interestingly, the word midget was once used to describe “proportionate dwarfs,” that is, people who were less than five feet tall, but otherwise resembling healthy adults. During the late 1800’s, the era of sideshows and circuses, to call a little person a midget was to imply that they were well-formed. It was almost an affectionate term at the time. In fact, the original reason why the Little People of America changed its name from “Midgets of America” was to be more inclusive to those dwarfs considered “disproportionate” (Kennedy). The connection of “midget” to this sort of physical hierarchy, along with its link to the sideshow era, contributes to its unpopularity.



In April of 2009, the New York Times manual of style made a rare revision, and declared, “that people of unusually (and medically) short stature should be referred to as dwarfs, not ‘midgets’” (Harris). For a long time, though, the *Times* freely used “midgets,” and only when deputy style editor Philip Corbett received letters from offended readers and did further research into the subject, uncovering its dark and problematic history, was the decision made to change. So, it can be said, at least concerning the past several years, that the word “dwarf” is a perfectly acceptable term, and a welcome alternative to “midget.” However, what is considered acceptable terminology one day may not necessarily last long. One example is the various words used throughout history to describe people with cognitive illnesses, including “aments,” “cretins,” and even “idiots,” and of course, the still highly controversial “mentally retarded.” It is not at all uncommon for word meanings to change rapidly.

## Portrayal in Media



Google Ngram shows that between 1800 and 2000, “dwarf” was almost consistently used more often in works of fiction. The line graph shows that use of “dwarf” reached several peaks throughout the nineteenth century. This was the period in which the Grimm brothers published various editions of their collected fairytales, such as *Snow White*. Jacob Grimm was also a scholar of Germanic mythology, and he sought to revive interest in the folklore of his country. It was what Grimm found in legends that inspired both Disney and Tolkien to put dwarfs in the spotlight again in 1937, starting another rise in popularity that lasted until about 1960. But its long association with legendary creatures is what makes “dwarf” a potentially problematic term for referring to human people.

Peter Dinklage, an actor perhaps most well-known for his current role in the HBO series, *Game of Thrones*, explains his dislike for the way that dwarfs tend to be portrayed in works of fantasy:

*"I try not to read too much into it, but there's a bit of a bias, where you're thought of as a mystical creature, which is a bit absurd.... I have a great sense of humor -- and a dark sense of humor -- about everything, but it is a bit narrow-minded sometimes, where if they have a dwarf character, the shoes have to curl up at the end, he has this inherent wisdom, he isn't sexual, all of that. You look at something like 'Snow White,' and each of the dwarves is just one thing -- this one sneezes, this one is angry, this one is tired. And that's sometimes still true for modern-day stories. But it's not just for dwarves, that could be the case for anybody, for women, for people of color. Right now it's Middle Eastern people who are all playing terrorists. It's short-sighted. But life is too short -- no pun intended -- to be interested in roles that haven't got any meat to them." (Vineyard)*

Dinklage believes that use of the word “dwarf” serves to reinforce negative stereotypes. Still, while short actors will often find themselves typecast as one-dimensional fairytale characters, even average-sized actors are rarely able to choose what roles they want to play. And for Warwick Davis, an English actor possessing a rarer form of dwarfism known as spondyloepiphyseal dysplasia congenital, his unique stature was what allowed him to enter the field of his career to begin with. When he was eleven years old, his grandmother heard that short actors were needed to play Ewoks in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. Today he runs an agency for actors under five feet tall or taller than seven feet. Davis does not mind the use of the word dwarf, or even midget, believing that it is better to use the wrong word than to simply avoid conversation and miss out on the opportunity to gather a better understanding of people who are different. He considers being short part of what made him who he is, and tries to handle adversity with a sense of humor. “If I’d been average height I don’t think



I'd have been quite so outgoing... you tend to amplify your personality a little bit, just so as you're not forgotten" (Gilber).

So, being short can get you a place in the theater. Isn't this just a continuation of the Barnum-era sideshow? While many of the roles that dwarfs appear in can be trivial or downright insulting, many see them as a way of earning money in order to bring them closer to their life goals, whether that is acting, painting, or medicine (Harris).

## It's Not What You Say, But How You Say It

What are the alternative terms? "Midget" is clearly much more offensive. "Little People" has the same connotations of fantastic creatures, along with a sense of someone who is less important – as in "standing up for the little guy." Nor does it fit well into every kind of usage. Matt Roloff, former president of the Little People of America, believes that "to an intellectual," "Little Person" can sound more demeaning than midget (Kennedy). "Most individuals," says Dr. Betty M. Adelson, "prefer simply to be called by their given names" (Harris). Regardless of the phrasing, dwarfs are human beings, and those who search for a word to describe people of short stature must be careful to avoid defining them by their condition. This remains true for any person. A derisive tone can make even a generally accepted word sound offensive. Changing a word alone will do little to change people's opinions. A change in metalanguage begins not in the lexicon, but within the culture.

## References

- Battles, Paul. "Dwarves in Germanic Literature: Deutsche Mythologie or Grimm's Myths?" Published in: *The Shadow Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, edited by Tom Shippey. Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies. Tempe, Arizona. 2005.
- "dwarf, n. and adj." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2014.
- Gilber, Girard. "Size matters: Warwick Davis is no small talent." *The Independent*. 22 October 2011. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/size-matters-warwick-davis-is-no-small-talent-2372841.html>>
- Giles. "Essay: Doors - Entrances and Exits, Liminality and Sacred Space." UiO Museum of Cultural History. <<http://www.khm.uio.no/english/research/projects/religion-and-money/religion-and-money-blog/posts/doors---entrances-and-exits-liminality-and-sacred-.html>>
- Harris, Lynn. "Who you calling a 'midget'?" *Salon*. 16 July 2009. <[http://www.salon.com/2009/07/16/m\\_word/](http://www.salon.com/2009/07/16/m_word/)>
- Holberg, J. B. (2005). "How Degenerate Stars Came to be Known as White Dwarfs". *American Astronomical Society Meeting 207*: 1503.
- Kennedy, Dan. "What is Dwarfism?" *Big Enough*. 2005. <<http://archive.pov.org/bigenough/film-update/>>
- Kozma, Chahira. "Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt." *American Journal of Medical Genetics*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 27 December 2005. <<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2005/12/051227102614.htm>>
- "Talk:Dwarf (Norse mythology)." *Wikipedia*. last modified 17 January 2014. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Dwarf\\_\(Norse\\_mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Dwarf_(Norse_mythology))>
- Tolkien, J.R.R. "Letter #17." Letter to Stanley Unwin, Chairman of Allen and Unwin. 15 October 1937.
- Vineyard, Jen. "Peter Dinklage Confirms Dominic Cooper For 'My Dinner With Hervé'". *The Playlist*. 10 November 2011. <<https://theplaylist.net/peter-dinklage-confirms-dominic-cooper-for-my-dinner-with-herve-20111110/>>

# Eleventy

Julia Connally

Cite as: Connally, Julia. 2021. Eleventy. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 84-86.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The word *eleventy* originally referred to the number one hundred ten, and later achieved modest fame after it received mention in J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy of fantasy novels, *The Lord of the Rings*. Today, *eleventy* is used primarily for hyperbolic purposes and to refer playfully to punctuation overuse, especially on the Internet. How and when did *eleventy* become a tool for exaggeration? Who uses the word and in which contexts?

*Eleventy* is composed of the number *eleven* and the suffix *-ty*, which represents multiples of the number ten in English cardinal numbers. In arithmetic, cardinal numbers are primitive or "natural" numbers and answer the question "how many" (for instance, one, two and three). Cardinal numbers contrast with ordinal numbers, which mark a position in a series (for instance, first, second, and third). The use of *-ty* stems from the Old English *-tig*, through a Germanic root that existed as a distinct word in Gothic (*tigjus*) and Old Norse (*tigir*), which meant "tens, decades." (Online Etymology Dictionary)

According to Google Ngram Viewer, *eleventy* was used in print early in the nineteenth century. Charles Buck used *eleventy* in his book *A Theological Dictionary, Containing Definitions of All Religious Terms; a Comprehensive View of Every Article in the System of Divinity; an Impartial Account of All the Principal Denominations...Together with an Accurate Statement of the Most Remarkable Transactions and Events Recorded in Ecclesiastical History* (1818). Buck wrote, "In the eleventy century they were exempted by the popes from the authority established; insomuch, that in the council of Lateran, that was held in the year 1215, a decree was passed, by the advice of Innocent III. to prevent any new monastic institutions; and several were entirely suppressed." (Buck, p. 335). The use of "eleventy century" is not typical and likely reflects a typographical error for the word *eleventh*. An identical error occurred in 1834, when Samuel Astley Dunham used *eleventy* in his book *A History of Europe During the Middle Ages, Vol. IV*. Referring to Anglo-Saxon poets, Dunham wrote:

*"So little has our ancient language been studied, that we have no critics capable of distinguishing the style of the seventh from that of the eleventy century...The first specimen is evidently from an Anglo-Saxon poet—of one hostile to the barbarous Danes, whom he calls heathens and pirates. It is the death of Brithnoth; a composition that must doubtless be referred to the eleventy century."* (Dunham, pp. 22-23)

In 1854, Thomas H. Palmer used *eleventy* in its mathematical context in *Arithmetic, oral and written, practically applied by means of suggestive questions*: "...Forty-five from a hundred and forty-eight? [or eleventy-eight.] Seventy-two from a hundred and forty-eight? Thirty-six from a hundred and twenty-nine? [twelvety-nine]..." (Palmer, p. 36).

In 1897, R.A. Brock, secretary of the Southern Historical Society, edited and published *Southern Historical Society Papers, Vol. XXV.*, in which a history of Confederate States of America forces refers to P.B. Akers of the Eleventy Infantry of Lynchburg, Virginia. It is likely that in this context, *eleventy*

was a typographical error for eleventh. The word *eleventy* does not appear elsewhere in the book. (Brock, p. 376)

In 1921, Margaret Wilson published her short story “A Little Boy’s Utopia” in *Atlantic Monthly*. Wilson used *eleventy* to refer to an indefinitely large number: “No grown-up people, no babies, no girls. It was a world of boys, eleventy and a hundred strong.” (Wilson, p. 639).

In his 1917 novel *The Job*, Sinclair Lewis used *eleventy* in a hyperbolic context: “Oh, I dun’no; you’re so darn honest, and you got so much more sense than this bunch of Bronx totties. Gee! they’ll make bum stenogs. I know. I’ve worked in an office. They’ll keep their gum and a looking-glass in the upper-right hand drawer of their typewriter desks, and the old man will call them down eleventy times a day, and they’ll marry the shipping-clerk first time he sneaks out from behind a box...” (Lewis).

Printed use of *eleventy* was not common between 1900 and 1950. In the early 1960s, however, the word became increasingly popular. This phenomenon was possibly due to the publication in 1954 of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The book is the first volume in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series and the sequel to his earlier children’s book, *The Hobbit*. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*’s first chapter, Tolkien’s iconic hobbit character Bilbo Baggins celebrates his eleventy-first, or one hundred eleventh birthday (Tolkien).

In their book *The Ring of Words: Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary*, Peter Gilliver, Jeremy Marshall, and Edmund Weiner suggest that Tolkien gave his hobbits “a practice used by our forefathers,” but that he may also have known of similar words in Icelandic upon which he based his fictional language (Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner 2006).

Tolkien’s books have sold about one hundred million copies worldwide (Shippey). His popularity prompted the publication of a number of books dedicated to his works. At least three were published in the 1970s, including *The Middle-Earth Quiz Book* (1979), *A Tolkien Compass* (1975), and *The Tolkien Companion* (1979). Each mentions Bilbo Baggins’s eleventy-first birthday.

According to Google, Internet groups and chat rooms referenced Tolkien’s use of *eleventy* as early as 1994. In addition, the film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, released in 2001, was enormously popular among theatergoers. According to the Internet Movie Database, the film remained among the top ten grossing films in the United States for thirteen weeks. It is estimated that *The Fellowship of the Ring*’s film version alone grossed more than eight hundred sixty million dollars worldwide. The enormous popularity of Tolkien’s written and filmed works at a time when the Internet became increasingly accessible were likely the single greatest influence on *eleventy*’s presence in the English language.

Use of *eleventy* in another context, to indicate hyperbolic numerals, became popular in 2000, when the television comedy show *Saturday Night Live* aired a sketch in which the cast member playing actor Keanu Reeves competes on *Celebrity Jeopardy*. In the sketch, Reeves bets “eleventy-billion dollars” on Final Jeopardy, but fails to answer the question (“Just write anything”). When the cast member playing *Jeopardy* host Alex Trebek informs Reeves that *eleventy-billion* isn’t a number, Reeves replies, “Yet.” (Snltranscripts)

*Eleventy-billion* has since become a popular way among fashionable Internet posters to describe hyperbolic numerals. The use of the hyphenated form, however, appears to be distinct from the use of *eleventy* in a *Lord of the Rings* context.

*Eleventy* is also a trendy way to mock Internet posters who overuse exclamation points. UrbanDictionary.com notes that “Since many people preferred using the Caps-Lock to the shift key, they would be unskilled with the shift key...and it would end up coming out as !!!!!!!111!!!! or things along that line.” (Urban Dictionary) Urban Dictionary also defines *eleventy* as “a fictional number used to describe an immense amount or the result of a cat walking across the numbers of a keyboard.” (Urban Dictionary)

The website freejinger.org, which has about seven thousand two hundred registered members, also uses *eleventy* in its hyperbolic numeral sense, often to refer to families with many children. “These families all have eleventy billion kids, so I would think the lure of money would be more easily forgiven than looking at those evil, tempting womenfolk.” (Freejinger)

Free Jinger posters also use *eleventy* in its punctuation overuse context. They refer to Rebecca, a blogger with a penchant for exclamation points, simply as Rebecca Eleventy, sometimes with a string of exclamation points interspersed with the numeral one. (Freejinger)

Thus far, *eleventy* is primarily used by fans of *The Lord of the Rings* and by trendsetters. It has been proposed that in the future, *eleventy* will be used to refer to the decade from 2010 to 2019 (or more accurately, from 2011 to 2020). This is possibly due more to J.R.R. Tolkien’s influence than to widespread knowledge of *eleventy*’s numerical origins.

## References

- Brock, R.A. *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Vol. XXV. 1897.
- Buck, Charles. *A Theological Dictionary, Containing Definitions of All Religious Terms; a Comprehensive View of Every Article in the System of Divinity; an Impartial Account of All the Principal Denominations...Together with an Accurate Statement of the Most Remarkable Transactions and Events Recorded in Ecclesiastical History*. W.W. Woodward, 1818.
- Dunham, Samuel Astley. *A History of Europe During the Middle Ages*, Volume 4. Longman, 1834.
- “Eleventy.” Online Etymology Dictionary. <http://www.etymonline.com>.
- “Eleventy.” Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=eleventy>
- Freejinger.org. <http://freejinger.org/forums/viewforum.php?f=8>.
- Gilliver, Peter, Jeremy Marshall, and Edmund Weiner. *The Ring of Words: Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Google Groups.  
<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!search/eleventy%7Csort:relevance/alt.fan.tolkien/j9QAAsAI-IY/iBf96MJsXUIJ>.
- Lewis, Sinclair. *The Job*. Grosset and Dunlap, 1917.
- Internet Movie Database. “The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001).”  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120737/>
- Palmer, Thomas H. *Arithmetic, oral and written, practically applied by means of suggestive questions*. Crocker & Brewster, 1854.
- Shippey, Thomas. “The Hobbit: What has made the book such an enduring success?” *The Telegraph*. 20 Sept. 2013.
- “SNL Transcripts: Tobey Maguire: 04/15/00: Celebrity Jeopardy.” [Snltranscripts.jt.org](http://snltranscripts.jt.org).
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings*. HarperCollins, 2008.
- Urban Dictionary. <https://urbandictionary.com>
- Wilson, Margaret. “A Little Boy’s Utopia.” *The Atlantic Monthly: Volume 127*, 1 Jan. 1921.

# Erectile Dysfunction

Corrinne Sanger

Cite as: Sanger, Corrinne. 2021. Erectile Dysfunction. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 87-92.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

It's a quiet Sunday evening and the average American family is sitting down to watch Sunday Night Football. Maybe the kids are on the couch with a bowl of popcorn in their favorite jerseys, waiting for the first commercial break so their father can explain to them what an on-side kick is. Then the first commercial airs and before the young children can get a word out, a middle-aged woman provocatively posed in a large football jersey sitting on a bed looks into the camera and says:

*"Sure watching football is great, but cuddling after the game is nice too. And, there's Viagra to help with the rest" (Viagra 2016)*



Moments later, another commercial, this time a man in his 60s is working hard on some craft-hobby, and later meets up with his wife for a romantic scene followed by the caption:

*"You've reached the age when giving up isn't who you are, this is the age of knowing how to make things happen. So why let erectile dysfunction get in the way? Talk to your doctor about Viagra today." (Viagra 2016)*

Suddenly, the kids don't care too much about the on-side kick and the father is awkwardly pretending to have to get something from the kitchen to avoid being in the same room as his children for the next five minutes. Surely he knows the next question the kids will have is: "Daddy, what's erectile dysfunction?"

Erectile dysfunction (ED) is defined as a condition in which a man struggles to maintain an erection strong enough for sexual intercourse (ICD-10-CM 2016). Since 1998, pharmaceutical



companies specializing in the treatment of erectile dysfunction have bombarded our television programs, radio shows, and sports simulcasts with interruptions from middle-aged, heteronormative men talking about how they overcame erectile dysfunction with the help of a little blue pill (Baglia 2005). However, look through historical records and one would be hard pressed to find a single mention of such a disorder prior to the twentieth century. So, consider this: if a penis fails to maintain an erection, and nobody is around to care, is it still erectile dysfunction?

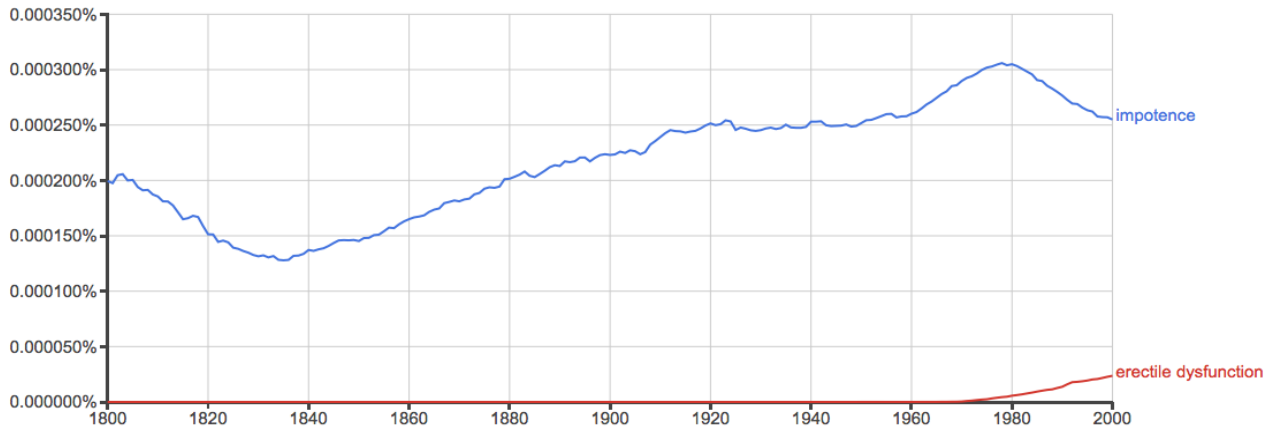
In this report, I aim to explain the reasons for the creation of “erectile dysfunction” as it is used in discourse throughout American society today. Every language is capable of meeting the needs of those who speak it, no matter how “advanced” or “primitive” the culture may seem to outside observers (Harlow 1998). Before the 1970s, there was little use for a word other than impotence to describe the sexual performance issues plaguing men. But with changes in the culture of the time and an increased shift towards somatic diagnoses in an ever-changing healthcare industry, a need for a new term emerged – one that could separate the psychological inability to meet expectations from the physical inability to perform sexually. And so “erectile dysfunction”, in all of its awkward moments, became a commonly used phrase in the American English lexicon.

### Etymology, History, and Usage: Impotence vs. Erectile Dysfunction



Erectile dysfunction (ED), as we know it today, has been plaguing men for conceivably as long as the human race has been engaging in sexual intercourse. Why, then, is the term “erectile dysfunction” absent from any historical records or documents before the 1970s? The most obvious answer is that it simply was not needed. Instead, the term “impotent” was used to describe a man lacking in sexual potency. But it was also used to describe somebody who was useless, physically weak, easily led astray, poor, or “cunt-beaten”; adjectives that, most of which, do not apply to today’s average American man suffering from ED (Harper 2017). “Impotence” is more of a descriptor used to identify a range of qualities that may or may not be related to a man’s masculinity or ability to perform. The first instance of “impotence” being used in literature is in 1390 by John Gower, a British poet and classic scholar, who in his 33,000-line poem *Confessio Amantis* wrote, “And also for my daies olde That I am feble and impotent” (OED Online 2017). This use of the word “impotent” has more to do with general physical weakness and helplessness, and less to do

**An unhappy wife is complaining to the Kaddi about her husband's impotence. Her evidence is a zibik (dildo). Miniature from Hamse-i Atai. 18th century.**



with the status of the man’s penis. However, this example may be the beginning of its understanding as a loss of power for a man later in history.

As time went on, “impotence” remained a commonly used word in everyday literature and medical text, with occasional drops in frequency only to be followed by more steady increases. Quotes found in the Oxford English Dictionary show it was commonly found to be used in multiple meanings from the 14th century on. In terms of sexual impotence though, uses of the word showed it was a natural process, one that occurred with age, sickness, or body condition. If it came at a time when a man was old and feeble, it was understood to be normal, a simple step in the aging process. Sir Henry Halford, on the subject of impotence in 1813, stated that “there is no cure for the male climacteric”, that is, the decline in sexual activity or “male menopause” (Marshall 2007). It was instead said to be a moral problem rather than a physical one, that which required an adjustment to the inevitable loss of sexual power. This belief continued well into the twentieth century, with literature on the matter stating: “Where old age is the cause of impotence, there is, alas! no remedy, except to submit as gracefully as possible to the decrees of fate, and by carefully husbanding the sexual resources to prolong the usefulness of the genital organs as far as possible” (Sturgis 1931). This is about where that belief stops. According to statistics pulled from Google, the word “impotence” began to face a decline in use around the 1980s, while a newcomer showed up on the scene: erectile dysfunction.

### **When Impotence Just Didn’t Cut it: Medicalization and Insurance Policies**

The twentieth century was an explosive time for medicine, which began to look toward biology for the most basic explanations of complex human behaviors and issues (Conrad 2005). New scientific discoveries were being made across the country and life expectancies boomed with the help of medical technology. To aid the growing population, the government created Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s and infused extra funding into American medical schools and institutions to encourage students to meet the rising medical needs of the American population (History 2017). What that meant was that the number of students studying one particular specialty became increasingly competitive and more interested in branching out to reach a broader population with more diverse ranges of disorders; specifically, in the case of erectile dysfunction and impotence, we look to the subspecialty of urology (Tiefer, 1994). Thanks to the work of clinical sexologists and psychiatry at the time, a new set of terminology began to appear around the 1970s, labeling impotence and other climacteric issues as “sexual dysfunctions”, as opposed to descriptions of natural states in health, with an established psychogenic diagnosis (Masters 1970). Basically, the American Psychiatric Association took a personal experience that was originally individually structured (e.g., impotence and sexuality) and defined it socially as a universal norm in an attempt to solidify their work in an increasingly biological and



medicalized society (Tiefer 2006). These beginning steps of social medicalization allowed for physicians to capitalize on these new “disorders” previously understood to be unavoidable aspects to aging (Lopiccolo 1978). So, urologists began surveying potential patients with questionnaires asking about sexual complaints as defined by clinical psychology and found an increasing trend in men displeased with the functioning of their penises (Tiefer 1994). However, urology is about the physical body, and to create the patient population that they needed to fulfill economic and academic interests, they needed to define the sexual disorder of impotency in a way that medicalized it into a biological problem that could only be addressed through proper physical diagnostic techniques. What they believed was that “sexual dysfunction in the male is a disease entity, the diagnoses and treatments of which deserve equal attention to that given to other diseases” (AUA Today 1983). And so, the term “erectile dysfunction” came to be used to describe impotence in a way that spiked interest in the research of somatic causes and treatments for the disease.

While still used interchangeably with “impotence” for the first decade of its conception, “erectile dysfunction” soon overtook diagnostic control as healthcare policy changed in the early 1980s. Under President Reagan, a new system of insurance payment plans began, called DRGs or diagnostic-related groups (Mistichelli 1984). The idea was to save money by identifying products that medical institutions provided and reimbursing on a predictable clinical understanding of each groups’ universal treatment plan (Tiefer 1994). What this meant was that multi-visit services, including mental health services, were cut back and most insurance companies instead agreed to cover the costs of surgical and pharmacological treatments of sexual problems as defined by the Major Diagnostic Categories as outlined in DRGs (Kramon 1989). “Impotence”, as a psychogenic etiology, no longer fit the criteria for treatment by psychotherapy, and so the rise in diagnoses of “erectile dysfunction” and their subsequent treatments by pharmaceuticals and surgical interventions, prevailed. Later, in 1992, even the National Institute of Health went so far as to comment about the preference of the use of “erectile dysfunction” over “impotence” in everyday language, stating:

*“The term ‘impotence,’ has traditionally been used to signify the inability of the male to attain and maintain erection of the penis sufficient to permit satisfactory sexual intercourse. However, this use has often led to confusing and uninterpretable results in both clinical and basic science investigations. This, together with its pejorative implications, suggests that the more precise term ‘erectile dysfunction’ be used instead” (National Institute of Health 1992).*

## **A Cultural Embodiment of Erectile Dysfunction**

Even before the National Institute of Health noticed the “pejorative implications” of the word “impotence”, American men had been expressing the same feelings as their diagnoses slowly changed from “impotence” to “erectile dysfunction”. The medicalized construction of sexuality offered by the new doctors of the 70s and 80s gave men an objective world of embodiment through science and medicine that reduced anxiety provoked by public discourse on sexual inadequacy. Because, of course, as sexual function became normalized and discussed as a universal experience by psychiatrists and sexologists, more and more people were able to compare themselves to a standard previously not spoken of outside of physical penetration. But medicalized discourse keeps the sexuality focus on the physical, and avoids injury to the man’s masculinity by replacing the stigma of failed responsibility with the face-saving excuse of physical incapacity instead (Seidler 1992). When asked why impotence might be perceived more as a failure for men than a diagnosis of erectile dysfunction, one male doctor explained:

*“I think there’s several reasons for it. I think it’s based historically. Even if you look at the word impotence, impotent doesn’t – I mean the root of the word’s not someone who’s got a medical problem that cannot generate an erection. Impotence*

*means a useless person, you know, someone that's got no power, in anything, and men – it's sort of a physical representation of what a man is, you know, a man can get an erection and if he can't get an erection he's not a man, you know, and that sort of carry on.” (Potts 2000)*

There is an impact of cultural prescriptions of proper masculinity on popular understandings of healthy and unhealthy male sexuality (Traister 2000). With erectile dysfunction, suddenly it's not just a weakness from his age – it's instead a vascular problem, a side effect of medications for managing his high blood pressure, or a neurological disorder that can only be treated by a medical professional in a hospital setting. Combine this understanding with an increase in direct-to-consumer advertising by pharmaceutical companies and the consensus on ED being a more acceptable diagnosis for the American masculinity is solidified (Marshall 2007). Erectile dysfunction as a diagnosis is the perfect social role, the opportunity to play sick and be treated accordingly. While it may not have been a new word, or a new phenomenon, it was a new way to experience a common problem in a way that fit the needs of those who used the word. The historical use of the word “impotence” to define male erection difficulties was misleading and destructive to the modern American man. And while there often isn't a definitive reason for the creation of new words in languages, it is easy to see how language is influenced by culture and how culture can influence language. Arguably, the medical construction of “erectile dysfunction” operates by averting the possible perceptions by men, or women, as a failure by the man and his control of his sexual response. Again, with “erectile dysfunction”, the sick role can be fulfilled and the blame shifted away from the core being of a man's masculinity.

## Conclusion

In summary, the medicalization of sexual function in the mid-twentieth century actually medicalized the embodied experience of sex and created a standard from which “dysfunctions” could be identified and normalized. “Erectile dysfunction” as a term came out of a shift in the broader social context, that was created and moved by the changes in science, medicine, politics, and culture. Culture and language went from being reserved about sex and accepting of the aging process to mass media using medicalized information to publish sexual subject matter without the perception of obscenity or pornography. “Impotence” became a subject matter in articles published by *The Wall Street Journal*, stating that new research found organic causes for sexual disorders (Stipp 1987). Then, *Time* magazine devoted a whole page to disproving the assertion that psychological issues were relevant to impotence (Toufexis 1988). It's no surprise then that the American English vocabulary would grow to create newer terminology to describe the new discoveries surrounding a previously unavoidable problem. While the experience of erectile dysfunction might be similar to earlier experiences of impotence, culture has changed its meaning in today's language so that that two terms define entirely different understandings. Today's use of “erectile dysfunction” is a welcome addition to the English lexicon that enables doctors and patients to talk about sex as an object of symptom analysis and of a medical diagnosis (Grace et al. 2006). Not only that, but it allows people to care about the status of their erections in a socially acceptable and medicalized way, even if the commercials still make people uncomfortable and the kids giggle.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association (1980) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd edn). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
- American Urological Association Executive Committee (1983) 'AUA Policy Statement, January, 1980', AUA Today May: 8.
- Baglia, J. (2005) *The Viagra AdVenture: Masculinity, Media and the Performance of Sexual Health*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

- Conrad, P. (2005) 'Shifting Engines of Medicalization', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 46: 3–14.
- Grace, V., Gavey, N., and Potts, A. (2006) 'Viagra Stories: Challenging "erectile dysfunction"', *Social Science and Medicine* 59: 489–499.
- Harlow, R. (1998). *Some Languages are Just Not Good Enough*. In L. Bauer and P. Trudgill (Ed.s) *Language Myths*, (pp. 9-14). London: Penguin Books.
- Harper, D. (Ed.). (2017). *Impotent*. [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)
- History. (2017, September 14). <https://www.cms.gov/About-CMS/Agency-Information/History/index>.
- ICD-10-CM (2016) 'Tabular List of Disease and Injuries', WHO.int
- Kramon, G. (1989) 'Psychiatric care: Orphan of Insurance Coverage', *New York Times* 9 February: 92B16.
- LoPiccolo, J. (1978) 'Direct Treatment of Sexual Dysfunction', *Handbook of sex therapy*. Edited by J. LoPiccolo and L. LoPiccolo. New York: Plenum.
- Marshall B. L. (2007) 'Climacteric Redux? (Re)medicalizing the Male Menopause', *Men and Masculinities*, 9(4): 509–529.
- Masters, W. C. and Johnson, V. E. (1970) *Human Sexual Inadequacy*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co.
- Mistichelli, J. (1984) 'Diagnosis Related Groups (DRGs) and the Prospective Payment System: Forecasting Social Implications'
- National Institutes of Health (1992) *Consensus Development Conference Statement on Impotence*, Bethesda, MD: Office of Medical Applications of Research.
- OED Online (2017) 'Impotent, adj.' Oxford University Press.
- Potts, A., Grace, V., Gavey, N. and Vares, T. (2004) 'Viagra Stories: Challenging "Erectile Dysfunction"', *Social Science and Medicine* 59: 489–99.
- Siedler, V., ed. (1992) *Men, sex, and relationships: Writings from Achilles' Heel*. New York: Routledge.
- Sturgis, F. R. (1931) *Sexual debility in man*, Chicago.
- Stipp, D. (1987) 'Research on impotence upsets idea that it is usually psychological', *Wall Street Journal*.
- Tiefer, L. (1986) 'In Pursuit of the Perfect Penis: The Medicalization of Male Sexuality', *American Behavioral Scientist* 29: 579–99
- Tiefer, L. (1994) 'The Medicalization of Impotence: Normalizing Phallocentrism', *Gender and Society* 8: 363–77.
- Tiefer, L. (2006) 'The Viagra Phenomenon', *Sexualities* 9(3): 273–294
- Toufexis, A. (1988) 'It's Not All In Your Head', *Time* (5 December): 94.
- Traister, B. (2000) 'Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies', *American Quarterly* 52(2): 274–304.
- Viagra [Advertisement]. (2016, January 26). ESPN.
- Images: <https://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Daily/Issues/2017/07/10/Marketing-and-Sponsorship/NFL-ED-Ads.aspx>

# Eskimo

Valerie Jaruzel

Cite as: Jaruzel, Valerie. 2021. Eskimo. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 93-96.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The genesis of the word “Eskimo” has both old North American and European roots, with its ultimate source unclear. Prior to contact with European explorers and whalers, they did not label themselves as a group with a title. What they had instead was word for people as a whole, Inuit, which they have since adopted in efforts to preserve their cultural identities and take their power back from those that have labeled them since colonial times. Here, I will explore the stories of how the word “Eskimo”, now rejected by most as inappropriate, came into being and how it came to mean this particular set of people, be they flesh-eaters, snowshoe wearers, or those outside of the realms of the Catholic church.

The word “Eskimo” has had many versions in spelling over time, such as its first appearance in writing as Esquimawe in 1584, Excomminquois in 1605, Eskemoes in 1689, Esquimaux 1792, Eskimaux and Eskimo both in 1850, Esquimos in 1855, and Esquimau in 1895. The prevalent spelling in American English usage is “Eskimo”, and that is what will be used throughout unless directly quoted another way, and is defined as “a member of an aboriginal people inhabiting northern Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and eastern Siberia” (OED). The preferred terminology to refer to this particular group of people today is “Inuit”, with the exception of some Alaskan Natives.

The first writings of contact with the Inuit people come from a man named George Best, who sailed with renowned yet completely unsuccessful English explorer, Martin Frobisher. They were in search of the Northwest Passage, a shortcut to China and the supposed riches therein, and instead met with the frozen northernmost area of North America and inhabitants of now Baffin Bay. George Best (1555-1584) recorded and published the expedition entitled *A true discourse of the late voyages of discoverie* in 1578:

*“In this place he saw and perceyued sundry tokens of the peoples resorting thither. And being ashore, vpon the toppe of a hill, he perceiued a number of small things fléeting in the Sea a farre off, whyche hée supposed to be Porposes, or Ceales, or some kinde of strange fishe: but comming nearer, he discouered them to be men, in small boates made of leather”* (Best).

What is remarkable about the writing of George Best is that there is not one mention of the word “Eskimo”, or name whatsoever for the inhabitants of the new territory. This was almost certainly not the first encounter the Inuit had with Europeans, as “the Inuit appeared familiar with ships such as this; they tried European food, drank wine, and competed with the mariners in acrobatics on the ropes of the ship's rigging” ([historymuseum.ca](http://historymuseum.ca)). Christopher Hall nor Michael Lok, both fellow seaman on the expedition with Frobisher and Best, both who also made recordings of their experience, do not mention a calling of the people encountered by a specific name, only by their impressions of their appearance and apparent lifestyle.

What is found in the writings of George Best is the possible origin of the flesh-eater labeling of the Inuit. “The women carry their sucking children at their backes, and doe féede them with rawe fleshe, whiche firste they doe a little chawe in their mouths” (Best). This and several other passages allude to their dietary habits of eating the raw flesh of fish for sustenance.

The word “Esquimawe” was first used in 1584, same year as the work of Best was published, by another English author Richard Hakluyt, who spent a good deal of his life promoting colonization of the new world. Hakluyt’s work in which the word “esquimawes” appears, *A Discourse Concerning Western Planting*, would not be published for some 300 years later in 1877, and there is very little use of the word “Eskimo” or any of its iterations until the 18th century.

The Online Etymology Dictionary attributes the word to Algonquin origin, “probably from an Algonquian word, such as Abenaki *askimo* (plural *askimoak*), Ojibwa *ashkimeq*, traditionally said to mean literally “eaters of raw meat,” from Proto-Algonquian \*ask- “raw” + \*-imo “eat”” ([etymonline.com](http://etymonline.com)). Strong evidence to support this meaning come from the writings of Reverend T.B. Murray, who worked closely with an Inuit man who came to live in England, whose name is Kalli-Hirua, who also went by the anglicized name Erasmus Augustine York. Kalli-Hirua went to England and learned the language, religious custom, and had a great deal to with what is understood of the Inuktitut language today. “The people called by us Esquimaux do not know that word, but style themselves Inuit. The word *Esquimaux* is a nickname given by a neighboring people, who were at war with them, and is supposed to mean, *Raw fish-eaters*” (Murray). This supports both the neighboring contribution to the naming of the people but also the defining characteristic of eating raw flesh for sustenance. Further support comes from John Steckley, author of *White Lies about the Inuit*, stating “it is not unusual for Aboriginal groups to refer to their neighbors in terms of what they eat. The Mi’kmaq of the Atlantic provinces and Quebec called their Maliseet neighbors “porcupine people,” and the Maliseet, who live in New Brunswick, reciprocated by calling the Mi’kmaq “muskrat people,” based on their slightly different preferences in meat. The Mohawk called their Algonquin neighbors “Adirondack” (“they eat trees”), supposedly because those peoples boiled the inside bark of evergreens for the vitamin C in winter. In return, their Algonquin neighbors referred to the Mohawk as something more sinister: Mohawk derived from a word meaning “eater of living things,” implying that they were cannibals” (Steckley).

While the strongest argument to be made for the word meaning of “eskimo” as raw-flesh (or meat) eaters, post-Christian cultural influence, it has been considered derogatory both by people being labeled as such and by those who working to gain greater understanding of the inhabitants of the North American Arctic Circle, so investigations evolved into looking into potential alternate meaning and origin. Ives Goddard, curator emeritus in the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution, points at a different neighbor for the naming of the “Eskimo” in a work published in 1984. “In spite of the tenacity of the belief, both among Algonquin speakers and in the anthropological and general literature ... that Eskimo means “raw-meat” eaters,” this explanation fits only the cited Ojibwa form (containing Proto-Algonquin \*ashk- “raw” and \*po- “eat”) and cannot be correct or he the presumed Montagnais source of the word Eskimo itself. ... The Montagnais word ayassimew [signifying of the Mi’kmaq] (of which ay-is a reduplication) and its unreduplicated Attikamek cognate exactly match the Montagnais assimew, Ojibwa ashkime “she nets a snowshoe,” and an origin from a form meaning “snowshoe netter” could be considered if the original Montagnais application (presumably before Montagnais contact with the Eskimos) were to Algonquins (Goddard). Goddard proposes that a kinder interpretation of “Eskimo”, finding words in neighboring languages that sound a good deal like “Eskimo”, and concluding through respectable critical analysis that the Inuit people were called after their footwear as a defining feature and titling entity.

Another scholar looking to address the origin and meaning of “Eskimo” is Jose Mailhot, an anthropologist from Quebec. In the opinion of Steckley, “her proposed etymology was similarly well crafted [referring to the work of Goddard], following proof type once, but weak in terms of the cultural logic of the people. Referring to the East Cree word for Inuit, ischiimew or iischiimau (Cree School Board 1987:23), Mailhot constructed another interpretation for Eskimo. She utilized the Proto-Algonquin forms \*aya(ch)- “other,” \*axkyi “land” + \*me “by mouth” + animate suffix \*-w to come up



with the suggested meaning “other land speaker. Again, we have a credible construction with this form, but this interpretation too suffers from not coming from Native speakers. It is a linguist’s logical construction. It was built on highly competent linguistic techniques. It goes on to say “Sometimes, however, such constructions have to take a back seat to how people interpret their own words” (Steckley).

This brings my point back to Kalli-Hirua. While the Inuit people did not come up with the term “Eskimo”, if those using it and recording the language and culture that he was a part of, would he not have corrected them? It could be said that with the language and cultural barrier it was an unclear distinction to him, but with a lifetime dedicated to the task it stands that it would have been corrected or updated. The recent attempts to update the origin and meaning of “Eskimo” seem more to improve upon the reputation of both the Inuit people and those who first encountered them, rather than honor the history of the word itself.

The last aspect of the story of the word “Eskimo” comes from Jesuit missionaries in contact with the Inuit. In an article in *American Anthropologist*, William Thalbitzer addresses a potential connection between the word “Eskimo” and the Catholic church:

*“Originally the form of the name, as found in the Jesuit Relations, was Ex; comminquois or Excomminqui. Escoumins is the name of a village in the interior of the country on the north side of St. Lawrence Gulf. The name Excomminqui was first used by the French Jesuits who, in 1605, began missionary work particularly among the Algonkin Indians, their friendly allies. These Indians often had encounters with the coastal tribes of Labrador, wild seal hunters who for a long time remained hostile to the Jesuits and their Indian friends. The missionaries invented the name of Excomminquois (pronounced Excomminqué) for their pagan neighbors to the north-east, and this name was later, by degrees, altered to Escoumaux and Esquimaux. The original meaning of the name is probably connected with the fact that the hostile pagans were interdicted from the church and the sacrament: Latin excommunicati. Therefore the etymology of Eskimo is not “eaters of raw meat,” but “the excommunicated ones” (Thalbitzer).*

He goes on to relay the long-known feature that the Inuit did not use the word themselves and have preferred since at least 1605 to be referred to as Inuit. There is no doubt that the Jesuit missionaries in this time and place used this term for these particular people, however, the word itself is too broad to be used exclusively and throughout time to refer to this particular group of people. Thalbitzer’s proposal appears to be the most painfully white-washed interpretations of the word “Eskimo”, and since it is this reference to the use of Excomminquois proceeding Richard Hakluyt’s use of Esquimawe, it isn’t a very viable thread of thought towards the answers sought of origin and meaning. There is a possibility of coevolution of the word, but there are no written accounts that have survived to date connecting the two, and there is no evidence that Jesuit usage of this word has appeared in any other surviving literature, indicating the term was not used to enlighten the educated community about the far-off frozen peoples of Arctic.

Present in many of the recollections of these indigenous people is their preference for being called by their own name, the Inuit. “The Eskimos do not know that word or name, but call themselves Inuit, from the singular of the noun inuk, “man”-that is, a human being who speaks an intelligible language such as their own” (Thalbitzer). Similar sentiment has been echoed in the works of Murray, the man who worked with Kalli-Hirua, as stated above. The rest of the world is catching up to the Inuit and their preferences. Here in the United States, President Barack Obama passed a bill replacing all words for minorities deemed derogatory, affecting the Alaskan peoples connected to the Inuit, and in May 2016 Eskimo was replaced with Alaska Native in public contexts ([pbs.org](http://pbs.org)). Canada’s history with the Inuit who are most of the inhabitants of the territory of Nunavut and much of the Canadian

Arctic, is more complicated. "Section 35 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982 recognizes Aboriginal peoples' inherent right to self-government, which was reaffirmed in the federal government's 1995 Inherent Right Policy. The structures of self-government created in each of the four Inuit land claim regions are different, and include both Inuit (ethnically-based) and public governments" ([www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca](http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca)). With this came an update in terminology and power returning to the Inuit to manage their own affairs.

The 432-year-old English word "Eskimo" has had asserted origins as a raw-flesh people courtesy of their neighbors, snowshoe wearers, or speakers of other languages, and those outside the reach of the church, and the full answer is still debated. This was never a name chosen by the people being defined by it. Whatever the story, their name is Inuit.

## References

- Best, George. "A True Discourse of the Late Voyages of Discoverie, for the Finding of a Passage to Cathaya, by the Northveast, Vnder the Conduct of Martin Frobisher Generall Deuided into Three Bookes." Henry Bynnyman, 1578.
- "Canada's Relationship with Inuit: A History of Policy and Program Development." Government of Canada; Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada; Communications Branch.
- "Civilization.ca - Inuit and Englishmen : The Nunavut Voyages of Martin Frobisher." Civilization.ca - Inuit and Englishmen : The Nunavut Voyages of Martin Frobisher.
- Hakluyt, Richard, Leonard Woods, and Charles Deane. *A Discourse concerning Western Planting*. Cambridge: Press of J. Wilson, 1877.
- Murray, T.B. . "Kalli, the Esquimaux Christian".
- "Obama Signs Bill Eliminating 'Negro,' 'Oriental' from Federal Laws." PBS.
- Steckley, John. *White Lies about the Inuit*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2008.
- Thalbitzer, William. "A Note on the Derivation of the Word "Eskimo"(Inuit)." *American Anthropologist* 52, no. 4 (1950): 564-564.



# Expat

Michelle Layton

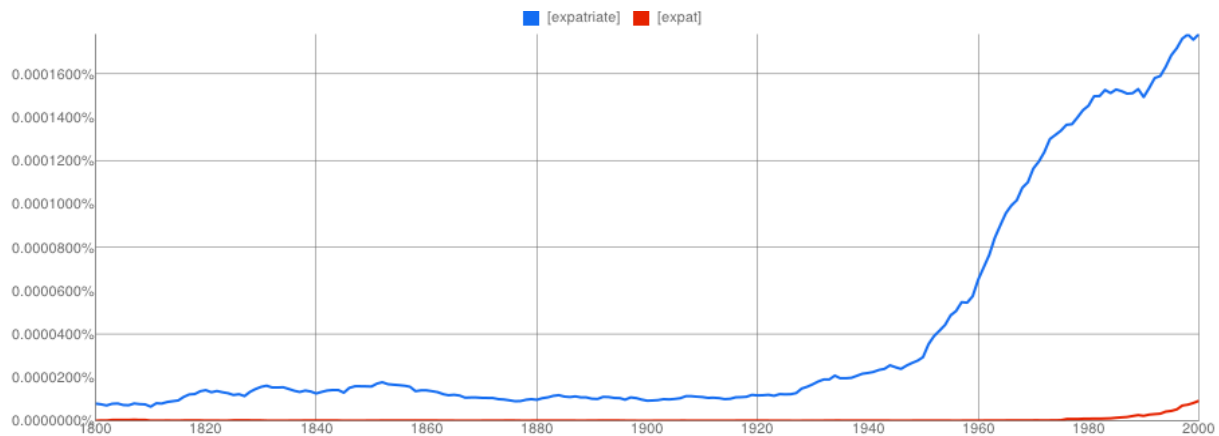
Cite as: Layton, Michelle. 2021. Expat. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 97-102.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Many everyday social interactions, such as meeting a new person, create first impressions and categorization of people based on a number of readily-apparent factors. These initial expectations about people are highly influenced, in turn, by cultural beliefs and norms. Although the labels that people assign one another derive from a set of perceptions of the labeler, these categories are also formed by widely shared cultural beliefs and values within a society. Travelers are often the recipients of intense labeling because they are seen as outsiders or ‘them’ instead of ‘us.’ This way of thinking often leads to harsh, unfair, or prejudiced attitudes toward people who were not born in the country where they reside.

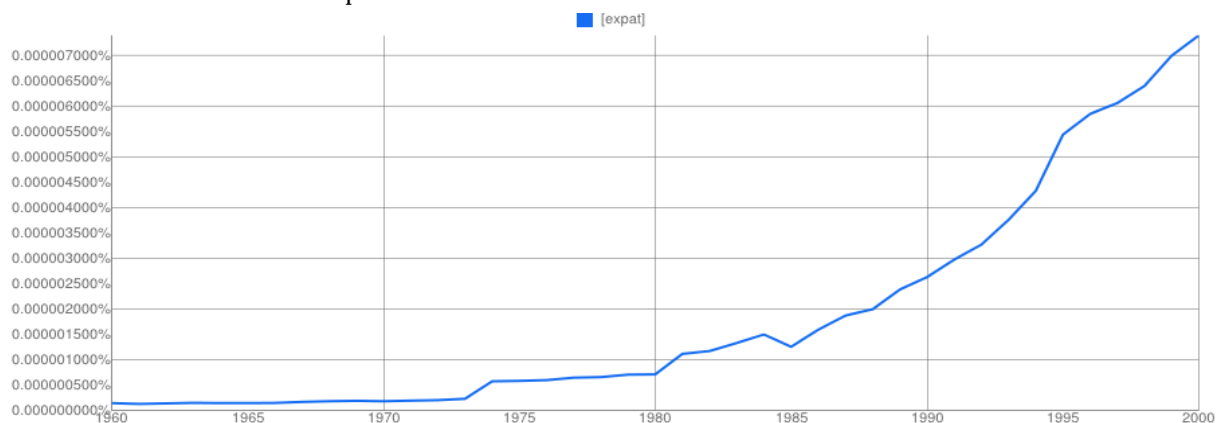
This paper will focus specifically on the word ‘expat’, how it came to exist, and its contextual usage in relation to the words ‘expatriate’ and ‘immigrant’; essentially, who is considered an ‘expat’ and why? What cultural factors and labels, such as the desire to distinguish between types of travelers and visitors, caused the word ‘expat’ to emerge in a British context with different connotations than ‘expatriate’ or ‘immigrant?’ The primary sources used for this research are Pauline Leonard’s book, [Expatriate Identities in Postcolonial Organizations: Working Whiteness](#), focusing on the racial and social implications of the word ‘expatriate’ or ‘expat’, Caroline Knowles’ article, “It’s not what it was: British Migrants in Postcolonial Hong Kong,” which addresses British citizens’ experiences living abroad and specifically discusses the usage of the word ‘expat;’ and finally, Peter Matanle’s article, “Expatriate Games,” published by The Guardian news website (Leonard 2010, Knowles 2007, Matanle 2011). In addition to these sources, several dictionaries will be used to examine dissimilarities in definitions of ‘expat,’ ‘expatriate,’ and ‘immigrant.’ The word’s contextual usage in various blog posts will also be analyzed, as the aim is not only to focus on official sources, but how the words are actually used in everyday life and viewed by ordinary people.

To study the usage and meanings of the word ‘expat,’ one must first dissect the word that it is shortened from—‘expatriate.’ The word ‘expatriate’ comes from the Latin words ‘ex’ meaning out, and ‘patria’ meaning one’s native country; therefore, the simplest and most common definition of this word used today is a person living outside their native country. However, as early in 1787 according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word was used as a verb in the sense that one could be expatriated, or exiled, from their country (Expatriate, v.). This word has been applied to people living outside of their home country for the last couple hundred years and has consistently been used much more widely than ‘expat’ (as the graph below demonstrates), suggesting it can be used to refer to a much broader category of travelers or be used in more contexts.



Google Ngram of the usage of 'expatriate' and 'expat' in books from 1800-2000

Expatriate was shortened, and the word 'expat' emerged as a largely British word in the 1960s with different connotations. The Oxford English Dictionary has two examples of the word beginning to be used, in 1962 and 1968, and both are used in a British context (Expatriate, n). However, Grammarphobia states that the May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1961 issue of the New York Times uses the word in quotations, suggesting it was not widely known at this time and may have been the first published use of the word (O'Connor). The origins of the word lie in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century British customs and the popularity for wealthy or well-known British people to temporarily live in a different country. At this time, it was seen as a status symbol for authors, academics, and aristocrats to be well-traveled; and that holds true today as six million British people, or a tenth of the population, are not currently living in the UK (Knowles). Peter Matanle, a Senior Lecturer and Director of Research at the University of Sheffield, states that in the mid-1900s "being an expat amounted to a movement" in the UK (Matanle). It has become widely used more recently (as the chart below conveys) possibly to describe a larger category of people, but likely due to the effect of globalization and technology on mobility and the increased expectation for professionals to travel away from their country to work for a short time (Definition of "expat"). In the United States the word seems to be used more often to describe people traveling for business, while in the U.K, it is often used to describe wealthy vacationers (as they often spend weeks at summer homes abroad). However, the focus of this paper will mainly address the more common British uses of the word 'expat'.



Google Ngram of the usage of the word 'expat' in books from 1960-2000

It is also necessary to examine the word 'immigrant' in juxtaposition to 'expat'. 'Immigrant' has been around since the 1700s and is most commonly defined as a person who goes to another country

to live (Immigrant). Although this word has a more permanent implication than the most common uses of the word 'expat,' these terms are actually quite similar but are used in very different contexts. Although some bloggers who love to travel have stated that the words 'immigrant' and 'expat' are interchangeable, such as one blogger who claimed, "an expat is also an immigrant of course" (Are You an Expat), it seems to be a much more widely held belief that these words are used to describe different groups of people and in very different situations, which will now be discussed in detail (Deo).

The amount of time one can live in a foreign country and still be called an expat is not strictly defined, as supported by the scholarly research of a professor at the University of London who claims that "temporariness involves a wide range of temporalities from a year, to what eventually accumulates to a lifetime of deferred decisions to move-on" (Knowles). This is also demonstrated in a blog post that got a lot of supporting comments, "The time you live abroad does not matter either; you are labelled as an expat whether it's for a year to sixty years" ("Expatriate" ExpatWoman). The amount of time one intends on spending in a country often distinguishes the word 'expat' from the word 'immigrant' as a person who eventually plans on returning to their native country at some point. However, if one moves past the official definitions found in scholarly dictionaries and studies how the words are used in everyday language, it is evident that there are larger and more important factors in labeling someone as an 'immigrant' or 'expat' beyond their length of stay.

When the word 'expat' is used to describe someone, many people might instantly have a distinct mental picture of who that 'expat' might be (see pictures below). In the UK, this word is most often used to describe a high-class, professional British person who is going to a different country to share their expertise and work, or sometimes just to get out of paying higher taxes. Although this word can be used to refer to Americans or anybody born in a 'Western' country, there was not a single American that I mentioned the word 'expat' to who knew of the word or did not ask me to repeat it several times and then define it. This word is almost only used by British people referring to themselves or other 'expats'; and many have claimed this word is elitist because it was produced out of the necessity to distinguish oneself from immigrants (Matanle).



**These pictures are the first results of a Google search of 'expat' and 'immigrant'**

The question of whether one would be considered an expat or immigrant is very much based on class, race, and the country one is going to and coming from. According to Peter Matanle, the word 'expat' "is too easily used as a cultural marker to distinguish people from one another, making it easy for some Britons to feel both superior to and separated from the local people in their host cultures" (Matanle). According to Pauline Leonard, professor of sociology at the University of Southampton, a person usually has to possess three qualities in order to be labeled an 'expat': they must be privileged; they must come from 'the West'; and they usually must be white (Leonard). These terms are often used to include or exclude certain people or groups who do not fulfill these requirements. It can be seen from the above photos, which were some of the most common types of pictures on Google for 'expat' and 'immigrant,' that these words are used to distinguish between people of different social classes, ethnicities, and cultures.

First, an expat must be privileged so this immediately excludes people who come from countries with few opportunities. Moreover, people who go to another country to try and better their chances for getting a reasonably-paying job or having a higher quality of life are also automatically excluded from 'expat' status. Therefore, one is labeled an immigrant instead of an expat if they are leaving a poor country and going to a more privileged one. Since the 'Western' countries are often seen as the most privileged and 'sophisticated', a person must be traveling from a 'Western' country to either another 'Western' country or to a less privileged country in order to be called an 'expat' (Leonard). This idea will be discussed in more detail shortly.

The claim that a person usually has to be white to be considered an 'expat' can be seen in the above photos, or any photos that come up with a simple search of the word. In fact, many people do not like to use this word because they are aware of and sensitive to the class- and race- based implications. One blogger writes, "Some would reserve the word 'expat' for mid-20<sup>th</sup> century travelers," as they were all elite white Britons during the period when it first became very fashionable to be well-travelled and cultured (Mark). Knowles discusses 'postcolonial whiteness' in her article, asserting that white people are "invisible in terms of ethnicity" and that the usefulness of 'whiteness' in suppression and superiority over groups lies in its ambiguity as it "occupies a central but undeclared and unmarked position" (Knowles, 8). Therefore, it is argued that 'whiteness' in postcolonial terms is just a concept, not a real thing or referring to a specific ethnicity, however it can still be seen in the context of who is considered an 'expat' or not.

A British website that encourages its users to come up with the funniest possible definitions for words, Uncyclopedia, actually presents some useful information on how the words 'expat' and 'immigrant' are viewed and used, even if it is used in a joking context and meant to be exaggerated. In discussing the 'expat' vs 'immigrant' label, the article states that the difference in 'expat' and 'immigrant' is that "an Expat is cool and rich whereas an immigrant is some poor person moving to a rich country to steal low paying jobs from honest folks" (Expatriate Uncyclopedia). The surprising thing is how many people actually embrace this view. Immigrants are looked down upon and thought to be a problem because they supposedly take jobs from native-born, hard-working people. However, when an expat is sent to another country to work there by their corporation, it is apparent that the company probably did not try to find a native-born person to take the job before looking elsewhere for someone to bring in. In this way, expats also take possible jobs from people who live in these countries, but are not generally viewed with this negative connotation.

It is clear that the word 'immigrant' comes with negative implications for many speakers, just as the word 'expat' comes with supposedly positive ones. It is evident from the debates over immigration policy that many people from 'Western' countries view immigrants as unhelpful, unskilled, and a burden. However, 'expats' around the world are viewed as having "skills that contribute to receiving countries and place no burden on host countries" (Knowles). Therefore, it can be concluded that a common belief is that immigrants take jobs and expats create them, or only take jobs that nobody else is skilled enough to do. Also, others traveling to the 'West' to live are seen as a problem, whereas 'Western' people traveling to other countries are seen as charitable or helpful to that country. This belief is based on factors such as socioeconomic and political conditions of one's home country versus the country one is moving to (Knowles).

Many bloggers insist that people born in the 'West' feel as if their country should be reserved only for native-born people. Some bloggers rightly assert that there is hypocrisy in the idea that immigrants are unwanted in the 'West' but many 'Westerners' are immigrants themselves in other countries. One blogger, having a conversation with a British 'expat,' claims this man "told me how he hated immigrants and wished they would all bugger off to where they came from," even though this man was on a cruise ship coming back from living in the Caribbean. This blogger, who seems to have a lot of contact with Britons, also states that many people hate being called immigrants because they contribute to their new country and are not "job-seeking flotsam" as he claims many expats believe

(Deo). While many non-expats criticize the usage of the word, one blogger states that "people in the expat community, however, seem to use the word as a badge of honor rather than seeing the negative impression of it" (Caitlin). These statements are very illuminating as they demonstrate how one person, if not many, view immigrants, or anyone else for that matter, in relation to themselves as expats.

There is one more factor that is necessary to discuss in the labeling of an 'expat' or 'immigrant'—assimilation into the new culture. Since 'expats' usually do not plan on staying long and often have a superior attitude, many do not bother learning the language or anything about their host country; however, immigrants are expected to learn the new language and conform to the new social customs. These processes of "transmission and accumulation are uneven" (Knowles). Emily Prucha, a blogger who focuses on bilingual and multicultural families living abroad, writes that 'expats' network and make friends in a very different way than immigrants or even common tourists. She also claims that there are "cohesive communities" of expats who keep to themselves, only visit 'expat' bars, and only socialize with other 'expats' (Prucha). There are also various websites for expats to come together to share their feelings and make friends online so they do not have to put as much effort into getting to know people from the new country. Although immigrants might live in a community with people who share their ethnicity as expats often do, there are not accessible and far-reaching resources for them to discuss their experiences or make friends as there are for expats.

The more recent usage of the word 'expat' in British contexts demonstrates many cultural values and beliefs. The labeling of a person as an 'expat' or an 'immigrant' comes with positive and negative implications, as cultural views and stereotypes are ingrained in this labeling. Therefore, the words are used in a way to purposefully include or exclude groups of people, and distinguish someone as being high or low class, and a problem or an asset. So, are you an expat? There seems to be a choice, at least for some people such as wealthy 'Westerners,' to call themselves expats or not, but many people, such as immigrants, are stuck with the labels they are given.

## References

- "Are You an Expat or an Immigrant and Does It Really Matter?" Shelter Offshore.  
<<http://www.shelteroffshore.com/index.php/living/more/expat-or-immigrant-does-it-matter-11011>>.
- Caitlin. "Thoughts on the Word "Expat"" A Rant A Rave and a Little Bit of Everyday Life. 23 Apr. 2013.  
<<http://ktayd13.wordpress.com/2013/04/23/wordexpat/>>.
- "Definition of "expat"" Collins Dictionary.  
<<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/expat>>
- Deo, Ritwik. "The British Abroad: Expats, Not Immigrants." The Guardian. Guardian News, 9 July 2012. <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/09/british-abroad-expats-immigrants-indians>>.
- "Expat." Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper.  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/expat>
- "Expat, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press.  
<<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/66438?redirectedFrom=expat&>>
- "Expatriate" Expat Woman.  
<[http://www.expatwoman.com/global/features\\_define\\_expatriate\\_13846.aspx](http://www.expatwoman.com/global/features_define_expatriate_13846.aspx)>.
- "Expatriate." Oxford Dictionaries.  
<<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/expatriate>>.
- "Expatriate." Uncyclopedia. 1 Oct. 2014. <<http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/Expatriate>>.

"Expatriate, v." Oxford English Dictionary.  
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/66445?rskey=Bb91Qy&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>>

"Immigrant." Merriam-Webster. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/immigrant>>.

Knowles, Caroline. "'It's not what it was': British Migrants in Postcolonial Hong Kong." *Sociology Working Papers* (2007): 1-25. <<https://www.gold.ac.uk/media/its-not-what-it-was.pdf>>.

Leonard, Pauline. *Expatriate Identities in Postcolonial Organizations: Working Whiteness*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010.

Matanle, Peter. "Expatriate Games." *The Guardian*. Guardian News, 11 Apr. 2011.  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2011/apr/11/mind-your-language-expat-brits>>.

Mark. "Who Is an Expat?" *TheNextRoad*. 6 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.thenextroad.com/expat/>>.

O'Connor, Patricia, and Stewart Kellerman. "Is 'expat' Domesticated?" *Grammarphobia*. 2012.  
<<http://www.grammarphobia.com/blog/2014/03/expat.html>>.

Prucha, Emily. "'Expatriate' – a Dirty Word." *Prague Monitor*.  
<<http://praguemonitor.com/2010/09/17/expat-%E2%80%93-dirty-word>>.

Images:

<https://magazine.wharton.upenn.edu/issues/spring-2012/in-support-of-the-expat-experience/>

<https://medium.com/@jaguillonchavez/immigration-the-american-dream-df1630f08f1f>



# Feisty

Kathryn Horner

Cite as: Horner, Kathryn. 2021. Feisty. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 103-107.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

I've always had a special fondness for the word *feisty* because the word as an adjective in the current cultural context of which I am most familiar embodies all of which I consider myself to be: opinionated, aggressive, self-confident, and a myriad of other descriptors that apply mainly to women. As I set down to discover the origins of *feisty*, I imagined the word having Germanic or Norse roots, with perhaps the “ty” ending being added within Old or Middle English times, because the oh-so-popular singer Feist doesn't have the “ty”, therefore there must be a meaning or usage other than adjective form. I set up my Google scholar search, and waited eagerly for the search bar to yield the results. The page loaded and as I scanned a few sentences of each entry I was surprised at what they all had in common; the Germanic origin: “to fart”. So, when I'd been referring to myself as a “feisty woman” I was actually referring to myself (as my research led me to deduce) a “farting, small dog”.

Obviously, the word has seen a semantic shift over the centuries, as most people do not use the word *feist* to refer to a small, dog nor when a person “breaks wind” do they say, “I've just feisted”. We've taken the word and shifted it according to the cultural times and as a descriptive word we can see where a *feisty* person perhaps does imitate a small, yappy dog. If an individual thought about this rationally instead of being potentially insulted, we can see where the idea that a person who is aggressive, outgoing, loud, raucous, etc. has a lot in common with small lap dogs who tend to be those things. Taking it further, if we again use a rational head to think how a small lap dog could become synonymous with the Germanic word *fyst* or *fist*, which has a basic meaning of “to fart or break wind” we only need take a moment and think of an encounter we may have had with a small dog and the correlation between “breaking wind” and the attitude, demeanor, and dare I say “wind-escapes” that the dog may have, we can see the synonymous nature of the two and it becomes understandable.

How and why did the word Germanic and Middle English word *fist* (*fyst*), which as we now know means “to break wind” shift to *feist*, meaning “a small lapdog”, to *feisty* which has been used since the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an adjective form to describe a person (usually a female) who bears resemblance to said antics of a *feist*?

## Those feisty Germans

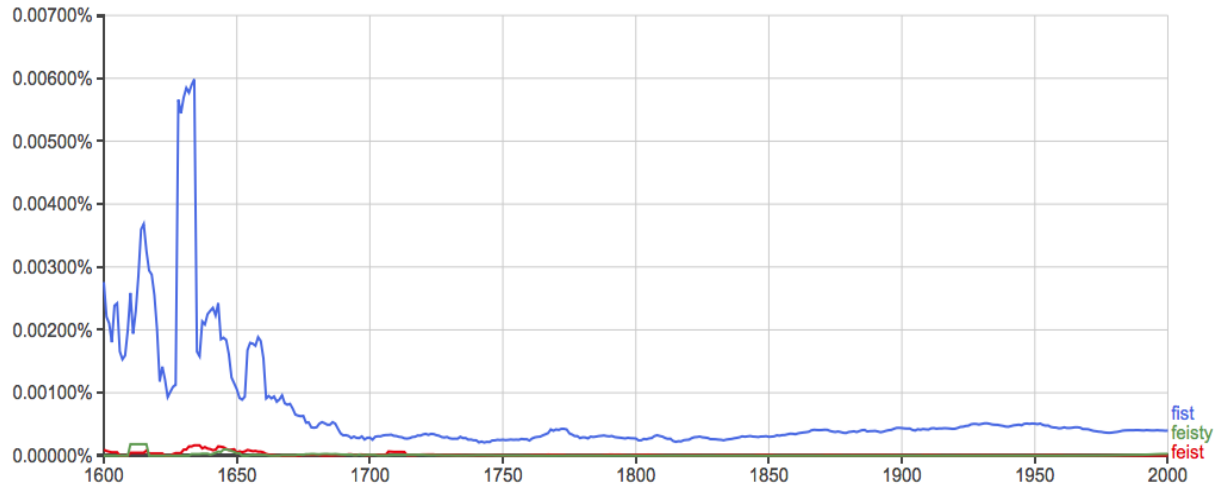
I gave a rudimentary outline of the semantic shift above, however the individual words themselves need understanding in order for the question to be answered properly.

Like many words, there is usually a root word from the “parent”, and because of cross-cultural trade, wars, etc. there is the borrowing of words from one language to another, and *feisty* is not different. As I stated above, the word has a Germanic origin in *to fist*, meaning “to fart or break wind”, and according to The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories, “because *fisting* is attested as early as the year 1000, there was probably a verb *fistan* ‘to break wind’ in Old English” (175). Now that a rough timeline of the word has been shown, context now becomes important.

As with many words that stem far back into time spelling is varied. One could take every spelling of the word from Old English to Middle English, to Norse, etc. and research the various cognates and

contexts in which it was used to ascertain the meaning, however I've decided to settle on *fist*, *feist*, and *feisty*, those three being the most common amongst the sources I've found.

When I used the Google Ngram viewer to get a basic idea of the word's usage in British English, I searched using all three: *fist*, *feist*, *feisty* from 1600 - 2000. I chose British English as a starting point because of the Germanic influence on the lexicon. Of course, *fist* is a general word for a clenched hand, and it is difficult to separate these results from those referring to *fist* in the way we're interested.



#### Google Ngram of *fist*, *feist*, and *feisty* 1600-2000

I chose to use such a large timeframe to start with because of my initial research into the word and the mention of its Germanic origins, but also the culture dictated a change in Old and Middle English, so it's important to consider that time and quantify it. One difficulty with using the time frame I did, however, is that speakers and writers of Old and Middle English did not have a standardized way of spelling; this lack of uniformity thusly challenged my ability to analyze early data, simply because when I clicked on books in time periods offered by Google, I found them to be 1) religious in nature (which makes sense given the time) 2) the usage being closer phonetically to *feast* or *first* and 3) illuminated manuscripts or copies of books from the 1600's show the "f" as an "s". Nonetheless, we can see *fist* saw tremendous usage changes from 1600-1700, with peaks and valleys mostly between 1600-1650 and *feisty* and *feist* not even on the radar.

Next, I did a Google Ngram search for the same three words but this time changing it to American English, to see if there was a change. The few dictionaries I'd consulted stated that *feist* was a term that was seen in American English, and the "ty" ending was added on to the noun to change it to an adjective. Webster's Dictionary and the OED both give dates of origin around 1806 and both list it as being of American English origin.



### Google Ngram of *fist*, *feist*, and *feisty*, American English, 1600-2000

The difference in the three words can be seen in the red line, which is used to represent *feist*. The word that has been considered “American” is used more frequently in American English, giving rudimentary credence to the thought that *feisty* then and now, is “American made”.

### From *fist* to *feist*: an American tale

“**Feisty**,” proceeded the interpreter, “**feisty** means when a feller’s allers wigglin’ about, wantin’ ever’body to see him, like a kid when the preacher comes. You know a feist is one o’ them little bitty dogs that ginerally runs on three legs and pretends a whole lot.”

The above is a passage from Horace Kephart’s book *Our Southern Highlanders* (1922: 94), which is part of a series of books he wrote about the rural peoples of the Appalachian Mountains. What precedes this statement is a question posed to the character about why he was called “feisty” and what did it mean? The answer given to the young boy is that he is as feisty as a feist! That he has an excitable, assertive nature much like that of a small dog. At the time of this writing *feist* had been an acceptable word to call a small to medium sized dog for over a century. Now we must ask: “why?”

If you’ve ever been around a small dog, you know they have a very specific demeanor. Most small dogs are bred for hunting, chasing small game, etc. but the main thing they are “wont to do” is to break wind. A small dog breaking wind on your lap is something a person would notice, in fact a lot of people in the room would be able to notice it, so one can see how these small creatures were called *fists* or *fisting hounds*.

In his book *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Weird Word Origins*, Paul McFedries explains that “when the word crossed the Atlantic to take up residence in the United States, the pronunciation had changed so that *fist* now rhymed with *heist*” (McFedries 2008: 57). So small dogs are now being called something analogous to “a fart”, and the New World-ers have done what they do well and changed the spelling and pronunciation, but how did the word itself transcribe into our modern lexicon as “an assertive, independent person”?

## From farting to females: a woman's worth

I've already established *feisty*'s historical transformation in spelling and meaning, but when did it become a common, established adjective used to describe women? You don't often hear a man being referred to as "feisty", but a woman? Certainly. When I was still in the beginning throes of my research and I saw that *feisty* had come from "breaking wind" and I considered how we use it now in relation to a woman, my first thought was "because women are so long-winded!" I was wrong.

Going back to Paul McFedries and his weird word origins book, the idea that a person who embodies the behavior of a small hound, is therefore considered to be *feisty*. "The spiritedly aggressive nature of a feist was also a trait seen in humans, so by the end of the nineteenth century, folks were describing such people as *feisty*" (McFedries 2008: 57). Not to be outdone: "Since such dogs tend to be nervous and temperamental, *feist* gave rise to the adjective *feisty*, which was applied to lively, fidgety, or quarrelsome people." (Merriam-Webster 1991: 175). So there we have it. Those who embody the spirit of a small, farting dog have the pleasure of being called *feisty*! The entries didn't state *a woman*; they stated *a person* or *people*. So how did the word end up being used in a mostly feminine context?

As I said in the beginning, I tend to describe myself as *feisty*, and I don't think it is a negative word to be associated with. I see nothing wrong with being assertive, lively, or even quarrelsome (depending on the context, of course), but as I began this part of my research, I found that the word's usage, context, and whether or not it is demeaning is under current debate. I cannot solve all the cultural and socio-linguistic questions of the universe, so I will have to leave that aspect out, but that debate is worth taking into consideration when looking at the Ngram viewer of the word and its usage, especially after 1970.



### Google Ngram viewer timeline of *feisty* from 1900-2000 (American English)

I used the Google Ngram viewer to give myself a rough timeline of when the word became more involved in our vernacular. I chose a smaller time window because my previous research showed that the word had entered the vernacular as being used to describe a person around 1895. As the chart shows, the word has steady usage through the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it picks up in usage in the late 1960's. The 1960's were a very historical point for America, specifically in relation to civil rights for women and minorities. Taking our present-day knowledge about the use of *feisty* and it being a word commonly used to describe an assertive woman, we can theorize about its usage becoming more popular because of the women's movement. Even someone with a rudimentary understanding of the 60's can conjure up TIMES images of bra-burning feminists, and who better to embody the current context of the word *feisty* than those women?

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women felt the need to be demure, respectful, yielding, quiet, and to play second fiddle to men both in the workplace and at home. Once the cultural landscape shifted, and women were given a larger voice in political, social, and economic arenas the usage of feisty steadily grows. We see that incline in the viewer: from 1970-2000 there is a continuous upsurge in usage and the variety of books that Google has within its corpus to support that this is a word that grew steadily after a very conflicting time in American society.

As I said above, *feisty* has become a word that is in a tussle between men and women as to whether it is appropriate or not. Like some words, if one cultural group calls members by it the word is acceptable; it is not acceptable for outsiders to use that word in relation to an insider, as that can be considered shameful and demeaning. The modern-day sources and social media, (online magazines, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) that I briefly looked at show that we are in the midst of this with *feisty*. This new and emerging paradigm will be interesting to follow.

*Feisty* is a word that embodies how cultural shifts take place. From its humble origins as a word meaning to “break wind” to the current “a person who is aggressive or confident”, the word itself has undergone change in spelling, changed from a verb to adjective, and become a broader term within American society, as well as other societies around the world. Those *feisty* Germans, Anglo-Saxons, Brits, and Americans have put their own spin on many words, but this word takes the proverbial cake.

## References

- Kephart, Horace. *Our Southern Highlanders: A Narrative of Adventure in the Southern Appalachians and a Study of the Life Among the Mountaineers*. Macmillan, 1922.
- McFedries, Paul. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Weird Word Origins*. Penguin, 2008.
- Merriam-Webster, Inc. *The Merriam-Webster new book of word histories*. Merriam-Webster, 1991.

# Femme

Dana Paglia

Cite as: Paglia, Dana. 2021. *Femme*. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 108-112.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

In the French language the word *femme* translates literally to “woman” - from the Latin word “femina” which translates to “she who suckles”. Its Proto-Indo-European root, “dhe(i)”, which means “to suck”. From its implications of a woman’s ability to breastfeed a child, to the literal translations of other languages, the English word *femme* has centered on women for many years. But throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, *femme* has changed and grown to include and define many different people. How has a word that literally translates to “women” grown to include more people over time? To better interpret how the use and meaning of *femme* has evolved over the years, it is important to understand the word’s own history as it became a part of the English language.



Google Ngram Viewer [Blue = “femme” in English, Red = “femme” in French]

## Ngram Analysis

With *femme* originating as a French word, it is no surprise that we find that *femme* is used in French literature far more often than we come across it in English literature. Though it’s hard to see when we compare the use of the word *femme* in English writings versus French writings, there has been a gradual increase of the word in English literature.





However, when you look at *femme* as an English word on its own in the Ngram Viewer, we can see that its use has been generally increasing in English literature and writing since the 1950s. But **why** do we start seeing this increase around the 1950s? One might hypothesize that the word *femme* started becoming more prominent in English writing due to something called “butch and femme culture”.

## The Early Years

We have already discussed that the literal translation of *femme* is “woman”. However, we start to see *femme* take a new identity in the 1950s and 60s as lesbian couples started to become a visible part of Western society. The Butch-Femme relationship is the idea that a lesbian couple is made up of a more “masculine” woman - who would identify as *butch* - and a more “feminine” woman - who would identify as *femme*. This concept stems from heteronormative ideals - that a couple needs to be composed of a person who is masculine and a person who is feminine in order to be a functional relationship (Bailey 1997: 960).

Those who identified as *femme* - whether that be by society or by their own accord - received backlash throughout the 1950s. *Femmes* were accused of “passing as straight” due to following traditional and conventional ideals of being feminine of a woman. If a *femme* woman chose a *butch* partner, then it was believed that they were imitating heteronormativity by choosing a more masculine partner. According to Joan Nestle, a Lesbian author and scholar, “butch-femme couples were the front-line warriors against sexual bigotry. Because they were so visible, they suffered the brunt of street violence.” (Nestle 1992: 138-146).

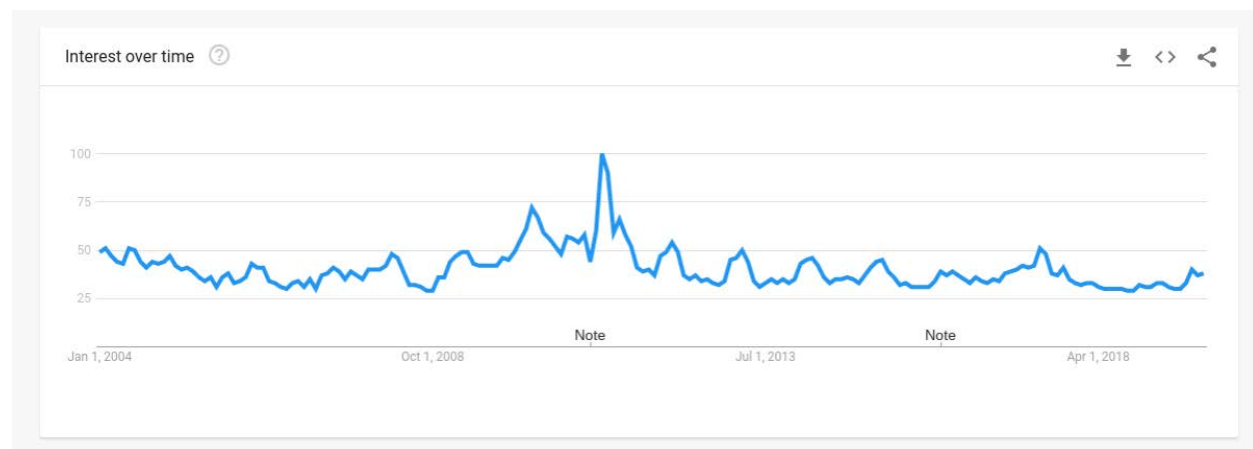
The negativity and controversy around the word *femme* appears to be directly related to what society thinks a woman should be and should not be. More so, it appears to be linked to one’s view of lesbian culture - both from within the LGBTQ+ community and from the outside. The social construct of the *femme* identity was used to measure how “feminine” a woman is by conventional standards. But the standards the *femme* identity sets raised other problems within the lesbian community, because a common belief among society was that a lesbian woman should not fit into a traditional “feminine” mold. A *femme* lesbian may not be “gay” enough to be a lesbian, or a *femme* lesbian woman who chose a *butch* lesbian partner is simply conforming to the heteronormative standard of society. For example, in Audre Lorde’s *Tar Beach*, she states that “butch and femme role playing was the very opposite of what we felt being gay was all about - the love of women” (Lorde 1983).

As the sexual liberation and feminist movement arose in the 1970s so did the idea of lesbian feminism. With the birth of this movement, we start to see that the butch-femme dynamic - more specifically, the *femme* identity - become a rejected term and identity. There were continued assertions that *femme* lesbians were conforming to the traditional feminine guidelines and therefore submitting themselves to the patriarchy. It was thought that the only way to deconstruct these gender norms was through rejecting traditional femininity and support androgyny (Kennedy and Davis 1993: 82-86).

## The Femme Fatale

The use of *femme* is also prominent in both French and English culture due to the *femme fatale* trope. A *femme fatale* is a woman who is conventionally attractive yet also deadly and may also weaponize her appearance or sex appeal. In Jules Claretie's "La Vie a Paris" in 1896, he describes that *femme fatale* is "a woman who brings bad luck" (Claretie 1896). However, the basic idea of a *femme fatale* dates back to much earlier than the French term we still use today. *Circe*, a character from Homer's "Odyssey", could arguably be the first *femme fatale*. *Circe* was a beautiful sorceress or witch who was able to turn men into swine if they were to drink out of her favorite cup. Before the 1850s where we start to see the use of the term *femme fatale*, a woman or female character who fit the "beautiful but deadly" description may have been called a *circe*.

Today, we see the *femme fatale* trope in many forms of art, such as the female characters in James Bond films or Catwoman, from DC's Batman comic book and movie franchise. Though the term is almost 200 years old, *femme fatale* and its trope are still very much alive and frequently used today.



According to Google Trends, *femme fatale* has been and continues to be consistently searched since June 2004. This may be due to the countless movies that feature a *femme fatale* character - from Marvel movies to reboots of Charlie's Angels - or maybe because retailers such as Forever 21 offer printed t-shirts with "FEMME FATALE" printed in block lettering across the front. It has become a mainstream term, and one of the most prominent uses of the word *femme*.

We see a huge spike in interest and searches for *femme fatale* in March 2011. This was the exact time that pop artist Britney Spears announced her new album and tour, titled "Femme Fatale". It is no surprise when *femme* is used or coined by a top female pop icon, that we see a huge increase in internet searches for the word. However, I do believe that this spike was due to people searching her album and tour, and less about interest in *femme* as a word.

## Femme and Lipstick

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, we see the creation of the term “lipstick lesbian”. In 1990, *OutWeek*, a gay and lesbian magazine based out of New York City, did a story on a group of self-identified “feminine lesbians” who required themselves to wear dresses and skirts to social functions (Lynch 1990: 44).

We even see the term used on television - such as *Ellen*. Ellen DeGeneres became one of the first openly gay entertainers in the 1990s and used her self-titled show as a way of coming out and to discuss the subject matter. In one specific episode of *Ellen*, Ellen’s parents ask her if a particular woman would be considered a “lipstick lesbian”, however they use the incorrect phrase of “dipstick lesbian”. Ellen then corrects her parents, and comedically refers to herself as a “Chapstick lesbian” (Troisi 2018).

To dive down further, in *Intersectionality, Sexuality, and Psychological Therapies*, both “lipstick lesbian” and *femme* have definitions that go hand in hand with one another. The book explains that both terms are a way for one to define themselves as both a lesbian and as feminine. For example, the author states that term ‘lipstick lesbian’ is defined as “a lesbian or bisexual woman who exhibits ‘feminine’ attributes such as wearing makeup, dresses and high heeled shoes” and that “more recent iterations of feminine forms of lesbianism such as ‘femme’ or ‘lipstick lesbian’ are an attempt to define as both lesbian and feminine.” (Das Nair and Butler 2012). The two are not mutually exclusive of one another, despite past belief or what others believe to be true.

As society began to show progress on tolerance and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, we begin to see an acceptance of *femme* lesbianism, or “lipstick lesbianism”. Some argue that *femme* lesbians are **choosing** to be feminine, not conforming to the society’s expectations of a woman. The idea that a woman could be conventionally feminine yet be attracted to other women - or that a feminine lesbian could be attracted to another feminine woman, rather than a masculine woman or “butch” woman - is an idea that disassembled what society believed lesbianism should be. This breakdown of heteronormative narratives opened the door for *femme* to become the more inclusive term, definition, and identity that it is today.

## Femme Today

With the birth of the Feminist Movement in the late 1960s we begin to see women celebrate their femininity and the fact that they are women. Women were no longer accepting that they were the “weaker” sex. A woman could be feminine, but also demand equal pay and equal rights to her male counterparts. We begin to see that *femme* starts to go hand in hand with the term *feminist* - the idea that women should have the same rights as men. But as we progressed as a society, feminism itself is no longer enough. We see the creation of *intersectional feminism*, a type of inclusive feminism that offers support to anyone and everyone who identifies as female, or perhaps *femme*.

In the 2010s and going forward, sexual and gender identity are widely discussed. The idea of belonging to something, sharing that something, and being proud of that something. Today, *femme* has become an identity for many people. While many gay women still identify as *femme*, it is no longer a term used strictly for feminine lesbians. With the rise and visibility of trans and queer culture we begin to see different people use *femme* as a way to identify themselves.

A transgender man or woman may identify as *femme*, again a choice of femininity despite the gender they may identify as.

A cisgender man - or a man that generally fits the conventional societal norms of a masculinity - can identify as *femme* because of the clothing or styles they prefer.

A heterosexual woman can identify as *femme*, because she is proud to be feminine, despite years and years of society claiming that feminine meant less or weak.

## So what is Femme?

*Femme* is not the same word that it was almost 100 years ago. It is pronounced the same, but it has evolved. *Femme* itself evolved from words that referred to a woman's ability to breastfeed a child. *Femme* itself translates literally to "woman". *Femme* was backed by such negative connotation - and sometimes still is. *Femme* meant that you were a lesbian who wanted to "pass off" as straight. It meant that you were not gay enough to be a "real lesbian", but that you did not quite fit in with the heteronormative narrative either.

*Femme* was - and perhaps still is - the *femme fatale* trope. It was Pussy Galore and countless other Bond girls - who had strengths and talents that were often overlooked because of their hypersexualization. It was the "fierce dance album" recorded by pop queen Britney Spears. It's a mainstream t-shirt.

But today *femme* is more than all of these things combined.

*Femme* has evolved because people as a society have evolved. We are slowly, but surely, moving in the direction where the LGBTQ+ community is not just tolerated, but accepted and welcomed. *Femme* was once a way to limit women, particularly lesbian women. *Femme* was a term that put lesbian women in a box, and claimed they were not enough - not gay enough, but straight enough. Not visible enough to be an active part of lesbianism. Not brave enough to defy the heteronormative narrative. But today, *femme* has no limits. *Femme* is for those who were born men or women. For those who transitioned into their true selves. For those who are nonbinary. *Femme* is for anyone.

Today, it's not uncommon to see people use *femme* on their social media or dating profiles to identify oneself. People are proud to be *femme*. Today, we have men in the makeup industry, such as the drag queen Trixie Mattel. Not only are these men makeup artists, but they actually create and design makeup that is used by millions of people - both men and women. Today, we have the "**Me Too**" movement, where women are standing up for themselves after decades of keeping quiet about sexual abuse in the workplace. Being *femme*, or feminine, is no longer a sign of weakness to society. (Well...for the most part.)

*Femme* is not just the choice, but the right to be feminine.

## References

- Bailey, J. Michael, et al. "Butch, femme, or straight acting? Partner preferences of gay men and lesbians." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73.5 (1997): 960.
- Claretie, Jules (1896). *La Via à Paris*. Adegri Graphics LLC 1999.
- das Nair, Roshan, and Catherine Butler, eds. *Intersectionality, sexuality and psychological therapies: working with lesbian, gay and bisexual diversity*. John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
- Kennedy, Elizabeth Lapovsky and Madeline D. Davis (1993). *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. New York: Routledge.
- Lorde, Audre (1983). *Tar Beach*. In Smith, Barbara (ed.), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Rutgers University Press. pp. 141-148.
- Lynch, Patsy (1990). "Lesbian Ladies (or where did all the femmes go?)". *OutWeek*. 4 April 1990, p. 44.
- Nestle, Joan (1992). *The Persistent Desire: A femme-butch Reader*. United States of America: Alyson Publications. pp. 138-146.
- Troisi, Dayna (26 January 2018). "An Ode To Ellen Degeneres..." *GoMag*

# Gangbang

Michelle Gardner

Cite as: Gardner, Michelle. 2021. Gangbang. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 113-116.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

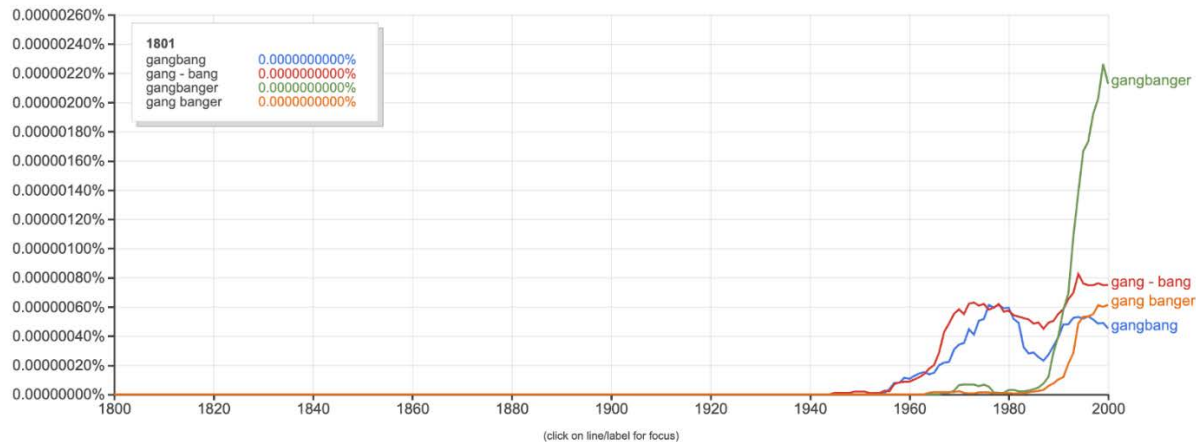
The metalinguistic belief of linguistic stagnation is a fallacy. As professor and linguist John McWhorter states, “language is actually analogous to cloud formations” because “the formation of clouds will almost certainly change by the next time you look” up and the same goes for language (McWhorter, 2003). English unabashedly borrows words from different languages which is why spelling, definition, and usage could vary widely with several exceptions for the numerous rules within the language. Unsurprisingly, just as English is constantly gaining new words, its current words are also capable of gaining new definitions. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), an ever-growing repository with contributions made from amateur scholars, ‘gangbang’ has three distinct definitions (Oxford English Dictionary). The first definition states that ‘gangbang’ is a noun used to refer to “sexual activity or intercourse involving a number of participants, esp. that in which several men in succession have intercourse with one woman”. This definition also includes “intercourse involving coercion or force” and does not differentiate ‘gangbang’ from ‘gang rape’. The second definition states that a ‘gangbang’ is “something undertaken or experienced by a group of people, esp. a situation or activity characterized by high stress, intensity, or confusion”. The third definition characterizes a ‘gangbang’ as “a fight between rival gangs; an episode of gang violence” and broadly “of or relating to gang culture”. These definitions appear to vary widely in meaning; however, they are all attached to the same word. After reading these various interpretations, one begins to wonder what the relationship is, if any, between ‘gangbang’ referring to sexual intercourse as opposed to criminal gang activity and were the first ‘gangbangs’ performed by members of a gang?

The journey to this answer begins with the Oxford English Dictionary. ‘Gangbang’, spelled as ‘gang-bang’ in this dictionary with a hyphen, attributes the oldest known usage of the word to a crime novel titled *So Many Doors* that was originally published in 1950. This usage was associated with the sexual intercourse definition and believed to be slang originating from the United States. Oakley Hall, Pulitzer Prize finalist and author of *So Many Doors*, uses ‘gangbang’ with the hyphenated spelling. This first recorded usage leaves much to be desired since the word is used in a context where the reader is expected to know the definition. There is not much context surrounding the word and Hall does not define ‘gang-bang’ when he writes, the phrase is simply a reference to a young man being kicked out of school because he was “caught in a gang-bang with May Pearl Jackson in the boiler room” (Hall, 1950). Because the Oxford English Dictionary lists ‘gang-banging’ under the etymology of the word ‘gang-bang’, this naturally seemed to be the next place to look. ‘Gang-banging’ as a verb shares its first definition with that of ‘gang-bang’ where they both refer to sexual intercourse amongst numerous participants regardless of coercion or force. The oldest use here is credited to a compilation of underground criminal lingo written by police officer Vincent J. Monteleone in 1949 titled *Criminal Slang: The Vernacular of the Underworld Lingo*. At this time, Monteleone had over thirty years of experience as an officer and wanted his book to serve as a dictionary with words and phrases “used by the gangster, tramp or hobo” (Monteleone, 1949). Unlike Hall’s work, Monteleone is very straightforward in how he uses the word, stating that it is the act of “teen-age girls” being “forced by teen-age males to have sexual relations” (Monteleone, 1949). Monteleone’s work provided slightly more



detail than Hall's, however, it still is not the beginning of the word. Monteleone's work may not be the oldest use of the word but, is the oldest written record of the word in English that one is able to find.

With this in mind, it is safe to assume that 'gangbang' is related to 'gangbangers', a term synonymous with gangsters and directly linked to the third definition listed on the Oxford English dictionary. 'Gangbanger' has only one definition listed there and its oldest use was featured in a Minnesotan newspaper titled the *Evening Tribune* from February of 1930. At this point, it seemed imperative to take advantage of the Google Ngram viewer and discover when the use of 'gangbang', 'gang-bang', 'gang banger', and 'gangbanger' had heightened use in written media. Below is Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Ngram: gangbanger, vs. gang-bang vs. gang banger vs. gangbang**

A notable find in Figure 1 is that 'gangbanger' was not used in printed books until the late 1960s. Its alternative spelling as 'gang banger', however, has been in use since around the 1930s, coinciding with the 1930 *Evening Tribune* statement of, "pick up every one you know as a gangster or gang banger" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019).

After utilizing both the Google Ngram Viewer and Oxford English Dictionary, the Online Etymology Dictionary was next. There, 'gang-bang' is listed as a noun dating back to 1953 and used to mean 'group sex' or performing sexual intercourse, "especially many men on one woman or girl, regardless of consent" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2019). Similar to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'gang-bang' is the term regardless of consent or lack thereof. Here, 'gang-bang' is a newer rendition of the word 'gang-shag', which is credited as having origins from 1927. The other featured definition is to "participate in a street gang" and according to this dictionary, that definition has a much later date of inception of 1968. The 1927 date of 'gang-shag's' debut remains consistent when compared to the Oxford English Dictionary, the only difference being that this source includes specific context in which 'gang-shag' was initially used. It was used in a novel written in 1927 by author Frederic Milton titled *The Gang* and it was a thorough analysis of over 1,000 Chicago street gangs, similar to Monteleone's *Criminal Slang: The Vernacular of the Underworld Lingo*. The major difference between both bodies of work is that Milton's was designed to inform the reader about how and why gangs form as opposed to Monteleone's goal of warning others about the danger of gangs and gang activity. In Frederic Milton's *The Gang*, he defines a 'gang-shag' as an event that "includes boys from sixteen to twenty-two years of age" and a "party carried on with one woman from fifteen to thirty boys from one gang or club" (Milton, 1927). Milton's definition is almost identical to that of Monteleone's of 'gang-bang'. This definition implies that 'gangbangs' began featuring members of a gang. Both men define



the word in regard to age of participants, implying that adults or elders cannot comprise the participants of a 'gangbang'.

When looking at the Google Ngram Viewer, there is a drastic increase in the frequency of 'gangbang' in the mid-1990s. Using Google Scholar to look into academic writings that feature the word, Asian women continually appeared. When Google Scholar was insufficient in answering why Asian women were being heavily associated with the term 'gang-bang', regular Google was used. Amongst the numerous pornographic videos was one specific title that stood out, "World's Biggest Gang Bang". With the stage name Annabel Chong, Grace Quek is a woman from Singapore who holds the record for the world's largest 'gangbang'. Her film was originally released in 1995 and featured her having sexual intercourse 251 times over the course of ten hours (O'Sullivan, 2000). There are discrepancies as to whether or not she had sex with 251 different men or closer to seventy men 251 total times. Quek was on the receiving end of an unwilling 'gangbang', which she refers to as a 'gang-rape', back when she was eighteen years old and studying law in London. She had met a friendly gentleman on the train whom she later decided to meet in an alley. When they arrived at their destination, she was surprised when other men joined them. This event served as the impetus for Quek's move to the United States. She quit law school and moved to Los Angeles, California, enrolling at the University of Southern California with a dual major in women's studies and photography. She was fascinated with the idea of depicting women as openly sexual beings. A few years later, Quek responds to a newspaper ad searching for models; after responding, she realizes that the agency is searching for pornographic models. She agrees to stay because this appears to her as a chance to spread her message of sexual liberation to a larger audience.

In interviews following her 'gangbang', Quek shows no signs of remorse. She tells reporters that if a man were to have done the same exact thing, have sex 251 times in one day, then he would be receiving countless accolades instead of repetitive questions. She famously stated that if a man could be a stud, then so could she. Her only regret about the event is to never have been compensated for her work and for not seeing that HIV/AIDS testing was stricter of the men she had condom-less sex with (Im, 2018). While Quek's film explains why there was a drastic increase in the usage of 'gangbang' around the time her film aired, her story introduces a new related word: 'gang-rape'. Although definitions thus far do not differentiate between consent or coercion in regard to 'gangbang', 'gang-rape' is strictly defined as non-consensual and, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it was used before the term 'gangbang' was. According to its definition, 'gang-rape' is also heavily gendered – men are always the perpetrators and women are usually the victims. 'Gang-rape' is dated back to 1875 during the British occupation of India where it is used in a Bengali police report written by an officer with the last name Hankey. Hankey states that there had been two instances of 'gang-rape', "both of which a woman was forcibly dragged out into the field and raped by [in] one case eight, and in the other nine, men successively" (Hankey, 1875). This source supports the theory that 'gangbangs' were initially performed by members of a gang and this could be why 'gangbang' and 'gangbangers' are seemingly connected.

Although 'gangbang' and 'gang-rape' can be used synonymously, both of them diverge from the term 'orgy'. 'Orgies' have their origins in Greek and Roman religions surrounding celebrations of the Greek and Roman god of wine, sex, and merriment Dionysus/Bacchus. This definition of 'orgy' dates back to the 1560s and was not characterized by sexual activity until the early 1700s. The sexual activity was not necessarily in reference to group sex, rather, it was pertaining to excessive drinking, indiscriminate sexual activity, and otherwise overindulgent behaviors. Nowadays, the definition has shifted in favor of 'orgies' as the act of group sex. The overindulgence logically appears to stem from the aforementioned religious celebrations (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). What separates 'gangbang' and 'gang-rape' from 'orgies' seems to be that 'orgies' encompass a wider range of sexual activity. 'Gangbangs' and 'gang-rapes' always involve multiple people acting upon a single person while orgies are sex in any group setting. 'Gangbangs' are 'orgies', however, not all 'orgies' are 'gangbangs'.

'Gang' did not enter English as a word describing "a number of people related or connected to each other" until the 1550s. This definition evolved to mean more specifically "a group or band of people who go around together, or associate with one another regularly" who are also "joined together by a shared interest or common cause" in the late sixteenth century. Colloquially, 'gang' is now used to refer to an "organized group of criminals" or organization that is specifically "involved in large-scale criminal activity" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). That final definition is synonymous with the term 'gang-banger' which was first mentioned in the 1930 *Evening Tribune*. Now that the 'gang' part of 'gangbang' is accounted for, 'bang' is next. 'Bang' has multiple definitions referring bumping, knocking, and striking. Although the Oxford English Dictionary attributes 'bang's' initial sexual use from 1937, this term did not rise in popularity until nearly two decades later when it was used in Jack Kerouac's famed work *On the Road* when he used the term to describe two characters reuniting and having celebratory sexual intercourse (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019).

The second definition listed under the Oxford English Dictionary under the word 'gangbang' did not have much data surrounding it. Only this particular dictionary even mentioned that a 'gangbang' could be used to describe a group experience and according to it, the term only carried this definition for about fifty years from 1953 until 2000. The examples of this use were difficult to find and it seemed to only be used in formal speech such as 'gangbang' brainstorming during a business meeting or relying on creative 'gangbanging' to write a paper (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). Although it cannot be definitively stated that the first 'gangbang' was committed by a gang, following the etymology of 'gangbang' does heavily imply that this is the case. Right now, 'gangbang' is North American slang commonly used to discuss an act of group sex where multiple partners have sex with one specific person. Despite this, if studying language teaches us anything it is that this will one day change and expecting it not to is ludicrous.

## References

- Digital News and Media, August 16, 2013. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/sex-annabels-never-ending-story-281350.html>.
- Hall, Oakley M. *So Many Doors*. New York: Random House, 1950.
- Hankey, (1875) Rep. on Police of Lower Provinces. From gang rape n.<sup>1</sup>, Oxford English Dictionary
- Im, Soyon. "Sex: The Annabel Chong Story." *Seattle Weekly*. Seattle Weekly, November 10, 2018. <https://www.seattleweekly.com/film/sex-the-annabel-chong-story/>.
- McWhorter, John H. *The Power of Babel: a Natural History of Language*. New York: Perennial, 2003.
- Monteleone, Vincent Joseph. *Criminal Slang: The Vernacular of the Underworld Lingo*. Boston, MA, 1949.
- O'Sullivan, Charlotte. "Sex: Annabel's Never-Ending Story." *The Independent*. Independent
- Thrasher, Frederic M. *The Gang: a Study of 1.313 Gangs in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1927.

# Giddy-up

William Pizzimenti

Cite as: Pizzimenti, William. 2021. Giddy-up. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 117-123.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

“Giddy-up” is an interjection that arose in the English-speaking world around 1900. Its contemporary spelling is variable; however, “giddy-up” slowly surpassed other spellings in the mid-1990s in English books. Regardless of spelling, the definition has remained unchanged throughout the decades. A related term “gee” has the same meaning that can be traced to the early 1600s. The origin of giddy-up is colloquial form of *get up*, and is an imperative interjection used as “a command to a horse: go! go ahead!” (Oxford English Dictionary). The word was used by carriage drivers, in many country-western songs, and many western films and television shows. Historically, the context is often restricted to handler-animal communication; rarely was “giddy-up” used to address people. However, in a contemporary context, it is often used to address people, primarily in a comedic fashion, telling someone to hurry up. Since the definition has not changed, this raises the question: why was there such variation in the spellings? I hypothesize that spelling variants are a product of authors attempting to express a verbal interjection in a written medium. Another factor to consider is the blending of words and phrases, for instance: “gee”, “get up”, “go along”, and “get going”. This combination of factors is likely what caused the development of different spellings. As a result, my research will be focusing only on three spelling variants: “gee/gee up”, “giddap”, and “giddy-up” (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Google Ngram graph for ‘giddyup’, ‘giddap’, and ‘gee up’

## Etymology: Gee up, Giddap, and Giddy-up

Before a discussion of the interjection “giddy-up” in the contexts listed above it is necessary outline an etymology. The Online Etymology Dictionary describes “giddy-up” as a “command to a horse to go, 1909, probably an extended form of earlier *giddap* (1867), itself probably from *get up*”

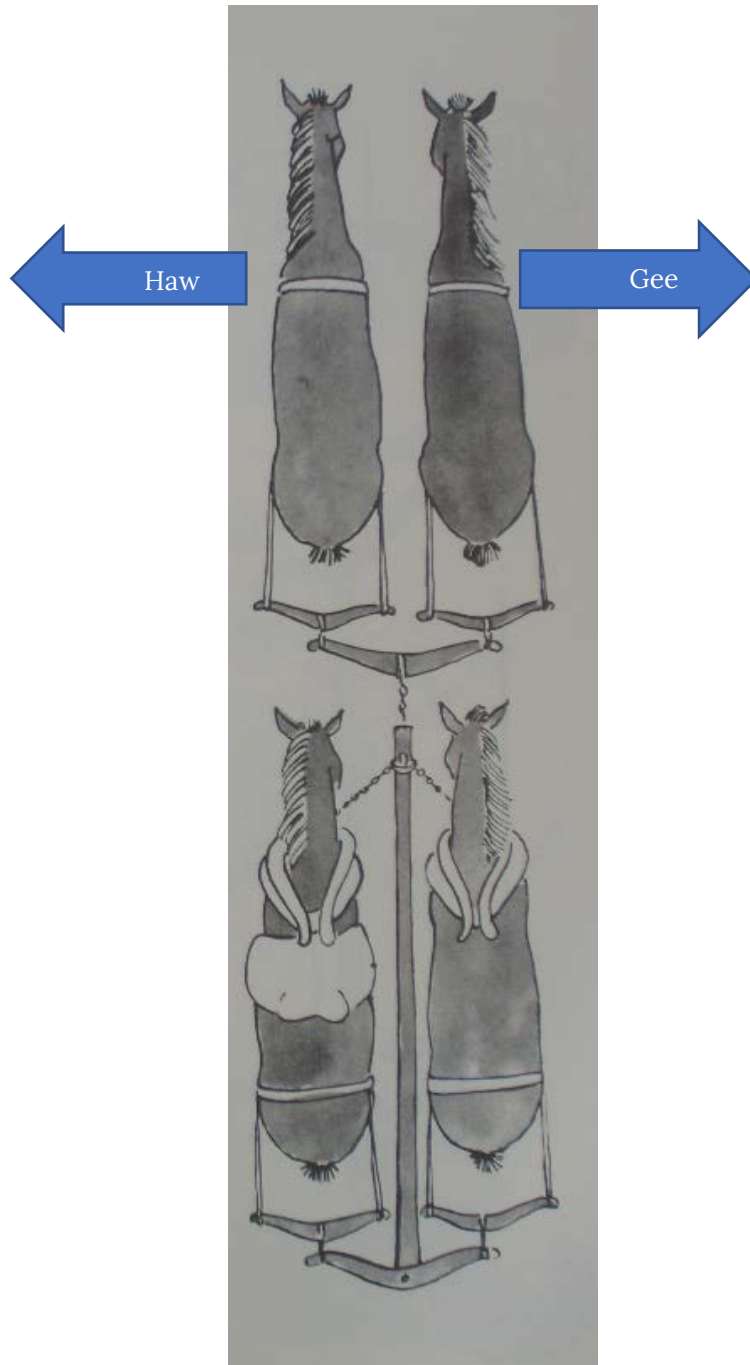
(Online Etymology Dictionary). After following the link to “gee”, the Online Etymology Dictionary establishes a connection between “giddy-up/giddap” and “gee”, noting the etymology of “Gee” as “a command to a horse to go, 1620s, Scottish. It had a particular sense as a teamster's command: “go to the right (or off) side of the driver.” Extended form *gee-up* is from 1733” (Online Etymology Dictionary). This establishes that “gee” can either be a command to go forward and/or a command to go to the right. In either case, “Gee” would be pronounced like “jee”. While searching for the etymology of “gee”, an article by Henry Carrington Bolton out of *The American Anthropologist* titled, “The Language Used in Talking to Domestic Animals”, which served as an important source of information relating to both “gee” and “giddap” (Bolton 1897).

*Gee/Gee-up*: Henry Carrington Bolton was a chemist and is known for his research related to uranium during the latter half of the 1800s. Bolton’s research followed the epistemological frameworks of anthropologists of his time, adhering mostly to cultural evolutionary theory. He sought to record the means of communicating with all domestic animals in many different languages. Bolton explains that he collected his data through observations he made in other countries, interviewing “natives” and through correspondence with people all over the world who were subscribed to *The American Anthropologist* around 1888. Bolton establishes that “gee” is “an English word of much antiquity” (Bolton 1897: 86). He also provides a citation from Thomas Heywood’s “Fortune by Land and Sea” dating to 1620, “Come, I’ll go teach ye gee and whoe” (86), which refers to learning how to stop and go. Bolton states that the primary meaning of gee at that time to move the horse forward, and, that it was not until much later that the definition of “gee” changed to mean to turn to one side, traditionally to the right. These commands are still used by people who drive animals today. Commonly when driving a horse (and any animal including oxen, mules, dogs, etc.) right is “gee” and left is referred to as “haw”. Below, Figure 3 shows the directions. There are also Youtube videos available showing the contemporary use of these commands on horse teams (Minicharioteer 2013).

The transition from “gee/gee-up” to “giddap” seems to happen just before 1920 according to Google Ngram Viewer (see Figure 1). Although, “gee up” declines it never vanishes and still survives today, my hypothesis is that it persisted because “gee up” is found in Charles Dickens’, “The Personal History of David Copperfield”:

**“ Gee up, Dobbin,  
Gee ho, Dobbin,  
Gee up, Dobbin,  
Gee up, and gee ho—o—o ! ”**

**Figure 2 “The Personal History of David Copperfield”, Charles Dickens (1894: 174)**



**Figure 3: Horse team showing 'gee' and 'haw'.** Source: Wikipedia, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Medieval\\_horse\\_team.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Medieval_horse_team.jpg)

*Giddap*: According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), “The imperative interjection “giddap” is a colloquial pronunciation of “get up” originating in the United States, defined as a command to a horse: go! Go ahead!”, the earliest quote dating to 1925, “T. Dreiser *Amer. Trag.* I. i. xviii. 133 ‘Giddap, horsey,’ she played. ‘Giddap.’” (OED). The OED is suggesting that that “giddap” does not get used until 1925 where it is first quoted. Bolton’s work again becomes a helpful tool. Bolton explains (Figure 4):

b. TO START AND HASTEN HORSES IN HARNESS

The terms used to start horses in harness and to urge them to a better appreciation of the value of time comprise vulgar corruptions of ordinary speech and peculiar inarticulate sounds. Throughout England and the United States drivers start their horses by picking up the reins, drawing them gently against the animals' mouths, and exclaiming *go 'long* and *get up*; the latter appears in the forms *get āp* (*a*, as in *hat*), *giddap*, and *gee-hup*, or *gee-up*.

“Huddup, says the Parson,  
And off went they.”

(*One Horse Shay Holmes.*)

Figure 4: Language Used in Talking to Domestic Animals (Bolton 1897: 80)

Bolton indicates that not only was “giddap” used at the time of his published work in 1897 but from his research, which was conducted ten to fifteen years prior. Since these commands were spoken, it is impossible to know the exact dates. An interesting example is from a 1938 publication titled, “The Road to Safety: Here and There” (Buckley 1938) which was a series of short stories published by American Book Company for pre- sixth grade readers. The book includes a glossary where it defines words used throughout the text (Figure 5):

<p>OF SAILS.</p> <p><b>capture</b> (kăp'tūr), to take and hold by force.</p> <p><b>cattail</b> (kăt'tāl'), a tall marsh weed with long flat leaves and long rough spikes.</p>	<p>THE ESCAPE (es'kăp), a ladder or stairway by which one may get out of a burning building.</p> <p><b>giddap</b> (gĭd'ăp'), a command given to a horse. Get up!</p>
---	--

Figure 5: The Road to Safety: Here and There (Buckely 1938: 284)

In 1915, *The American Magazine* published a short story titled “Giddap!” by John A. Moroso (Moroso 1915), about the last Manhattan’s carriage driver. The *American Magazine* was known for its human-interest stories and social issue topics. The story follows a veteran carriage driver, that is working his last day on the job. The driver Jimmie explains that his job is being replaced by automobile chauffeurs. “Giddap” is used in few unusual contexts; in particular, there is a point in the story where Jimmie calls a long-time customer (the narrator) on the telephone. Jimmie asks him to help him move out of the city, during the phone call the operator disconnects the two by accident (Figure 6):



“Whoa!” I heard Jimmie command at the other end. The girl obeyed and I found myself wondering how many months or years or days it would be before she was replaced by a modern invention. “All right, sir?” asked Jimmie, and I told him that the wire was clear again. “Giddap,” he said. “I just wanted to consult you about a little matter. You asked me one time to call on you if I needed a friend.”

**Figure 6: The American Magazine “Giddap!” by John A. Moroso (1915: 18)**

In this context, “giddap” seems to mean, “continue or to resume” which is how it can be used in relation to horse commands. Seems to be a beginning towards uses for the word outside of horse driving.

*Giddy-up*: According to Google Ngram Viewer (Figure 1) , the spelling “giddy-up/giddyup” emerges around 1909; however, the spelling does not appear again until the mid-1940s. This is not to say that “giddap” and “gee up” have fallen out of use, since written texts still use all the variations. “Giddy up” first appearing in 1909, in *Collier’s* magazine (Figure 7):

**P**OPULAR SONGS! Can they sink lower, or has the bottom been reached? The absurdity lies not so much in the fact that they are un-lyric or vulgar as in vapidty. Observe a “love” song:

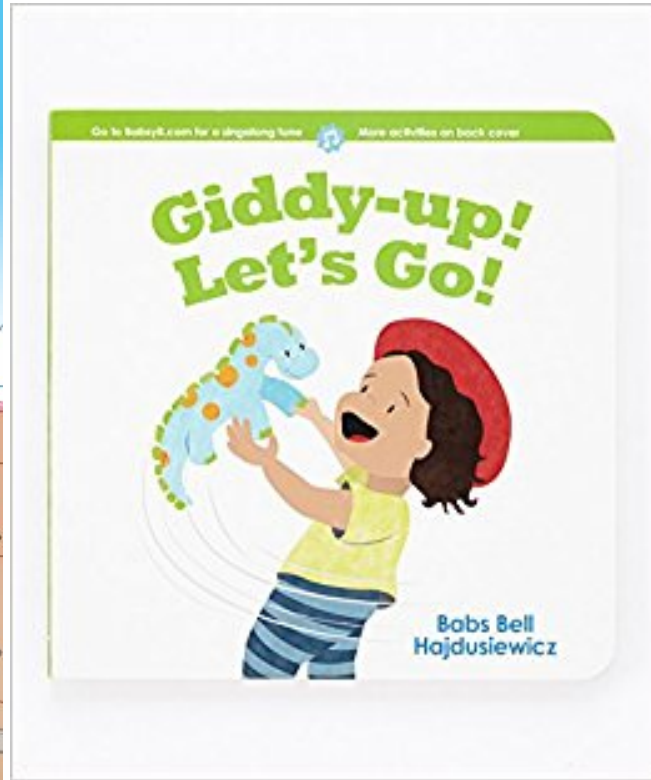
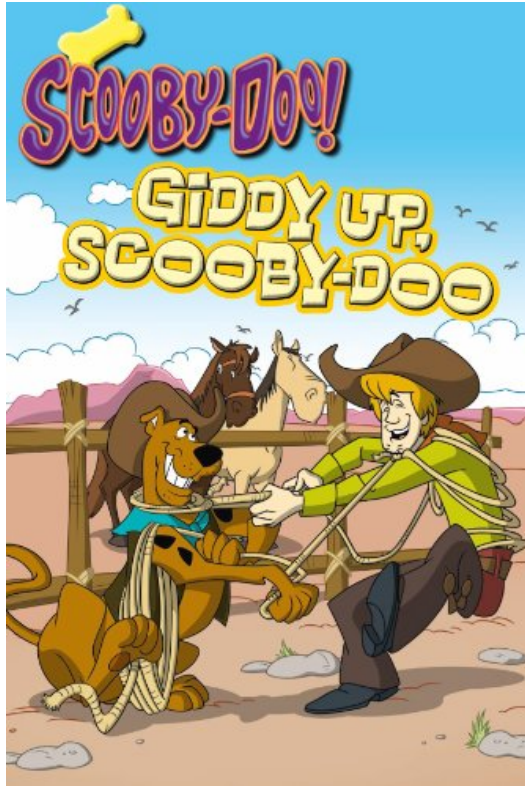
“Sweet moon-bird, won’t you be my moon-bird, Cherokee?  
My heart your own tepee thro’ life will always be;  
And in my wigwam, fine, your eyes will softly shine  
With lovelight all the time, sweet moon-bird mine.”

Or, for your chastisement, take this:

“Pony boy, pony boy, won’t you be my Tony Boy?  
Don’t say no, here we go off across the plains;  
Marry me, carry me right away with you.  
Giddy up, giddy up, giddy up, whoa! My pony boy.”

**Figure 7: “Popular Songs” (1909: 8)**

The context is about a critique about “raunchy” music being created at the time. It is unclear whether the author is referring to the “giddy up” part as being “vulgar”; however, the more important fact is that the author decided to use this spelling. The context is that *Collier’s* was known to push for social action, and was known for its powerful effect on legislation. For instance, Upton Sinclair’s famous article “*Is Chicago Meat Clean?*” educated readers about unsanitary food production in Chicago. Therefore, by critiquing a song that contains “giddy up” and calling the lyrics vulgar suggests that the spelling “giddy up” may have fallen out of favor as a result. Comically, the most common contemporary context for “giddyup” can be found in young reader novels and children entertainment. Two examples provide the contexts in which “giddyup” is used in contemporary society (Figure 8, 9). The first is in the romanticized American West, where Scooby-doo and the Gang are dressed in a cowboy and cowgirl hats, in a desert scene, with lassos in hand, and a couple of horses in the background. In the second, the title “Giddy-up! Let’s Go!” strictly refers to the modern usage meaning “to hurry or let’s go” according to Urban Dictionary.



**Figure 8 (Left) Warner Bros. Global Publishing (Oct.2013)**

**Figure 9 (Right) Babsy B Board Book Series, Giddy-up! Let's Go! (2014)**

## Conclusion

Although society is no longer moved by horse-power, the legacy of the horse lives on through idioms, phrases, and words like “giddy-up”. The word “giddy-up” has seen many variations in spelling, while the definition has remained constant, still maintaining a meaning of forward movement. The use of the word has declined greatly in recent decades, largely a result of horses being removed from society. The fact is that “giddy-up” could easily fade away within the next generation or two, unless a cultural revival of the American West is pushed into mainstream culture. The new HBO series *West World* has an extremely large following, that can be said for the Western-themed video game series *Red Dead Redemption*. Thus, that fate for “giddyup” may not be so grim.

## References

- Bolton, H. Carrington. "The language used in talking to domestic animals." *American Anthropologist* 10, no. 3 (1897): 65-90.
- Buckley, Horace Mann. *The Road to Safety*, American Book Co., 1938.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, Houghton, Mifflin, 1894.
- “Driving (Horse).” Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Driving\\_\(horse\)#/media/File:Medieval\\_horse\\_team.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Driving_(horse)#/media/File:Medieval_horse_team.jpg).
- “Gee (Interj).” Online Etymology Dictionary, [www.etymonline.com/word/gee](http://www.etymonline.com/word/gee).
- Minicharioteer. Gee and Haw Practice, 20 August 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DOVSS5oJeY>

Genku. "Giddy-Up." Urban Dictionary, 11 Nov. 2003,  
[www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Giddy+Up](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Giddy+Up).  
"Giddy-up (Interj)." Online Etymology Dictionary , [www.etymonline.com/word/giddy-up](http://www.etymonline.com/word/giddy-up).  
"giddap, int. and v." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2017.  
Hajdusiewicz, Babs Bell. Amazon. [www.amazon.com/Giddy-up-Lets-Babs-Bell-Hajdusiewicz/dp/0966556895](http://www.amazon.com/Giddy-up-Lets-Babs-Bell-Hajdusiewicz/dp/0966556895).  
Howard, Lee. "Giddyup, Scooby!" Amazon, Scholastic,  
[www.scholastic.com/teachers/books/giddyup-scooby-by-lee-howard/](http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/books/giddyup-scooby-by-lee-howard/).  
Moroso, John A. "Giddap!" *The American Magazine*, vol. 79, 1915, pp. 17-22.  
"Popular Songs." *Collier's*, vol. 43, no. 15-26, 1909.

Images:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Medieval\\_horse\\_team.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Medieval_horse_team.jpg)

[https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51o-ahsUx-L.\\_SY445\\_QL70\\_.jpg](https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51o-ahsUx-L._SY445_QL70_.jpg)

[https://www.babsybooks.com/images/products/1426108038\\_lets-go-ft-md.jpg](https://www.babsybooks.com/images/products/1426108038_lets-go-ft-md.jpg)

# Gnarly

Mallory Moore

Cite as: Moore, Mallory. 2021. Gnarly. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 124-128.

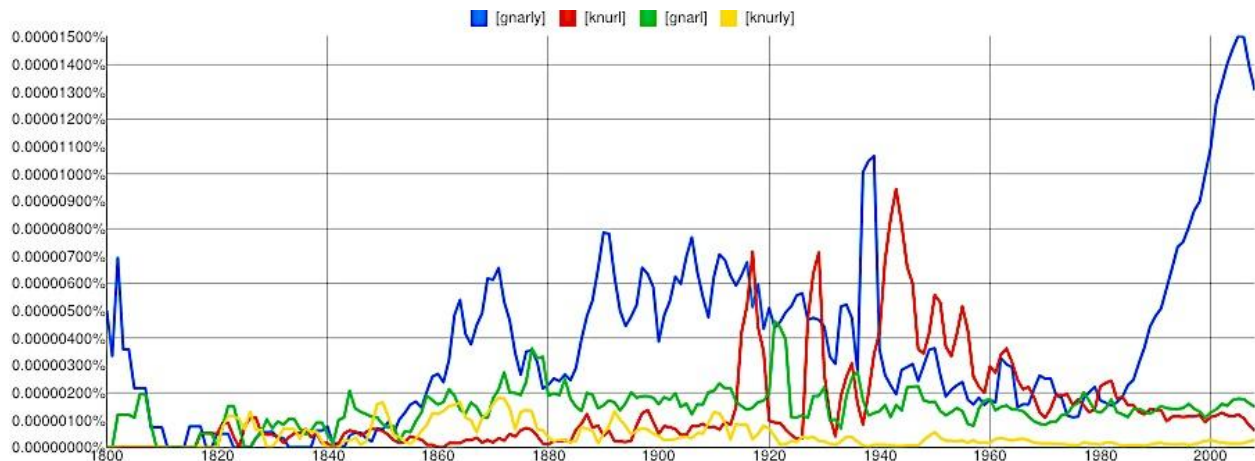
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The original form of the word gnarly is an adjective meaning mangled and twisted but evolved to be a word of exclamation meaning awesome and cool. The real mystery is: how can a small subculture have such a major impact on the meaning of a word that is used by an entire nation? The word “gnarly” originated from the mispronunciation of the word “knurl”, which means twisted, deformed, rugged, and timeworn (alphaDictionary). The word was eventually taken over by the Californian surfer culture in the 1970s and 1980s to describe intense and rough waves. Given the fact that surfers intentionally seek out these specific types of waves, the term eventually became synonymous with words like “awesome” and “incredible”. This new definition is a very drastic transformation from the word’s original meaning. According to a commenter in the Urban Dictionary, “Gnarly is when you’ve gone beyond radical, beyond extreme, it’s balls out danger, & or perfection, & or skill or all of that combined” (Urban Dictionary). According to the SurfLibrary.com page, Surfin’ USA, “Among surfers (with whom the word is most commonly identified), “gnarly” may have first been used at a California surf spot where Torrey pine or Monterey cypress trees grew. Their gnarled roots and branches may have inspired comparisons with the waves. In California surfer terminology, “gnarly” came to be used to describe complicated, rapidly changing surf conditions.” (Nguyen). It is very intriguing to find out just how this drastic change occurred – how a negative, descriptive word, meaning twisted and disgusting, could change so quickly to a slang word meaning awesome and intense from such a small group’s decision to use a word differently.

The base word for gnarly, knurl, in its noun form is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “A small projection, protuberance, or excrescence; a knot, knob, boss, nodule, etc.; a small bead or ridge, especially one of a series worked upon a metal surface for ornamentation or other purpose.” (OED). When looking at this definition, it is not a far reach to the original definition of gnarly. In its verb form its definition is “To make knurls, beadings, or ridges (on the edge of a coin, a screw-head, etc.); to mill, to create.” (OED). When looking at the verb form of the word, it is easier to see both definitions of the word gnarly and how they relate to each other. The verb form of this word appeared over 250 years after the noun appeared.

As shown in the chart below, the words “gnarl” and “knurl,” were used almost at the same frequency for most of the years of their popularity. Between 1940 and 1960, the popularity of their use in American English began to plummet. After the uses declined, they remained pretty consistent until 1980 when the meaning of the word “gnarly” changed. At this point in time there was a drastic spike in the use of this word in American society. When the spike occurred, the use of the related words further decreased and have remained at a very low rate of use ever since.

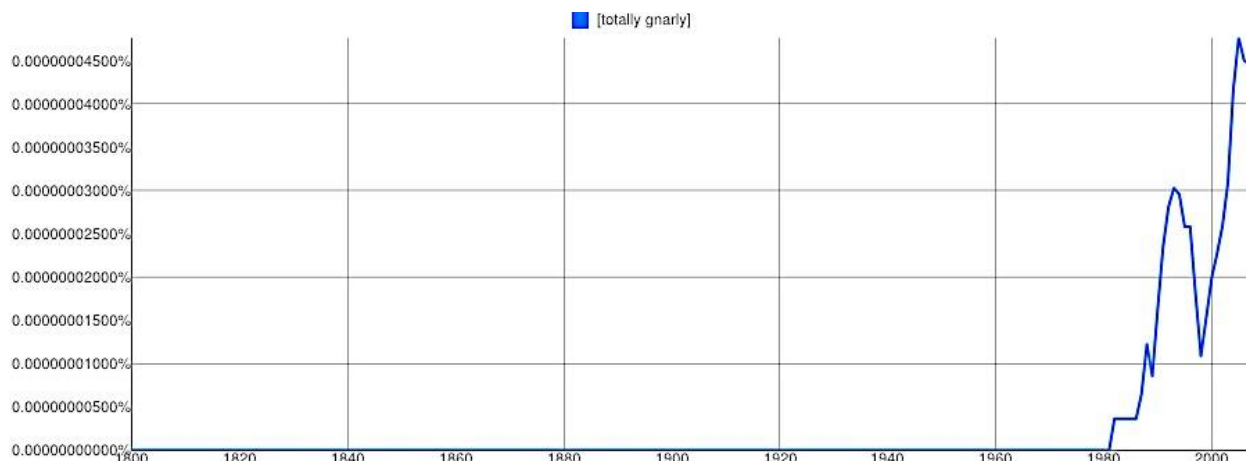




The original form of the word “gnarly” was just used for descriptions. The use of the word in this form can be seen through this excerpt from the article “Madame Brownie’s Mourning” by Mrs. Celestia Rice Colby in the journal, *The Little Pilgrim*. Here it is clear that the word gnarly is meant to help the reader visualize the “boughs” in which they are describing. Other than the word “gnarly”, descriptive words in the sentence are old, torn, and discolored (Colby 80). Even if the reader did not know what the word “gnarly” meant, it is clear from the context words around it, that this is a negative term.

**But the birds came and built their nests among the trees and poured forth such a wealth of song, such a cheery stream of music, that I am sure the gnarly old boughs did not mourn much for their torn and discolored wreaths. And the birds were so friendly and sociable, and seemed so neighborly, and I do not believe their lively gossip had any sting in it, or that they ever slandered or told bad stories about each other. For I do not remember to have seen a single bird among them all who seemed sad or broken-hearted but once, and then all her feathered friends were so full of sympathy for her and mourned with her. And this reminds me that it was the story of Madame Brownie’s Mourning that I started to tell you, instead of the story of Mr. Zephyr’s wooing, that somehow would crowd in first.**

During the 1980s, the new definition was still unknown to most of society outside of the surfer culture. This can be shown by the excerpt below from the book “Directions 1983”. It shows the word “gnarly” being used to describe the hand position of Saint Louis of France in a work of art. The word “gnarly,” is written in quotes and given a definition in the book, which is that it means “wow, cherry, bitchin’, for sure, all that surfer, valley-girl type lingo” (Rosenzweig 47). The fact that in this book, the word “gnarly” is put in quotes is a good representation that this definition of the word is not yet widely known and it is still necessary to provide the definition or people would not understand.

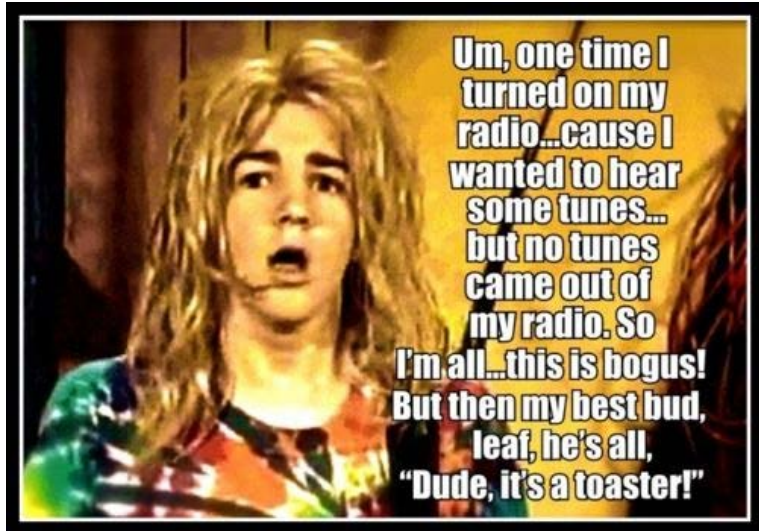


When the term was adopted by the Californian Surfer culture after 1980, the use of the phrase “totally gnarly” came into use and became very popular as shown by the Google Ngram Viewer chart above. Before 1980, this phrase did not exist. After the phrase was associated with the surfer culture, its popularity was drastically increased when words like “awesome, righteous, totally, and gnarly” were included in movies like “Fast Times At Ridgemont High,” that were set in California and were released in the early 80s. One of the tag lines for the movie was “It’s Awesome! Totally Awesome!” (Fast Times At Ridgemont High, Transcript). This movie introduced American society to the surfer language and culture, which had a major impact on American culture. The actors who portrayed characters acting as stereotypical “surfer dudes,” can be seen in the movie poster on the next page. The popularity of the movies that came out during the early 1980s and 1990s, such as this one, had a major impact on the conversation style of many teenagers growing up during this time period. Hearing these phrases in movies, brought them to the attention of the American public, and teenagers around the nation soon picked up the surfer language.

When the word “Gnarly” became popular around the nation, it was picked up and evolved further by many other cultural groups. The word was picked up by the skateboarding and snowboarding subcultures and often shortened to Gnar. An example of the word “gnarly” being used in these subcultures, would sound like “It’s pretty gnarly out, Bro. It’s double overhead today!”(Stone). This form of the word is used in the same way as the surfer culture in phrases like “shredding the gnarly” (Stone). According to Will Mari, in his opinion column, the word Gnar is “used by snowboarders and skiers to refer to snow, especially to the fabled fluff that is the ‘gnar gnar.’”(Mari). Mari goes on to describe the snow as being “the deepest of the deep. The driest of the dry. The powest of the pow pow” (i.e., powder): in other words, the best possible snow to ski, sled, and ride on.” (Mari). This form of the word has strong similarities to the word “gnarly,” the only difference is they are used by different cultural groups. Even though it may not be obvious to someone who is not involved in surfing, skateboarding, or snowboarding, the members of each group have their own individual linguistic differences.



In recent years, the popularity of the word “gnarly” has remained relatively steady, with a slight decline in its use. When the term is used in television shows, it is used in a comedic fashion, by a person who speaks in the surfer accent, and is only ever talking about surfing. This can be seen in television shows such as *SpongeBob Squarepants*. The excerpt below, from an episode of *SpongeBob* called “*SpongeBob Square pants vs. The Big One*” shows the word *gnarly* as a way of mocking the surfer culture, as opposed to just using the word. You can also see the mocking qualities by the name and description of the surfer in this passage. The name “*Jack Kahuna Laguna*” is clearly meant to make fun of the language of the surfer culture. Another example showing how the surfer culture is portrayed in today’s society, through the character portrayal of “*Kyle the Surfer Dude*” is in the television show “*The Amanda Show*”. This character is meant to sound uneducated, which gave the viewers of the show a negative concept of the members of the surfer culture and their distinct linguistic aspects. This negative portrayal, in turn, gives the terms they use, like *gnarly*, negative aspects as well. The word “*gnarly*” in the form of surfer speak, is still in use today but has been given a negative connotation over the years.



"Search Totally Kyle Images." *Imafave*. 2012.

The word “*gnarly*” has evolved a great deal over time. It has gone from a physical description of the surface of a tree, to surfer speak for awesome and intense. It has then gone from the standard teenage way of talking to a way of portraying a negative stereotype. It has even gone through drastic geographic changes from California to skateboarders and snowboarding to virtually the entire teenage American population in the 1980s. Television and movies were the driving force behind the popularization, as well as its slow decline. Language changes, depending on what we hear regularly, and which cultural groups we choose to be a part of. Every little change someone makes to their daily speech has its effect on the language as a whole.

The word “*gnarly*” has evolved a great deal over time. It has gone from a physical description of the surface of a tree, to surfer speak for awesome and intense. It has then gone from the standard teenage way of talking to a way of portraying a negative stereotype. It has even gone through drastic geographic changes from California to skateboarders and snowboarding to virtually the entire teenage American population in the 1980s. Television and movies were the driving force behind the popularization, as well as its slow decline. Language changes, depending on what we hear regularly, and which cultural groups we choose to be a part of. Every little change someone makes to their daily speech has its effect on the language as a whole.

## References

- Batchelder, Steve, and Molly Batchelder. *Under a Monterey Cypress Canopy*. Magnificent Trees Photo Gallery, Point Lobos. SBCA Tree Consulting.
- Colby, Celestia Rice. "Madame Brownie's Mourning." *The Little Pilgrim*. Ed. Grace Greenwood. Vol. 11. Philadelphia: 1864. 80-81.
- Fast Times at Ridgemont High. Dir. Amy Heckerling. By Cameron Crowe. Perf. Sean Penn, Jennifer Jason Leigh, and Judge Reinhold. Universal Studios, 1982. Transcript.
- "gnarly, adj." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2014.
- "Gnarly." AlphaDictionary \* Free English Online Dictionary \* Grammar \* Word Fun.
- "knurl | nurl, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2014.
- Mari, Will. "Will's Word of the Week: gnarly" *The Daily*. 4 Jan. 2012.  
[http://www.dailyuw.com/wills\\_word/article\\_a917711b-0eef-520a-9d11-2491ce9e14e7.html](http://www.dailyuw.com/wills_word/article_a917711b-0eef-520a-9d11-2491ce9e14e7.html)
- Nguyen, Céline. "SURFIN' USA." *Surf Library*. <http://surflibrary.org/SurfingUSA.html>

Rosenzweig, Phyllis D. *Directions* 1983. Washington, D.C.: Published for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden by the Smithsonian Institution, 1983, p. 47.

Sandy's Rippa. "Gnarly." Urban Dictionary. 8 July 2003.

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gnarly&defid=175860>

"SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One (transcript)." Encyclopedia SpongeBobia. 17 Apr. 2009.

Stone, Madeline. "12 Sayings Only People From California Will Understand." Business Insider Australia. 6 Nov. 2014.

"Totally Kyle Quote." Deviantart. 18 Apr 2012.

<https://www.deviantart.com/dbzfangirl98/art/totally-kyle-quote-297139557>

# Guru

Kaitlin Carter

Cite as: Carter, Kaitlin. 2021. *Guru*. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 129-133.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

As argued by linguist John Gumperz, language serves as a repository of cultural knowledge. This not only includes the culture initially associated with a language, but also the other cultures that the language comes in contact with. Given that the volume of the English language is notoriously 99% percent loanwords (McWhorter), it may come to no surprise that the transcription and usage of these words reflects the English-speaking world's interaction with loanword culture. Taking a look at the word *guru*, we can see that although its use has spiked in recent years (Michel), its meaning and application has varied widely. With its beginnings in British colonialism to its modern-day application in many non-religious contexts, I argue that this term is a small insight into the history and culture of the Western, English-speaking world over the last 215 years.

For the purpose of this essay, sources derived from databases will be used from the year 1800 onward. While varying spellings for the term *guru* are documents as far back as the early 1600's, this paper will focus on the two most prevalent spellings since 1800; *guru* and *gooroo* ("guru, n."). Additionally, this paper does not serve to be an exhaustive history of every way the word *guru* has been utilized and augmented in English. Rather, its aim is to highlight semantic changes that illustrate the evolution of this word.

The word *guru* first enters the English language as a loanword from Hindi. As aforementioned, many spelling attempts occurred in English since the 1600's, and its appearance and use correlates with the arrival and increased presence of the British in India (Marshall). England first utilized India as a trading point for the East India Trading company, but the abundance of desirable products and labor lead to the British presence escalating over the centuries and developing into colonialism by the 1800's (Marshall). The word appears in texts entirely in the context of Indian religion or culture, referring to a spiritual teacher or priest ("guru, n.").

Starting in the 1800's, two spellings of *guru* are prevalent: *guru* and *gooroo*. Today, the term *gooroo* exists commonly as a phonetic spelling to teach readers how to pronounce *guru* (Michel). It is also commonly used in fictional and historical texts that are meant to recreate an earlier time period (Leland), and interestingly enough, a first name for characters in works of fiction (Dowling). In the 1800's, both forms seem to be used interchangeably. The earliest and most common form of literature that both of these terms appear in during the 1800's is British documentation of Indian culture and religious texts (Trumpp).

The use of *guru* vs. *gooroo* parallels that of the related term *Hindoo*, which has been overtaken in recent times by *Hindu*. During the early 1800's, *Hindoo* was used much more frequently than its "u" based counterpart and *guru* was seen to always be used slightly more than *gooroo*. (Michel). All of this leads me to believe that *gooroo* and *Hindoo* were initially phonetic spellings that were utilized when transcribing Hindi words by British academics who accessed India through the door that colonialism opened. It can be seen in the chart below that during the early 1800's, *Hindoo* was used much more frequently than its "u" based counterparts (Michel). Visible here, overall use of the word *Hindu/Hindoo* is much higher than the use of *guru/gooroo*. This seems logical given that *Hindoo/Hindu* is a worldwide religion encompassing 15% of the world's population ("The Global

Religious Landscape.”), while *gooroo/guru* is one term among many in the Hindu and Sikh religions. Both “oo” terms peak in use by 1840. By 1867, *Hindu* has surpassed *Hindoo*. *Guru* has always been used in slightly higher frequency than *gooroo* but begins a noticeable upward trend by this time period. Overall, it has not diminished as greatly compared to *guru*, as *Hindoo* has in comparison to *Hindu*.

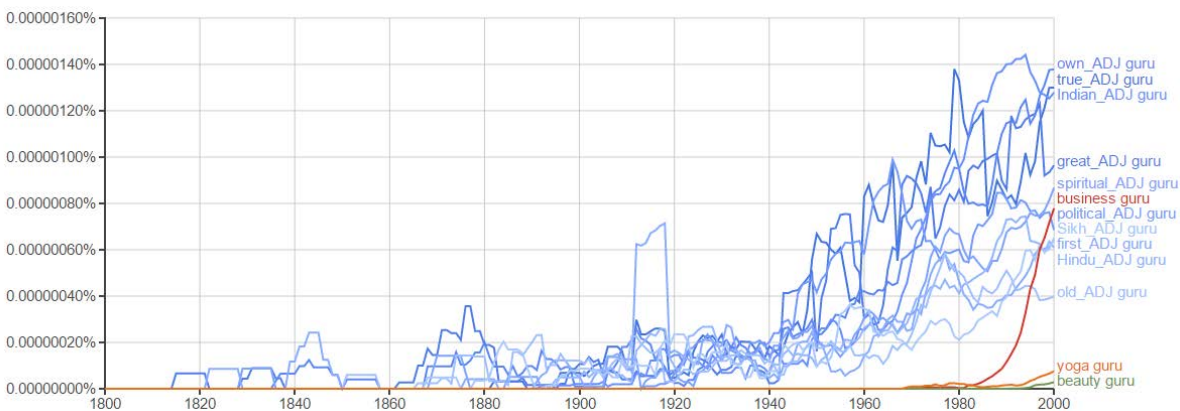


Many loanwords enter the English language when English-speaking people adopt the concept associated with it. An example from class lecture was *sushi*; it entered the English language when people began eating *sushi*. *Guru* has taken a decidedly different path than *sushi*, however. Instead of continuing to represent roughly the same concept, *guru* is now commonly stripped of its religious context and formality.

Today, the term *guru* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary both in terms of its original Hindu meaning and its now common, everyday English use: “A Hindu spiritual teacher or head of a religious sect. Also, in general or trivial use: an influential teacher; a mentor; a pundit” (“guru, n.”). *Guru* also appears in the Sikh religion with a similar definition: teacher, honored person, religious person or saint” (“The Sikh Gurus”). This definition reflects the dichotomy of the term’s use today: it is largely used to refer to a specialist or teacher by the masses, but there is a definite opposition to this “misinterpreted and misused” word (Howe). This opposition stems mainly from those who practice the Sikh religion today and are frustrated by the modernized, debauched definition (Howe, Singh). Otherwise, *guru* is still largely associated within an Indian context.

Assessing the frequencies of phrases involving *guru* preceded by an adjective, we can see in the chart below that although using *guru* in a religious context is still the most widespread use, using *guru* in a non-religious context has increased rapidly since the 1990's (see Ngram above). *Own guru*, *great guru*, *spiritual guru*, *Indian guru*, and *true guru* all correlate to translations of Sikh religious texts or otherwise documentation of Sikh religion (Trumpp). From there, it can be seen that the non-secular terms *business guru*, *political guru*, *yoga guru* and *beauty guru* have all relatively taken off since the 1980's.

One major non-religious application of *guru* today is in business culture, as illustrated by this Google Ngram Viewer chart:



According to the Language Monitor's computation of international English business documents, *guru* was the fifteenth most used buzzword of 2015 in business literature (Top Trending). This reflects the heightened use of *guru* in non-religious settings. What may be most striking in the Language Monitor's assessment of the term *guru* is its decidedly technical definition compared to traditional dictionaries. When they give examples of the term, they use "rocket scientist" and "brain surgeon", which convey the mastery associated with *guru*, but is entirely stripped of the originally religious context.

In his 2015 book on the internet marketing business, Brian Johnson prides himself with the thought of becoming a *business guru* as he gained internet notoriety by posting informational content online and was invited to a conference on marketing: "yes, I had my sights set on becoming a Goo Roo (aka guru)!" (Johnson). This is another representation of the semantic shift of the term from being used in a very narrow, religious context, to being used to apply to a person with superior knowledge on a subject, commonly applied in business discourses.

The term *guru* is used off the cuff in many internet discourses: *beauty guru*, *workout guru*, *financial guru*, etc. The term *beauty guru* represents a burgeoning discourse of internet communication about "beauty" topics – frequently makeup, skin care, and hair care. In a female-centric culture, *Beauty gurus* sometimes identify themselves as *gurus*, while others are identified as *beauty gurus* by the media and fans. Today, some of the most popular YouTube entertainers who identify their YouTube channels under the category of "Beauty and Lifestyle" have millions of subscribers and hundreds of millions of views. A beauty YouTuber by the channel name Zoella is largely regarded as the most popular *beauty guru*, with just under 9.5 million subscribers and a combined 591,450,370 views of her posted videos ("Zoella"). In cases as extreme as this, it may be easier to understand the application of the word *guru* to these entertainers; they have cult-like fan bases and are informative and entertaining enough to capture the attention of millions of people across the world.



Most now-famous *beauty gurus* (“famous” referring to multi-million YouTube subscribers) started their internet careers between 2007-2010 (Mahlmeister), which correlates with the first reference of “Beauty Guru” in the Google Books database in 2008 (Michel). This occurrence also lines up with when Brian Johnson first considered the idea of becoming a *guru* based on his success starting in 2008 (Johnson). It leaves us with the question: in the search for a term to describe a very knowledgeable, influential individual in relatively new fields, why do we choose a solemn religious term from another culture?

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis dictates that language influences perception. In the case of the word *gooroo*, the apparently phonetic spelling that does not look like native English may add to the inherent “otherness”, or “foreignness” of the term, potentially influencing one’s perception of the culture that it stems from. “U” spellings may seem more succinct, while “oo” spellings may appear more like an English attempt at transcription.

There is a powerful argument made by some scholars today that the spelling *Hindoo* is representative of the stereotype created of Indian culture in the time of British colonialism, because it was the attempted spelling that was then associated with the reports of the foreign, far away Indian culture. As articulated by Michael Altman, an assistant professor of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, “During this period [the colonialist documentation of India], people in India did not present themselves to an American audience. Rather, they were represented by American and European authors to an American audience and in that process, they were represented as *Hindoos*” (Altman). Altman closely links the English spelling of *Hindoo* to the stereotypes and biases that Colonial English speakers impressed upon a generalized Indian culture. This theory can also be applied to the term *guru*. In the case of both words, their spellings stem from English speaking colonizers transcribing the language of a colonized people and thusly influencing English speaking people’s perception.

To summarize, the semantic shift of *guru* reflects different levels of sensitivity toward the original Hindi meaning within the English language’s recent history. Today, *guru* is still most often used in a religious sense, but its denatured form has been incorporated into both professional communities and everyday language with a meaning that does not reflect its Hindu and Sikh origins. Many people find its casual use to be appropriative and diluted, but this argument has not gained enough momentum to prevent the word *guru* from skyrocketing in use over the last couple of decades and becoming assimilated into the English language.

## References

- Altman, Michael J. "Hindoos, Hindu, Spelling, and Theory." *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*. 03 Sept. 2014.
- Dowling, Bernie, ed. *Inspired By . . . : WAG Short Stories, #3*. Vol. 3. Lawnton: Bent Banana, 2015.
- "The Global Religious Landscape." Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. The Pew Charitable Trusts, 17 Dec. 2012.
- "Guru." Merriam-Webster.com.
- "guru, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press.
- Howe, Shivani. "Shining a Little Light on the Term Guru." *Elephantjournal.com*. Waylon H. Lewis Enterprises, 5 Mar. 2012.
- Johnson, Brian G. *Trust Funnel: Leverage Today's Online Currency to Grab Attention, Drive and Convert Traffic, and Live a Fabulous Wealthy Life*. 2015.
- Leland, Charles Godfrey. *Gypsy Sorcery and Fortune Telling: Illustrated by Incantations, Specimens of Medical Magic, Anecdotes, Tales*. New Hyde Park, NY: U, 1963.
- Marshall, Peter. "The British Presence in India in the 18th Century." BBC. BBC, 2 Feb. 2011.



"mahant, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2015.

Mahlmeister, Chrissy. "These 29 Famous Beauty Gurus' First YouTube Videos Are Proof That Hard Work Pays Off." Mtv.com. Viacom International Inc, 13 Aug. 2015.

McWhorter, John H. *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*. 2001.

"Other Religions." Pewforum.org. Pew Research Center, 12 Dec. 2012.

"The Sikh Gurus." Sikhism Religion of the Sikh People. 2011.

Singh, Simran Jeet. "10 Things I Wish Everyone Knew About Sikhism." Faithstreet.com. 18 Nov. 2014.

"Top Trending Business Buzzwords for Global English in 2015." The Global Language Monitor. 17 June 2015.

Trumpp, Ernst. *The Ādi-Granth, Or: The Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*. London: 1877.

"Zoella." YouTube.

# Heavy Petting

Abigail Orzech

Cite as: Orzech, Abigail. 2021. Heavy Petting. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 134-138.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

**Pet** (n.): a domesticated animal kept for pleasure rather than utility. **Pet** (n.): a person (usually child) who is treated with unusual kindness or consideration. **Pet** (v.): to stroke or caress. **Pet** (v.): to engage in amorous embracing, caressing, and kissing. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

**Heavy petting** (v.): an occasion when two people kiss, hold, and touch each other in a sexual way, but do not have sex. (Cambridge Dictionary)

**Heavy petting** (v.): non-coital physical contact between two people involving sexual stimulation of the genitals. (Oxford English Dictionary)

How did something once meaning a fluffy, domesticated animal friend or adored child come to mean something so different? Why is “heavy petting” as a phrase not very common anymore even though sexual exploration and expression are more accepted now than ever? In this analysis, I explain some reasons why this change in meaning occurred and why we tend to associate this term with older generations and ways of life.

## Linguistic Origins

“Heavy petting” can be broken into its two parts for a heartier explanation of the phrase. “Heavy”, deriving from the Old English “hefig” (Online Etymology Dictionary) and typically meaning having great physical weight; or serious, grave, or being something of importance, is still used in that sense today. “Petting” is a verb derived from the noun “pet”, which has an unclear definite origin, but is thought to have roots in the Middle Irish word “peta”, meaning a tame, or domesticated animal (Wiktionary). “Petting” in contemporary English can be defined as “to make a pet of, treat as a pet;...to fondle, to stroke” (Oxford English Dictionary). Put those two seemingly innocent words together, however, and you get a phrase that means something a little less innocent. “Heavy petting” was coined in early 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. as a euphemism for erotic contact between two people in which they engage in anything from kissing and cuddling to full on foreplay (Delvin, 2015). There have been some distinctions between “light petting” and “heavy petting” such as in Catherine Chilman’s book *Adolescent Sexuality in a Changing America* in which light petting is described as “feeling above the waist” and heavy petting is described as “feeling below the waist” (Chilman, 1980, p.111). “Heavy petting” was used most often, though, because adding the “heavy” gave it an air of seriousness. Parents, news outlets, and religious groups were always warning their adolescents and teens about the dangers of “heavy petting”. “Heavy” seems to have given their decrees more weight. So, why “petting”? One obvious theory is that those who engage in “heavy petting” are stroking, fondling, and caressing each other, comparative to how one would pet a cat or other beloved animal (hopefully not in the same way, but the image is there). We paw at each other, if you will. Another hypothesis compares the act to the social grooming many animals partake in where they clean and maintain another’s body/fur/hair. This act is important in pair bonding and can be used as a means of social interaction (Krueger, Jin). “Heavy petting” can certainly be a bonding experience and was once a major social

event for young people. However, the most likely reason, I think, is because of the severe social stigma that surrounded sex at the time “heavy petting” came to rise. Americans love euphemisms, especially around sex. There is the baseball metaphor where you have to pass each “base” before you can “score home”. You could “knock boots”, you could “do the no pants dance”, you could partake in some “hanky panky”, or you and a partner can play around with “heavy petting”. Each of these, “heavy petting” in particular, is meant to make the act sound as innocent as possible. The church couldn’t condemn you to hell for something as sweet sounding as “petting”, right? Another interesting aspect of this phrase is the roles it assigns. “Petting” gives the idea of a “petter” and a “pettee”, and often we will automatically assign the (by social norm) more dominant “petter” to the man and the (by social norm) more submissive “pettee” to the woman. These roles further perpetuate the idea (in heterosexual couples at least) that women have something inherent in their sexuality that can be taken and that men are seeking to take it. I discuss how “heavy petting” contributes to the upholding of the believed sanctity of virginity later in this paper.

## Social Context

The first recorded use of “petting” in the sense meaning to kiss/caress/fondle is found in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s debut novel *This Side of Paradise*, published in 1920 that tells the story of Amory Blaine, a Princeton student who is coming of age in WWI era U.S.

### “PETTING”

**On the Triangle trip Amory had come into constant contact with that great current American phenomenon, the “petting party.”**

**None of the Victorian mothers—and most of the mothers were Victorian—had any idea how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed. “*Servant-girls are that way,*” says Mrs. Huston-Carmelite to her popular daughter. “They are kissed first and proposed to afterward.”**

**But the Popular Daughter becomes engaged every six months between sixteen and twenty-two, when she arranges a match with young Hambell, of Cambell & Hambell, who fatuously considers himself her first love, and between engagements the P. D. (she is selected by the cut-in system at dances, which favors the survival of the fittest) has other sentimental last kisses in the moonlight, or the firelight, or the outer darkness.**

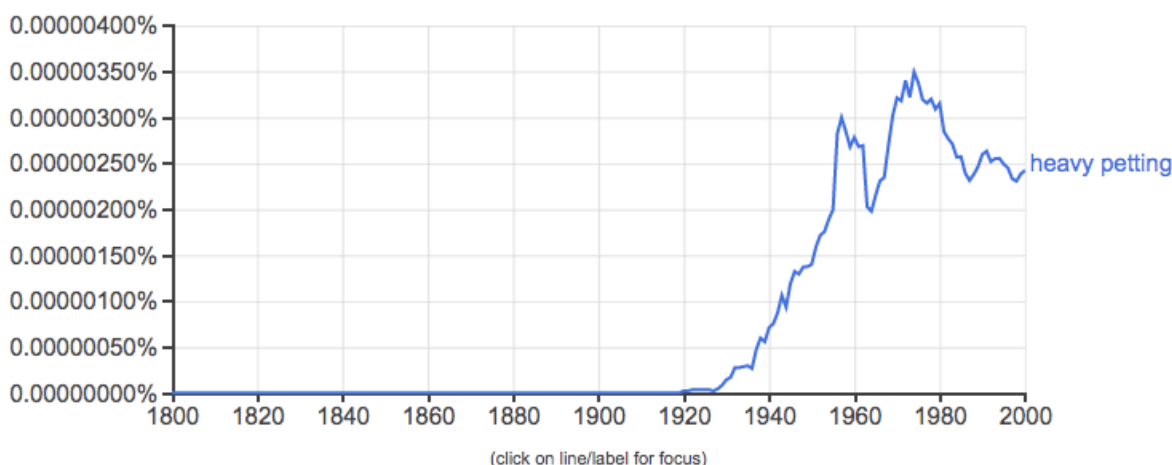
### Excerpt from *This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

In this context, Fitzgerald’s character is referring to “that great current American phenomenon, the ‘petting party’”. “Petting parties” became all the rage in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which was a time of shifting moral and social values. WWI had just ended and the repressed society was looking to grow and flourish and have fun. Jazz music, prohibition (still with loads of drinking), flapper culture, shorter dresses, and dancing took over the social scene for young people. “Petting parties” were another element to their fun; these parties were places for young people to get together and explore sex without actually having sex. “Petting parties” weren’t orgies or swinging parties; everyone mostly stuck to one partner and full intercourse was never on the menu (Sartore). These events found young people kissing, touching, and cuddling, but not sleeping with one another. “Petting” took on many other names as well; “snugglepupping” which was mostly used in flapper culture and by flappers who liked to be called “snuggle puppies”, “necking” was the term most commonly used in the south, “mushing” which saw the most action in western U.S., “fussing” was the Midwest’s way of eluding to the fun, and “cuddling” and “spooning” which were used nearly everywhere (Sartore). This was a time in which young people were trying to shed the Victorian-style social restrictions and experience their

sexuality before settling down into a committed relationship or marriage. Of course, with something as controversial as pre-marital sex was in the 1920s and 1930s, there was also major push-back against the act by older generations and religious groups. Organizations like the *Women's Christian Temperance Union and League of American Women in New York* frequently spoke out against petting parties and flapper culture. One wife of a Princeton professor, Mrs. Augustus Trowbridge, was quoted when giving a speech to Wellesley College students admonishing the “vulgarity and revolting badness” of “petting parties” (Sartore).

## The Rise of Heavy Petting

Even amid religious shaming and reprimanding from the older generations, “heavy petting” persisted. In the 1920s and 1930s, engaging in “petting sessions” and dating around with multiple partners was the way to popularity for many young people. If you weren't frequenting the dating scene, you were considered a square, a flat-tire, a sissie, or a prude (Sartore). However, the culture continued to shift and after WWII, “going steady” was the new custom (Chilman, 1980, p.108). Young people were more interested in having a special someone than dating around. The increase in more serious relationships also likely influenced the rate of “heavy petting”, as these relationships were thought to be an acceptable context to engage in the erotic behavior. We can see from the Google Ngram chart below that reported rates of “heavy petting” use start to take off in relatively small amounts starting in 1920, but really spikes up around 1940-1957, drops some, and reaches its all-time peak in 1973 before it starts to decline again.



To explain the dramatic rise in the use of “heavy petting” between ~1940-1980, we look mostly to the youth culture that took off in the post WWII era. The strict, religious shackles were loosening. Media was (and remains) a huge influencer to young people, but while movies and TV were seeking to entertain within the confines of societal standards, rock and roll sought to break the rules. It preached young love, rebellion against authority, and independence. Rock and roll has its roots in African American Rhythm and Blues so in this era of regular racism, it was therefore generally classified by white middle-class parents as low-class and tasteless (Khan Academy). A “heavy petting” session with loud, “tasteless, low-class” music playing in the background was the perfect recipe for pissing your parents off and living some of that sweet, sweet freedom and love the rock favorites were singing about. The youth of that day were also seeing the most prosperous economy of any other youth and were able to experience much more leisure time that they could devote to extracurriculars than other generations (Khan Academy). Given this extra free time, paired with the influence of rock and roll, it is no real surprise that “heavy petting” use increased so much.

## Heavy Petting as a Virginity Saver

Sex and sexuality were taboos in our nation for a long time, so comprehensive studies on American sex lives are rare and most likely a bit skewed. However, Alfred Kinsey, an American sexologist who founded the *Institute of Sex Research at Indiana University*, performed a study featuring college-aged (white and middle-class) women in 1953. In this study, Kinsey researched the percentage of women who reported having engaged in “heavy petting” and those who have engaged in intercourse. The numbers reported had a pretty sizable gap in between them with 84% of women in his study petting by age 18, but only 10% of them were having intercourse (Chilman, 1980, p. 109). It is theorized that the gap between those having intercourse and those sticking to petting was so large because “heavy petting” kept a woman’s “virginity” intact. The concept of virginity was, and still can be, a huge deal to a lot of people. Especially in the 1950s, women were meant to be pristine virgins until their wedding night. Their entire reputation could be damned if they were “defiled” before marriage. Ms. Lauper said it best, though: girls just want to have fun. “Heavy petting” was a way for ladies to get their kicks without being treated like Hester Prynne. Saying, “Oh, Johnny and I just did some heavy petting in his car”, was taken easier than, “Johnny and I had sex.” Times change, though, and by 1968, researchers Eleanore Luckey and Gilbert Nass performed a similar study to Kinsey’s and found the gap between “heavy petting” and intercourse closing. In this study, it was found that 68% of women tried “heavy petting” by the time they were 19 years old and 43% were having intercourse (Chilman, 1980, p.109). These numbers coincide with the sexual revolution that came along with the late 1960s and into the 1970s.

## The Decline of Heavy Petting

As time moves along, we see the decline of “heavy petting”. As I was gathering research for this paper, I would ask my friends and classmates what their thoughts were on “heavy petting” and about half of them didn’t even know what it was. I’m sure if I asked high school-aged kids today if they knew what “heavy petting” was, I’d get a more resounding “huh?” than I did with my peers. “Heavy petting” is a slang term and such terms move in and out of the social sphere quite rapidly, especially today. The internet has given us a vehicle to spit out any word, previously meaning something else like “sick” or a new invention like “FOMO” (Fear of Missing Out), and turn it into a regularly used/recognized word for a majority of the internet-using population. “Heavy petting” was mostly employed before the internet’s time, though, and it has since faded in use to be replaced by more common word for the act. Kids these days “hook up”, “make out”, “mack on”, “booty call”, and/or meet up for casual, “friends with benefits” relations. Nowadays, those who know what “heavy petting” is really only associate it with our parents or our parents’ parents. I think “heavy petting”’s place in today’s vernacular is best summed up by this Urban Dictionary definition submitted by a one Bob Elva in 2008 (Urban Dictionary):

7



### heavy petting

A term usually used in health [classes](#) to describe the act of [mutual masturbation](#); i.e. playing with each others' [junk](#). This term has never before been used outside of such classes.

As with most slang, “heavy petting” has fizzled out of use for most people. Its associations with the uptight, shaming, and outdated culture from which it derived most likely had a hand in its demise, so another reason could be due to the more open and free-flowing attitudes many youth of the present and recent past have toward sex and sexual expression. While obviously still not accepted by everyone, particularly not the people still using “heavy petting” in seriousness, sexuality is more talked about and celebrated than ever before. Those saying “heavy petting” today are typically in the older

generations and are typically saying it like it's a mortal sin. Most other instances use it as a comical factor like in the book *Caviar Dogs: The Essential Guide to Heavy Petting* by William Davis which illustrates human-pet relationships, or *Heavy Petting: Romantic Advice From My Cat* by Elizabeth Nickles and Tamara Asseyev which puts a humorous, cat's-eye point of view on massages and other romantic acts (Davis, 2008; Nickles 1994). "Heavy petting" seems outdated and humorous when used today, but language is always flowing and plenty of it gets recycled. Maybe my generation will be warning our kids about the dangers of "heavy petting" too.

## References

- "Heavy petting (def. 13b)." Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/85246?redirectedFrom=heavy+petting#eid1930356>.
- "Heavy petting." Cambridge Dictionary, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/heavy-petting](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/heavy-petting).
- "Heavy." Online Etymology Dictionary, [www.etymonline.com/search?q=heavy](http://www.etymonline.com/search?q=heavy).
- "Pet." Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pet](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pet).
- "Pet." Oxford English Dictionary, [https://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=p&\\_searchBtn=Search](https://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=p&_searchBtn=Search).
- "Peta." Wiktionary, [en.wiktionary.org/wiki/peta#Middle\\_Irish](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/peta#Middle_Irish).
- Khan Academy. "Popular culture and mass media in the 1950s." [www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1950s-america/a/popular-culture-and-mass-media-cnx](http://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1950s-america/a/popular-culture-and-mass-media-cnx).
- "Heavy petting." Urban Dictionary, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=heavy+petting>
- Chilman, C. S. (1980). *Adolescent Sexuality in a Changing American Society: Social and Psychological Perspectives*. United States: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health.
- Davis, William. *Caviar Dogs: The Essential Guide to Heavy Petting*. Abington Media Services, 2008.
- Delvin, David. "Petting: what is it and what does it involve." *netdoctor*, 4 Jan. 2015, [www.netdoctor.co.uk/healthy-living/sex-life/a2231/what-is-petting/](http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/healthy-living/sex-life/a2231/what-is-petting/).
- Elva, Bob. "Heavy petting (def. 7)." Urban Dictionary, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=heavy+petting](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=heavy+petting).
- Fitzgerald, Francis Scott. *This side of paradise*. Scribner, 1977.
- Krueger, David, and Lanlan Jin. "Social Grooming in Primates." Reed College, [www.reed.edu/biology/professors/srenn/pages/teaching/web\\_2008/dklj\\_site\\_final/adaptive.html](http://www.reed.edu/biology/professors/srenn/pages/teaching/web_2008/dklj_site_final/adaptive.html).
- Nickles, Elizabeth, et al. *Heavy Petting: Romantic Advice From My Cat*. Hyperion, 1994.
- Sartore, Melissa. "How 'Cuddle Parties' Became the Tinder of the 1920s." *Weird History*, [www.ranker.com/list/1920s-cuddle-parties/melissa-sartore](http://www.ranker.com/list/1920s-cuddle-parties/melissa-sartore).



# Househusband

Lynn Charara

Cite as: Charara, Lynn. 2021. Househusband. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 139-143.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Though I am familiar with both the concept of *househusbands* and a few *househusbands*, I had never heard anyone use that exact term to describe men who stay at home and take care of their children and their homes. I was definitely familiar with terms such as *stay-at-home dad* and *full-time father*, but I had never even come across the term *househusband* until 2016. Considering how often we encounter the word *housewife*, be it in conversation, in articles, or in movies and the news, the scarcity of the use of the word *househusband* caught my attention.

The word *househusband*, at first glance, looks like the masculine equivalent of the term *housewife*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *househusband* is defined as “a husband or male partner who carries out the household role and duties traditionally associated with a housewife; typically one who does not go out to work.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016) It is first used as a hypothetical concept in E.A. Leatham’s *Charmione* in 1858: “A crowd of house-husbands—if the term be admissible in default of house-wives—sauntering along among the crockery-stalls in search of pots and pans” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). It continues to be used as a fictional notion into the mid-twentieth century, such as in the British magazine *Punch* in 1932: “Men, who, although they may be seen nowadays engaged in various household tasks, have never become house-husbands” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). The term *househusband* becomes more frequently used in the 1960’s, and peaks in 1983, according to Google Ngram Viewer. In this timespan, women become more present in the workforce and some men opt to stay at home. Even at its peak, however, *househusband* is used significantly less frequently than *housewife*, defined as “a (typically married) woman whose main occupation is managing the general running of a household, such as caring for her family, performing domestic tasks, etc,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). The main difference between *househusband* and *housewife* is that the latter refers to women, while the prior refers to men. So how do our societal expectations of gender roles affect the use of the term *househusband*? Can it be considered the mirror-image of the term *housewife*? And how do its meaning and use differ from those of its ‘synonyms,’ such as *stay-at-home dad* and *homemaker*?



Table A

The first place I thought to look in order to see what people think of the term *househusband* was Urban Dictionary. The five definition entries available ranged from describing househusbands as “amazing” and “supportive” to labeling such men as “cowards” and “lower than unemployed”. All but one of these definitions related the term back to traditional gender roles of the woman as the nurturer and housekeeper and the man as the breadwinner. The definition I found most interesting stated that *househusband* is “a term that shouldn't even exist due to thousands of years of sociobiological and anthropological evidence in gender role”. In other words, the user who posted this definition, along with many other individuals, believe that it is natural for a man to go out and work and for women to be housewives, and that the reversal of these roles is not only odd, but also goes against ‘human nature’. Another interesting trend I found in the definitions of *househusband* is that they often referenced unemployment, an element that the definition of *housewife* lacked. This goes to reinforce the social expectation that a man's first option should be entering the workforce, while a woman should be staying at home and caring for the children.

In the article *Men Don't Do This Sort of Thing: A Case Study of the Isolation of Househusbands* (1998), Calvin D. Smith writes about the difference in the social perceptions of househusbands and housewives. He argues that there are a lot less househusbands than there are housewives in society, and that men who take on housekeeping roles are ostracized and isolated. The explanation provided for this phenomenon is that men are not considered naturally nurturing like women are, and therefore, their taking on of housekeeping roles is unmanly. The author states that “the consequence of the naturalization of gender is that men do not have legitimately available to them the status of full-time child career and housekeeper”, and that the discourse of masculinity has limited men to the workplace just as the discourse of femininity has limited women to the home (Smith, 1998, p. 140). In his interviews with eleven Australian househusbands, Smith found that the men faced challenges of illegitimacy by non-househusband male peers and by housewife mothers. The fact that they were not accepted by women with the same occupation as theirs is proof that *househusband* is not the male equivalent of *housewife*. These labels clearly bear different social associations and perceptions, with the latter accepted more comfortably than the first.

A more in-depth examination of people's perception of *househusbands* is described in Diane Keyser Wentworth's and Robert M. Chell's article *The Role of Househusband and Housewife as Perceived by a College Population* (2001). The authors recruited 526 undergraduate and graduate psychology students between the ages of 19 and 55 from a private university in the northeastern United States. The research project included answering a questionnaire of 51 questions about househusbands and housewives. The researchers hypothesized that there are large differences in the perception of househusbands versus housewives, and that women would be more accepting than men of non-traditional gender roles, and the results of the study supported their hypotheses. Though women had more egalitarian views, the sample of students as a whole reacted more negatively towards the concept of househusband than to that of housewife. However, despite the overall negative reaction to the concept of *househusband*, role reversal is becoming a more readily available option for families with working women.

So then, what do we call a man who stays at home, takes care of the kids, and completes domestic chores? In the article *Feminist Linguistic Reform and Social Change* (2006), Jo Winters and Anne Pauwels analyze data from an online survey of English-dominant speakers in different regions of the world in order to determine the preferred term used to describe men who stay at home and look after their children. The set categories included “stay at home +parent,” “house +spouse,” “house+parent,” “home +noun,” “institutional +child carer,” “unemployed parent,” “unknown,” and “others.” The survey found “stay-at-home +parent,” or “stay at home dad,” in this case, to be most popular in the U.S. and Canada, selected by 50.7% and 49.1% of people in those regions, respectively. This category was selected by 9.7%, 11.1% and 15.3% in Australia, Singapore, and the U.K. respectively. The option of describing ‘men who stay at home to care for their children’ as *househusbands* was selected by far less

Canadian (9.4%) and American (16.3%) participants than by Australian (45.2%) and Singaporean (55.6%) participants and participants from the U.K. (55.6%). The “home +noun” (e.g., homemaker, homemaker) was selected less frequently than *househusband* or *stay-at-home dad*, but it still seems to be more popular in the U.S. (5%) and Canada (7.5%) than in Australia (3.2%), Singapore (11.1%) and the U.K. (4.2%). Though *househusband* seems to have originated in North America, it is now less prevalent in that region. The authors explain that the variance in the preference of the term *househusbands* in different countries “reflects linguistic and social processes of spread and expansion associated with socially induced and mediated language change” (Pauwels and Winter, 2006, p. 28).

The authors then go on to examine the media’s use of the two most popular naming categories, *stay-at-home father* and *househusband*. For the most part, the proportions of *househusband* and *stay-at-home father* in published newspapers in the selected regions reflected the data collected from the online survey. The only exceptions were the more prevalent use of *househusband* in Canadian newspapers than in the online survey sample, and less difference between the two terms in Australian newspapers than indicated in the survey. In conclusion, the authors explained that *stay-at-home father* is becoming more popular than *househusband*, due to what was described as “a problematisation of *househusband* based on an analogy with *housewife*, which is not a preferred form” (Pauwels and Winter, 2006, p. 33). They consider the concept of the *housewife* to have had a history as a derogatory label, and that its parallel is equally problematic in terms of feminist linguistic reform. That being said, whereas *househusband* may have been the more popular option at a certain point in time, *stay-at-home father* is gaining popularity for two reasons: first, it was found to be a more accurate representation of the role of men who stay at home to look after their children, and second, it was not in any way related to terms that could be and have been used in derogatory contexts to both men and women.

*Househusband* also seems to be losing its popularity to *stay-at-home father* due to the latter’s focus on the parenting aspect of the role it describes. As indicated in Smith’s article *Men Don’t Do This Sort of Thing*, most of the househusbands interviewed thought of their current state as temporary, until their children start attending school and no longer need to be looked after all day long. The men chose to justify their being househusbands by emphasizing the nurturing aspect of their role more so than the housekeeping aspect in an attempt to legitimize their status. Favoring *stay-at-home dad* over *househusband* is not exclusive to interpersonal interactions, however, and can also be found in popular culture. Even in movies with plots about househusbands, the men are never described as such, but rather they are labeled in relation to their paternal role. Examples of this includes the movie titles “Mr. Mom” (1983), “Daddy Daycare” (2003), and “Stay-at-Home Dads” (2014). This supports the concept mentioned by Pauwel and Winter that there is something typically pejorative about the label of “house +spouse,” be it *housewife* or *househusband*. These descriptions emphasize housework and domestic chores, whereas their supposed ‘synonyms’ *stay-at-home dad* and *stay-at-home mom* focus on the more noble task of nurturing one’s children. Adding stereotypical gender roles only bolsters people’s difficulties in accepting the label of *househusband*. Not only does this term mean that a man is taking care of domestic tasks, but it also indicates that he is ‘downgrading’ from providing for his family ‘like a man’ to cleaning up after everyone ‘like a woman.’ This could explain why people tend to prefer *stay-at-home dad* to *househusband*. It has a more ‘positive’ connotation, as it carries with it the noble task of being emotionally invested in raising their children. It is important to note, however, that the inclination towards *stay-at-home dad* is more prevalent in interpersonal interactions than in written sources.

Though Smith uses the term *househusband* frequently throughout his article, it is very rarely used by the men he interviewed. Instead, they often referred to themselves as *fathers*, *dads*, or *caregivers*. This is in line with Pauwels’ and Winter’s finding that *househusband* is used more frequently in newspaper articles than was predicted based on the online surveys. The discrepancy in the uses of the two terms would also explain why Google Ngram Viewer displays the dominance of *househusband*

over *stay-at-home dad*: these graphs do not reflect people’s usage of the words in everyday interactions, but rather how they are used in news articles and scholarly sources (Table B). Another interesting finding, that I came across, is that while my search for the word *househusband* yielded results in scholarly dictionaries, there were no entries for *stay-at-home dad/father* or *stay at home dad/father*. *Househusband* seemed to be the more scholarly or formal term for the concept it describes, partly explaining its larger presence in formal writing than in speech. Keeping in mind people’s distinct perceptions of the terms *housewife* and *househusband*, it is thought-provoking to learn that though *housewife* is used in both formal and informal (social and scholarly) contexts, *househusband* seems more limited to the scholarly sphere and replaced by *stay-at-home dad* in social interactions.



**Table B**

When I started doing my research for this paper, there were two questions I aimed to find answers to about the word *househusband*: first, why is it used so infrequently if it appears to be the male equivalent of *housewife*? Second, what is the difference between describing someone as a *househusband* versus describing him as a *stay-at-home dad*? The research gathered for this paper showed that society clearly differentiates between the concepts of *housewife* and *househusband*, viewing the first as a ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ role for a woman to take, and the latter as an ‘illegitimate’ and ‘emasculating’ role for a man to take. This leads to a negative reaction to the reversal of the roles of the working man and housewife, leading to the subsequent averting of the use of the term *househusband*. The research also showed that in daily social interactions, people would rather call such men *stay at home dads/fathers*, in an attempt to steer emphasis away from traditional and oftentimes limiting gender roles and place that focus on parenting. The combination of those two factors provides an explanation for the infrequent use of the term *househusband*, despite the presence of househusbands in society.

## References

- “Househusband.” Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 2016.  
<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/283504?redirectedFrom=househusband#eid>
- “Househusband.” Urban Dictionary. Urban Dictionary, February 2, 2016.  
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=house+husband&defid=8804011>
- “Househusband.” Urban Dictionary. Urban Dictionary, November 20, 2009.  
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=house+husband&defid=8804011>

- “Househusband.” Urban Dictionary. Urban Dictionary, February 8, 2004.  
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=house+husband&defid=8804011>
- “Housewife.” Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Smith, Calvin D. 1998. Men don't do this sort of thing: A case study of the social isolation of househusbands. *Men and Masculinities* 1 (2): 138-72.
- Wentworth, Diane Keyser, and Robert M. Chell. 2001. The role of househusband and housewife as perceived by a college population. *The Journal of Psychology* 135 (6): 639-50.
- Winter, Jo, and Anne Pauwels. 2006. Men staying at home looking after their children: Feminist linguistic reform and social change. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 16 (1): 16-36.

# Ixnay

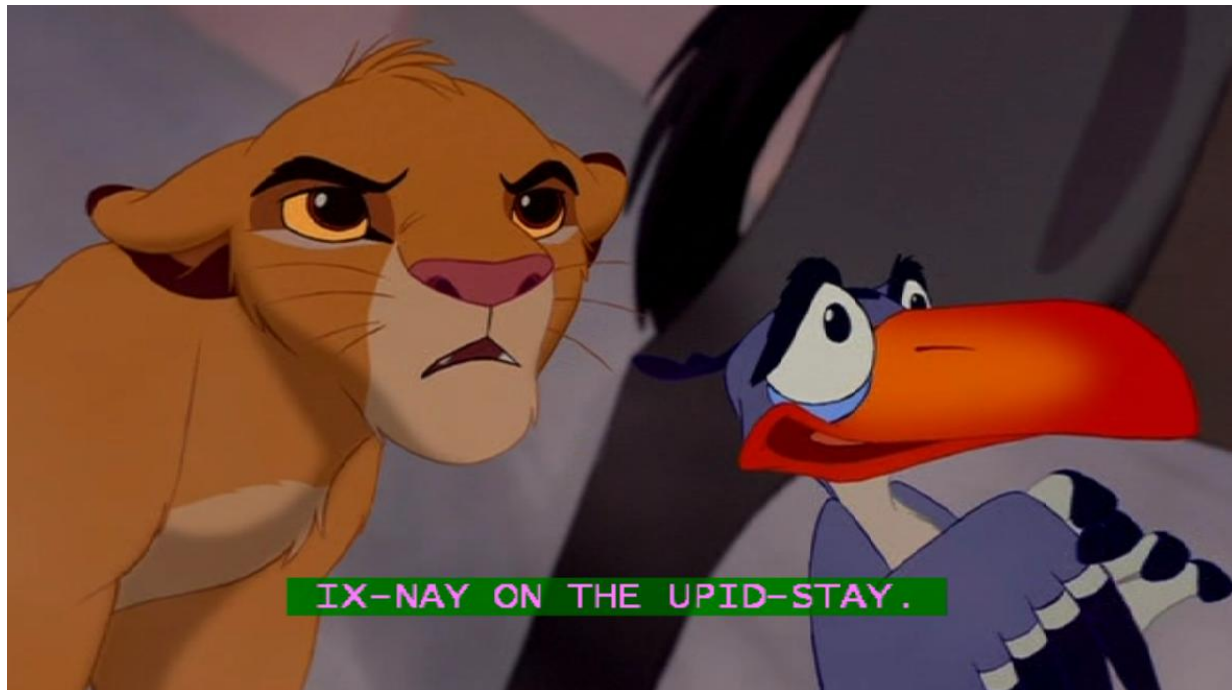
Lisette Wittbrodt

Cite as: Wittbrodt, Lisette. 2021. Ixnay. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 144-148.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Many people know that “ixnay” is the fairly common Pig Latin word for “nix”, heard in informal American English speech. But how many people know that “ixnay” is considered a real word and can even be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)? 99% of the words in English are borrowed words (McWhorter), including the word “nix”, from the German word for “no”. In this paper, we will address the origins and popularity changes of “ixnay” since the 1800s and the significant factors that led to its fame and establishment as an official word according to the OED. We will also discuss Pig Latin, the language into which it was created, and the significance that Pig Latin and other “secret” languages can have on societies.

Many languages have created their own “sub”-languages that only work with a parent, base language. This means that these “secret” languages have 100% borrowed words, although some people may claim that these sub-languages are not real languages, or even real dialects. In English, the most common of these sub-languages is Pig Latin. Pig Latin is commonly associated with children or considered a simple childish word game. Many adults today do not use Pig Latin as a common language to speak in, and may even call it a fake language. These same people may maintain metalinguistic beliefs that using “fake” words to describe what they are trying to express is a fine thing to do in an informal context.



Most Americans recognize Pig Latin as a “secret” language they learned in school. The idea behind having a secret language was to shield the meaning of the words from outside listeners. Since



Pig Latin is so widespread in the US now, it doesn't seem to really do its job so well anymore, unless it is spoken very quickly, and the unintended audience is a little out of practice. For the most part, we recognize Pig Latin as a form of English spoken with close friends or in small groups about petty gossip or rumors. Pig Latin tends to trend with kids, and adults associate it mostly with children. Pig Latin appears in several children's movies, including Disney's *The Lion King*, when Zazu says to Simba, "Ixnay on the upidstay," meaning "No more mention of stupid [hyenas]," as well as *Young Frankenstein* when Igor says to Dr. Frankenstein, "Ixnay on the ottenray!", although neither of the characters who use the Pig Latin are children. Both of these quotes also use incomplete Pig Latin, leaving the words "on" and "the" out of the Pig Latin sentence. Instead, they use the common phrase "ixnay on", which is recorded in many instances in history. Pig Latin, though, is not the only secret English language used by children. The late '90s and early 2000s television show, *Zoom*, made Ubby Dubby a popular secret language amongst kids in the USA. Ubby Dubby is similar to Pig Latin in that they both add extra sounds to English words, but Ubby Dubby does not switch around letters in the words like Pig Latin does. Ubby Dubby also is not as widespread and well-known as Pig Latin, which is probably the reason words from Ubby Dubby have not seeped into the everyday common speech of American English speakers like "ixnay" and "amscray" from Pig Latin have.



Many other languages have secret or coded languages, and usually the difference in their phonetic or grammatical structure from their parent language is well-known at least to the native speakers of the parent language. For example, Verlan is a secret language in French where syllables are switched to make slang words. Verlan is one of these words itself; in its original form it's spelled "l'envers", which means "backwards". At least one of these words, "meuf" (which is a backwards form of "femme", meaning woman) has been used so frequently that it has been accepted as a real word in standard French to mean "girl" (Okrent).

While languages like Pig Latin, Ubby Dubby, or Verlan are usually used more for amusement or simple play,

some secret languages had more "sophisticated" uses. "Thieves' Argot", or "Thieves' Cant", and also known by a number of other names, is a secret language that was developed by thieves and criminals in the 1500s in order to communicate and to plot without unveiling information on their illegal activities to anyone else, especially the authorities (Cant). Thieves' Argot is a kind of informal language, but more complex versions of the language have more complex grammars and rules. Most of the simpler versions used words that were "coded" to mean other things, and this type of language coding, and even some of these words, is still used by those practicing "less than legal" activities. While Thieves' Argot is more rarely used in its entirety today, some translations of the cant still exist. The regular English words are encrypted by following an association pattern which can be difficult to crack unless one already knows the double meaning of the encoded word. For example, one source defines "angler" in Thieves' Cant to mean: "Pilferers or petty thieves who with a stick having a hook at the end, steal goods out of shop windows, grates etc. Also someone who 'draws in' victims in order to rob them."<sup>4</sup> The English definition for "angler" is "a person who fishes with a rod and line."<sup>2</sup> One can see

the connection between using a fishing hook to catch fish and using a hooked stick to retrieve items from a shop or luring a victim, as with bait on a fishhook. "Black art" is defined as "the art of picking a lock."<sup>4</sup> The logic here would follow pickpocketing to be a form of show, an artful skill, but also a dark trick to the oblivious and unsuspecting victim. Thieves' Argot also has specific words and phrases to describe time, size, weight, and some other terms that might need to carry more precise meaning for criminals. These word associations can range anywhere from being fairly simple, like these, to very complex, where the true meaning is hidden beneath layers of word correlations. Nevertheless, Thieves' Argot is a successful secret language from English origin. Below is an example of a conversation from Thieves' Cant, taken from the same source as the word definitions.

<p>Thief #1: "Knock-knock, Blackhand an I were flag wavin' bout visiting Papa Porker's crib at seven clean fingers. We're lookin' fer a third gentleman for a pair o' eyes. Interested?"</p> <p>Thief #2: "What style of stuffing ya wanna to borrow ? Who's your uncle?"</p> <p>Thief #1: "Uncle's out of town. We're gonna pick bits.</p> <p>Thief #2: "That's fat lady work. Sounds too boring. I'm not interested."</p> <p>ENGLISH TRANSLATION</p> <p>Thief #1: "Hello, Blackhand and I were planning on burglarizing the Captain of the Guard's house tonight at 1:00 am. We need a third thief to act as lookout. Are you interested?"</p> <p>Thief #2: "What kind of loot are you going to steal? Who's your fence?"</p> <p>Thief #1: "We won't need a fence. We are going for money only."</p> <p>Thief #2: "That's going to be heavy work. Sounds too risky. I'm not interested."</p>
--

#### **An example of Thieves' Cant in conversation (Cant).**

Pig Latin has very few rules, but the rules vary from speaker to speaker. One acceptable way to alter English words is by taking the initial consonant letter or first few consonants and placing them at the end of the word, followed by "-ay". For example, the word "piano" changes to "ianopay". All of the original vowel sounds of the word would remain, just perhaps in a different order. If the word begins with a vowel, one may leave the word alone and simply add "-ay" or "-way" to the end of the word. An example of this is the word "of", which would turn into "ofay" or "ofway". Some speakers of Pig Latin make exceptions to the rule regarding words that begin with a vowel and continue to use the original rule for these words, as in the case of "obliterate", which could turn into "literateobay", or "amphibian", which could transform into "phibianamay". Some Pig Latin speakers end all their words in "-ay", while others end all in "-way", and still others use a mix, based on guidelines of their own. Overall, these variances in the basic rules of Pig Latin do not conflict with each other so much that one speaker's use of a single set of rules is not understood by other speakers who use a different set of rules. The rule variances are more closely related to different dialects, just like in many other languages. Most Pig Latin speakers will agree that "ixnay" is the proper Pig Latin form of the word "nix".

The origin of Pig Latin is not well understood. The spoken language dates at least as far back as the 1800s, and by the mid-1800s, Hog Latin (the name first given to Pig Latin) became recognized in American literature. Pig Latin is not an official language of any nation or state, and it is not recognized as a real language in the professional world. That is, Pig Latin (and any of the other "secret languages" in existence) is not a language that is taught in any public school as a second language, and it is not generally used in formal speech. Exceptions include scattered instances of "ixnay" appearing in certain more formal contexts. "Ixnay" is defined by a contributor to Urban Dictionary as the "Pig Latin word for 'nix' meaning 'nothing' commonly used to indicate something has been cancelled, refused, or stopped" as well as "to cancel, cross-out plans" (Urban Dictionary). Urban Dictionary is the only dictionary that carries a definition for "amscray", Pig Latin for "scram", which suggests this word is only used in very informal situations. However, "ixnay" does show up in the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines "ixnay" as "No; not possibly, not at all" and also "no way; 'enough'."



### Google Ngram Viewer comparison of “ixnay” and “amscray” from 1900 to 2008.

The Google Ngram Viewer above shows a comparison between the written uses of “ixnay” and “amscray” in published English works (case insensitive). “Ixnay” is used consistently more often than “amscray” from the earliest written records of them in 1929. The first appearance of the word “ixnay” is in *Broadway Melody*, a talkie that came out that year. “Ixnay” use spikes way above “amscray” from about 1946 to 1954. Around 1994, the year Disney’s *The Lion King* was released, “ixnay” soars again while “amscray” remains with its regular trend.

The origin of “nix” in English is from the German word “nicht”, meaning “no”, and has been very popular among American English literature. Urban Dictionary defines “nix” as, “No/Njet/Nicht/Nej, the opposite of YES”. This definition is consistent with the definition of “ixnay,” but also includes other synonyms: “nicht”, again meaning “no” in German, and “nej”, the Swedish word for “no”. It is approximately two orders of magnitude more popular throughout written American English accounts than “ixnay”. Interestingly, “nix” and “nicht” are found with approximately the same frequency in British English literature, but “ixnay” does not show up on the Ngram Viewer in British English texts. “Ixnay” eventually reached Britain after the 1940s through American novels, but it never became a coined term to use in writing.<sup>7</sup> American author Mickey Spillane’s famous mystery novels brought a heavy focus to gory details in the mystery and crime genre, and contain many uses of the word “ixnay”. Four books from one of his most successful series were published in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>7</sup> These and other American published mystery novels contribute a significantly to the rise of “ixnay” in writing and are the reason why “ixnay” popularity spiked in the late 1940s. These novels made their way to Britain no earlier than World War II.

The beginnings of the popularity of “ixnay” can be found in a different type of entertainment. The earliest accounts of “ixnay” in American English include various articles from magazines, newspapers, and gazettes, as well as *Broadway Melody*, which is recorded as its first appearance when it is used in a dialogue between two female leads of the story who work closely together as actresses and singers on Broadway. In the 1930s, *The Three Stooges* brought “ixnay” to light among the public fanbase for the iconic show. This television program may be one of the main reasons that “ixnay” began to filter through more types of media after the 1930s. “Ixnay” appears most often in dialogues between friends or close characters and quotes that are written in second person, as well as alongside more casual speech like “totally” or “coppers”, and other words originally borrowed from German, including “kaput” and “verboten”. These trends incline one to conclude that “ixnay” is used in informal speech and writing scenarios. It is possible that since many people agree with the metalinguistic belief that “fake” or obscure words not suitable for formal situations are perfectly acceptable in informal contexts, the use of “inxnay” has dominated in informal literary examples throughout history.

“Ixnay” carries with it a fascinating story through history and its growth to popularity in American English. Pig Latin’s origin is a fuzzy one at best; the term “Pig Latin” doesn’t appear in written form

until the year 1806, but it remains fairly unpopular until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Although “Hog Latin”, the earlier used name of Pig Latin, begins to appear in American English books after 1860. Throughout history, it has been affiliated with children and has been considered a children’s word game or a secret language. The famous Pig Latin word “ixnay” has seeped into standard commonly spoken English starting in the early 1900s. The combination of Thieves’ Argot and the burst of the mystery genre made “ixnay” a trendy word in detective and crime novels, reaching a peak around 1950, when a new passion for mystery novels came into the spotlight. Thieves’ Cant is however, differentiated from traditional forms of Pig Latin even though they are both secret languages. While Thieves’ Argot hides intended meanings through word associations, Pig Latin changes the spelling of the parent word entirely, like many other secret languages do around the world. The mental association between Pig Latin and children hasn’t died; television programs and movies created specifically for kids have used Pig Latin and similar secret languages. Pig Latin is a language born of English and its words are seeping back into English today. “Ixnay” successfully received its own entry in the OED in 2006, and “amscray” may not be very far off in receiving one as well. “Ixnay’s” exciting history of its trend in popularity, as well as its no-so-secret meaning to the general population of English speakers today make it a fascinating linguistic feat: borrowed from the German “nicht”, nix became a popular word in English, and then was translated into Pig Latin, becoming so famous through media and various forms of entertainment that it has now been reborrowed by Pig Latin’s parent language – the language that created it – and assimilated into a common word that is used in informal contexts.

## References

"Cant to English Translation of the simple Thieves' Cant - The slang and coded speech of criminals and assassins." The Thieves Guild.

"History of the Mystery." MysteryNet, MysteryNet and Newfront Productions, Inc.

McWhorter, John. The Power of Babel. HarperCollins.

Okrent, Arika. "The Pig Latins of 11 Other Languages." Mental Floss, Felix Dennis, 23 Apr. 2013.

Quinion, Michael. "Ixnay." World Wide Words, 18 Apr. 2009.

Urban Dictionary. Urban Dictionary, [www.urbandictionary.com/](http://www.urbandictionary.com/).

Images:

[https://68.media.tumblr.com/tumblr\\_l9f61l5u8W1qd0axho1\\_500.jpg](https://68.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_l9f61l5u8W1qd0axho1_500.jpg)

<https://www.bustle.com/articles/43194-13-reasons-pbs-zoom-was-the-best-non-cable-show-from-your-childhood>

<http://www.angelfire.com/stars2/thievesguild/thievescantbook>

# Judeo-Christian

Dominic Colaluca

Cite as: Colaluca, Dominic. 2021. Judeo-Christian. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 149-154.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The word “Judeo-Christian” has seen an interesting alteration in usage in its short lifetime. The word’s use in literature is seemingly limited to the past eight decades, according to Google’s Ngram Viewer, but the metalinguistic implications of “Judeo-Christian” have altered quite drastically in this period. In this paper, I argue that these aforementioned implications have shifted from a commonly accepted set of shared values to a more intense descriptive tool with applications mainly in politics. There is evidence to suggest that in its earliest usage, the word was a non-partisan term used in reference to widely-accepted American values. Today, the evidence points to an extremely partisan and continuously referenced debate term. Although the word’s application to politics do not seem to be exclusive to the present, the weight it carries has evidently increased. Is this due to a degenerative state of American politics? Or rather, have more people continuously left religious organizations associated with the word? These are both prominent questions I examined through my research. Most importantly, I argue that the metalinguistic implications have increased in severity over time, this severity being attributed to the negative emotions surrounding the word’s usage regardless of which political demographic is using it.

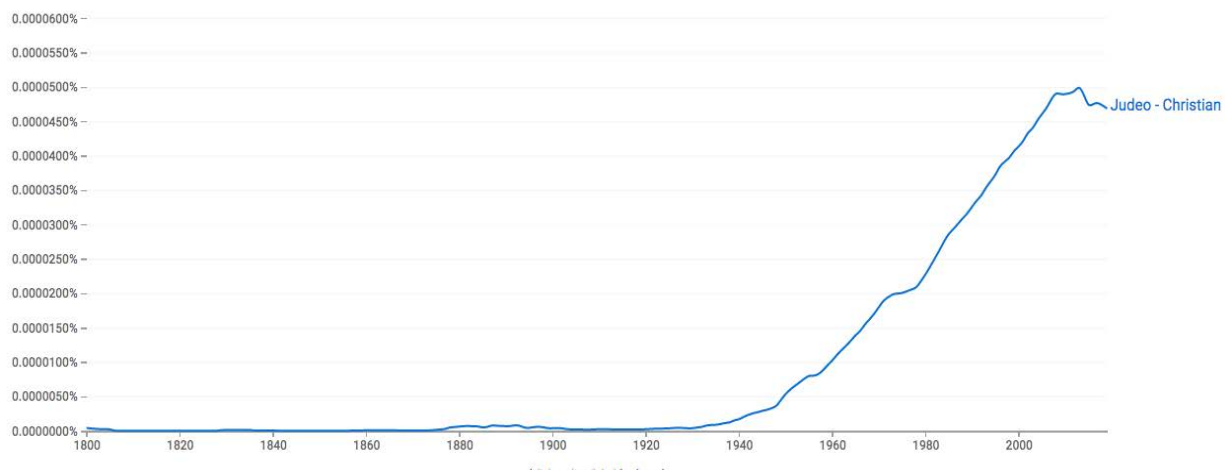


Figure 1: Judeo-Christian (Google Ngram Viewer)

The meaning of Judeo-Christian has fluctuated depending on the speaker, intended audience, and of course the time period. For example, one definition is that Judeo-Christian is “A member of a Judeo-Christian church or community” whereas another states that it is “Designating those religious, ethical, or cultural values or beliefs regarded as being common to both Judaism and Christianity.”(OED). The latter definition is more accurate in regard to the research I have done on past and present usage; typically, the primary focus is on the values of Judeo-Christian traditions. It is noteworthy to consider that the term excludes other faiths from the scope of the conversation such as another considerably prominent Abrahamic faith, Islam. However most interestingly to me is the



cultural implications of the metalinguistic fluctuation of the word. It is seemingly one used to focus on values, traditions, and beliefs however its usage has become more volatile and typically used in argumentative contexts today. What does this imply about politics, human behavior, and the changing state of the world if anything?

In 1941, then-General Eisenhower said that “Our form of government... has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith...With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept but it must be a religion that all men are created equal” (Silk). This exclamation in the infancy of the word’s use has its cultural implications in shared values. Eisenhower implies that as a country, Judeo-Christian values are something we should all share and something that benefits all of the members of the country. Maybe his comfort lies in the fact that the Judeo-Christian set of values was more applicable to a (then) more religious country, or maybe because the values he considered important for a country are those contained in a shared set of Judeo-Christian values. After all, “As of 1952 good Americans were supposed to be, in some sense, committed Judeo-Christians. It was a recent addition to the national creed” (Silk). Note that the implications of the word in the 1940s and 1950s was one with positive implications: we are one community with a shared set of values deeply rooted in religion and tradition. Although some believe these same notions today, the usage of Judeo-Christian has almost become weaponized. I do believe that evidence also implies the lexiculture of this word is an example of an increasingly polarized country (America) and world.

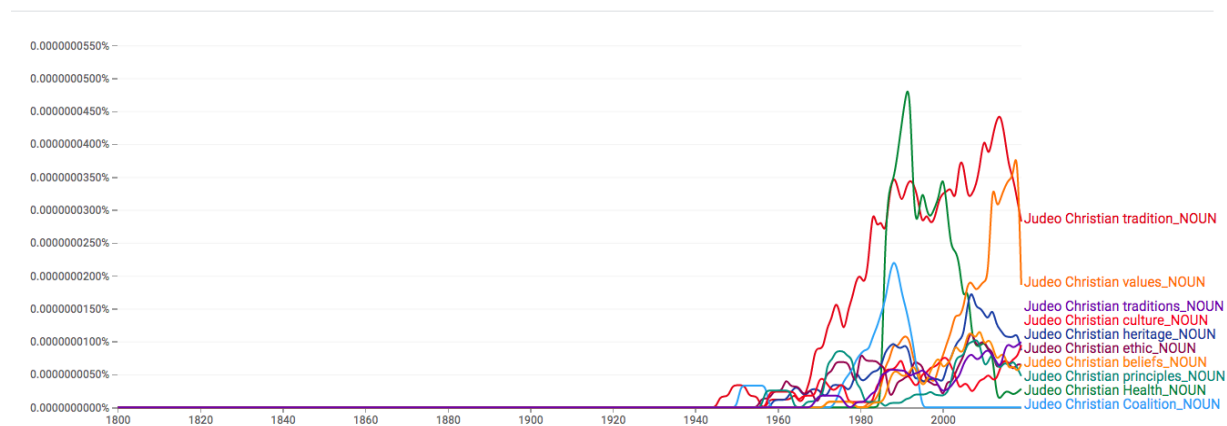
The modern Republican party seems to have kept the same perspective on Judeo-Christian values as Eisenhower did upon his election. For instance, “...Ted Cruz referred to ‘Judeo-Christian values’ as an essential building block of American society” (Haynes). But now, however, it appears as an example of increasing political polarization, high tension in society, and a fearful human population. Social media has been an eye-opening source of evidence. “PdpScam” on twitter states that he is not a religious person, “...but what has made us great is our nation’s foundation in the Judeo-Christian value system... As the Left works to destroy religion, they are really working to undermine the foundation of our country. With no moral compass...”(PdpScam). This pattern of foundational values arises again in the “conservative” side of American values, but what’s different is the tone. The “left” are apparently working to dismantle these values, and to a conservative individual they are essentially ripping America off of its foundation. “Chaz Packan” on twitter is on the same page: “...it’s even more important to stand up for traditional Judeo-Christian Values and our principles as a freedom-loving nation!” (Twitter). Conclusively, for the American conservatives, the same Judeo-Christian principles Eisenhower referenced are being targeted and endangered, signaling a failure of our country and its people.

The liberal side of the American political arena also provides examples of the term being used more aggressively in current times. Rabbi Jack Moline considers the term to be synonymous to “...the religious right...” (Haynes). This is self-explanatory and obvious. It’s the social implications that follow that are interesting to explore. For example, Shalom Holdman, a professor from Vermont, believes that Judeo-Christian is “...a term ‘defined by exclusion,’ implying rejection both of secular values and those of different faiths...” (Haynes). Certainly, the notion that Judeo-Christian is exclusive to the Jewish and Christian faith(s) outlines a rejection of the relevance of other theological or secular perspectives from the community that considers these values to be necessary and foundational. It seems that within the cultural realm, the word has molded to an increasingly volatile and unstable political environment in America. People seem to be using the term as either a source or common characteristic of whoever opposes them politically. For example, Alison Joyce states that she notes “...the ‘judeo-christian’ and ‘magna carta’ dogwhistles to white supremacy” (Twitter). Whether there is historical backing and/or actual evidence to support Alison’s serious claim, her conversation on social media is evidence of this word being weaponized, changing in weight and meaning according to the social changes its speakers are experiencing. A group of researchers examined a phenomena similar to this in which they state “...The argument... suggests that Judeo-Christian tradition is behind



environmental degradation, by prompting the idea of human dominion over all other creatures” (Chuvieco). So, if the conservatives of America are worried Judeo-Christian values are being torn away from the country’s foundation, what are the liberals saying? On this side of the political arena, separation of church and state is a pivotal and constitutional American concept. Implying that Judeo-Christian values should be foundational to a country is offensive to this demographic considering that it does not encompass the diversity, especially religious diversity, of the population. Whether the intricacies of the political arena are to be explored or left alone, it is clear that Judeo-Christian has been picked up in the current American debate as either a cherished set of values for one side, or a terrifying doctrine that threatens Americans for the other.

Whether or not the state of American politics is in shambles, the previously-mentioned usages of Judeo-Christian are clearly an example of a word changing along with a culture changing. Increasingly polarized and heated debate, especially in the political arena, are evidently an area in which Judeo-Christian is used to either attack the opposition or reinforce one’s own values or beliefs. However, my question as to whether the alteration in usage is due to a drop in religious members of Judeo-Christian faiths produced some interesting answers. More importantly, the answers arose in searching for Judeo-Christian traditions, in contrast to Judeo-Christian values. Both values and traditions are seemingly the most referenced collocates to the term in question most recently, evident in both research and more specifically Google’s Ngram Viewer.



**Figure 2: Judeo-Christian + nouns (Google Ngram Viewer)**

After searching for articles and information on Judeo-Christian traditions, I gathered a lot of evidence that there is a culture of skepticism on the term’s validity in general, its political implications, and alteration in metalinguistic relevance. In an editorial written by Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski, they examined a piece titled “The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition” written by Arthur Cohen. The general theme here is that “...there is no Judeo-Christian tradition; this tradition is an ideologically motivated myth” (Nathan and Topolski, 9). The metalinguistic implications that are noteworthy in this regard are that some philosophers, politicians, and anthropologists seem to devalue the traditionally accepted meaning of the term, even referencing it as a myth. Connecting it to one of my prominent research inquiries, Cohen, Nathan and Topolski all find common ground in attributing the rise of the term’s significance to a rise in atheism and a flight from religion (especially those commonly associated with the term Judeo-Christian). Cohen further suggested that those of Jewish and Christian traditions are allies in the face of a common enemy, living in a world that continues to turn their back on them and consider them useless. This is a threat that with their combined efforts (hence the term) and similar values, can seemingly be handled with a more useful strategy (Cohen, 10). From the perspective of Cohen and the authors examining his work, Judeo-Christian does not necessarily properly encompass exact values or demographics included in the

term, but rather show two diminishing populations joining forces in the face of losing support and power (Cohen, 10).

Paul Tillich, a professor of theology in New York proposes some interesting insights in accordance with the term’s lexical semantics as well. He outlines the differences between Jewish and Christian traditions, a considerable notion for any linguist or inquisitive mind studying the term for what it is. “These traditions, rites...psychological attitudes diverge considerably from one another” (Tillich). However more relevant to my personal exploration, he poses the question of whether there is “... a unique series of events which is considered revelatory by both Jews and Christians...” (Tillich). My answer to this agrees with Cohen, Nathan and Topolski. Both Judaism and the various Christian traditions are living in a world that seems to be leaning far closer to atheism and agnosticism than it is traditional Christian or other religious institutions. This would explain the term’s increase in relevance in recent decades, and why the traditions would be grouped together. These faiths are losing members, representation, and power. So, although the term is used by both those within Judeo-Christian faiths and those outside of it, its origins in relevance can potentially be explained by this notion. The question then remains if it is simply correlation without causation or rather a varying number of contributing factors in reference to the implications of the word’s usage and applications.

Further research does at least to some extent suggest a causal relationship; “...in the early 1990s, the historical tether between American identity and faith snapped. Religious non-affiliation in the U.S started to rise...” (Thompson).

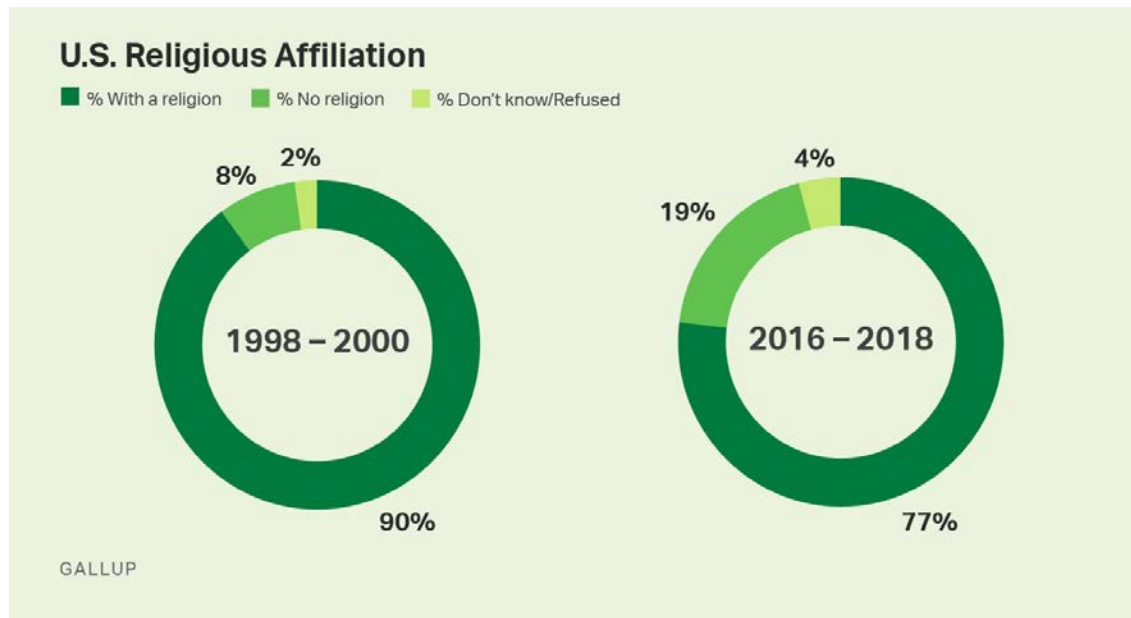
### Accelerating growth of the unaffiliated, 1972-2016



Source: General Social Survey, 1972-2018

Figure 3: Rise in religious unaffiliation, 1972-2018 (General Social Survey)

The decline in religious affiliation in America is a factual trend. I suggest that considering the majority of the religious demographic in the U.S is Christian or belonging to an institution within the Judeo-Christian set of values and traditions, the decline in theists and increase in atheists is most likely a contributing factor to the metalinguistic implications of Judeo-Christian evolving with social trends, and being used in more emotional contexts.



**Figure 4: Rise in religious unaffiliation (Gallup)**

As the numbers of individuals who consider themselves to be members of a faith or set of ideals drop, the word Judeo-Christian has been used in a fashion respective to these social and cultural trends. Judeo-Christian believers are worried about the ramifications of losing fellow people of faith, power, and political representation. Conversely, the increasingly irreligious population attributes many of the problems in America and the world to Judeo-Christian ideology, worrying about the ramifications of these institutions having political power. Judeo-Christian is a term changing along with the social and cultural trends just as language as a whole changes constantly. The beginning of its most prominent use was a time in which most of America belonged to a Judeo-Christian faith and therefore it was used in a confident and widely accepted fashion: these are our values that represent us and we consider them to be extremely important. As the U.S has fallen away from religion, the term has understandably been used in more emotional, and even aggressive contexts (not surprisingly having overwhelmingly political implications). The severity of the conversations surrounding the word Judeo-Christian have increased, and is yet another effect of an increasingly polarized socio-political environment in which people use words attributed to sets of values to defend or attack proposals in politics and society alike.

## References

- Alliejoys. 20 Nov. 2020, [www.twitter.com/alliejoys/status/1329653212190711808](https://twitter.com/alliejoys/status/1329653212190711808)
- Chuvieco, Emilio, Mario Burgui, and Isabel Gallego-Álvarez. "Impacts of religious beliefs on environmental indicators: Is Christianity more aggressive than other religions?." *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 20, no. 3 (2016): 251-271.
- Haynes, Jeffrey. "Donald Trump, "judeo-Christian values," and the "clash of civilizations"." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 15, no. 3 (2017): 66-75.
- Jones, Jeffrey M. "U.S Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades." *Gallup*, 18 Apr. 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>

- Nathan, Emmanuel and Anya Topolski, eds. 2016. *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- PdpScam. 18 Nov. 2020, [www.twitter.com/PdpScam/status/1329055125554352128](https://www.twitter.com/PdpScam/status/1329055125554352128)
- Redskinsrock91. 20 Nov. 2020, [www.twitter.com/redskinsrock91/status/1329852558437912577](https://www.twitter.com/redskinsrock91/status/1329852558437912577)
- Silk, Mark. "Notes on the Judeo-Christian tradition in America." *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1984): 65-85.
- Thompson, Derek. "Three Decades Ago, America Lost It's Religion. Why?" *The Atlantic*, 26 Sept. 2019, [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/atheism-fastest-growing-religion-us/598843/](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/atheism-fastest-growing-religion-us/598843/)
- Tillich, Paul. "Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition?." *Judaism* 1, no. 2 (1952): 106.
- Una\_Alta\_Volta. 18 Nov. 2020, [www.twitter.com/Una\\_Alta\\_Volta/status/1329254104464584704](https://www.twitter.com/Una_Alta_Volta/status/1329254104464584704)

# Kiki

## Pierce Krolewski

Cite as: Krolewski, Pierce. 2021. Kiki. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 155-159.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

In 2018, the Toronto native songwriter, Drake, released the song *In My Feelings* and in the opening of the song he sang, “Kiki, do you love me? Are you riding? Say you’ll never ever leave from beside me.” (Drake, 2018). Drake’s song went on to be the most popular songs that summer and has received 246 million views on YouTube to date. If you asked anyone in their early twenties what kiki was, they might think of the phrase “Kiki, do you love me?” due to how popular Drake’s song was. However, what many may not know is that kiki has had a long history of meaning something other than being someone’s name. Kiki has records of being used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as slang that has been used specifically to describe members within the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, kiki took on a new meaning in the 1980s, creating a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community to come together and express themselves freely. The question that I will investigate for this paper is, *In what ways does the word Kiki create a safe space for members within the LGBTQ+ community and has this been adopted in other social groups as well?*

In order to answer this question, it is important to first understand the meaning of kiki throughout history. Records dating back to the 1930s indicate that kiki had been used within the LGBTQ+ community to describe certain members, specifically gay men. Kiki referred to a gay man that was comfortable with either taking the active or passive - also known as top or bottom - role during sex with another man (Micone, 2020). Today we no longer use kiki to describe a gay man that is comfortable with being a top or bottom; instead, we say versatile. Moving into the 1940-50s, kiki had expanded from being used exclusively with gay men to then being used to describe subcultures within the lesbian community (Micone, 2020). Lesbians whose gender identity that was described as butch or fem were called a kiki and this was often associated with sexual positions as it was for gay men. A butch would take the active (top) role and the fem would be passive (bottom). Not only was it associated with sex positions for lesbians but calling a lesbian a kiki also made the woman seem suspicious and mysterious since they did not prescribe to specific gender roles of women at the time (Micone, 2020). Kiki created this cultural fascination around lesbians, specifically in regard to the curiosity that a male-dominated society had when it came to how women have sex with other women. Moreover, in the 1960-70s, kiki was predominately associated with gay men again to describe the man in a threesome that was participating in oral and anal sex simultaneously and it was also used to describe the action of two men having sex together (Green, 2020). With these definitions of kiki, there is the underlying message of gender role bending for both men and women. Arguably, kiki had implications of defying the norms of the dominant culture at the time.

While kiki had 40 years of known use by that time, during the 1980s the definition of kiki that is better known today began to be used more. Kiki grew out of what is known as Ball Culture. Balls were places where a majority of young LGBTQ+ individuals would walk on runways and compete for trophies and prizes. This subculture grew out of New York City during the 80s and consisted mostly of black and brown LGBTQ+ youth. The increase in knowledge of Balls coincided with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States since black gay men were disproportionately affected; therefore, bringing more attention on their social life (Bailey, 2013). Moreover, the term kiki grew out of Ball

Culture and it was described as being an event where friends could come together to talk, gossip, feel safe, and be with people of their chosen family since many LGBTQ+ people during this time were kicked out of their homes. In relation to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, kiki parties were formed to create a safe space for those that had been infected (Salzman, 2019). The term kiki became more popular as film and popular media began to introduce the meaning of it into mainstream culture. Ultimately, with bands, documentaries, and popular TV shows adopting the term kiki, the action of having a kiki spread out of the LGBTQ+ community and into other social groups.

Once kiki was associated with ball culture in the 1980's, a new meaning arose of what a kiki was along with understanding the cultural significance behind it. In the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, kiki is defined as a party in which LGBTQ+ individuals come together to vogue, walk runways, and compete for prizes. The image to the right shows a modern day kiki and it depicts these individuals as challenging gender norms by the clothes they wear. These events are usually high intensity, and it is a scene where cross dressing occurs, drag queens come to compete, and gender norms are being challenged. The meaning of a kiki during the 1980-90s was very important for LGBTQ+ youth as it created a space for them to be their authentic self when society did not allow them to (Kikis with Louie, 2020). When someone would say "let's have a kiki", they knew the significance of it and understood that kiki signified acceptance and inclusion. Furthermore, *Paris is Burning* was the starting point in defining how American society at large envisioned kiki parties. Other forms of popular media allowed the word to be put into mainstream culture and began to introduce it to the rest of the world.

Therefore, the next question that will be considered is, *how has popular media influenced the use of the word kiki beyond the LGBTQ+ community?* With *Paris is Burning*, there was some introduction of kiki parties to other social groups; however, it did not spread too far within or out of the LGBTQ+ community. From the 1990s to the early 2000s there was still an association with kiki parties as being part of the black LGBTQ+ community specifically (Salzman, 2019). However, kiki parties did continue to become more popular in urban areas where there were high populations of black LGBTQ+ people. Detroit was one city that saw the kiki night scene flourish during the late 1990s. One significant aspect of kiki parties during this time was that it made the black LGBTQ+ youth of Detroit feel valued due their standing in the dominant society as being poor or part of the working class (Bailey, 2013). Whether this is linked to the influence of kiki parties in popular media or not, the word kiki itself created a sense of community and inclusion for those that could not find it elsewhere.

Moreover, in the early 2010s, the word kiki began to be used more in songs and in TV shows that many people listened to and watched. For example, in September 2012 the song *Let's Have a Kiki* was released by the American band, the Scissor Sisters in the US and the UK. The song itself achieved the number one position on the US Dance Club Songs on the Billboards Charts and 119 on the official UK Singles Chart for 2012. Later in 2019, Billboard included the song in the Top 100 Greatest Music Videos of the 2010s, which has 17.5 million views on YouTube today. Following the release of this song, a better idea of what a kiki party was emerged, as illustrated by the song lyrics, "A Kiki is a party for calming all your nerves. We're spilling tea and dishing just desserts one may deserve." (Scissor Sisters, 2012). This is when we begin to see a new wave of what kiki means to individuals. Instead of the high intensity Balls, which still exist today, kiki parties become smaller group gatherings and parties where LGBTQ+ youth could come together with older LGBTQ+ adults and talk about anything, including spilling the tea, which is the modern-day way of saying gossiping. The definition of kiki from Urban Dictionary echoes the lyrics in the Scissor Sisters song in that it describes a kiki as "A party including good music and good friends, held for the express purpose of calming nerves, reducing anxiety and stress and generally fighting ennui." (Urban Dictionary). This image of a kiki party was mirrored in an episode of *Glee* in November 2012 in which they sang the same song mentioned above. In the scene in which this song is being sung, the characters are sitting at a table eating dinner and then burst out into a big party. While there were some references to Ball Culture, such as individuals not fitting into the gender binary



and people dancing, there were also elements that fit into the newer way of having a kiki, such as being in a small gathering and gossiping. With Glee being the popular show that it was, this episode received 8.14 million views. The combination of the Scissor Sisters song and the episode of Glee that used this song expanded the term kiki to different social groups outside of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, social groups within the LGBTQ+ community are now having kikis that are taking the form of sharing knowledge between older and younger people (Salzman, 2013). The conversations that are happening today in kikis are meant to provide a safe space for those that do not have one while also providing a space to educate the youth about a variety of topics, such as sex, bullying, and school. Moreover, while popular media did not have much of an impact on Black LGBTQ+ members, it did spread kikis within the LGBTQ+ community and beyond.

When looking at those that are having kikis today, we can see that it is not exclusive to specific members within the LGBTQ+ community. Instead, it has gone beyond this community to be more of a kiki that we would see today. For example, new moms are now saying that they are having kikis where they come together with close friends and share advice and guidance in being a new mother (Kikis with Louie, 2020). These kikis are similar to the ones described above in that it is a gathering of individuals who are going through similar situations and there is a sharing of knowledge that occurs during these events. In addition, college students are having kikis more and more during the last couple of years and in some cases these kikis might involve alcohol but there is usually always a sense of friendship and acceptance (Kikis with Louie, 2020). While the connection between popular media and the spread of kikis within and outside of the LGBTQ+ may not be direct, arguably there is evidence that suggests this to be true in that more people today are having kikis and are calling these gatherings a kiki. Furthermore, the quantitative data is hard to find on programs like Google Trends and Google Ngram because kiki is also a name, which is more common to find in the data that these software programs are collecting. However, with personal testimonials about kikis, the qualitative data helps us better understand the past, present, and future of the kikis.

Finally, now that I have examined the historical changes in the meaning of kiki along with how popular media has influenced the spread of them outside the LGBTQ+ community, I am better able to answer the following question, *in what ways does the word Kiki create a safe space for members within the LGBTQ+ community and has this been adopted in other social groups as well?* To the latter part of that question, kiki has been adopted in other social groups within and beyond the LGBTQ+ community. Where it used to be strongly associated with Black LGBTQ+ culture, it is now being used by others who are white, Asian, etc., and often the color of one's skin does not play into who is accepted at kikis. According to the organization Advocates for Youth, a kiki is now being used in multiple settings for all LGBTQ+ youth in order to challenge the toxic-heteronormative society that we live in. In addition, kikis are important for the youth whose family have disowned them (Kikis with Louie, 2020). In today's society, saying the word kiki is associated with love, acceptance, and support. One word can have the impact of helping many through difficult life challenges. Also, by understanding what a kiki is, it is clear that safe spaces are being created by allowing individuals to express themselves freely. The impact that using this language can have on youth is important because it will help them throughout their life as they get older.

Furthermore, kikis employ their own set of language around sex that is especially important for LGBTQ+ youth. Gay men statistically contract HIV/AIDS at higher levels than other groups. Therefore, the language around safe sex that older adults use at kikis is important for teaching the youth about consent and safe sex. Kikis have created safe spaces for those that have been marginalized in society while also employing its own set of language around sex. Much of American culture has taboos about sex and using language to talk about it. However, kikis do not and they talk about sex openly in order to educate the youth. Moreover, with kikis beginning to make their way into other social groups, the future of the word in dominant culture could be used more in our lexicon than it is used today. As the acceptance of LGBTQ+ culture becomes more prevalent in our society, kikis may

make their way into many other aspects of life. In addition, with popular media continuing to depict kakis, more and more social groups will see what they are and may use them with their close friends. One problem that we will have to be aware of is cultural appropriation of kakis. While kiki is a term used by many, it is important to still acknowledge its significance in the black and brown LGBTQ+ communities and how kakis address the racial justice and health disparities that these individuals face.

Overall, the word kiki has changed meaning since its origin in the 1930s. Kiki has been exclusively used to refer to LGBTQ+ individuals and has been associated with the Black LGBTQ+ community for quite some time. Kiki has been used to create acceptance, love, and support for LGBTQ+ youth that have been turned away from their parents and who do not have anywhere else to go. Also, kakis have become increasingly popular in other social groups as popular media has influenced the spreading of the phrase, “let’s have a kiki”. Moms are having kakis, college students are having kakis, and soon we might see every group of friends having kakis as the word continues to become part of dominant culture.

## References

- Bailey, M. M. (2013). *Butch queens up in pumps: Gender, performance, and ballroom culture in Detroit*. Ann Arbor, MI, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Drake – In My Feelings. (2018). <https://genius.com/Drake-in-my-feelings-lyrics>
- Green, J. (2006). *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Kiki. (n.d.). Retrieved November 24, 2020, from <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Kiki>
- Kiki (social gathering). (n.d.). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiki\\_\(social\\_gathering\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiki_(social_gathering))
- Kakis with Louie. (n.d.). <https://advocatesforyouth.org/campaigns/kakis-with-louie/>
- List of LGBT characters in television and radio. (n.d.) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_LGBT\\_characters\\_in\\_television\\_and\\_radio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LGBT_characters_in_television_and_radio)
- Micone, S. 2020. Kiki. <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/kiki/>
- Salzman, A. 2019. In the Kiki Ballroom Scene, Queer Kids of Color Can Be Themselves. <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2019/11/nyc-kiki-community/599830/>
- Scissor Sisters – Let's Have a Kiki. 2012. <https://genius.com/Scissor-sisters-lets-have-a-kiki-lyrics>

# Lawl

Erica Preciado

Cite as: Preciado, Erica. 2021. Lawl. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 159-163.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

Language, according to John Gumperz, serves as a repository of cultural knowledge, a symbol of social identity, and a medium of interaction (Gumperz 1974). Ultimately, language is a form of social interaction. Because “language” does not only constitute verbal language, we should also take into consideration the language of the internet. The word “lawl” has made its way around the internet, but rarely do we wonder where this word came from or in what context is it appropriate to be used. In this report, we will seek to find the “true” meaning of the word, “lawl”.

## Origin

Even though the word “lawl” is a fairly new word, “lawl” still has a history. “Lawl” is a play-off of the initialism, “LOL”, short for “laughing out loud”. Understanding what initialisms and acronyms are, are essential for understanding the etymology of the word “lawl”, “Initialisms are words pronounced letter by letter while acronyms are pronounced as normal words” (Hong-mei, 2010, 99). Beginning in the early 1990’s, instant messaging, computer chat, entered existence to the general population. The use of the initialism, “LOL”, originated in 1993 used in instant messaging (Etymology Online, ‘LOL’). “LOL” was then passed on and used in text messages as texting jargon when text messaging became popular.

Because “lawl” is such a new word, it has not been placed in a formal dictionary yet, so its meaning relies solely on how individuals use it. Urban Dictionary says that if “LOL” were to be spoken aloud, it would sound like “Laaaaaawwwwwlllll” (Urban Dictionary, “lawl”). Because of the influence of text and social media, we see the use of “LOL” being spoken aloud gives a person a sense of social identity, perhaps meaning they are “up to date” on technology. Interestingly, the use of “LOL” has dropped and has been replaced by “haha” or “hahaha”. According to the article “Hahahaha, No One Uses LOL Anymore,” a person who uses “LOL” is no longer “up to date” with society and are “so yesterday”, as the article explained how using “LOL” is “so yesterday” (Poon, 2015). What is really interesting is the fact that “LOL” is being used like an acronym. This isn’t uncommon as “ASAP” (as soon as possible) can be used as both an initialism and an acronym, either pronounced “A-S-A-P” or “A-SAP”. “LOL” is pronounced letter by letter “L-O-L”. However, in recent years, we have seen a shift towards the initialism “LOL” being pronounced in speech as “lawl”. “Lawl” no longer has the same meaning as “LOL” or “laughing out loud,” even if they were synonymous at a brief point of time.

## Context

Because of the social risk of saying something that is deemed unacceptable by society and the need to be accepted, “LOL” has shifted into two different words with different meanings: the first being “haha”, laughing in a literal sense, and the second being “lawl”, expressing emotion in a sarcastic sense. The use of “lawl” is common throughout social media, especially Twitter. According to Urban Dictionary, “lawl” is “the stand in for ‘lol’, however usually said in a sarcastic manner, where

somebody's substandard manner of typing is criticised" (Urban Dictionary, "Lawl"). The manner of writing being criticized refers to a socially unacceptable concept or if "something went wrong".

## Data

Through examining data on Twitter, I will explore the gravity of the meaning of "lawl" by comparing it to the tweets that use "fml" (an initialism for "fuck my life"). I have chosen to understand the meaning of "lawl" by comparing the word to "fml", because they are both placed in tweets in a similar manner that reflects a socially unacceptable situation. I have decided not to use the initialism, "LOL" to compare with "lawl", because ultimately, the two words have a different meaning and socio-contextual usage. In contrast, I have found that "lawl" and "fml" seem similar in the way they are used. Both "lawl" and "fml" seem to have the same connotation, that something is socially unacceptable or "bad". The main difference is "lawl" allows the reader to take the content more "light-heartedly", taking a consequence and laughing about it. As "fml" allows the reader to feel the emotions of: "oh man, that sucks". By comparing "lawl" and "fml", I hope to gain a deeper understanding of social rules and why we use "lawl" in the first place.

Below, I have identified tweets in order to provide a thorough analysis of the data I have collected. Through this data, I will explain why "lol" and "lawl" are too different to understand the meaning of "lawl" as well as explore the gravity of the meaning of "lawl" has by comparing it to the tweets that use "fml".

*Ima do some mint tea with honey and lemon... I smell like a whole bottle of Vicks lol*  
([https://twitter.com/Cyn\\_Santana/status/913885199653593088](https://twitter.com/Cyn_Santana/status/913885199653593088))

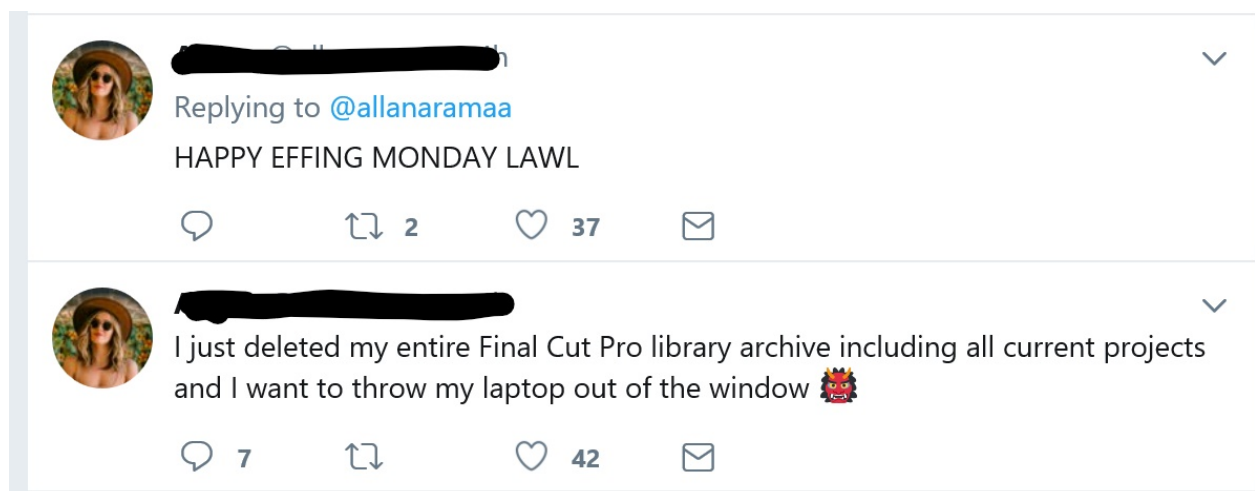
*People keep asking and yes we are playing all dates. Ignore our official website if any dates are missing. We suck at the internet lol.*  
([https://twitter.com/withconfidence\\_/status/913912031866171392](https://twitter.com/withconfidence_/status/913912031866171392))

Here, "lol" is used in a joking manner. There are no consequences to what the writers are saying. Let's take a look at the first tweet. Normally one doesn't advertise smelling bad, which can have negative consequences on one's reputation. Instead, this tweet suggests an indifferent attitude in a joking, self-deprecating way. In the second tweet, the writer uses "lol" to joke about their failure to provide correct concert information on a website. In this case, there may be a negative consequence if people are unable to attend a concert but the tweet is poking fun while at the same time making a correction. In both cases, the readers of the text can probably visualize the writers sending a smirk or a small laugh. This is keeping in mind that "haha" has derived from "LOL" to actually express laughter; therefore, we can assume that both tweets don't express a complete laugh.

Next, here are a few tweets of how “fml” is used on Twitter:



Typically, the tweets have a negative connotation, referencing things that are not socially acceptable or deemed as “good”. Again, this is very similar to the use of the word “lawl” in text. Unlike the use of “lol”, both “lawl” and “fml” are used in a way of expressing feelings and emotions of a person without coming off as “too serious”. Take this person who uses “lawl” to express their inner struggle, for example:



"Lawl", used in the tweet "I just wanna scream and cry and die lawl", sends a message about the emotions the writer feels. Adding “lawl” at the end of their statement is a way to mask the true feelings and to make the situation seem a bit “lighter” than it is. If this person would have used “fml”, it wouldn't



have made sense but would also suggest a cry for help within the social context. In the tweet, "I just started crying because nobody laughs at my jokes that's how pathetic I am lawl", the use of "lawl" is, again, taking something that may hurt slightly and making it a joke. "Lawl" is making reality a joke, but also with the gravity of truth, like the saying: "in every joke, there is a little bit of truth to it". If the person removed "lawl" completely from this tweet, the tweet would then be completely 100% serious without any intention of being funny. Doing this is unacceptable to society, because to say you are "pathetic" is not okay. However, it is okay to say you are "pathetic" if you are laughing about the matter, even though it may be serious beneath the surface. If this person would have replaced "lawl" with "fml" then it may suggest socio-contextually that a reader ought to reach out to the person tweeting. Because the tweet used "lawl", it is socially acceptable for the reader to laugh with the person tweeting.

In the tweet about the projects being deleted, the person replied to herself saying, "HAPPY EFFING MONDAY LAWL". This sends a message to the readers about how horrible this is, but by adding "lawl" the person is laughing at herself. This sends the ultimate message of "my Monday is going so bad, it's funny". Another person has used "I need to get my grades up bruh fml", suggesting there may be little hope for them to get their grades up, but it's not a laughing matter. This may also trigger a response from the reader suggesting their hand of help. However, if the person replaced "fml" with "lawl", the reader may not feel the need to help out. This is because the tweet would then suggest that everyone is going through this or that it's funny at this point and there isn't really a need to help out. Comparing "fml" and "lawl" again, we see that "fml" suggests a bad ending that has no hope of going up, as "lawl" suggests "I'm still going to laugh even though this is a bad ending."

## Society

Even though we can compare words, uses of words, or even the definitions of words, the words do not have meanings without shared social norms. Ultimately, the use of "lawl" masks emotion in text to make light of something serious. People are taught to do this socially. When people in American society interact with others, they can mask their true self and send the message that they are okay, even when they are not. For example, when a person is asked how they are doing, the response is *expected* to be "I'm good, how are you?" This response is not thought out. However, when someone says something about how they are truly feeling, a laugh is often added to mask the societal tension, as well as the true feelings the person is experiencing.

The word "lawl" is used in the same way in writing. It is a written expression of how feelings are to be expressed socially. To use an expression of something with "lawl", is to say something like "this horrible thing happened to me, but everything is fine". Below is an illustration of how societal expectations are represented in words by the person communicating their situation with emotion.



First is the model of how a situation and emotions are translated into text including two example tweets using this social formula:

*Social Formula: [Raw situation/raw emotion] + [lawl]*

*[Horrible thing] + [lawl]*

*Example Tweets: [I wanna scream and cry and die] + [lawl]*

*[I just deleted...including all current projects] + [lawl]*

Now using this model in the physical representation of life, without text, it would look like:

*Person A: How are you?*

*Person B: I'm fine, how are you?*

*Person B: [I wanna scream and cry and die] + [how are you?]*

*(Raw situation/raw emotion) (lawl)*

In this case, "I'm fine" masks the true emotion and "how are you" draws attention to something else, to make light of how the person is really feeling. We see that same pattern in written text form in the tweets that use "lawl". In the case of tweets, nobody must ask how the person is doing. Society is programming people through a social formula, teaching people how to mask their emotions and then express the masked emotions through media in the same way.

## Conclusion

The meaning of "lawl" involves the masking of people's emotions, which is socially constructed. By using "lawl", people are masking the gravity of their own emotions when written in text form, which mimics society's ideals of how people should express themselves. Even though "lawl" originated from the initialism "LOL", its meaning has evolved and changed completely, reflecting societal standards of how people should act and express themselves, transcribing a physical social formula into text form.

## References

- \_akumaboi. "I need to get my grades up bruh fml". 20 November, 2017. 11:10 PM. Tweet.Allana (allanaramaa). "HAPPY EFFING MONDAY LAWL". 20 November, 2017. 2:52 PM.
- Allana (allanaramaa). "'I just deleted my entire Final Cut Pro library archive including all current projects and I want to throw my laptop out of the window". 20 November, 2017. 2:52 PM.
- Bragg, Maddi (MaddiBragg). "FML I don't wanna be sick". 20 November, 2017. 4:20 PM.
- Cyn Santana (Cyn\_Santana). "Ima do some mint tea with honey and lemon... I smell like a whole bottle of Vicks lol". 29 Sept. 2017.  
[https://twitter.com/Cyn\\_Santana/status/913885199653593088](https://twitter.com/Cyn_Santana/status/913885199653593088)
- Gumperz, John J. "Linguistic anthropology in society." *American Anthropologist* 76, no. 4 (1974): 785-798.
- Hong-mei, SUN. "A Study of the features of Internet English from the Linguistic Perspective." *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 1, no. 7, 19 Sept. 2010.  
<http://cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/viewFile/1448/1467>
- Poon, Linda. Hahahaha, No One Uses LOL Anymore. City Lab, 11 Aug 2015. <https://www.citylab.com/life/2015/08/hahahaha-no-one-uses-lol-anymore/400982/>
- With Confidence (withconfidence\_). "People keep asking and yes we are playing all dates. Ignore our official website if any dates are missing. We suck at the internet lol". 29 Sept. 2017. Tweet.  
[https://twitter.com/withconfidence\\_/status/913912031866171392](https://twitter.com/withconfidence_/status/913912031866171392)

# Make Out

Anna Khreizat

Cite as: Khreizat, Anna. 2021. Make Out. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 164-169.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

I assume many young children in America have heard a variation of this interjection at some point in their lives. The first time I heard this exclamation, I didn't even know where babies came from. I was watching a movie with my older cousin and her friends, and as the two actors on the television leaned in to kiss each other, my cousin looked at me and shouted, "Anna! Close your eyes! They're making out!". I hadn't heard such a term prior to this moment, but it was at this very moment that I had come to learn that to 'make out' simply meant 'to kiss'. But as with all other words, I soon came to realize that 'make out' contains a very rich and complex etymology. By analyzing the term through a linguistic lens, we are able to study the way its usage has transformed overtime, the implications of these transformations, and the open-ended nature of language in general. To begin this study, we must begin by asking ourselves a single question: How did a phrase that seems to have very little sexual connotation at all come to express such an intimate and romantic behavior?

The phrase 'make out' can denote different connotations based on the context in which it is used. Take the following sentences for example:

"Hey Johnny, how'd you make out at the basketball tournament last night?"

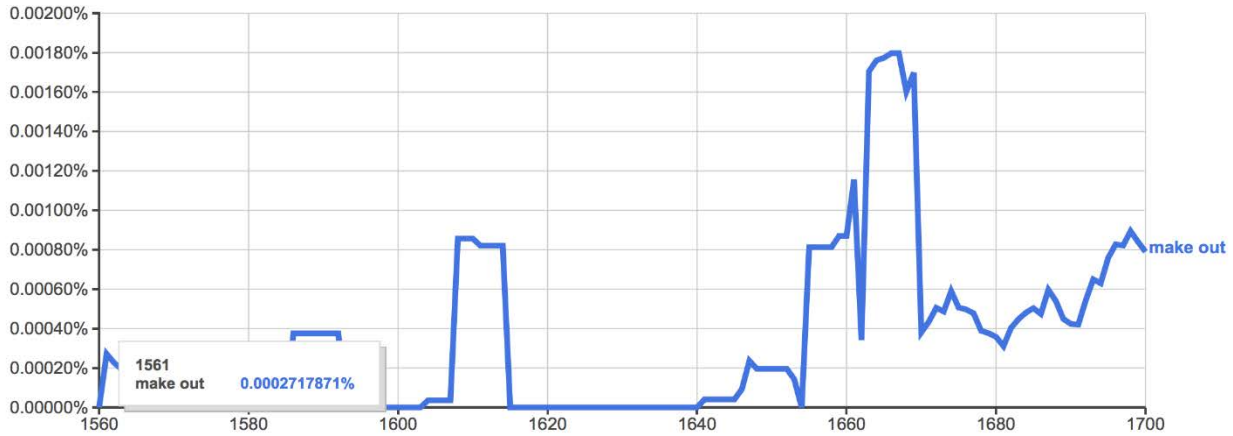
"Hey Johnny, did you and Elizabeth make out last night?"

In the first example sentence, 'make out' refers to Johnny's performance at the tournament. The person asking the question is interested in knowing things related to how well Johnny has played – i.e., how successful his game was – such as how many points he has scored or whether his team has won or not. This use of 'make out' employs the original definition of the word, meaning 'to succeed' (Moe, 197). The second sentence, however, seems to conjure a new definition. It uses 'make out' to indicate a sort of activity, and the person asking this question is interested in knowing whether Johnny and Elizabeth have engaged in this activity or not. The specific activity, however, that is implied is left uncertain due to the vagueness of what 'make out' actually means. One could assume that this activity refers directly to the act of having sex, because according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the definition of 'make out' is "to engage in sexual intercourse" (Merriam Webster). The Merriam Webster Dictionary is not the only dictionary that defines making out as a sexual activity. Google's Dictionary.com, the Cambridge Dictionary, and the Oxford Living Dictionary all categorize 'making out' to be a sexual act as well. If the person asking the question was going by this definition, then he or she wants to know if Johnny and Elizabeth have had sexual intercourse. On the contrary, because of the way 'make out' has been used in more recent years, most modern folk would assume that the person asking the question is referring to nothing more than the common activity of romantic kissing. For example, the Urban Dictionary website defines 'make out' as the following:

*A "form" of kissing characterized by its long duration of time, and often involves what can be described as "French kissing" (Urban Dictionary, 2003)*

*The act of kissing fervently, (i.e. Frenching) while also engaging in various acts of rubbing, touching, and optional groping (Urban Dictionary, 2003)*

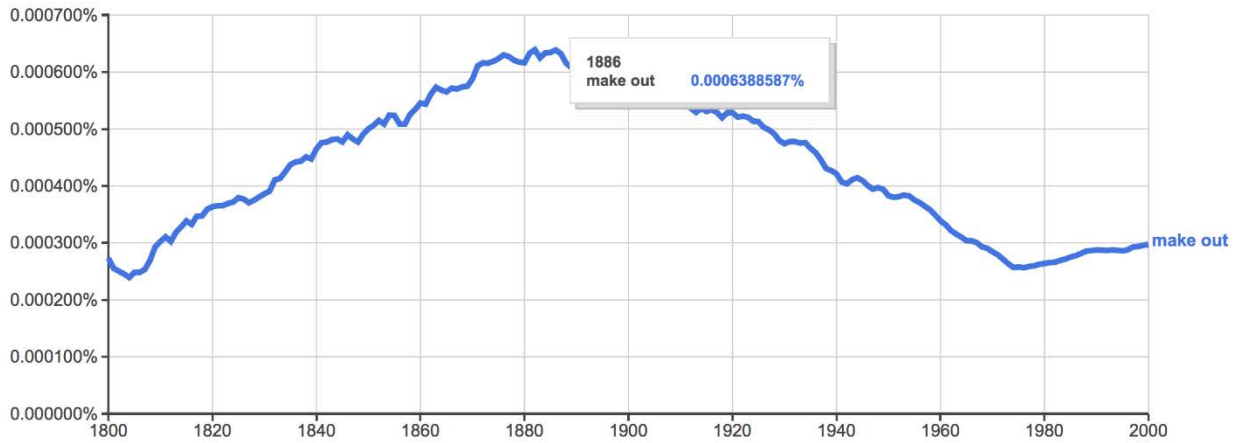
**Figure 1:** Frequency of 'make out' in English printed sources between the years 1560 and 1700



**Figure 2:** Frequency of 'make out' in English printed sources between the years 1500 and 2000



**Figure 3:** Frequency of 'make out' in English printed sources between the years 1800 and 2000



One of the definitions on the site states that making out can “lead to sex”, but none of the definitions state that making out is equivalent to sexual intercourse. In fact, most of the definitions explicitly state that ‘making out’ is not the same as having sex, but rather just “a form of kissing”. Other contemporary websites further confirm this notion. For example, a WikiHow article titled “How to Make Out” discusses how to kiss your partner passionately and romantically but does not mention anything related to sex. Two Cosmopolitan Magazine articles titled “15 Things Guys Think When They Make Out” and “Making Out is Cool Again” also discuss ‘making out’ but fall short of mentioning sexual intercourse. In fact, the latter article explicitly distinguishes between making out and having sex. The author writes:

*“Some of the flirtiest and horniest people I know are turning down sex in exchange for some good, old-fashioned passionate smooching. There’s a change in the tides, my friends, and the change is that making out is the new doing it.” (Smothers)*

Alternatively, ‘Necking’ (the lesser-known ancestral equivalent to ‘making out’) is defined as “kissing, caressing, and other sexual activity between partners that does not involve stimulation of the genitals or sexual intercourse” (Dictionary.com) and “to caress your clothed partner on and above the neck” (Urban Dictionary). Furthermore, ‘snogging’, the British equivalent of ‘making out’, is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as is to “kiss and caress amorously” (Living Oxford Dictionary). The concretion of the definitions of these two words compared to the vagueness of ‘make out’ leaves me asking yet another question: Why does the formal definition of ‘make out’ diverge so greatly from what the phrase is used to describe in everyday vernacular? What caused this divergence, and what does it tell us about the etymology of the phrase?

In order to understand how the present definition of ‘make out’ came to be, it is important to study the ways in which the term has been used in the past. A quick search on the Google Ngram Viewer shows that the term ‘make out’ has been circulating the English language since as early as 1561 (**Figure 1**). The frequency of the term reached an all-time high in 1667 (**Figure 2**), and hasn’t peaked since 1886 (**Figure 3**). Yet, by this time ‘make out’ still hadn’t attained any sort of sexual connotation. As previously mentioned, make out originally meant “to succeed” and was being used under completely different contexts than it is today. It wasn’t until the mid 1900’s that ‘make out’ began to transform in meaning. The earliest major record of make out in the Oxford English Dictionary under this context dates back to 1949 (**Figure 4**). It appears in the term ‘make-out artist’. The appearance of this term occurs at a time when the usage of ‘make out’ was relatively low, but the usage of ‘make-out’ with a hyphen – just like in ‘make-out artist’ – was steadily rising (**Figure 5**). This corresponding trend signifies one of the major shifts in the etymology of ‘make out’.

- 1949 *N.Y. Times Mag.* 6 Mar. 33/2 They use washed-up expressions like ‘wolf’ when the correct description for such a fellow is ‘make-out artist’.
- 1967 C. WILLINGHAM & B. HENRY *Graduate* (film script) in S. Thomas *Best Amer. Screen-plays* (1986) 334/1 You don’t happen to know exactly where the Make Out King is getting married, do you? I’m supposed to be there.
- 1982 *Guardian* 26 Oct. 8/8 The Valley Guy drives a make-out van with sheepskin seat-covers.
- 1986 M. HOWARD *Expensive Habits* 231 She can see he is a make-out artist in his linen suit, gold cuff links, Liberty tie.
- 1991 D. GAINES *Teenage Wasteland* iv. 77 On the extreme opposite side, far away from the moms and the Perrier, there’s a video arcade with hot & heavy make-out action.
- 1994 *Seattle Times* 16 Sept. c6/4 And then there’s what I call ‘the makeout album’... It’ll be all romantic music, intimate and personal.

**Figure 4:** Quotations displaying the use of ‘make out’ throughout history, recorded from the Oxford English Dictionary website.



**Figure 5:** Frequency of ‘make – out’ in English printed sources between 1800 and 2000

Considering that it was originally being used as a means to measure success and accomplishment, ‘make out’ entered the realm of intimacy and romance early on. In the early 1900’s, just as ‘make out’ was used to question Johnny’s success during the basketball tournament in the previous example, it was also being used to question the success of romantic endeavors. The question “Did you make out on your date?” simply referred to how successful a date was. By the thirties and forties, make out had developed an even more explicit usage and meant to persuade a woman to ‘come across’ with full sexual intimacy (Moe, 96). Essentially, it was being used in reference to its original meaning by predominantly young males to indicate whether one has succeeded having sex with a woman or not. By this point, to ‘make out’ with someone did not mean to simply just kiss them, but to successfully have sexual intercourse with them. It is from this context that the term ‘make-out artist’ is derived from. The Oxford English dictionary defines ‘make-out artist’ as “a person (usually a teenager) who frequently engages in ‘making out’, or who is sexually promiscuous” (Oxford English Dictionary). Dictionary.com defines the term as “a man known for sexual success; cocksman, stud, Swordsman” (Dictionary.com). By the 1960’s, ‘make-out artist’ was being commonly used in English writings (**Figure 6**), just at the same time in which the usage of ‘make-out’ was on the rise as well (**Figure 5**). It was during these years that make out really gained its sexual connotation. Although it is not completely unheard of to use ‘make-out artist’ today, the term slowly began to fall out of trend and decrease in usage. ‘Make out’, however, has only continued to evolve since and gain popularity in its usage among different demographics, including adolescents, young adults, and even older generations as well.



**Figure 6:** Frequency of 'make - out artist' in English printed sources between the years 1900 and 2000

As time went on and sex became more widely spoken about and the act kissing began to grow in popularity, make out began to lose its intensity under the contexts in which it was used. Eventually it began to be used most often by men to mean at least 'to persuade' a woman to have sex with them or to 'hit it off' on a date (Moe, 98). Considering that 'making out' is generally a sign of success in a budding relationship, and can also often lead to sex, it makes sense that overtime make out slowly morphed from to meaning specifically sex to a euphemized and quite vague version of what it originally implies, one used to describe the act in which I had to shield my eyes from on the television all those years ago.

It is easy to consider the two major definitions of 'make out' – to succeed and to romantically kiss – and presume that these two meanings are completely unrelated, as if the term has been randomly chosen to describe two entirely different actions. However, by studying the etymology of the term closely it becomes clear that this is not the case. Once perceived through a cohesive timeline, it can be seen that it was the original meaning of success that led to the 'new' meaning of the term in the first place. The divergence of how 'make out' is defined in dictionaries such as the Merriam Webster Dictionary compared to contemporary, everyday users' definition of the term, such as on Urban Dictionary or in entertainment magazine articles, is a result of the transformation of the phrase from first being used to refer to sexual intercourse, and then to a less explicit and vaguer action of romantic kissing. This linguistic divergence of 'make out' reflects something important about American culture. It shows that people, specifically men, have placed an unnecessary value on sex even in earlier times, using it as a means to measure the success of a rendezvous empirically rather than focusing on more abstract ideas such as emotional connection and dynamic. One could make the argument that the term was derived under sexist contexts, as this seems to be paradoxical considering the taboo against women engaging in promiscuous sex, or sex before marriage. But even more prominently, it shows us how fluid and transformative English, and language in general, can be. It shows us that it is not concrete, set in stone, or invariable. Instead, language is change. It is a constant process of slow transformation that is influenced but certainly not singlehandedly caused by historical, social, and cultural, conditions. Consequentially, 'make out' isn't just a random word selected to mean 'to kiss'. It has a rich and diverse history, and has taken the role of meaning a vast variety of things – all which can be traced back in relation to what the term initially meant – to succeed. Through slow and constant change, it has evolved to mean something quite different today, but still retains its original definition under the certain contexts. There is no telling the future, but considering how significantly the phrase has changed already, it is interesting to think about what 'make out' will be used to refer to during later times, if anything at all.



## References

- “English Dictionary, Thesaurus, & Grammar Help | Oxford Dictionaries.” Oxford Dictionaries | English, Oxford Dictionaries. [en.oxforddictionaries.com/](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/).
- Frank, Cosmo. “15 Things Guys Think When You're Making Out.” *Cosmopolitan*, 8 Oct. 2017, [www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/advice/a5955/what-guys-think-when-making-out/](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/advice/a5955/what-guys-think-when-making-out/).
- Merriam-Webster. [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/make%20out?src=search-dict-hed](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/make%20out?src=search-dict-hed).
- “How to Make Out.” WikiHow, 20 Nov. 2016, [www.wikihow.com/Make-Out](http://www.wikihow.com/Make-Out).
- “Make-out Artist.” Dictionary.com, Dictionary.com, [www.dictionary.com/browse/make-out-artist](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/make-out-artist).
- “Make out Meaning.” Cambridge Dictionary, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/make-out](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/make-out).
- Moe, Albert F. “‘Make out’ and Related Usages.” *American Speech*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1966, p. 96., doi:10.2307/453127.
- “Necking.” Dictionary.com, Dictionary.com, [www.dictionary.com/browse/necking](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/necking).
- Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Make%20Out>
- Smothers, Hannah. “Making Out Is Cool Again.” *Cosmopolitan*, 15 Apr. 2016. 2017. [www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a56948/making-out-is-cool-again/ut+is+the+new+doing+it](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a56948/making-out-is-cool-again/ut+is+the+new+doing+it).

# Magick

Matthew Ashford

Cite as: Ashford, Matthew. 2021. *Magick*. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 170-174.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The supernatural has always fascinated mankind. Our ancestors tried to understand the forces behind natural phenomena for millennia, and when our understanding of the world was insufficient to the task, or when science was unable to offer us an explanation, we labeled those phenomena the works of mystical forces, fantastic creatures, devils, and gods. Even today these beliefs still hold true for many people. The supernatural still fascinates even those who do not credibly believe in such things; people still flock to see movies, read books, and watch television shows about the mystical and fantastic.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the origins of the word “magic” date back to Hellenistic Greece, and it is almost directly derived from the classical Latin term *magica*. Over the centuries many different spellings of the word magic have been coined, such as the Middle English words *magik*, *magyk*, *magyque*, and so on. In all of the word’s varied forms, however, its technical definition has remained the same: “The use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge; sorcery, witchcraft.” (OED, 2015)

One of the many different forms of the word “magic” is “magick”. Coined in the fifteenth century and in use through the seventeenth century, “magick” would, on the surface, appear to be just another variation on the commonly used term (OED, 2015). However, one has only to peruse the shelves of the Spirituality section at their local bookstore to realize that this is not the case. The term “magick” is still in use today and has, in recent years, experienced a rise in popularity in American English. And this fact prompts several questions: Why does its use persist? How has the use of the word changed? And most importantly, is there a difference between “magic” and “magick”? Is all “magic” created equal?

To examine the resurgence of the term “magick” in common use, we must first look at how it was brought back from relative oblivion. A large portion of the credit for the revival of the term “magick” in common use is attributed to Aleister Crowley, who was a firm believer in the occult and spent a significant portion of his life practicing the mystic arts. Crowley exclusively used the term “magick” in his writings, and intentionally so. As Crowley explains in his work *Magic in Theory and Practice*, “I found myself at a loss for a name to designate my work, just as H.P. Blavatsky some years earlier. “Theosophy”, “Spiritualism”, “Occultism”, “Mysticism” all involved undesirable connotations. I chose therefore the name. “MAGICK” as essentially the most sublime, and actually the most discredited, of all the available terms. I swore to rehabilitate MAGICK to identify it with my own career...” (Crowley & Desti, 1998, p.xvi)

Crowley seemed acutely aware of the common perception of “magic” in his writings; that is, that “magic” was seen as a stage act, sleight of hand or illusions to entertain people. By stating that he would rehabilitate the term and identify it with his career, he was essentially stating his intention to bring it back into common usage, redefine it as a true occult art completely separate from “magic” in that accepted form, and establish himself as a sort of forefather to those who would adopt his practices. In effect, Crowley was attempting to create his own “brand identity”, one that would set him and his works apart from others. His adoption and redefinition of an archaic spelling of “magic”

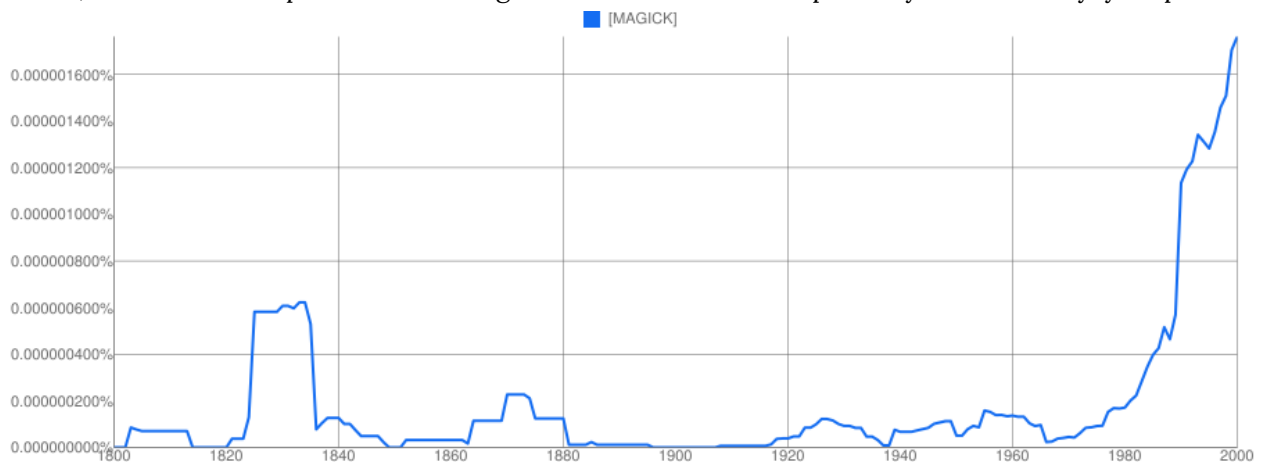
created a new way for his followers to index themselves in a way that left no doubt in an observer's mind that what they were doing was not magic, it was "MAGICK".



Crowley's attempts to usher in a new way of thinking about the difference between "magic" and "magick" would appear, on the surface, to have had a limited success. According to Google's Ngram Viewer, which tracks word usage in the books in Google's database, common usage of the word "magick" in print went up slightly after Crowley began publishing his works in the 1920s, as can be seen in the graph above (Ngram Viewer, 2015). Crowley himself could not have published enough books to account for the rise in use alone, so it stands to reason that his ideas, or at the very least his terminology, found its way into other author's works as his philosophies became more widely known.

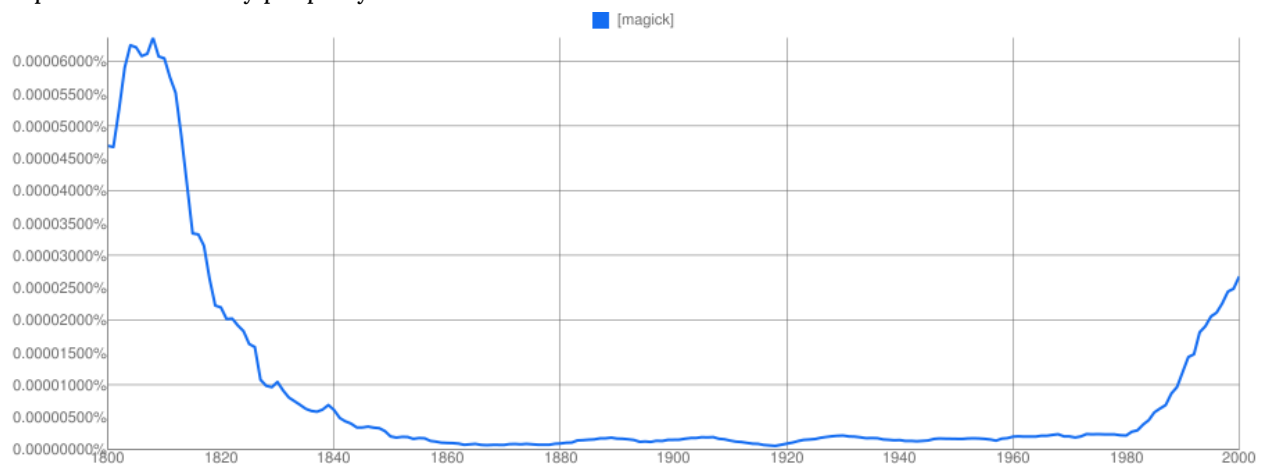
Another aspect of this influence that should be addressed is not just the attempt to create a new way of thinking by using a different spelling, but also the inflection that Crowley used in his efforts. In most cases, Crowley capitalized "Magick", or used upper case letters for the whole of the word, as in the earlier quotation. In English, capitalization is reserved for important words, distinguishing them in the minds of the reader as proper nouns; in effect, Crowley was creating a name for his system of beliefs in an attempt to further foster the separation he began with the difference in spelling.

Examining an Ngram graph for the use of "MAGICK" (in all capital letters) shows us a similar uptick in use around Crowley's time, although less sustained than the use of the word with just the first letter capitalized (Ngram Viewer, 2015). From that point until the 1970's, according to the graph below, use of the all-caps version of "magick" waxed and waned repeatedly over that fifty-year period.



Interestingly, usage of "magick" without capitalization at all showed little to no change around the introduction of Crowley's work, as can be seen in this graph (Ngram Viewer, 2015). It would appear that Crowley's attempts to legitimize "magick" as a separate way of thinking were, at least in some

ways, accepted and found their way into common use in the manner he intended them to; that is, as a separate philosophy and a belief system deserving of a proper name, using the same rules for capitalization as any properly named institution.



Another interesting piece of data that can be gleaned by examining these three data sets is that all three uses of the word (without capitalization, capitalized, and in all caps) experienced a remarkable upswing in use between 1980 and 1990. As interest in Neo-Paganism and New Age philosophies and religions began to rise, so did the use of the term “magick” in books printed in the English language.

Several modern authors of books that focus on the practices of mysticism use the term “magick” exclusively in their books, even though the traditions they follow differ wildly in most cases from the sort of mystical society Crowley was attempting to found. Raymond Buckland’s book *The Complete Book of Witchcraft*, Scott Cunningham’s work *Magickal Herbalism*, and all of Silver Ravenwolf’s books, including *To Stir a Magick Cauldron* and *Angels: Companions in Magick* have reverted to the older form of the word to distinguish themselves as discussing legitimate or “real magick”. A search for the term “magick” on Amazon returns 11,832 results for books in categories such as Witchcraft Religion and Spirituality (1,560 results), Magic Studies (6,361 results), Religion and Spirituality (8,111 results), New Age and Spirituality (5,484 results), Occult and Paranormal (6,841 results), and more. Of all the results returned by such a search, Classic Literature and Fiction results account for a total of ten books (Amazon, 2015).

Despite Crowley’s attempt to rebrand “magick” and its subsequent revival in the face of the growing popularity of New Age religions, Neo-Paganism, and renewed interest in spirituality, “magic” and “magick” still retain the same dictionary definition quoted at the beginning of this paper. But the two are interpreted to mean different things by many people. The Urban Dictionary is a perfect illustration of this. A search for “magic” on The Urban Dictionary returns a broad spectrum of definitions written by contributors. Those definitions range from something resembling the dictionary definition of “magic” to slang terms, sexual innuendo, references to a popular card game, and more. In modern English, “magic” has become a catch-all, an umbrella term under which a great many things fit.

However, a search for “magick” on the Urban Dictionary website returns a completely different set of definitions. Most of those definitions reference the art and practice of manipulating energy to alter the physical world, and almost all of them attribute the spelling to Aleister Crowley. People don’t refer to “magick tricks” or “magick acts”; they continue to use the more common spelling. In many ways, the term “magick” has become exactly what Crowley intended it to be: a new way to index oneself based on individual belief in spirituality. If a person considers themselves a “true believer”, convinced of the power of mysticism and the occult, using the term “magick” is a way to exhibit their

beliefs without having to vocalize them, to prove that they are “in the know” about such things, and a status symbol of sorts.

People speaking of “real” supernatural or extrasensory powers often use the altered spelling to distinguish themselves, and set their ideas apart. Which form of the word to use is wholly dependent on the beliefs of the person using the word, and it often depends on the context in which the word is being used. So, in the end, if there is a difference between “magic” and “magick”, it exists in a metalinguistic context, outside of the scope of technical definitions and entirely in the mind of the individual.

To delve into that context, it becomes necessary to see what individuals have to say about the difference between “magick” and “magic”, to get a “boots on the ground” perspective. Fortunately, a large number of people continue to debate the issue on the internet. In a blog post on Llewellyn.com in 2010, Donald Kraig weighed in with his take on the issue. He explains much the same idea that Crowley was attempting to foster, that of distinguishing stage magic and real supernatural phenomena. He sums up his statements thus: “I like to define the difference simply as “Magic is an attempt to imitate magick, by artificial means, as part of entertainment.”” (Kraig, 2010, Llewellyn.com)

Joanna DeVoe is a self-proclaimed KickAss Witch who publishes an online blog about being a practitioner of magick, and she said very much the same thing in her blog post “Putting the “k” in Magick: What does it mean and why would you want to?” in 2012. Once again, the first statement she makes is that adding the “k” ending to “magic” serves to distinguish what she practices from the illusions of stage magicians. She terms “magick” as “Real magick” or “natural magick”, and she is very clear about her own personal division between this and more commonplace magic. (DeVoe, 2012)

A poster on Yahoo! Answers asked the same question that this paper has been examining: “What is the difference between magic and magick?” His question engendered several responses, as well as some spirited debate, that illustrate what certain individuals think of both spellings. The highest rated answer was from user jessi lynn, who cites the “source” for her answer as seventeen years of being a Wiccan. Her response equates the “c” ending with stage magic, parlor tricks and sleight of hand; the “k” ending, in her opinion, means effecting change on the world through the manipulation of energies from the world around us. This same sentiment is echoed multiple times by the majority of the fifteen responses to the original poster’s question. Very nearly all of them, most of them citing their own practice of Wicca, witchcraft, and spirituality, agree that the distinction has meaning and sets the two ideas apart (Yahoo Answers, 2009).

Another poster, Khnopff71, takes his opinion one step further by saying that “magic” and “magick” are the same thing, but the “k” that distinguishes the latter is necessary. His reasoning is that belief is necessary for magic to work and the proliferation of stage magicians and sleight of hand, along with the concepts of magic in novels, movies, and television shows has rendered people incapable of believing that magic is a real force to be harnessed and used. The “k” ending, in his opinion, distinguishes the two as separate concepts in the mind of the individual practitioner, making it easier to believe. Thus armed, the practitioner’s attempts to manipulate magick will have a better chance of success (Yahoo Answers, 2009).

But the distinction is not universally accepted, even among people of similar ideologies. On the same thread, user Aandeg-Maiingan, a practicing witch of eight years, eschews any sort of difference in meaning between the two spellings. She feels no need to alter the spelling of the more commonly accepted magic because; as she puts it “Magic is magic no matter how you spell it” (Yahoo Answers, 2009). Similarly, user Halcon also eschews the “k” ending for magic for a variety of reasons; she notes that Crowley used the two terms interchangeably, she speaks about people using the different spellings to index themselves differently while decrying their lack of understanding of the “whys” behind the adoption of the k ending, and notes that she would never append the “k” on the end of the word because “today it seems pretentious quite frankly” (Yahoo Answers, 2009).

Clearly, the difference between “magic” and “magick” lies entirely in the point of view of the individual. To some, the distinction is clear-cut and meaningful, while others view it as unnecessary at best and a pretentious affectation at worst. Crowley’s attempts to “rebrand” his practices and differentiate them from stage magic have been adopted and expanded on by Wiccans and other occultists and spiritualists, but have by no means become a universal concept. In the end, the answer to the question “Is all magic(k) created equal” is very much dependent on your perspective on the words, their meaning, their differences, and individual beliefs.

## References

- Crowley, A., & Desti, M. (1998). *Magick: Liber ABA, Book four, parts I-IV* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed.). Weiser Books.
- DeVoe, J. (2012). Putting the K in Magic: What Does it Mean and Why Would You Want To? <http://www.joannadevoe.com/2012/09/putting-k-in-magick-what-does-it-mean.html>
- Kraig, D. (2010). Magic vs. Magick. <http://www.llewellyn.com/blog/2010/05/magic-vs-magick/>
- Urban Dictionary. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/>
- Yahoo Answers. (2009). What is the difference between magic and magick? <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090523013429AApWRdH&page=1>



# MC

## Travis Kruso

Cite as: Kruso, Travis. 2021. MC. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 175-179.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

When I set out, I was determined to find the history of MC, but in my research, I found the contemporary metalinguistic ideas (and their influences) surrounding MC to be far more fascinating. My question changed from “what is the history?” to “who gets to call themselves/be labeled as an MC, and what does that mean?” and “how do fans, critics, and artists index themselves & others through the use of the label MC?” To start, though, I’ll begin with where I began.

I assumed that, as an initialism of “Master of Ceremonies”, MC would date back to anywhere between the 1400-1500s, being used in ritual/ceremonial/religious performances (people have been lazy forever, abbreviations are far from modern inventions!), and as it turns out, I was pretty close! The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) gives this definition for Master of Ceremonies:

*Master of (the) Ceremonies n.* (a) an officer of the British royal household in the 17th cent., who superintended state ceremonies and was responsible for the enforcement of court etiquette (now hist.); (b) (also master of ceremonies) a person who presides over a ball, formal dinner, or other entertainment, or who introduces speakers, players, or entertainers in the course of such an occasion; abbreviated M.C.

And its first recorded usage of Master of Ceremonies dates back to 1605-1610 (later than I had expected): “Lewes Lewkenor..the office of maister of the ceremonies..for terme of life.”

Interestingly enough, the first recorded usage of MC as an abbreviation occurs nearly two hundred years later in the journals of Elizabeth Sheridan (1758-1837) from 1790:

“It was Tyson's Benefit, and as he is my acquaintance, independent of being M:C:, it was but decent that at least one of us should appear there.” (Sheridan 1986: 192).

So, where did MC start? As an identifier - a title that separates one with definite skill and ability from the rest of us. The MC is someone with prestige that is in a position of responsibility to the attending parties during such events as benefits or balls. The MC had to be informed and gentlemanly, prim and proper; “the M.C. of a watering-place is on a par with the late Earl of Chesterfield in mind and manners.” (Dramatic Censor 1811: 470-471). Primarily, it was the MCs job to introduce the “real” entertainment for the evening while keeping the audience entertained and engaged, but, at some point in the United States during 1970s and 80s, the title of MC (and all the indexing that comes with it) changed dramatically. We can actually trace the subtle change in definition for MC and that we can see that the change from historic to contemporary definition seems to happen in America specifically.

We can see the MC as an introductory figure: “the figure and tune being selected, the M.C. should be informed of it” (Analysis of the London Ball-Room 1825). “A typical Club Night starts with a welcome from the MC, who then introduces instrumentalists..of all ages and abilities” (Scottish World · 1989). Both of these examples are referring to practices in London and Scotland, and though the latter was written in 1989, it still holds to the historic definition. However, in the US and ten years earlier than the *Scottish World*, the Sugarhill Gang released their hit single *Rapper's Delight*, and while it wasn't the first track to feature rapping, it's arguably the track that popularized the style in the US as it was the

very first rap single to become a Top 40 hit. The following is an excerpt from the “long version” of the song:

*“So when the sucker MCs try to chump my style  
I let them know that I’m versatile  
I got style, finesse, and a little black book  
That’s filled with rhymes and I know you wanna look  
But the thing that separates you from me  
And that is called originality”  
(Rapper’s Delight. Sugarhill, 1979. MP3)*

There’s an *undeniable* sense of prestige in the above excerpt, but it’s changed from the type of prestige found in regard to officers of British households presiding over balls. It’s bolder, brasher, more outwardly sure of itself—an embodiment of the ideas of rap mashed with the musicality and dance of hip hop. The historic definition is not gone, but rather, it has been adapted to a different audience. Each MC in the Sugarhill Gang considers themselves to be skilled in their practice, and each engages with the audience and introduces another member, but instead of playing support to the entertainment, they *are* the entertainment. More importantly, this selection highlights one of the key facets of the modern definition of MC: *originality*. This idea that the MC must be more than charismatic and engaging, that they must *create* on some artistic level, is one that draws a line in the sand when people refer to MCs (or emcees, as a variation) in comparison to rappers and other musicians. This idea is so divisive that it has caused a rift in the hip hop & rap communities, a rift that is readily apparent with a simple Google search and a trip to basically *any* forum focused on rap & hip hop, a rift that is absolutely entrenched in ideas surrounding taste, merit, and elitism.

In terms of raw data collection, internet forums were a godsend. The Online OED was good (a lot better than I expected), COCA & COHA were decent but didn’t quite yield enough results, and the Google Ngram viewer was basically useless as it not only gave results for MC (as in Master of Ceremonies), but also for M.C. (as in Escher), Mc (as in McDonalds, McManus, etc), and mc as in a scanning typo of “me” where the software read the “e” as a “c.” But that was fine. The discussion/debate surrounding MC is very much still alive and well, and people are still happy to engage in fiery, colorfully worded insult-hurling competitions to get their points across over the internet.

I started with a simple Google search: “what is an MC?” That brought me to the Wikipedia page for Master of Ceremonies (which was actually a lot less helpful than I would’ve liked, as it gave only a very basic definition of what a Master of Ceremonies is, and that MC is an acronym of its most commonly used in the hip hop genre of music), and the UrbanDictionary. The top definition for MC on UrbanDictionary, posted by user G on December 5, 2003 is as follows:

*“Short for master of ceremonies or mic controller. Essentially a word for a rapper but the term is not limited to hip hop. Drum and Bass, Garage, Happy Hardcore, Ragga and old school rave all feature MCs, however with these genres, the MC generally MCs live while a DJ mixes the tunes, whereas hip hop MCs mainly do so on record  
Navigator is a wicked MC  
Biggie was a phat MC  
I’m MCing at a house party tonight, you coming?”*

And the second highest rated definition, from user Marshall Hopkins on June 11, 2004:

*“Master of Ceremonies or Microphone Controller. A rapper who is either the host of an event; someone with enough flow and skill to be considered a master of the art of rap. Mos Def is one of the best MCs in the world.”*

These are generally open definitions with the only requirements being a musically skilled individual that hosts an event, most often used in, but by no means limited to, hip hop. The interesting bit though is that each example given by each author names an artist that they deem worthy of the title MC—and neither author overlap in artists. Now, obviously a self-styled MC (MC Hammer, MC Ride, etc) will generally be referred to as an MC—if only to avoid confusion - but as for hip hop artists lacking the moniker MC, it's a whole different story. This is when it gets *really* interesting.

A thread in the Rap Genius section on genius.com asked the users “What is your definition of a rapper versus your definition of an MC, and rap versus hip-hop, if there is any difference at all?” The following are some of the most agreed upon and most controversial answers:

*“Rapper= Someone that makes rap music for money as a job or occupation. Lil Wayne, 2 Chainz Chief Keef and Lil B are solid examples  
MC= One who makes rap music as a hobby and as a job, and usually is talented.  
Mainly MC's lean more towards the roots and fundamentals of hip hop like the four pillars, they do not try to put on a pop or mainstream image. KRS-One, Big L, Nas, and my English Teacher/Rapper JOAL.”*

*“As Bun B put it: an MC is someone who is “culpable for what they say,” so someone who takes responsibility for what they're saying; a rapper isn't. An MC is a rapper, but a rapper isn't necessarily an MC. Hip hop is the cultural movement, made up of b-boying (break dancing), rap (the rhyming), graffiti, and DJing.”*

*“A RAPPER is an ARTIST.  
An EMCEE is a MASTER OF CEREMONIES... someone who maintains the energy of a room, an entertainer.  
But our world has switched the connotated definitions.  
But HIP HOP refers to the lifestyle subculture. Graffiti, break dancing, rapping, DJing... they're all part of hip hop, and so are many other things.”*

So the opinions are divided. Who can claim the title of *artist*? Rapper, or MC? In another, similar thread found on the forums at rapmusic.com, users mirrored the above answers, but the discussion got a little bit heated, which is great as it gives a deeper insight into the indexicality of the meaning of MC (as well as providing me with a healthy dose of *schadenfreude*). Here's an example of indexicality in action through a disagreement between users (typos and formatting left intact so as to maintain the *integrity* of the debate):

**MadVillain413:** *“a rapper is someone who:*

- 1. Creates music garenteed to sell*
- 2. Creates an image that will sell*
- 3. Does songs from the current album and commercial hits*
- 4. Get's songs on the radio and MTV / BET rotation*
- 5. Get's paid more then professional sports players to make bad music for teenagers.*

*The true essence of hip-hop goes to the MC a lot of people get it twisted and call MC's rappers, when in reality, it's bullshit. The media and popularity of the "bling bling" faze gave hip-hop a bad name, some people only think of that when they hear "rap".*

*I've been thinking about this a lot lately. Drop your opinion on this matter...”*

Here, user MadVillain413 is indexing MCs by othering rappers, claiming that rappers “make bad music for teenagers” and that “the true essence of hip-hop goes to the MC.” MadVillain413 then goes on to claim that hip hop has been soiled thru the media's representation and popularization of rap.

**OrtizDupri:** *“Based on your definition (rapper #4), Common and Talib Kweli are both rappers as opposed to emcees... You're a typical closed-minded "underground" fan.”*

User OrtizDupri then indexes MadVillain413 thru labeling him "a typical closed-minded 'underground' fan", a jab at MadVillain413's perceived music tastes & character.

*MadVillain413: “You say this like you know what I listen to...”*

*OrtizDupri: “I say it like you define yourself - you're the type of person that separates MC from rapper and rap from hip-hop.”*

OrtizDupri furthers his argument by claiming that MadVillain413 is, in fact, indexing himself----"you define yourself"--arguing that, in separating rap & hip hop, MadVillain413 is an elitist--"you're the type of person that...". OrtizDupri is mirroring Edward Said here (Orientalism) in his claim that by othering perceived outsiders, MadVillain413 is actually othering himself.

*D!CK: “It's topics like this that make me wish Hip Hop never reached the spoiled white kids in the burbs.”*

*MADVILLAIN413: “Fuck you...I don't live in the burbs...asshole...”*

*!ronHorSe: “rural parts are no better.”*

*D!CK: “damn sure don't live in the city asking tard questions like that.”*

Two more users, D!CK & !ronHorSe join in, making assumptions about MadVillain413's geographic location, class, and race. In the hip hop community especially, being labeled a "white kid(s) in the burbs" is a heavy insult, one that carries assumptions/accusations of affected behavior, disingenuous opinions and actions, and a lack of understanding/appreciation for hip hop—and in extension—black culture. It's interesting to note that where MadVillain413 claims the media is at fault for the desecration of hip hop, user D!CK posits that "the spoiled white kids in the burbs" are to blame. Whatever the cause, hip hop sure ain't what it used to be...Kids these days...

Poor MadVillain413, getting dragged so viciously like that, but clearly, there's something that defines an MC. That something just isn't universally agreed upon (surprise!). A rapper is an artist and an MC is not, and MC is an artist and a rapper is a skill, MCs are the foundations of hip hop, rappers are strictly entertainers, MCs are in it for the money, there is no difference at all and even suggesting that there is a difference labels you as someone not in the know, an elitist, unintelligent, a wannabe, a tard...

It's a lot to parse. But it doesn't stop with fans of rap and hip hop, artists are also involved with the discussion. Bun B, quoted in one of the above posts, attributes a sense of culpability to MCs, a responsibility that rappers lack. For Bun B, an MC represents a role model figure, a person in their community held responsible for what they do, say, and advocate. The MCs responsibilities go much further than the stage. On #SwayInTheMorning, artist Ice-T explains the difference as such:

*“An MC means a person that can move the crowd and, basically, control an audience[...]A rapper[...]you might see them onstage but they're afraid of the audience, or they can only sing their hit record, but they can't just say 'ok we bout to just break this down, change it up a little bit.'[...]A true MC[...]is somebody that,*

*when they're onstage, they're just in control of that whole audience. Rhyming is something they do, but it's not all they do."*

So, who's right? Honestly, there isn't a single answer that satisfies me enough to convince me. An MC is any one person that, regardless of if they claim the title or not, is lauded by enough people as *an MC*. Words *only* have meaning because a group agrees upon a certain meaning (or set of meanings), but in cases like MC where the groups in question can be from very niche areas, establishing a widely accepted definition is much more difficult and can lead to a ton of debates filled with attacks on taste, intelligence, and basic understanding of hip hop. Perhaps the best answer (or at least, *my favorite*) comes from rapmusic.com user o0\_BigBadBoner\_0o:

*" nah...MC dont mean u have to Rap.....a country singer is an MC....rap is a sub catagory of MC...a poet is an emcee....but its the same shit.....its like sayin' a poet, the guy who talks really fast in auctions and singers are MC.....aint no difference tho...its like sayin' CAR and VEHICLE...a car is a type of vehicle....plus what the fuck does this even matter? its irrelevant..ya'll makin' a big deal of nothin'....go suck on a tit"*

## References

*Index to Warrant Book 1605–10*. 1610.

Sheridan, Elizabeth. 1986. *Betsy Sheridan's Journal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*The Dramatic Censor*. 1811. London: G. Brimmer.

*Analysis of London Ball-Room*. 1825. London: T. Tegg.

*Scottish World*. 1989.

<http://genius.com/discussions/27126-Difference-between-a-rapper-and-mc-rap-hip-hop>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180308112359/http://rapmusic.com/threads/define-the-difference-between-mc-and-rapper.880159/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrLmvqsljmU>

# Michigander

Jaime Baker

Cite as: Baker, Jaime. 2021. Michigander. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 180-186.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The word *Michigander* was coined among American elites in the mid-nineteenth century as a *patrial*, or name describing a resident of some place, in this case, the state of Michigan. At first glance the word clearly makes no sense. It is seemingly a portmanteau of the prefix *Michi-* referring to the State of Michigan, and *gander*, a male goose. Yes, there are giant Canadian geese populations abundantly found in Michigan, but that does not connote anything about the people that live or settled here. We are certainly not known as the “Northern Geese People” (although there have been some violent geese-human interactions), but geese had nothing to do with the formation of this state. Or did they? What happened to all of the other variants of Michigander that group together the people of Michigan? Was Michigander used right from the start of statehood or was it coined later? Why is the most popular term for the people of Michigan such a ridiculously formed noun? My research has led me to ask all of these questions and the answers may be surprising.

## Where did it come from?

According to the Google Ngram Viewer (Figure 1), the word Michigander emerged in 1850. That year, I found, is somewhat accurate but not entirely precise. The Online Etymology Dictionary places its origins in simply 1848 with no citation. However, the Oxford English Dictionary Online states its first citable roots lie in the Hampshire Gazette in 1838, with a quotation by Senator Abraham Lincoln a decade later.

- 1838 *Hampshire (Northampton, Mass.) Gaz.* 14 Nov. 1, I came..the last thirty miles to Detroit by rail road. This is part of one which the Michiganders are making across St. Joseph's.
- 1842 *Bellows Falls (Vermont) Gaz.* 25 June 3/4 'The Vermonter' does well enough,..but come to the New Hampshire, or Massachusetts, or Connecticut, or Michigander—'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet'.
- 1848 A. LINCOLN *Coll. Wks.* (1953) I. 509, I mean the military tail you Democrats are now engaged in dove-tailing on to the great Michigander [sc. General Cass].

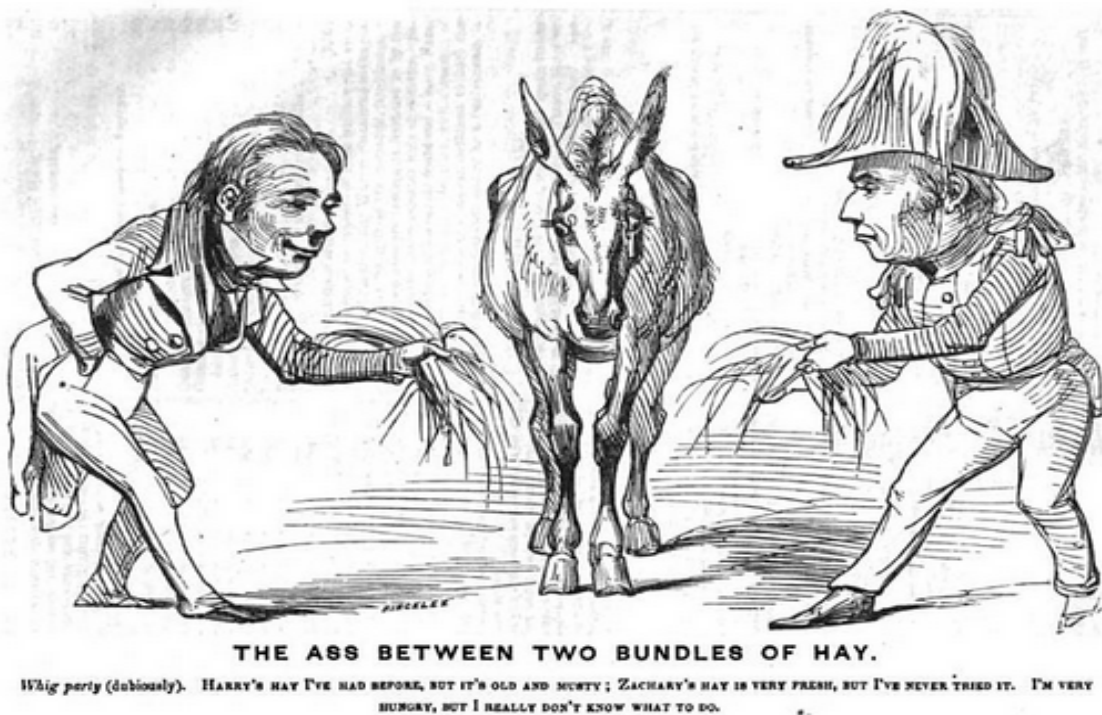
### Source: “Michigander, n.” OED Online

So, which is the precise answer? Upon further investigation, I was unable to retrieve the original articles from the Hampshire Gazette or the Bellows Falls Gazette. There are, however, two pieces of evidence I was able to retrieve that may slightly antedate Lincoln's speech. The first is from an 1848 United States Presidential campaign debate between General Lewis Cass of Michigan and John Parker Hale of New Hampshire but there is no precise date associated with it: “‘Tell Hale,’ said Cass ‘that he is a Granite goose.’ ‘Tell Cass,’ said Hale, ‘that he is a Michi-gander[.]’” (Bungay 1854, 93). The second is a quotation from Hans Sperber of Ohio State University, citing an Ohio newspaper article, which came out on the same day as Lincoln's speech in Congress. This signifies that Michigander must have been used before Lincoln's speech since there were no telegraphic lines available for the Xenia writer to have any knowledge of it (Sperber 1954, 25)



Xenia (Ohio) *Torchlight*, 27 July, 1848. When Sam Medary and other locofoco editors first announced the great Michigander as their candidate for President. . .

The next question is with whom and where did it originate? As shown, Michigander was coined as a political slur for General Lewis Cass during the Presidential campaign for the election of 1848. As the timeline would have it, there is a high likelihood that it was later in 1848 when Lincoln notably used Michigander as a political attack against Cass' campaign and his decisions as a General in the war of 1812. This was not the first time that a politician was personally attacked based on physical appearance and it was also not the first time General Cass had been mockingly related to an animal. His opponents also stated that he was like a donkey, apparent in this political cartoon referring him to as "Cass-ass." (Dexter 1848, 184):



The name Michigander was not originally a partial given to the people of the state but rather a nickname directly for Cass himself and it remained just that for several years (Sperber 1954, 25). Cass reportedly hated the term and had good reason to. A quote from Mrs. Varina Davis attests to this; "Mr. Cass was testy sometimes, but it was the testiness of an over-worked man, not an ill-natured one. Nothing annoyed him so much as being called a Michigander; he said the name was suggestive." (Shriner 1918, 104). Political cartoons, commercials and nicknaming still widely continue on in national politics today. Though, I have not come across a nickname since that has gained so much popular attention.

### What Drove the Semantic Shift?

Michigander has since taken a dramatic semantic shift from a derogatory slur to its place atop the list of acceptable patrials for the people of the State of Michigan, though it did not spike in popularity until 1860, the year that Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States, Cass

left Washington, and the year before the Civil War began. Cass also stated in 1860 in opposition to any state's secession from the union and in defense of his personal integrity; "I speak to Cobb, ... and he tells me he is a Georgian; to Floyd, and he tells me he is a Virginian... I am not a Michigander, I am a citizen of the United States." (Klunder 1996, 304).

Prior to Michigander, many terms were, and still are, acceptable when referring to the people of Michigan including Michiganian, Michiganite, and Michiganese. Slightly before Michigander emerged, Michiganian was the predominant term for the people of Michigan and still firmly holds second place among recent English literature (Figure 1). An article published in 1847 from the *Detroit Free Press*, originally taken from the *Milwaukee Courier*, praising the educational system of Michigan while the rest of the infrastructure was somewhat lagging behind, reads, "After reading it, what Michiganian will not feel proud of his home?" (Figure 2). Conversely, Michiganese never caught on as much as its supporter, David Dudley Field in 1888, desired it to when he presented before the congressional Committee on Territories (Marckwardt 1952, 204)

Michigander has no obvious place in the English language, referring to people or otherwise. It is a portmanteau, or combination of two existing words to form a new word with both meanings (for example: bodacious, edutainment, or frenemy). Therefore, the word Michigander literally breaks down to "the gander from Michigan" (Sperber 1954, 27). The logical thing to do when referring to a population or a person's native land is to tack on an ending such as: -ian, -an, -ite, or -er. Ex: Pennsylvanian, Alaskan, New Hampshireite, and Detroiter. Following that, the noun Michiganian makes the most sense when referring to the people of Michigan. Since the word already ends in -an, it was necessary to add -ian to make an easy transition from one word to the next (Marckwardt 204). Michiganian was first used in *The Weekly Register* by Hezekiah Niles in 1813, according to Albert Marckwardt and the OED Online. However, since the Michigan Territory was created by an act of Congress on January 11, 1805, the term may have been used before 1813 but was not as widely well known (Marckwardt 204). The State was admitted to the Union on January 26, 1837 and the patrials Michigander and Michiganian have been used interchangeably throughout our history. Though previously, Michigander was the "odd goose out" so to speak.

## How is it used today?

Today Michigander, and its various forms, is the most widely used term to index and refer to people from Michigan, but some still prefer to use Michiganian and some prefer Michiganite. A poll taken by the Michigan Natural Resources Magazine in the July-August 1983 issue of relays that between Michigander, Michiganian, and Michiganite; Eighty-two percent of responders voted for Michigander, only fourteen percent voted for Michiganian, and just four percent voted for Michiganite (Figure 3). Many of the published comments in the poll were issues with the use of Michigander, mainly focusing on the term not being gender neutral. Though, some commenters defended its use as strong and inclusive. One even stated that it does have the ability to change by gender, "I'm a Michigander, my wife is a Michigoose, and our children are Michigoslins" (Figure 3). This comment in the article was the first time I had ever heard of the terms Michigoose or Michigoslins but further research reveals that the terms have also been in use almost as long as Michigander has been the preferred patrial.

The U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual (GPOSM) is the official handbook for printed text released from the U.S. Houses of Administration. In the current GPOSM, updated in 2008, the official term for residents of the state of Michigan is Michiganians and that is what must be used in all official printings (Office 2008, 108). Though it appears that this may not have always been the case. In the Journal *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review* there is an article entitled *Wolverine and Michigander* By Dr. Albert H. Marckwardt. He writes, "Officially, of course, we are all "Michiganites," for that is the term approved by the U.S. [GPOSM], in its revision of January 1945. This particular edition undertakes to give an approved designation for citizens of each of the forty-eight states, and it appears to be the

first to make such an attempt. At least none of the earlier editions I have examined have a comparable department.” (Marckwardt 1952, 206). Thus, in national capacities, the people of Michigan were Michiganites and are now Michiganians, not Michiganders.

Chapter 17 of the book *Language Myths* by Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill is entitled *They Speak really Bad English Down South and in New York City*. Its author, Dennis R. Preston, describes a survey of language correctives that he took of people from Texas, New York City, Alabama, and Michigan. He refers directly to the Michigan responders as Michiganders six times in the chapter with no indication at all of any other patrials for the people of Michigan (Preston 1998, 142-47). This shows the common thought shared by many that Michigander is a neutral term perfectly acceptable for use when one needs to refer to the people of the State of Michigan.

I also conducted my own poll using a non-random sample of friends and family (in-state natives and out-of-state non-natives alike) to evaluate what their primary word choice is for the patrial of Michigan natives and residents. Of a sample of twelve responses collected, eight responders chose Michigander, three chose Michiganian, and only one chose the term Michiganite. The term Michiganese was not mentioned by anyone. When informed of this term, eleven of them accepted it as another possibility for a patrial and one of them said that Michiganese only makes sense as the dialect of English that the people from Michigan speak, using the example Portuguese. It is also of good note that one of the responders to my poll was a part of Governor Rick Snyder’s 2014 campaign and he preferred the use of Michigander to any other cognate. (Interviewee 2014).

## Conclusion

The term Michigander has emerged and changed drastically over the past one hundred sixty-four years or so. It began as a direct personal attack against one of the great founders of the State of Michigan and has drastically grown in popularity to far surpass any of its related patrials over its lifetime. Michigander is reportedly the preferred patrial noun by people of the State of Michigan according to a poll by the Michigan Natural Resources Magazine, and possibly Governor Rick Snyder. It is also safe to state that most residents of the State have no idea that the term has such a rich history dating back nearly to the time of Michigan’s admittance as a state, and did not come about naturally but instead was thrust into the American culture through the American democratic process. While it began as a very derogatory slur for one of the founding fathers of the State of Michigan and indexed him as a goose, it has since become the most widely accepted and unique patrial word among the fifty states. May the Great Michigander for whom it was created live on in our memory and respect for our Great State.

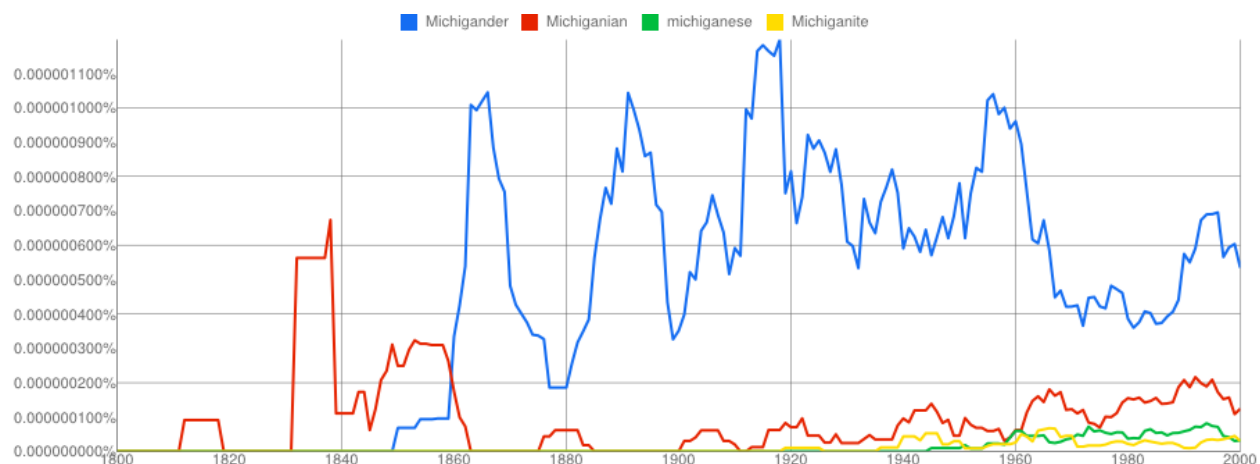


Figure 1. Source: Google Ngram Viewer.

### Complimentary to our State.

We cut the following from the Milwaukee Courier. It is but justice, and we thank the editor for it. After reading it what Michiganian will not feel proud of his home?

One of the proudest features of the institutions of Michigan is her noble system for educating her children and youth. To this, more than any thing else, may be attributed her prosperity. Twin-sister with Arkansas, how different has been their course and the results since their admission into the Union. Michigan, the very year of her birth as a State, organized her system of education, and she is now reaping a noble harvest for her foresight in this respect. Her population is as intelligent, as sensible, and as thriving, as that of any State in the Union. Her common Schools have been steadily radiating light and life. Her banks have failed, her public works have been suspended, and at times commercial gloom has covered the whole State with a dark pall; yet it is now the universal acknowledgment, that her population has, during all this time been constantly and steadily improving in thrift, character and honesty; indeed, in every thing which truly makes a State a desirable residence or a star in the American confederacy, and we know that not a little of this change may be attributed to the constant and healthy influence her common schools have generally and insensibly exercised over all classes of her population.

It is a mistaken notion that gigantic systems of internal improvement, extensive systems of banking, and other schemes, or the introduction of foreign capital, are the 'great engines in all movements towards the prosperity and happiness of a State.' On the contrary, these have been the rocks on which the prosperity of every new State has split, while the limiting of legislative power, and provisions for education have been the measures of salvation and permanent prosperity. May Wisconsin profit by example.

Figure 2. Source: Democratic Free Press 1847, 2.



ids?

e seems little  
ns across the  
fire as a  
ool." An  
cluded that  
es between  
er and the  
caused by  
il burning  
A modern ex-  
: "grasslands,  
: there  
move fire,  
or trees  
"ite men did  
ans' practice  
may account,  
han's com-  
markable"  
ative  
disappeared  
ent.  
is W. Knaggs  
DeWitt

ig  
nable bottle  
an effective  
de litter, ac-  
rear study by  
artment of  
ne law took  
1978.  
plots of  
ed off at  
ng the state's  
em in the  
between 1977  
r found in  
ne month of  
red. Analysis  
ited a contin-  
ced litter,  
containers.  
e was an  
reduction of  
id cans, both  
n-returnable,  
: bill years of  
ore than half  
ttles picked  
n-return-  
ates.

atural Resources  
/Agot, 1983

## "Michigander" Wins Landslide Vote Of MNR Readers

By an overwhelming margin of more than five to one, readers of this magazine prefer to be known as "Michiganders." This decisive vote was delivered in response to a poll that we announced in our May-June issue when we asked readers to choose between Michigander, Michiganian, or Michiganite as their word for people who live in this state. Eighty-two percent voted for Michigander, only 14 percent chose Michiganian, and just 4 percent voted for Michiganite. As you might expect, most of their comments focused on the use of "gander," and the problems associated with the masculine/feminine use of this phrase in identifying gender. (The others cited various historical references to support their view, and one reader even found supporting evidence in the dictionary.)

Here then, are some of the comments from readers who voted for Michigander:  
From Marian Lush of Detroit: "I vote for gander. It's easier to say, is unique among the states and has served us well for a long time."  
From Jerry and Virginia Fish of Kalamazoo: "We like our name Michigander. Let's keep it. We do lots of 'gandering' around the state."  
From Dale E. Pasco of Oshtemo: "My parents were both one room school teachers and they taught it this way: I'm a Michigander, my wife is a Michigoose, our kids are Michiganders, so what is the use. After 12 years with these categories I see no reason for change."  
From Elaine Cash of New Hudson: "Michigander is a natural. Nothing else I've heard is better. My daughter also agrees. I bought her a license plate I'm a Michigander. She is very proud of it."  
From Joanna Gunn of Charlevoix: "We've always been



Michiganders. Of course my husband Carl says I'm a Michigoose, but I'd rather be that than one of the others."  
From Bob Nobles of Saugatuck: "After 62 years, I'm still saying Michigander. Just who are the interlopers who say Michiganian?"

From Alan and Susan Jones of Ann Arbor: "Here are two votes for Michigander, the historic and traditional name for residents of our fair state. The upstart term Michiganian is totally unacceptable."

From John C. Colling of Northville: "To be a Michiganian is absurd. To be a Michigander, divine. The word is strong. Vibrant. Assertive. No one makes fun of a Michigander—not to his face, anyhow. Michiganders are strong, proud of their heritage, proud of their state. Show me a Michigander and I'll show you what Michigan is all about. Real Michiganders don't eat quiche! Michiganian is a whiney, wimp word. One must whine to say it (*aaa-nee-aaan*.) Ridiculous. A Michiganian suffers from eternal guilt trips and is forever sorry for it. You step on his foot and he'll apologize to you for having it in your way. Michiganians eat quiche and constantly worry about whether their fingernails are done properly."

From Harvey B. Randall of Marshall: "I believe one of the first uses of the term Michigander was by President Abraham Lincoln in referring to Michigan residents. Critics of the use of Michigander say it reminds them of a goose. This

is a typical Michiganian reaction which shows a tendency toward effemininity and effeness. Have you ever seen a gander defend his goose or take charge of his gaggle of geese? Michigander now more than ever needs this 'gander' spirit—bold, aggressive, and protective."

From Jack W. Benson of Haslett: "I'm a native Michigander. My family first settled here in the early 1800s. Some letters I've seen referred to residents of this state as Michiganders. The evolution of the word Michigander comes from adding *der* to Michigan, as in 'flatlander.' To label us 'Michiganians' is just an attempt to avoid a 'sexist' connotation. It is very clumsy and sounds awful. According to the dictionary, the root *ian* means 'of or belonging to,' while *der* indicates a derivation from, i.e. Michigander—from Michigan."

On the opposite side of this issue, readers were equally strong in their convictions in favoring use of the word Michiganian. Here's what they had to say:

From S. Bacsanyi of Ypsilanti: "A gander is a male goose. I am neither male nor a goose. I vote for the suffix *ian* (as in olympian)."

From Betty Cummings of Manchester: "I vote for Michiganian. I like the sound of it better and I hate those Michigander bumper stickers. What's wrong with *ian*? We have Californian, Virginian, etc."

From Edith W. Ash of Oshtemo: "May I never become a Michigander, much less a Michigoose! Michigander was a

term of derision bandied about on editorial pages and in cartoons mocking Abraham Lincoln and his supporters because the Republican Party was founded in Michigan. Michiganite sounds like a rock. So it's Michiganian for me."

From Ted Bays of Marquette: "The proper name for a Michigan person? I vote for Michiganian, partly because I doubt any Michigan woman would put up with Michigander (wrong gender) or Michigoose, and partly because it echoes other usages: Floridian, Californian, Pennsylvanian, Lake Wobegonian. Perhaps we could avoid the controversy entirely by recognizing each Michigander's region: Folks below the straits of Mackinac are, as everyone knows, Beetweeders, while we here in the land of April blizzards are—well, anything but Yoopers, an irksome bit of bumpkinish anagrammatic that currently besmirches at least one business sign here in Marquette."

And finally, we received letters from two readers, one who is originally from out-of-state and the other who lives in Missouri, that may provide the best answer of all:

From William J. Joyce of Inkster: "You really do not have a one word answer, one name for state residents. A lot of people get by without any. I'm from Massachusetts. Try to get an easy name out of that!"

And from Mary and Tom Haak-Frendscho of Florissant, Missouri: "Since Michigander has automatic gender association, should Michigan women call themselves Michigeese? Ridiculous. Michiganite sounds like some sort of rock formation. Totally unacceptable. Michiganian distorts the root word and obscures the purpose of state association. We suggest simply stating in a loud, clear voice, I'm from Michigan."

Figure 3. Source: Michigan Natural Resources Magazine 1983: 9.

## References

- Bungay, George Washington. *Off-hand Takings; Or, Crayon Sketches of the Noticeable Men of Our Age*. New York: De Witt & Davenport, 1854.
- Democratic Free Press. "Complimentary to our State." *Democratic Free Press* (1842-1848), May 12, 1847: 2.
- Dexter, George. "The John-donkey." (George Dexter, Burgess, Stringer and Co.) 1 (1848).
- Klunder, Willard Carl. *Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1996.
- Marckwardt, Albert H. "Wolverine and Michigander." Edited by Frank E. Robbins. *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review* (The Alumni Association of the University of Michigan) 58, no. 18 (May 1952): 203-208.
- Michigan Natural Resources Magazine . "'Michigander' Wins Landslide Vote of MNR Readers." *State of Michigan*, July-August 1983: 9.
- OED Online. Oxford University Press. <http://oed.com>
- Office of U.S. Government Printing. "U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual." U.S. Government Printing Office. September 16, 2008. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/search/pagedetails.action?granuleId=&packageId=GPO-STYLEMANUAL-2008&fromBrowse=true>
- Online Etymology Dictionary. 2014. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php>
- Preston, Dennis R. "They Speak Really Bad English Down South and in New York City." In *Language Myths*, by Peter Trudgill and Laurie Bauer. London: Penguin Group, 1998.
- Shriner, Charles Anthony. *Wit, Wisdom and Foibles of the Great: Together with Numerous Anecdotes*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1918.
- Sperber, Hans. "Words and Phrases in American Politics: Michigander." *American Speech* 29, no. 1 (February 1954): 21-27.



# Molly

Brianna LeBlanc

Cite as: LeBlanc, Brianna. 2021. Molly. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 187-193.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

“Molly” comes from the Latin word “mollis” meaning “soft,” or “gentle.” This word, and therefore its definition, evolved to mean something more in 17th and 18th century culture, England in particular. As this society shifted their attention towards the gay men of the time, the word “molly” evolved into a weapon and an accusation used against these men. The contexts in which the word was used in public trials, characterizations, and overall stereotypes allows us to look into how society perceived homosexual men of the time. Because of the way these men were tried and mistreated, a new subculture emerged, coded by an entirely new lexicon. So, what can the use of the word “molly” tell us about not only society’s perception of gay males in 17th and 18th century England, but also the culture of gay males themselves?

Molly was a common name for the female immigrants from Ireland, some of whom were lower class and turned to prostitution, (Norton). Society used the name in a derogatory way and inflicted their biases against the lower class and immigrant prostitutes in this manner, shortening the word to “moll.” The Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue, published in 1785 references this definition, simply stating that a “moll” is “a whore,” (Grose, 1785:110). Because of the association with criminal acts such as prostitution, the term “moll” was picked up and included in what is referred to as Thieves or Rogue’s Cant. This cant type was a lexicon used for criminals, prostitutes, and other “outsiders,” such as gay men.

There is a theory that one of the reasons “molly” grew in popularity was due to gay men themselves picking up the term from thieves’ cant and applying it to their own language. Gay men, who were seen by society as criminals by nature, found themselves relating to other criminals and prostitutes. This comes from Norton’s understanding that these groups would have been living in the same area, facing the same stereotypes and isolation from society, so their cultures and language consequently merged. This is noted in “Mother Clap’s Molly House,” (2006:103) and further proven, as other words from the Rogue’s Lexicon made it into what would soon be called the “molly lexicon.” Words such as “Rumbo” or “Whit” for a particular prison, or “poll” for a wig are just some examples of how the two lexicons mixed.

But “molly” was not only used by gay men and criminals. It began to be applied *towards* gay men, who were seen by society as taking on feminine roles. For having sex with another man, gay men were seen as “male-whores,” and their equivalency to a female prostitute or straight woman consequently defined them as mollies. This is evidenced by the overall stereotype that society placed on the gay men at the time, who were seen as overly feminine or indulgent in their appearance and actions. The print seen in Figure 1 is a perfect example of how this feminine stereotype was shown. Created in 1746, William Hogarth plays with the idea of a feminine man. It is not explicitly said that the man in Figure 1 is gay or a molly, but this depiction matches what the stereotype for a molly was at the time.



**Figure 1: William Hogarth, 'A Taste in High Life', c.1746**

The man in the photo has an exaggerated style, with “feminine” features such as a slender form and decorated clothing. The photo also shows that this man fits in with the women, engaging in conversation and fashion rather than a depiction of sex. This stereotype of the molly was also referred to as a “macaroni,” defined as a very fashionably dressed effeminate man who was a trend-setting member of London high society, (St. Andrew’s History). These men were seen as not real “men” but rather playing a female role in society that was seen as unnatural or sinful, and the reaction to their existence involved rejection from the “normal” society. Social consequences were isolation, but mollies could also face legal persecution. This is clear once we take a look at court documents that show the word in use, and how it is applied in context about these men.

In 1726, at the height of the “molly trials,” a person by the name of Mr. Rigs testified against George Whitle. Whitle was being tried for sodomy, and during the testimony, Rigs stated that Whitle was in charge of a Molly-House for at least a couple of years, and this common knowledge led their neighbors away from the area, “they did not care to go and drink there,” (Applebee 1742). This comment made by Rigs displays the rejection from society due to an “impolite” life. The everyday lives of the “mollies” was viewed as immoral, and needing to be changed, apparent in 18th century society’s habit to persecute gay men by authority of “Societies for the Reformation for Manners” (Robinson, 2020).

In another example from a 1761 trial, Jeremiah Hargrave testified against John Lowther on the count of assault with sodomitical intent. In this court document, Hargrave explained that he was teaching Lowther how to read and write. However, he stated that after seeing Lowther in the presence of another “sodomite,” (a word used interchangeably with “molly”), he assumed that Lowther was also gay, and therefore halted all educational meetings to instead, “hiss at the prisoner whenever he saw him,” (Norton).

This reaction to the mollies of the time was not uncommon, and the anger by the presence of these men motivated violence and hate, which was justified as a righteous punishment. “A Molly in the Pillory,” created around 1763, shows such punishment:



**Figure 2: “A Molly in the Pillory,” c. 1763**

This image reveals what would happen if a prisoner was found guilty of sodomitical intent, therefore convicted of being a molly. The people surrounding the pillory shout hateful things, such as “Flogg him,” and “Cut it off.” These punishments were known to be terribly violent, as bystanders would be allowed to throw whatever they chose at the prisoner to the point of dehumanization. Several hundreds of lashings would be issued, and it was not uncommon for prisoners in the pillory to die as a result of the crowd, (Henry, 2019:24).

By now, the 18th century society had an identity to attach to the word “molly.” It was a fuller definition, adhered to gay men who were seen as too feminine in an unnatural sense, and equivalent to a female prostitute. However, at the same time, the gay men who were subjected to this derogatory term were creating a definition of “molly” themselves, and formed an identity and subculture through this new lexicon.

The idea that being authentically yourself was enough for persecution caused a need for communities and safe havens for the mollies. Molly houses, a term for a gay brothel or gathering place, began to appear more frequently. The purpose of these houses was to safely allow these men to live without interference from outsiders. To keep themselves safe and hidden, mollies developed their own language or code, similar to the thieves’ cant mentioned earlier.

The molly houses would require a representation of homosexuality that was coded rather than open, made evident by behaviors such as the way one dressed, stood or spoke. “The act of sodomy as defined in law was considered too taboo even to mention by name,” (Thom, 2015). This coded language was a way to refer to each other and themselves, without fear of immediate persecution. This language served as protection but it also symbolized a community and terminology exclusive to them. “Molly” was beginning to be reclaimed and used in friendly ways by the group, similar to how “Queen,” has



been reclaimed in the modern-day gay lexicon. In these houses, the lexicon was able to evolve and have constant use, as the men would commonly live in these spaces together, (Norton). Here, “molly” evolved from a noun in reference to someone, to a uniquely flexible term – noun, verb, and adjective – where meaning was dependent upon context and tone, (Battis). In the 1745 trial of Richard Manning, molly appears both as a noun (“So, Molly”) and as a verb (“I never mollied you”), proving its versatility and intricacy.

To get into a molly house, one must have been referred or been a guest of one of the residents due to the increasing number of raids on the houses and general prosecutions. The use of “molly cant” therefore protected the mollies, and those who sought to persecute this group had to get a handle on the dialect, for this was the only way that one would be permitted into a molly house. This lexicon was of importance, as this community really began to have an influence on gay culture through language. A large part of detection relied on whether or not one was fluent in the code of the molly subculture, where inside, rituals and relationships would take place that are still being analyzed today.

In the molly houses, acts of mimicking female rituals was common during festival nights, most notably the “mock-births” discussed in Norton’s book “Mother Clap’s Molly House,”(2006:98). The ritual involved dressing up the “mother” in women’s clothes, where she would then go into a mock labor and give “birth” to a wooden baby. There is debate on whether the mollies engaged in this pastime to pick fun at women or prove superiority, (Trumbach, 1998). But others such as Frances Henry believe that it is possible that these men were taking the effeminate nature forced upon them by their society, in a way to cope or poke fun at their reality. While reading this portion of molly history, I couldn’t help but be reminded of a similar ritual on *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* (season 5, episode 3), where contestants dressed up child-size dolls and presented them as their daughters to the others.

The application of a female persona from society furthers in molly subculture. In addition to functioning as meeting places for gay men, molly houses were also the home of a discreet drag culture, a space for men to dress and present themselves in feminine personas, (Thom, 2015). During this time, the men would take on “maiden names” such as Moll Irons, Pomegranate Molly, Queen Irons, or Dip-Candle Mary, (Norton 2006:92). This was a development of the “macaroni” culture previously mentioned, emphasizing female persona shown by dress and behavior, (Figure 3). An association by the word “molly” may have been part of the cause of this cultural development. The art form of drag is present in modern day, and still is a part of the subculture relating to the LGBTQ+ community.



Figure 3: A drawing depicting male and female crossdressing, c. 1780 by John Collet.

As a community was formed at these molly houses, so were strong relationships that prevented further persecution. Mother Clap, a woman in charge of a molly house in 1726 is found in court documents where she spoke on behalf of a man named Derwin and helped him gain an acquittal, (Old Bailey, 1674). Society perceived mollies in such a dehumanizing way, it was believed that if a family member or friend knew that the accused was indeed a molly, they would not have the moral compass to lie to the court, and would agree punishment was a fit ruling, (Henry 2019:142).

After the height of the molly trials, historians note that the word “molly” begins to decline in newspapers and other documents. However, the act of sodomy was still seen as a crime in London until 1967, so it was still common for sodomy trials to be held, an example being against Oscar Wilde in 1895. However, the use of the word “molly” declined and instead new words were generated as a replacement, still inspired by the original definition. Even though the use of the word “Molly” died out, the meaning of the phrase was found to be similarly linked to words like “Nancy,” “Mary,” “Dorothy,” or “Margaret,” showing that the word has evolved since the 18th century. This act of using feminine related terms in a derogatory way has a theme, and it is linked with women’s names. By applying yet again a feminine role to gay men, we see that society still does not think male homosexuality is natural, and must be equated to feminine persons and ideals. Words related to weakness are also used such as “pansy,” or “bitch,” (Dynes 2016).

Although “Molly” by itself is no longer a common term, it has relevance in the words “mollycoddle,” or “mollycot,” defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a pampered or effeminate man or boy.” Still, molly is used in an effeminate manner and found to be applied in negative terms. For example, G. Lowes Dickinson’s book, “Red Bloods and Mollycoddles.” This book was published in 1915 and shows a great juxtaposition between a tough and rigid, “Real, red-blood American,” and the “others,” in this case the mollycoddle. The Red Bloods in Dickinson’s book are compared to Henry V, Bismarck, and businessmen. Mollycoddles on the other hand are compared to Socrates, Voltaire, and Shelley, and are all around not seen as true men. Dickinson notes that there will always be a drastic variation in the “hardness” of men, but when written in this manner shows that there is still a negative connotation towards feminine or “weak” men.



**Figure 4: Popular Drag Queen Trixie Mattel reclaiming the word “Mary,” into her own vocabulary in a comical way. Twitter, November 2020.**

The names and feminine titles mentioned such as “pansy,” or “Mary,” are still in use today. More commonly used today are the slurs “faggot,” or “fairy,” but all of these words seek out same intentions; to effeminate and weaken the gay male, even though the origins may be different. What still reigns true today is the action of sexual outcasts taking terms of abuse used against them and turning them into terms of endearment for each other or use them for comedic and entertainment purposes. Just like

18th century culture, people are reclaiming the words once used against them and creating their own vocabulary, (Figure 4).

There are similarities in gay and drag culture that mimic the rituals of the 18th century molly houses. Drag shows, where gay men imitate or exaggerate female gender roles for entertainment purposes mimics the macaroni culture. There is still a coded lexicon that is ever evolving in the drag community, where a term such as “fish” is a compliment that refers to a drag queen looking as if she were a “real woman,” (Urban Dictionary, 2010). These are terms of endearment that echo terms of the molly culture, allowing us to see that the lexicon created in the past is still developing today.

After analyzing the word “molly,” it is clear that the word in 18th century society was linked with negative stereotypes, cruel treatment, and isolation. These actions were associated with the term and generated a justification for hate, dehumanization, and mistreatment of gay men. As a result, a new subculture began to form its own lexicon and found a community bonded together by experiences of prejudice. These men reclaimed the word used against them and embraced the term as a method of coping, poking fun, and entertaining themselves from the society surrounding them. The idea of embracing their effeminate nature in a positive way shows the strength of these men as they worked to refashion the language once used against them. What started as a code formed for survival and secrecy has evolved into a lexicon of resilience that is still alive, breathing, and evolving today.

## References

- A Molly in the Pillory. Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. 1763.
- Applebee, J. *Select Trials: At the Sessions-House in the Old-Bailey, for Murder, Robberies, Rapes, Sodomy, Coining*. Oxford University, 1742.
- Baker, Paul. *Polari - The Lost Language of Gay Men: the Lost Language of Gay Men*. Taylor and Francis, 2004.
- Battis, Jes. “Molly Canons: The Role of Slang and Text in the Formation of Queer Eighteenth-Century Culture.” *Erudit*, Nov. 2016, [www.erudit.org/en/journals/lumen/2017-v36-lumen02702/](http://www.erudit.org/en/journals/lumen/2017-v36-lumen02702/)
- Carlton, Genevieve. “What It Was Like Being A Male Sex Worker In An 18th Century London Molly House.” *Ranker*, <https://www.ranker.com/list/what-london-molly-houses-were-like/genevieve-carlton>.
- Collet, John. *A Morning Frolic, or the Transmutation of the Sexes*. London: Carington Bowles, 1780.
- Dalton, James. *A Genuine Narrative of All the Street Robberies Committed since October Last by James Dalton, and His Accomplices, Who Are Now in Newgate ... To Which Is Added a Key to the Canting Language ... Taken from the Mouth of James Dalton*. Printed, and Sold by J. Roberts, 1728.
- Janes, Dominic. “‘Macaroni’ Scandal of 1772: The Homosexuality Trial That Rocked England a Decade before Oscar Wilde.” *Scroll.in*, <https://scroll.in/article/886439/macaroni-scandal-of-1772-the-homosexuality-trial-that-rocked-england-a-decade-before-oscar-wilde>
- Dynes, Wayne R. *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*. Taylor and Francis, 2016.
- Grose, Francis. *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue: a Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence*. Createspace, 2014.
- Henry, Frances. “Love, Sex, and the Noose: The Emotions of Sodomy in 18th Century England.” 2019.
- Hogarth, William. “A Taste in High Life.” 1746.



- Jackson, Sarah. "Miss Muff's Molly House in Whitechapel." *East End Women's Museum*, East End Women's Museum, 20 Nov. 2016, <https://eastendwomensmuseum.org/blog/miss-muffs-molly-house-in-whitechapel>
- Linder, Douglas. "The Trials of Oscar Wilde: An Account." *Famous Trials*, <https://famous-trials.com/wilde/327-home>
- Moore, Mary. *Great English Influencers: G Lowes Dickinson "Red Bloods and Mollycoddles"* Pt. 1. 2013, <https://marymoore2012.weebly.com/blog/great-english-influencers-g-lowes-dickinson-red-bloods-and-mollycoddles-pt-1>
- Norton, Rictor. "A Study of Criminal Subcultures in Eighteenth-Century England." *Homosexuality (The Georgian Underworld, Chap. 16)*, <https://rictornorton.co.uk/gu16.htm>.
- Norton, Rictor. "Homosexual Terms in 18th-Century Dictionaries." *Homosexuality in 18th-Cent. England: Dictionary Definitions*, <https://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/diction.htm>.
- Norton, Rictor. "Molly Exalted 1762." *Homosexuality in 18th-Cent. England: Molly Exalted, 1762*, <https://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/exalted.htm>.
- Norton, Rictor. *Mother Clap's Molly House: the Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830*. Chalford Place, 2006.
- Old Bailey. "The Proceedings of the Old Bailey." *Communities - Homosexuality - Central Criminal Court, 1674*, <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Gay.jsp>.
- Robinson, Peter. "Faggots, Punks, and Prostitutes: the Evolving Language of Gay Men." *The Conversation*, 20 Jan. 2020, <https://theconversation.com/faggots-punks-and-prostitutes-the-evolving-language-of-gay-men-73136>
- Trumbach, Randolph. *London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behavior and Western Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Berghahn Books, 1998.
- Thom, Danielle. "18th Century Queer Cultures #1: the Macaroni & His Ancestors • V&A Blog." *V&A Blog*, 4 Mar. 2015, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/18th-century-queer-cultures-1-the-macaroni-and-his-ancestors>
- Trixie Mattel. "Mary they found them in ballot boxes from voters. Pack your shit." *Twitter*, November 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/trixiemattel/status/1324070543822331904>
- Urban Dictionary. "Fish." *Urban Dictionary*, LadyBitch, June 2010, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fish>.

# Morph

Jack Marone

Cite as: Marone, Jack. 2021. Morph. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 194-198.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The word ‘morph’ is familiar to most native English speakers, but when asked what it means or how it is used, many people might not be able to really put their finger on it. You might be able to think of a few examples of words but you probably don’t have an exact answer to the question. If you were born in the 1990’s or later than this will most likely strike even closer to home. So, what is this funny little word? Where did it come from and why does it feel so familiar yet so strange? This paper will dive into the rich lineage of the word ‘morph’, and how it has changed into the widely used, though narrowly understood word, that it is today. The process of this paper will also be structured in an unconventional manner, we will be starting with the present day, focusing on where it changed and then moving backwards almost 3,000 years.

The year is 2017, quickly closing in on 2018, and you would be in the minority if you’re a college student or just someone who likes to drink and have not seen such a sight (Image of a morphsuit to the right). Ladies and gentlemen, this is a “morphsuit”, one of the most popular party apparels of the 21st century. This is where the journey begins, here is a colloquial, Urban Dictionary definition of a morphsuit:

*“Morphsuits are bodysuits that completely cover the wearer from head to toe in spandex/Lycra. Morphsuits are the brand name for the general term "zentai" or "zentai suit" similar to how some people call vacuum cleaners "Hoovers." Morphsuits are typically used for going out and having fun around town, with friends, or just about anywhere else, but with the fact that unless your hood is down, no one knows your identity. A Morphsuit is made up of a single piece of stretchy spandex/Lycra with arm, leg, and head cavities to place said parts in. There is a double zip going the top of your head on the back of the suit for easy access in and out of the suit. The word "Morphsuits" is branded on the butt of the suit. You can breathe, see, and drink through these suits. Morphsuits are usually seen at sporting events, parties, and even your local market in some cases! However, the most common time of the year where you can see them walking about is on Halloween. Morphsuit fans that go out in their suits on a fairly good schedule or fans in general who really enjoy the suits usually refer to themselves as "Morphs" and the act of zipping up and going out in their suits as "morphing." Morphsuits have recently gained popularity as of Halloween 2011 in the US due to Party City picking up the suits and making them available on shelves to everyone without the need to order online.*

Mr. Magnet, January 14, 2012

This new word, ‘morphsuit’, is a compound word, meaning that it is comprised of two words. In English the head, or the last word, within the compound is what determines the part of speech. Though the head of this compound is not important to us, it is the complementary verb ‘to morph’ that really holds the key. This root word which has been most commonly used as a noun, has increasingly morphed into a verb throughout its very long life. These ‘morphsuits’ were not the sole

factor in the changing of this word or even the origin of it, but simply a product of a societal force much larger than college party costumes.

While tracing “morph” back even further, it is readily apparent that this word isn’t some silly string of letters that a company coined for a costume, or that college students made up on a whim. It has roots that spread even deeper, roots that even move up the sociolinguistic chain, grasping on to even the “standard” dialect, so to speak. For example, Michael Desch, a professor at the University of Notre Dame, writes:

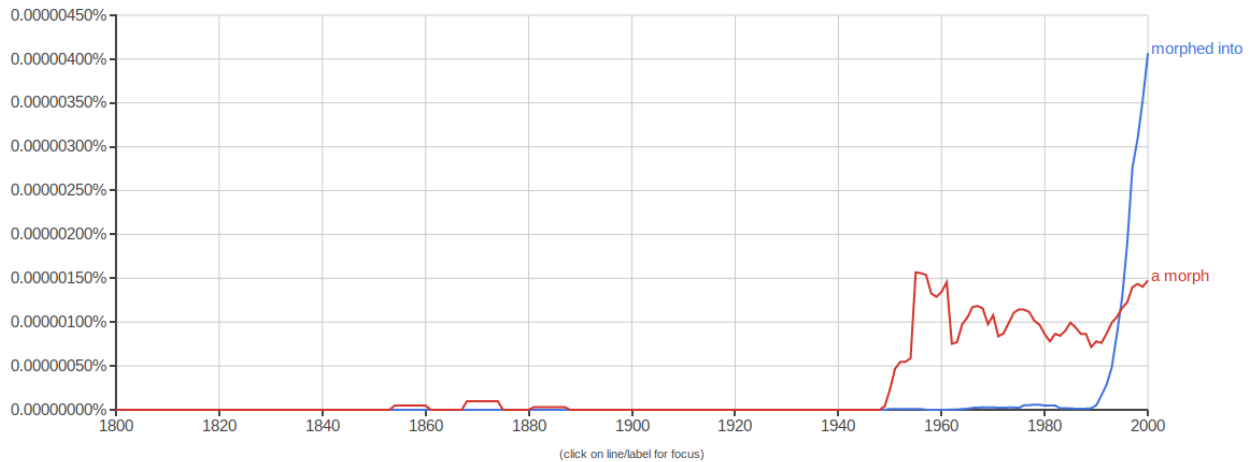
*“division commanders in Iraq) -- in calling for Rumsfeld's resignation. According to a Military Times poll, 42 percent of U.S. troops disapprove of President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq. In the fall of 2006, the White House and influential hawks outside of the administration finally conceded that the United States did not have the troop strength to secure contested areas in Iraq. But by then, senior U.S. military commanders in Iraq had come to believe that U.S. forces were part of the problem, rather than the solution, as the insurgency had **morphed** into an interconfessional civil war” (Desch 2007)*

This passage was written in the media (in a standard English variety), in regard to the Bush administration during the Middle East conflict. This quote was retrieved from the Corpus of Historical American English, a platform that, not unlike Google Ngram Viewer, shows frequencies of word use throughout recorded American English history. Within this platform’s database, a record is kept from the beginning of the 19th century. According to this site the frequency of the word “morphed”, the past tense of the verb to ‘morph’, as seen above, has its earliest use recorded in 1992. When looking at the Google Ngram Viewer to broaden the scopes of this investigation, we will see that a major spike in the use of this verb takes off at an exponential rate around the year 1989. Let’s see why that is.

According to the data in the chart below, it really appears that ‘morph’ as a verb, or even as a word in general, appeared in the blink of an eye. While languages change, naturally the lexicon follows suit. Though this change, graphically speaking appears very quick and sharp, making it a linguistic outlier. As stated in the previous paragraph, you can very clearly see that something happened around 1989. Digging deeper into the past and looking for further insight by using both the Oxford English Dictionary and some historical resources, one can see the driving force behind this shift in word usage. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘morph’ as a verb in the realm of computing with these two examples:

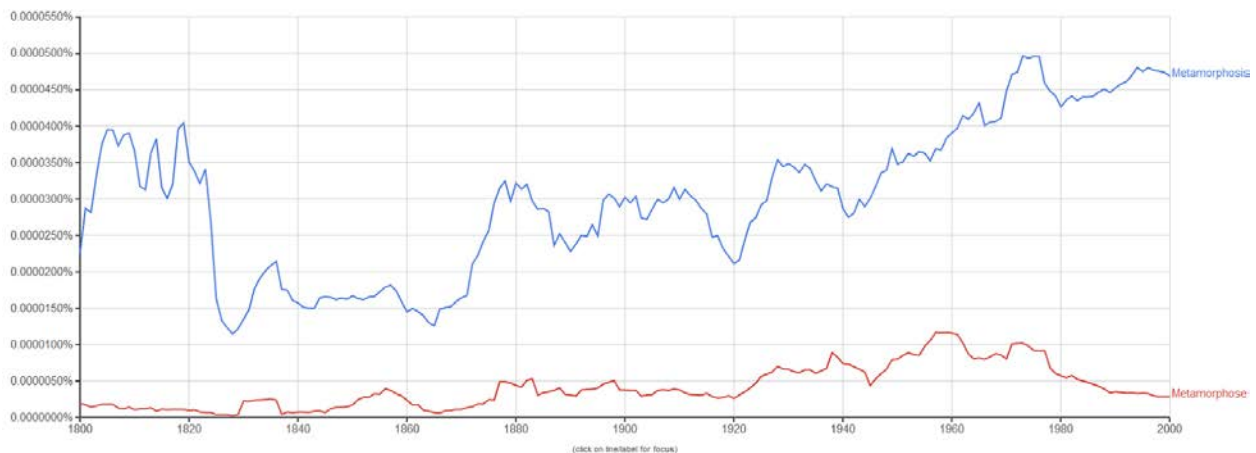
*1991 Computer Pictures (Nexis) Apr. Every object in the scene...can be animated. 3-D objects can be scaled, squashed even morphed into other objects.*

*1993 New Scientist 13 Mar. 20/3 The characters can be transformed or ‘morphed’ on screen. For example, when Mario tells lies to a viewer, his nose can be made to grow like Pinocchio's.*



In 1990, Tim Berners-Lee, a physicist in a Geneva laboratory, created HTML (HyperText Markup Language) which in turn allowed the creation of the *internet and all that comes with it*. In this *Oxford English Dictionary* example, this trend can be seen within cameras paired with computers: “1995 *Daily Tel.* 10 Feb. 20/3 A restless camera...rushes through the passages of a lakeside sand-castle...or ‘morphs’ a rural landscape into a magical garden inhabited by unicorns.” As well, the development of the first digital cameras that were obtainable for the average consumer happened around this time.

The very obvious trend here is that the rise of technology fueled the word ‘morph’ to not only become more prevalent but also made it a verb. Forty years prior to the release of the digital camera, the word ‘morph’ was really only used in conjunction with affixes and other roots, it was most commonly used within the sciences. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that in 1955 it was a noun in biology (skeletal morphology), and in 1947 it was also coined as a noun in the field of linguistics. This word did not just come out of nowhere, evidence suggests that it likely has been derived from the word metamorphosis. These are two *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of the word metamorphosis: “a. the action or process of changing in form, shape, or substance; esp. transformation by supernatural means. 2. A complete change in the appearance, circumstances, condition, or character of a person, a state of affairs, etc.” What is really strange is that prior to the technological revolution, there already was a verb for the process of metamorphosis. The verb is ‘metamorphose’ and the reason that this is most likely not where ‘morph’ was derived from is simply the contrast of these two in literature. It appears as if metamorphose was hardly used at all (see chart below).



This Ngram Viewer graph illustrates the popularity of the word 'metamorphosis', and especially around the time that 'morph' took the stage. The Corpus of Historical American English shows that the frequency of use of the noun, 'metamorphosis', historically has been eleven times higher than the use of the verb 'metamorphose', stretching back to the early 19th century. So then, to understand where the meaning of 'morph' in today's culture came from, we must discover where the noun metamorphosis come from.

The Online Etymology Dictionary shows that the word 'metamorphosis' came about in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This is a very significant period in history, especially for the English language. Ever wonder why the romance languages, seem as if they have hundreds of the same words that we have in English? Well, they do, and they are indeed cognates, though, they are not from German, but from Latin. Now, English is of a Germanic language while Latin is an Italic language (although both stem from the Proto-Indo-European language). So how did all of these Latin cognates or words in general (and specifically, 'morph') get into the English lexicon? Professor Suzanne Kemmer sheds some light on this topic:

*"the effects of the Renaissance begin to be seriously felt in England. We see the beginnings of a huge influx of Latin and Greek words, many of them learned words imported by scholars well versed in those languages. But many are borrowings from other languages, as words from European high culture begin to make their presence felt and the first words come in from the earliest period of colonial expansion."*  
(Kemmer)

It is most likely that the noun 'metamorphosis' entered the English lexicon during the Renaissance period. Both Etymonline and the Oxford English Dictionary date the word into the appropriate timeline and link it to proper descent (Latin). Though, in the etymology database, the definition of metamorphosis, has this bit in it: "1530s, "change of form or shape," especially by witchcraft, from Latin metamorphosis, from Greek metamorphosis "a transforming, a transformation,"". The Greek word and Latin word are both completely the same. While Greek and Latin are indeed relatives within the Indo-European language family, it is more likely to be a sort of borrowing rather than a cognate, and here is why.

As previously mentioned, the Indo-European language family consists of hundreds of languages the two relevant language groups to 'morph' and 'metamorphic' are Italic and Hellenic. Italic is the mother tongue of Latin and thus the mother tongue of all the Romance languages. Hellenic is the parent of the Greek language, including both ancient and modern-day Greek. These two languages were the first of their kind, and the transferring of words comes from the influence of power and the idea of a lingua franca, which is the widespread language of a period, generally speaking, the language of the current dominant culture. For example, the modern-day lingua franca of the 21st century would be English. Around 250 BCE, the Roman Empire was the conduit of the Latin language, implementing their tongue in their conquered regions. In 146 BCE the Roman Empire began to topple the Greeks, the Empire built up by Alexander the Great. Dr. Cynthia L. Hallen explains how Greek penetrated the Latin language, in her article, *The history of the Latin language*, "classical Latin is marked by an increase in writing and written records beginning in the first century BC" (Pei 48). During its early Classical Development, Latin borrowed extensively from the writing forms employed by the Greeks, inspired by the epics of Homer and the histories by Herodotus and Thucydides as well as the tragic poets and others. The Greek literary tradition included many forms of writing and so, "when the Romans began their literary apprenticeship, Greek literature had passed its zenith" (Palmer 96-97).

The Greeks have been around for thousands of years, though their mythology has only been documented at around 700 BCE. "Around 700 BC, the poet Hesiod's Theogony offered the first written cosmogony, or origin story, of Greek mythology" (History.com Staff: Greek mythology November 21st, 2017). This is the actual origin of the word 'morph' or 'morphe' in Greek. It is first used as a proper noun, the name of the Greek god Morpheus, who is the maker of shapes (dreams). 'Morphe' means

form, and beauty, which is why it was also used as another name (morpho) for the goddess Aphrodite, the famous goddess of beauty.

For those born during the technological revolution or more specifically around the time of the birth of the internet, you now know that the 'morphsuits' that you wear to parties are a cultural symbol of linguistic and historic change. For the previous generations, who might have seen this metamorphosis on a slightly larger scale, you are now aware that the 'morphsuted' youths of college Greek life are just embracing the rich heritage of their Greek counterpart the god Morpheus. All jokes aside, you can see not only how the word 'morph' came to be through the centuries, but more importantly the power of language, and how as human beings we can sculpt it within a set of rules. Having seen how the proper name of a Greek god spread across hundreds of years, changing with relative stability as a noun in an instance is derived into a verb; it makes you wonder, what other words have morphed.

## References

- Aphrodite Titles. <http://www.theoi.com/Cult/AphroditeTitles.html>
- Atsma, A. J. Morpheus. <http://www.theoi.com/Daimon/OneirosMorpheus.html>
- Bellis, M. (2017, April 13). What Is the History of the Digital Camera? <https://www.thoughtco.com/history-of-the-digital-camera-4070938>
- Desch, Michael C. (2007). "Bush and the Generals." *Foreign Affairs* (2007): 97-108.
- Gascoigne, B. (2001). *Lingua Franca*.  
<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=099>
- Greece Timeline. <https://www.ancient.eu/timeline/greece/>
- Guiseppi, R. A. *Beginning And Progress Of The Renaissance*. <http://history-world.org/renaissance.htm>
- Hallen, C. L. (1999, September 6). <http://linguistics.byu.edu/classes/Ling450ch/reports/latin.html>
- History.com Staff. (2009). *Greek Mythology*. <http://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/greek-mythology>
- Kemmer, Suzanne. *Major Periods of Borrowing*.  
<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/Words04/structure/borrowed.html>
- Mark, J. J. (2013, November 14). *Alexander the Great*.  
[https://www.ancient.eu/Alexander\\_the\\_Great/](https://www.ancient.eu/Alexander_the_Great/)
- Magnet, M. (2012, January 14). *Morphsuit*.  
<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Morphsuit>
- phonology. <http://slideplayer.com/slide/7416568/>
- Story. (2011). from <https://www.morphsuits.com/story>
- Violatti, C. (2014, May 5). *Indo-European Languages*. [https://www.ancient.eu/Indo-European\\_Languages/](https://www.ancient.eu/Indo-European_Languages/)
- Zimmermann, K. A. (2017, September 06). *History of Computers: A Brief Timeline*.  
<https://www.livescience.com/20718-computer-history.html>
- Images:  
<http://membean.com/wrotlds/morph-shape>  
[https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/IE\\_Main2\\_Satem\\_bw.html](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/IE_Main2_Satem_bw.html)



# Nirvana

Soni Qazim

Cite as: Qazim, Soni. 2021. Nirvana. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 199-205.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

What comes to mind at the mention of the word *nirvana*? The answer to such a question ultimately depends on one's cultural perspective. Surely, asking a practitioner of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand will give you a more accurate definition than a coffee Barista in California, right? If one were to ask multiple adherents in different schools of Buddhist thought, they would immediately be presented with rich complexity and differences in answer. Not only would they feel a sense of being left empty-handed, but also with a greater appreciation of how difficult it is to ascertain universal definitions of words in usage, be it in religions or any other social activity. *Nirvana* is dynamic and still used for different reasons, similar to how a tool's function changes depending on who picks it up. Words or phrases cultivate certain ideologies in how they are used, and this subsequently influences renderings of these through time, leading into a continual evolution of the word's meaning.

If an answer cannot be conclusively decided on among dedicated groups, then can we ever get to the truth of meaning? Historical analysis provides us one suitable means of finding consistency and patterns in meaning, but we are still faced with the constant battle of misinterpretation, bias, and spurious sources. Can we not just simply accept the fact there is an inherent instability in meaning, exempting us from answering such pestering questions? Not entirely. The way meanings change and are used can be quite revealing for anthropological insight. Analysis should be considerate for the multitude of perspectives that are encompassed in nomenclature. We are dealing with the nature of culture; therefore, our investigation naturally needs the respect needed to properly treat something that is alive and developing.

The project here is descriptive. It is with this in mind that I will explore *nirvana* as it is used in Western society while using its essentially original meaning as a way to highlight a contrast displaying semantic change. How did its meaning change by the influence of those that used it? Four major transition points in Western culture will be examined.

## The Beginnings

“One of the great challenges of the word ‘nirvana’ is that it is expressed in both negative and positive language” Andrew Olendzki (2019).

*Nirvana* originated from Sanskrit, an ancient language historically recognized as the *lingua franca* of ancient India, where it amassed an impressive reputation as an almost divine language; gradually becoming associated as the tongue of the ruling elite (Joshi, 2016).

निर्वाण

‘Nirvana’ in the original Sanskrit. Source: Google.

*Nirvana* is spelled with the marker ‘vā’ which means “to blow” and combined with ‘nis’ (interpreted as ‘nir’), meaning “out”. Interestingly, if we examine the word through its three main morphemes (nir-var-na), we get a meaning akin to “blowing out”, which is attributed to blowing out a flame (Olendzki, 2019). This meaning was first used in Hinduism (O’Brien, 2018). Correspondingly in ancient India, when one decided to live a life of ascetism it was common practice to extinguish a fire, symbolizing the end of earthly desires and the beginning of a journey into renunciation (V). The Hinduist religion referred to *nirvana* as a state that ceases desire and suffering through a reunion with Brahman, a universal and transcendent state free from all the follies of life on earth, termed *dukkah* (O’Brien, 2018). Accordingly, fire plays a very important role in Hinduism, it is used commonly in rituals and ceremonies, symbolizing life, desire, and the soul (Rodrigues, 2008). From this it is evident that the meaning of *nirvana* had an important significance that could be interpreted quite radically.



The caste system has had an incredibly influential role in shaping Indian culture and religion. Historically, castes did not distinguish people based on social class but on heredity, and this has had profound spiritual implications (Joshi, 2017). The cycle of ‘rebirth’ entails the rewards and punishments received by the dead in a past life that are transferred into a new life within an appropriate caste. This cycle, no matter what caste you are born in, is considered to be a locus of suffering which the attainment of *nirvana* completely liberates an individual from (Harris).

#### **A depiction of the ‘varna’ (caste) system in ancient India (Joshi 2017).**

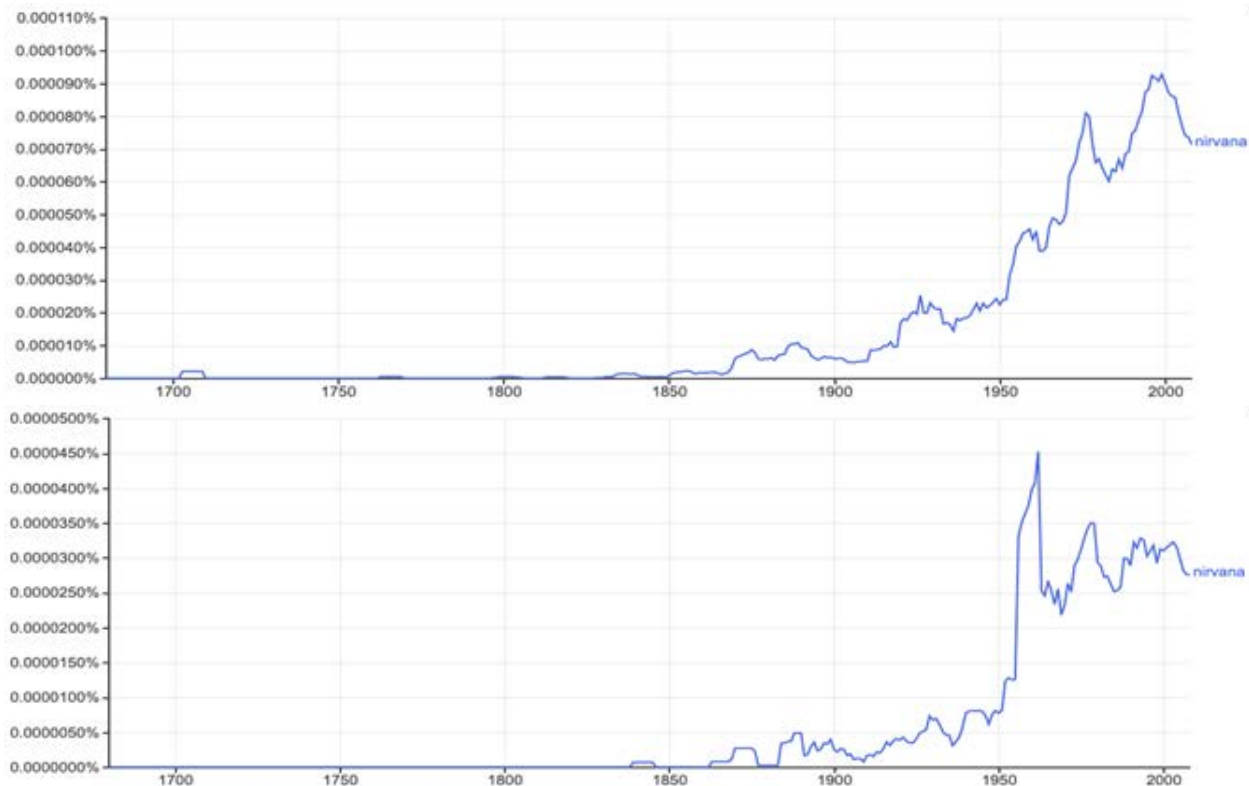
Buddhism developed around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Kingsland, 2016). The Sanskrit variant of *nirvana* would change to Pali (*nibbana*), which was more widely used throughout Buddhist texts (Olendzki, 2019). In short detail, Buddhism denied worship of the gods and reliance on the caste system, however, similarly, *nirvana* is still considered the most supreme state one could attain (Kingsland, 2016). So, the meaning remained fairly equal with Hinduism, even though it entailed a whole new set of practices and world view.

According to Buddhism, one can reach *nirvana* through dedicated practice, which once attained releases an individual completely from the cycle of rebirth (synonymous with suffering). Hence, one can see here how the word can be interpreted as reaching a heaven, but upon further examination it is not quite accurate because *nirvana* is not meant to be taken as a place to be reached (O’Brien, 2019). Another interpretation would be attaining pure emptiness, but even this is not accurate (Olendzki, 2019). Indeed, Buddhism is a complex religion with varying traditions embedded in it. Many schools of thought have taken *nirvana* with either positive or negative valence, denoting bliss or nothingness (Olendzki, 2019). This ambiguity is a major source of contestation amongst many Buddhist scholars (Wright, 2018). In order to satisfy a need for a working definition, we can simply describe *nirvana* as an end to suffering.

Ironically, Gautama, the original Buddha, did not spend too much time offering a concrete explanation of *nirvana*; believing that language was too limited to contain the breadth of the words meaning; and positive and negative renderings need to be avoided (Olendzki, 2019). Gautama was also incredibly accommodating towards how each person understood Buddhist teachings (Kingsland, 2016). Accordingly, *nirvana* can mean many different things for different people.

All this raises an interesting point: if *nirvana* is meant to be understood in various ways, then surely the many interpretations of it cannot be a source of contention? Either way, now we can turn our attention to the main focus: how this word was first brought to Western cultures and languages and its particular usages therein.

## Nirvana Appears in The Wild Wild West



These two graphs, from Google Ngram Viewer, highlight the use of *nirvana* in the English language through 1680 to 2008: the first, in all English books, and the second only in English fiction. The top graph shows that the word first appeared sometime around 1700. On a side note, what is responsible for this slight uptick is possibly due to colonial expansion into India by Western powers. If we focus on the difference between the two graphs, we notice an interesting dissimilarity. On the second, the surge in popularity within the 1960's is markedly different than the first. During the 1960's, the invasion into Vietnam by the United States was underway. Vietnam is a predominantly Buddhist nation, and one can't help but wonder if somehow collective attention into the territory sparked curiosity in the American public towards the culture. The category of fiction also better highlights major cultural influences around the time. The 60's was the decade of peace movements and so-called "hippy" culture. An adoption of Eastern religious thinking and ideology was increasing in popularity, especially among the youth. Both of these graphs will be investigated, with more emphasis on the second, as it provides specific instances of material culture using *nirvana*.

## The First Shift

Buddhism first entered into the Western lexicon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the arrival of Chinese immigrants; before that it was virtually unknown (Duerr, 2010). Previously, centuries before, Alexander the Great had come into contact with ancient India but mention of religion or a conception of *nirvana* remain scarce during that time (Duerr, 2010).

The Chinese brought a particular definition of *nirvana*, with a specialized style of translating the word from the traditional Chinese characters. Original Chinese scholars used a method of translation called *Ko-yi*, which translated *nirvana* to the word *wui-we*; giving the word an aesthetic quality (Kim, 2004). Although this is controversial because *wui-we* engendered too much semantic difference (Kim, 2004).

During this time, many scholars and philosophers began investigating Eastern philosophy and religion. Journeys to the East weren't uncommon and with this came an import of religious text and material culture (Buddhism in the West). The common understanding of *nirvana* in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western society was negative. Many in Victorian society considered *nirvana* to be a state of complete annihilation, and accordingly they viewed Buddhism as a nihilistic and life-denying religion (Buddhism in the West). Regardless, universities started to offer courses related to Eastern thought as international travel became more prominent.

Incidentally, Buddhist terminologies were not as available to the mainstream public as they were for those who had access to higher education, so the semantic variations of *nirvana* were probably not as numerous, and truer to the original, as they otherwise could have been.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhist ideology began to proliferate into academic thought, influencing many philosophers and thinkers into initiating the Transcendentalist movement (Jue, 2013). The movement aimed to revert conception of the human being back into nature and to give it a higher spirituality away from the currents of industrialization and materialism (Jue, 2013). *Nirvana* was considered to be the only true permanent state, a state by which the eternal nature of everything was achieved (Jue, 2013).

What is most interesting to consider here among the transcendentalists, and among Western society as a whole, is the notion of "absolute truth". When Buddhism was taken up by this movement, its end goal of *nirvana*, was regarded as obtaining a universal truth (Jue, 2013). The truth, and its attainment, is a uniquely Western obsession (Olson, 2000). Eastern philosophies and religion have never been concerned explicitly with truth. There was always a tendency towards a 'way', finding a method, or a state of being, rather than a 'truth' (Olson, 2000). It seems, in contrast, that Western philosophy has been perennially focused on finding the truth of things, thus influencing the meaning of *nirvana*, making it an achievement of a truth that before had never been achievable through traditional methods of logic or philosophy.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism was primarily known in the West esoterically, either through academia or practice centers started by wealthier devotees (Duerr, 2010). Naturally, these circles were kept small and the nomenclature was constrained by the reception of texts received from foreign cultures entering Europe and the United States. Of course this was also a period of two world wars, which ironically would have a huge influence in bringing Buddhism to the Western world (Duerr, 2010).

After World War II, the need for a transcendent line of thinking devoted to dispelling the suffering of life was ripe in the conditions set forth. The 1950-60's saw a huge surge in Eastern religions, and with them came an accompanying terminology that the West, particularly in the United States, turned into a lexicon combatting the ills of society; ordained with a much-needed mysticism previously lacking. Thus, came the first instances of *nirvana* merging with the mass public mind,



whereby its meaning would be determined by the forces of a collective culture trying to cope in a chaotic world rife with political, social, and existential struggle.

## The Second Shift (The 50's)

The Beat generation in 1950s America had a large part to play in bringing Buddhism to a wide and young American public (Dewar, 2017). The three men pictured on the right are poets and writers who spearheaded the generation. One of them, the one in the middle, John Kerouac, sometimes referred as the “Avatar of American Buddhism”, engaged seriously with Buddhism, and consequently influenced its meanings through his writing (Dewar, 2017). The Beat generation, named so quite arbitrarily, emphasized liberation in all its forms, along with a romantic attraction to Eastern religions and spiritual practices (Dewar, 2017). Indeed, the 1950's saw a surge of interest among the young in anything spiritual. The counter culture was against the traditional western conception of life, thereby finding the principles of Eastern religions to provide a suitable coping mechanism for a fast-paced capitalist society based on consumerism.

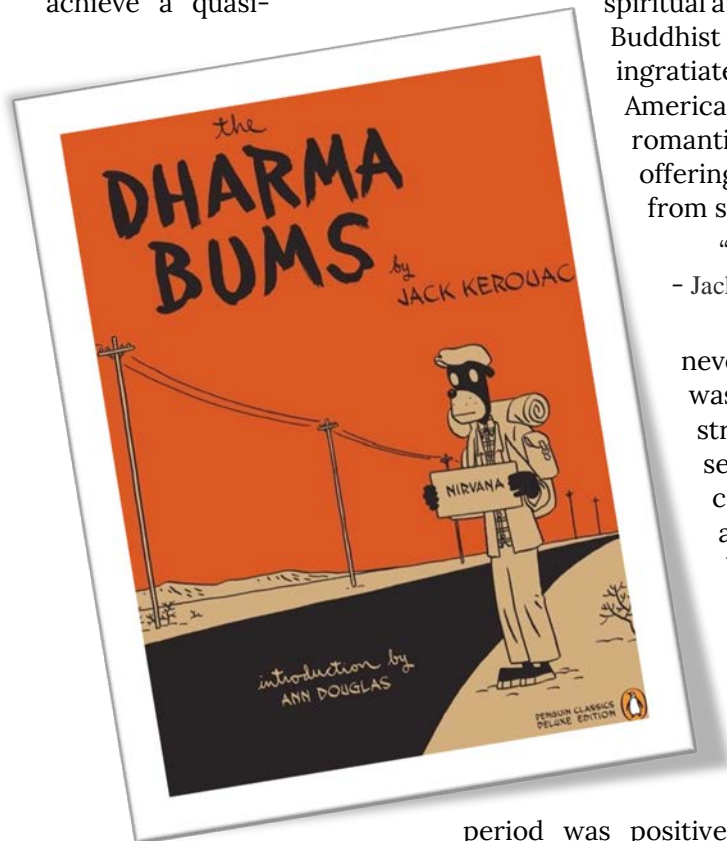
The seminal novel produced by the Beat generation that had the greatest influence in spreading Buddhism in the West was by Jack Kerouac, titled *The Dharma Bums*, appropriately titled because of a conception towards those participating in the Beat sub-culture as being dharma bums (Dewar, 2017). The novel follows an autobiographical narrative with Kerouac being the main character. He tries to achieve a quasi-

spiritual awakening with the help of a friend who is a Zen Buddhist (Dewar, 2017). Consequently, this novel helped ingratiate Buddhism and its terminology within American literature, resulting in *nirvana* becoming romanticized within the unique Beat culture and offering the ticket needed for a serene disconnect from society.

“Finding Nirvana is like locating silence.”  
- Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (1958)

Buddhism presented an exoticism that had never existed before in America. Its terminology was vacated by the insurgence of a movement strange to it, a movement of rebellious youth seeking a way out of a mundane and constraining existence. *Nirvana* traveled across centuries to end up in a place like New York City, so different than where it was conceived, with a meaning almost stripped of a sacredness.

*Nirvana* was the end goal, as it had always been, but its conception during this period was positive, liberating, joyful, and even echoing the sentiments of the Transcendentalist movement with a retreat into nature and minimalism. It thus had a meaning, not attached to Buddhism *per se*, but to the time and place it found itself in, which needed something to cling onto for optimistic substance.



## The Third Shift (Hippy Culture)

The USA, after fighting the Korean War in 1953, enacted another in Vietnam shortly after. Public protests were carried out and the political climate grew ever more turbulent. It was between the height of the Vietnam war, 1960-1970 that another subculture had grown, one which drew inspiration from the Beat generation (Duerr, 2010). This sub-culture introduced further ideologies of self-liberation and spiritual awakening, both imported and homegrown, of course with a touch of chemical exploration. Accordingly, *nirvana* and the allure of its escapist quality provided both a goal and a withdrawal from the larger society, which was viewed as hostile and inhospitable to the ideals set forth by a vibrant and socially-aware youth movement.

The 'hippy' culture was not looking for an absolute truth that accorded with fundamental human nature as the transcendentalists were, but in a similar fashion, hippies wanted a meaningful life filled with a purpose that transcended the one given to them by a cruel and alienating society. *Nirvana* not only became this, but also a 'peak experience' engendering the state of an ultimate high (Blomfield, 2012). Accordingly, the sacred and religious ideation was irrelevant; *nirvana* became ingratiated within a drug culture bent on psychedelic reformation.

## The Fourth Shift (Nirvana Onwards)

In 1987 a new band hit the grunge scene: Nirvana. They were highly influential and revered in the grunge scene and in mainstream music. Searching *nirvana* on Google today almost entirely produces links to the band, as if the word in the religious sense has never existed. Incidentally, the reasoning for their name is quite mundane, and mostly due to it sounding "beautiful or nice and pretty" (Edwards, 2018). However, regardless of the reasoning, the band would still go on to bring exposure to *nirvana* to a different generation. Now, the word no longer was a pull towards anything more meaningful, or esoteric, but rather, became part of a general branding of American culture, where disillusioned youth no longer sought to overcome political or social constraint through activity, but through unproductive indolence. There are no religious associations with *nirvana* any longer in this sense. One can even conceptualize this borrowing as a result of a growing post-modernism in American culture, which relegates strongly held narratives, such as truth, religion, politics, to a mere play of meaningless discourse (Olson, 2000). *Nirvana* is now an American ideology, a product, a band, an image, resulting from a process of pervasive commodification.

Today, when you search *nirvana* on Google, synonyms and antonyms are generated through algorithms based on frequency and word usage. Synonyms given such as paradise, heaven, Eden, and the promised land seem antithetical to the original Buddhist definitions. Clearly, we can understand that general religious ideology in the West have influenced *nirvana* greatly. This is even more apparent with the antonyms, hell and purgatory. It is difficult to assign antonyms to the original Sanskrit definition; some might include full, ignorant, light, while synonyms could include disappearing, void, nonexistence, and even dark. These are quite bizarre in comparison with the more recognizable conception of the word.

In conclusion, we have briefly gone through four transition points illustrating semantic change. At each point, *nirvana* was used in a way its users saw most appropriate. Firstly, *nirvana* was an end to suffering, then it became an absolute truth of existence, then it gradually mutated into a spiritual escape from society, then a euphoric experience similar to a drug, and finally, a name for a band. Currently *nirvana*, besides the band, has a strong association with that special state of transcendence, a moment of pure awakening. Make no mistake, however; because of the rise of the internet and the information age, many are realizing the complexities inherent in concepts and cultures, so we can safely assume that there are more people who are aware of the word's equivocal meaning than in the past.



## References

- Blomfield, V. (2012, March 16). How western Buddhism has changed in 50 years. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/mar/16/western-buddhism-10-things-learned>
- Buddhism in the West. BuddhaNet. [buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/to-west.htm](http://buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/to-west.htm)
- Dewar, K. (2017, January 23). Buddhists and Dharma bums. Beatdom. <https://www.beatdom.com/buddhists-dharma-bums/>
- Duerr, M. (2010, March 17). How Buddhism came to the West. The Buddha. <https://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/blog/2010/mar/17/how-buddhism-came-west-maia-duerr/>
- Edwards, B. (2018, June 14). Nirvana: everything you need to know. Louder. [loudersound.com/features/nirvana-everything-you-need-to-know](http://loudersound.com/features/nirvana-everything-you-need-to-know)
- Harris, T. How Nirvana works. HowStuffWorks. [science.howstuffworks.com/science-vs-myth/extrasensory-perceptions/nirvana3.htm](http://science.howstuffworks.com/science-vs-myth/extrasensory-perceptions/nirvana3.htm)
- Joshi, N. (2017, November 20). Caste system in India. Ancient History Encyclopedia. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1152/caste-system-in-ancient-india/>
- Joshi, N. (2016, August 22). Sanskrit. Ancient. [ancient.eu/Sanskrit](http://ancient.eu/Sanskrit)
- Jue, I. (2013, May). Ralph Waldo Emerson: From Buddhism to Transcendentalism, the beginning of an American literary tradition. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7dd7/16143742a1f6592ff9999c7fd3301aaf17fb.pdf>
- Kerouac, Jack (1958). *Dharma Bums*. Viking Press.
- Kingsland, J. (2016, April 26). Siddhartha's brain: Unlocking the ancient science of enlightenment. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Kim, Sangkeun (2004). *Strange names of God: The missionary translation of the Divine Name and the Chinese Responses to Matteo Ricci*. Peter Lang Inc.
- O'Brien, B. (2018, December 24). Nirvana and the concept of freedom in Buddhism. Learn Religions. <https://www.learnreligions.com/nirvana-449567>
- Olendzki, A. (2019). What's in a word? Nirvana. Tricycle. <https://tricycle.org/magazine/what-is-nirvana-in-buddhism/>
- Olson, C. (2000, August). *Zen and the art of postmodern philosophy*. SUNY Press.
- Rodrigues, H. (2008, June 23). Fire in Hinduism. Mahavidya. <http://www.mahavidya.ca/2008/06/23/fire-in-hinduism/>
- Wright, R. (2018, May 10). What is Nirvana? Aeon. <https://aeon.co/essays/nirvana-can-seem-an-exotic-metaphysical-idea-until-you-look-closer>
- V. J. The meaning of Nirvana. Hindu Website. <https://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/essays/nirvana.asp>

# Nonzero

Gianna Eisele

Cite as: Eisele, Gianna. 2021. Nonzero. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 206-211.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

“Nonzero” is an interesting enigma, if not for its indefinite connotation in a discipline well-documented in its search for definite answers, then for the incredible range it has reached beyond the world of mathematics, given the lateness of its origins.<sup>1</sup> How did “nonzero” cross the mathematical threshold to become a common part of the English lexicon, and moreover, what can be inferred about culture from such contexts and its users?

“Nonzero” is a derivation of English; it represents the combination of the negating prefix “non,” and the noun “zero” to form the adjective. Written versions of “nonzero” can include a hyphen as “non-zero”, and usually do so in formal lexicographical notations, mathematical contexts, and older (1879-1950s) versions of the word. The amount of variation in modern day examples (1961-2019, according to the Corpus of Historical American English) suggests the hyphen’s presence is representative of stylistic choice, rather than indicative of different meanings or strict grammar rules. Additionally, this claim is supported by an observed lack of criticism applied to those who choose to write out “non zero” as two separate words. The fluid grammatical construction of “nonzero” is perhaps attributed to its relatively new introduction to print and barren etymological history. While the individual parts of “nonzero” have their own linguistic backgrounds, the word as a whole has none; attempting to find answers in etymological dictionaries results in a circular conundrum similar to reading a definition which includes the word itself. To elaborate, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) cites “nonzero’s” etymology as “non- prefix + zero n. and adj.,” and the Online Etymology Dictionary claims “no results were found for nonzero”. The ambiguity here is intriguing, and services the research question above by situating “nonzero” as a linguistic piece created by language-users to describe something new.

According to the OED, the first printed mention of “nonzero” appears in 1879, in the *American Journal of Mathematics*. E. H. Hall, a fellow at Johns Hopkins University, writes in “On a New Action of the Magnet on Electric Currents” that “the equation  $u^2v + v^2w + w^2u = 0$  is resolvable in non-zero integers” (Hall, 383). The context is straightforward and mathematical; Hall uses “nonzero” to mean exactly what the lay person may infer, and the OED definition confirms– that “nonzero” is “not equal to zero.” A simple google search reinforces such an inference and adds “having a positive or negative value,” signaling to non-mathematicians that the negative number line is indeed worth remembering.<sup>2</sup> As literal and intuitive as the above definitions may seem, Hall provided no explanation, suggesting

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Seife, author of *Zero: The Biography of A Dangerous Idea*, emphasizes in his first chapter (after Chapter 0, of course, “Null and Void”) that zero was left out of early mathematics. The birth of zero did not occur until the Babylonians invented it around 300 BCE (2,320 years ago). This is significant when compared to the first known archaeological evidence of counting, which appears in the Upper Paleolithic time period around 30,000 years ago.

<sup>2</sup> In order to prep us, perhaps, for the self-declared “web’s most extensive mathematics resource” definition of nonzero: “A quantity which does not equal zero is said to be nonzero. A real nonzero number must be either positive or negative, and a complex nonzero number [expressed as  $(a + bi)$  (Complex Numbers)] can have either real or imaginary part nonzero” (WolframMathWorld).

the concept was not primarily introduced in Hall's paper. Attempts to antedate 1879 were unsuccessful; presumably, "not equal to zero" was floating around in the mathematical world but not yet regarded as the word "nonzero" or "non-zero". For example, Charles Seife, author of *Zero: The Biography of A Dangerous Idea*, recalls that father of calculus Isaac Newton "disliked infinitesimals, the little 0s in his fluxion equations that sometimes acted like zeros and sometimes like nonzero numbers" (Seife, 122). The word "nonzero" (or any of its punctual variations) makes no appearance in several of Newton's celebrated publications, including *Mathematical Properties of Natural Philosophy* (1687) and *The Method of Fluxions and Infinite Series* (1736). It is the positive conclusion of a surface-level Newtonian researcher that Seife's referenced infinitesimals, which dictionary.com identifies as "an indefinitely small number; a value approaching zero," equates Newton's diction, "finite systems". during the 17th and 18th century and describes that floating context Hall's paper introduces to the print world in 1879 as "nonzero".

The Google Ngram Viewer identifies the rise of "nonzero" (displayed by Figure 1 below) following Hall's publication; the word first appears in 1898 (at 0.0000000111%) and experiences a steady climb at a 705.5% increase until 1944 (at 0.0000078305%).



Figure 1

This may be attributed to E.W. Barnes' essay, "The Asymptotic Expansion of Integral Functions of Finite Non-Zero Order," published in 1905 by the *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society*. Barnes expanded "nonzero's" literal mathematical meaning (suggested by Hall decades previously) to include "the case of functions of finite (non-zero) order". This represents the first of many mathematical nouns to be described as "nonzero"; "vector," "integer" (to a higher multitude), and "function" soon join "order" as illustrated by Figure 2:

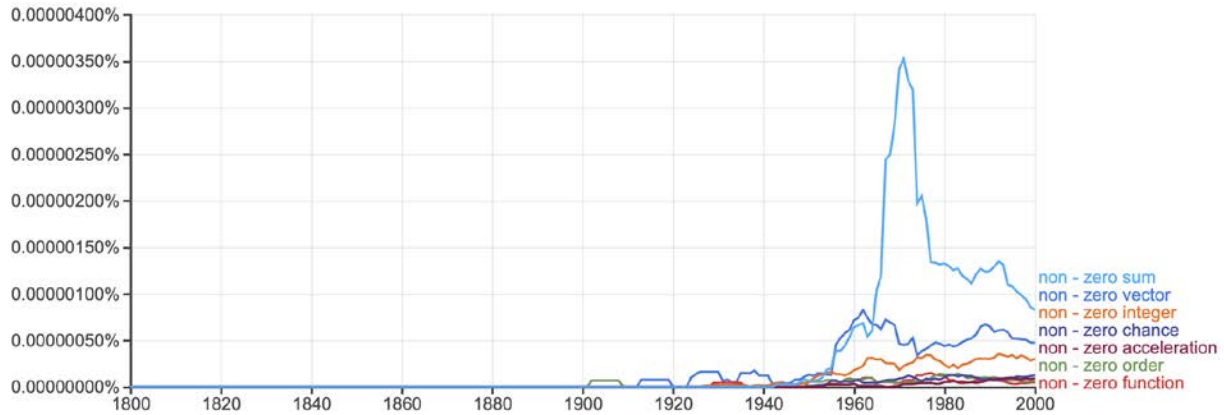


Figure 2

At this time, the people using “nonzero” were scholars, mathematicians, and physicists. The context for these phrases is restricted to the mathematical discipline, and the overview discussed above is important to understand how “nonzero” dissolved that restriction in only the first 46 recorded years of its life. *Figure II* describes the snowball effect “nonzero” took on within mathematics. First Hall, then Barnes, then gathering representation in publications at an average rate of  $3.9 \times 10^{-6}$  to reach the 1944 peak. “Nonzero” emerged within the context of literal description, but the major shift allowing it to spread beyond the boundaries of integers is an application to fit the purposes of new thought.

After 1944, the graph displayed in *Figure I* treks a steep incline at a 973.2% increase, striving for its 1991 zenith (at 0.0001080212%). This jump reflects the creation of new contexts for nonzero congruent with the publication of *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern. Game theory became a catalyst for “nonzero’s” application to the larger world. Google Ngram reflects the diversity of thought following 1944; *Figure II* illustrates new players such as “sum,” “chance,” and “acceleration.” This is where the threshold for “nonzero” opens from the lucrative, consistently homogenous group of largely white, rich, male people who worked with “nonzero” throughout history as we have previously discussed. The transition happened with no amount of swiftness, moving from mathematics to math-based economics, but it eventually experienced large growth. Readers today can attest to nonzero’s maintained relatibility from recognizable “nonzero” sum games; The Prisoner’s Dilemma is one such famous example. In this new context, “nonzero” took on an air of possibility rather than nothingness. Whereas Newton’s infinitesimals and Barnes’ functions performed amazing feats of mathematics within the categories of calculus and algebra, game theory offered possibility to the masses. Rather than a number very near zero, “nonzero” in the context of game theory shows the possible outcomes for two players will never add to zero (thus, non-zero *sum*). In simple terms, “nonzero” opposes zero, where one player’s gain is reflected in the other’s loss; “nonzero” does not hold this possibility. Our interest, leaving matrix-writing to the calculators, is the application this expanded nonzero context provides to multiple disciplines.

From 1944 on, archives and articles in online databases expand the extreme range “nonzero” allows for. The list of publications which apply “nonzero” to highly varying situations boast titles or headlines in categories including but not limited to psychology, trade and economics, international regulation, ice hockey statistics, the stock exchange, moral philosophy, quantum correlation, chess, and dark matter (to name a select few). The spread of “nonzero” has retained some of its first meaning, parts of its game theory growth spurt, and grown new ideas since in its expanded range. Robert

Wright, author of *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*,<sup>3</sup> describes nonzero “as a kind of potential– a potential for overall gain, or for overall loss, depending on how the game is played” (Wright, 7). Wright makes an addition to the base understanding of “nonzero” games by framing “nonzero” in a philosophical context. The potential he sees is historical and futuristic, an accumulation of “nonzero” games “whose ongoing growth and ongoing fulfillment define the arrow of the history of life, from the primordial soup to the World Wide Web” (7). His bold claim, the “logic of destiny” he advertises, is that “both organic and human history involve the playing of ever-more numerous, ever-larger, and ever-more-elaborate-non-zero-sum games. It is the accumulation of these games– game upon game upon game– that constitutes the growth in biological and social complexity” (6). If the universe is hurtling through space faster than the speed of light, society is also hurtling toward something; it’s propelled by those “nonzero” games, the potential for gain which unfolds and multiplies at an exponential rate as globalization (the result of other non-zero sums) increases interactions and therefore potential, the foundation of “nonzero” Wright identifies. The “potential” aspect to “nonzero” is reflected among the language-use of the general population following Wright’s publication. It’s possible this is a direct result of Wright’s contributions; just as likely, “nonzero” has finally been repeated (post-game theory) long enough to enter the general social sphere, and thus, the leisure-language user’s radar. J.T. McDaniel, a blogger, offers his understanding of nonzero:

On the face of it, nonzero would just mean greater than zero. I've seen it phrased both ways, but I think nonzero has a more precise meaning. Greater than zero can easily be interpreted as being likely. Nonzero is, generally, used where there really is no chance something will happen, but you can't entirely rule it out, either.

McDaniel clarifies his above definition with a Cartesian<sup>4</sup> example. In his view, the chance of something happening is nonzero if you definitely cannot rule out that it *can't* happen. If a person exists, therefore anything also existing can interact with them. From this researcher’s perspective, McDaniel’s understanding of “nonzero” is the same as Wright’s– on a smaller scale.

Echoing McDaniel’s view, a nuanced question posted on reddit.com asks, “If something has a nonzero chance of happening, will it definitely happen given an infinite time period?” The user clarifies:

*It seem [sic] intuitive that given infinite time even the most unlikely events will happen. Flipping heads 1 trillion times in a row followed by flipping tails 100 trillion times in a row (with a fair coin). Or perhaps winning the lottery every day for 5 years. However, I have also heard that things like this can 'just not happen'. That a set of infinite coin flips might not contain the highly improbable scenario I laid out above.*

Another question, posted to StackExchange.com, under the English Language & Usage section asks something similar: “How infrequent is a ‘non-zero chance?’” and the conversation thread displayed by Figure 3 offers new insight:

---

<sup>3</sup> Published in 1999. Note the small but determined uptick Figure I demonstrates in the throws of its millenium-closing downfall...

<sup>4</sup> McDaniel offers a long, detailed situation involving his neighbor, summarized and simplified as “I exist, therefore anything also existing can interact with me,” which can be understood similarly to Decartes’ famous contribution to philosophy *Cogito, ero sum*, “I think therefore I am.”

I misinterpreted the expression “a non-zero chance” as an emphatic way to stress that there was no possibility or likelihood of something happening.

- there is **a non-zero chance** that they will pay attention to some of the responses...
- there is **a non-zero chance** that the feedback may matter.

The author explained

**NB:** ...the chance of them changing it is *not zero* and therefore must be more than that. I used a double-negative to emphasize that, while there is a chance, it probably isn't a *good* chance.

**Me:** It's confusing and ambiguous... why not just say "slim chance"?

**NB:** Because I prefer 'non-zero chance'; I like the phrasing of it. I like using double-negation as a way to minimize something. And for the record, thus far you appear to be the only person who has mentioned being confused by this phrase.

- Does “a non-zero chance” mean ‘more than zero’?
- Is the author right? Am I the only person who could misinterpret this phrasing?
- Is this phrasing peculiar to American speakers or do British speakers use this expression too?

### Figure 3

The user asks follow-up questions relevant to lexiculture, and though “nonzero” (as laid out by this paper) has expanded to language platforms far past narrow mathematical contexts, the conversation thread observed in *Figure III* suggests it still holds a vague place in common vocabularies. The individual uses “nonzero” in varying contexts equal to their exposure to its multiple definitions, and moreover their personal stylistic preferences.

Another important takeaway from the *Figure III* exchange is evidence that “nonzero” has expanded from disciplinary use (statistics, psychology, philosophy) and now occupies a colloquial space. This is the most recent, inferred by user's questions to “phrasing,” but it marks a significant notch in “nonzero's” linguistic timeline. Users of “nonzero” now include the modern blogger, the curious reddit user, and the general English language-speaker seeking clarification on a phrase they haven't previously come across. As the word “nonzero” increases in age, it reaches new contexts and thus gathers new meaning. The ambiguous connotation of “nonzero” was the luring factor for this paper, and such a connotation continually allowed mobility beyond Hall's very first mention. The space a word like “nonzero” occupies reflects its life in linguistics. Essentially, it describes infinity– the infinite numbers possible between zero and one. Drawing a conclusion from this paper, it is the hypothesis of this researcher that “nonzero” will parallel the infinite meaning it describes– gathering new contexts exponentially through the passage of time.

## References

“Complex Numbers.” *Physics For Idiots*, physicsforidiots.com/maths/complex-numbers/.

“Non-Zero.” *Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)*, [www.english-corpora.org/coha/](http://www.english-corpora.org/coha/).

“Nonzero.” *From Wolfram MathWorld*, Wolfram Web Resources, [mathworld.wolfram.com/Nonzero.html](http://mathworld.wolfram.com/Nonzero.html).

“Non-Zero.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/128171?redirectedFrom=nonzero#eid>.

“Non-Zero-Sum Games.” *Stanford.edu*, Stanford University, [cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/courses/soco/projects/1998-99/game-theory/nonzero.html](http://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/courses/soco/projects/1998-99/game-theory/nonzero.html)

“r/Askscience - If Something Has a Non-Zero Chance of Happening, Will It Definitely Happen given an Infinite Time Period?” *Reddit*,



- [www.reddit.com/r/askscience/comments/1peqny/if\\_something\\_has\\_a\\_nonzero\\_chance\\_of\\_happening/](http://www.reddit.com/r/askscience/comments/1peqny/if_something_has_a_nonzero_chance_of_happening/).
- “Zero: Search Online Etymology Dictionary.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/search?q=zero](http://www.etymonline.com/search?q=zero).
- A, Mari-Lou, et al. “How Infrequent Is ‘a Non-Zero Chance?’” *English Language & Usage Stack Exchange*, October 28, 2018, [english.stackexchange.com/questions/470486/how-infrequent-is-a-non-zero-chance](http://english.stackexchange.com/questions/470486/how-infrequent-is-a-non-zero-chance)
- Barnes, E. W. “The Asymptotic Expansion of Integral Functions of Finite Non-Zero Order.” *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society*, vol. s2-3, no. 1, 1905, pp. 273–295. doi:10.1112/plms/s2-3.1.273.
- Campbell, Rich. “Duncan Keith's Goal Completes Blackhawks Comeback in 4-3 Victory Over Blues.” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr 04, 2018.
- Hall, E. H. “On a New Action of the Magnet on Electric Currents.” *American Journal of Mathematics*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1879, pp. 287–385., doi:10.2307/2369245.
- Li, Bo, Lin Chen, and Heng Fan. “Non-zero total correlation means non-zero quantum correlation.” *Physics Letters A* 378, no. 18-19 (2014): 1249-1253.
- McDaniel, J.T. “Nonzero Chances.” *J.T. McDaniel's Blog*, Typepad.com, [jtmcdaniel.typepad.com/blog/2012/03/nonzero-chances.html](http://jtmcdaniel.typepad.com/blog/2012/03/nonzero-chances.html).
- Newton, Isaac. *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. Vol. 1, Motte, 1729. Trinity College Dublin, [www.maths.tcd.ie/pub/HistMath/People/Newton/Principia/Bk1Sect1/PrBk1St1.pdf](http://www.maths.tcd.ie/pub/HistMath/People/Newton/Principia/Bk1Sect1/PrBk1St1.pdf).
- Newton, Sir Isaac. *The Method of Fluxions and Infinite Series*. London, Henry Woodfall, 1736.
- Rockwell S. “Non-Zero Sum: A Win-Win Trans-Atlantic Game.” *Wall Street Journal*, Jun 20, 2002, pp. A10.
- Seife, Charles. *Zero: The Biography of A Dangerous Idea*, Penguin, 2000.
- Reich, Robert. *The Non Zero-Sum Society*. January 28, 2013. <https://robertreich.org/post/41745594892>
- Van Neumann, John, and Oskar Morgenstern. *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock : Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Wright, Robert. *Nonzero: the Logic of Human Destiny*. Vintage Books, 2000.

# Nymphomaniac

Christen Helper

Cite as: Helper, Christen. 2021. Nymphomaniac. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 212-216.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

In the 1960s there was a new wave of feminism rising in American culture; women were rallying against the homemaker image and pushing toward a more modern, independent, and influential image. During this time there was a 'Sexual Revolution' making an imprint on American culture; women were becoming more open and proud about their sexuality. They viewed themselves and their actions as liberated and powerful, but to outsiders they were viewed as the new-age deviant nymphomaniacs. *Nymphomaniacs*, women who express and pursue an excessive amount of sexual activity, have felt a strong backlash for centuries to the cultural norms and gendered expectations of women in Western cultures. But where did the rise of the nymphomaniacs begin, and how did they become such an iconic taboo in Western cultures and societies? As our society strives to make steps toward more progressive and accepting ideologies, will women have to continue to keep their sexual identities hidden?

## History and Etymology

The origin of *nymphomaniac* can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece; the word *nymphē* means "bride" or "young wife" ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)). The word then goes on to give rise to the Greek mythological characters with the same name - the Nymphs. According to classical mythology, the Nymphs are minor female deities and protectors of springs, mountains, and rivers; they are represented as young, beautiful girls (Mythica). There are five different types, each named for the landmark or location they were entrusted to protect: celestial, water, land, plant, and the underworld. They never grew old or died from old age, and in some legends, they gave birth to demi-gods. These free spirits were set apart from the common, mortal woman of Classical Greek life because they could not be tamed by men; they never married. The gods and goddesses most commonly associated with nymphs are Artemis, Apollo, and Dionysus. The following page includes a classical painting of nymphs.

This is an Italian artist's representation of what mythological nymphs could have looked like. An important feature of these women is their comfortable appearance and body language; they are creatures of nature. Their nudity isn't meant to create the poster image for sexual desire or promiscuity, but to display the most natural state for all humans and divine beings. This portrait captures the original meaning behind the word *nymph*.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, *nymph* went through a semantic shift. Doctors began to add the suffix *mania* to form "*nymphomania*"; a disease in which women suffer through an excessive sexual desire (Dictionary). Women accused of being *nymphomaniacs* were often sent to hospitals or asylums where doctors would treat these patients with a series of traumatic and violent procedures; most commonly hysterectomies, lobotomies, and various other techniques that by today's standards would be considered cruel and unusual. Unfortunately, many of the accused women did not have any form of a mental disorder or cognitive impairment; they were usually sent away by fathers or husbands for not conforming to archaic cultural norms for women's behavior.



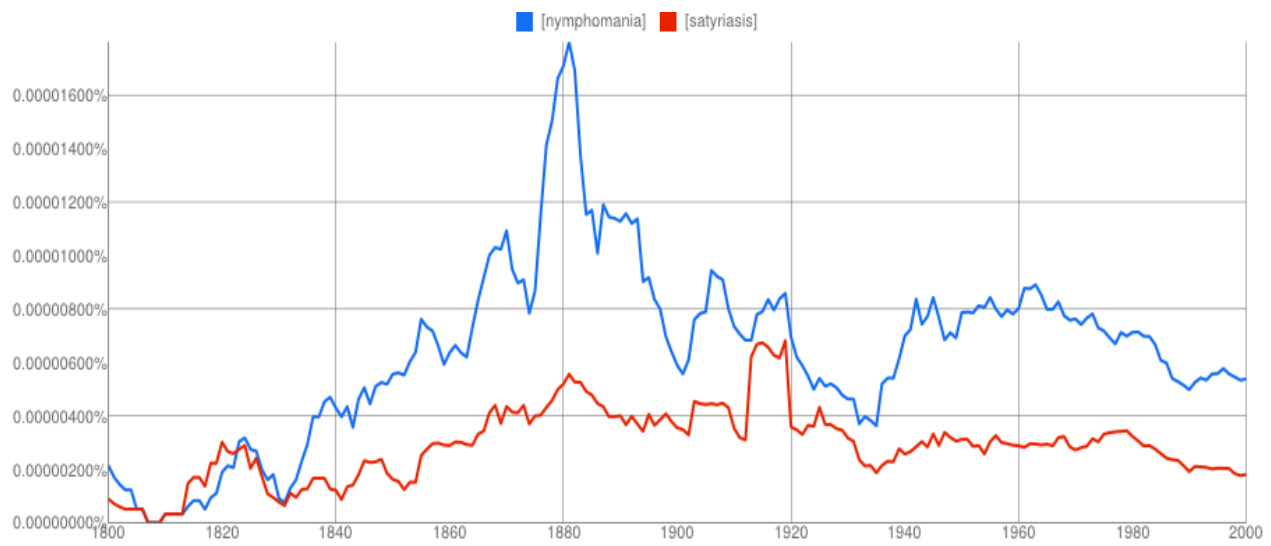
Palma Vecchio 1480-1528: Bathing nymphs. Photo © Maicar Förlag - GML

**Figure 1: Portrait of nymphs, Vecchio**

### **Nymphomaniacs and Satyriasis**

Figure 2 displays the Google Ngram comparison of the words *nymphomania* and *satyriasis*. Just as *nymphomania* refers to the excessive sexual urges in women, *satyriasis* is the excessive sexual urges in men. This word also takes its roots in Greek mythology as well as having a similar semantic shift involving psychiatry.; however, around 1880 *nymphomania* appears to be used almost three times as much as *satyriasis* in literary publications – but why? If both words are used to describe a person with excessive sexual compulsions and with identical symptoms, why is the female diagnosis much more commonly used and recognized?

**Figure 2: Nymphomania vs. satyriasis**

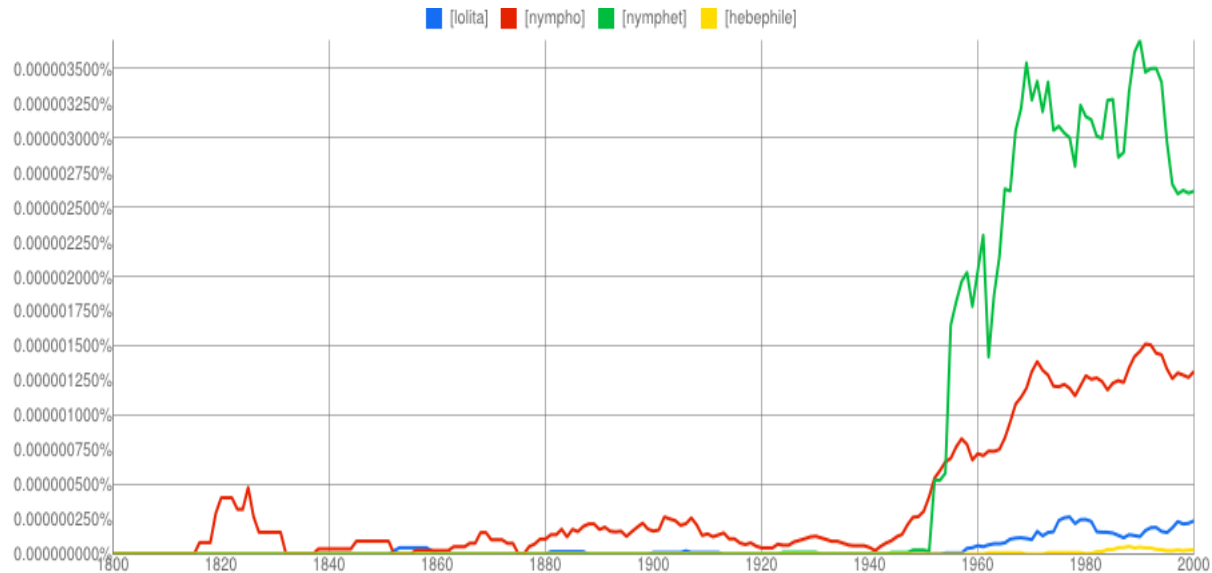


One hypothesis reflects the differences in the names themselves. When one hears a word that includes the suffix *mania*, it is automatically associated with a mental or cognitive impairment. This then leads one to start associating other characteristics of what one might know about other manias, such as mood swings, aggression, or erratic behavior. In general, abnormal behaviors. When a woman is diagnosed as being a *nymphomaniac*, she is immediately stigmatized as having a sort of immoral, uncontrollable, and irrational behavior; she is a danger to society and possibly threatens the moral guidelines for other women she may come in contact with. On the other hand, if a man is diagnosed as having *satyriasis*, the name doesn't do as much as to trigger a preconceived notion as to what that might entail. The suffix *-sis* in medical terms is usually associated with a physical ailment, such as dialysis or neurofibromatosis, or even a biological event (*meiosis* or *biogenesis*). Its name doesn't automatically trigger thoughts of abnormal or uncontrollable behavior, but more of an abnormal condition involving bodily function. This still leads to question why one gender is left with a much more burdening stereotype of the same state.

## Nymphomaniacs and Literature

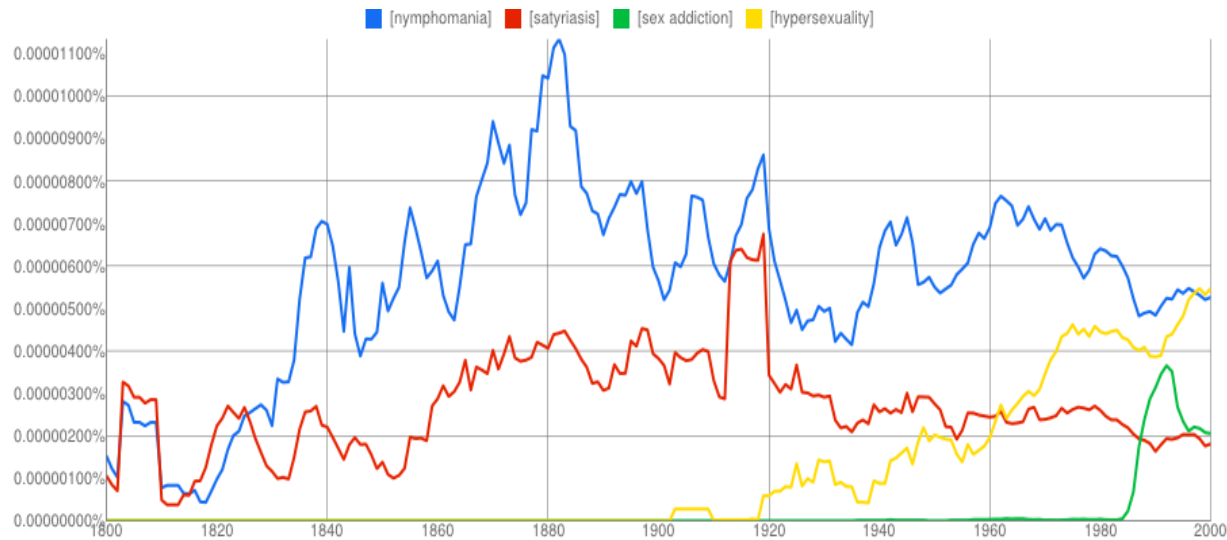
Apart from the tragic, medicinal history behind the term *nymphomaniac*, there is another event that launches the use of the word; the 1955 novel *Lolita*. Written by Vladimir Nabokov, it is the controversial story of a middle-aged man who becomes infatuated with a twelve-year old girl. He eventually seduces her and begins a sexual relationship with the girl, despite her fragile, young age. The protagonist, Humbert Humbert, has had a longstanding interest in pubescent-aged girls; he refers to them as *nymphets*. Throughout the novel Humbert frequently uses this term, as well as a few others, to justify his sexual advances of a young girl. By giving his love interest a title that suggests that she is sexually promiscuous or has insatiable sexual appetite, he is drawing attention away from his own perversions. *Lolita* is then portrayed in a completely different way; no longer is she an innocent adolescent, but now is a vixen and antagonist using adult behavior. While it is clear that in the novel the young *Lolita* is objectified and sexually exploited by a much older man, the words associated with her character have an oppositional view. Around the time of *Lolita's* publication in 1955, a dramatic increase occurred in the usage of the words *nympho* and *nymphet*, as shown in Figure 3. Although the context of the two words is not specified in the NGRAM search, it is rather coincidental that their sudden gain in popularity runs along the same time as the release of what is considered to be one of

the greatest novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Notice that until approximately 1950 *nymphet* was virtually nonexistent; *nympho* also takes a dramatic increase in use around the same time. Could this be a direct influence from *Lolita*?



**Figure 3: Lolita vs. nympho vs. nymphet vs. hebephile**

Figure 3 also examines the term *hebephile*, a type of chronophilia in which one is primarily or exclusively sexually interested in pubescent individuals approximately eleven to fourteen years of age (Wikipedia). Humbert is described in character analysis as being a hebephile, as throughout the story he is fulfilling his sexual fantasies with Lolita; yet it is the words associated with her character analysis that transpire into culture and common vocabulary use. Could this be due to gender gaps in society at the time of its release? Even though adult-child relationships were considered morally unethical and taboo, did society still dissect Lolita's character as being an explicit character, despite her age, simply because she is a young, unorthodox female?



**Figure 4: nymphomania vs. satyriasis vs. sex addiction vs. hypersexuality**



## Conclusion

As we progress further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the gender-isolating terms of the past are taking on new names, as well as new identities. Women are breaking away from the Victorian Era stereotypes of being the silent, restrained housewife and bridging the gender inequality gap.

*Nymphomania* is being replaced with more neutral terms such as *hypersexuality* and *sex addiction*. This neutralization of *nymphomania* reduces the shame and attention that was once predominately geared toward women. *Hypersexuality*, defined as a dysfunctional preoccupation with sexual fantasy for a period of at least six months (Weiss), is a part of sex addiction. Figure 4 shows the increase in these new expressions as they begin to replace the older in cultural aspects of the English language.

The term *sex addiction* does not appear until the early 1980s, peaks in the 1990s, and then drops back down around the turn of the century; within the past five years it has regained some of its popularity within its use in pop culture. The recent trend has been for celebrities (mostly male; Tiger Woods, David Duchovny, etc.) to come out as having sex addiction issues after a scandalous event or failure in personal relationships are covered by the media. Since American culture is greatly intertwined with media and pop culture, this could be a huge contributing factor in the eradication of the use of *nymphomania* and *satyriasis*. Media is one of the biggest contenders in the ways that language shapes culture (whether it's subliminal or not); the words that are chosen for today's news reports and magazine articles are the words that will be repeated in tomorrow's conversation.

## References

- Encyclopedia Mythica. Nymphs. <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/n/nymphs.html>
- Weiss, R. Hypersexuality: Symptoms of Sexual Addiction. [www.psychcentral.com](http://www.psychcentral.com):  
<http://psychcentral.com/lib/hypersexuality-symptoms-of-sexual-addiction/00011488>
- Wikipedia. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebephilia>
- [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com). Online Etymology Dictionary:  
[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=nymph&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=nymph&allowed_in_frame=0)
- Picture Credit : <http://spenceralley.blogspot.com/2011/12/masters-of-venice.html>



# Octopi

Kayla Niner

Cite as: Niner, Kayla. 2021. Octopi. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 217-228.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

Octopuses. Octopi. Octopodes. Octopus. How many plurals can one word have? Somewhere across the span of the last two hundred years, the word octopus has ended up with four mainstream pluralizations. Why are English speakers so obsessed with the plural form of an animal that they rarely encounter outside of aquariums and food? What makes octopi so special that people are willing to write entire blog posts dedicated to the discussion of what the correct plural form is? This paper seeks to explore these murky waters to see how long this whole squabble has been going on and what in the world is on the minds of the people who spend so much time trying to figure out the right answer.

*“In deep recesses of a cave  
That cool and limpid waters lave,  
Where human eye doth rarely pierce,  
Sojourns a creature strange and fierce :  
Not mine be it to sing its fame—  
I only wish to find its name.  
Octopus has a formal sound,  
Yet like my theme is full and round ;  
But common parlance writes it thus,  
And says it is the Oc'topus.  
So far if one ; —but if of more,  
I puzzled truly am, and sore,  
As Octopod 'tis often writ  
(In which I don't believe a bit).  
Sometime 'tis spelt Octopidæ,  
But that it surely cannot be ;  
Nor Octopi, nor Octopes,  
Less likely still Octopodes ;  
And Octopods is too absurd—  
A plural of a plural word !  
I have it now—for all this fuss is  
The way to spell the “Octopusses.”  
(The Spelling Bee 1876:172)*

In 1876, someone who called himself ‘The Spelling Bee’ wrote the above poem seeking the same answer that this paper had initially set out to find. Using Google Ngram viewer, which searches a great number of English language books for the phrases typed into its search box, the terms ‘octopuses, octopi, and octopodes’ were searched and their frequencies over time mapped (Table A, Table B, Google). Since the Ngram viewer can only find words and not differentiate on whether the word was used as a plural or a singular noun, another plural form, ‘octopus,’ was omitted from the search. The

results were clear on one thing: it appeared that octopi and octopodes were the oldest, with results showing up in the early 1800s (Table A, Google). Octopi won this early battle it seems, as octopodes vanished from the Ngram viewer until its return briefly in the 1840s, then again in 1906. However, by the 1870, octopuses had made the scene and by 1920 had pushed octopi into second best. By 1930 octopuses made a clear leap into popularity. It continued on its way up in usage until 1963 when it reached a peak, and began to fall (Table B, Google). However, as no other form begins to rise, this is likely due to less chatter about the eight-tentacled organism.

## Early Appearances

The origins of these three plurals, which are by and large the most argued about, come from three different languages. The word 'octopuses' is a normal English plural: octopus ends in an 's' so, like with other words ending in 's' and 'z,' one should add an 'es' to pluralize it. 'Octopi' is how that word would be made plural if octopus were Latin, like syllabus and syllabi. Finally, 'octopodes' is a Greek pluralization. So how did the plurals from two different languages end up in the English language? According to Kory Stamper, an editor for Merriam Webster's dictionary, 'octopi' was invented in the 1730s when there was a Latin revivalist movement going on (2014). It was around this same time that 'octopodes' entered the language, the response of a different group of people who realized that octopus was a Greek loanword, not a Latin one. She also states, contrary to the Ngram, that the standard plural of the time was 'octopuses' (Stamper 2014). Of course, just because the word does not appear in the digitized literature of the early 1800s does not mean that it did not exist, or perhaps it disappeared for a while after the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Library of Congress' Chronicling America database turns up 'octopi' in newspapers as early as 1839, but 'octopuses' does not show up until 1881 (Library of Congress). What is known, is that in 1876 someone wrote a poem about the issue (*The Spelling Bee* 172) and in 1882 the word octopuses was listed in a manual called "Errors of Speech," which cited that either 'octopi' or 'octopuses' would be appropriate plurals (Brewer 1882:742). The word 'octopi' has its own separate dictionary entry in 1889, listed simply as "plural of octopus" (Smith 4079). A little earlier than the poem was written, in 1872, a man who gave his name as Philologus Orthodoxus wrote into a journal called *Medical Press & Circular*. He wrote in stating that the word 'octopi' was "abominable" and that the whole word 'octopus' should be thrown out in favor of 'octopod,' which is easily pluralized as 'octopods' (106).

Thirty years later, in 1906, two men wrote separately to a magazine called *New Scientist* to debate, once again, proper pluralization. The first man, E. L. Haste, is actually writing about the use of data vs datum. He brings in octopi as an example of a word usage that he is "shocked by" and states later that he would like it if all loanwords would adopt standard English plurals (41). The second man, H. D. Johnson is concerned solely with the plural of octopus and hippopotamus, which is also Greek. Johnson criticizes a Mr. Barlow who reportedly greatly dislikes the use of 'hippopotamuses' and would prefer the use of Latin 'hippopotami.' He asks if the man would prefer the use of octopodes for the plural of octopus since it's Greek, but firmly states that he would prefer the plural of 'octopuses' since it is the English pluralization (1906:41). Johnson feels that using the Latin plural is showing a sense of superiority as he states, "No sir! "Octopuses" and "hippopotamuses" for me, and a little less damned superiority" (41). Another book from the same timeframe refers to 'octopi' as "an amusing fictitious plural" (Coll. 1904:93).

It is also the early 1900s when the word 'octopodes' makes its first and last appearance in Chronicling America's newspaper database. Both instances appear in the San Francisco call of 1908. The first is on October 5 and the second on November 27. Neither have anything to do with actually referring to more than one octopus. The snippet from the first paper reads "What on earth or anywhere else are "octopi"? Is it possible our great and good friend mistakes "octopus" for a Latin word on account of its deceptive termination? It is Greek, and "by right," should be spelled octopous. If our friend wishes to be alarmingly and distressingly classical let him try octopodes for the plural,

allege same “antipodes.” However, octopuses is a good enough plural and is used by all who do not wish to be considered eccentric.” (Simpson, ed. Oct. 1908:6). Once again, ‘octopuses’ and its conformity to English pluralization rules seems to win out against the Greek and Latin-based plurals. The next paper contains a very peculiar article indeed. This article seeks to point out that ‘octopi’ is an incorrect plural and suggests that ‘octopodes’ is not used “in consideration of space.” It also refers to ‘octopi’ as an evil plural that has “infected the editor of *Colliers’ Weekly*” (Simpson, ed. Nov. 1908:4). There seems to be a metalinguistic view expressed here that says that people who use the Latin and Greek plurals are arrogant.

The mood changes later when, in 1964, someone by the name of Stephen F. Maron writes in to *Boy’s Life* to complain that in a previous article that the word ‘octopuses’ was used multiple times. This, he says, is incorrect. The correct plural is ‘octopi,’ which he was taught about in the third grade. The reply to this comment comes from “Pedro,” a donkey who is the mascot of the write-in page, who reports that actually there are three plurals to octopus: ‘octopuses,’ ‘octopi,’ and ‘octopodes’ and that they are all correct. This is the first time that it is suggested to not only use ‘octopuses’ and ‘octopi,’ but also ‘octopodes.’

## Latin Revival and ‘Octopi’

So, for those who are in favor of ‘octopi,’ why is giving an English word a Latin plural so important? According to Anne Kingston of McLean’s, “Latin hones cerebral muscles” and is a “formal, stately language” (2013). Another article about Latin in Maine suggests that the study of this ancient language improves SAT scores because it helps kids to learn logic and understand English (Press-Herald 2007). Pushing Latin to the side for a moment, one should recall the numerous studies that tout these health benefits from learning any second language (NEA Research 2007). This love for Latin may be born out of popular views of Roman society, where the general public mostly learns about Julius Caesar, Virgil, and other well-known ‘good’ Roman figures. If instead people only learned about the slaves, dictators, and gladiators of Rome, it might become an ugly language based on context alone (Bauer and Trudgill 1998:91). Nonetheless, the importance of Latin in the minds of some has caused the octopi vs. octopuses war to rage onwards.

## Modern Uses

Many times, strange grammatical beliefs and pseudo rules are born out of grammar books and the things kids are taught at school. To see if this is true, the place to look is in children’s grammar books. Google Books turned up three of these such books right away upon searching for ‘the plural of octopus’ in 21<sup>st</sup> century books. Amazingly, they all had a different thing to say about the answer. The first book, *Primary Grammar Word and Study: Ages 7-8*, clearly states that “the plural of ‘octopus’ is ‘octopuses’ but may also be ‘octopi’” (R.I.C. Publications 2008:46). The next book, *Nonfiction Reading, Grade 5* contends that statement with an assertion that the correct plural is octopi (Foster 2011:61). No mention of the plural ‘octopuses’ is made. Yet the third book, *Laugh and Learn Grammar*, tells its readers that the plural form is ‘octopuses’ (Housel 2007:9)! What about octopus and octopodes? They are not in these grammar books. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘octopodes’ is a rare usage (2006), so it is not likely to show up in a kid’s grammar book. As for ‘octopus’ (plural), it is not even mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary. It does not mean the form is not out there, but perhaps simply more uncommon even than ‘octopodes.’

Another source from which many receive grammar help, although often enough incorrect, is Microsoft Word’s spell check. If one were viewing this document in its original Microsoft Word format, it would be easy to see which plurals Microsoft word prefers. Every time the word ‘octopodes’ appears in this paper, it is underlined with a red squiggly line telling the author that this word is incorrectly spelled (Microsoft 2010). Spellcheck suggests that it be shortened to ‘octopod,’ which according to

some is yet another plural for octopus, although most dictionaries would say that octopod is “any of an order (Octopoda) of cephalopod mollusks (as an octopus or argonaut) that have eight arms bearing sessile suckers” (Merriam-Webster) which would include cuttlefish. Newspapers in *Chronicling America* confirm this, referring mostly to cuttlefish within the context of octopod (Library of Congress). Perhaps ironically, in the comments section on the Merriam-Webster online dictionary entry, one person states that they looked the word up because their daughter seemed to think it was the plural of octopus (Chester via Merriam-Webster).

For those that need grammar help later in life, or simply want to learn science or cleverness, there are books geared towards adults that seek to pluralize octopus in the “correct” way. Ben Pridmore, author of *How to Be Clever* (2008:67), agrees with *Laugh and Learn Grammar*’s octopuses. What makes this book so peculiar is that it has nothing to do with grammar. *How to Be Clever* is a book about doing things like multiplying long numbers, taking square roots, playing blackjack, and ironically, how to be creative. None of these things are grammar. The octopus footnote comes out of the blue. In fact, all of the footnotes in the book seem to be completely unrelated to the page’s subject. So why pick the plural of octopus? He has some very strong feelings on this matter, not just on the improperness of the word octopi, but on the improperness of ‘octopodes.’ People who use ‘octopodes,’ he argues, “...are just being silly” (Pridmore 2008:67). *Verbal Advantage: Ten Easy Steps to a Powerful Vocabulary* also agrees with the octopuses, although Elster tells us that ‘octopodes’ was used more in the past than it is now, which Google’s Ngram viewer does show to be true, with its tiny flare of popularity in the 1950s and 1960s (Table A). However, they suggest that one should only use octopuses and that ‘octopi’ is improper (Elster 2009). A science book from 1987, *Life of Southern California*, is more liberal than its grammar book counterparts, suggesting that people choose any of the three plurals and use them, as they all work just fine. The author, Hinton, adds here one more plural: octopus (1987:122). Another science book about only octopuses, *Octopus: The Ocean’s Intelligent Invertebrate*, uses the word octopuses, stating, again, that ‘octopi’ is an improper pluralization of a Greek loanword. (Mather, Anderson, & Wood 2013). As a second language learner in Japan seeking to successfully make it through an interview, the correct plural is given as ‘octopi’ (Ishii 2008:174).

The discussion of whether or not to use ‘octopi’ has even invaded modern fiction. The most well-known of these modern fictional sources is the 1983 James Bond film, *Octopussy*. When James Bond is speaking to titular character Octopussy about the origin of her nickname, she states that her Uncle studied ‘octopi.’ While there is no argument between her and Bond about the word, its usage here is significant: the writers chose to use the word ‘octopi’ rather than ‘octopuses.’ In a film of the Bond series’ popularity, the word is sure to catch on even more. The other two sources are recently published fiction novels that appear to be relatively unknown, based on a complete lack of Amazon, Google Books, and Goodreads reviews. Their lack of popularity, however, does not discount the fact that the authors chose to mention this pluralization debate. The first book, *Devil’s Tag*, author John Schaeffer has his character wonder about the correct plural of octopus, among other things, eventually deciding that he preferred to use ‘octopuses’ despite the fact that he hated English and ‘octopi’ sounded more like pie and he liked pie (2012). The second book, *Death in Pozzuoli*, involves a man asking someone to check the plural of octopus for the title of a lecture titled “Octopuses in the mentality of Greece and Rome” as he believes the plural of octopus to be ‘octopi’ and he does not “trust psychologist practitioners with English grammar” (Evans 2009:53). Later, one of the characters mentions that he does not use ‘octopi’ because he does not want to “parade his learning” (Evans 2009:91). He is then introduced to speak by the same man who was conflicted about the plural earlier who proceeds to emphasize the ‘pi’ in octopi (92). One line conveys this perfectly: “Fordham sat down, having emphasized his grammatical point in a stentorian voice...” (92). In both its use in a James Bond film by a sophisticated woman and its clear preferential treatment in *Death in Pozzuoli*, the use of ‘octopi’ almost seems to be conveying a sense of elite-ness and superiority. In contrast, the use of ‘octopuses’ in *Devil’s Tag* seems to say that people who use it are less concerned with grammar than

people who use 'octopi.' Obviously, the authors' metalinguistic views about the plural of octopus are strong enough to warrant inclusion in fiction writing.

## Outside of Literature

The word 'octopi' also seems to get a lot of use from people who would use it in a satirical or pun-like manner. One example of this comes from 2012's Occupy Wall Street Movement. Some people got creative with the sounds of 'occupy' and 'octopi,' and, upon finding the two words to be similar made a silly image with invertebrates seeking taxonomic equality (Image A, Dehavelle 2012). In addition to 'octopi' Wall Street, another person noted the 'pi' ending [read π] of the plural and the 'octo' [meaning eight] on the front of the word and combined the two to create 'octo- π' or an eight-legged version of the Greek letter 'pi' (Image B, ZeroGtees 2010). Octopi is seen almost as a 'fun' word that can be played with, more so than 'octopuses,' although the whole argument has been made fun of by Jon Wilkins who drew a fun flowchart detailing how to choose the correct plural. Only one path leads to 'octopi' and 'octopuses' and they both show up together to be used interchangeably (Image C, Wilkins 2012).

## What People Use in Daily Life

So, do people actually use these plurals or is it all a lot of noise about nothing? Do their reasons have anything to do with being scientifically literate or obsession with grammar? Or perhaps the knowledge of Greek or Latin shapes their choice? Using Google Documents, a survey was sent out to about 50 Wayne State University students, 14 of whom replied (Table C). These students were told that a paper was being done on the plural of octopus. The majority, 50 percent, reported 'octopi.' Other answers included octopuses, with four submissions, and 'octopies,' 'octopus,' and 'octopusi,' each with only one submission. 3 out of 4 of the 'octopuses' here replied that grammar was only 'somewhat' important, while 5 of the 7 'octopi' respondents replied that grammar was 'very' important (Table C). Perhaps, then, the importance of grammar has a bearing on which plural is chosen. This survey, with its small response size and large non-response bias can hardly provide answers for the Metro-Detroit area, much less the whole world, but it does offer some insight into what modern day people think about the issue.

Later, the same survey was posted publicly on a deviantArt profile page, where anyone who viewed the profile page could view and complete the survey. No one was told what was for aside from school. It was also posted on two Facebook pages, where friends and family of the people who posted it could view and complete the survey. Since most of the deviantArt watchers are also known people, albeit from around the world, this survey was entirely non-random. This time the survey turned up 62.5 percent in favor of only 'octopi,' counting three entries that also read octopi but are spelled in a non-standard manner. 29.2 percent responded 'octopuses' (Table D). One person went so far as to list both octopuses and octopi and state that either is correct. Interestingly, of the three people who responded whose native language was not English (Dutch, Russian, French), two responded 'octopuses,' although one used the British English spelling of 'octopusses.' Largely, respondents did not know Greek or Latin. The two who did know Latin, however, responded 'octopi' and the one who knew Greek responded 'octopuses.' More data is needed to see if there is a real connection between the languages and choice of plural, but these three responses seem to indicate that there may be a connection. The other connection that this survey sought to find was whether or not the choice of plural had anything to do with how important people saw grammar. Half the people who said grammar was only 'somewhat' important to them answered 'octopuses.' Three answered 'octopi,' one of whom spelled it 'octipi.' The only other person to list grammar as 'somewhat' important answered that the plural was identical to the singular: 'octopus.' It appears, then, that there is not much of a connection between 'octopuses,' 'octopi' and grammar from this point of view. However, if instead the answers of the 'octopi' respondents and the 'octopuses' respondents to 'how important is proper grammar' are



looked at separately, there is a different story. 13 out of 15 ‘octopi’ respondents answered ‘very important,’ while only 3 out of 7 ‘octopuses’ respondents answered ‘very important’ (Table D). While, again, more data is needed before a conclusion can be reached, it does seem that the answer to the question ‘how important is proper grammar’ is connected to a person’s choice of plural. Age appears to be completely unrelated. Upon making this survey another hypothesis was that people who had a science background would be less likely to pick ‘octopi.’ This proved to be untrue and again seemingly unrelated, as 40 percent of ‘octopi’ respondents were not in science related fields, while 60 percent are. It was almost split evenly with the ‘octopuses’ respondents (Table D). It may still be worth revisiting the issue, but instead separating each scientific discipline into its own category. This may yield clearer results.

## Opinions About the Various Plurals

Along these same lines, what do other people think about why people use the plurals they use, and what do the people who use them think about the words themselves? One blogpost had some very strong metalinguistic views about not only the plurals, but the people who use them as well. This blog was written in response to a video by Merriam-Webster about the correct plural of octopus, where the editor said it would be found to use any of the three: ‘octopuses,’ ‘octopi,’ and ‘octopodes.’ (heraclitus 2010 and Merriam-Webster). According to the blogger who goes by ‘heraclitus’ there are five kinds of people in the octopus plural world: “1. People who think *octopuses* is the best because it comes naturally, like children think *foots* is an acceptable plural of *foot*, instead of *feet*. 2. People who like *octopuses* because it sounds like the Bond film *Octopussy*. 3. People who use *octopi* because it seems like the way we deal with words ...[ending]... in *-us*, like *alumnus/alumni*. 4. People who use *octopodes* because they think it has a better historical basis (to be explained below). 5. People who think *octopodes* sounds silly and pedantic, and *octopi* is wrong, so they settle on *octopuses*. (Many dictionary and style guides go this route.)” (heraclitus 2010). Of all of these people, heraclitus argues, only those from reason two are right and that anyone who uses ‘octopodes’ or ‘octopuses’ for reasons four and five are being arrogant. In addition, heraclitus says that since ‘octopus’ is a word coined by Carolus Linnaeus that there is no proper Greek or Latin plural since the word is neither Greek nor Latin (2010). They conclude, then, that the proper plural is ‘octopuses.’ However, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, octopus is derived “from Greek *oktopous*, literally “eight-footed,” from *okto* “eight” (see *eight*) + *pous* “foot” (see *foot* (n.))” (Harper 2014). In response to this blog, a commenter named Joe mentioned that ‘octopus’ is a Latinized word that he believed may have been assigned to the third declination of Latin, which would make ‘octopi’ correct. Another commenter, C. Guerra said that using ‘octopodes’ does not make one smug. She or he uses ‘octopodes’ since they like the way it sounds and it saves them from arguing with those who will correct ‘octopuses’ to ‘octopi.’ Another person said based on the evidence provided in the blog that ‘octopi’ must be the correct plural since Linnaeus must have invented it for use with Latin (heraclitus, comments 2010).

## Conclusion

In the end, people have a lot of different ideas about what the plural of octopus should be, and why. Many feel that ‘octopi’ and ‘octopodes’ are used by those who feel superior to others, while some would contend that with the beauty and formality of Latin or the historical basis for Greek. Whatever the reason, the word ‘octopus’ has begotten almost as many plural forms as legs. If, instead of trying to decide on one ‘correct’ form and forcing others to go along, people realized that there are thousands of different ways to say the same thing and that these ways are constantly changing there would be a lot less argument over a matter that seems rather odd to be arguing about in the first place. Besides, has anyone ever asked an octopus what it thinks?



## Data

**Table A:** Octopi, Octopuses, Octopodes Frequency for 1800-1900

Google books Ngram Viewer



**Table B:** Octopi, Octopuses, Octopodes Frequency for 1900-2000

Google books Ngram Viewer



**Table C**

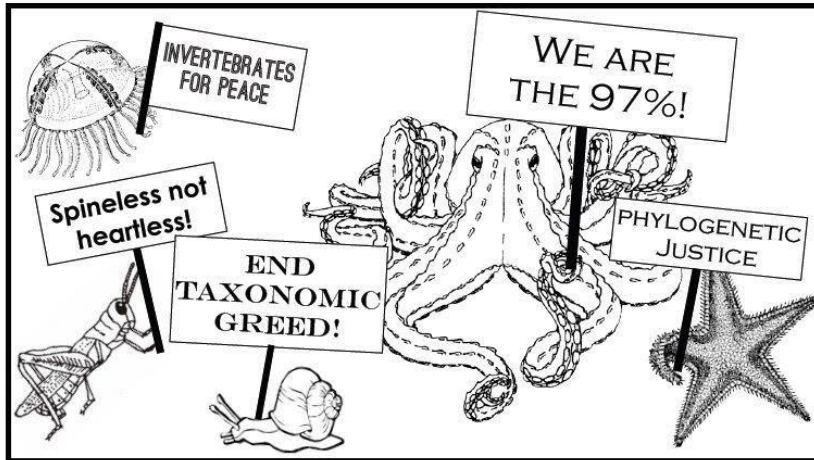
What is the plural of octopus?	What is your age?	Do you work/are majoring in a science related field?	Do you know Latin?	Do you know Greek?	How important is proper grammar to you?
Octopi	18-24	Yes	No	No	Somewhat
octopi	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
Octopi	18-24	No	No	No	Very
octopies	18-24	No	No	No	Somewhat
Octopuses	18-24	Yes	No	No	Somewhat
Octopuses	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
octopuses	25-34	Yes	Yes	No	Somewhat
octopus	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
octupusi	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
Octopi	18-24	No	No	No	Very
octopi	18-24	No	Yes	No	Somewhat
octopi	18-24	No	No	No	Very
octopi	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
Octopuses	18-24	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat

**Table D**

What is the plural of octopus?	What is your native language?	What is your age?	Do you work/are majoring in a science related field?	Do you know Latin?	Do you know Greek?	How important is proper grammar to you?
octopuses	french	25-34	No	No	No	Very
octopi	Russian	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
Octopuses	English	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
octopi	English	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
Octopuses	English	18-24	Yes	No	Yes	Somewhat
octopi	english	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
octopi	english	45-54	No	No	No	Very
octopuses	Dutch	18-24	No	No	No	Somewhat
Octopi	English	35-44	Yes	Yes	No	Very
octopuses	English	25-34	Yes	No	No	Very
octopi	English	18-24	Yes	No	No	Somewhat
Octopi	English	25-34	Yes	No	No	Very
Octipi	English	25-34	No	No	No	Somewhat
Octopi	English	18-24	No	No	No	Very
Octopi	English	18-24	No	No	No	Very
octopi	English	25-34	Yes	No	No	Somewhat
Octopuses or octopi; either is correct	English	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very
octopus	english	54+	No	No	No	Somewhat
Octopuses	English	18-24	Yes	No	No	Somewhat
octopi	English	18-24	No	No	No	Very
Octupi	English	35-44	No	No	No	Very
Octopi	English	45-54	Yes	Yes	No	Very
octopuses	english	54+	No	No	No	Somewhat
octopi	english	18-24	Yes	No	No	Very

Image A

# OCTOPI WALL STREET



Invertebrates are 97% of animal diversity!

(Dehavelle 2012)

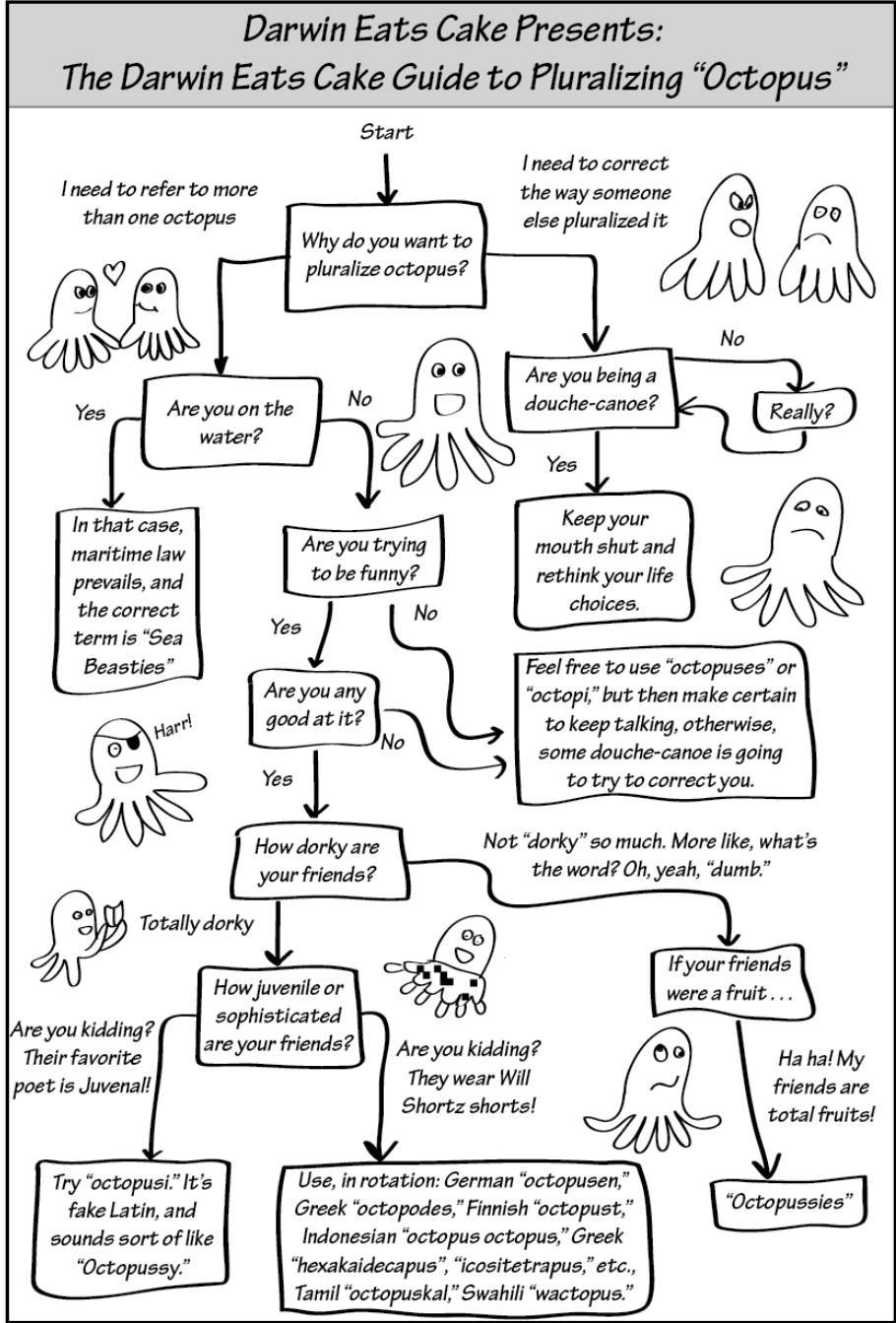
Image B



(ZeroGtees 2010)

Image C

Darwin Eats Cake



(cc) 2012 Jon Wilkins  
www.darwineatcake.com

(Wilkins 2012)

## References

- Bauer, Laurie, and Peter Trudgill. *Language Myths*. London: Penguin, 1998.
- Brewer, Ebenezer C. "Errors of Speech." *Etymological and Pronouncing Dictionary of Difficult Words*. Ward, Lock, 1882. 742.
- Coll. "Fictitious Latin Plurals." *Notes and Queries: A Medium of Intercommunication for Literary Men, General Readers Etc.* Oxford UP, 1904. 193.
- DeHavelle, Keith. "Octopi Wall Street." *DeHavelle.com*. Keith DeHavelle, 4 Oct. 2012. <<https://www.deepseanews.com/2011/11/octopi-wall-street/>>.
- Elster, Charles H. "Unknown." *Verbal Advantage: Ten Easy Steps to a Powerful Vocabulary*. Diversified, 2009. Not Numbered.
- Evans, James Allan. "VII." *Death in Pozzuoli*. S.I.: Trafford On Demand Pub, 2009. 53.
- Foster, Ruth. "Warm-Up 21: Surprise at the Necropsy." *Daily Warm-ups: Nonfiction Reading, Grade 5*. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Resources, 2011. 61.
- Haste, E. L., and H. D. Johnson. "Letters: Data/Datum." *New Scientist* 15 May 1958: 41.
- Heraclitus. "Will the real plural of "octopus" please stand up?" *Heraclitean River* RSS. WordPress, 4 Aug. 2010. <http://www.heracliteanriver.com/?p=240>
- Hinton, Sam. "Order Octopoda (Octopuses)." *Seashore Life of Southern California: An Introduction to the Animal Life of California Beaches South of Santa Barbara*. Los Angeles: U of California, 1987. 122.
- Housel, Debra J. "Plurals." *Laugh and Learn Grammar*. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Resources, 2007. 9.
- 石井, 隆之(Ishii, Takayuki). "その 5 FORM." *あなたの魅力を伝える面接の英語* (Lit. Convey Your Charm in English Interviews). 三修社, 2008. 174.
- Kingston, Anne. "Harrius Potter and the Latin Revival." *Maclean's.ca*. *Maclean's*, 4 May 2013. <http://www.macleans.ca/society/life/a-full-blown-latin-revival/>
- Library of Congress. "Chronicling America « Library of Congress." *News about Chronicling America* RSS. Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>>.
- Maron, Stephen F., and "Pedro" "The Hitchin' Rack." *Boy's Life* Apr. 1964: 4.
- Mather, Jennifer A., Roland C. Anderson, and James B. Wood. "Introduction: Meet the Octopus." *Octopus: The Ocean's Intelligent Invertebrate*. Portland, Or.: Timber, 2013. Not Numbered.
- Merriam-Webster. "Octopod." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster, 4 June 2014. See also comments section, Chester, Shelley. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/octopod>
- Microsoft. Microsoft Word. Vers. 2010. Redmond: Microsoft, 2010. Computer software.
- NEA Research. "The Benefits of Second Language Study: Research Findings with Citations." *Journal of Reading* 32.3 (1988): 230. Connecticut State Department of Education, Dec. 2007.
- Octopussy. Dir. John Glen. By George MacDonald Fraser, Richard Maibaum, and Michael G. Wilson. Prod. Michael G. Wilson. Perf. Roger Moore, Maud Adams, and Louis Jourdan. MGM, 1983. DVD.
- Orthodoxus, Philologus. "Correspondence." *Medical Press & Circular*. London: Medical Press & Circular, 1872. 106.
- Online Etymology Dictionary. <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php>>.

- Oxford English Dictionary. "Octopus, N." *Octopus, N.* Oxford English Dictionary, Mar. 2006.
- Press-Herald. "Rogueclassicism: Latin Revival in Maine." Web log post. *Rogueclassicism: Latin Revival in Maine*. David Meadows (Reblogged from Source), 1 May 2007. <http://www.atrium-media.com/rogueclassicism/Posts/00005958.html>
- Pridmore, Ben. "How to Calculate Square Roots." *How to Be Clever*. Lexington, KY: Lulu.com, 2013. 67.
- R.I.C. Publications. "Understanding and Choosing Words: Plurals." *Primary Grammar and Word Study: Ages 7-8*. Greenwood, W.A.: R.I.C Publications, 2008. 46.
- Schaeffer, John. "Chapter 7: His Father's Right Hand." *Devils' Tag*. Authorhouse, 2012. 29.
- Simpson, Ernest S., ed. (Oct) "The Wild Shrimp." *San Francisco Call* 5 Oct. 1908, Monday ed., Editorial Page sec.: 6. *Chronicling America*.
- Simpson, Ernest S., ed. (Nov) "Stuffed Horses and Octopi." *San Francisco Call* 27 Nov. 1908, Friday ed., Editorial Page sec.: 4.
- Smith, Benjamin E., ed. "O." *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*. Century, 1899. 4079.
- The Spelling Bee. "The Engine Works at Swindon." *Mill Hill Magazine, Conducted by the Mill Hill Boys* 1876: 172.
- Stamper, Kory. "Ask the Editor: Octopus." *Merriam-Webster*. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2voh0q>
- Wilkins, Jon. "How to Pluralize "Octopus"" *Darwin Eats Cake*. 2012. <<http://www.darwineatscake.com/?id=113>>.
- ZeroGtees. "Octopi by ZeroGtees." *CafePress*. CafePress, 28 Dec. 2010. <<https://www.cafepress.com/+octopi,498149607>>.



# Orgo

Emma Velasquez

Cite as: Velasquez, Emma. 2021. Orgo. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 229-237.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

To those studying the sciences, whether biological, chemical, and social, the word organic holds a connotation of life. In chemistry, organic compounds are “...the chemical basis for life itself. Proteins, carbohydrates, enzymes, and hormones are organic molecules... Organic chemistry is the study of hydrocarbons (compounds of carbon and hydrogen) and their derivatives” (Stoker, 2013). In biology, the organic is explained from a somatic point of view: “[carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen] constitute 96.3% of the weight of your body. The majority of molecules that make up your body are compounds of carbon, which we call organic compounds. The organic compounds contain primarily these four elements (CHON) [carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen], explaining their prevalence in living systems” (Raven, et. al., 2011). The chemical definition establishes ‘organic’ as a system made up of carbon and hydrogen. Biology constructs the body as ‘organic’ by defining the body as made up primarily of carbon and its compounds.

In the social sciences, organic has been used as an analogy to compare social structure to that of a living system. The sociologist Emile Durkheim’s ‘organic solidarity’ is the idea that “the unity of the (social) organism is as great as the individuation of the parts is more marked” (“organic analogy”, 1998). The anthropologist Herbert Spencer is famous for his ‘Organic Analogy’ that directly compares society with a living system and establishes society as a ‘social organism’. The analogy states that, through the process of differentiation of structure and function, societies become increasing complex and transition from being homogeneous to heterogeneous. Thus, members of society become more dependent upon others – as the stomach is dependent upon the hands and feet in procuring nutrition or the blood is dependent on the heart and veins to transport it.

I originally set out to explore how it is that a term with specific uses within mostly academic fields comes to be used as a casual descriptor. Specifically, how is it that a term heavily used across the sciences becomes so associated with a food and farming movement, as well as investigating the words most commonly associated to or collocated with organic in informal language (“new age”, “chemical”, “poison”, “nature”, “genetically modified”, “granola”, “granola girl”). I also had interest in coming to understand how ‘organic’ was used in conjunction with other words to modify their meaning as well as the metalinguistic information, values and intentions associated with it (i.e., organic friending, communication, and alarm clock: without the use of surrogate technology; organic backpacking: with spontaneity/without planning). I was soon drawn to the examination of regional uses of shorthand devices in the reference of ‘organic chemistry’ as a subfield of chemistry, for which there exists many subfields and subsequent short hands.

Through my research, I seek an understanding not only of the localities that employ one short hand use of the words over another, but how values and conceptions may shape those usages. Because the information I seek is most commonly communicated verbally, I rely heavily on Urban Dictionary as well as online forums. This presents a caveat in terms of research information because any primary research available done is informal – very informal in the case of Urban Dictionary. Please be advised that the sections of my work derived from Urban Dictionary contain language that is strong and

commonly regarded as problematic. Google Trends was used heavily to gauge the informal use of my terms of interest. My research focused on the use of three words: orgo, ochem, and organic.

Organic is an adjective that can be traced back to the fifteenth century as “an organ or instrument” from the Latin ‘organicus’ and “of or pertaining to an organ, serving as instruments or engines” from the Greek ‘organikos’, as well as ‘organon,’ “as an instrument” (Organic, Etymonline). The Oxford English Dictionary offers a robust definition of the word organic:

Field	Definition	Contextual citation (earliest, latest)
Medicine	Not psychogenic.	1706, 2003
Biology	Of, relating to, or derived from a living organism or organisms; having the characteristics of a living organism.	1670, 1984
	Belonging to the constitution of an organized whole; structural.	1880, 1993
	Of or relating to an organized structure compared to a living being.	
Law	Constitutive; that establishes or sets up; stating the formal constitution of a nation or other political entity.	1831, 1995
Economics	The organic composition of capital	1877, 1991
Architecture	Designating a style which attempts to make a unity of a building and its setting and environment.	1896, 1999
Business	Designating expansion generated by a company's own resources, as opposed to that resulting from the acquisition of other companies.	1923, 2000
Chemistry	Of, relating to, or designating any compounds of carbon, whether of biological or non-biological origin.	1822, 2000
	Of, relating to, or derived from living matter.	
Fertilizer, manure	Produced from natural substances, usually without the addition of chemicals. Also designating a farmer or gardener utilizing such a method, or a farm on which the method is employed.	1861, 1990
Farming, gardening	Using no chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or other artificial chemicals.	1942, 2001
Food	Produced without the use of artificial fertilizers, pesticides, or other artificial chemicals.	1960. 2002
'organic world'	the animal and vegetable kingdoms in combination; living things collectively; nature	1784, 2008

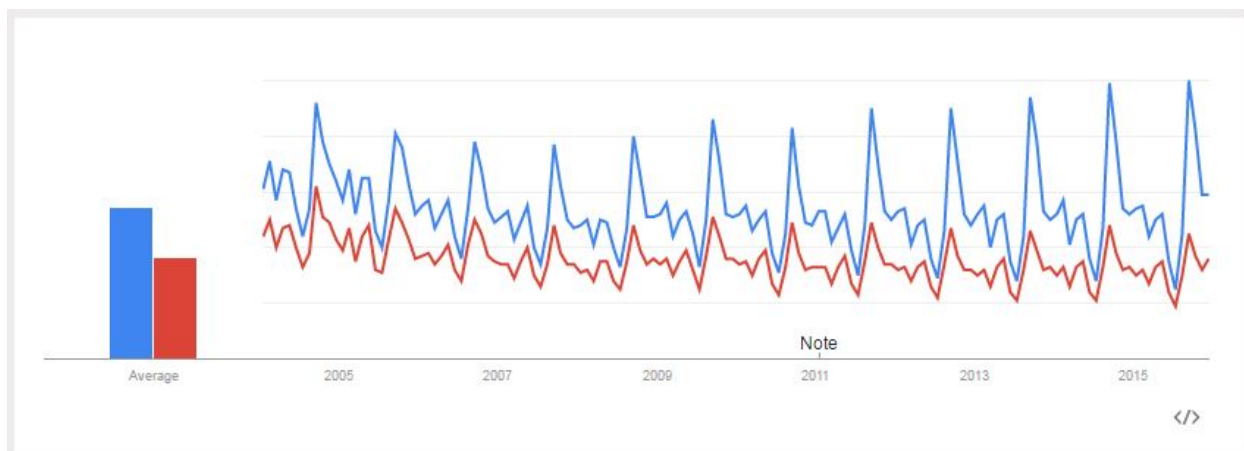
**Table 1: Table of currently used definitions of organic. (Organic, 2004)**

Through the data in Table 1, one observes that the term has been applied to a wide spectrum of disciplines and in variable ways. It is in the fact of its versatility that my interest lies.

Although organic chemistry is a professional subfield of chemistry, search results for ‘organic’ and ‘organic chemistry’ correlate with other search terms associated with tertiary education such as ‘university’, ‘university of’, and ‘American Chemical Society’. The significance of the American Chemical Society as a search term originates in the Society provided final exam of many organic

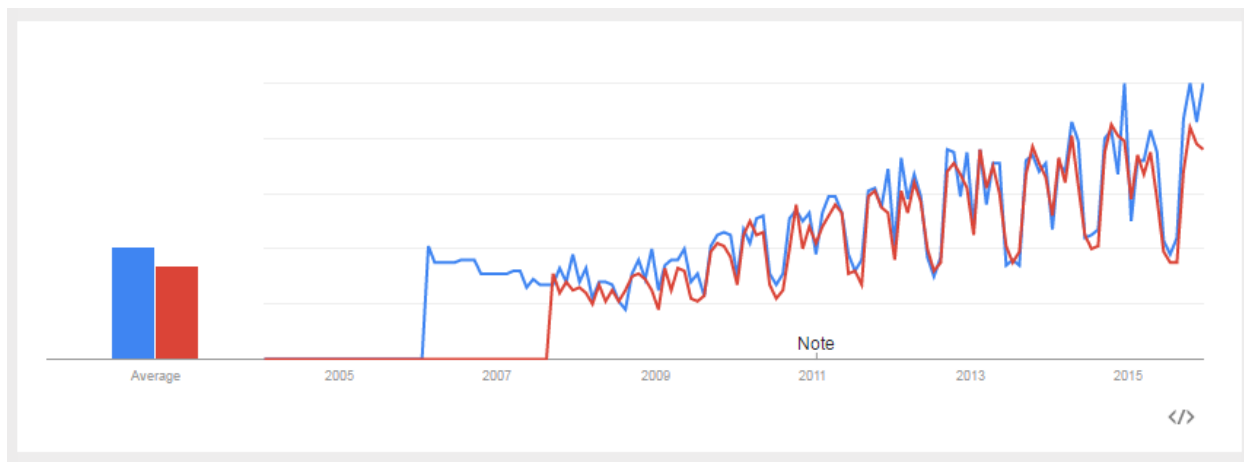
chemistry courses in college and university settings. Upon passing the exam, a student is considered by the Society to be qualified for professional work within the field.

The date in Graph 1 illustrates the correlation between the crests and troughs of the four search terms. Most visible in blue, the search terms crest consistently in September, drop and plateau until January, drop again, then rise once more in May, then trough in July. The trend of organic chemistry searches correlates with the academic calendars of most tertiary education institutions.



**Graph 1: Descending: Organic, blue; Organic chemistry, red. Data Source: Google Trends ([www.google.com/trends](http://www.google.com/trends)).**

An interesting trend in the use of shorthand in referring to the course itself emerged from the data. It appears as though the short hands 'orgo', 'ochem', and 'organic' are regionally distinguishable, although their use is nearly identical in terms of search prevalence, with exception to 'organic'.



**Graph 2: Orgo, blue; ochem, red. Web Search, United States, 2004-present, All Categories. Data Source: Google Trends ([www.google.com/trends](http://www.google.com/trends)).**

Turning to data from Urban Dictionary, users of both terms define it by both the level of difficulty as an object of education, as well as the regional differences. An observable trend within the definitions is the trope of regional supremacy and socioeconomic stratification.

Orgo (Top Definition, November 16, 2011, submitted by "Omniscient Dumb Fuck")  
Short hand for "organic chemistry."

An extremely difficult course that one takes, usually during the second year of college for prospective Pre-Med students. It is associated as a "weeder" class for hopeful students, as many people drop the class before they complete it.

"Holy fuck man, I don't get any of this orgo stuff at all."

"Yeah, ikr?"

"I want to drop this class, but I don't wanna look like a fucking retard. What should I do?"

"Idk man. Idk." (Orgo, 2011)

Ochem (Top Definition, April 6, 2009, submitted by "Clyde George")

The second worst course in chemistry only to biochem. Full of lots of useless chemical reactions focusing on carbon containing compounds and making new carbon carbon bonds! Beware of gay professors that try to make retarded jokes to ease your pain!

Matt: That ochem exam was brutal

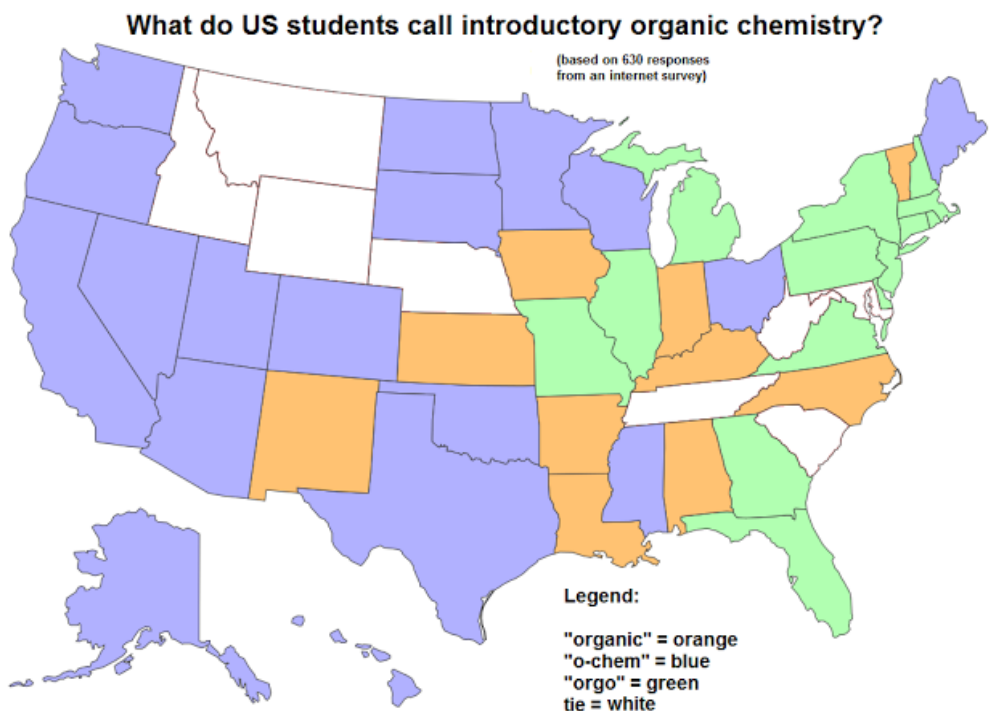
Tim: I know the class average was 67% (Ochem, 2009)

Data from Student Doctor Network forum as well as the blog Chemjobber indicates that there exists another shorthand for 'organic chemistry':

Majority of East Coast people say it's "Orgo"

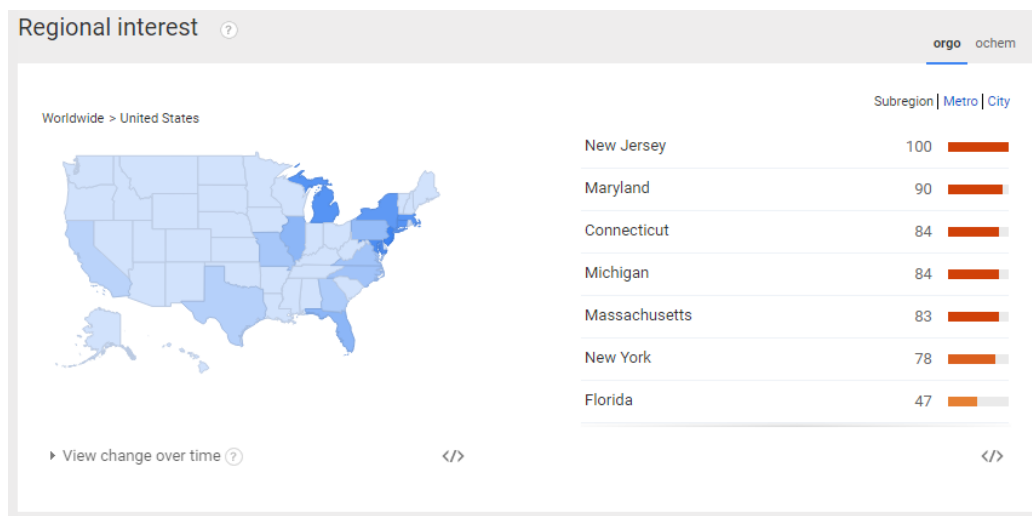
Majority of West Coast people say it's "O-chem"

Majority of Central people say it's "organic." (Bear, 2002).

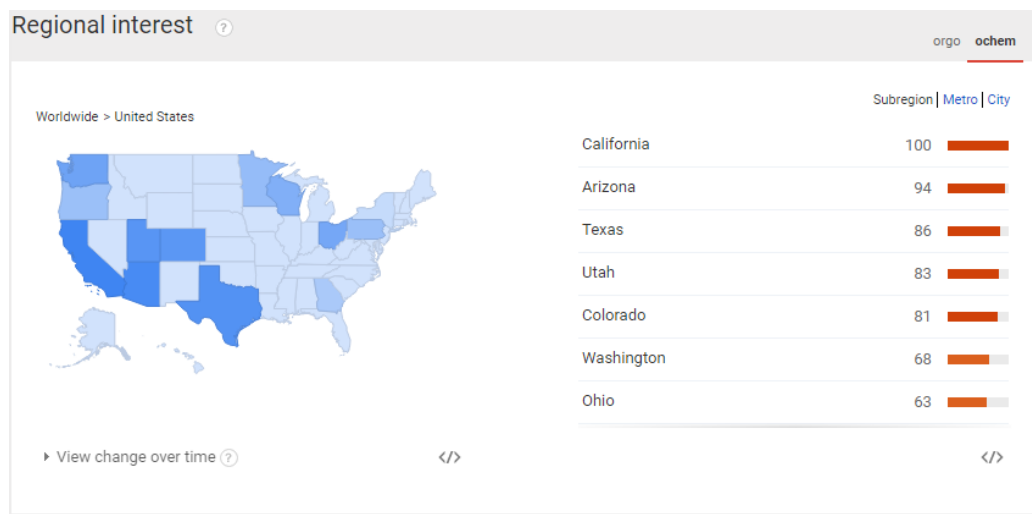


**Figure 1: What do US students call introductory organic chemistry? (Chemjobber, 2013)**

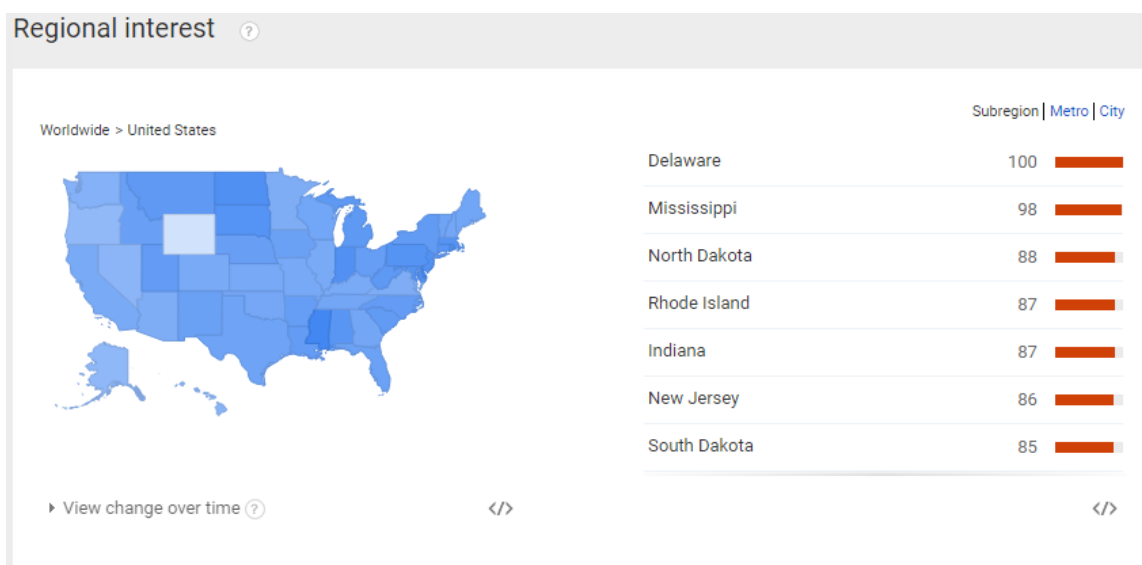
One poll (Figure 1), found on the Chemjobber blog, substantiates the information. The information seems to match the information collected through Google Trends, with 'orgo' more common in the Northeast, Michigan, Illinois, Missouri, Georgia, Florida, and Virginia (See Figure 2), and 'ochem' more common in the West, Southwest, North Central, as well as Ohio and Mississippi (See Figure 3). Because of the ambiguity of the word and its subsequent widespread searches, I am unable to verify whether 'organic' is a well-used shorthand. However, the Chemjobber poll indicates that the country is scattered with organic-preferring states everywhere except the west. States using 'organic' include New Mexico, Kansas, Iowa, Arkansas, Louisiana, Indiana, Kentucky, Alabama, North Carolina, and Vermont (Chemjobber, 2013).



**Figure 2: Regional interest, orgo. Web Search, United States, 2004-present, All Categories. Source: Google Trends (www.google.com/trends)**



**Figure 3: Regional interest, ochem. Web Search, United States, 2004-present, All Categories. Data Source: Google Trends (www.google.com/trends)**



**Figure 4: Regional interest, organic. Web Search, United states, 2004- present, category: chemistry. Data Source: Google Trends ([www.google.com/trends](http://www.google.com/trends))**

In my investigation of social features relating to the contracted forms, I have been unsuccessful in establishing causality. There exist more negative comments about orgo than about ochem, which may be an indication of regional hostility or a reflection of a larger population using ochem rather than orgo. Another possibility, as reflected in the two definitions of orgo below, is that orgo is viewed as an elitist term used by those in higher socioeconomic strata, a reflection of the density of Ivy League Schools in the Eastern United States. However, these hypotheses are just that, hypotheses. Further research is required to substantiate any of the hypotheses I have presented.

Ochem (April 25, 2009, Submitted by "bchonchon")

A retarded abbreviation of organic chemistry. Trumped by the much more common "orgo" abbreviation.

Person 1: What're you taking next semester?

Person 2: OChem and some other shit.

Person 1: It's called orgo, bitch. (Ochem, 2009)

Orgo (April 11, 2011, Submitted by "The Boomhower")

Sometimes referred to as ochem by holier than thou west coast students when referring to organic chemistry.

I can't go surfing dude! I have to study for my orgo exam tomorrow.

Orgo (October 12, 2010, Submitted by "relaxin")

A term for "organic chemistry" that stuck up rich ass east coast students use because apparently the east coast is too good for conventional usage of abbreviations. Many east coast students like to call it a "weeder" class for premed students, but on the west coast, pre-med students know better than to be discouraged by a single class, so such a trend does not exist.

East coast student: "Hey what do you think of orgo?"



West coast student: "Sorry, we only speak English over here. I don't know about any orgo, but ochem is a pretty good class to take."

East coast student: "Hey what do you think of orgo?"

West coast student: "Sorry, we only speak English over here. I don't know about any orgo, but ochem is a pretty good class to take."

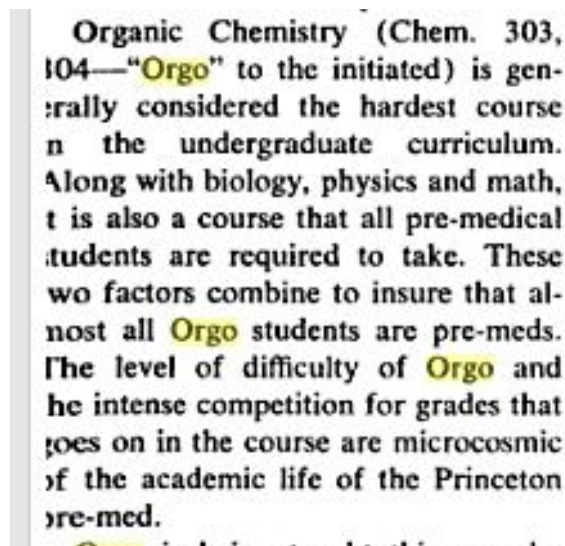
Orgo (January 16, 2006, Submitted by "NUndergrad")

Abbreviation for "Organic" in the context of organic chemistry - regarded as among the simplest of many upper-level ivy-league chemistry sequences. Also commonly employed as a weed-out class for premedical students. However, the material is simple, and the tests are easy. Especially lab commandant's Parr-Hydrogenation tests.

Dude, that orgo final was mad easy. (Orgo, 2011)

Graph 2 is peculiar in that its results abruptly begin in February of 2006 for orgo and September of 2007 for ochem. Google offers no explanation for the results. However, turning to Google Search and Google Books with specified dates yielded results that antedate the data found in Graph 2. It was discovered that "org." was used as an abbreviation of "organic" in the 1960s (Gilbertson, 1967) (Raphael, 1965). "Biochem." was used as an abbreviation of "biochemistry" in the 1980s (Harborne, 1986), and "chem." was used as an abbreviation of "chemistry" in the 1950s (Popular Mechanics, 1954). These are important because "biochem" and "chem" are accepted shortenings today, differentiated from their 1986 and 1954 counterparts by the absence of a following period. This finding leads me to hypothesize that "org." also lost its period and gained the ending "o".

The earliest evidence of the shorthand's existence is from the Princeton Alumni Weekly, "An editorially independent magazine by alumni for alumni since 1900" (Swanson, 1973). In its text, organic chemistry was being discussed using "orgo."



**Organic Chemistry** (Chem. 303, 104—"Orgo" to the initiated) is generally considered the hardest course in the undergraduate curriculum. Along with biology, physics and math, it is also a course that all pre-medical students are required to take. These two factors combine to insure that almost all **Orgo** students are pre-meds. The level of difficulty of **Orgo** and the intense competition for grades that goes on in the course are microcosmic of the academic life of the Princeton pre-med.

**Figure 5: excerpt, Princeton Alumni Weekly, 1973, On The Campus, Brad Swanson**

A number of online resources were available demonstrating the use of the word orgo including "Your Guide to Dartmouth Slang" (The Dartmouth, 1999), "Students pick toughest classes" ("students pick toughest classes," 1998), and a comic strip titled "Orgo Professor" (Mason).



Figure 6: "Orgo Professor" by Porter Mason, 1997 (Mason).

There exist far fewer examples of printed "ochem.", however, like "chem" and "biochem", "ochem." has been used as an abbreviated version of "ochem" (Dabbs & Walter, 1961), although the only instance of use found was from 1960 in the proceedings of a conference on Semiconductor Nuclear Particle Detectors. The only other printed document found containing ochem is the MCAT Organic Chemistry Review by The Princeton Review.

### Reading an O-Chem Passage

You should never really *read* much of the text of an O-Chem passage, but rather, just skim through the text. Remember that most of the important information you'll use from an O-Chem passage will be in the form of the structures and data presented. O-Chem passage-based questions are often

Figure 7: excerpt, 2015 MCAT Organic Chemistry Review, The Princeton Review. (Princeton Review, 2015).

### References

- Bear, Y. (2002, February 27). Did you take "Organic", "Ochem", or "Orgo" Poll II: East/West Coast T. <http://forums.studentdoctor.net/threads/did-you-take-organic-ochem-or-orgo-poll-ii-east-west-coast-t.9703/>
- Dabbs, J. & F. Walter (Eds.). (1961). Proceedings, Semiconductor nuclear particle detectors (p. 163). Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council.
- Google Trends ([www.google.com/trends](http://www.google.com/trends))
- Gordon Marshall. "organic analogy." A Dictionary of Sociology. 1998. Encyclopedia.com: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/organic-analogy>
- International Correspondence Schools. (1954, November 1). Popular Mechanics, 9.
- Mason, P. Comic strips about Duke University in the 1990s. <http://portermason.com/johnny/1997/04/10/orgo-professor/>
- "Orgo" [Def. 1, 3, 5, 6]. (November 16, 2011). In Urban Dictionary. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=orgo>
- "Ochem" [Def. 1, 2]. (April 25, 2009). In Urban Dictionary. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Ochem>

- “Organic” [Def. 1-8]. (September 2004). In OED Online. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/132431?redirectedFrom=organic#eid>
- “Organic” [Def. 1]. In Etymonline. Online Etymology Dictionary.  
[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=organic&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=organic&allowed_in_frame=0)
- Organic Chemistry Strategy for the MCAT. (2015). In MCAT organic chemistry review: For MCAT 2015. Princeton Review.
- Raphael, R. (1965). *Advances in Organic Chemistry*, 289-289.
- Raven, P., Mason, K., Losos, J., Singer, S., & Johnson, G. (2011). *The Nature of Molecules and the Properties of Water In Biology* (9th ed., pp. 22-23). New York, New York: McGraw- Hill.
- Harborne, J. (Ed.) (1986). *The Flavonoids Advances in Research Since 1986*. New York, New York: Chapman & Hall/CRC.
- Stoker, H. (2013). Saturated Hydrocarbons. In *General, Organic, and Biological Chemistry* (Sixth ed., pp. 342-343). Mason, Ohio: Cengage Learning.
- Students pick toughest classes. (1998, September 17). <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/1998-09-17/latest-news/students-pick-toughest-classes>
- Swanson, B. (1973, September 25). *On The Campus*. Princeton Alumni Weekly.
- What do US students call introductory organic chemistry? (2013, November 19).  
<http://chemjobber.blogspot.com/search?q=surveymonkey>
- Your guide to Dartmouth slang. (1999, August 1).  
<https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/1999/08/your-guide-to-dartmouth-slang>

# Penultimate

Asa Choate

Cite as: Choate, Asa. 2021. Penultimate. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 238-243.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The useful, yet not used enough, word *penultimate* has retained the essence of its definition throughout the course of its life, from its Latin roots and to modern day, signifying that which appears next-to-last in a sequence. “Penultimate” is not particularly well-known throughout all of the English-speaking world, as demonstrated in FlytimeTV’s video on “Penultimate”. The video is a bit biased toward black, non-native English speakers, but it shows that those who study English as a secondary language are not taught the word due to its lack of popularity. Most of the subjects were wrong in their definitions, and some even had a difficult time pronouncing it (FlytimeTV: Word of the Day ‘Penultimate,’ 2012). Google Ngram Viewer is a useful language tool that allows one to see the historical trends of a word or a group of words from all forms of literature and non-fiction. This tool shows that “penultimate” follows a fairly steady usage cycle in written works from 1800 until around 1920, where it starts becoming more commonplace as shown in Table 1. It becomes more popular during this time period partly due to the growth in language study starting in the 1920s, specifically surrounding languages that had never been written down, where use of “penultimate” was required to describe the stressed ‘second-to-last’ syllable in certain languages. Though this word is primarily used correctly by many of its users, there are those who are unaware that this word is not a synonym to the more popular *ultimate*. By the early 2000s, this incorrect interchange between the two words has become more prevalent in both spoken and written language. “Penultimate” is an excellent word with a single purpose, but is it actively undergoing a semantic shift? It is, and it is causing a stir among those who feel that it is a perfectly good word and should retain its definition.



Table 1

“Penultimate” has roots that extends back to Latin, and it has maintained its integrity throughout the centuries in other Romance languages and English. In French, the word is *pénultième*, and Spanish it is *penúltima*. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), a useful resource for viewing the history of a word throughout its time, in addition to its etymology and current usage, informs us that ‘penultimate’ is modelled off of Latin’s *paenultimus*. Its root, ‘ultimate,’ comes from Latin’s *ultimus* and *ultimare*,

which both mean “last” or “final.” Then there is the suffix ‘pen-,’ which is a derivative of *paen-* coming from Latin’s *paene* meaning “nearly” or “almost.” “Penultimate”, therefore, means “almost last,” or in common parlance, “next-to-last” or “second-to-last.” For several centuries, “penultimate” has sat as the penult in a sequential series of words, which include ultimate in the final position, and preceded by antepenultimate, and even preantepenultimate to describe something’s location from the end.

According to the OED, “penultimate” served to describe “the last day but one of a month,” but it is most commonly used in regard to the second-to-last syllable of a word or piece of metrical writing (Penultimate, Oxford English Dictionary). It has also been used as a term in mathematics to describe a member in a family of curves, or as the lowest card but one of a suit. In these other cases, the meaning still indicates that there is something further in the sequence. If this word has grasped essentially the same meaning since its conception into the English language, what is happening right now that is causing people to misuse it? How does the perfectly fine “penultimate” fall victim to a semantic shift causing it to become synonymous or even better than “ultimate?”

“These two words aren’t intended to be interchangeable,” writes Lauren of the blog *The Common Parlance*, “as much as they are misused that way” (2007) referring to the similarity between “penultimate” and “ultimate”. The use of “penultimate” indicates that there is still something more in the series, but many who do not know the definition of the word believe it synonymous only due to the presence of the root. “Ultimate” has its very own disparate definitions that cannot be covered by “penultimate”. Even though “ultimate” has undergone its own semantic shift, this shift was not as far a stretch. The OED for the word “ultimate” shows that the written works between 1600 and 1700 written started using different versions of the word. Instead of solidly clinging to its “last” definition, it was able to adopt forms along the lines of “the final result, the conclusion, the final step” or more relevantly, “the best that can be achieved or imagined” (Ultimate, Oxford English Dictionary, B. 1). An example, written in 1794 shows the use of being the last step, “A proper fulminating composition, which seems to be the ultimate to which we may proceed.” (Hutton, 211, 1794) In 1958, “The Central Hotel...advertised as the ultimate in gaiety and chic,” is an example of ultimate’s shift into being the best (Perelman, 1958, 343). Ultimate itself became more than just the sequential word, indicating something higher and unattainable by normal or simple means.

Undergoing a similar semantic shift would permit “penultimate” to both follow the same trend and retain some semblance of its original definition. It is not at all illogical to indicate that something is *almost* the best thing possible. We could have a sentence like, “My sports car is the *penultimate* choice, save for the *ultimate* Italian sports car.” Unfortunately for those who resist language change, “penultimate” is not following this pattern and is being thrown in the same boat with “final”, “best”, and words with similar connotations, despite its purpose in another sense. There is something else at play keeping the word on the path it is currently travelling.

Who is using this word incorrectly and pushing it toward its new meaning? Those who are mostly descriptivist, meaning they have a more progressive and understanding mindset in comparison to a prescriptivist, yet they still critique the incorrect word use, add their opinions and analyses of the word’s shift. “The Language Lady,” as she dubbed herself, mentions in her blogpost “The Penultimate” (2011), that the people most likely to misuse are the more educated trying to sound more intelligent by using grand vocabulary that they actually do not know. Rather, people who do not know what the word means, but know that the word exists. This shift does not appear to be a world-wide phenomenon, as romance languages also have their derivations of the word. Parisian French *ultime* does not mean “best,” only “last” or some similar version as it once did in English (“English Words and nuances). Students who are learning Spanish all know that most words are often “stressed on the *penúltima* syllable,” making it unlikely that they would be mixing up their vocabulary in the way English speakers do (The Language Lady, 2011). She also writes that she doesn’t like about the word is that “it sounds so fancy but doesn’t mean anything fancy at all,” thus it would become uplifting if the perceived definition were the real one. “Penultimate”, according to this blogger, emphasizes that which cannot

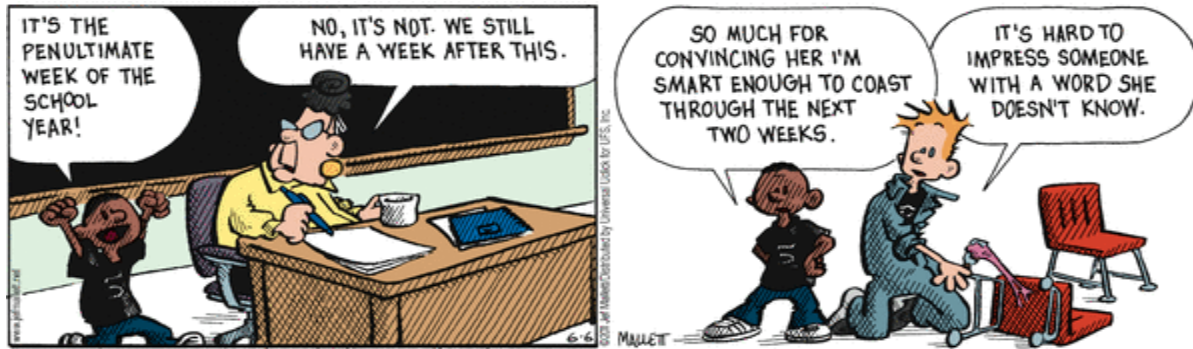
only be described with ultimate, or any other word for that matter (The Language Lady, 2011). It is sought after only because of how it sounds and because there is a prefix added onto the word that makes it slightly different than ultimate.

Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster Editor at Large, is the center of a series of videos in a series called *Ask the Editor*, where he details different aspects of words as he sees them. He is another descriptivist, as he does not correct incorrect language use, but follows and instructs on it. Part of the video focuses on his view that people should find a different word to use other than “penultimate” when we want to describe something higher than ultimate. Words like “extraordinary” or “utmost” would serve much better in place of a semantically altered “penultimate” who is trying to fulfill a role it should not have to (Sokolowski, 2010). Another relatively descriptivist definition found on Urban Dictionary, a repository of the modern usage of vocabulary and slang phrases, describes that the street use of “penultimate” “takes on the meaning ‘second to none’ or simply used to describe something utterly appeasing. It is easy to get away with using this word because of [its] confusion with “ultimate” by those who don’t know any better.” (Patrick, 2004, Urban Dictionary) These words are being used interchangeably, which will also be attributed to “penultimate’s” slow shift toward synonymy with ultimate.

In opposition to the relatively descriptivist point of views already brought up, there are plenty of prescriptivists who have taken arms against this erroneous use and strive to prove that “penultimate” must remain where it is, for its roots do not allow for horizontal movement. On the website for About Education, the grammar and composition expert Richard Nordquist argues that these two words have definitions that are close in meaning, but that does *not* make them synonymous (Nordquist, 2016). *The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style* says that “penultimate” is sometimes mistakenly used where *ultimate* is called for, “especially when meaning ‘representing or exhibiting the greatest possible development or sophistication’” (2005, 372). Additionally, the book also adds that many who use it in this way confuse the prefix ‘pen’ as an “intensifier of the word *ultimate*.” “Ultimate” already serves to describe something that is beyond compare, but people are prone to exaggeration, even when it is about something that is already exaggerated to the fullest extent possible. The prefix “pen” in English is incredibly rare, showing up only with the two words *peninsula* and *penumbra*. This suggests that the Latin meaning of the prefix is not widespread knowledge, allowing for people to interpret it as they see fit.

Nancy Friedman suggests that people using prefixes as intensifiers, despite its true function, may be attempting to make them sound more intelligent or that the word itself sounds more legitimate with the extra syllable (Friedman). Finally, the section ends with the writer adding, “People who know the correct meaning of *penultimate* reject its use as a synonym of *ultimate* and may be disposed to view the speaker or writer as ignorant or even pretentious”. Direct and to the point, Kate Burridge writes in *Gift of the Gob: Morsels of English Language History*, “Something cannot be *more* ultimate than something else”. Burridge adds that “penultimate” is being used for this purpose, with this new usage taking it to mean something “beyond all other,” and that it is best described as a malapropism, occurring when a word is used incorrectly due to similar pronunciation (Burridge, 2011). Following is a four-day series of comics written by Jef Mallett that uses “penultimate” in this way. It portrays a teacher who does not appear to understand that “penultimate” means “next-to-last” and proceeds to correct a student who uses it correctly. It is later discovered that she does understand, but she is one who likes to see language change happen, perhaps to downplay her mistake.





Mallett, Jef, "Frazz," <http://www.gocomics.com/frazz/2011/06/06>



Mallett, Jef, "Frazz," <http://www.gocomics.com/frazz/2011/06/07>



Mallett, Jef, "Frazz," <http://www.gocomics.com/frazz/2011/06/08>



Mallett, Jef, "Frazz," <http://www.gocomics.com/frazz/2011/06/09>

In writing, especially prose, it can sometimes be difficult to ascertain whether or not the word is used correctly. There are cases where the word, not understood or known by non-native English speakers or languages that are Latin-based, may not grasp the difference between the two. Prose also has an ambiguous aspect where the reader has to read between the lines to understand what is happening. In the translated work “Task and Realization” originally written in Russian by V.S. Yanovsky and translated to English by his wife, Isabella, there appears to be an incorrect use of “penultimate”. “Of course, the possibility of his father’s death had also occurred to him: then only, he thought, complete, penultimate loneliness would set in” (Yanovsky, 2016, 79). Since the word “complete” is used here, it would indicate that anything further is impossible, the feeling of loneliness fully present, thus the usage of “penultimate” is not dictionary-approved. It is possible that, in this case, in translating the work, Isabella meant “ultimate”, but thought as many others do and used “penultimate” in this context.

There are those other times, when the new use is apparent, especially when Krista Vernoff admits to it in her book *The Game On! Diet*, saying, “The concert was awesome. It was, like, the penultimate entertainment!” Upon discovery from her instructor that “penultimate” does not mean “super-ultimate,” she realizes her mistake and is mortified (2009). In this example, she is corrected and learns the real definition of the word. Going back to “The Language Lady’s” “The Penultimate,” there are several different real-life examples of penultimate being misused. For example, in an advertisement made by the San Francisco Symphony regarding Mozart, the marketing department wrote, “...the final—and perhaps penultimate—symphony he produced” (The Language Lady, 2011). The group did not mean that this was his second-to-last symphony, rather that it was the greatest, above reproach, reaching divine status. In the same article, she writes of an Australian newscaster saying, “AMP clears penultimate hurdle to buy AXA AP,” and it is explained that the newscaster meant ‘final’ in this scenario, as the corporation had taken over this other company. This is another instance of “penultimate” being used as a synonym for “ultimate” or “final” (The Language Lady, 2011).

In researching the use of “penultimate”, there were several examples that showed that, despite the fact that this word is semantically changing, many people still hold onto the original definition. In the children’s book series, Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the twelfth book is titled, *The Penultimate Peril*, as it is the next-to-last book. There are several uses of the word, for example, “...but usually the denouement of a story is not the last event in the heroes’ lives, or the last trouble that befalls them. It is often the second-to-last event, or the penultimate peril” (Snicket, 2005, 54). An article titled, “Allman Brothers Band Play Penultimate Show of Career” talks about how they group recently played their next-to-last show and would be playing their final show (Bernstein, 2014). There are books and sentences all over that portray more correct usage of “penultimate” than the incorrect.

The word “penultimate” is certainly undergoing a semantic shift in certain circles, but it is still a slow change. It is still a word rarely used in both speech and writing, and thus the majority of the English-speaking world does not know that it exists. It appears that the people who continue to use the word in its new sense have not been informed that it is new or incorrect, as suggested by Merriam-Webster’s Peter Sokolowski, or they do not care, as demonstrated by Mallett’s comic, which allows for this word’s usage to spread. Certain groups of people believe that this word should definitely retain its definition, for that is the purpose for which it was created. Others believe that it is acceptable for this word to change, despite what it has traditionally meant.

## References

Bernstein, Scott. "Allman Brothers Band Play Penultimate Show Of Career." JamBase. JamBase, 28 Oct. 2014.

Burridge, Kate. *Gift of the Gob: Morsels of English Language History*. Pymble, N.S.W.: ABC, 2010.

"English Words and Nuances That Don't Exist in French." Eupedia. Eupedia.org.

FlytimeTV: Word of the Day 'Penultimate' Perf. Lolo1. Youtube. FlytimeTV, 28 Sept. 2012.

Friedman, Nancy. "The Prefix Perplex." Web log post. Fritinancy. Typepad, 12 May 2012.

Hutton, James. *A Dissertation upon the Philosophy of Light, Heat, and Fire*. Edinburgh: Cadell, Junior, Davies, 1794.

Newmeyer, Frederick. "Linguistic Society of America." *The History of Modern Linguistics | Linguistic Society of America*. Linguistic Society of America.

Nordquist, Richard. "What's the Difference Between the Words Ultimate and Penultimate?" *About Education*. About.com.

"Penultimate." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford English Dictionary.

"Ultimate." Def. B. 1. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford English Dictionary.

Patrick. "Penultimate." *Urban Dictionary*. Urban Dictionary, 6 Jan. 2004.

Penultimate - Merriam-Webster Ask the Editor. Dir. Peter Sokolowski. Perf. Peter Sokolowski. Youtube. Merriam-Webster, 4 June 2010.

Perelman, S. J. *The Most of S.J. Perelman*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958.

Snicket, Lemony, and Brett Helquist. *The Penultimate Peril*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

*The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

The Language Lady. "The Penultimate." *The Language Lady*. Blogspot.com, 28 Aug. 2011.

Lauren. "Ultimate; Penultimate." Blog post. *The Common Parlance*. Blogspot.com, 30 Dec. 2007.

Vernoff, Krista, and Az Ferguson. *The Game On! Diet: Kick Your Friend's Butt While Shrinking Your Own*. New York: Harper, 2009.

Yanovsky, V. S., and Isabella L. Yanovsky. "Task and Realization." *The Iowa Review* 42.1 (2016): 75-81.

# Pow

Justin Williams

Cite as: Williams, Justin. 2021. Pow. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 244-248.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Pow! What happens when you hear ‘Pow’ used in a sentence or used to express a situation? How does the word ‘Pow’ stimulate the core five senses which is hearing, sight, smell, touch, and even taste? When someone says, “and the bomb went POW!” you can visualize what that looks like with the upmost detail or when someone says, “wow that sour candy adds a strong POW! sensation to my taste buds” and you can instantly think about what a ‘Pow’ would feel like on your tongue. Everyone has heard sound words in their life at one point or another and ‘Pow’ can be argued to be the most popular form of this category of sound words, also known as Onomatopoeia. But one question remains, why is onomatopoeic words so important in the English Language, and how does these sound words help in expressing ourselves in ways that no other word choice can? The goal of this paper is to explore why the onomatopoeic word ‘Pow’ became popular in post 1950s contemporary American media, literature, and common everyday speech, and how other forms of onomatopoeia that are directly linked to ‘Pow’ arose during this period, such as “Boom!”, “Blam!”, and “Wham!”

## The Meaning of Pow!

The word ‘Pow’ is defined as an interjection “representing the sound of a blow, punch, shot, etc.: ‘Wham!’, ‘Bang!’ Also, figurative. Also, as noun” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. This definition for ‘Pow’ as an interjection was last updated by the OED in its third edition, in December of 2006. According to the OED ‘Pow’ has a band level of 3 out of 8 for word usage, which gives it a 37.5% chance of being said in everyday speech, literature, media, or any other forms of communication. It should be noted that ‘Pow’ has other meaning in English that isn’t as common or as known as the injection of the word. These variations are ‘Pow’ as a noun and the first recorded usage of the word was in the year 1481. The term’s meaning in 1481 was used to define “a slow-moving ditch like rivulet, esp. in a stretch of alluvial lowland beside a river; a small creek where such a rivulet falls into a river or estuary, serving as a dock or wharf for small vessels”. Its origin is perhaps from either a variant or alteration of another lexical item, or a borrowing from Scottish Gaelic, according to the OED.



Another variation is in the form of an acronym spelled as P.O.W which stands for ‘prisoner of war’, it should be noted that this is only included because of its similar spelling to ‘Pow’ the word and nothing more. Also, the same can be said for ‘POW’ another acronym meaning the “prince of wales” which was common for the people of England after 1916. It can be safe to say that, yes, the Scottish version of ‘Pow’ is the earliest recorded meaning of ‘Pow’ which essentially means a small body of water, but it can be argued that this is only a regional term used by the Scottish people to describe a certain thing. There are no instances that ‘Pow’ was used to define a steam or ditch of water in other dialects of English. Which raises the question of how did a Scottish word for steam became an onomatopoeic word later in its history?

The instance of ‘Pow’ being used in written speech as a sound word is recorded in “*Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen*” (1897), what was written is the following quote from a passage in the philological journal, “I will knocke..powe! ho? who is in the house?” (OED, 2019). Notice how “powe”



was used as a sound and action type word, showing power and force within the context of the situation. The word 'Power' is another theory that can explain where 'Pow' comes from. 'Pow' is just power without the -er added at the end, the definition of 'power' in verb tense "to make powerful, empower, strengthen" or in terms of intransitive "to move or travel with great speed or force" (OED, 2019), my theory is that 'Pow' came to its modern version from power itself to express great force relating to something else.

Now, let's discuss the meaning of the word as a form of Onomatopoeia. 'Pow' is closely linked to onomatopoeic sounds in the English language and would be hard to discuss without defining what onomatopoeia is and why it's important to this word and the English language. The meaning of onomatopoeia according to the OED is the following, "the formation of a word from a sound associated with the thing or action being named; the formation of words imitative of sounds. Occasionally: the fact or quality of being onomatopoeic". Onomatopoeia comes from the Greek language ὀνοματοποιία; ὄνομα for "name" and ποιέω for "I make". It creates a sound effect that mimics the thing described, making the description more expressive and interesting (literary devices, "Onomatopoeia"). For example, a group of words reflecting different sounds of water are "plop", "splash", "gush", "sprinkle", "drizzle", and "drip" according to literary devices. These words not only help convey meaning but also helps in creating a visual expression of what's happening in the real world, the striking difference between "the water dropped on the floor" (which let's be honest is extremely boring) and "the water SPLASHED all over the floor" shows how important onomatopoeia is towards examining and emphasizing a situation.

In addition to the sounds they represent, many onomatopoeic words have developed meanings of their own (Literary devices, Onomatopoeia). For example, the word "whisper" not only represents the wispy or breathy sound of people talking quietly, but also describes the action of people talking quietly according to Literary Devices. This is an excellent example of how words can have different meanings and how these words give an extra 'POW' (if I may), to the sentence or phrase. Another section of onomatopoeia is animal noises that helps us express the natural world around us. Many English readers can recognize the following sounds with ease these being: "Meow", "Moo", "Neigh", "Tweet", "Oink", "Baa" and many more.

The function of words is used to help express the world around us. Onomatopoeia is slightly different, on the other hand, onomatopoeia helps readers to hear the words they reflect. And Hence, the reader enters this space created by the speaker or writer and has no choice but to live in it with the aid of these words. The ultimate goal of onomatopoeic words lies in the fact that they are bound to influence the readers' senses, whether that effect is understood or not. In addition to this, a simple plain expression does not have the same emphatic effect that conveys an idea as powerfully to the readers, the use of onomatopoeic words helps create emphasis, detail, and "spice" in the English language.



### Onomatopoeia in the United States!

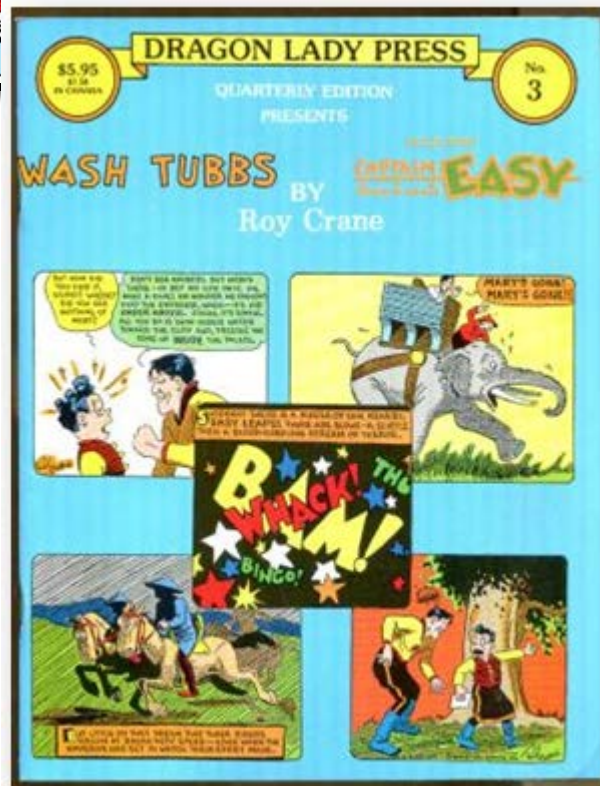
The comic industry is one of the most popular forms of media in the world, with companies such as *Marvel* and *DC comics* being in the leaderboard for most popular comic companies in history. These companies have been around for decades and the characters they own being as old as almost 100

years, such as Superman having his first appearance in Action Comics #1 in June 1938. But one thing that is as striking and colorful as the characters, is the presence of onomatopoeia that accompany the panels in the comics. Rather its “Pow”, “Bang”, or “Whap” the effect is always the same, that being their purpose as sound effects that drives the story through action. These “sound effects”, as Sean A. Guynes from University of Massachusetts Boston calls them, is an essential part of Comic book storytelling and as I would argue a unique part of Comic book culture.

In the article *Four-Color Sound: A Peircean Semiotics of Comic Book Onomatopoeia*, Guynes (2014) explains that “onomatopoeia occur in the phonic modality of speech, the written modality, and a third modality combining word and image”. He uses the concept of American Visual Language (AVL) as a framework for how comic books function in terms of sound effects. There is three types or dialects of AVL, Kirbyan or mainstream AVL, Barksian or cartoony AVL, and independent AVL.

Guynes states that mainstream and independent AVL is the most common forms in American Comic books. A study was conducted in which over 1,000 mainstream comics from big publishers including Marvel, DC comics, Dark horse, IDW and more sampled every tenth comic from an alpha-numeric list of more than 400 comics published in the last four years (of the making of this article), and revealed an average of 11.5 onomatopoeia per comic; a similar sampling of 200 comics from the 1990s revealed a much higher average of 28 onomatopoeia (Guynes, 2014). This study shows that sound words make up a major part of comic literature, while onomatopoeia in comics have somewhat loss an average number it still shows that onomatopoeia is important.

The first emergence of onomatopoeia in comic literature was in a comic strip that predate the Comic book, having appeared first in cartoon newspaper strips. This newspaper strip being Roy Crane’s *Wash Tubbs* of the 1920s. DeForest writes in his book *Storytelling in the Pulps, Comics, and Radio: How Technology Changed Popular Fiction in America*, that:







*"It was Crane who pioneered the use of onomatopoeic sound effects in comics, adding "bam," "pow" and "wham" to what had previously been an almost entirely visual vocabulary. Crane had fun with this, tossing in an occasional "ker-splash" or "lickety-wop" along with what would become the more standard effects. Words as well as images became vehicles for carrying along his increasingly fast-paced storylines." (DeForest 2004)*

The creation of "sound effects" in comic strips credited to Roy Crane is an important look at how hard it was to create a visual representation for certain actions in the comic pertaining to sound. Before the use of sound words in comics artists would symbolize both the sound and physical experience with things such as z's drawn around a character's head that indicated snoring while sleeping, or jagged edges on the border of an image showing an explosion.

### **Pow! An onomatopoeic word**

One question still remains, why is 'Pow' the central point of discussion pertaining to onomatopoeia and its presence in comic books? It's because 'Pow' is a major component in creating action in a scene rather it being a movie, video game, drama, cartoon, or comic book, 'Pow' will always influence the way action goes even if it isn't directly stated as 'Pow'. For instance, when an action scene is seen in a movie, the sound most commonly that appears when someone is getting punched is 'Pow', or 'Bang' or a variation of 'Pow' in a similar fashion such as 'ka-pow', and even with 'boom' while 'pow' is a smaller 'boom' and 'boom' is a bigger 'pow'. This is a common trope in classic action movies such as American westerns and more popular in imported Chinese kung-Fu movies. There are many examples of Kung-Fu movies such as in *Way of the dragon* (1972) where the 'Pow' sound effect is a commonly used sound product in post-production and its main purpose in creating action packed scenes for the audience.

The most popular and well-known American television series that used both the 'Pow' sound effect and 'Pow' comic sans within the show was *Batman* (1966-1968) starring Adam West. This show is notorious for having a symbolic mixing of action and onomatopoeia in a way that has defined Comic book pop culture. Wherever there is action there is either a 'POW!!', 'WHAMM!!', 'ZOK!', or even a 'ZZZZZWAP!'. The words are just as colorful, intense, and loopy as the music, costumes, and props/sets and without the use of onomatopoeia as sound effects the show wouldn't be the pop culture sensation it was back in the 1960's. An interview was conducted with George Barris, also known as the "king of the Kustomizers", in May of 2012. In this interview Barris discusses the importance of the creation of the Batmobile, the interviewer asked, "How did you come to create the Batmobile?" and Barris stated the following:

"I was called in by [Batman executive producer William] Dozier over at the TV studio, and I reviewed the Script. I noticed that he had "Pow! Bang! Wheel!" in the middle of the script as they were filming. That meant he had actors doing things every time he put in a "Pow!" so I had the Batmobile do the same. I wanted to make it a part of the show, and I made it become a star. When the script went "Pow!" I sent out a rocket. "Bang!"-a chain-slicer. "Boom!"-an oil spray." (McCabe 2017)

This is important because it shows the ability that words like 'Pow' had in creating a sense of action for not only the audience but also the actors and designers who read it in the scripts, in this excerpt George Barris exemplified that the words Pow!, Bang!, and Boom! was there before he designed the Batmobile and played a pivotal part in creating the iconic car.

In conclusion, the word 'Pow' is an extraordinary onomatopoeic sound word that has created several memorable moments in not only Comic books, but also Comic strips, movies, television series, video games, and American popular culture in general. Without the use of onomatopoeia, 'Pow' couldn't be understood in the context of researching its modern usage. Similar sound words such as 'Boom', 'Bang', and 'Ka-pow' adds insight into understanding why 'Pow' is such an important element in creating action in comics. The main point of this paper was to explore why the onomatopoeic word 'Pow' became popular in post 1950s contemporary American media, literature, and common everyday speech, and how did other forms of onomatopoeia arise during this period that is directly linked to Pow, such as 'Boom!', 'Blam!', and 'Wham!'. The popularity of comic books in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century can have a link to the rise of onomatopoeia such as 'Pow', and with the popularity of 'Pow' in comics one can found a link to why people in the modern era still enjoy comics and the heroes, story, and action associated with it. "Pow! Right in the kisser" as Ralph would say in the classic T.V show *The Honeymooners*.

## References

- DeForest, Tim. "Storytelling in the Pulp, Comics, and Radio: How Technology Changed Popular Fiction in America." Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004.
- Guynes, Sean A. "Four-color sound: A Peircean semiotics of comic book onomatopoeia." *Public Journal of Semiotics* 6, no. 1 (2014): 58-72.
- LiteraryDevices Editors. "Onomatopoeia" LiteraryDevices.net. 2019.  
[//literarydevices.net/onomatopoeia/](http://literarydevices.net/onomatopoeia/)
- McCabe, Joseph. *100 Things Batman Fans Should Know & Do before They Die*. Foreword by Paul Dini. Chicago, IL: Triumph Books, 2017.
- "pow, int. (and n.2)". OED Online. Oxford University Press.  
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/149130?rskey=2x2ae8&result=4&isAdvanced=false>
- "Pow! Whizz! What Are Onomatopoeia?" YouTube. YouTube, September 29, 2018.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uxFwmYIHwk>.
- Images:
- <https://sofietokorea.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/ono.jpg?w=1200> (Onomatopoeia word cloud)
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/DSzTYifKzMATYPoh9> (Superman)
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/2Lbg2kpZiemgRzmj7> (Spider-man)
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/WE4bRALoLBrEDbae6> (Roy Crane Wash Tubbs)
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/4hYZ54YH2NQwNmEMA> (Batman Adam West)
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/WE4bRALoLBrEDbae6> (Dragon Lady Press)
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/4hYZ54YH2NQwNmEMA> (Batman Pow)

# Punk

Mikey Elster

Cite as: Elster, Mikey. 2021. Punk. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 249-257.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

“Punk’ is a totally stupid word and I feel like I should be thrown in music jail for using it...one of the worst things about the word: It’s so fucking broad.” (Dan Ozzi, 2013).

Dan Ozzi, the columnist who wrote the above quote in an article for the blog Noisey, thinks that the word *punk* is “the grossest word in music” (2013). He says it is too broad, and that it is bordering on meaninglessness. He falls short of saying things like ‘punk used to mean something,’ but the gist of the article is clear: if *punk* were a word worth using it would point to something more concrete. He is not the only person to share this sentiment. A casual web search of “what is punk?” on Google will result in endless forum threads debating what *punk* is, whether it is or should be self-defined, or how it is a meaningless catchall category. This raises a few questions. If *punk* really is so broad that it is bordering on meaninglessness, why do people continue to use it, and what do they mean when they use it? Furthermore, why do people who think it is meaningless, such as this columnist, have such strong opinions on it? How has *punk* gone from a generally derogatory word to a rather productive morpheme in cases like the word “steampunk,” “cyberpunk,” or any of the “-punk” musical genres in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century?

## No good punks: derogatory origins

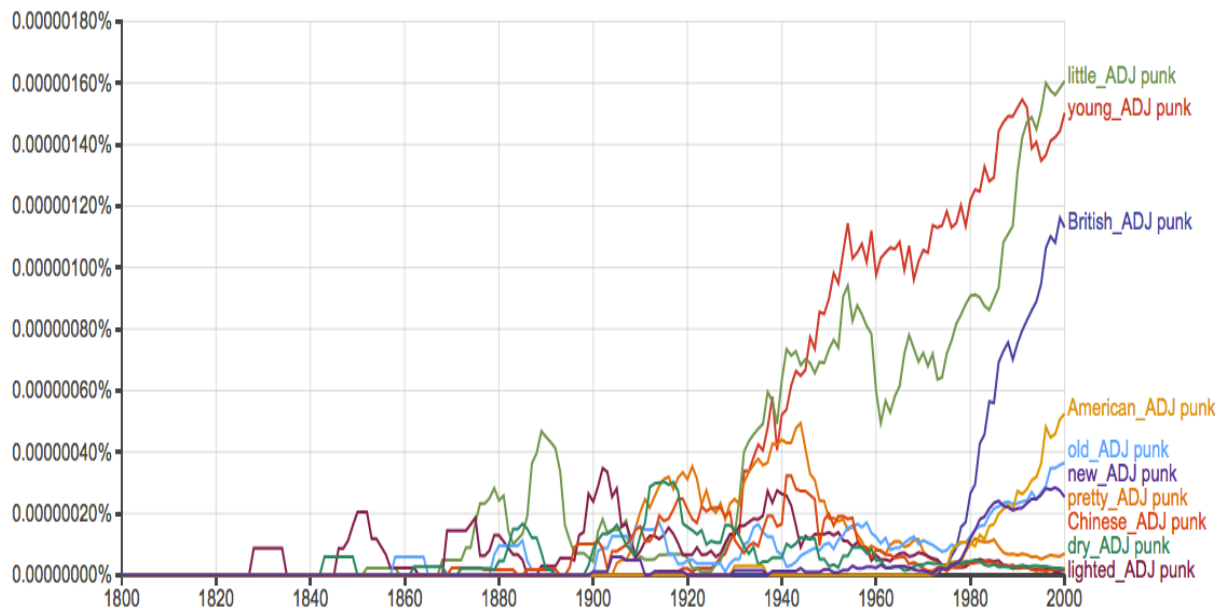
The etymology of *punk* is unknown, but the historical meanings of it are clear. In the time of Shakespeare, it was a synonym for a prostitute. He writes, “She may be a Puncke: for many of them, are neither Maid, Widow, nor Wife” (*Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories & tragedies*, 1623). In one of the first discernable semantic shifts, *punk* switched genders and social setting by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to mean “a punk’s a boy that’ll...Give himself to a man,” (Berkman, A, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, 1912). Despite this shift, the old meaning did not fall out of usage, and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) cites usage going up to the 1980’s, but it was very rare to find it in this form. Still, it is clear that the conception of a *punk* is tied to people who commit sexually deviant acts, male or female. Most of the semantic shifts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century work along these lines: it becomes a derogatory word for homosexual men, whether in a prison setting or not, a word for a tramp’s sexual companion, and eventually just a stand in for “a contemptible person,” according to the OED. The transformation of the word *punk* to a specific word about people to a word that generally meant ‘bad’ is apparent in print media. “Punk Pitching,” an alliterative way of saying ‘bad pitching,’ appears in a headline from the *Oxnard Press Courier* from August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1944, and a similar headline about a “Punk Fight” from 1946 appears in the June 20<sup>th</sup> *Toledo Blade*.

**Punk** Pitching

Marks Major  
Play Wind Up'

Flock Of Troubles Beset  
Jacobs After **Punk** Fight

While these examples demonstrate some isolated meanings, some uses relied on every meaning of the word *punk* in order to evoke the image of a totalizing bad rather than a specific instance of it. Another 20<sup>th</sup> century newspaper article is a good example of all of “punk’s” constituent meanings in one instance. The headline from *The Miami News* in 1960 reads: “Did Punk Kill Women?” The article describes a possible murder suspect (the punk of the headline) as wearing “tight, worn blue jeans, a leather jacket, leather gloves, pink socks, and dirty white shoes.” It later describes him as “walking in a rather effeminate way”. Not only does it make subtle reference to the potential homosexuality of the “punk”, (since homosexuality was largely associated with acting opposite gendered in the 60s) it also attributes markers of youth culture to “punk.” Based on the description in the paper, the scene could have been a screenshot from a movie with Marlon Brando. Furthermore, the article repeatedly calls the suspect “the youth”. So not only does this particular quote illustrate a combination of femininity, homosexuality, and contemptible qualities, it also adds an association with youth culture. Whoever wrote the headline read the description and thought that “punk” was the best way to imply all of these characteristics. The inclusion of youth culture to the meaning of *punk* is somewhat new, but it certainly lasted at least into the next decade. To this day Google’s Ngram shows words like “young,” and “little” as the two top descriptors of “punk.” “Young” was in the lead up to the 80’s.





## Burning Punk

A Google Ngram search for verbs that appear before the word *punk* essentially lists all possible conjugations of the verb “to be” in the top. In this sense, the verbs “feeling,” “called,” and “feel” all make sense. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, someone called another person a *punk*. They did not ascribe it to themselves until the association of *punk* subculture. But one verb in particular that was popular from the 1930’s to 1950’s does not quite fit these definitions: “burning”.

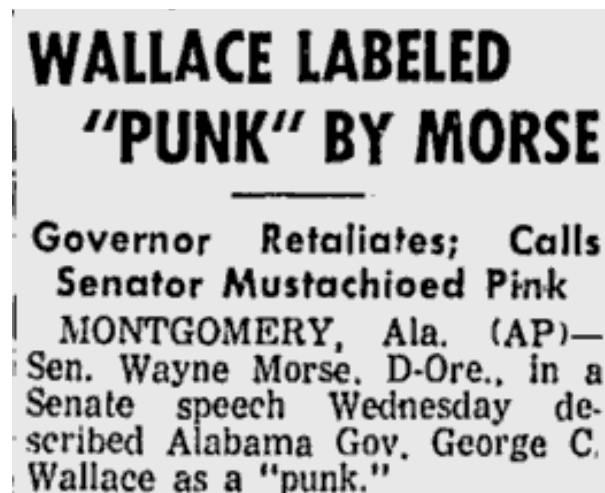


The OED lists a second entry for *punk* as “soft, decayed or rotten wood” that one uses for tinder or to start a fire. One cited usage is “as the East-Indians use Moxa [in blistering], so these [in Virginia] burn with Punk, which is the inward Part of the Excrescence or Exuberance of an Oak.” This citation, from 1687, is contemporaneous with Shakespeare’s usage meaning a prostitute. Although this is a separate entry, looking at the world in total provides a more robust understanding of the word. Uses that the OED cites for either of *punk*’s entries, whether it refers to gay men, contemptible people, and prostitutes, or subpar wood used for tinder and fires, occur concurrently with one another, and on the whole mean “bad”. However, the additional entry about kindling taken with the connotations of homosexuality in other entries provokes a comparison to another word: *faggot*.

The connection here is provocative—and may be nothing more than that—but the possible connection seems worth pointing out. *Punk* could be throwaway, rotten wood, only good for starting fires, or when it was aimed at people it could connote homosexuality, passiveness, contemptibility, or femininity. Both forms of the word existing contemporaneously set up a linguistic structure in which people that are *punk* are akin to the types of wood that are *punk*. That is to say, both words denoted valueless things or people. While I found no data with ambiguous examples of *punk*, where the speaker may have been playing off of either definition, searching for this in particular may help explain why the *punk* subject became increasingly male in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and would further an investigation into movements like ‘queercore’ and ‘riot grrrr’ that challenged taking the *punk* as a straight male for granted.

It is important to note at this point that *punk* was not nearly as severe a term as *faggot* by the 1960s, if ever. In a 1963 edition of *The Lewiston Daily Sun*, a newspaper from Lewiston, Massachusetts, the editors felt that *punk* was an appropriate word to appear in print. Furthermore, as the article shows, politicians felt it was appropriate to call a colleague a *punk* in public. The above examples are not meant to frame *punk* as a word that is as direct and violent as the word *faggot*, nor are they aimed at proving that it is or should be considered as such. They do provide a starting point for more research into more ambiguous uses of the word *punk* to see if the presence of both definitions ever

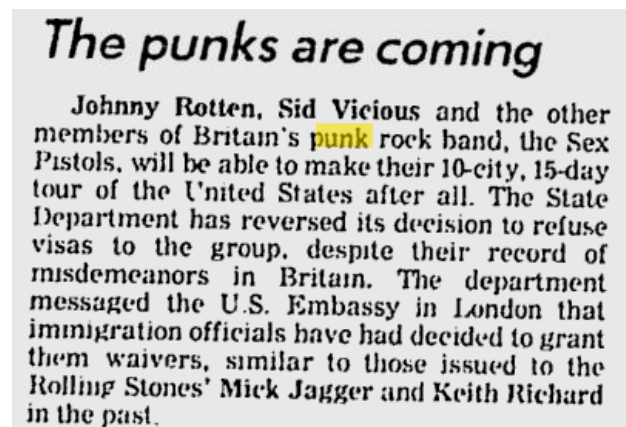
affected its social meaning, and whether the connection between one definition of *punk* and *faggot* is a coincidence of no consequence for the creation of a *punk* subject or not.



"Wallace Labeled 'Punk' By Morse," *Lewiston Daily Sun*, Sep. 5, 1963

### The case for language reclamation

Sometime in the 70's or possibly the late 60's, *punk* underwent another semantic shift. This is when *punk* became largely associated with a musical genre and its respective subculture. The early citations of this semantic shift seem more or less understandable. L. Bangs, a writer for *Creem Magazine* describes a band's music by saying "Man, that is true punk; that is so fucked up it's got class up the ass," (1972). Considering the past associations with youth culture in the 60's and the generally negative connotations, this shift seems like a logical—but still inventive—use. To describe a type of music that was more technically aggressive and vulgar, and to associate it with a rebellious youth culture, people used the term *punk rock*. There is a degree of linguistic play here. Uses of *punk rock* make sense by the invocation of *punk's* negative connotations, and this linguistic play ends up being culturally productive. In the late 70's and early 80's *punks* become a definitive group in popular culture. Still, the newspaper clipping below from 1977 has the rather looming headline "the punks are coming," and the clipping from 1980 still conjures up images of the former definition of *punk* in the way it describes their dress and associates them with violence and negative connotations.



"The Punks are Coming," *The Deseret News*, Dec. 31, 1977



## GLORIA OHLAND

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Tagging themselves with names such as “Fear” and performing numbers with titles such as “Homicide,” punk rock bands have traditionally inspired violent behavior among their leather- and chain-clad fans on the dance floor.

“Punk Violence,” *The Evening Independent*, Jul. 10, 1980

In order to fully investigate the nuance around *punk* and its reclamation, it is worth asking who reclaimed it. At least until 1980, coverage of *punk* or *punk* still evoked images of violent youth and made use of negative connotations that were present in decades earlier. So even though there was a subcultural group using the word as a cultural identity, it is not the case that the meaning simply “flipped”. Most uses in popular media use it as a descriptive word aimed at evoking older negative connotations, not as an identity people are swarming to adopt. Even if headlines using phrases such as “the punks are coming” or articles talking about “punk violence”, are referring to a particular subculture, it is not clear that this is devoid of all the historical social connotations of *punks* as contemptible people. In some ways one can understand the new uses of *punk* in the 70’s and 80’s to be just another linguistic shift, one that recognizes the appeal or intrigue of danger, badness, and vulgarity.

Looking further into the question of who exactly is reclaiming *punk* it makes sense to look towards the LGBTQ community, given the word’s historical context. There is no attempt by the LGBTQ community to reclaim *punk* as their own. In fact, the word the LGBTQ community is best known for reclaiming is *queer* (hence the Q). There were certainly allusions to homosexual fetish-culture in *punk* fashion, even as reported by the media: leather, chains, and bondage pants all conjure images of gay fetish scenes, but there is no clear indication that these fashion styles were inspired by or meant to promote acceptance of non-normative sexualities. Plus, when one considers modern derivatives such as *punk-ass* that draw very explicit and clear connections to *punk*’s history as a derogatory term for passive homosexual men, it is clear that despite the reclamation of *punk* by a subculture, its past meanings still persist, and the latest semantic shift had nothing to do with reclaiming the word for all of the people to which it referred.

Looking to the founders or prominent voices of the subculture can yield a mixed bag of results. The closest the Ramones come to defining punk appears in lyrics to the song “Judy is a Punk.”

Jackie is a punk  
Judy is a runt  
They both went down to Berlin, joined the Ice Capades  
And, oh I don’t know why  
(1976, track 3)

This is not exactly an example of clearly defining and owning a subcultural identity. Two years later, the British band Crass had proclaimed *punk* to be dead:

Yes that’s right, punk is dead,  
It’s just another cheap product for the consumers head.  
Bubblegum rock on plastic transistors,  
Schoolboy sedition backed by big time promoters.  
CBS promote the Clash,

But it ain't for revolution, it's just for cash.  
 Punk became a fashion just like hippy used to be  
 And it ain't got a thing to do with you or me.  
 (1978, track 5)

Crass, a band that most would consider a classic anarcho-punk band, were not especially concerned with promoting themselves as *punks*, favoring instead to declare *punk* dead. However, the ability to declare it dead does demonstrate some sort of linkage to what *punk* is supposed to be or what *punk* was. In this passage it is clear that they equated *punk* to some sort of anti-capitalist or anti-corporate ethos, but they explicitly exclude the Clash from this definition, a band that is unquestionably a representative *punk* subculture.

Rather than providing a clear and cohesive meaning of *punk* the passage from Crass is an example of a usage of *punk* that aims to establish some sort of cultural identity or boundary. Similarly, the publication of the magazine *Punk* in 1976 showed an intentional effort to align *punk* with a specific subculture. The magazine names the “first punk” as Marlon Brando, a clear reference to an image of youth culture that was imagined as dangerous in the 60’s.

<b>PUNK</b>	
VOL. 1 NO. 1 CONTENTS JAN 1976	
MARLON BRANDO - THE ORIGINAL PUNK.....	1
BY JOE KOCH	
POEM - BY ROBERT ROMAGNOLI.....	2
LOU REED - EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW.....	3
BY JOHN HOLMSTROM	
RAMONES - ROCKN' ROLL - THE REAL THING.....	8
BY MARY HARRON	
METAL MACHINE MUSIC - A REVIEW.....	10
BY ROGER FRECHETTE	
SLUGG0 - INTERVIEW WITH A FAMOUS BRAT.....	11
BY SCOOP 'LEGS' McNEIL	
CARS AND GIRLS - LEGS ON THE PROWL!.....	12
BY THE PUNK STAFF	
JOE - THE CARTOON PUNK GETS SHIT FROM SHIT.....	13
BY JOHN HOLMSTROM	
PUNK CONTEST QUIZ - TAKE MY QUIZ, PLEASE	14
BY THE PUNK STAFF	
DO IT YOURSELF 60's PROTEST SONG.....	15
BY ROB ROMAGNOLI	
NEXT MONTH IN PUNK:	
PATTI SMITH MEETS ARTHUR RIMBAUD	
TALKING HEADS SPEAK OUT	
PLUS: MORE OF LEGS McNEIL - RESIDENT PUNK	

The intriguing thing about this use and its attempt to establish *punk* as a cultural identity by reference to a proverbially ‘primordial’ *punk* is that it works on images of *punks* that were prominent decades earlier, such as the news clipping about the dangerous leather-cladded youth. Even in new or different uses of *punk*, all of its cultural connotations present themselves. In this way, the subcultural *punk* played off of the negative connotations of *punk* in order to produce a new meaning. Ironically, because of the restrictiveness of the *punk* subject before the subculture, this new cultural identity was also predominantly straight and male during its subcultural reclamation (something that would become increasingly contested during sub-movements like riot grrrl, queercore, and anarcho-

punk). How women *punks* made a claim to this identity is a provocative question that also escapes the scope of this paper.

So what exactly is it that Dan Ozzi, the columnist from *Noisey*, so upset about? *Punk* has always had a broad definition, and it has always been tied up in a number of cultural value judgments about people. The shift in the 70's was originally an inventive descriptor of a new musical trend, and only clearly denoted a specific subculture later. On top of that, this shift did not dissolve the past meanings of the word.

The harsh reaction to *punk's* broadness that is apparent in Ozzi's column, or any number online forums dedicated to punk subculture, or Crass' declaration that *punk* is dead, is borne out of an attempt to establish a hold on the cultural capital that *punk* has as a young, new, and cool cultural category. In earlier instances, such as those in *Punk* magazine or songs by Crass, setting a descriptive linguistic boundary was a way of establishing an identity that was part of a productive linguistic and cultural process. Ozzi's column, on the other hand, is an extension of this, but it is a rather reactionary lamentation of the amount of linguistic productivity the word has, if not a call to control or restrict its linguistic productivity. Control or restriction of *punk's* meaning would have barred the invention of words like "cyberpunk" and "steampunk."<sup>1</sup> Both have nothing to do with the original subculture, but they play on connotations of youth-culture, inventiveness, and coolness, all of which are attributed to *punk* because of the subculture of the 70's and 80's. One could argue that its productive potential is the most punk thing about *punk*. Given these examples, it is ironic that *punk's* linguistic productivity is what Ozzi identifies as the undoing of *punk* subculture. Further, movements within *punk* have generally condemned the restrictiveness of it, not the openness. The contradiction between needing to establish a cultural boundary and wanting to fall within it is the very thing that kept *punk* from becoming a simple synonym for rascal.

## Conclusions

The word *punk* has had a variegated past, and it is easy to get lost in all of its constituent meanings, but two things about its social history are clear. The first is that despite its varied uses and meanings, they all worked off of each other and produced connections that reflect the social standing and conception of certain people. The use of *punk* as a type of throwaway word, and its use as a derogatory word for a homosexual work in conjunction with dichotomies of morally pure and morally impure, or socially valuable and socially valueless, or dominant and submissive. This paradigm is applicable to any number of other English words. "Black" in comparison to "white," or "queer" in comparison to "square" or "straight" are all examples of words that could have multiple meanings and interpretations depending on context. On one hand they are simply descriptors, and on the other hand they have implications about the social value of the things or people they describe.

Second, *punk's* varied history is one of the main contributors to its productive capabilities. If it really were so broad that it is meaningless, then it would probably fall out of usage. But it is clear that any of the things that are considered *punk* have some sort of criteria that make them so, even if that criterion is confusing by nature of the word's opposing definitions. Its reclamation by a subculture furthered the productive capabilities by shifting its connotations within the dominant cultural paradigm, which gave it the ability to play off of either positive or negative connotations. This in turn led to attempts of language control that hindered its productive potential by those who identify with

---

<sup>1</sup> One could argue that "-punk" is describing "cyber," or "steam," and not the other way around. That is to say, "-punk" is denoting how these particular subgenres of science fiction, "steam" and "cyber," have "punk" qualities.

the subculture. *Punk* demonstrates both the productive and restrictive potential of linguistic shifts resulting in the creation of a cultural identity.

Exploring the outline of punk's history further, and considering the socio-historical relationship between *punk* and homosexual people, provokes another look at the word *faggot*. While it is still clearly an insult, and a very harsh one, it has experienced shifts similar to *punk*. According to the OED, *faggot* was once a term of abuse for women, is now a derogatory term for gay men, and at one time was a word for bundles of wood used to start a fire. But who would want to adopt the word as a cultural identity? Fittingly, an example of a potential shift comes from a *punk* band.

*Fake fags on the radio don't sing for me  
metrosexuals annoy the shit out of me  
fake fags in Hollywood don't impress me  
try to demonstrate how I'm supposed to be  
(Limp Wrist, "Fake Fags," 2006)*

This usage is, of course, meant to be provocative, given the current cultural context. Arguably, so was the first use of *punk* to describe music. The lyrics here are also an attempt by Limp Wrist to declare that there is a social and cultural boundary for who is a *fag* and that *fake fags* do not represent those who take the word as their own, while simultaneously contesting the *punk* as a straight male and creating space for a queer subject in punk. This frames a *fag* as something that yields a boundary: something that someone may actually want to be, rather than an insult. Given the current cultural meaning, and despite Limp Wrist's efforts here, it is still not likely that *fag* or *faggot* are about to undergo major semantic shifts that lead to the words denoting a celebrated cultural identity rather than a derogatory category. However, this use of *fag* does have two parallels with *punk*: the establishment of a restrictive linguistic or cultural boundary as an act of producing a cultural identity, and the linguistic play off of oppositional parts of social dichotomies.

That is to say, while linguistic structures may organize words into hierarchized social dichotomies, such as the one between a derogatory word and a self-proclaimed cultural identity, semantic shifts along these lines do not work solely within this framework, but interrogate it. Words that play off of or subvert social dichotomies may have some of the most productive potential. And that is pretty *punk*.

## References

- Anonymous. (1946, Jun 20). Flock of Trouble Beset Jacob After Punk Fight. *Toledo Blade*.
- Anonymous. (1960, March 18). Did Punk Murder Women? *The Miami News*.
- Anonymous. (1977, Dec 1). The Punks are Coming. *The Deseret News*.
- Associated Press, (1963, Sep 5). Wallace Labeled "Punk" by Morse. *The Lewiston Daily Sun*.
- Bangs, L. (1972) Creem. From Punk n1 and adj.2, Oxford English Dictionary online
- Berkman, A. (1912). Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist. From Punk n1 and adj.2, Oxford English Dictionary online
- Clayton, J. (1687) Philosophical transactions. From punk n.3, Oxford English Dictionary
- Crass, Punk is Dead (1978). On The Feeding of 5000 [CD]. Small Wonder Records: London, UK
- "Flock Of Troubles Beset Jacobs After Punk Fight." *Toledo Blade*, [Toledo], 20 June 1946, p. 28.
- Holstrom, J. (1976). Table of Contents. *Punk*.  
[http://www.punkmagazine.com/vault/back\\_issues/01/toc-vol1no1.html](http://www.punkmagazine.com/vault/back_issues/01/toc-vol1no1.html)
- Limp Wrist, Fake Fags (2006). On Want Us Dead EP. Lengua Armada Discos: Chicago, IL.

Ohland, G. (1980, July 10). Punk Violence: Blood Flows as Rock Craze Swells in Southern California. The Evening Independent.

Ozzi, Dan. (2013, June 13) "Punk is the Grossest Word in Music," Noisy.  
[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/655336/punk-is-the-grossest-word-in-music](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/655336/punk-is-the-grossest-word-in-music)

"Punk Pitching Marks Major Play Wind Up." Oxnard Press Courier, [Oxnard], 31 Aug. 1944, p. 1.

"Punk Violence." The Evening Independent, [Massillon], 10 July 1980.

Ramones, Sheena is a Punk Rocker (1976). On Ramones [CD]. Sire Records: New York, NY.

Shakespeare, W. (1623) Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories & tragedies. From Punk n1 and adj.2, Oxford English Dictionary online

"The Punks Are Coming." The Deserter News, [Salt Lake City], 31 Dec. 1977.

"Wallace labeled "Punk" by Morse." Lewiston Daily Sun, [Lewiston], 5 Sept. 1963.

# Radical

## Mohanned Darwish

Cite as: Darwish, Mohanned. 2021. Radical. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 258-262.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

I regularly hear on Arabic and Hebrew political talk shows the word *radicali*, an Arabized/Hebraized form of the English “radical”, used in the same context as its English counterpart to refer, more often in a negative sense, to a fringe group/person of an extreme ideology. Arabic and Hebrew are certainly not without native words that carry the same meaning, so why some speakers of these Semitic languages opt to use the loanword instead has been a mystery to me. This made me wonder if the word “radical” carries an intrinsic concept that can only be conveyed if the word itself or an altered form of it is used. Moreover, how did it acquire its negative socio-political connotations and maintain them through the many other languages that borrowed the word?

The first step in unraveling this mystery was to consult different English dictionaries. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as a noun, *radical* has four main, yet very distinct definitions:

*Politics*: “is a person who advocates thorough or complete political or social reform; a member of a political party or part of a party pursuing such aims.”

*Linguistics*: “Any of the root letters that form a base word.”

*Chemistry*: “A group of atoms behaving as a unit in a number of compounds.”

*Mathematics*: “a quantity forming or expressed as the root of another.”

All these definitions point to the fact that the radical serves as a basic unit of something bigger and more complex. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the etymology of the word comes from Late Latin *radicalis*, “of or having roots,” from Latin *radix* “root”.

As a political term meaning “reformist”, it had first appeared in English in 1802 as a noun and in 1817 as an adjective. This came as no surprise to me since this semantic shift had occurred during a period riddled with revolutions and social change. The 18<sup>th</sup> century came to an end with the conclusion of the French Revolution, a decade of *radical* social and political upheaval in France, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century began with a rise in German nationalism, which fueled the road to German unification and statehood.

In its political context, the idea of “radical” essentially starts with the French Revolution, which gave birth to the tripartite idea of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” From this beginning, the radical idea spread to the east through several iterations. Put differently, the radical idea was met by the counterforce of “reaction,” creating wars and revolutions that, it can be argued, continue to this day. It is worth recalling that many radicals, including Robespierre, who was the preeminent exponent of the “virtue” of revolutionary terror, was himself sent to the guillotine. Additionally, Napoleon used the French Army to fire on the radical Parisian mob. This “whiff of grapeshot,” as many historians call it, effectively ended the French Revolution, and after Napoleon’s empire was destroyed, the French Monarchy was restored.

The pendulum swinging towards and away from radicalism never rests. Further revolutions occurred in France and in central and eastern Europe. The “bourgeoisie monarchy” of Louis Philippe was put into power by one revolution in 1830 and ended by another in 1848. It is that revolution of

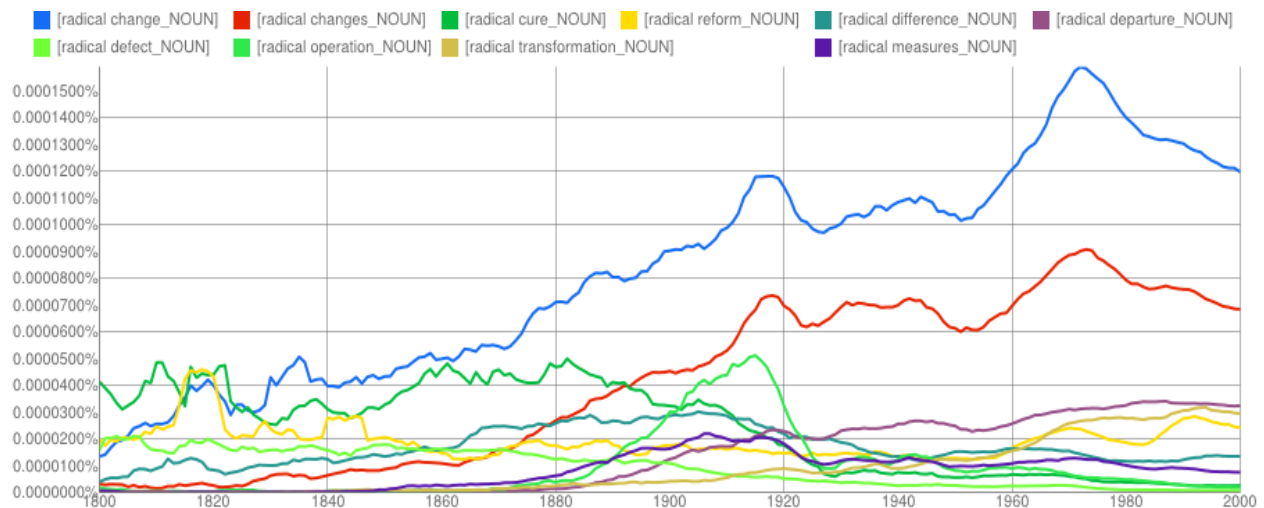


1848, derided by the historian Lewis Namier as the revolution of the intellectuals, which showed, if further proof was needed, that ideas (radical ideas especially) divorced from power of arms are worthless. Or are they? The picture is far from static.

The Paris Commune of 1871, in the wake of a bitter and humiliating defeat in foreign war, delivered power into revolutionary hands of a Paris under siege and facing starvation. Radicals ruled, and it was a very bloody affair. And yet, it was the idea of the Paris Commune that fired the minds of the radicals in the Russian Revolutionary movement. Whereas it can be said that the French Revolution was more or less “spontaneous,” its Russian counterpart was probably the most anticipated event of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Lenin, after taking power and feeling his hold on it tenuous, counted the days in the hope of achieving and then surpassing the tenure of the Paris Commune. What Lenin ensured at the same time was the use of revolutionary terror to maintain his grip on the state. Proponents of radical policies have not forgotten this lesson in the past 100 years.

The word’s negative connotation is also connected to the Progressive Movement that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which asserted that advances in science, technology, economic development, and social organization can improve the human condition. Since progression entails refining our ideas about a particular subject matter, the more we progress in this regard, the less “root” ideas become pertinent to our existing state of affairs. So, by virtue of this, when one continues to adhere to what becomes regarded as rudimentary, that is, the ‘root’ ideas, one regresses and thus falls out of favor with the status quo.

Though a period of drastic social change is needed as a fertile ground for new ideas to grow, it is only after enough time has elapsed for these new ideas to fully develop that the contrast between ‘rudimentary’ and ‘progressive’ becomes wide enough for “root” ideas to be regarded as extreme. A consultation with Google’s *Ngram Viewer* best demonstrates that.



It is only after the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the word “radical” becomes more frequently used and mainly done so with political overtones as seen in the examples of “radical change” and “radical reform”. This reflects that time is needed as a catalyst in societies to make more visible, when looked at in retrospect, the chasm between ideas that emerges with any sociopolitical change. Meanwhile, the word’s usage in any other sense declines like in the example of “radical cure”.



This phenomenon is also found in other languages, like Hebrew, that use the loanword in the same sense. It is worth mentioning that though the word in Hebrew carries the sociopolitical overtones found in its English equivalent, the factors involved in bringing about this semantic shift in Hebrew-speaking societies came at a later time than in English-speaking ones, hence the word's frequency in Hebrew not picking up until the 1940s. For the Jewish world, this decade was preceded by a period of intense sociopolitical change that culminated in the formation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the modern Jewish identity that rose out of the ashes of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from which came the founders of the Zionist state. It was then that the Hebraized term was used to distinguish the modern Jew from those refusing to migrate to the Holy Land, choosing instead to live in ghettos around the world. To the modern Jew, these people constituted a fringe group that held on to what is regarded as the “roots” of their religion, which call for them to dissimilate and live in diaspora, a group that was not compatible with the new ideals of the modern Jewish state.

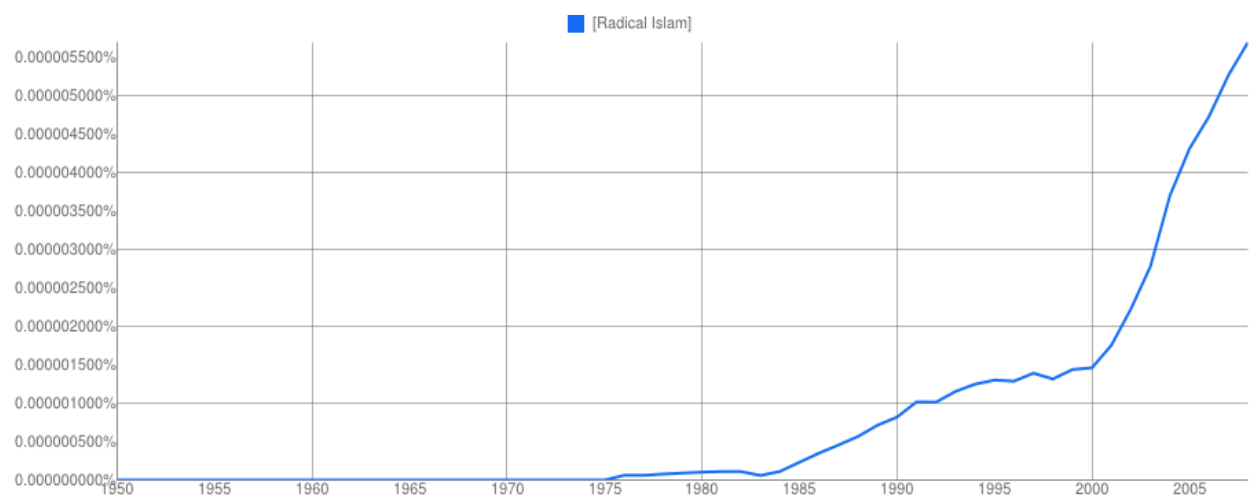
	WORD/PHRASE	TOKENS 2	TOKENS 1	PM 2	PM 1	RATIO
1	RADICAL CHANGE	44	0	1.99	0.00	199.12
2	RADICAL CHANGES	12	0	0.54	0.00	54.30
3	RADICAL DIFFERENCE	9	0	0.41	0.00	40.73
4	RADICAL ELEMENT	9	0	0.41	0.00	40.73
5	RADICAL PARTY	7	0	0.32	0.00	31.68
6	RADICAL MEASURES	6	0	0.27	0.00	27.15
7	RADICAL IDEAS	6	0	0.27	0.00	27.15
8	RADICAL ACTION	6	0	0.27	0.00	27.15
9	RADICAL DEPARTURE	5	0	0.23	0.00	22.63
10	RADICAL REFORM	5	0	0.23	0.00	22.63

The above table from the *Corpus of Historical American English* shows the 10 most common ways “radical” as an adjective has been used in American English from 1810–1900. This indicates that initially the talk about radical change was more of a domestic phenomenon, as it dealt with constitutional change, differences amongst national parties etc. This is best seen in the first American use of *radical*

in a political sense, which dates back to July 1827 and comes from the *North American Review*, the first literary magazine in the United States:

*But though we expect no radical change, in any sense of the word, in the constitution of Great Britain, there is much in her present system of government, which many of her wise and good men are laboring, we trust not in vain, to extirpate. The change of public opinion in the Course of half a century with respect to the slave trade is of itself a sufficient proof of how much can be effected for the cause of truth in a country, where the press is unshackled.*

The shift in the word's usage from a local to a national level came after the Age of Globalization to describe those outside a particular mold who are viewed as a threat. From 1990–2010, “radical Islam” becomes the most frequent use of the adjective, most notably during George Bush’s administration, under which the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq took place. This period also witnessed an increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric from the Republican Party after the September 11 attacks.



Islam in the West, particularly in the United States, is thus perceived as a religion whose core beliefs promote backwardness and justifies violence, or “jihad”, against the “other”. The term “Islamic radicalism” has been criticized by American orientalist like Bernard Lewis and John Esposito, who regard the expression as an antagonistic misinterpretation of Islam which attempts to denote that violence and backwardness are “basic” attributes of the faith.

On second glance, the word radical seems far more neutral than it had perhaps seemed initially. For example, “radical surgery” to completely remove cancerous tissue, is a very positive usage of the word. In a different fashion, the notion of “radical chic,” as Tom Wolfe (2008) has shown, conveys a type of playfulness among the social elite who are prone to dabbling among the fringes of radical politics in a purely vicarious way.

The journalist and social critic, H.L. Mencken, also saw the concept of the political radical in a positive light. He said, “The notion that a radical is one who hates his country is naive and usually idiotic. He is, more likely, one who likes his country more than the rest of us, and is thus more disturbed than the rest of us when he sees it debauched. He is not a bad citizen turning to crime; he is a good citizen driven to despair.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. L. Mencken, letter to Upton Sinclair (2nd May, 1936)

The word “radical” is more neutral than I had assumed upon starting this project. It is actually a very flexible word that is used in many fields, as noted above. Thus, I have learned that my interpretation of it had been a reflection, quite possibly subconscious, of my own interest in politics, especially with regard to the Middle East, where important political news is made virtually every day and the word “radical” is used predominantly in a very emotionally charged way. However, my newfound realization that the word can also be used in positive contexts shows that many words, and even language itself, says something important about the conditioned nature of all human thought. Indeed, the words we use and the words we hear never exist in a vacuum. By trying to understand the social aspect of language, we understand ourselves better.

## References

- Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). Created by Mark Davies, Brigham Young University. <  
<https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/> >
- Everett, Edward. Review of *America, or a General Survey of the Political Situation of the several Powers of the Western Continent, with Conjectures on their future Prospects*. *North American Review*, vol. xvi, p. 176, 1827.
- “Radical.” Online Etymology Dictionary. <http://www.etymonline.com>.
- Wolfe, Tom. Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s. *New York*, April 15, 2008.  
<http://nymag.com/news/features/46170/>

# Ratchet

Jessica Hurst

Cite as: Hurst, Jessica. 2021. Ratchet. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 263-267.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

*Ratchet*: it's what Miley Cyrus was trying to be when she wagged her booty all over the stage during 2014's Video Music Awards. *Ratchet* is loaded with nuance and entrenched in racial and feminist commentary. *Ratchet* first appeared in rap music in the late 90's. Rapper Anthony Mandigo, of Shreveport, Louisiana is often credited with being the first to record a song-using *ratchet* as slang. From here, the word took off; Mandigo's song was later recorded by a more popular rap artist, and since has made its way into pop culture through music and other media sources (Ortved).

So, what does *ratchet* mean? Defining it can be a little tricky, as the term has made its rounds in the spotlight; it has taken on different shades of meaning. To some, *ratchet* is only negative. To others, when used in a different context it can also mean something that isn't entirely negative. Some reserve the term for women only, while others use it in a more all-encompassing way. *Ratchet* is used in a similar sense of words like *ghetto* and *hood-rat*, while also taking on characteristics of words like *bitch* and *slut*.

The meaning of the word *ratchet* diverges based on which speech community is using it. The first recorded definition of *ratchet* is as follows, "1. To be ghetto, real, gutter, nasty. 2. It's whatever, bout it, etc." (Ortved). Since this definition was written in 1999, *ratchet* has become a more and more widely used term, and as with any piece of language, it has continued to change over time. As we continue, we will explore how the use of the word *ratchet* has changed over time as it has taken on popular usage, and analyze how this word is used by speech communities to have both negative and positive connotations.

Most recently, the word *ratchet* has caught the attention of many people because of the antics of pop star Miley Cyrus. To understand what Miley, a former Disney Star, and daughter of country music singer Billy Ray Cyrus has to do with a term originating in the southern rap scene, we must discuss her preoccupation with African American culture. Miley has been getting a lot of attention in the media for her cringe worthy quotes. Referencing her new album she said, "I want urban, I just want something that just feels Black." (Platon). She has also had questionable performances such as in her VMA appearance this summer. Many are up in arms about Miley's selective and flippant use of *ratchet* culture as cultural exploitation.

As is pointed out in a *Jezebel* article by Doadi Stewart, there is not a problem between the exchanges of ideas between cultures. In fact, this is an inherent part of what happens whenever different cultures interact with each other; however, what Cyrus is doing is appropriating the *ratchet* culture, her particular brand of appropriation is considered by some to be cultural exploitation. Cultural exploitation is when a dominant culture appropriates elements of a subordinated culture in a way that treats it as a resource to be mined (Rogers, 486). It is important to note that appropriation in its essence is not determined by the intentions of those involved such as Miley, but instead by the social, economic, and political environment in which they occur (Rogers, 476). This means that culture politics and power relations matter very much when discussing the phenomenon around Cyrus, as this is the primary way one can categorize cultural appropriation.

What does Miley's portrayal of *ratchet* culture have to do with the overall perception of this word? A whole lot. In the 90's, a similar word to *ghetto* similar to *ratchet* became very popular. *Ghetto* came into the everyday lexicon, and the word hit such a peak that it could be used to describe anything from a girl's butt to a broken blender (Bowen). *Ghetto* aesthetics became so visible in pop culture the girls on *Sex and the City* could be seen wearing *ghetto* inspired styles and accessories (Stewart).

*Ratchet* is going in the same direction; it is becoming a blanket term for, "all things associated with the linguistic, stylistic, and cultural practices, witnessed or otherwise, of poor people; specifically poor people of color, and more specifically poor women of color." (Bowen). It is easy to be like Miley and borrow from the experiences of others, while discarding anything that may be unpleasant about it. Being *ratchet* is cool for play, not as a valid cultural practice from learned experience, that is the message Cyrus is sending (Stewart). Being thrust into more popular culture has turned *ratchet* from a nuanced term into a more diffuse one, the original meaning discarded in popular culture for a more watered down, less sophisticated, and less offensive version of itself.

*Ratchet* originally appeared in a rap by artist Anthony Mandigo. His single, "Do tha Ratchet" was first released in 1999 (Ortved). When his rap was first recorded, it was not a particularly popular song. People from Mandigo's locale of Shreveport, in northern Louisiana had heard it; its popularity did not stretch much further than that. It wasn't until five years later in 2004 when Mandigo collaborated with rapper Lil' Boosie to produce a new version of, "Do tha Ratchet", that the song came into wider play (Latin Rap). This later version of the song has an accompanying music video. In the music video clubbers are filmed doing the *ratchet*, a dance that goes with the song. While Mandigo states he got the word *ratchet* from his grandmother, he does not provide details on the context (Ortved). The dance however, many people point out, is akin to the movement of that socket wrench makes (Latin Rap). In this way, the word has a double meaning. When used as a verb, it is describing a dance move. For example, "I'm not very good at doing the *ratchet*, could you teach me how?" This usage of the word is not in flux, when used as a verb *ratchet* has a very straightforward meaning. It is when *ratchet* is used as an adjective that things get more complex. Today, most nouns can be described as *ratchet*. It is the development of *ratchet* as an adjective that has continued to change as it passes into greater usage.

When the term was first coined, it was supposed to be a word for just getting loose, and being silly. It was used to describe mainly what people did when they go to the club; dance, drink, be high energy, let loose and have a good time (Porter). This original meaning is pretty harmless. It was just a slang word used to describe partying in a small speech community in Louisiana. Earl Williams, producer of Lil' Boosie's version of, "Do tha Ratchet" suggests that it is tied to a proud working-class mentality of being real, and unapologetically what you are (Ortved). It may not have been the original intention; however, *ratchet* came to embody a way of life for some in working class Louisiana. Not something negative, just a way of saying, "I'm proud of what I am, I work hard to get by, now let's get stupid and let off some steam."

Southern native, and radio host Charlamagne sees *ratchet* in this way. He describes being *ratchet* as being young, wild, and free, letting loose. Charlamagne sees *ratchet* as having two forms, intelligent *ratchetness*, and ignorant *ratchetness* (The Root). The difference between the two can be very subtle. Intelligent *ratchetness* still conveys the mentality of going hard. Ignorant *ratchetness* adds a level of negativity, such as a person who makes reckless or poor decisions, does things that are unsafe, or in poor taste. Filmmaker, and creator of Ratchetpiece Theatre, Issa Rae describes the difference as this, "Ratchet is a word that was intended to describe someone who is "all the way turnt up," "buck," "crunk," or "hyphy". It's now plumbing the depths of "Hood Gone Wild" (The Root). It is this change in meaning, the turn away from intelligent *ratchetness* that has swung the word into a negative direction.

As *ratchet* left its original speech community and was introduced to a larger audience, the meaning began to change. Hurricane Chris, a local rapper from Northern Louisiana, was the first from the speech community using *ratchet* to reach a large audience with music using the term. Hurricane



Chris was signed to a nationally known record label where he released a hit called, “Ay Bey Bey” which reached #7 on the US Billboard Hot 100 charts (The Root). This hit was released on his album *51/50 Ratchet*, the remix for the song “Ay Bey Bey” is titled, “The Ratchet Remix”, and includes Lil’ Boosie as one of the collaborators. On his journey to becoming a nationally known presence on the hip-hop scene, Hurricane Chris brought the word *ratchet* along with him. In his remix for the song, “Ay Bey Bey” Hurricane Chris, Lil’ Boosie, and the other collaborators do a good job of representing ratchet without being negative. They merely rap about representing Shreveport, having a good time at the club, and being known in the club and hip-hop scene. After the success of this song, and Hurricane Chris, *ratchet* had officially arrived on the hip-hop scene, and in the lexicon of many new users.

As *ratchet* gained popularity in hip-hop, it became commodified. Those who used it were not longer in tune with the roots of the word, or had no understanding of how it came to be in hip-hop culture. The form of *ratchet* that came into popular use is the one described by radio host Charlamagne as ignorant *ratchetness*. One of the more well-known takes on this form of *ratchet* is a spoof music video created by Emmanuel and Phillip Hudson called, “Ratchet Girl Anthem”. In their music video for the song Emmanuel and Phillip both dress up as, “ratchet women” on the club scene and rap about the ignorant and loose behaviors these types of women exhibit when they are out on the town (Hudson, Hudson). In their song, they describe *ratchet* girls as those who, “Carry outdated flip phones, go clubbing while pregnant, and try to punch other women in the face. “Ratchet is basically a lack of home training – being out in public and acting like you don’t have any sense,” (Ortved). While Emmanuel and Phillip’s song is just a parody, their descriptions bring to light the way the word *ratchet* is being thrown around in pop culture, and by popular artists.

Today, artists who represent the “Ratchet Movement” or *ratchet* music scene do not even always do Shreveport the honor or representing the root of *ratchet*. In fact, some even have begun to claim *ratchet* as their own word, and their own movement (Geezy). Dj Mustard, who is the producer of many club hits such as, YG’s, “B\*\*ches Aint Shit”, and Tyga’s “Rack City” has claimed to be behind the *ratchet* sound. As *ratchet* has reached a new level of popularity, people such as DJ Mustard have been able to claim the word as their own. Those who do, don’t necessarily understand, or represent *ratchet* as Mandigo or Lil’ Boosie would have liked. They associated the term *ratchet* with pride from the place they had come from, as well as their penchant to have fun. Producers such as DJ Mustard have taken the *ratchet*, “Hood Gone Wild” level that filmmaker Issa Rae discusses. Mustard associated the “ratchet movement” with artists from the west coast who are making party music (Geezy). The problem with this newer claim to the *ratchet* movement is not just the fact that this is not how the word was originally intended, but the fact that it has now acquired a more derogatory meaning.

*Ratchet* music is known today in popular culture as music that has vulgar and outrageous lyrics (Nathan). These lyrics are also often degrading towards women. The word *ratchet* is being used to describe things such as a woman’s genitalia, as in the Juicy J song, “Bandz That Make Her Dance”:

“She got friends, bring three, I got drugs, I got drinks  
Bend it over, Juicy J gon' poke it like wet paint  
You say no to ratchet pussy; Juicy J can't  
Racks er'where, they showin' racks, I'm throwing racks.”  
-Juicy J (Prod. Mike WiLL Made-It)

In this song, rapper Juicy J is insinuating that *ratchet* women are attracted to a man who has drugs, booze, and money to spend at the club. This is not a very attractive portrait of a woman. Juicy J seems to realize this, stating that, “you say no to ratchet pussy; Juicy J can’t.” He sees that the appeal of *ratchet* women is not universal, but he finds something appealing about a woman who is attracted to and is down for a party. The song “Bandz”, by Juicy J, is a prime example of how the word *ratchet* has been twisted in the spotlight.

This brand of *ratchetness* has also been exploited on shows such as, “The Real Housewives of Atlanta”, and “Flavor of Love”. Both shows highlight behavior between women that is uncouth, baiting the women into drama for television ratings. Women in these shows have been depicted as women that do not have moral and professional compasses (Jackson). It is these types of images that are getting the most radio and television play representing *ratchet*.

While *ratchet* may have reached a level of distaste and offensiveness in the public eye, it has not gone without notice. Movements such as writer Michaela Angela Davis’, “Bury the Ratchet” are taking a stand against this negativity towards women in the media. The aim of her campaign is to transform the ideologies that are being associated with the word *ratchet* (Membis). She considers herself an image activist, one who draws attention to the inequalities in image and works to correct them. Davis hopes that her campaign will spark a conversation among young women who are caught up in the *ratchet* image that is in popular culture. Davis’ campaign seeks to reclaim the word *ratchet*, to highlight the success of women, rather than the negative stereotypes.

Davis’s campaign is not the only push back in popular media against the *ratchet* craze. Jay-Z, long time respected hip-hop artist has commented on the course *ratchet* has taken on his newest album, “Magna Carta Holy Grail”. In his song, “Somewhereinamerica” Jay-Z raps,

“They see I’m still putting work in  
Cause somewhere in America  
Miley Cyrus is still twerkin’  
[Outro]  
Twerk, twerk (Miley, Miley)  
Only in America”  
-Jay-Z

Jay-Z’s commentary may be more subtle than Davis’s Bury the *Ratchet* campaign, but the message is no less clear. He, as a major player on the hip-hop scene, sees what is happening here. There are women, such as Miley Cyrus who are willing in ignorance to represent a negative image of women to earn money. What’s worse is the image she is appropriating is from a culture that she is uneducated about and she does not respect in her public productions. Jay-Z rarely praises white women in his music as many others on the hip-hop scene do. In this way, it is obvious to those who are familiar with the hip-hop scene that he is calling out Miley and those who are like her for misrepresenting, and profiting from this bastardized version of *ratchet* culture (Viera).

Fame really hasn’t been good to *ratchet*. While it was originally just a harmless term in hip-hop language, just as “jiggy” was for Will Smith, popularity left *ratchet* with a much less attractive image. *Ratchet* went through many changes as it climbed to fame. Beginning in Shreveport, Louisiana, *ratchet* was just a term for partying hard. As the public caught hold, it came to mean so much more, a music movement, a distasteful act, or most troubling, a distasteful woman. While *ratchet* is no longer contained by its original speech community, at least there are some who recognize where it came from.

## References

- Bowen, Sesali. "Let’s Get Ratchet! Check Your Privilege at the Door." *Feministing*. 28 Mar. 2013.
- Geezy, Nicky. "DJ Mustard Talks Ratchet Movement." *Sway’s Universe*. MTV Music, 21 Apr. 2012.
- Hudson, Phillip, and Emmanuel Hudson. "Ratchet Girl Anthem (SHE RACHEEET!)." *You Tube*. 16 Jan. 2012.
- Jackson, Jenn M. "Michaela Angela Davis Gives Us “Bury the Ratchet”." *The Worth Campaign*. 7 May 2013.

Latin Rap. "Ratchet Does Not Come from Wretched – Slang Word Origin History - See More At: <https://twitter.com/latinrapper?lang=en>." Latin Rapper. 29 Sept. 2013.

Membis, Laine. "It's Time to Bury the Ratchet." Clutch Magazine Online. 10 Dec. 2012.

Nathan, Anthony. "'Ratchet' Is the New Fad in Rap Music." The State Hornet. Sacramento State University, 20 Feb. 2013.

Ortved, John. "Ratchet: The Rap Insult That Became a Compliment." New York Magazine. New York Media LLC., 11 Apr. 2013.

Platon, Adelle. "Miley Cyrus Asked For A 'Black' Sound For Single, Says Songwriters Rock City." Vibe. Spin Media, 12 June 2013.

Porter, Terrance. "Let's Get Ratchet: The Origin Of Ratchetness." Nappy Afro. 23 May 2012.

Rogers, Richard A. "From Cultural Exchange To Transculturation: A Review And Reconceptualization Of Cultural Appropriation." *Communication Theory* (10503293) 16.4 (2006): 474-503.

The Root. "The Origin Of The Word Ratchet : The Word Is the New "ghetto," and It's Everywhere." Dallas Black. Washington Post Company, 16 Oct. 2012.

Viera, Bené. "Miley Cyrus and the Obsession with 'ratchet Culture'." The Grio. MSNBC, 13 July 2013.

# Realness

Samantha Hess

Cite as: Hess, Samantha. 2021. Realness. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 268-271.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

“To be able to blend”, Dorian Corey’s voice floats over video of men and women dressed in over-the-top fashions and simple day-to-day attire. They walk down an improvised catwalk in a large ballroom in Harlem, surrounded by hundreds. “That’s what Realness is”, the famous drag queen explains (Livingston, 1990). The 1970’s Opulence Ballroom scene is coming back in vogue – pun intended—as of late, however, the history behind the language adopted from ballroom culture has not been greatly recognized. Through this research I intend to shed light on the rich, fascinating history of the term that we know today. Even more specifically, I intend to display how this word has travelled through various communities and taken on different meanings to each culture it touches.

While searching through newspaper articles, a theme began to emerge regarding ‘Realness’. Up to the 80’s, ‘Realness’ shows up in specific contexts in a non-slang form, often being used to discuss how real a thing is. One of the earliest newspaper articles is from 1905 and proclaims that women “Cannot Grasp the Realness of Money in Large Sums.” (P.R., 1905) ‘Realness’ also seems to be used in the context of the Christian faith in many articles as well. Many documents that include the word in a more “traditional” sense (traditional being used loosely here, to mean a more literal version of the word) happen to be in black publications or show up in documents by the NAACP and mention civil rights or the Black Power Movement. One fascinating example comes in the form of a letter discussing God creating all people as equal regardless of skin color (Kilbourne). However, the first article noting the usage of ‘Realness’ as a slang word comes in the form of a Chicago Tribune article in 1991 (Steinmetz, 1991), discussing voguing, a dance battle style that started in the 70’s by Black and Latinx gay men, and popularized in the mainstream by Madonna in her music video for her song named “Vogue” (Turner, 2015).

## Ball Culture

In order to begin discussing the initial meaning of the word ‘Realness’ it is important to understand the background from which it sprang forth. The Opulence Ball. Born of the need for an inclusive place for queer people of color, the Harlem-based drag ball, colloquially known as an Opulence Ball was a gathering place for hundreds (Buckner). The term ‘opulence’ itself holds an important position in the title, as these meetings were focused on showing off over the top extravagant fashions created by the contestants, who largely could not afford these fashions (Loggans). As the famous quote from the documentary *Paris Is Burning* exclaimed, “Opulence—You own everything” (Livingston, 1990). For many of the people who came to these events, these balls were an opportunity to dress and act like the upper echelons of society that they were closed off from due to their minority status. LGBT men and women compete in several different categories and are awarded trophies based on how closely they fit the theme. Originally, the themes were over the top and bizarre—and some still are. However, many themes revolve around looking as close to a heterosexual, cisgender person as possible. These are known as ‘Realness’ categories. Banjee (hood or urban, we

might say, today) Girl Realness, Butch-Femme Realness, Schoolboy Realness, and Executive Realness, to name a few.

'Executive Realness' is given focus in many articles regarding Opulence Balls because of the deep feelings behind it. For many black and Latinx gay men, this category gave them the opportunity to look and be someone that they would never be accepted as in their real lives—an executive. Dorian Corey claims that this is simply a difficult feat for queer people of color in the 1970–80's (Livingston, 1990). But this 'Executive Realness' category gives these young men the ability to look the part, if only to prove that if they were given the opportunity to be an executive, they could do it, since they can look 'real'. The meaning to glean from this time period, is not only to pass as cisgender and heterosexual (although this a huge part). 'Realness' also means fighting back against the social injustices brought upon minority groups in a way that they felt safe from the retaliation of a world not yet accepting. As Shon Faye argues in their article for DAZED, "*It is not just a sassy by-word for a convincing costume but a tragicomic disguise of the chasm between what is being emulated and what is absent (namely racial justice, class equality and safety)*" (Faye, 2016).

## Rap Culture

The word takes on a slightly different meaning when viewed from the lens of the hip hop and rap community. To be 'real' in the rap community was interpreted as requiring that one live the lifestyle of the original rap artists: having a tough outer shell, being able to survive on the streets, drugs and violence (Pareles, 1994). Rapper Mobb Deep used 'Realness' in his 1995 song "Shook Ones Part II", exemplifying these concepts:

*"I got you stuck off the Realness, we be the infamous/ You heard of us, official Queensbridge murderers /The Mobb comes equipped for warfare, beware/ Of my crime family who got nuff shots to share/ For all of those, who wanna profile and pose"* (Deep, 1995).

The ability to be authentically what a rapper "should be" is important to the persona of the rap artist. Rappers are expected to have "lived the life," or else face scrutiny regarding the authenticity of their character. To have been able to live and survive in a hostile environment and "make it" in the rap game proves how real you are. 'Realness' can be understood to be integral to black lived experiences, as well as keeping close ties to the original sources of rap and hip hop culture (Hess).

A secondary phrase related to 'Realness' within the rap community is "real recognize real". The Urban Dictionary defines it as an idiom used by individuals as a sign of respect for someone as "real" as themselves, denoting that both parties are authentic individuals who agree on ideas to some degree (Urban Dictionary). It can be understood from these sources, and the colloquial usage of "real" and "fake" in the Black community today that this 'Realness' is an important characteristic to many.

## RuPaul's Drag Race – The Modern Drag Ball

In 2009, RuPaul's Drag Race came to television, first on Logo, then VH1 (Paperno, 2016). The American reality show brought drag queen culture to the general populace, and opened the doors for many young queer people to see folks like themselves portrayed in media. It has also allowed LGBT language to be heard and understood by the public. 'Realness' is no exception to this.

However, at this point is when 'Realness' seems to have a change in meaning once again. While previously in the queer community was akin to "passing", now it tends to take on something like "being very similar" to something (Turner, 2015). Although, a major difference is the comedic undertones. Remember, 'Realness' of the 1980's was focused on looking like a heterosexual, cisgender person, about the social injustices of the time and to feel as if one could belong. Now, 'Realness' can be used humorously, absurdly or to empower. The best way to understand the difference is to see and hear it in action. For instance, Natalie Wynn, transgender youtuber known for the popular channel Contrapoints says in a video, mocking the current frivolous usage of 'Realness': "*Whomst among us*

honestly hasn't slipped into a dissacociative fugue state dressed like a clown, kidnapped a few neighborhood children and told the cops 'I'm giving you John Wayne Gacy Realness, hunty?'" (Wynn, 2019). Now, clearly, nothing about that statement is spoken in or intended to be taken seriously in word or tone. And this is often the case with the current usage. The idea of the drag queen in modern times is not a serious, down to earth portrayal of womanhood. It's a performance of absurdity. It's often used to be silly or poke fun at something conceptually. The tone is generally over-the-top and abstract.

There are use some common ways to use 'Realness' in a phrase, most notably, "Serving \_\_\_\_\_ Realness" or "Giving (me/you/us/etc.) \_\_\_\_\_ Realness". In place of the blank is placed a concept that relates to what one is trying to achieve. A well-known example is 'Fishy Realness'. 'Fishy Realness' simply means to look like a convincing performance of a woman, echoing the older drag ball category of 'Femme Realness'. The difference lies in the tongue-in-cheek humor implied with the usage of "fishy", a comment on the smell jokingly associated with the vagina (Paperno, 2016).

## African American English and Lavender Language

I would be remiss to not include a discussion of the sociolinguistic relevance of 'Realness'. The word, as previously examined, has its roots in the black and LGBTQ communities, as it was originally given its new meaning by queer people of color. This qualifies it both as Lavender Language (also known as LGBTQ Linguistics) and African American English (also known as AAVE, or Ebonics). Lavender Language is informed by Queer Theory (Motschenbacher, 2013), which is focused on the understanding of LGBT culture through the lens of the Queer community. African-American English is a dialect of English spoken by Black Americans that includes unique grammatical structures and phrases created by the Black community. Studies have observed previously the appropriation of language back and forth between these minority groups, and it can be seen to have happened with 'Realness' as well. These borrowings of words and phrases by different social groups, that, in turn redefine and make them apart of their group is called enregisterment (Ilbury, 2019). By utilizing words and phrases like 'Realness' or 'serving Realness', community members can show their membership to other participants in their groups (Johnson, 2009). This is not unique to only marginalized communities, however. Like many words that have originally been coined by Queer POC, 'Realness' has been adopted by white and heterosexual women in particular. Articles such as "'Aspirational Realness,' the Instagram cool-girl look, disguises advertising as authenticity" (Kozłowska, 2019) uses 'Realness' to describe the idea that Instagram has created a generation of advertising by young women that seem real and attainable. Rosie Findlay, who coined "Aspirational Realness", is a white cisgender woman in the fashion industry, and articles discussing her research use examples of white women in images and explanations of her work. While this adoption of 'Realness' by the general population may seem to make the word lose its deeper meaning or make it seem "frivolous", as Natalie Wynn mentioned, it seems to also just be the natural progression of the evolution of 'Realness', and despite this, 'Realness' will still derive its meaning in many different groups and mean different things for those groups anyway.

## Conclusions

As a member of the LGBTQ community myself, I often find myself curious about the heritage of the folks that make up the community I associate with. As societal opinions have shifted over the years regarding embracing LGBTQ culture, I find more and more that I've never heard about, but am fascinated by. This research has opened me up to the deep, rich history of Queer marginalized groups, and encourages me to search more into the past of an often forgotten and disregarded group that greatly deserves to be known. An important takeaway from this research is the the flow of language through different groups and cultures' how minority groups borrow and appropriate language to suit the needs of the community. 'Realness' has never been a flat, featureless word for minority groups. 'Realness' is hope, aspiration, defiance and history. It is the ability to be unapologetically you in a world



that doesn't know or want to know you. As 'Realness' continues to evolve throughout time, it is my belief that it will continue to hold unique power to those communities that wield it.

## References

- Buckner, R. Subcultures and Sociology. <https://haenfler.sites.grinnell.edu/subcultures-and-scenes/underground-ball-culture/>.
- Deep, M. (1995). Shook Ones Part II. [Recorded by M. Deep]. On *The Infamous* [CD Single]. RCA. (1994)
- Faye, S. (2016, August 23). Looking at Paris Is Burning 25 years after its release. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/32530/1/looking-at-paris-is-burning-25-years-after-its-release>
- From the, P. R. (1905, Sep 16). FEMININE FINANCIAL MIND.: WOMEN CANNOT GRASP THE REALNESS OF MONEY IN LARGE SUMS. *The Washington Post* (1877-1922), pp. 1.
- Hess, M. (2005) Hip-hop Realness and the White Performer, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22:5, 372-389, DOI: 10.1080/07393180500342878
- Ilbury, C. (2020). "Sassy Queens": Stylistic orthographic variation in Twitter and the enregisterment of AAVE. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 24(2): 245-264. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12366>
- Johnson, E. P. (2009). SNAP! Culture: A Different Kind of Reading. In *Performance: Critical Concepts* (Vol. 4). New York: Routledge.
- Kilbourne, J. NAACP Papers: Special Subjects. [https://proquest.libguides.com/historyvault/naacp\\_special](https://proquest.libguides.com/historyvault/naacp_special)
- Livingston, J. (1990) *Paris is Burning* [Motion Picture] Off White Productions, Inc.
- Loggans, R. Fantasies of Opulence: Racial Dynamics of Drag Balls in New York City, 1890-1969. [https://www.academia.edu/32755203/Fantasies\\_of\\_Opulence\\_Racial\\_Dynamics\\_of\\_Drag\\_Balls\\_in\\_New\\_York\\_City\\_1890-1969](https://www.academia.edu/32755203/Fantasies_of_Opulence_Racial_Dynamics_of_Drag_Balls_in_New_York_City_1890-1969)
- Motschenbacher, H., & Stegu, M. (2013). Introduction: Queer Linguistic approaches to discourse. *Discourse & Society*, 24(5), 519-535.
- Paperno, Hannah (May, 2016) I'm Serving Up Drag Queen Realness: A Look Into Language, Kinship, And Significance Of Gender Performative Within And Beyond The Drag Community And Its Role In National Transgender Progression (Bachelor's Thesis). Florida Atlantic University Digital Library.
- Pareles, J. (1994, December 11). How Real Is Realness In Rap? *New York Times*, p. H34.
- Steinmetz, J. (1991, August 4). Voguing's pioneers 'Paris is Burning' examines the drag balls of Harlem. *Chicago Tribune*, p. 8.
- Todd, S., Kozłowska, H., & Bain, M. (2019, October 15). "Aspirational Realness," the Instagram cool-girl look, disguises advertising as authenticity. <https://qz.com/quartz/1722511/how-brands-like-glossier-sell-aspirational-Realness-on-instagram/>.
- Turner, K. (2015, June 29). Pretty Much Everything We Say Comes From the World of Drag Queens. <https://www.mic.com/articles/121464/rupauls-drag-race-shade-yaaasss-vocabulary>.
- Urban Dictionary. (2007, November 14). real recognize real. [https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=real recognize real](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=real%20recognize%20real).
- Wynn, Natalie. [Contrapoints] (2019, October 12). [Video File] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD-PbF3ywGo&t=170s>.

# Slaps

## Cheyenne Boinais

Cite as: Boinais, Cheyenne. 2021. Slaps. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 272-278.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

Slaps has been in use in the English language for a long time, first appearing in the 1600s, and it has taken on many colloquial meanings over the years. Recently, it has been used in new ways to describe both food and music that is considered good quality. When did these new uses spring up, where did they come from, and what do they really mean? In this paper I will start with a brief history of the word 'slap' and then I will explore the new uses of the word 'slaps' and how its use and contexts has changed over time.

## Etymology

Slap originates from German and the primary definition presented is "A smart blow, esp. one given with the open hand, or with something having a flat surface; a smack; an impact of this nature." The definition also includes a slap on the back as an act of friendship or congratulations; "a cut or stroke of something"; at a slap, meaning all at once; a gust of wind; slap and tickle, meaning amorous play; and the slap of a piston in an engine (OED, 1911). In all these cases, slap refers to an action that occurs quickly and at times forcefully generally leading to contact. The second definition is marked as transferred and includes "A reprimand, reproof; a spoken or written attack or censure; a side-hit"; "An attempt, venture, go, at something"; and "a quick trip or dash" (OED, 1911). Each of these meanings again points to a sense of speed and action and can take many forms. In both these definitions there is also the implication of sensation, mostly in the form of touch.

This entry has not been updated since 1911 but does contain some draft editions added in 1993 with a few colloquial definitions that have been adapted over time. The first addition refers to the sound of something as a slap, yet another link to sensation although this time through sound. The next two definitions point to more colloquial uses, the first "*Jazz slang* (originally U.S.). The percussive sound made when the strings of a double-bass strike the fingerboard in slap-bass playing; the technique itself". The second slang use is "Theatrical make-up, as rouge, grease-paint, etc.; also *transferred* more generally: any cosmetic make-up, esp. applied thickly or carelessly," (OED, 1993). Here we can begin to see a few ways the word slap has been used for more modern uses; however, slap retains its former meanings of both action, speed, and contact. In the case of the jazz term, the new context describes the way in which one takes the action on their instrument, along with another sensory experience of hitting the strings. In the case of the theater lexicon, slap illustrates the speed in which the makeup is applied and the intensity of it, it may also draw on the effect such makeup has on those seeing it. Slap in this sense doesn't change meaning but rather assists in describing the actions taken in a particular context and the sensations linked to these actions.

## New Modern Uses

I will focus on two modern uses of the word 'slaps'. The first is in reference to music with strong bass lines, while the second definition, which has only recently jumped in use, relates to food so good it 'slaps'. Use of the word has gradually risen over time, with a large spike in 2012 and a few smaller spikes in 2017, 2018 and 2019 according to Google Trends search data (Figure 1). This graph only shows from 2004 and on, but it seems 'slaps' was not searched much before that point (Google trends, 2020). The second graph (Figure 2, below), from Urban Dictionary, shows a slightly different trend. The activity of the word "slaps" shows the highest spikes in March and April of 2020; however, there doesn't seem to be any information before 2012. In 2016 there seems to be a dip in the usage of 'slaps' with the upswing beginning in the middle of 2017. As Frikkin Hecc notes in their 2020 definition, the meaning has shifted to "something that is really good/desirable" that is linked it to both music and food (Urban Dictionary, 2020).

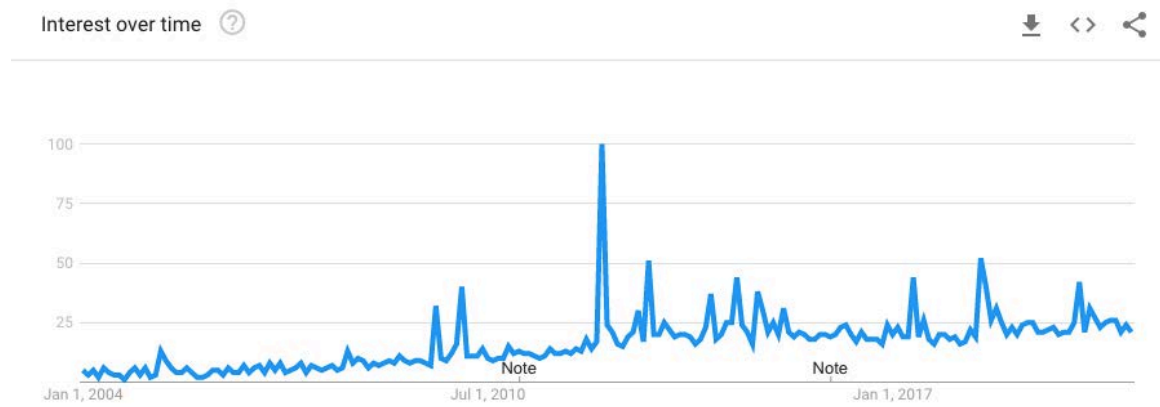


Figure 1: 'Slaps' search results on Google (Google Trends)

## This Beat

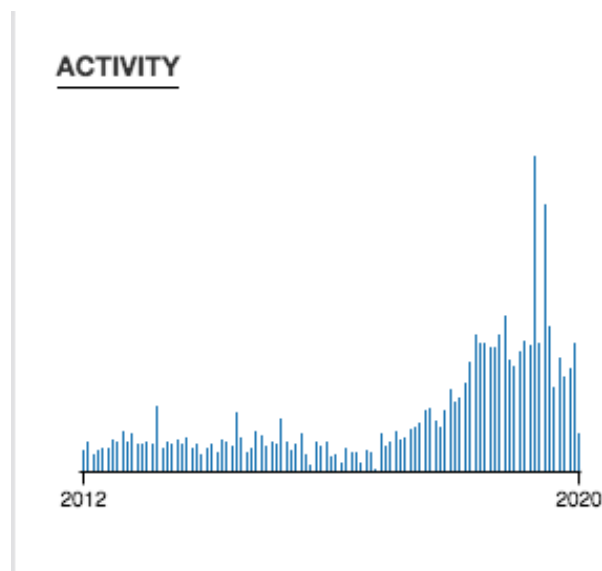


Figure 2: Search activity for 'Slaps' (Urban Dictionary)

The highest voted definition in Urban Dictionary is by Steelo and was posted October 2<sup>nd</sup>, of 2005 saying, "crackin songs from the bay area" (Urban Dictionary, 2020). This specific definition seems to be ahead of the wave of use. When looking through google trends, there are two related searches that help expand on this definition, 'song slaps' and 'this song slaps'. The first of these two shows no usage until the end of 2006 when it begins to be searched irregularly but gradually growing to a peak in the middle of 2012 then it then begins to taper off. It also shows that the only places where this was searched are California and Texas (Google trends, 2020). The second related search, 'this song slaps', has no searches until the beginning of 2011, then it raises to a sustained peak over 2012 and 2013 before falling mostly out of use by

2015. This time the places that searched for it the most are California, Texas, and Colorado (Google Trends, 2020).

The use of “slaps” in this context arose out of the Bay Area, more specifically the city of Oakland. This would explain the number of searches from California as people may have begun hearing this term used and wondered it’s meaning. Other users on Urban Dictionary have similar definitions to Steelo; Metal gear ray posted “music that is desirable” in June of 2005. Ninjapleaaaassee posted “a verb used to describe a song with sick bass” in April of 2011. ProperOrigins shared a lengthy meaning February of 2019 stating,

*Origin: West Coast of the United States Background: The term derives from the process during love making in which your testicular sack creates contact with anus cheeks making a continuous slapping sound signifying that you are getting the most out of your pumps and doing an outstanding job laying pipe. Meanings: Very Good, Hard Hitting, Great, Top Notch. Use: This song slaps! (Urban Dictionary)*

These definitions match the idea that something is moving quickly and creating contact like the OED definition but generally focus on the bass line of the song. This shifts the focus from a physical sensation to an auditory one as the music contacts the listener’s ears. What is interesting is that I am unable to find “slaps” used in this way on Twitter until late 2009 when a few select people begin to use it in that context. In one example, @itscrookie says “got a few beats to send off to some artist today. if u dont got a crook beat. holla @ me fast fast. i make #SLAPS,” (Crookie, 2009). This seems to be far behind the Urban Dictionary time frame where the first uses of “Slaps” occurred in 2005. The Sensei posted in March of 2005,

*To have a very loud, good quality sound system esp. in your car. Or a song that just sounds hella good and has tremendous bass in it. I have to set the record str8 once again. We started this in the Town, Oakland, Ca, USA. When everybody else was still callin it "Knock" or "Thump" We in Oakland started calling it "Slap". The rest of the Bay Area eventually caught on to it. Str8 Up!*

As we move forward in time on twitter’s advanced search, #slaps becomes used far more frequently, mostly in reference to music. @JoeyAndersonPDX posted on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011, “Slapping @SacTownRadio while I clean the house, so many #blaps #claps and #slaps #slappinBayMusic” (Joey Anderson, 2011), this tweet clearly follows the link to the bay area’s music although not all the tweets share such a link. @peezyfbaaby tweeted in 2011 “@DjDunkz i love your music! #slaps” (Castillo, 2011), and joins the countless others using “slaps” in reference to music, as well as a few people who also begin to reference food that “slaps” more on this later. The tweets at this point seem to reference primarily rap and hip-hop artists, for example this tweet by @QuissNasty in April of 2013, “Sweet love x Chris Brown>> #Slaps” (Marquis, 2013). Or this tweet by @Musiczoo posting “IT’S HERE! #childrinkfucksmoke by @KOOLJOHN NEW Mixtape posted on http://Muziczoo.com! #SLAPS” (Musiczoo, 2013). Around this same time the use of “slaps” to talk about sticker art and graffiti begins to rise, so the use of “slaps” to describe music is more dispersed.

In 2016, there begins to be a shift in the type of music that “slaps”. There are still some references to the bay area and hip-hop, such as this tweet by @OGMCREW posted, “Yo I need everyone to go click that link in my bio for some that new South Bay sound! #ogm #bayshit #newmusic #slaps,” October 12<sup>th</sup> of 2015 (L.I.L F.R.@.N.K, 2015) and @Cntrushgr8ness “S/O @BayAreaCompass For showing love ... #new #video #clickthatLink #LP #Lijahp #BayArea #slaps #HipHopTuesday” (Lijah p., 2016). But there is the beginning of a shift towards using this term for other types of music such as electronic dance music(edm) as this tweet by @iamRockyTV illustrates, “Current Slap ... #Music #EDC #Motivation #RUFUS #Remix #DJ #Slaps #iamRockyTV #Lost #Follow”

(Elizabeth, 2016). There are still countless references to hip-hop and rap such as @itslineage's tweet, "We have someone special about to be put up in a song! Can't wait to hear the finished product ... [#newmusic](#) [#sactown](#) [#hiphop](#) [#rap](#) [#slaps](#)" (Lineage, 2017), but the music that "slaps" is clearly expanding as seen in @whitebulgershow's tweet "SEND YOUR MUSIC <http://SlapGods.com> Email [TheSlapGods@gmail.com](mailto:TheSlapGods@gmail.com) [#Rock](#) [#Reggae](#) [#HipHop](#) [#Rap](#) [#EDM](#) [#Electronica](#) [#edmfamily](#) SLAP DAT 1 TIME" (Gods, 2016).

This trend of using slaps for any kind of music continues to grow as exemplified by @coryfrmfelicity who tweeted, "no shame. This song [#slaps](#)" about 'I won't say (I'm in love)' from Hercules (Nicholas, 2019). Even though the music that can be labeled with "slaps" has expanded there is still a strong link to both hip-hop and rap music to this day. For example, @itsbabynash's tweet September 23<sup>rd</sup> of this year, "'NEW FOREVER EP By BABYNASH OUT NOW ON SoundCloud and YouTube! ... [#Rap](#) ... [#Hiphop](#) [#Slaps](#) ...," (Forever, 2020).

## This Food

Figure 2, from Urban Dictionary, indicates a trend towards the use of 'slaps' relating to food that is amazing, since the peaks in use for music that "slaps" appears to be years earlier. On Urban Dictionary the second highest definition was, "Good as Fuck. Ex. This chipotle slaps," posted November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017 by EM liy22 (Urban Dictionary, 2020). This definition matches the OED in its idea of contact, but this time it's linked it to the sensation of taste. The time frame of the Urban Dictionary definition matches the start of the upswing seen in this activity graph. However, as stated above this use of "slaps" long predates this spike. @princessjaszmin posted on May of 2011, "Rally's loaded fries [#slaps](#)," (Jaszmin, 2011). Others also ahead of the curve where @DaBerdman\_007 who said "Chocolate milk [#slaps](#)!" and @aTalentedSoul who said "Mcdonalds strawberry lemonade [#slaps](#)" (Twitter, 2011). In 2013, @therealcriscam posts twice, "Gonna go in on this dominos pizza [#slaps](#)," and "Just made some poutine [#slaps](#) [#canadianfood](#)" (miramontes, 2013).

Use of "slaps" to speak about food quality remains low for an extended period with only a few instances like @trapxtaylor's tweet "This Sweat Baby Ray's Honey Mustard [#slaps](#)!" (Slapgod, 2014) and from @A\_Wil\_ "Was gonna work out but instead went to lunch with my parents. Went to this BBQ place and ate a ton of brisket and pulled pork ... [#slaps](#)" (Wilson, 2015). There is little use in this context during this time until with only a few examples from 2017; @brazzynial's tweet, "yall put bbq sauce on pizza rolls ? [#slaps](#)" (Nia, 2017) and @ThyJimmy "I'd never thought I say this but my mom's guac might actually be better than chipotle's [#slaps](#)" in September of 2017 (D'jimmy, 2017). Use stays low through 2018 and early in 2019 @Gomez\_diggty tweets "This right here is what I live for [#SLAPS](#) [#ifyouknowyouknow](#)," with an image of a pupusas, an el-Salvadorian dish, below (Liz, 2019). Use in relation to food quickly begins to pick up near the end of 2019 exemplified by @alwaysAP\_'s tweet "Finally tried a spicy chicken sandwich from Popeyes. [#slaps](#)" (👉, 2019) and @beantownbobby37's tweet "Professor thoms ale absolutely [#slaps](#)" (bardownbobby, 2019). Use gradually increases and by April the use of slaps with food is more apparent. For example, @sara\_hi\_c's tweet "Waffle fries from Chick-fil-a would slap ..." (Riddin, 2020) and @super\_blessed21 "White rice & mackerel wid nuff pepper slaps idc idc ..." (Driven, 2020). Interspersed with other uses of "slaps" it seems that the use is still spreading and growing, exemplified by @hondadeal4vets tweet just a few days ago, "Fruit slaps harder than candy don't @ me" (Urban, 2020).

## Other uses

Besides the definitions from the OED, "Slaps" has a variety of other uses. One other widespread use of the word "slaps", as Lain+ posted in 2006, is "[Stickers](#) containing graffiti usually taken from the [post office](#). They are usually slapped onto walls, [street lights](#), etc," (Urban Dictionary, 2020). This is



interesting because #slaps referencing graffiti stickers and street art do not appear on twitter until much later, around the middle of 2014. There are also a number of posts in Urban dictionary that label “slaps” an acronym for “sounds like a plan” (Urban Dictionary, 2020). .Soap. posted in December of 2018 a definition saying

*A slap is a coded way of saying vape. When someone says can I get a slap they are asking for a hit. This term comes from the sound that a guy could make using his hand, it sounded like a slap and that's how he asked for hits of a vape so he would not be caught by staff/teachers, (Urban Dictionary, 2020).*

Interestingly, there is even a posted definition by Scar10 in 2009 stating, “Badly done make-up. Uncomplimentary term for make-up in general, used by people who don't like make-up, to annoy people who do,” (Urban Dictionary, 2020). This links back to the sense provisionally added to the OED. On twitter there were a few examples of the word “slaps” in reference to marijuana such as @sweetmamasdelil's tweet “Happy Friday people ... #dankingit #organic #positivevibes ...# #slaps #ganja #wakeandbakedaily #dabs #medical #abovetopshelf” (delites, 2017). And some people used “slaps” more generally to say something was good, for example @caramelimage's post showing an outfit and said, “patterns on patterns slap” (Heavensward, 2020). There were also uses that I could not link to these other definitions and left me puzzled. One example is the following tweet by @Sidellio on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011, “Some of these dudes beyond selfish, dumb and basic they just #SLAPS” (Ingraham, 2011).

## Conclusion

“Slaps” maintains its base meaning of speed, action, and contact, and then evolves to fit the many contexts in which it is used. When talking about music, rather than focusing on a hit to the body, “slaps” references the sound as it contacts the ear drum. When talking about food, rather than focusing on the tactile sting, “slaps” references the flavor as it contacts the tastebuds. Because of the quality, the sensations are so powerful it's as if the music or food “slaps” the individual. Using “slaps” to mean good creates a semantic link that reminds one of the physical sensations of a slap. The trend of using “slaps” to denote good quality seems to have started with music but has slowly broadened to food. Although it tends to focus around these two uses, it has spread to other areas. The origin of the use of “slaps” in relation to music is hard to pinpoint exactly, but it appears to originate from the bay area around 2005. The context of food that “slaps”, is even harder to pinpoint but the earliest uses I could find are in 2011.

It was harder than I expected to find examples of food that “slaps”, perhaps because it is more common in spoken English than in online posts. “Slaps” may come African American Englishes, as most of the people who posted using “slaps” early on appear to be African Americans and use gradually shifts to a broader section of the population and broader contexts. More research on this would be needed before it could be said definitively. Overall, I found myself surprised as I discovered more information about “slaps” that disproved my earlier assumptions. I assumed that many people were using “slaps” to describe food and it would be easy to find quotes, but it appears less used than I expected. I also originally thought that music that “slaps” referenced only EDM music but found that is a rather recent development. There are still questions in relation to this issue that could use further investigation. For example, is “slaps” the only way this word can be used, can it be used in a past or future tenses? Can anything be so good it “slaps” or is it restricted in its use to things that have a sensory component? What is certain, however, is that “slaps” is a dynamic word whose meaning is likely to evolve to fit an even wider range of contexts, but it appears that its base meanings of action, speed, and contact will remain a feature of these new uses.



## References

- \$Lapgod. "This Sweat Baby Ray's Honey Mustard #Slaps!" Twitter, 19 July 2014, <https://twitter.com/trapxtaylor/status/490628267175464960>
- Brazzynial. "Yall Put Bbq Sauce on Pizza Rolls ? #Slaps." Twitter, 18 Nov. 2020, <https://twitter.com/brazzynial/status/1328855277685202944>
- Big Berd. "Chocolate Milk #Slaps !" Twitter, 28 July 2011, [https://twitter.com/Da\\_Berdman\\_007/status/96457905246703616](https://twitter.com/Da_Berdman_007/status/96457905246703616)
- JoEY AndERson. "Slappin @SacTownRadio While I Clean the House, so Many #Blaps #Claps and #Slaps #SlappinBayMusic." Twitter, 20 July 2011, <https://twitter.com/JoeyAndersonPDX/status/93747029800534016>
- Purpose Driven. "White Rice & Mackerel Wid Nuff Pepper Slaps Idc Idc 🙄😏." Twitter, 30 Apr. 2020, [https://twitter.com/super\\_blessed21/status/1256009151085502472](https://twitter.com/super_blessed21/status/1256009151085502472)
- BarDownBobby. "Professor Thoms Ale Absolutely #Slaps." Twitter, 12 Dec. 2019, <https://twitter.com/beantownbobby37/status/1205274896777056257>
- Castillo, Paola. "@DjDunkz i Love Your Music! #Slaps." Twitter, 28 July 2011, <https://twitter.com/peezyfbaaby/status/96492004522999808>
- Crookie. "Got a Few Beats to Send off to Some Artist Today. If u Dont Got a Crook Beat. Holla @ Me Fast Fast. i Make #SLAPS." Twitter, 13 Nov. 2009, <https://twitter.com/ItsCrookie/status/5682226500>
- D'jimmy. "I'd Never Thought I Say This but My Mom's Guac Might Actually Be Better than Chipotle's #Slaps." Twitter, 28 Sept. 2017, <https://twitter.com/ThyJimmy/status/913411608474476544>
- Delites, Sweet Mama's. "Happy Friday People 🍀👉 #Dankingit #Organic #Positivevibes #👏 #uk420 #710 #420 #Slaps #Ganja #Wakeandbakedaily #Dabs #Medical #Abovetopshelf Pic.twitter.com/pSFoKMinO6." Twitter, 22 Apr. 2017, <https://twitter.com/sweetmamasdeli1/status/855680752914235393>
- Dj. "Mcdonalds Strawberry Lemonade #Slaps." Twitter, 12 June 2011, <https://twitter.com/aTalentedSoul/status/80031469074006016>
- Elizabeth, Raquel. "Current Slap 🎧👊 #Music #EDC #Motivation #RUFUS #Remix #DJ #Slaps #IamRockyTV #Lost #Follow Pic.twitter.com/Q7Mrt6o8nA." Twitter, 5 Apr. 2016, <https://twitter.com/iamRockytv/status/717428419068239872>
- Forever, Babynash |. "NEW FOREVER EP By BABYNASH OUT NOW ON SoundCloud and YouTube!#SoundCloud #Forever #Babynash #Nash #Rap #Song #Music #Artist #Newmusic #Upcomingartist #Soundcloud #Soundcloudrapper #Love #Friendzone #Art #HipHop #Slaps #Replaceable #CanthavemebackT.co/O6eD9mKMFl." Twitter, 23 Sept. 2020, <https://twitter.com/itsbabynash/status/1308882597741817856>
- Gods, Slap. "SEND YOUR MUSIC <https://t.co/lqUDjix1x0> Email [TheSlapGods@gmail.com](mailto:TheSlapGods@gmail.com) #Rock #Reggae #HipHop #Rap #EDM #Electronica #Edmfamily SLAP DAT 1 TIME Pic.twitter.com/HxoVSdZTPH." Twitter, 26 Nov. 2016, <https://twitter.com/WhiteBulgerShow/status/802642796490260480>
- Heavensward, ?e-Boy Em @. "Patterns on Patterns Slap. Pic.twitter.com/UPgnlel9bG." Twitter, 31 Aug. 2020, <https://twitter.com/caramelimage/status/1300570842816888834>
- Ingraham, Sidell. "Some of These Dudes beyond Selfish, Dumb and Basic They Just #SLAPS." Twitter, 20 May 2011, <https://twitter.com/Sidellio/status/71393525631168512>

- Jaszmin. "Rally's Loaded Fries #Slaps." Twitter, 16 May 2011, <https://twitter.com/princessjaszmin/status/70236210014072832>
- L.I.L.\_F.R.@.N.K. "Yo I Need Everyone to Go Click That Link in My Bio for Some That New South Bay Sound! #Ogm #Bayshit #Newmusic #Slaps 🍟😄." Twitter, 12 Oct. 2015, <https://twitter.com/OGMCREW/status/653593718277079042>
- Lineage. "We Have Someone Special about to Be Put up in a Song! Can't Wait to Hear the Finished Product 😄 #Newmusic #Sactown #HipHop #Rap #Slaps." Twitter, 6 June 2017, <https://twitter.com/itslineage/status/871964975136292864>
- Liz. "This Right Here Is What I Live for 😄 #SLAPS #Ifyouknowyouknow Pic.twitter.com/ODERTUqMny." Twitter, 28 Jan. 2019, [https://twitter.com/Gomez\\_Diggy/status/1089678749866414081](https://twitter.com/Gomez_Diggy/status/1089678749866414081)
- Marquis. "Sweet Love x Chris Brown>> #Slaps😄." Twitter, 13 Apr. 2013, <https://twitter.com/QuissNasty/status/322977063462109185>
- Miramontes, C.c. "Gonna Go in on This Dominos Pizza #Slaps." Twitter, 14 Apr. 2013, <https://twitter.com/therealcriscam/status/323518156285046785>
- Miramontes, C.c. "Just Made Some Poutine #Slaps #Canadianfood Pic.twitter.com/F6wjRMMKoj." Twitter, 27 Apr. 2013, <https://twitter.com/therealcriscam/status/327968902581743616>
- Muziczoo. "IT'S HERE! #Childrinkfucksmoke by @K00LJOHN NEW Mixtape Posted on [Http://T.co/CBnHIAO04u](http://T.co/CBnHIAO04u)! #SLAPS." Twitter, 23 Apr. 2013, <https://twitter.com/Muziczoo/status/326804065474457604>
- Nicholas, Cory. "No Shame. This Song #SlapsT.co/AWv6KzU5ee." Twitter, 18 July 2019, <https://twitter.com/coryfrmfelicity/status/1151902137494003713>
- P., Lijah. "S/O @BayAreaCompass For Showing LoveT.co/OtmKzntuDq #New #Video #ClickthatLink #LP #Lijahp #BayArea #Slaps #HipHopTuesday." Twitter, 19 Apr. 2016, <https://twitter.com/CntRushgr8ness/status/722468339411357698>
- Riddim, Thankful. "Waffle Fries from Chick-Fil-a Would Slap 🍟." Twitter, 30 Apr. 2020, [https://twitter.com/sara\\_hi\\_c/status/1256009419986399234](https://twitter.com/sara_hi_c/status/1256009419986399234)
- "Slap." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1993, [www-oed-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/181350?rskey=LwBu22](http://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/181350?rskey=LwBu22).
- "Slaps." *Slaps Search Term*, Google Trends, 2020, [trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=slaps](https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=slaps).
- "Slaps." *Urban Dictionary*, 2020, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=slaps](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=slaps).
- "Song Slaps." *Song Slaps Search Term*, Google Trends, 2020, [trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=song%20slaps&date=all&geo=US](https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=song%20slaps&date=all&geo=US).
- "This Song Slaps." *This Song Slaps Search Term*, Google Trends, 2020, [trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=this%20song%20slaps&date=all&geo=US](https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=this%20song%20slaps&date=all&geo=US).
- Urban, Joseph. "Fruit Slaps Harder than Candy Don't @ Me." Twitter, 22 Nov. 2020, <https://twitter.com/hondadeal4vets/status/1330357139169189889>
- Wilson, Alec. "Was Gonna Work out but Instead Went to Lunch with My Parents.. Went to This BBQ Place and Ate a Ton of Brisket and Pulled Pork 😄 #Slaps." Twitter, 26 Mar. 2015, [https://twitter.com/A\\_Wil\\_/status/581168289524527104](https://twitter.com/A_Wil_/status/581168289524527104)
- ✿. "Finally Tried a Spicy Chicken Sandwich from Popeyes. #Slaps." Twitter, 21 Nov. 2019, [https://twitter.com/AlwaysAP\\_/status/1197454437935124480](https://twitter.com/AlwaysAP_/status/1197454437935124480)

# Soul Patch

Mikayla Swasey

Cite as: Swasey, Mikayla. 2021. Soul Patch. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 279-284.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

Soul patch: the name that sounds like a rock band, yet is the term for the tuft of hair some people collect under their bottom lip. There is a coolness to the term that doesn't match its appearance nowadays. While the small clump of hair seen under one's lower lip is met with eye rolls nowadays, it was once "one of the coolest looks going among those who would consider themselves purveyors of street style" in the 90s (Reynolds). What made the 'cool' soul patch into "one of the most reviled facial hairstyles" in recent news (Evans)? Along with this, what does 'soul' have to do with the facial hairstyle itself? While 'patch' is a term seen in facial hairstyles, like the patched goatee, 'soul' isn't a word I'd immediately associate with hair. Looking at original term for the hairstyle, 'jazz dab' and the current 'soul patch', I will try to answer the questions 'why do we call that tuft of hair a soul patch, and what does it mean for people who wear it?'

## The origin of 'jazz dab'



The first thing I did in my investigation of the origins of the soul patch was to search multiple archives to find signs of the term. This worked for the term post-80s, but as I looked into more recent news on the word, many writers referred to an earlier name before it was known as a 'soul patch'. While the 'soul patch' first became popularized as a term in the 90's, the tuft of hair itself is argued to have had a popular surge in the 1950s. Edwards and Barton of Vox Media reveal that this is because famous jazz trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie was one of the first to popularize the beard, with him referring to it as his 'jazz dab'. Soon after that, more jazz players and listeners were seen sporting the facial hair, making it a visual symbol for those a part of the jazz community. New York Times columnist Penelope Green also suggests it may also be more than just a facial accessory—she mentions that some jazz players held the superstition that if they shaved off their 'soul patch', it would destroy their embouchure, the muscles in the mouth important for trumpet players. In the "Encyclopedia of Hair", Sherrow connects the two terms 'jazz dot' and 'soul patch' within the index, and refers to jazz listeners and 'beatniks' as other wearers of the hairstyle (Sherrow, pg. 361-363).

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) also connects the 'beatniks' to the late 50s, which sets them at the same time of the jazz dab. 'Beatniks' were a part of the beat generation, a mid-50s era of literature, specifically 'beat poetry', and fashion that went against social convention. Jesse Carney Smith in her book "Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture" identifies Dizzy Gillespie as someone who inspired beat fashion, specifically the beret, glasses, and 'soul patch' (pg. 129). Pamela

Reynolds also discusses this connection in her article “What do you call that thing?” in the line “The interest in odd placements of facial hair probably stems from the current fascination with the lives, literature and music of the 1950s Beat crowd. It's that coffeehouse thing: Cool Beat men always seemed to wear goatees or soul patches”. ‘Beatniks’ and the beat generation are connected to jazz, and it’s the bebop style of jazz in particular from this time that Smith references as an influence on the main figures of the generation, like Jack Kerouac.

## **Finding the use of ‘soul patch’: 70s-80s**

After finding the term ‘jazz dab’, I went closer to the present to find when the transition from ‘jazz dab’ to ‘soul patch’ began. While there aren’t many references showing the word being officially defined in the Oxford English Dictionary before 1986, there is an earlier instance of it 1979. Interestingly enough, it’s in reference to the hair tuft of Jake Blues of the Blues Brothers, also known as John Belushi. In the Rolling Stones article “Blues Brothers: Jake and Elwood’s Secret Life” Timothy White briefly mentions the ‘soul patch’ in the line “...Jake admits, scratching the bristly soul patch under his lower lip...” Because it’s referenced in a way that doesn’t explain what a ‘soul patch’ is, this seems to be a word that’s used regularly before this that just may not show up in print regularly.

This still raises the question: why exactly are we referring to this lower lip hair as a ‘soul patch’? Looking up the word ‘soul’ in the dictionary, we can find many different definitions for the term. One that stuck out to me defined ‘soul’ as “the emotional or spiritual quality of African American life and culture, esp. as manifested in music; soulful quality”. From this definition, we can also see that ‘soul’ is a part of African American culture and music, and that things can be described as ‘soulful’. Of course, in many modern iterations of the ‘soul patch’ in current times, we see the ‘soul patch’ on white men, as well as white musical artists. This to me leads me to believe the idea of ‘soul’ may have been appropriated for a broader audience, and that people use this term to define any type of music that’s deemed to be of ‘soul quality’, even if it’s not directly jazz performed by African Americans. Blues music is a form of jazz, and while it was also made by Africans, in this time it’s also a style being used by white artists as well, with these artists also wearing a ‘soul patch’.

Nick Heffernan, in his article “As Usual, I’ll Have to Take an IOU”: W. E. B. Du Bois, the Gift of Black Music and the Cultural Politics of Obligation” discusses how the Blues Brothers in particular brought the blues music to white audience and started the trend of white artists performing blues music (pg. 1100). While Heffernan goes on to discuss the discourse behind whether the Blues Brothers had a right to perform blues because they’re not African American, we can see the Blues Brothers reviving blues music for white artists. In the Rolling Stones article, White also refers to the Blues Brother’s music as an “unholy soul”. While the Blues Brother is more of a tribute band, with songs like ‘Soul Man’ and a multitude of blues covers, we can see their connection to soul, and this can explain the transition of ‘jazz dab’ to ‘soul patch’. With their outfits and music style, their entire look, including the ‘soul patch’, could also be seen a tribute to that older, original ‘soul’ music, worn by Dizzy Gillespie when ‘soul patches’ were still ‘jazz dabs’.

Some other blues artists that wore the ‘soul patches’ were Stevie Ray Vaughan and Tom Waits. Blues guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan sported a ‘soul patch’ on his 1983 debut album Texas Flood. Vaughan’s style was signature for his time, and as other guitarists picked up a similar blues style, they also imitated his look as well. In “Wake of the ‘Flood’: 21 Stevie Ray Vaughan Wannabes”, Dave Marchese lists several other artists that followed Vaughan that copied his ‘soul patch’ as outfits as well.

Tom Waits, a man known for his signature singing style, also was a ‘soul patch’ wearer. In his biography in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, his music is described as a “mixture of beat poetry and jazz-blues”, further connecting him to the older idea of the ‘soul patch’ as well. Tom Waits was someone considered to go against the mold of music at the time, similar to the beatniks in the 50s, the visual of the ‘soul patch’ is connected with this. Due to there being a gap in time between ‘jazz dab’

to 'soul patch' from the 60s-70s, this is all mainly speculation for the transition of terms. In the next section, looking to the 90s, I'll further explore how 'soul patch' and music connect, and how this goes further into film as well.

## Soul patch in the early 90s

The 90s is when we see a jump in the usage of the phrase 'soul patch'. Being officially added to the Merriam Webster Dictionary in 1991, 'soul patch' became something that was discussed in the news, books, and opinion articles in a way the 'jazz dab' wasn't. The 90s also brought in a new music style that 'soul patches' were rebirthed with called 'grunge'. During this decade, many artists and music listeners began to wear the 'soul patch' again, and there's also a cross over into film that helped the 'soul patch' gain more popularity as well.

'Grunge' is a more familiar style than 'beatnik' because many of the artists from that time are still listened to today. Bands like Nirvana, Soundgarden, and Pearl Jam were popular in the early 90s, and some of the members in these bands were also 'soul patch' wearers. Anne Billson with the Sunday Telegraph defines 'grunge' best as "a messy-sounding rock 'n' roll played by long-haired young men in baggy shorts". The 'soul patches' of this time don't seem to be inspired by anything previous, and seem more like just an easy form of facial hair to have and be a part of grunge culture. Locke Peterseim in the ESPN article "Minds, bodies and soul patches" speculates that 'soul patches' were revived due to grunge artists at the time being too sloppy to properly maintain a goatee, while Mark Rahner of Seattle Times describes the 'soul patch' as "a very low-maintenance way of customizing the body and showing individuality, while paradoxically signifying membership in a group or subculture". Rahner's description makes the 'soul patch' into a visual language, something to let others know without saying anything that they have similar tastes and have something in common. The paradox of this is interesting as well, because the grunge music and the 'soul patch' were connected would boast on the differences it had from others, not its similarities (Wilson). Grunge artists and fans nonetheless were a huge community, which could explain why 'soul patches' were discussed more during this time and could have crossed over into other types of media.

Along with this musical rebirth of the 'soul patch', we begin to see it in film as well. While the Blues Brothers did have a film in 1980 that featured Jake with a 'soul patch', there was a specific type of character made in the 90s that also became associated with 'soul patches'. These characters were also connected to grunge music, and usually seen as a slacker type. Ann Hornaday describes this type of character best in her New York Times Article "Valley of the Slacker Seekers":

*They are the twenty-something thinkers, the laconic purveyors of knowing sarcasm, the chain smokers. (...) These outsiders brood. They glower. They make oblique cultural references. (...) Certain accessories—a familiar object they clutch like a talisman (a guitar, for instance), a little beard (known as the soul patch)—are de rigueur in the films to let the audience know right away: 'This is the deep guy.' (Hornaday)*

The article goes on to include a chart of famous slacker characters in four other films, with a checklist to show how they fit into the character archetype. 'Soul patch' is one of the points to be checked off, along with a talisman the character carries around, and a philosophy they held. This connection of the 'soul patch' with slackers in film shows that there is a clear image for many on who wears a 'soul patch' in the early 90s. The grunge styles and slacker styles are so similar that they can be combined to give an idea of the type of person associated with 'soul patches' in this time. Around this time, 'soul patches' still held a level of positivity to them - the famous people who sported them in film, like Luke Perry in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, or Matt Dillon in Singles, were still well liked and famous, and grunge music was still popular. It's not until the late 90s that 'soul patches' are viewed in a harsher light.



## Soul patches and the late 90s-present

In the late 90s, 'soul patches' become connected to a new crowd, and the change is one Green describes as "a chilling example of a trend going terribly awry". This change isn't from a band, or from a new style this time: 'soul patches' gain a negative view from one person at the end of the 90s, where looking at Google's Ngram, we can also see it's this time that the term itself began to make more appearances in books. In 1999, Garth Brooks decided to create an alter ego, dark haired, 'soul patch' wearing Chris Gaines, and move from his country style briefly for a new style of music. Many people



considered the change in style to be fake, with Renee Graham of the Boston Globe calling it "milquetoast pseudo-soul" in her article "Aim of New Garth Brooks Album is not so Much 'soul' as 'sell'". Graham isn't the only one to talk about how Brooks' Chris Gaines album is considered fake either. An article from Palm Beach Post explains the situation pretty well: Garth Brooks created a persona to get a movie deal, and was trying to get enough interest in the persona to make a movie about the character. Unfortunately, the imagined character Brooks made didn't capture the styles of the 80s, or the grunge of the 90s, seeming more like a "knock off Prince".

Garth Brooks in his attempt to create a new persona, with a vast change in appearance, made the style of 'soul patches' no longer cool. In an article from Toronto Sun made months after the Chris Gaines album was released, a comment was made on 'soul patches': "Goodbye to the truncated tuft of hair under the lower lip. Popularized by some talent-challenged music biz flash-in-the-pan, the soul patch is but another prickly 90s variation of 'facial hair as street fashion statement.' Here's the real problem: It screams dumbass or, worse, Chris Gaines". Garth Brooks, and his use of the 'soul patch', has made it into something people didn't like, and it didn't have a cool reputation as before.

Although Garth Brooks has changed the view of the 'soul patch', the wearers of it haven't changed exactly, instead the view of the crowd has changed. People that wore it were no longer seen as 'cool' and 'deep thinkers', but instead were trying to imitate being cool. The term 'soul patch' was becoming inauthentic. Kim Ode, a staff writer for Star Tribune writes about an attractive athlete, whose only flaw is that he has a 'soul patch'. When describing the 'soul patch', she mentions that 'soul patches' were "once considered cool and edgy", which, since her article was published in 2002, implies that in 2002 'soul patches' were well on the way of being uncool. Johnathan Evans describes the descent of the 'soul patch' in the 2015 article "A Brief History of the Much Maligned Soul Patch": "the style has slipped further and further in the public's estimation, eventually becoming the symbol of general doofishness it's recognized as today".

## Conclusion

'Soul patch' hasn't changed its definition, yet over time the culture surrounding the word has changed. Since the 1950s, different communities have sported the 'soul patch', which is where the perception of the 'soul patch' changes. From the usage of the word 'soul' in 'soul patch', we see that it's trying to add a meaningfulness to the facial hairstyle, to connect the wearers of the look to a deepness or 'soulfulness'. While that may have worked in the blues and grunge era, the term, and hairstyle has gained an unliked reputation from it being associated with unauthentic 'soul'.



## References

- Billson, Anne. "The Arts: The Postman Dies First Anne Billson on 'Man Bites Dog', Singles', 'Sarafina!' and 'Soft Top, Hard Shoulder'." *The Sunday Telegraph*, 17 Jan. 1993.
- Edwards, Phil, and Gina Barton. "Soul Patches, Explained." *Vox*, Vox, 9 Dec. 2015, [www.vox.com/2015/11/2/9646232/soul-patch-beard](http://www.vox.com/2015/11/2/9646232/soul-patch-beard).
- Evans, Jonathan. "A Brief History of the Much-Maligned Soul Patch." *Esquire*, Esquire, 9 Oct. 2017, [www.esquire.com/style/grooming/a39367/soul-patch-video/](http://www.esquire.com/style/grooming/a39367/soul-patch-video/).
- "Facial Hair." *Beauty around the World: a Cultural Encyclopedia*, by Erin Kenny and Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols, ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 112.
- "Goatee." *Carnal Knowledge: a Navel Gazer's Dictionary of Anatomy, Etymology, and Trivia*, by Charles Hodgson, St. Martin's Griffin, 2007, pp. 65–66.
- Gottlieb, William P. *Portrait of Dizzy Gillespie*, New York, N.Y., ca. May. ||||, Monographic. Photograph. Library of Congress, <[www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.03141/](http://www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.03141/)>.
- Graham, Renee. "Aim of New Garth Brooks Album is not so Much `soul' as `sell': City Edition]." *Boston Globe*, Aug 10 1999.
- Green, Penelope. "Ranting: Stubble Trouble PENELOPE GREEN Bemoans the Return of the Mustache, the Goatee and, in Particular, the Dreaded Soul Patch." *New York Times*, 19 Mar. 2000.
- Heffernan, Nick. "'As Usual, I'll have to take an IOU': W. E. B. Du Bois, the Gift of Black Music and the Cultural Politics of Obligation." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 52, no. 04, 2017, pp. 1095–1121., doi:10.1017/s0021875817000883.
- Herrera, Elena. "Your Facial Hair Says Something about You; A Soul Patch Bares Your Soul." *Pipe Dream*, 23 Apr. 2010, [www.bupipedream.com/archive/4768/your-facial-hair-says-something-about-you-a-soul-patch-bares-your-soul/](http://www.bupipedream.com/archive/4768/your-facial-hair-says-something-about-you-a-soul-patch-bares-your-soul/).
- Hornaday, Ann. "Valley of the Slacker Seekers." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Feb 13, 1994
- "In with the Money, Out with Soul Patches: 1 Edition]." *Toronto Star*, Nov 18, 1999
- Jeff Houck Palm Beach Post, Staff Writer. "GARTH BROOKS: LIVING LA VIDA LOCO?: FINAL EDITION]." *Palm Beach Post*, Sep 28, 1999
- Marchese, David. "Wake of the 'Flood': 21 Stevie Ray Vaughan Wannabes." *Spin*, 11 Jan. 2013, [www.spin.com/2013/01/stevie-ray-vaughan-white-blues-guitar-texas-flood-reissue/](http://www.spin.com/2013/01/stevie-ray-vaughan-white-blues-guitar-texas-flood-reissue/).
- Ode, Kim. "Sure, He's Got Gold - but that Soul Patch!: METRO Edition]." *Star Tribune*, Feb 23, 2002
- Peterseim, Locke. "Minds, Bodies and Soul Patches." ESPN, ESPN Internet Ventures, [www.espn.com/page2/s/closer/020221.html](http://www.espn.com/page2/s/closer/020221.html).
- Rahner, Mark. "Hipness Takes it on the Chin; is the Way to Ohno's Soul through His Patch?: Fourth Edition]." *Seattle Times*, Feb 22, 2002
- Reynolds, Pamela. "What Do You Call That Thing?" *Boston Globe*, 14 Nov. 1995, p. 77.
- Smith, Jessie Carney. "Bebop Music." *Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture*, Greenwood, 2010, p. 129.
- "Soul Patch." *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HAIR: a Cultural History*, by VICTORIA SHERROW, GREENWOOD, 1996, pp. 226, 361-363.
- "Soul Patch." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soul%20patch#h1](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soul%20patch#h1).
- "Soul Patch." *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/185083?redirectedFrom=soul+patch#eid91683640>.

"Soul Patch." *Wahl Home Products*, [wahlusa.com/beard-mustache-trimming/how-to/goatee-styles/soul-patch](http://wahlusa.com/beard-mustache-trimming/how-to/goatee-styles/soul-patch).

"Tom Waits." *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*, 1 Jan. 1970, [www.rockhall.com/inductees/tom-waits](http://www.rockhall.com/inductees/tom-waits).

White, Timothy. "Blues Brothers: Jake and Elwood's Secret Life." *The Rolling Stones*, 22 Feb. 1979.

Wilson, Carl. "Dead Punks on Hope: On Counterculture, Co-Optation and Life after Grunge." *This Magazine*, vol. 28, no. 2, 08, 1994

Images:

<http://2.bp.blogspot.com/->

[OA4EATJISMw/Ti05yTpSbI/AAAAAAAAHDI/sJ2fiFzmTYE/s1600/dizzy+gillespie.jpg](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-OA4EATJISMw/Ti05yTpSbI/AAAAAAAAHDI/sJ2fiFzmTYE/s1600/dizzy+gillespie.jpg)

# Spaniard

Eric Gresock

Cite as: Gresock, Eric. 2021. Spaniard. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 285-288.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

When setting out to write this paper I initially found myself totally stumped. *Spaniard* and *Spanish* seemed to be wholly interchangeable, without any noteworthy difference. The Oxford Living Dictionary defines a *Spaniard* as, “A native or inhabitant of Spain, or a person of Spanish descent,” and the definition of *Spanish* is given first as an adjective, “relating to Spain, its people, or its language,” and as a noun as, “the people of Spain”. Naturally, *Spanish* is also defined as the language of much of South America and of Spain itself as well. So, what was the difference between the two? It was suggested to me that the word could have a racist connotation. At first blush, I thought that was a bit absurd. How could *Spaniard* be considered offensive? Some Googling later didn’t reveal a great deal of information, just some scattered forum posts asking the same question and the answer being “no”. However, this did prove that the conception of *Spaniard* being a racist term did exist. This got me thinking. When I thought about the word, what images immediately came to mind? *Spaniard* conjured a Conquistador, sword raised above his head, a black waxed mustache sitting above a mouth open in a snarl. I posed this question to a few of my friends and many of them gave similar responses. A few others responded Inigo Montoya and Antonio Banderas, which we will touch on later. Well, I thought to myself, that constitutes a lead. I propose that when you use the word *Spaniard*, you’re implying certain stereotypes.

We are talking about contemporary English, so let’s examine some English-language literature from the 1800’s to the early 1910’s for starters. In *An Old Sailor’s Yarns* (published in 1835, coincidentally the same year as the author’s death), Nathaniel Ames (not to be confused with the author of the first American almanac by the same name) describes a Spanish character as, a “genuine old Spaniard, and professed, and probably felt, the most implacable hatred to all heretics, especially English and Americans”. A “genuine old Spaniard” implies that this character is the archetype of his people. And what is this archetype? A through and through intolerant Catholic.

In the five-act play *Gordian Knot* by the Jewish reformer Isaac Harby, which is based on the anti-Catholic novel, *The Abbess*, where the protagonist languishes in the dungeons of the inquisition, there lies a warning not “To tempt my rage -- an injur’d Spaniard’s rage!” This passage certainly indicates that one should especially fear his rage because it is the rage of a *Spaniard*. The *Spaniard* bit adding extra weight to the threat.

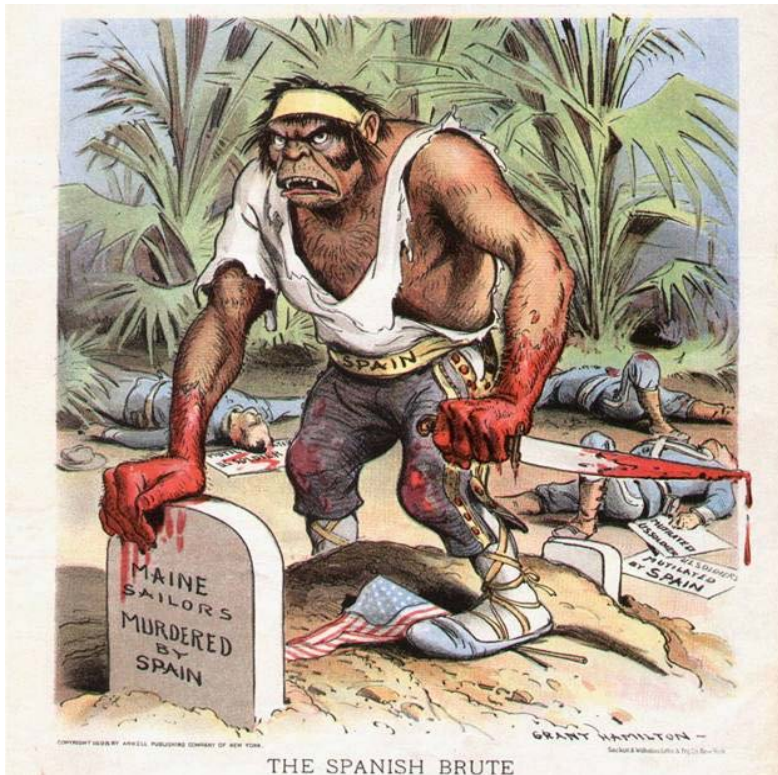
Washington Irving writes in the *North American Review* that, “the Spaniard, we say, who casts a melancholy glance over this dreary interval, will turn with satisfaction to the close of the sixteenth century, as the most glorious epoch in the annals of his country.” This “most glorious epoch” refers to the period of Spanish expansion and conquest most famously (or more properly, infamously) in South America and the East Indies. During this period, Spain, united with powerful Austria through the House of Habsburg, strode the globe like a giant, rich and vastly powerful.

Elizabeth Fries writes in *Teresa Contarini*, warning the titular character, “Teresa The Spaniard dwells there! It is death to enter these forbidden walls! Is it not so decreed?” It is unwise, and dangerous to cross a *Spaniard*, who will give death to the one who dares defy him.

Burt Standish in *Frank Merriwell Down South* has this sort of racist passage for us, “Wondareful -- ver’ wondareful,” purred the Spaniard, in mock admiration. “You give-a me great s’prise.” Phonetically spelling out an exaggerated accent is a method of firmly establish a character a foreigner, something *other*.

Lastly, Cyrus Townsend Brady neatly sums up all of these attitudes in the following passage from *Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer A Romance of the Spanish Main*, “There are numberless tales of the brave days of the Spanish Main, from “Westward Ho!” down. In every one of them, without exception, the hero is a noble, gallant, high-souled, high-spirited, valiant descendant of the Anglo-Saxon race, while the villain -- and such villains they are! -- is always a proud and haughty Spaniard, who comes to grief dreadfully in the final trial which determines the issue.” With this passage, we can surely add “proud” and “haughty” to the list of words with which we can describe the archetypical *Spaniard*. “And such villains they are!” says Brady, indicating a particularly vicious maliciousness amongst the *Spaniards*. While Brady goes on to say that he hopes to write a book with a good *Spaniard* as the protagonist, as perhaps he is not inclined to indulge the stereotype, his statement certainly helps to give us insight into the general feeling the English-speaking world felt towards people of Spanish origin.

Who is the *Spaniard* that the English-speaking world of the era paints for us? He (it is invariably a he) is a hot-blooded, dangerous, and often violent Catholic. A historical context is necessary here. The United States of America and England were (and are) predominantly Protestant countries, while Spain has historically been Catholic with close ties to the Papacy and Rome. England and Spain came



to blows over the matter of the Protestant United Provinces (modern Netherlands) in the Anglo-Spanish War, which was fought from 1585 to 1604. Dutch rebels had risen up against their Catholic Spanish overlords and the English threw in their lot with the Protestant Low Countries for various commercial and religious reasons, culminating in the Treaty of London. Later, the two maritime powers would come to blows once more during the great European smackdown between Catholics and Protestants (it is a little more complicated than that, of course, but it’s a sufficient explanation for our purposes) in the Thirty Years War (1618 to 1648). The two powers would compete in the 18th Century over the vastly valuable Caribbean, both sides eagerly employing the services of privateers to prey on merchant vessels.

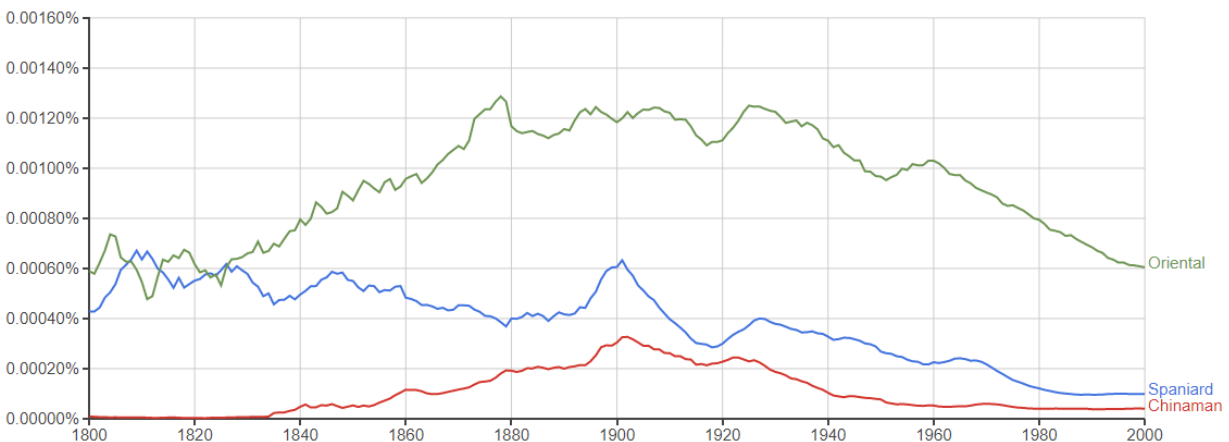
In the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States of America went to war with Spain over the matter of Cuban independence, eventually resulting in the ceding of the remainder of Spain’s colonial holdings to the US. In times of war, it is often very helpful to the state and national morale to dehumanize the enemy and accentuate his otherness. It is easier to kill a man if you’re not thinking about his wife and children. Take a look at this propaganda poster by Grant Hamilton from the



Spanish-American War. The *Spaniard*, in all his racist glory, is depicted as a stooped, ape-like figure, a simian savage clutching a bloody knife. He's hairy, dark-skinned, and with a brutish (it's called "The Spanish Brute" after all) expression that shows his pointed teeth. One of his massive, plate-sized bloody paws (for we cannot really call them hands) rests on a tombstone that reads "MAINE SOLDIERS MURDERED BY SPAIN", alluding to the sinking of the USS *Maine* off the coast of Havana, which carried considerable public favor for the war, as yellow journalism placed the blame for the destruction of the ship squarely on the, if this poster is to be believed, broad and stooped shoulders of the Spanish. Further investigation suggests that the USS *Maine* was destroyed by an internal coal explosion and not Spanish action. The *Spaniard* stands on the American flag, indicating his contempt for everything American. A yellow headband is wrapped around his head, and his yellow belt reads "SPAIN" in the case that for some reason we couldn't pick up that this hideous figure represented Spain. Let's break down this grotesque figure with the information we've already gathered. This swarthy figure represents is representative of the attitudes held by the English-speaking world towards the Spanish, a violent degenerate, a foreigner with disregard and contempt for their way of life. The *Spaniard* is the villain ("and such villains they are!") and the brave, murdered Americans are our heroes.

However, this stereotype of violent, ruthless machismo has declined in the English-speaking world. Let's call back to the intro paragraph for a moment and to the friends who responded to my question with Antonio Banderas and Inigo Montoya. "I give you my word as a Spaniard," says Inigo Montoya, the, dare I say, new archetypal *Spaniard* in the American consciousness. His honor, he claims, the words given to him by American author William Goldman in 1973 in the classic *The Princess Bride*. He is a man driven to avenge the murder of his father at the hands of the Six-Fingered Man, and while possessing the machismo of the earlier stereotype, and certainly embodying the "injur'd Spaniard's rage", is honorable and loyal. Somewhere along the line, Americans stopped seeing the *Spaniard* as the enemy, but as tall, dark, and handsome. A search of Google Books for "Spaniard" uncovers a host of Romance novels featuring Spaniards, with titles such as, *The Spaniard's Virgin Housekeeper*, *The Spaniard's Baby Bargain*, *At the Spaniard's Convenience*, and the straight to the point, *In the Spaniard's Bed*. The second definition of *Spaniard* on Urban Dictionary is listed as "a really good-looking type of guy, generally with dark hair and eyes, who speaks Spanish and lives in Spain". The ultimate fusion of this stereotype of the tall dark and handsome Spaniard combined with the noble Spanish swordsman is the character of Puss in Boots from the *Shrek* franchise, who is, of course, voiced by Antonio Banderas; a tall, dark, and handsome Spaniard. Today, the *Spaniard* is a sex symbol, an exotic foreigner, still removed from our society and still an outsider, who stars in our films, and in our romance novels.

It was suggested to me by a friend that *Spaniard* is an outdated form of address in the same vein as *Chinaman* and *Oriental*. Placing these together on the Google Ngram Viewer yielded these results:



As you can see, *Spaniard* and *Chinaman* show similar rates of decline, as well as the sudden spike circa 1900, and become virtually extinct according to this chart by 2000, which seems to corroborate her theory. To me this suggests that *Spaniard* has entered largely into the realm of a word used to describe a specific set of stereotypes.

## References

- Adamson, Andrew, director. *Shrek 2*. Dreamworks, 2009.
- Ames, Nathaniel. *An Old Sailor's Yarns*. Dearborn, 1835.
- Brady, Cyrus Townsend. *Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer A Romance of the Spanish Main*. G.W. Dillingham, 1903.
- Ellet, Elisabeth F. *Teresa Contarini: a Tragedy in Five Acts*. 1835.
- Fischer, Louis. "Destruction of the Maine (1898)." *Law Library of Congress*, 4 Aug. 2009.
- Goldman, William, et al. *The Princess Bride: S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love & High Adventure*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2017.
- Hamilton, Grant. *The Spanish Brute*. Judge Magazine, 1898.
- Harby, Isaac. *The Gordian Knot: Or, Causes and Effects. A Play, in 5 Acts*. Univ. Microfilms Internat., 1978.
- Irving, Washington. *The Conquest of Granada*. North American Review: October 1829, 1829.
- Morgan, Hiram, "Teaching the Armada: An Introduction to the Anglo-Spanish War, 1585-1604", *History Ireland*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (Sep.-Oct., 2006)
- "Spaniard." *Urban Dictionary*, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Spaniard](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Spaniard).
- Standish, Burt L. *Frank Merriwell down South*. 1903.
- Images: <https://thesignificantword.wordpress.com/category/biographies/>



# Tarnation

Hannah Langsdorf

Cite as: Langsdorf, Hannah. 2021. Tarnation. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 289-297.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Today, the word “tarnation” is usually associated with rural America – particularly the South, the Frontier, and of course, the Wild West. For many people today, their first exposure to the word may have been through Western movies or even the iconic “what in tarnation” meme that took the internet by storm in 2017. But the word “tarnation” has a long history not only in America, but in Scotland, Ireland, and England as well. For our purposes, we will focus on the changing use and context of “tarnation” in America. The word tells a story about a changing America. Tracing the various uses of “tarnation” in America’s history shows us that it is indexed particular identities such as Yankee, rural man, and cowboy, that have changed as the American identity formed and shifted. There is no one American identity and there is no one context for the word “tarnation”.



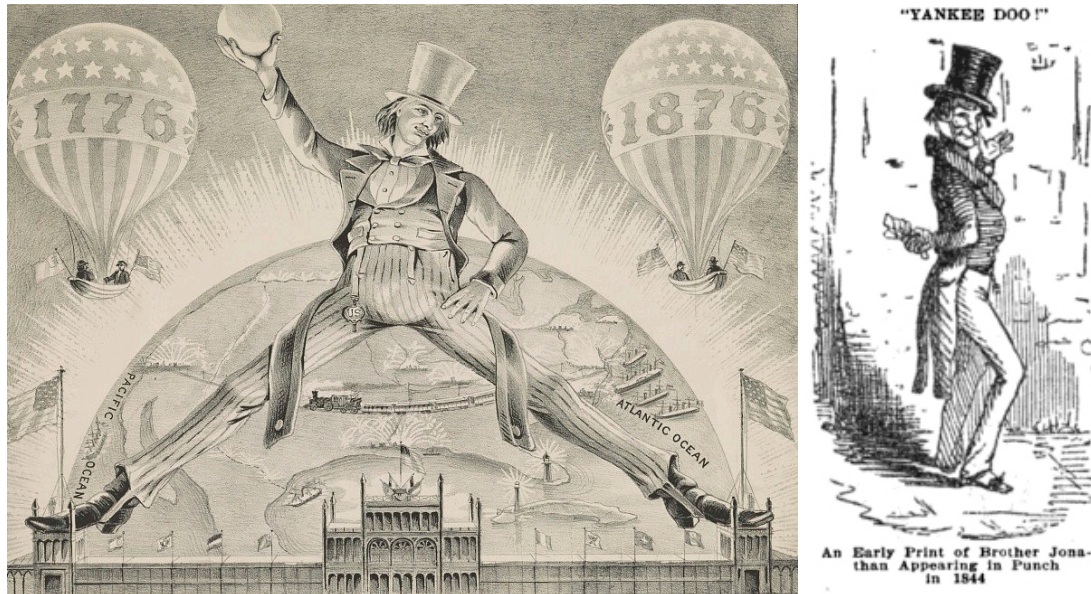
Some important background information to keep in mind is the origins of the word itself. “Tarnation” is thought to be a euphemism for “eternal damnation”. “Eternal” was shortened to “tarnal”, forming the tarn at the beginning of “tarnation”. Louise Pound writes in 1927 of the word “darnation”, the precursor to “tarnation” (Pound 1927). The website [word-detective.com](http://word-detective.com) speculates that America’s Puritan legacy required that such swears as “eternal damnation” were unfit for polite conversation and thus had to be changed to “tarnation” instead (Morris 2003).

## Yankee Origins

“Tarnation” makes its debut in Royall Tyler’s 1790 play *Contrast*. The character Jonathan, who says the word, “represents the New England Yankee, an unsophisticated country bumpkin, honest

and patriotic” (Morris 2003). The name Jonathan is no mistake here – before there was Uncle Sam, there was Brother Jonathan. Atlasobscura.com describes this early symbol of America in this way:

“Brother Jonathan was a rustic New Englander who was depicted at various times on stage as a peddler, a seaman, and a trader, but always as a sly and cunning figure. He began to show up in political cartoons in newspapers and magazines during the early part of the 19th century as new and cheaper printing methods developed. It was at this point that American cartoonists transformed Brother Jonathan from a figure of derision into one of patriotic pride” (Braun 2019).



He was both a figure of New England but also of America as a whole. Brother Jonathan was one of several mascots America was trying out, including Colombia and the Bald Eagle. Brother Jonathan would often use the word “tarnation” in speech and song performance to mark himself as being from New England (Morgan 1988). “Tarnation” was found in many other songs about Yankees, including “Old Ben, the Yankee: Or, More Jonathans” (Diprose 1844). Once again, the name Jonathan referred to the stereotypical New Englander and Yankee identity overall. The popular song “Tarnation Strange” was also known as “Yankee Wonders” (Hadaway 1840). This clearly establishes that being a Yankee means using the word “tarnation”. Using the word “tarnation” was a way to mark something or someone as Yankee. This idea was reinforced over and over again by the reprinting of songs such as “Old Ben, the Yankee” and “Tarnation Strange”, which appear in various American songbooks throughout the 1800s. Even in 1883, the play adaptation of “Tarnation Strange” was considered a standard play (Dicks 1883). Although the social associations of the word “tarnation” had changed a lot by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the memory of its Yankee origins was still in the American consciousness.

TARNATION STRANGE  
OR  
YANKEE WONDERS.

2

Written by the American Boz.

Composed by T. Blewett.



TARNATION STRANGE;  
OR, MORE JONATHANS.  
AN ANGLO-AMERICAN FARUCIAL COMEDY, IN TWO ACTS.  
BY W. T. MONCRIEFF.  
First performed at the Theatre Royal, Strand, August 5, 1838.



**Dramatis Personæ.**

[See page 20.]

GENERAL POPEAM (Commanding officer of a small garrison town, near London) ... ..	Mr. G. Cooke.
MR. JOHN DAWKINS (Solicitor, Town Clerk, and Master Extraordinary in Chancery) ... ..	Mr. Malville.
CORNET WIMBLETON (a young Officer of Dragoons, in the regiment of the General, in love with Amelia Swallow) ... ..	Mr. J. Lee.
MR. JONATHAN JONAH GOLIAN HANG (of West Tennessee County, Kentucky, affianced to Amelia) ... ..	Mr. W. J. Hammond.
ORDERLY (Confidential servant to the General) ... ..	Mr. Saller.

No. 687. Dicks' Standard Plays.

As Americans went westward in the name of Manifest Destiny, the social association of the word "tarnation" changed at the same time. "Tarnation" became associated with a different group of Americans: those in rural areas. Eventually, it would become associated with the Frontier, the South, and the Wild West.

## Tarnation in Rural America

Although “tarnation” was associated with Yankees, it was still used widely in other parts of young 1800s America. This was likely due to people from the East Coast carrying “tarnation” and other dialectical features with them in their westward movement. Richard Slatta says of Western frontier life that “immigrants to the West arrived from a wide range of backgrounds and locations. A large number of these newcomers came from the eastern United States” (Slatta 2006). In fact, Egerton Smith notes in 1831 that “tarnation” was a commonly used term in “several of the states of America” (Smith 1831: 274). Furthermore, there was already “occasional confusion between Yankee and Frontier stereotypes” during this time (Morgan 1988). With this in mind, it’s easy to see how the word “tarnation” became associated with rural America as well.

One could speculate too, that the large influxes of Irish immigrants to the U.S. might have contributed to “tarnation’s” association with rural America. The word was in common use in Ireland, Scotland, and England (Wright 1893). It’s not a stretch to say these immigrants greatly influenced American language and culture. The Library of Congress states:

“Between 1820 and 1860, the Irish constituted over one third of all immigrants to the United States. In the 1840s, they comprised nearly half of all immigrants to this nation ... many Irish men labored in coal mines and built railroads and canals” (Library of Congress).

Many Irish men went to work on the railroads and coal mines. These are jobs we associate with “the Wild West” and the Frontier. It’s easy to imagine an Irish coal miner out in the wild west saying “Tarnation!” Furthermore, it seems to me that the Ngram for “tarnation” and a graph of Irish immigration correlate somewhat. One can’t help but wonder if the influence of Irish immigrants contributed to “tarnation’s” popularity, since they both peak around 1840-1860.

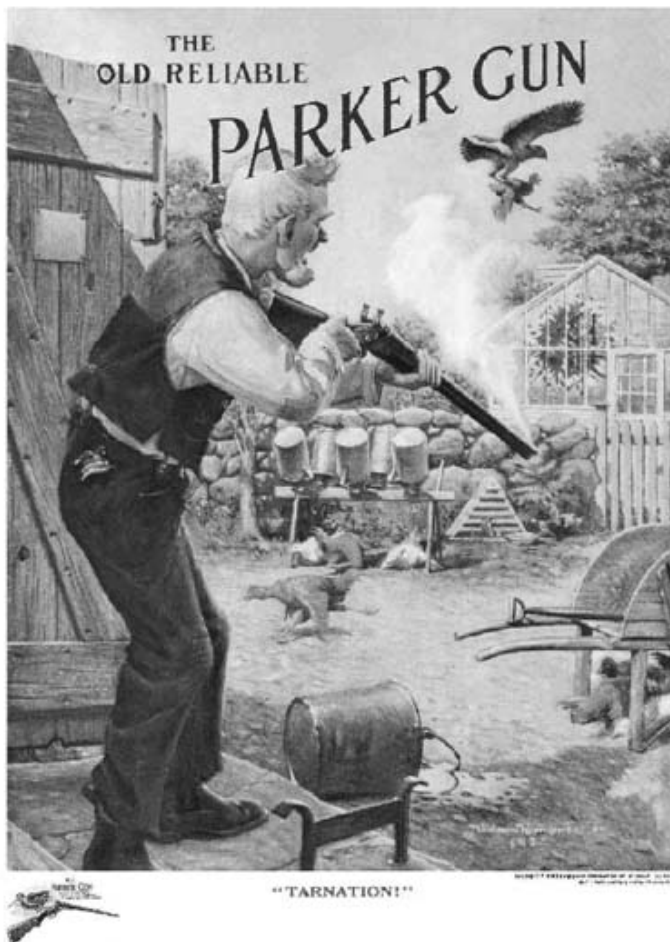






However, this is very speculative and more research is needed before any concrete conclusions are drawn.

What is undeniable is that “tarnation” became associated with rural America and the values of rural America, including hunting and the outdoors. “Tarnation” is listed in “Reprinted Glossaries and Old Farming Words” in 1880, clearly identifying and marking the word in connection with rural life (Skeat and Britten 1880: 81).





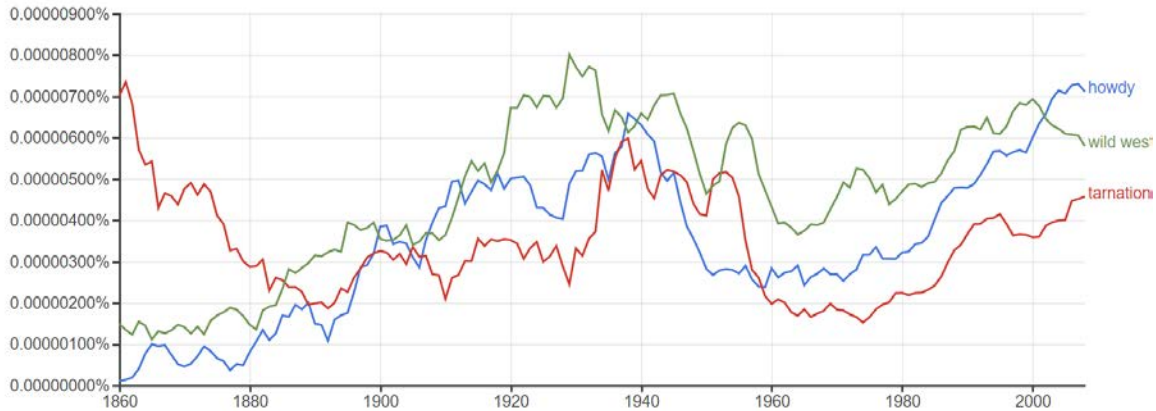
“ I HED A WHOPPIN’ TIME TRYIN’ TER MAKE SUM UV THE  
**TARNATION** STUFF STICK ONTO MY KNIFE LONG ENUFF TER  
GIT IT TO MY MOUTH.”

“Tarnation” is used extensively in a story from the satirical magazine *The Judge* about an old man from the country who comes to New York City. He is generally shocked and unprepared for the city ways and city food and expresses this in his speech with “tarnation”. The speech in general is very distinct and is spelled differently than “standard English”. It’s a country dialect with country vocabulary such as “tarnation” to index it. The spelling of words really indicates that it is not standard, such as in the following sentence: “I began ter think that air restoorant feller wuz tryin’ ter make a fule er me kase I wuz frum the kentry” (*The Judge* 1912). Words such as “feller” and “tarnation” make this a form of non-standard English. This tells us that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “tarnation” was likely only in use in “the kentry”. The old man in the story is acutely aware of these cultural differences as he tries to navigate city life. He has a sense that the city folk see him as inferior: “I didn’t want folks ter think I wuz brung up in a kentry circus” and “We kentry folks kin larn them city dudes sumpin onct in a while” (*The Judge* 1912). The word “tarnation”, along with his other speech qualities, is an essential part of his identity and he knows it is quite different from how the “city dudes” speak. Although this is from a satirical magazine and the situation is obviously greatly exaggerated, this fictional story illustrates how the word “tarnation” became further associated with rural American life.

## Tarnation and the Wild West

From its association with rural life, it wasn’t far of a jump to begin associating the word with the Wild West and Frontier life. Countless fictitious works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have used the word “tarnation” in its characters speech. However, all of these fictitious works take place either in the South or the West. As far as these books, magazines, and comics are concerned, the word “tarnation” has become geographically isolated to these areas. The Ngrams for “tarnation”, “howdy”, and “wild west” start to rise and fall together around 1880 and the trend continues today. This Ngram shows that these words are culturally bound to each other in the language of the imagined Wild West.

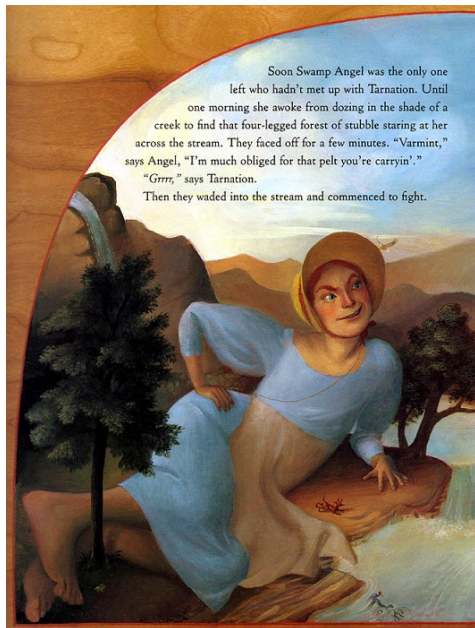




From this point in the research, it was difficult to tell what reflected how people actually use the word “tarnation” and what was just playing upon existing stereotypes about speech in the Wild West. The word was used frequently in adventure-type stories about the Wild West targeted towards young boys. These adventurous stories appear in *Boys’ Life* magazine (both in 1917 & 1928), *Hardy Boys* 05: *Hunting for Hidden Gold* (1928), and *John Wayne Adventure Comic* (1950).



In these stories, the people saying “tarnation” are all older men with knowledge of nature and the West. Another kind of fiction the word “tarnation” frequently appears in is plays taking place in the West around the 1800s. These include *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1943), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1970), and *The Crosspatch* (1973). From what I could find, Mark Twain doesn’t use the word in any of his works, so it is interesting that the playwrights decided to use the word in their creation of the play. In all of these works, “tarnation” is used to index a piece as authentically Western/Southern or to mark a character as being of that cultural background. The word in these fictitious works marks the scene as Western much like a physical marker such as a tumbleweed, cowboy hat, or a desert sunset might do.



**\$1.50 a Year**  
or 15c a copy at News-Stands



If you can't subscribe for a year, by all means get it every month. Earn the 15 cents yourself or tell Dad and Mother you want it. Most any news-stand carries it. Don't miss "Tarnation Wildcat" or "The Sawmill With a Plaster." *Go Buy it Today.* When sending subscription address

**THE SPRAGUE PUBLISHING CO.**  
No. 133 American Bldg., Detroit, Mich.

**THE AMERICAN BOY**

*"The Biggest, Brightest, Best Magazine for Boys in All the World."*

## Conclusion

In modern times the word "tarnation" marks a person as being a cowboy or from the South or historic Frontier but it wasn't always associated with these places. "Tarnation" began its cultural life in America as an indicator for Yankees and New England. It gradually became associated with more rural populations of America, until in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was eventually thought of as analogous to life in the Wild West or South. "Tarnation" demonstrates how a word may change its regional identification over time and how that relates to regional histories. "Tarnation" has brought joy and entertainment to audiences from the birth of our nation to modern times. Although plays, music, and stories have told us much about the use of "tarnation", there are many gaps in knowledge that need to be filled.

## References

- "Irish - Irish-Catholic Immigration - Immigration...- Classroom Presentation: Teacher Resources." Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/irish2.html](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/irish2.html).
- Braun, Ade. "Before America Got Uncle Sam, It Had to Endure Brother Jonathan." *Atlas Obscura*, 4 July 2019, [www.atlasobscura.com/articles/brother-jonathan-uncle-sam](http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/brother-jonathan-uncle-sam).
- Dicks, John Thomas. *Dicks' standard plays*. John Hicks, 1883.
- Diprose, John. "Old Ben, the Yankee: Or, More Jonathans." *Diprose's Royal Song Book*, John Diprose, 1844.
- Hadaway, T.H. "Tarnation Strange, Or Yankee Wonders." *Hadaway's Select Songster*, Gihon & Kucher, 1840.
- Morgan, Winifred. *An American Icon: Brother Jonathan and American Identity*. University of Delaware Press, 1988.
- Morris, Evan. The dagnabbit factor. [www.word-detective.com/050404.html](http://www.word-detective.com/050404.html), May 4, 2004.
- Pound, Louise. "The Etymology of an English Expletive." *Language*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1927, pp. 96-99.

Skeat, W.W. and James Britten. *Glossaries and Old Farming Words*. English Dialect Society, 1880.

Slatta, Richard W. *The Cowboy Encyclopedia*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Smith, Egerton. *The Melange: A Variety of Original Pieces in Prose and Verse : Comprising the Elysium of Animals*, Egerton Smith and Company, 1831.

Wright, Joseph. *The English Dialect Dictionary*. Henry Frowd, 1893.

Images:

[https://www.lifewire.com/thmb/aTvr70bvhEoVD0sOlwZ0VU40Ik=/768x0/filters:no\\_upscale%8%29:max\\_bytes%28150000%29:strip\\_icc%28%29/tarnationshiba5b0305046bf0690036ba335b.jpg](https://www.lifewire.com/thmb/aTvr70bvhEoVD0sOlwZ0VU40Ik=/768x0/filters:no_upscale%8%29:max_bytes%28150000%29:strip_icc%28%29/tarnationshiba5b0305046bf0690036ba335b.jpg)

[https://media0.giphy.com/media/3ohuPr8CdTZpgNCbOo/200\\_s.gif](https://media0.giphy.com/media/3ohuPr8CdTZpgNCbOo/200_s.gif)

<https://assets.atlasobscura.com/media/W1siZiIsInVwbG9hZHMvYXNzZXRzL2JmMzJhZjEyZDJIN2ZkN2YzZV9icm8tam8uanBnll0sWyJwIiwY29udmVydCIsljJdLFsicCIImNvbnZlcnQiLCItcXVhbGl0eSA4MSAtYXV0by1vcmlbnQiXSxbInAiLCJ0aHVtYiIsIjEyODB4PiJdXQ/bro-jo.jpg>

<https://acdwyer.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/1844-brother-jonathan.jpg>

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175035143059&view=1up&seq=3>

<https://i.pining.com/736x/12/9f/1e/129f1ead66ae3f659f55fa99487d6e23.jpg>

<https://i.pining.com/736x/57/c5/54/57c5543e675bede07215973ff14c9704.jpg>

# Troll

Mary S. Cavanagh

Cite as: Cavanagh, Mary S. 2021. Troll. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 298-306.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## Introduction

Picture a troll; what do you see? Does your mind immediately go to a dark and cold basement with a middle-aged white-male causing havoc and mayhem through a 14 by 11-inch computer screen, a grotesque boil-ridden trespasser at Hogwarts, or perhaps to an unknown-being created in the mountains of Scandinavia? Trolls are everywhere and even though our personal notations of them may differ, they still have the power to invoke negative feelings and connotations. How has the ambiguity of its origins combined with the language surrounding the word ‘troll’ within its lifetime allowed a type of mythological being to reside in both the imaginative realm and human reality simultaneously influencing social perception towards the Other<sup>1</sup> throughout history?

## Etymology: An Uncertain Beginning

The definition of ‘troll’ is fairly convoluted and perhaps delving further into each possibility may be a paper in and of itself. Although, in order to get a true understanding of the ambiguous evolution of the troll, an origination needs to be explored. It is said that “trolls date back all the way to ancient Norse and Viking culture, appearing in the oldest definite text on Norse culture, the *Prose Edda*” (Geller, 2017). Originally, in Old Norse<sup>2</sup> there appears to be two forms of the word ‘troll’: *troll* and *troll-*variously meaning fiend, demon or giant. Other guesses of origin are said to derive from such verbs as ‘tread’- to rush away angrily- ‘roll’ or ‘enchant’, as well as from a noun meaning ‘stout person’; feasibly, dating back to the Proto-Germanic word *trullan* meaning giant or monster or a Proto-Indo-European root for run, flee, or escape (Lindow, 2014, 11).

With such a lexical anomaly, it may be appropriate, that like trolls themselves, the word is capable of shapeshifting with several synonymous forms throughout history; Norwegian trolls being described as *jutul* (sing.), *jöttnar* (plural), *gygr* (fem.), or *reise*, the Scandinavian forms of *riesen*, with the Danish and South Swedish troll corresponds with the *huldrefolk*, the *trold*, *bjærgfolk*, and with *vättar* (Ingemark, 2004, 7). Even when exploring the Online Etymology Dictionary or Oxford English Dictionary (OED), ‘troll’ produces several entries on definitions ranging from a mythical being, to move, a type of fishing technique, or an Internet tyrant while including multiple forms of the word such as *trull*, *droll*, *trolley*, *trollop*, *trolle*, *trol*, *trole*, *trowel*, *troule*, *trowl*, *trowel* and so forth. With a ‘troll’ etymology ultimately being described as “a word or series of words of uncertain origin, and of which all the senses do not closely go together” (“troll”, 2019). Perhaps it is due to this lack of definition

---

<sup>1</sup> *Other*; in this essay, refers to the sociological analysis idea of ‘otherness’ of how majority and minority identities are constructed. The constructed identities reflect the way individual groups internalize social categories that shape ideas about who they think they are, how they want to be perceived, and the groups in which they and other people ‘should’ belong to (Zevallus, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> *Old Norse*; A North-Germanic language spoken in Scandinavia, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and parts of Russia, France, the British Isles and Ireland, but being more notoriously recognized as the language of the Viking and Norsemen (Ager, 2019).



or unknown origin that ‘troll’ seems to easily fill the social perception of Otherness throughout history.

## The Weaving of Realms

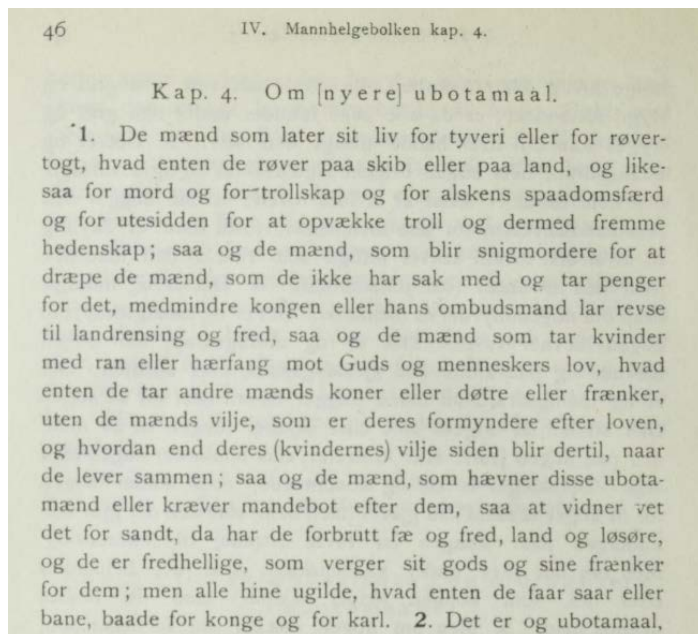
Trolls, being from unknown beginnings, have become a fixture of Scandinavian mythology from its inception, although, there is much confusion and overlap in the terms used for the word ‘troll’ in Old Norse. The first literary encounter of ‘troll’ is claimed to have occurred as far back as the 9<sup>th</sup> century but not recorded until c. 1220-30 in Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, a piece of literary work considered to be the most detailed source of Germanic mythology to-date (Lindow, 2014, 14). *Edda*, combined with the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of Old Norse anonymous poems and is said to have been written shortly after the *Prose* by a shared source, are commonly referred to being the main resources for skaldic traditions in Iceland and Norse Mythology (Lindow, 2014, 14.). ‘Troll’ is found in the longest section of the *Prose*, the *Skáldskaparmál*, where the first named North poet, Bragi Boddason confronts an unnamed troll-woman in a ‘certain’ far away forest late one evening who aggressively asked who he was in the process of describing herself (Lindow, 2014, 15):

Old Norse:	Anthony Faulkes <sup>3</sup> :	John Lindow <sup>4</sup> :
‘Troll kalla mik trungl sjotrungnis auðsug jøtuns,  élsólar þol, vilsinn vølu, vørð nafjarðar,  hvélsvæg himins - hvat’s troll nema þat?’  (Lindow, 2007)	‘Troll call me moon of dwelling- Rungnir, giant’s wealth-sucker, storm-sun’s bale,  seeress’s friendly companion, guardian of corpse- fiord, swallower of heaven- wheel; what is a troll other than that?’  (Faulke, 1995)	‘They call me a troll, moon of the earth- Hrungnir, wealth sucker of giants, destroyer of the storm- sun,  beloved follower of the seeress, guardian of the corpse- fiord swallower of the wheel of heaven [the sun] what is troll if not that?’  (Lindow, 2014)

From their first passage in *Edda*, although appearance and size are not mentioned, trolls are represented as a threat to the cosmos [‘destroyer of the storm-sun’], demolisher of prosperity [‘wealth sucker’] and closely associated with death and destruction [‘guardian of corpse’/‘swallower of heaven’]. This mere description of the ‘troll’ erupted the first influence of social cognition towards the female gender by assigning the troll to be a woman. With yet another piece of information being

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Faulkes; an Icelandic scholar and professor at the University of Birmingham that specialized in Norse literature and most known for his studies on the texts of *Edda* and other Nordic mythology (“Anthony Faulkes”, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> John Lindow; author and professor at the University of Iceland focusing research and studies regarding Old Norse literary traditions, particularly in myth and religions and the texts and genres that reflect them (“John Lindow”, 2019).



**Figure 1:** “Magnus Lagabøter’s National Law”, 1970.

exposed through Snorri’s *Edda*, the *pulur*<sup>5</sup>, where five stanzas contain more than 60 names of troll-women and no *pulur* for the male counterpart. A consistent gendered system throughout Norse literature and mythology will continuously associate the female to chaos and evil, conceivably the source of corresponding women with witches. Although not always correlated with the female sex, trolls will forever be associated with “disorder and darkness, with the non-human, with chaos and the Other” (Lindow, 2014, 17).

It is crucial to note that the negative female perception was more of an attribute of Christianity rather than the Norsemen who allowed women to have relatively free status, legal rights, and even religious authority as active priestesses and oracles (Curry, 2013). Taking their first steps from mythical folklore into human

reality, trolls, with their uncertain origins become the perfect poster child for the demonization of paganism<sup>6</sup> during the introduction of Christianity throughout the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century; although it is unknown if the word ‘troll’ was created by Snorri primarily for this reason.

In 1274, after the signing of the Treaty of Perth<sup>7</sup>, King Magnus Haakonsson (VI), otherwise known as “Magnus the Law-Mender”, modernized legislation, which remained common law of Norway, Faroe Island and Shetland for over 500 years, through the *Leges Gutathingenses* that introduced European culture, confirmed privileges of the clergy and was the first unified code of law for a whole country (Ingemark, 2009, 432). This is where trolls make their second appearance and conceivably their largest contribution to social perception of otherness. King Magnus used the loan word ‘troll’ in one of the few statutory lawbooks that were common throughout all of Europe and the Middle Ages to connect prior Norseman traditions and culture with heathens and a general unfavourability. **Figure 1** showing a rewritten excerpt from Magnus Lagabøter’s National Law”, or *Leges Gutathingenses*, where both ‘*trollskap*’ and ‘*troll*’ are utilized in third and fourth line. Directly translating to, “1. The men who risk their lives for theft or for robbery, whether they rob on ships or on land, as well as for murder and for sorcery [*trollskap*] and for all kinds of divination and for outreach to awaken trolls and thus promote paganism...” adding men who take money for murder, take woman as their own, seek vengeance for wrongdoing, and those who awaken “mound-dwellers” were punishable by death (“Magnus Lagabøtes landslov – drap og ubotamål”, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> *pulur*; manuscripts that contain versified lists of poetical, mythological and heroic knowledge of Scandinavian traditions (Lindow, 2014, 18).

<sup>6</sup> *Paganism*; not a form of organized religion but more of a “conduit for transmitting traditions and moral lessons from one generation to the next and more broadly defined as any religious acts, practices or ceremonies that were not Christian”; a term often associated with Norseman or Vikings (Darensburg, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> *Treaty of Perth*; a treaty in 1266, concluded by King Magnus Haakonsson of Norway and King Alexander III of Scotland where Norwegian sovereignty was confirmed over Shetland and the Orkney Islands (Editors of The Gazetteer for Scotland, 2019).



In the practiced traditions of Norwegian forefathers prior to sovereignty, it was custom to raid, pillage, rape, and even worship by alters or sacred gravemounds at night to contact the deceased (Clark, 2014). Was King Magnus consciously using the metalanguage surrounding the word ‘troll’ to acquire his own objectives of invoking fear of the Other and push for a mass conversion of Christianity? The negative perception of ‘troll’ as a descriptor for a group of anti-Christian pagans was further solidified by legends of trolls having the ability to smell the blood of a Christian, steal Christian women and children, and even being driven away or killed by the sounds of ringing church bells (Gazur, 2016). These associations created a ‘troll’ that no longer lived only within the pages of mythology and stories but coexisted within the communities, were hard to identify by appearance alone, and should be feared. While almost impossible to define, one thing was for sure: Trolls were not Human nor Christian (Lindow, 2007).

It is worth noting, in 1218, two years prior to *Edda*, both King Magnus the Law-Mender and author Sturluson were close acquaintances with Snorri ultimately becoming the King’s political spokesman in the Icelandic Commonwealth<sup>8</sup> before its demise in 1262 by Icelandic chieftains swearing allegiance to the King of Norway (Jóhannesson, 2014, 244). Perhaps this friendship created ‘troll’ to influence the demonizing social perception of the forefather-cult, or it was purely coincidental. Regardless, since its unclear insemination, ‘troll’ has seeped into both the magical realm of folklore and the law books of human reality instilling certain negative perceptions of social groups that were deemed unnatural.

## The Evolution of Trolls

Legends throughout the Middle Ages continued to feature trolls as horrifying, dangerous and even satanic beings capable of coexisting in Nordic mythology and entering into the realm of humans whenever they see fit. This social perception remained resilient even with alternative definitions of the word beginning to erupt throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> century all the way through the early 1600s. In literary works such as *Piers Plowman*<sup>9</sup> the verb form ‘trolled’ is used in reference to roll or move (“troll”, 2019). In 1570, the *Manipulus Vocabulorum*<sup>10</sup> defines an alternative noun form of troll, *trówell*, as a type of wheel ultimately leading to a modern fishing bait-technique associated with the verb ‘trolling’ (“troll”, 2019). Imaginably, this could have been, yet another way ‘troll’ was able to shape-shift in order to remain a prominent influence in the human world throughout its lifetime. Perhaps the ambiguous ‘troll’ could have been lost to the poets, dictionaries, or fishermen as a type of action or technique if weren’t for Olaus Magnus<sup>11</sup> taking advantage of its vague origin when producing his legendary pieces of folklore history that would feed the perceptions of travelers, literature, and lawmakers to come. In 1539, the *Carta Marina*, created by Magnus and was said to be the only Scandinavian map in existence at the time, showcased ‘troll’’s first historical illustration that can be seen in **Figure 2** (Sjoholm, 2004, 250). This combined with his 1555 publication of the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (‘A Description of Northern People’)<sup>12</sup> allowed ‘troll’ to reweave itself amongst the realms of both

---

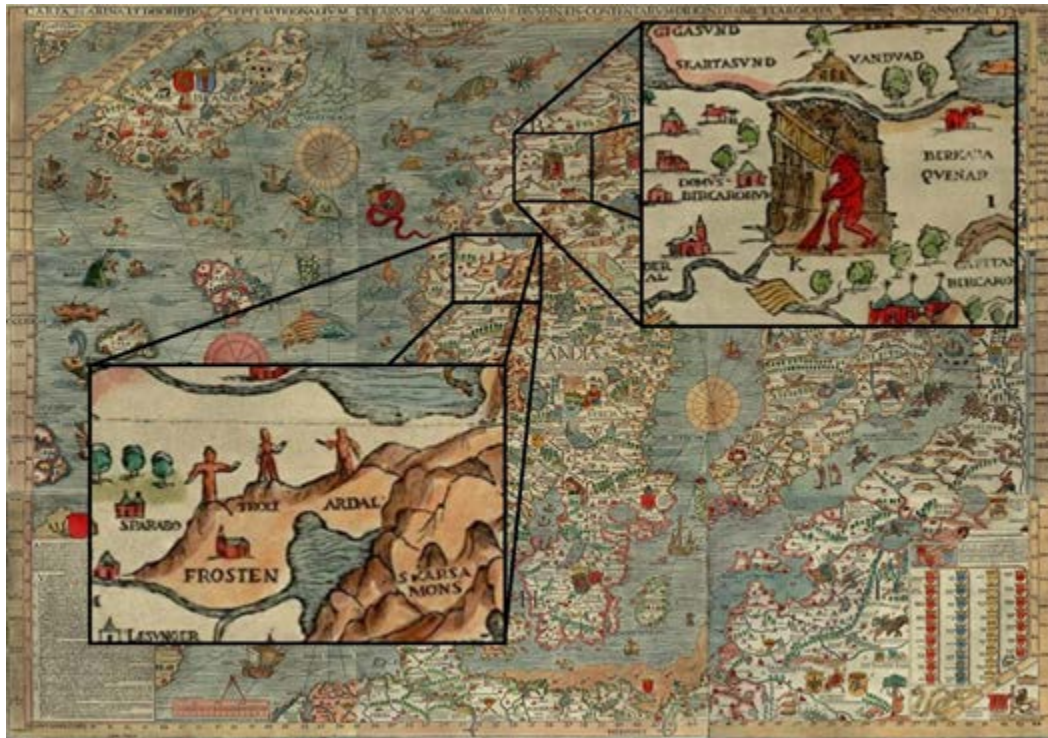
<sup>8</sup> *Icelandic Commonwealth*; a unique judicial structure existing in Iceland since 930AD avoiding a strong centralized authority that was composed of several chieftains during the Age of the Viking (Solvason, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> *Piers Plowman*; a compilation of Middle English poems published in 1377 by an unknown author but recognized as one of the greatest works of English literature of the Middle Ages to-date (Wright, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> *Manipulus Vocabulorum*; a dictionary of English and Latin words written by P. Levens in 1570 (“troll”, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> *Olaus Magnus*; a Swedish historian and catholic archbishop of Uppsala in the 15<sup>th</sup> century known for his work in Scandinavian mythology and folklore (Scott, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (‘A Description of Northern People’); Olaus Magnus’ intention to explain in detail the contents of the *Carta* that was regarded as the most valuable source of



**Figure 2: Carta Marina, Magnus, 1539, with edits to magnify illustrated ‘troll’.**

mythology and reality while simultaneously developing into the ideal food to quench the appetite for demonology growing within the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. In Olaus’ map and description, a whole chapter (**Figure 3**) is devoted to troll-demons lurking within mines causing chaos, darkness, and disorder while Magnus further describes the North as a place “(where in a quite literal sense the abode of Satan lies) demons, with unspeakable derision and in diverse shapes, express their encouragement to people who live in those parts” (Sjoholm, 2004, 252). *Historia* and the exploited language received great notice especially during a time when demonology was a serious issue in Europe where burnings, hangings and trials were on the rise. Subliminally, Magnus was able to influence a negative social perception of the North and its inhabitants, especially women, through the language surrounding ‘troll’ in his works that would long remain authority for the rest of Europe on Scandinavian matters.



**Figure 3: Illustration from *Histria de gentibus Septentrionalibus* by Olaus Magnus, introducing the chapter ‘a troll mine’ (or demon) in 1555 (Lindow, 2014, 50).**

Scandinavian customs/ traditions that included descriptions of Nordic manners, demons, government, holy practices, beings, war, superstitions and much more (Sjoholm, 2007, 245).

Further into Olaus' *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, Magnus seems to acknowledge and describe traditions of pre-Christian goddesses or sorceresses in connection with 'troll' that would later influence Jean Bodin<sup>13</sup> spurring the witch-hunt frenzy of Europe that would continue for another 200 years (Sjoholm, 2004, 252). During the height of the European witch-hunt, the 1616 *Dittay Sherriff Court Shetland*, or Scots Law of 1616, was enacted that solidified trolls' existence in human reality along with a foothold social perception of a demonic, evil, and dangerous Other. Scots Law of 1616 included a glossary denoting several different forms and definitions of 'troll' (*troilya, trow, trollibag, trowe, drow, hill-troll, sea-trowes, trolle, tryll*, etc) to mean devil, goblin, man-eating, dangerous, destructive to mankind and malignant (Jamieson, 1841, 597-600). The court document goes into extensive detail of the appearance, dwellings, demonic tendencies, types, mythical powers and even accounts of not only seeing such beings but apprehending them as well (Jamieson, 1841, 598). While trolls still existed within the pages of mythology through the continuous retranslation of the *Eddas*<sup>14</sup>, the law of 1616 cleared up any doubt of their existence amongst humans along with further influencing the perception of a troll as hated, feared and a satanic Other.

Until the late 1800s, trolls predominately filled the shoes of a scary, pagan, anti-Christian, evil and dangerous Other that were both common in the imagination and reality. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Norwegian writers and scholars, Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, published the most meaningful literary work for the Norwegian people from the 1840s to 1940s, the *Norske folkeeventyr* (Lindow, 2014, 104). The *Norske folkeeventyr*, or Norse Fairytales and anthology published every year since 1907, temporarily locks the 'troll' within the realm of imagination but does not stray from generating a sense of Otherness in describing them as dimwitted, dangerous, mean, a problem to deal with, thieves, isolationists, kidnappers and even killers. In 1907, Asbjørnsen and Moe hired illustrators John Bauer<sup>15</sup> and Theodor Kittelsen who would be attributed the leading artists for the troll's inhabitants, demeanor and appearance that would be carried on throughout their lifetime (Lindow, 2014, 105).

Literary icons such as J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Hobbit; or, There and Back Again* (1937) fiction, J.K. Rowling in her *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) series, as well as Ingri and Edgar D'Aulaires' *D'Aulaires Tales* (1972), exploited the unknown 'troll' and created their own definition in order to captivate audiences as well as create an Other that existed both in the imagination and amongst humans (Lindow, 2014, 124). Utilizing Norse mythology and folklore, Tolkien, created a darkened tone of 'troll' that was a being much like Olaus': a grotesque, dangerous species that long lived within the hills, mountains, and caves amongst human counterparts. Taking a lighter approach, J. K. Rowling created more of a dim-witted "horrible sight" of a giant 'stuck' in the magic school taking out everything in its path until ultimately being outsmarted by the more simple-minded character using his own club against him. In contrast, the *D'Aulaires Tales* followed in the footsteps on the *Norse Folktales*, aimed for children and perhaps the first and notorious reference of an unsightly troll dwelling underneath the cold, damp, and dark corners of bridges (Lindow, 2014, 125). Deliberately or not, by applying associations of the troll being dimwitted, grotesque, misfit, dangerous with the capable of residing within human reality, these authors shaped a modernized social perception of what it meant to be a 'troll' or what a 'troll' could be. To this day, the homeless are perceived as trolls, perhaps thanks to the D'Aulaires brothers it is due to their common inhabitants under bridges or it may be their unkept, often repulsive appearance coupled with the human fear of interaction that disseminated from Tolkien and Rowling's published perception of 'troll'. Similarly, these social

---

<sup>13</sup> Jean Bodin; the judge credited for the legal definition of witchcraft (Sjoholm, 2004, 252).

<sup>14</sup> *Eddas*; used to reference both Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*

<sup>15</sup> John Baur; his famous watercolor painting- "Princess and the Troll Brothers" published in 1913's "Among Gnomes and Trolls" featured on Title Page.



perceptions are conceivably why Yoopers<sup>16</sup> often refer to residents of the Lower Peninsula as trolls due to residing beneath the Mackinac Bridge<sup>17</sup> or perhaps they are deemed to be more ugly, inhuman and a danger to society.

### The Everyday Troll: An Uncertain Ending

The unreliable history of 'troll' allows for its lexical and physical shapeshifting throughout its lifetime to create different perceptions towards a regarded Other capable of intermingling within mythology and reality. Nowadays varying images, definitions and perceptions of trolls range from the mounds of Mordor<sup>18</sup>, infamous troll-dolls created by a Danish woodcutter in (1959), or an adoptive family of troll-rocks in Disney's *Frozen* (2013) influencing various perceptions of 'troll' to their audience. Feasibly the largest troll-infested environment today is said to be the trolls 'trolling' the Internet and social media. According to a draft addition of the Oxford English Dictionary, an internet troll is "to post deliberately erroneous or antagonistic message on a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response. Also...to elicit a response from a person" ("troll", 2019). The language used within this definition, for the first time in its history, trolls became any human in the world that was capable of crude, threatening and disruptive acts. *South Park*, an American animated sitcom aired Season 20, Episode 2, "Skankhunt" on September 21, 2016, portraying one of the main characters, in the dead of night, take pleasure in 'trolling' women across message boards for his own pure comical enjoyment (Figure 4). Being such a notorious show and seen by millions, this further solidified the new social perception of 'troll' to possibly just being the dark side of the everyday human.



Figure 4: *South Park* S20E02: Skanhunt\_42 in action, trolls women, screenshot taken from a post on YouTube.com from user Quriociti, February 12, 2017

<sup>16</sup> *Yooper*; a term created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seen by some as derogatory, in reference to the residents of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

<sup>17</sup> *Mackinac Bridge*; the bridge that separates the Upper and Lower Peninsula of Michigan opened in 1957.

<sup>18</sup> *Mounds of Mordor*; location in Middle-Earth within the realm of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings* Saga.

Going as far back as Usenet<sup>19</sup>, lexical origins pertaining to the OED definition is speculated. Could today's society be combining multiple historical perceptions of 'troll', a fishing technique requiring the trailing of bait in the hopes of a bite with the modified adaptation of a mythological being, to create their own social cognition of the word? Like its beginning, it can never be certain. What is clear is there is a new social perception of Other created from the language and context of 'troll' through the eruption of different social platforms; UrbanDictionary.com having 35 pages designated to 'troll' with the vast majority aimed at the nuisances and pests on the Internet (Lindow, 2014, 141).

## Conclusion

Everyone has their own perception of 'troll', perhaps the uncertainty in etymology and history has aided this feat of altering the negative opinion of the Other throughout its lifetime. From its literary insemination in the Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, trolls were a fixture of Scandinavian mythology lurking their way through the pages of King Magnus' unified legislation, Olaus Magnus' monumental pieces on mythology and folklore and the lawbooks of Scotland. The language used throughout these works alluded to the Norse forefathers as a type of Other that is to be hated, feared, and hopefully killed. With such an unknown lexical origin, authors such as Asbjørnsen and Moe, the D'Aulaires brothers, Tolkien and Rowling were able to not only create their own sense of 'otherness' from their description and language surrounding 'troll', but also begin to create visual images of what a 'troll' really is. Even today, the shape-shifting of the 'troll', we are left with the social perception that a 'troll' is the mere dark-side of the human, hiding behind anonymity; perhaps this was ultimately the initial definition that happened to be convoluted with politics and unfamiliarity. Regardless, "Trolls will continue to fulfil many roles in fiction and reality. Their very lack of definition means they will always have a niche to fill so long as there is a sense of Otherness we need to explain and explore" (Gazur, 2016).

## References

- Ager, S. (2019). Old Norse (Dǫnsk tunga / Norrœnt mál).  
<https://www.omniglot.com/writing/oldnorse.htm>.
- "Anthony Faulkes". (2018, May 22). [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony\\_Faulkes](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Faulkes).
- Bauer, John. (1913). The Princess and the Troll Brothers. [Illustration: Title Page].  
<https://www.artpassions.net/bauer/bauer.html>.
- Clark, D. (2014, July 16). Viking Religion and Burial Rituals. Word Press. <http://semiramis-speaks.com/viking-religion-and-burial-rituals/>.
- Curry, Andrew. (2013, June 10). The First Vikings. Archaeology: The Archaeological Institute of America. <http://www.archaeology.org/issues/95-1307/features/941-vikings-saaremaa-estonia-salme-vendel-oseberg>.
- Editors of The Gazetteer for Scotland. (2019). Treaty of Perth: 1266. Scotland: University of Edinburgh and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. <https://www.scottish-places.info/events/eventfirst171.html>.
- Faulkes, Anthony & Sturluson Snorri. (1987). *Edda* (Translated by Anthony Faulkes). London: Dent.
- Gazur, B. (2016, October 13). A Brief History of Trolls. England.  
<https://folklorethursday.com/folktales/brief-history-trolls/>.

---

<sup>19</sup> Usenet; the first large-scale discussion platform attracting a wide variety of Internet users established in 1980, preceding the World Wide Web by about a decade (Lindow, 2014, 140).

- Ingemark, C. A. (2004). *The Genre of Trolls: The Case of a Finland-Swedish Folk Belief Tradition*. Finland: Abo Akademi.
- Jamieson, John. (1841). *Scottish Dictionary and Supplement: In Four Volumes. Suppl. Kab-Zic, Volume 4*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Jóhannesson, Jón. *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Islendinga Saga*. (2014) Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- “John Lindow”. (2019). University of California, Berkeley: Scandinavian.  
<https://scandinavian.berkeley.edu/people/john-lindow/>.
- Lea, H. C. (2009). *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages: Special fields of inquisitorial activity*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Lindow, John. (2007). *Narrative Worlds, Human Environments, and Poets: The Case of Bragi*. Andrén, Anders: Nordic Academic Press.
- Lindow, John. (2015). *Trolls: An Unnatural History*. London: Reaktion Books.
- “Magnus Lagabøtes landslov – drap og ubotamål”. (2019) Oslo: University of Oslo.  
<https://www.norgeshistorie.no/hvordan-blir-historie-til/hoymiddelalder/K0928-Magnus-lagabotes-landslov-drap-og-ubotamal.html>.
- “Magnus Lagabøter’s National Law” (1970) Oslo: Oslo University Lecture.  
[https://www.nb.no/items/URN:NBN:no-nb\\_digibok\\_2012020808158](https://www.nb.no/items/URN:NBN:no-nb_digibok_2012020808158)
- Quiriociti [Screenname]. (2017, February 17). South Park S20E02: Skanhunt\_42 in action, trolls women. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwfeuGH2wdA>.
- Scott, Michon. (2018). Olaus Magnus. Strangescience.net.  
<https://www.strangescience.net/omagnus.htm>.
- Sjoholm, Barbara. (2004) “Things to be Marveled at Rather than Examined”: Olaus Magnus and “A Description of the Northern Peoples”. *The Antioch Review* 62(2): 245-254. DOI: 10.20307/4614640.
- Solvason, B. (2019). *Ordered Anarchy, State And Rent-Seeking: The Icelandic Commonwealth, 930-1262*. Iceland: University of Iceland. <https://notendur.hi.is/bthru/kafli2.htm>.
- “troll”. (2019) OED Online. Oxford University Press.
- Wright, Thomas. (2013). *The Vision and Creed of Piers Ploughman, Volume I or II*. Gutenberg: The Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/43660/43660-h/43660-h.htm>.
- Zevallos, Z. (2011, October 14). What is Otherness? <https://othersociologist.com/otherness-resources/>.



# Undocumented

Issamar Camacho-Almaraz

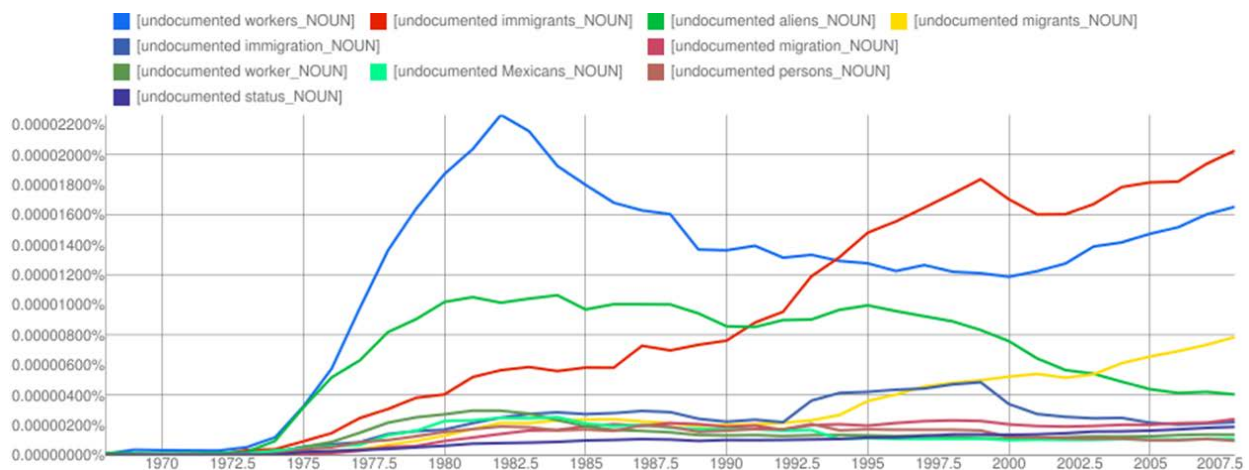
Cite as: Camacho-Almaraz, Issamar. 2021. Undocumented. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 307-313.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

*“Did our mom ever sit you down and tell you that you were undocumented?”*

My sister is a DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipient. Like many others, my family consists of both United States citizens and non-citizens—with and without a legal status. Given that I am the first person in my family to be born in the U.S, the difference between being documented and undocumented has shaped my consciousness ever since I can remember. So, when I recently asked my sister for the first time how she found out that she was undocumented and she furrowed her brow as she responded that “No one ever used that word, “undocumented.” I was taken aback. How could a word that I thought was ubiquitous in the conceptualization of citizenship status not have played any part in my sister’s experience realizing her own citizen status? I searched Google Ngram to ascertain what words were most commonly associated with “undocumented”. Figure 1 demonstrates the prevalent use of the word “undocumented” in relation to other words related to the question of immigration since the 1970’s. This confirmed a connection between “undocumented” and immigration in printed works. However, the question still remained as to how I, along with many others in the U.S, came to associate this word with citizenship status and why it has become so prevalent in the discourse surrounding the question of immigration. As I embarked on my quest to find the roots of the relationship between the word “undocumented” and citizenship status, I did not realize that I would be led down a winding path of historical events spanning over a century, inexorably leading to the presence of the word “undocumented” in contemporary U.S immigration discourse.

**Figure 1: Nouns most commonly following *undocumented***



In the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the word “undocumented” is defined in two parts; the first being “[something] [t]hat has not been documented,” the second “*spec.* in U.S., not having the appropriate legal document or licence” (“un’ documented, adj.”). Although the entry is short and has

not been updated since 1989, the quotations made available in the entry highlight important time periods where the meaning of “undocumented” was undergoing a shift. Furthermore, the fact that the entry includes a specific definition of the word in the United States illustrates the need for a historically-driven, localized contextualization of its meaning. With regard to the first meaning of the word (describing something for which there is no documentation), the earliest contextual example in the OED entry is dated May 12, 1883, where the word is used to describe a period of time that has not been documented (“un’documented, adj.”). However, I was able to locate an earlier example of the word in an article printed in the *Christian Observer*, a London based evangelical newspaper, where the editors respond to a letter denouncing them by referring to its contents as “undocumented gossip” (Drummond, 1831). The word “undocumented” is clearly used to discredit the assertions made against the editors of the *Christian Observer* by referring to the lack of empirical support for the charges leveled against them. These early examples express the ideals espoused by positivism which emerged from the period of Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and prevailed well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The word “document” also transforms during this time period to mean the gathering and writing down of observable evidence (“document, v.”). It follows that an emphasis on empirical data would catalyze the development of a word to then describe the process of collecting and producing observable data as well as the lack thereof. After all, “undocumented” owes its existence to the root word “document” and the usefulness of the prefix “un-” in the expression of antithetical concepts.

The subsequent transformation of “undocumented” continues to express its dichotomous relationship with the word “document.” Two years before the eruption of the U.S Civil War in 1859, the U.S. government instituted new regulations which required citizens to document any vessel being utilized to import goods or face forfeiture of their merchandise as well as their ships (“Undocumented Vessels”). The *New York Times* printed the inquiry of a reader regarding these new regulations which illustrates a shift of the meaning of “documented” and “undocumented” to the tangible experiences of U.S citizens engaged in maritime commerce (“Importing Goods in Undocumented Ships”). The meaning of “undocumented” was no longer confined to the realm of ideas and scholarly endeavors as illustrated in the earliest contextualization of the word, now, to operate an “undocumented” ship could threaten your livelihood. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century gives way to the 20<sup>th</sup> century the use of “undocumented” in relation to ships continues to prevail as maritime commerce regulations become tools to restrict the freedoms of non-citizens in the U.S.

**Importing Goods in Undocumented Ships.**  
*New York Times (1857-1922)*; Jun 24, 1859; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times  
 pg. 2

**Importing Goods in Undocumented Ships.**  
*To the Editor of the New-York Times :*

The important question of foreign vessels wholly owned by citizens of the United States having been variously discussed in the columns of the daily press lately, and also ably handled in your leader of the day before yesterday, I shall be glad to be enlightened on the subject of the disability of importing goods in such documented vessels as set forth by the inclosed Regulations taken from ANDROS' *United States Customs Guide*, obliging thereby

A CONSTANT READER.

**Undocumented Vessels.**  
*New York Times (1857-1922)*; Jul 7, 1859; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times  
 pg. 2

**Undocumented Vessels.**

New-York, Wednesday, July 6, 1859.

*To the Editor of the New-York Times :*

For your information, I beg to communicate to you the following dispatch from the Treasury Department:

TREASURY DEPARTMENT, July 5, 1859.

GENTLEMEN: In reply to your letter of the 1st inst., I have to state that Articles 78, 79 and 80 of the General Regulations to which you refer, are still in force, and in conformity with the laws of the United States as construed by the Department. You will perceive by them that no importation of merchandise can be made into the United States in such undocumented vessels without rendering the vessels and their crews liable to forfeiture.

I am, very respectfully,

HOWELL COBB,  
 Secretary of the Treasury.

Figure 2: 1859 laws requiring documentation of vessels importing goods

On the surface, the prevalence of the word “undocumented” in relation to ships or vessels seems benign until one looks further into the legislation that further cemented “documentation” to shipping and the intent behind the development of more restrictive maritime policy. The text of legislation proposed in 1940 states that “the penalty prescribed by this section shall not apply to undocumented

vessels of less than five net tons, built in and wholly owned by citizens of the United States and operated by crews at least 50 percentum of which, excluding the person in charge, shall be citizens of the United States..." (Citizenship Ownership, 1940, 28). The language of this legislation prescribes the differential application of maritime law based on citizenship status, "undocumented" vessels become a privilege of citizenship which at the same time reinforces the power of the state to confer and protect the rights of citizenship. In a hearing before the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, the House of Representatives, regarding the enactment this legislation contains an exchange between chairman Schuyler Otis Bland, and the general manager of a fisheries association which points to the impetus driving such legislation:

**The Chairman.** *It seems to me it is about time for aliens to stop messing with our affairs in this country, and let us run our own whether in a union or anywhere else.*

**Mr. Cooley.** *I do not want to appear here as objecting to that in the least, because I feel the same way, and I am sure the industry does in general. We have one section of the industry that will not operate under such rules, and that is the old dory fishing, and there is relatively little of it. I am speaking only for those.*

**The Chairman.** *Well, it is about time that people learned in this country that the law of this land is superior to the wishes of particular individuals or groups.*

**Mr. Cooley.** *We are for the use of American citizens, and the quicker it comes the better, so long as you afford opportunity for that section of the industry to adjust itself. When that group knows that at the end of that time they must operate under those conditions, then the industry will adopt itself. (Citizenship Ownership, 1940, 8)*

This exchange illuminates another angle to the utilization of documentation to reinforce the concept of citizenship. For any non-citizen who wishes to continue to earn a living in the shipping industry, documentation of citizenship that was previously not required becomes compulsory. Subsequently, the relationship between citizenship and documentation becomes entrenched through the concrete restrictions and freedoms to work granted via access to documents (naturalization papers) verifying belonging to the community of the United States in the shipping industry. It would take roughly three decades for the term "undocumented" to explicitly denote citizenship status, but the seeds were sown in the legislation of citizenship requirements enacted in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## FOR CURB ON SHIP OWNING

### House Committee Approves Bills to Require Citizenship

WASHINGTON, Aug. 28 (T)—The House Merchant Marine Committee approved today bills to tighten citizenship requirements for ownership and manning of American vessels.

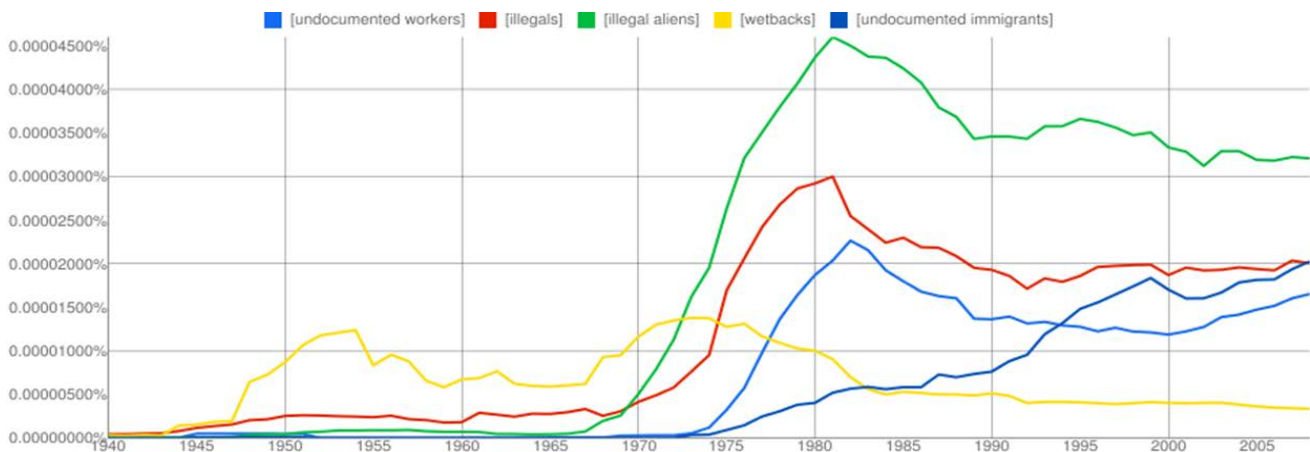
One would require that vessels engaged in the coastwise trade or in the whaling or other fisheries be wholly owned by United States citizens. Another would require all officers, pilots and crew members of vessels documented under United States laws, and of undocumented vessels owned in the United States, to be citizens of the United States.

The latter bill would not apply to publicly owned vessels other than those engaged in commercial service; vessels less than 16 feet long equipped with detachable motors; sailboats of not more than 16 feet; and non-self-propelled small craft.

Figure 3: 1940 New York Times article on 'undocumented' vessels

The historical circumstance following the entry of the United States into WWII shaped the conditions for the contemporary usage of the word “undocumented” in relation to citizenship status. Congressional records and foreign diplomacy documents show the eagerness of the U.S government and American industry to import Mexican workers during WWII to fill the jobs that were left empty by U.S citizens who were conscripted or enlisted in the armed forces. Through the establishment of the Bracero Program, the U.S and Mexican governments facilitated the recruitment and transportation of tens of thousands of Mexican nationals who were given temporary work contracts by U.S businesses (Salinas and Torres, 1976, 871). Many other Mexican nationals entered the U.S without contracts, prompting the Mexican government to push for more vigilant border control and deportations of Mexican workers who did not acquire the proper paperwork (Foreign Relations, 1944, 1299-1305). Although the U.S government did ramp up the number of deportations of Mexicans in the U.S from the 1940’s into the 1950’s, they allowed the border to remain permeable in order to maintain a constant flow of cheap migrant labor (Salinas and Torres, 1976, 868). News articles, congressional documents, and scholarly works show an almost exclusive concern with the immigration of Mexican nationals. At the same time that the documentation extended to Mexican workers through the Bracero Program constructs the “documented” Mexican worker, it produces its antithesis the “undocumented” Mexican worker.

However, the Mexican workers entering the U.S without documentation during the 1940’s and 1950’s are not referred to as “undocumented” or “illegal.” The majority of official documents and popular publications during this time used the term “wetback” to refer to Mexican workers who entered the U.S without documentation. Figure 2 illustrates the prevalence of the term “wetbacks” in comparison to other popular terms related to immigration from 1944 up to the 1970’s. The word continues to be used well into the 1980’s but the terms undocumented workers, illegal aliens, and illegals surpass its use during this time.



**Figure 4: Google Ngram, undocumented worker/immigrant, illegals, illegal aliens, wetbacks**

A Southern New Mexico congressman speaking at a hearing of the “Importation of Foreign Farm Labor” raised the issue of Mexican migrant workers to the Committee on Agriculture House of Representatives:

*When the time for the picking of cotton comes around, the impact of the Mexican laborers coming to the order is such that it is not possible to hold them. They swim across the river. We call them wet backs. They come over anyhow. There we have the growers with the cotton in their fields, and they are going to use the Mexican*

*laborer one way or another. That is just human nature. It creates a very difficult problem. (1949, 21)*

There starts to be a conscious application of the term “undocumented” to the citizenship status of Mexican immigrants in the U.S in the mid-1970’s. The first usage of the word as a description of the legal status of Mexican immigrants can be found in the report on the Sixteenth Mexico-United States Interparliamentary Conference of 1976:

*In opening discussion of this subject, a Mexican delegate recalled that the Organization of American States (OAS) at its 10th regular meeting held in Mexico City in 1974 had adopted the term "nondocumented migratory worker" as being preferable to the designation "illegal immigrant" or "alien". The purpose of that language change, he said, was to reaffirm the principle that work—and the attempt to earn a livelihood by productive labor—was a fundamental human right. Such labor, he pointed out, was inherently "legal", whereas the manner in which it was carried out was clearly subject to national regulation. (1976, 20)*

The term “nondocumented” is subsequently changed into “undocumented” in the rest of the report. This illustrates a conscious shift in language usage to introduce a different conceptualization of Mexican immigrant workers living in the U.S without a legal status. A similar use of the word can be seen in 1975 in a scholarly article titled “The Undocumented Mexican Alien: A Legal, Social, and Economic Analysis”:

*Stated simply, the undocumented Mexican alien is a Mexican national who is in the United States without proper documentation. Consequently, he is referred to as an illegal alien and has also been called a "wetback." Because of the derogatory use of the term wetback against persons of Mexican descent and because of the stigma of labeling one an illegal, the authors avoid these references wherever possible. (Salinas and Torres 863)*

The first use of the word “undocumented” in relation to immigration status in popular media is cited in a brief review of a Bill Moyers CBS report published in the Columbia Journalism Review in 1978:

The Aliens (CBS Reports, December 27, 1977) was a sympathetic look by Bill Moyers at the "undocumented" immigration from Mexico into California, centering on three brothers who gave the producer, Tom Spain, their cooperation despite the risk of exposure and deportation.” (“Illegals” 1978).

The use of quotations around the word “undocumented” demonstrates a new use of the word which was most likely espoused by Moyers in his report. Furthermore, the resistance to the use of the term “undocumented” is illustrated in the title of the review—“Illegals”. The journalist writing this review goes back to a more commonly known term for the immigration status of Mexican nationals. The terms “wetbacks,” “illegal aliens,” and “illegals” are still much more commonly used to reference the citizenship status of Mexican immigrants in popular media throughout the 1970’s as exemplified in Figure 5. Although the use of the word “undocumented” in relation to immigration rose in last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the terms “illegals,” and “illegal aliens,” were used interchangeably to describe citizenship status. It is not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that a more fervent debate over the use of to the term “undocumented” as a designation of citizenship status arises.



# 'Wetbacks' Who Go To Mexico

By Alice Marcarelli

PALO ALTO, Calif. — The President of Mexico, José López Portillo, is to visit Jimmy Carter in Washington next month, and energy is on their agenda. Few know it, but while President Carter has only recently begun paying attention to Mexico to solve our energy problem by buying oil and gas, other Americans have looked southward for years — to solve their employment problem.

Since few of these expatriates have legal working papers, you might say they are "wetbacks." There are thousands of them. I know: For three years, I, too, was a "wetback."

Unlike our Mexican counterparts, we pay no one to smuggle us north, across the border. We head south (to Guadalajara, in my case) with tourist visas in hand. We all appreciate the irony of working illegally in Mexico, while Americans at home complain of the reverse with "how-dare-they?" indignation.

Just as Los Angeles, San Jose, Chicago and other United States cities attract Mexicans, Guadalajara is home to approximately 30,000 North Americans. Some people say it is one of the largest American communities in the world outside the United States.

Most Americans in Guadalajara are retired but a good number fall into the infamous category of "illegal alien."

Why, mariachis and perfect weather aside, do Americans trek south to work?

I unexpectedly entered the ranks of the undocumented because my husband was employed by a large American corporation in Guadalajara. A legal work permit for me, I discovered, would have meant a five-year wait.

Reflecting, I had to admit that most Americans "illegals" I had met during my three years in Guadalajara were evasive about their reasons for leaving the United States. They weren't hiding anything as scandalous as a criminal past, but they were fugitives of a kind.

Some were running from bad marriages or an oppressive family life. Many were "losers" who simply dropped out of American society. As my friend put it, "Even if you bomb out in the States, you can do well here."

He had a point. In a country where the average education level is third grade, high school diplomas go a long way.

Most of Guadalajara's American "wetbacks," for example, teach English to wealthy and middle-class Mexicans, either privately or in one of the city's language institutes. It doesn't matter that they have no prior teaching experience or any other qualifications. Speaking authentic American English is enough.

My experience was similar. I was also a teacher, but my near-native Spanish landed me a job in the journalism department at a local university.

With only a few years' journalism experience, I was accorded the title of professor and paid top dollar — \$450 a month.

It was a sum earned by few in Mexico. It adequately covered monthly expenses, including the \$175 mortgage payment on a three-bedroom, two-bath home, a \$5 utility bill, \$70 for food, \$18 for gasoline and \$16 for a once-a-week maid.

If it hasn't already become obvious, American illegals have much in common with their Mexican counterparts. Possessing skills unmarketable in their own countries, they can make a satisfactory living by crossing the border, taking jobs nobody wants or is able to fill.

This genre of American illegals may soon give way to another breed, however. Mexico's oil resources already are luring foreign fortune-seekers attracted by the prospect of the country's new wealth.

When they realize the futility of applying for legal work papers, they, too, will join the ranks of "illegals." As their numbers grow, so will the awards

## The flight of the wetbacks: Wetbacks

By Richard Severo  
New York Times (1972-Current Affs); Mar 10, 1974; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times  
Pg. 249

Hunters and hunted: all caught up by forces beyond their control

# The flight of the wetbacks

By Richard Severo

SAN YERBA, Calif. You could hear them crashing through the dry red oaks and manzanita brush, then the whoosh of their footsteps as they ran through a concrete drainage tunnel under Interstate Route 5, just half a mile from Tijuana, then their heavy breathing. It was like watching big game, rather than men who only wanted bread. The wetbacks were all around us. They had been patient, these wetbacks. Mexico had taught them how to be patient. They had waited on the Tijuana side until they had met the right coyote, which is what they have traditionally called one who specializes in smuggling hungry people to the Provisional Land. In Tijuana they had also spoken of a police, a more recent, less fortunate name for a copote. In Spanish, a police is one who tends to his children, his police, and the wetbacks had found that they wanted to be police for a reliable police; they would pay \$200 or even \$300 to a good police who would hide them in a truck or under a truck or even set the engine of a truck and take them to Los Angeles so that they could walk

into the city. Even before Tijuana they had waited. They had waited in the dust outside little lots of shacks, lots filled with hungry children and hollow-eyed old men and old women, hunched and haggard, still waiting for the promise of a revolution to come true, watched little planes in Guadalupe, San Luis Point, Orange, Fullerton, Chino Hills and Downey, planes with heavy noses where God seemed forever bringing drought or fresh floods or more children, always children. But they had waited and perhaps they had sold a good cow, a few pigs and they had saved pesos and centavos until now. Finally, their time had come. With all of their belongings in a cardboard box or a shopping bag or a battered piece of luggage they had gone to the bus station and purchased a ticket which enabled them to slide north on the Autoroute of the Three Stars of Gold and even they could see the red, dusty streets of Tijuana.

Even in the Tijuana bus station, even as they made the final preparations to go to the United States, Mexico learned they be patient and they be safe. There were signs. One advised, "Please do not show chewing gum on the floor," and another ordered, "Put garbage in its place," and there were signs of others with other police who reported their efforts at several places in Tijuana. Soon it became dark. The time had come. On a street in Tijuana right on the border there is a shabby neighborhood and there is a mechanic there named Ramirez. There (Continued on Page 77)

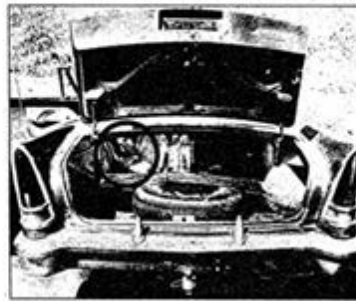
left a family of 13 and an annual family income of \$700 in the state of Michigan, walked up to the man's room. Two young men were at hand, nervously to dispose single sheets of toilet paper for 20 centavos (0.4 cents) each.

"You want toilet paper? Where are you from? Do you want to go to the United States? Do you have money? It can be arranged. For you, it is possible. For you, everything is possible."

The next day, Juan was in the Avenida Cuahuatimoc in Tijuana, in a rick sandwiched between two auto repair shops, a café under a big Pepsi sign where a police ran next his police. Do you want to go to the United States? Do you have money? It will cost you 250 American dollars to Los Angeles. You want New York fare? A thousand dollars. No, there is no danger. If they catch you they will not keep you. They will only send you back if they catch you, you pay, no nothing. You come back here and we will try again. You may have to try many times, but if it is worth it, try? Yes, it is worth it.

There were 10 in Juan's group of police, and there were dozens of others with other police who reported their efforts at several places in Tijuana. Soon it became dark. The time had come. On a street in Tijuana right on the border there is a shabby neighborhood and there is a mechanic there named Ramirez. There (Continued on Page 77)

Richard Severo recently completed two years as chief of the Times's bureau in Mexico City.



Smuggled Mexicans and imports, caught by the Border Patrol behind a false truck partition. It'll be closed by again and again—and they will eventually succeed.

The battle over the language used in the discourse surrounding the question of immigration is currently shaping the transformation of the word "undocumented" in the United States. The public debate over the use of "undocumented," "illegal aliens," and "illegals" to describe immigrants without a legal status has become a central question for individuals on opposite ends of the political spectrum. In 2005 Congressman Kennedy of Rhode Island spoke the House of Representatives:

*Mr. Speaker, I just want to respond to the previous speech, and that is to say I wish that we would call people "undocumented workers." I do not think it is too much to call people "undocumented workers" because that is who they are. Many times people are working hard in our communities, with families, who are trying to get their families food at night, a place for them to sleep. To call them aliens, I think, is demeaning to them, and I think it is derogatory, and I think it is unfitting for this country to refer to people in that way. (Cong. Rec., 2005)*

The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) published an article on their website denouncing the use of the term "undocumented" in reference to immigration status:

*Despite the clarity in the U.S. code on proper terminology, what is known in legal parlance as the "term of art,"...Insistence on alternate terms such as "undocumented worker" represent a deliberate avoidance of the central and inescapable fact that millions of people are illegally residing in the United States in direct violation of democratically enacted and popularly supported law. Those who object to the use of the term "illegal alien" appear to believe that if they can convince the American public that illegal immigration is not really illegal, then amnesty no longer is amnesty, and enforcing immigration law is unnecessary. (Ruark)*



In these examples, we can see how the use of the word “undocumented” is contested along ideological terms expressed in the concepts of human rights, and law and order.

The ubiquity of the word “undocumented” in the debate over immigration policy and in the evolving conceptualization of citizenship is not coincidental or opportunistic. The concept of “invasion” of the U.S by “illegal” immigrant workers is historically embedded in the economic and political relationship between the U.S and Mexico. This is evidenced in the construction of the “documented” and “undocumented” worker through the creation of the Bracero Program; the importation and deportation of Mexican laborers throughout the 20th century, and the creation of the “wetback” in relation to laws that punish the undocumented worker, not the person who hires them (Bustamante 71). My decision to trace back the development of the word “undocumented” was not purely based on academic inquisitiveness, I chose to research this word because it is ever-present in my life. I wanted to get a deeper understanding of the ways in which language is connected to historical events, and social change in order to get a better understanding of my own society. The futures of millions of undocumented immigrants like my sister are currently being debated in Congress and in the media. I realized how powerful language can be through my journey to understand how the word “undocumented” has become rooted in the concept of citizenship and in immigration policy.

## References

- Bustamante, Jorge A. “The ‘Wetback’ as Deviant: An Application of Labeling Theory.” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 77, no. 4, 1972, pp. 706–18.
- Cong. Rec. 25 July. 2005: 6407 Proquest Congressional Publications. (statement of Sen. Feingold). United States. Cong. House. Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. *Citizenship Ownership and Operation of Certain Vessels. Hearings, Feb. 13, 1940. 76th Cong. 3rd sess.* Washington: GPO, 1940.
- “documented, v.” OED Online, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/56329?>
- Drummond, Henry. “Letter from Mr. Drummond, and Remarks Upon It.” *Christian Observer, Conducted By Members of the Established Church (1802-1842)*; Boston, vol. 30, no. 12, Dec. 1831, p. 743.
- “For Curb on Ship Owning.” *New York Times*, August 29, 1940, p. 39
- “Illegals.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, vol. 16, no. 6, Apr. 1978, pp. 10–10.
- “Importing Goods in Undocumented Ships.” *New York Times*, 1859, p. 2.
- Marcarelli, Alice. “Wetbacks who go to Mexico”. *New York Times*, September 3, 1979, p. 15.
- Ruark, Eric A. “Illegal Alien”: *The Proper Terminology | Federation for American Immigration Reform.* 22 Aug. 2014, <https://fairus.org/issue/illegal-immigration/illegal-alien-proper-terminology>.
- Salinas, Guadalupe, and Isaias D. Torres. “The Undocumented Mexican Alien: A Legal, Social, and Economic Analysis.” *Hous. L. Rev.*, vol. 13, 1975, p. 863.
- Severo, Richard. “The flight of the wetbacks”. *New York Times*, March 10, 1974, p. 249.
- “Un’documented, Adj.” OED Online, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/212594?>
- “Undocumented Vessels.” *New York Times*, 1859, p. 2.

# Uppity

Emily Lock-Lee

Cite as: Lock-Lee, Emily. 2021. Uppity. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 314-320.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

I chose the word “uppity” for this project when my preliminary google research produced numerous results questioning the status of “uppity” as a racist term. A racist term? I had certainly heard the word “uppity” before, I had even used the word “uppity” before, so hearing that it was racist was shocking to me. “Uppity” - I believed the term meant someone that was snobby. I assumed the up of “uppity” was related to the way they carried themselves, with their “nose up in the air”. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “uppity” as “above oneself, self-important, ‘jumped-up’; arrogant, haughty, pert, putting on airs” (OED). This definition agrees with what I had originally thought “uppity” meant, snobby or arrogant. But what this definition ignores and what I was naive to is the much deeper and complex “unwritten social definition” (Shea 2008)

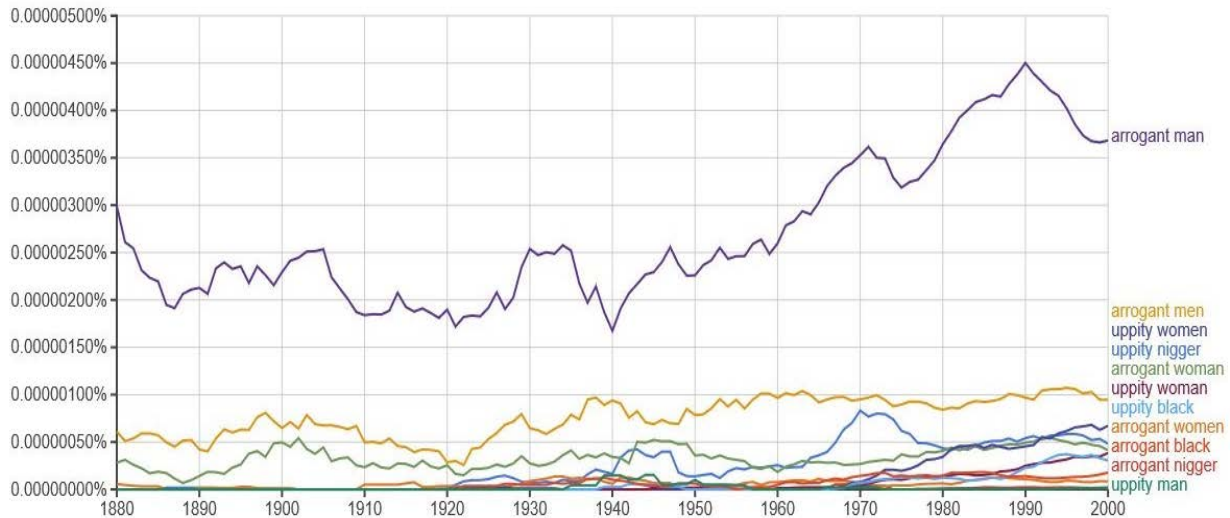
In this paper, I will show that this term is used in a specific relationship of power, and that it is used to index the identities of the individuals involved. Identity, the social position of the self versus the other, is created through conflict and comparison (Bucholtz 2005). To make my argument, I will use examples from current news, psychological studies, scholarly articles, and historical newspapers to illustrate how those higher in the hegemonic power structure tend to use “uppity” to point to the threat posed by minorities acting above their perceived social role.

## Can anyone be “uppity”?

If “uppity” and “arrogant” are synonyms, then we should expect to see that they are used in similar contexts; what is interesting is that we do not. Whereas “uppity” is used most often in relation to African Americans and women, “arrogant” tends to be used most often with men. What was very surprising to me was that within my Ngram search, there was not one instance of “uppity men” being used and very few of “uppity man”. As well, according to Ngram “arrogant black”, “arrogant n\*\*\*\*r”, and “arrogant women” are also almost never used according to Ngram. Why is this? “Uppity” is not used to describe men, because “uppity” does not mean “arrogant”; it means acting above your “place” in society. Therefore, “uppity man” and “uppity men” are paradoxes, men cannot “act above their place” since in white men hold the highest possible social roles in traditional Anglo hegemony.

Throughout the Jim Crow South, “uppity” was used primarily in conjunction with the word “n\*\*\*\*r”, and was used to describe African Americans who were believed to be acting above their inferior social standing. As history progressed the word shifted from solely describing African Americans to being applied to women as well. One thing about “uppity” is fairly consistent, it is nearly always pointed at minorities. This leads me to believe that describing someone as “uppity” means that they are perceived as acting above their intended social role in the hierarchy, which also indexes them as a threat to hegemonic patriarchy. The purpose of this paper is to show that “uppity” is used to index the identities of the minority party it describes, as well as indexing the identities of the individual that apply the term to others.

Ngrams not found: uppity men  
The Ngram Viewer is case sensitive. Check your capitalization!



Ngram Viewer analysis ran to distinguish uppity from arrogant, arrogant is used to describe men and never uppity. On the other hand, arrogant is almost never used to describe women and African Americans.

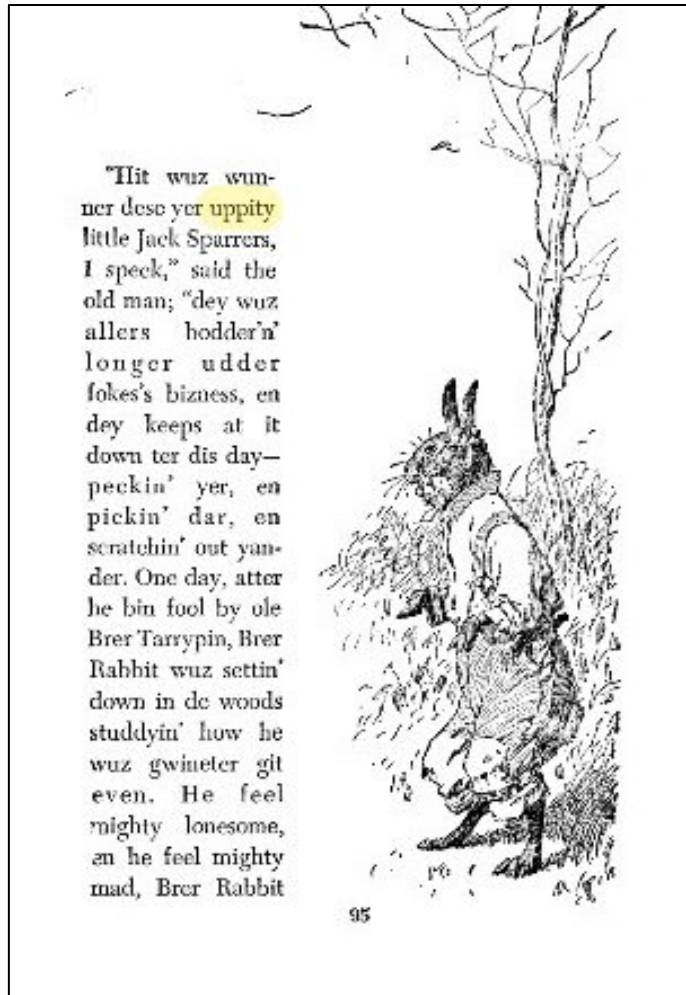
## Reader Asks Southern Writer to Explain Term 'Uppity'

**ATLANTA — (ANS)—**A reader from Rome, Ga., addressed a letter to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, one of the South's most powerful dailies, asking that the term "Uppity" colored persons be explained more fully. The letter was published in the *Constitution* on Jan. 24, and reads as follows:

Editor *Constitution*: "The *Constitution* sometime ago carried an article by Jimmy Jones stating among other things that by the meddling of Eastern do-gooders and publicity seekers, false opinions of Georgia are spread. And by their very actions caused "uppity colored persons" to be killed.

"I should like for the author to explain the term "uppity." Is a colored man considered "uppity" when he ceases to be a slave, and by honest means, acquires an education and a decent living for himself and his family? This seems to be true in the Mallard case and in many other cases. I do hope and pray that such persons will not be shot to death by a group of robed cowards."

An African American reader asks a writer to explain the meaning of Uppity in 1949, the question is never acknowledged by the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper and is instead published in the *Baltimore Afro-American*.



First appearance of uppity in writing. "Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings 1880. (pg. 95), 2008 republication.

From an anthropological perspective, the term is very interesting. Distinguishing someone as "uppity" creates a self/other relationship between the subject and the speaker. To label someone as in this manner is to partake in the process of "othering". "Othering" is the term promoted by Edward W. Said, to refer to the human tendency to believe that their racial, religious, cultural, gender, etc. group is the inherently right way, making all others who are different inherently wrong or inferior (Garcia-Ramon and Albet-Mas 1998). Through this process a relationship of power is established; the speaker in this example illustrates their power over the subject by labeling them as "uppity". In fact, in nearly all of the examples that I found, "uppity" was used by someone who is coming from a position of social superiority in relation to the subject being labeled "uppity". This again illustrates that the term "uppity" is a product of hegemonic power structure which rules social norms in American life. The very first recorded use of the word "uppity" was in the "Uncle Remus" stories by Joel Chandler Harris in 1880 (OED). The Uncle Remus stories began are a chronicle series of stories intended for children featuring an older, friendly ex-slave, Uncle Remus, who tells his young white listener stories about what he calls the "good ol' days" of plantation life. Joel Chandler Harris, himself a white man,

began publishing the folklore of the slaves that he had worked with on a plantation as a young boy. In present day, these stories are rather notorious for their racially insensitive portrayal of African Americans and are the origin of the term "tar baby". "Tar baby" began as a character in Harris' Brer Rabbit stories, as time went on the term "tar baby" became adopted as a racial slur. Both "tar baby" and "uppity" may have begun innocently enough, but through time they have developed into words loaded with racist beliefs and ideas about white superiority.

The page above is from the 2008 republication of "Uncle Remus: His Song and His Stories". "Uppity" was first recorded in one of Harris' Brer Rabbit stories, in the story, Sparrow is getting to be a little "uppity" since he is always in the business of others. Although the story is written about animals, the sentiment is the same; Sparrow is a threat to Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit is plotting his revenge against the "uppity" sparrow; who did he think he was getting into Brer Rabbit's business like that? This story, though fictional, seems all too similar to the situations in which "uppity" is used in real life.

The second example that the Oxford English Dictionary gives of "uppity" comes from a book published in 1952, "Big Change" by F. L. Allen. In the book, Allen identifies African American driving cars as a source of tension in the south. He says, "one began to hear whites complaining about 'uppity n\*\*\*\*rs' on the highways, where there was no Jim Crow." The book explains that white southerners



**THE YEAR of 1955 was marked by its contrasting news which ranged all the way from a \$25,000 "coming out party" tossed for a Detroit debutante, to the murder of four Negroes in Mississippi who got a little too "uppity" for the "white folks."**

**The chronology for 1955 touched upon all facets of human endeavor. It reflects the American Negro's earnest striving for first-class citizenship. It is marked by broad advances on all fronts for the Negro.**

"Contrasts Marked 1955's Parade of Top News Stories: These Names and ... Compiled from The Pittsburgh Courier" published by the Pittsburgh Courier, Dec 31, 1955.

were disgusted by African Americans owning their own vehicles; they worried that it gave them too much power and made them feel falsely confident. The image of an African American accomplished enough to own an automobile threatened the ideas of white superiority and was met with animosity.

What I have found through my research is that part of the reason that African American's are so offended by "uppity" is because it was very dangerous for an African American to be labeled as "uppity" for a period of time in the United States. As displayed by article above, 1955 was not a good year to be labeled in this manner. In 1955, there were four notable murders of African Americans in Mississippi: Reverend George Lee, Lamar Smith, Emmitt Till, and Clinton Melton. Reverend George Lee was himself one of the first African Americans in his county to register to vote, he used his platform as a reverend in Mississippi to stress the importance of voting to other African Americans. When he refused to comply with the white officials in his town and stop his voting efforts, he was shot in the face while driving down the street and murdered on May 7, 1955. No one was charged with his murder. Lamar Smith was a voting rights activist. On August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1955, Smith was in the front lawn of the Brookhaven, Mississippi courthouse encouraging African Americans to vote in a local election when he was shot dead. Lamar Smith's murder was committed in daylight in front of dozens of people, but still no one was ever charged. No one in the crowd would admit that they had witnessed a white man shoot Smith. Gus Courts worked with Reverend George Lee in Belzoni to establish a branch of the NAACP. He was shot for the first time in front of his store on November 25, 1955 and survived. A second shot in December 1955, however, claimed his life.

On August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American from Chicago was beaten and murdered in Mississippi. It is alleged that Till was flirting with a white shopkeeper, which in Mississippi was a terrible offense. Later, the shopkeeper's husband and brother-in-law took Till from his bed to punish him for his offense. Till was pistol whipped and beaten, but he would not submit to the white men. When they had had enough, they shot Till through the ear and tied him to a gin fan and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River. Newspapers nationwide covered the story, but one headline in particular caught my attention. "Mississippi Pair Admits Till Murder; Boy "Too Uppity", They Say" from the January 14, 1956 edition of the Norfolk Journal and Guide. While I could not find an actual quote from the killers using the term "uppity", the Norfolk Journal and Guide, an African American Newspaper, understood what was being implied. Till was murdered for being a threat to his white attackers, because he was a black man unwilling to submit to their will and that made him dangerous. The murderers were tried in front of an all-white jury and were found "not guilty". The Emmitt Till murder sparked an immense outrage from the African American community and roused many to join the fight for civil rights. 14-year-old Till became a martyr for the civil rights movement.

Another article in the Norfolk Journal and Guide from October of 1961 tells another story of how dangerous it can be to act "uppity". The headline reads, "At Dublin, Ga: Aged Merchant Held In Death

of "Uppity" Youth". The article tells the story of a shopkeeper who was enraged by the behavior of a 14-year-old African American boy, so he shot and killed him. According to the story, 14-year-old Willie B. Daniels blew smoke in the face of the shopkeeper and said, "Dad, I want three sodas". In a fit of rage, the shopkeeper shot and killed Daniels. I could find no record of the shopkeeper being either tried or convicted of the murder.

## Uppity and gender norms

Over time, "uppity" began being used to describe women in addition to African Americans. Ngram viewer estimates that "uppity" began being used to describe women around 1920. The first instance that I found through a search of newspaper and magazine articles was an article from 1948 from the Washington Post titled, "Wife Uppity so He Hit Her". Here is an example of a man who found his wife acting above her role in society, so he beat her back into place. The article describes an older man whose young wife refused to do what she was told. As justification for why he hit his wife in the head with a baseball bat, the man states "[she] has been getting uppity lately and we've been having some trouble." The explanation seems to have satisfied the judge, and the man was sentenced to pay a fine of \$100 for the assault charge.

A study was conducted by psychologists on sexual assault and "uppity" women. The study carried out in 2007 by Jennifer Berdahl set out to test the hypothesis that sexual assault was not committed out of sexual desire, but rather to assert power over women that challenged men. Berdahls article on the study titled, "Sexual Harrassment of Uppity Women" finds that "women with relatively masculine personalities (e.g., assertive, dominant, and independent) experienced the most sexual harassment" Berdahl suggest that strong women are the target of most sexual assault because their attackers view them as a threat to "gender ideals" and that the attacker feels they must assert power over the victim to "put them in their place". What this study shows is women who act strong and independent are targeted for the threat that they pose to male superiority.

In 1957, Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson (D-Texas) discussing the Civil Rights Act of 1957 with Sen. Richard Russell, Jr. (D-Georgia) is quoted as saying:

*These Negroes, they're getting pretty uppity these days and that's a problem for us since they've got something now they never had before, the political pull to back up their uppityness. Now we've got to do something about this, we've got to give them a little something, just enough to quiet them down, not enough to make a difference. For if we don't move at all, then their allies will line up against us and there'll be no way of stopping them, we'll lose the filibuster and there'll be no way of putting a brake on all sorts of wild legislation. It'll be Reconstruction all over again." (Bartlett 2007)*

I included this quote because I thought that it was a concrete example of exactly what is meant when "uppity" is used, "these Negroes, they're getting pretty (out of line and threatening) ...". Lyndon B Johnson recognized the fact that he could not stop African Americans, so it was better to just give them a little something to get them on your side. The idea of African Americans having political pull was dangerous and it was best if it were reigned in under the guise of supporting civil rights and exploited by politicians for their own gain. In the same conversation Lyndon B. Johnson is quoted as saying "I will have these n\*\*\*\*rs voting democratic for the next 200 years".

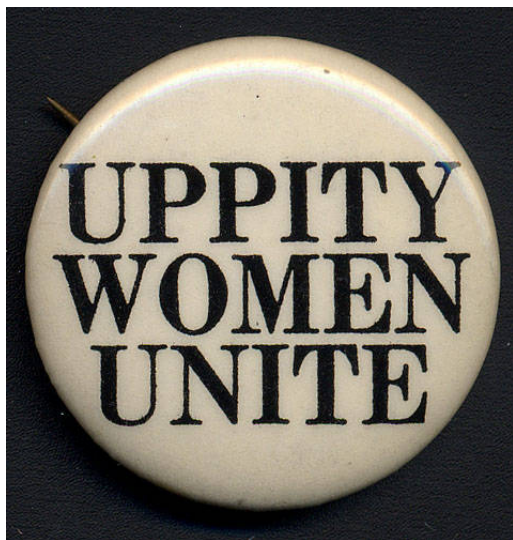
During the 2008 presidential election, John McCain's campaign was accused on more than one occasion of hinting at "uppity" in describing Democratic Nominee Barack Obama instead calling him an "elitist". Rep Shelley Berkley (D-Nevada) insists "elitist" in this context actually means "uppity" and is offensive. The 2008 election left many Republicans with a foot in their mouth, but none more so than Rep. Lynn Westmoreland (R-Georgia). When Westmoreland was asked to compare Michelle Obama with Republican Vice-Presidential Sarah Palin, he stated: "Just from what little I've seen of her



and Mr. Obama, Sen. Obama, they're a member of an elitist-class individual that thinks that they're uppity," when reporters asked him to clarify the word "uppity" he said, "Uppity, yeah." (Soraghan). As the first African American Presidential candidate in the United States, Obama posed a huge threat to the many people desperately clinging to the White House as a "Whites Only" club. This would give an African American the highest office in the country which was a huge blow to beliefs about racial inferiority. It is therefore unsurprising that when threatened by the chance of losing an election to a Black man, the Republican party resorted to using the term "uppity".

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the Democratic candidate was called many things: "power hungry", a "nasty woman", "elitist", etc. Though name calling is not new. In 1996, the Cincinnati Post called Hillary Clinton "uppity". The article titled, "Attacks on Hillary Clinton a Backlash to Her Uppity Role", was written while Hillary Clinton was the active First Lady of the United States. The article itself is not attacking Hillary, but rather expands upon criticisms already made about her; "a congenital liar," "a sleazy lawyer and a political liability". Hillary Clinton was the object of attacks from the Republican party, as they did not like seeing the First Lady, a lawyer by trade, speak out against conservative policies and advocate for human rights. Hillary was viewed as a threat to the Republican party as an educated woman willing to speak her mind in a position of power and with a platform to reach the entire American public. These ideas about Hillary did not change over the decade after the article was written. During her campaign, Clinton was crucified for everything she did or said. Called by her opponent a "nasty woman", and by some of my own female peers a "power hungry bitch". What the 2016 Presidential election taught America, and in particular women is that regardless of experience and qualification, the United States cannot stomach the idea of a female Commander-In-Chief. Hillary was viewed and indexed as "uppity", and a threat to white male power everywhere.

An interesting theme arose as I completed my research, I began to find several different instances of both African Americans as well as women using "uppity" as a term of empowerment. As I looked a



An "Uppity Women Unite" button circa 1972 from the Georgia Capital Museum.

little deeper, I found that this was not a new trend. During the fight to pass the Equal Rights Amendment between 1972 and 1982, the slogan "Uppity Women Unite" was adorned on buttons, posters, and banners of protesters. Supporters of the Equal Rights Movement reclaimed the word from their oppressors and embraced the fact that they were a threat to misogynistic tradition. "Uppity" has continued to be used by some women as a source of pride, shown in the books by Vicki Leon. She has written such books as "Uppity Women of Ancient Times", "Uppity Women of the New World", and "Uppity Women of the Renaissance". All of Leon's books discuss strong women throughout world that did not "behave" and left their mark on history.

Social media was rife with examples of individuals reclaiming "uppity" as a source of pride with twitter handles like Uppitynegress and nastyuppitywoman. I found a collection of shirts, mugs and stickers featuring "Uppity Negro" sold by the Uppity Negro Lab. The Uppity Negro Lab produces merchandise with the slogan "Uppity Negro" to instill pride in African Americans and to

stimulate discussions of race relations. Along with the Uppity Negro Lab, I found the Uppity Negro Network. The Uppity Negro Network was founded by Joshua L. Lazard, a writer and minister, in 2007 as a forum of cultural critique and African American pride.

In conclusion, “uppity” is used to index identities in multiple ways; it is used by the white male majority to index minorities as “acting above their status” and as a threat to the power structure. It indexes white males who use it as racists and sexists who believe that women and African Americans have “a place” that they can act above within the hegemonic power structure, and finally it is used by minority individuals to index themselves as strong and successful in an attempt to gain power through reclaiming the word as their own. In using the term “uppity”, a self versus other relationship is created which is deeply rooted in the hegemonic power structure. Being “uppity” has gone through several transitions--beginning with the danger associated with being an uppity negro in the American south, then transitioning to include “uppity” women, and eventually used as a form of resistance against hegemonic beliefs.

## References

- "An “Uppity Women Unite” Button in Support of the Equal ..." Digital Public Library of America. Georgia Capital Museum.
- "At Dublin, Ga.: Aged Merchant Held In Murder of “Uppity” Youth" *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003): 1. Oct 07 1961.
- ATTACKS ON HILLARY CLINTON A BACKLASH TO HER 'UPPITY' ROLE." *Cincinnati Post* [Cincinnati, OH] 23 Jan. 1996: 11A. Infotrac Newsstand.
- Bartlett, Bruce. "Whitewash." *WSJ. Wsj.com*, 24 Dec. 2007.
- Berdahl, Jennifer L. "The Sexual Harassment Of Uppity Women." *Journal Of Applied Psychology* 92.2 (2007): 425-437. PsycARTICLES.
- Bucholtz, M. "Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach." *Discourse Studies* 7.4-5 (2005): 585-614.
- "Civil Rights Martyrs." Southern Poverty Law Center.
- "Contrasts Marked 1955's Parade of Top News Stories: These Names and ... Compiled From The Pittsburgh Courier" *Pittsburgh Courier* (1955-1966); Dec 31, 1955.
- Garcia-Ramon, Naria, and Abel Albet-Mas. "Voices from the Margins: Gendered Images of 'Otherness' in Colonial Morocco." *Gender, Place and Culture* 5.3 (1998): 229-40.
- Harris, Joel Chandler. *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-lore of the Old Plantation*. Wildside, LLC, 2008.
- "Mississippi Pair Admits Till Murder; Boy 'Too Uppity', they Say." *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003): 1. Jan 14 1956.
- "Reader Asks Southern Writer to Explain Term 'Uppity'." *Afro-American* (1893-1988): 1. Feb 12 1949.
- Ridley, John. "How Bad Is 'Uppity'?" *NPR. NPR*, 16 Sept. 2008.
- Shea, Ammon. "Uppity-Up." Blog post. OUPblog. Oxford University Press, 11 Sept. '2008.
- Sorghan, Mike. "Westmoreland Calls Obama Uppity." *The Hill. Capitol Hill Publishing*, 04 Sept. 2008.
- "Those uppity Social Democrats; Germany's coalition negotiations." *The Economist* 23 Nov. 2013: 53(US). General OneFile.
- "Times Watch the Times' Uppity Cuban." *New York Post*: 26. Jun 11 2015.
- "Wife Uppity so He Hits Her." *The Washington Post* (1923-1954): 1. Aug 05 1948.
- Pin Image: <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-equal-rights-amendment/sources/1201>

# Vanilla

Cecilia Murrell-Harvey

Cite as: Murrell-Harvey, Cecilia. 2021. Vanilla. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 321-324.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

*Vanilla* is a word that I thought at one point, was simply the name of a plant species. I knew the extract of the vanilla plant was used for numerous reasons like flavoring my lip balm, adding depth and dimension to perfume, and making chocolate chip cookies taste better. However, as I began my research it became evident that *vanilla* stands to mean so much more than just a type of plant species. It has shifted from being understood as a description of an actual flavor, to meaning plain or boring, usually not in reference to flavor at all. I first became aware of *vanilla* meaning more when I asked my sorority sisters what they thought of when I said the word *vanilla*. Most of the sorority members had similar thoughts to mine about *vanilla*, but one specific sorority sister had a different take on it. Her first response was “Vanilla men are alright, but I think you need some chocolate in your life.” This was the beginning of my realization that *vanilla* is used as a descriptive word in different settings amongst people. *Vanilla* has shifted to mean plain or boring in some settings, when in all actuality, it is a plant with a very strong flavor and smell. The difference between what *vanilla* is literally and what it has become to mean in various social cultures has led my research to figure out *why* this divergence from *vanilla* in a literal sense has happened.

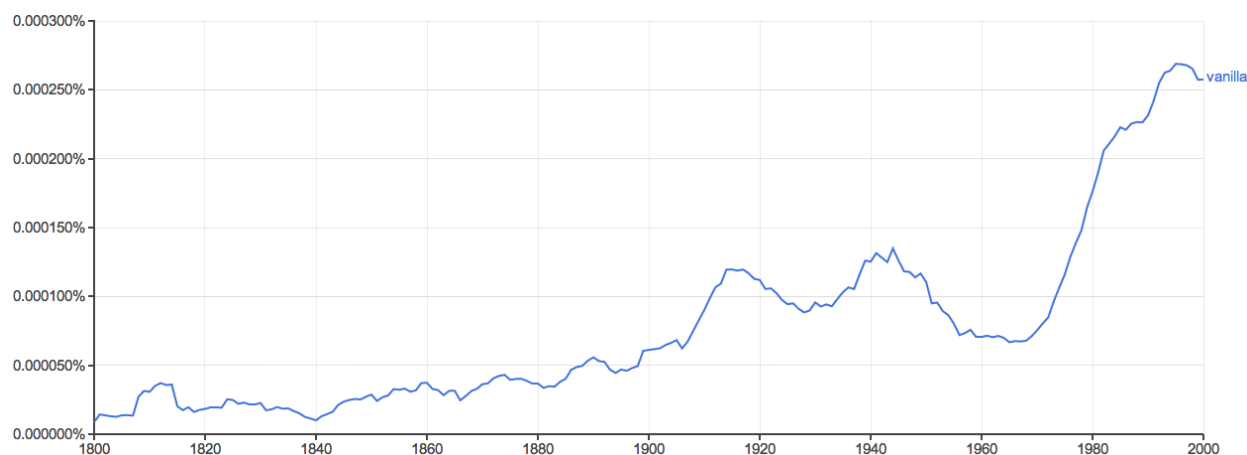
*Vanilla* is descended from the Spanish word *vainilla*, or “vanilla plant,” which literally means, “little pod”. Spanish settlers discovered the plant in the 1500’s upon landing in southeastern Mexico and named it from the shape of the pods. *Vainilla* is diminutive of *vaina*, or “sheath,” which comes from the Latin word for sheath, *vagina* ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)). *Vanilla* has come a long way from its literal meaning to its metaphorical meaning of describing something as plain or boring.

Most of the entries in the Oxford English Dictionary match the so-called “typical” and literal meaning of *vanilla*. The first few entries describe *vanilla* as “a pod produced by one or other species of the genus *Vanilla*...” or “the climbing orchid *Vanilla planifolia*, or other species related to this; the tropical (American) genus to which these belong.” These definitions were used in written context as early as the 1600’s. The OED does not document *vanilla* as “plain, basic, conventional; (esp. of a computer, program, or other product) having no interesting or unusual feature; safe, unadventurous,” until the 1970’s. Even though the OED doesn’t list *vanilla* being used in a different cultural sense until the 1970’s, there is evidence of it being used in a manner not describing flavor as early as the 1940’s.

A LIFE magazine article from 1942 provides an example of *vanilla* being used to describe something other than flavor. The article was titled “Willkie Evolves a Plain Vanilla Foreign Policy for Republicans,” (36). It is important to realize that the phrase “plain vanilla” is being used in a very popular magazine that denotes and captures much of what is going on in the world and also popular American culture. The phrase “plain vanilla” would not have been chosen if the readers of the magazine were not familiar with the descriptive choice of words. It can be inferred that *vanilla* began to shift from a description of an actual flavor to something meaning plain or boring before the 1940s.

As mentioned earlier, the Oxford English Dictionary does not note *vanilla* taking on a meaning to describe things as plain or boring until the 1970’s. This “new” meaning of *vanilla* is stated within the 1997 draft additions: “used orig. with reference to sexual activity (esp. in vanilla sex).” Most of the examples that the OED lists are all describing something sexual like “*vanilla bar*, a gay bar that is not

SM” (Rodgers, 184), which happens to be pulled from *Queens’ Vernacular*, a dictionary defining gay slang from the 1970’s. It is interesting to note that most of the OED quotes pertaining to “plain” or “ordinary” are in reference to gay and lesbian sexual behaviors. The Ngram (shown below) for vanilla shows a definite increase of *vanilla* being used in printed text through the 1970’s, which happens to be a big period for gay rights. Such a significant increase of the word *vanilla* in the 1970’s brings me to wonder the correlation between *vanilla* and the culture of the time and how it is used.



The 1970’s were a monumental time period for homosexual people (who are also referred to as the LGBT community). Prior to the 1970’s, people who identified as homosexual were penalized and treated differently (Cruikshank, 2). This was a decade where movements for gay rights really took off. More and more individuals were open about their sexual preference and really pushed for equality amongst society. This was a period that included the first official gay pride parade (June 28, 1970) and when the American Psychiatric Association voted to not consider homosexuality a mental illness in 1973 ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/stonewall/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/stonewall/)). These events were spurred because society was attempting to accept a new culture being brought into the mix.

The continuing openness of the LGBT community not only brought about the need for different cultural and political events, but also created a new social scene. As it was noted earlier, there is a text sample of *vanilla* being used to describe a gay bar that is not SM (Rodgers, 184). SM refers to “sado-masochism, a combination of the words sadism, meaning to take pleasure in inflicting pain on others, and masochism, to take pleasure in pain inflicted on you,” as an eloquent entry on Urban Dictionary puts it. Wayne Dynes also uses *vanilla* in a similar fashion in *Homolexis* when describing SM aficionados who “dismiss gays of simpler tastes as mere fluffs, who limit themselves to timid exercises in vanilla sex” (Dynes, 123). The LGBT community uses the standardized meaning of *vanilla* to describe sex or gathering places as plain or boring. One of the many possible reasons the LGBT community probably used *vanilla* as their choice description is because it seemed innocent. The homosexual community was already, and continues, to face much hostility from general society. Why would they use a descriptive word that would only draw more negative attention to their personal lives? Also, *vanilla* was and is probably used amongst the LGBT community because it had already been standardized by American society. As it was discussed earlier, people began to standardize *vanilla* to mean plain or boring since before the 1940’s. It would only make sense for the LGBT community to use a descriptive word that is already common amongst the society they are attempting to be equal members of.

The LGBT community circa the 1970’s and present day, is not exclusive in using *vanilla* as a description for sex. The Urban Dictionary has numerous current entries for *vanilla*, one example from 2003 being: “straight down the line, boring sex...” This entry is non-specific in regard to the word being used in a homosexual content. Both homosexual and heterosexual individuals probably use *vanilla* to describe sex for similar reasons mentioned before, as it seems innocent and already has



been standardized. I would even go far as to say that some individuals might use *vanilla* to describe his or her sexual encounter, to seem polite. Some individuals may consider “boring” or “plain” as an insult, where saying the sex was “vanilla” at least makes it sound interesting and neither good nor bad, just average.

The meaning of *vanilla* has expanded tremendously since the 1500’s, even beyond its adaptation to being a description for something plain or boring. *Vanilla* is even used to describe racial differences. The title of a research article discussing the shift of white individuals moving from the highly African American populated Detroit to suburbs around the city says it all: “Chocolate City, Vanilla Suburbs: Will the Trend toward Racially Separate Communities Continue?” (Bianchi, Colasanto, Farley, Hatchett, Schuman, pg. 1). The classification of individuals based on race, seems to be a perpetual occurrence. Since Europeans first settled America, there has been segregation amongst peoples of different skin color. It seems society establishes differences amongst groups of people at all points of American history.

It is interesting to note that the “pod-like” plant for which *Vanilla* originally got its name from is not white in color, yet people choose to use *vanilla* as a word to describe white skin tones. Yes, the blossom of the plant is white in color, but the actual appearance for which *Vanilla* is named, is not white. Nor is the extract that most people are familiar with. The eventual standardization of a word leaves society with uneducated members; people do not realize the knowledge behind the words they speak, that make up their languages. This exemplifies how disassociated people are with the goods they are consuming. Our consumer driven economy leads to a society potentially not ever knowing what the original form of a resource or word they use every day.

*Vanilla* continues to be used in numerous social settings to describe things as plain or boring due to its standardization in America. The word vanilla has even made its way into the world of business. The phrase “plain vanilla bond” is used to describe a United States issued bond that has “(a) a fixed date (maturity or expiry date) when the amount borrowed (the principal or face value) is due, and (b) the contractual amount of interest which typically is paid every six months in the US and once a year on the European continent” (bizterms.net). “Plain vanilla” used on its own, refers to a swap or derivative financial instrument that is issued with standard features (bizterms.net). It seems like *vanilla* is used in a way to make financial deals seem more approachable or safe. I think this is very representative of the financial burdens our society has gone through. America has had 2 stock market crashes, both ending with our economy struggling to get back on its feet. People who witnessed these crashes are probably more likely to invest in something labeled “vanilla” or low risk, because they have less to lose. On the other end of it, businessmen see these “vanilla” investments as boring, because they would rather be dealing with higher-risk financial deals to turn more of a profit. Regardless, the head businessmen of the finance and business departments recognize that they need to somehow appeal to a society that has been hurt economically before.

We are well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and vanilla still continues to be chosen as a descriptive word for even potential significant discoveries in the field of physics. Physicists had thought they had discovered a boson particle, but it turned out to be “pretty vanilla” (<http://io9.com/>). Basically, the physicists were not impressed with the final results of a test, deeming it a boring, or “vanilla,” particle in their world of physics.

I never realized a word as simple as vanilla could be used in so many different contexts. Since its first debut in the 1500’s, vanilla has undergone a major shift in meaning, from something that describes a flavor to something that describes a color or means boring, plain, or standard. The development of *vanilla* has shown that “the longer a word is embedded in the language, the more likely it is to develop transferred or figurative uses...” (Knowles, 135). The different uses of the word *vanilla* have shown insight into the different contexts it was and continues to be used in.

I now better understand the statement: “vanilla men are alright, but I think you need some chocolate in your life,” from my sorority sister when I asked about the word vanilla. I understand now

that vanilla is used in so many ways because of the standardization our society places upon *vanilla*, and among other words too. I now question what other words have a similar history like *vanilla*. I think it is important to note also, that all of this information pertaining to the definition of *vanilla* is strictly based in the United States. It would be beneficial to find any differences the word might have in other nations. Obviously not every nation has the same cultural history, so it is very possible that vanilla could have diverged from its original meaning in a completely different way. People in China may not have a clue what someone from America is talking about when they talk about a “vanilla” course at school. I think a shift in meaning of different words like vanilla, is unavoidable. Like William Safire wrote in his article, *On Language: Forewords March*: “Here, then, is a word coming to mean in slang the opposite of its standard meaning. Farewell, tasty vanilla.”

## References

Bizterms.net. <bizterms.net>

Cruikshank, Margaret. *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*. Psychological Press, 1992.

Knowles, Elizabeth. *How to Read a Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Farley, Reynolds, Howard Schuman, Suzanne Bianchi, Diane Colasanto, and Shirley Hatchett. “Chocolate city, vanilla suburbs:” Will the trend toward racially separate communities continue?.” *Social Science Research* 7, no. 4 (1978): 319-344.

Hershey's. [https://www.hersheys.com/en\\_us/our-story/our-history.html](https://www.hersheys.com/en_us/our-story/our-history.html).

Rodgers, Bruce. *The Queens' Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon*. Straight Arrow Books, 1972.

Safire, William. "On Language; Forewords March." *New York Times* 3 Nov. 1985.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/03/magazine/on-language-forewords-march.html>>.

Timeline: Milestones in the American Gay Rights Movement.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/stonewall/>

"Willkie Evolves a Plain Vanilla Foreign Policy for Republicans." *LIFE* 19 Oct. 1942: 35-36.

*Urban Dictionary*. <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=vanilla>>

U.S. History. <<http://www.ushistory.org/>>



# Vape

Julia Hoelzle

Cite as: Hoelzle, Julia. 2021. Vape. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 325-333.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

What emerged as a word for a hypothetical habit has turned into a term inseparably attributed to e-cigarette use – “vaping”. As its market grew, this new mode of “smoking” generated a whole lexicon within itself: one can now visit a “vape shop”, find “vape juice” behind countless party store counters, and may even make the daily observation of a “vaper” or two at the entrance of a public facility. However, words are not just instruments of our culture, but reflections of it. These terms above exist far outside their uniform definitions, only to be found riddled in connotations, communities, and, as it happens, consequences.

There are many controversies surrounding “vaping”. However, while the world waits for clear answers to resolve these uncertainties, those who “vape” in the meantime receive endless ridicule with just about no questions asked. It can be as soft as the injection of “douche” terminology when speaking with a friend who “vapes”, like the popular question: “do you even vape, bro?” or jokes that humorously mock “vapers”, like the “okay we get it you vape” tag-line:

i hate when people take pics like this, we  
get it... you vape



(credit: runt-of-the-web.com)

Alone there is not much harm in these comments. However, they allow for and frequently degrade into beliefs of an aggressive nature. Many smokers sustain a hatred towards “vapers”, while popular culture has left “vaping” somewhere in-between the butt of a worldwide joke and social suicide. All of this results in a shared dislike for “vaping” across most social communities. In fact, according to the number one Urban Dictionary definition for “vape”, it is actually the way to get everyone on the planet to hate you:

TOP DEFINITION



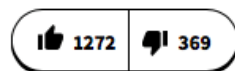
## Vape

The way to get [everyone](#) on the [planet to hate](#) you

*Kevin: [dude](#) I vaped the biggest [cloud](#) the other day*  
*Joe: you are a fucking faggot*

[#vaper](#) [#vapesta](#) [#vape god](#) [#bitch](#) [#faggot](#)

by [Cameron Katal](#) July 29, 2015



“Vaping” doesn’t have it much better. Though the top definition listed on Urban Dictionary remained fairly neutral, those following restrain no resentment.

2

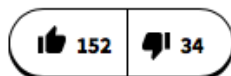


## Vaping

The quickest [way to make](#) all your friends [hate](#) you.

*Guy 1: [bro](#) I just bought this new [juice](#) called strawberry cheesecake.. Do you wanna go behind the [school](#) and start vaping with me and billy?*  
*Guy 2: no... Kill yourself Chad*

by [BrerMason](#) May 21, 2016



It does not stop there. Words that emerged while the “vaping” market grew have also absorbed the stigma. Take “Vaper” for instance. Like “vaping”, the first definition was neutral but those after were bluntly opinionated.

2



# Vaper

## Fucking losers

Those vapers are fucking losers.

by **DEEZNUTTS997** March 10, 2016



The disgust has even resulted in the evolution of terms that do not reference vape specifically in their titles, that nonetheless connote to the practice, for example “douche-flute” and “mouth fedora”.

TOP DEFINITION



drugs

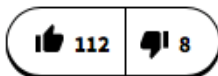
# douche flute

A personal vaporizer

Look, another guy in a fedora sucking on a douche flute!  
<puff>, <hat tip>, "M'lady..."

#vape #vaping #vaporizer #douche #douchebag #fedora #hipster #neckbeard #hat tip #m'lady

by **fivebags** July 30, 2015



TOP DEFINITION



## mouth fedora

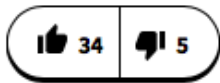
A vaporizer, or E-cig. Named so because socially they function identically to fedoras, ie. users think they look [cool](#) and rebellious, when in fact the opposite is true.

In at least two cases they are worse than fedoras, as the huge clouds are far more [obnoxious](#) and its hard to get a vapist to shut up about his rebuilt atomizer and sub-ohm [bullshit](#).

1: *Is the fog [rolling](#) in off the lake?*

2: *Nah, [just](#) some [mouth](#) fedoras on the corner.*

by [spenndiagram](#) March 21, 2016



There have been some bright points in vape's lifetime, though – like when it won Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year in 2014. Looking back, one may wonder: was the word at least celebrated by popular culture then, at its peaking moment? Twitter answers this question for us. (Schiavenza, 2014)

Oxford Dictionaries' 2014 Word of the Year: vape The terrorists won

— Taylor Hein (@Taylor\_Hein) [November 18, 2014](#)

First we lost a fucking plane, then "vape" was added to the dictionary, and now Charles Manson is getting married from prison.. tf 2014?

— Aaron™ (@eatsleepski02) [November 18, 2014](#)

All of these terms and comments represent the extreme which “vaping” has come to represent. To understand how the situation devolved into what it is now, it is best to take a look to where it all began. The first instances of the word “vape” were in the 1980’s, a time when the concept of an alternative to cigarettes was being popularized. Though many sources cite that the word first appeared in the cultural magazine *New Society* in 1983 (Oxford 2014), the earliest reference to “vape” can be accredited to Dr. Norman L. Jacobson – the physician who worked beside Phil Ray in developing a cigarette that would rely on nicotine inhalation. Though their end-product was faulty, the term was born (Dunworth 2014).

MEDICAL WORLD NEWS/February 18, 1980

## Smokeless cigs: ‘they satisfy’

**SAN ANTONIO**— Yet another way to help presumed nicotine addicts kick the habit may be a paperless, tobaccoless nicotine “cigarette” that looks just like the usual kind, but doesn’t burn. Inhaling through it— a process internist **Norman L. Jacobson** here calls vaping—gives would-be ex-smokers the satisfaction they need without requiring them to breathe carbon monoxide and tar, claims Dr. Jacobson. He’s not yet saying how it’s made.

Jacobson harnessed the fact that no tobacco would be burned in the process of inhalation when he chose to say “vaping” – “vape” being abbreviated from the pre-existing word “vaporize”. The formal definition of “vape” given in the Oxford English Dictionary reflects this:

*Vape, v. To inhale and exhale the vapor of (a substance) using an electronic cigarette or similar device; to use (such a device) in this way.*

As emphasized in the definition, “vaping” and electronic cigarettes go hand and hand. To better understand how “vape” earned such a contested place in our lexicon, then, it is best to gain some insight on its counterpart.

The electronic cigarette is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a cigarette-shaped device containing a nicotine-based liquid or other substance that is vaporized and inhaled, used to simulate the experience of smoking”. Interestingly, the first prototype was actually patented as a “smokeless non-tobacco cigarette” in 1965 by a man named Herbert A. Gilbert (Gilbert, 1965). One must fast forward through countless trials and tribulations, such as Dr. Jacobson’s, in order to find the present-day e-cigarette - namely to 2006. In just 41 years the electronic-cigarette, and thus “vaping”, were introduced to the world market, shortly after being successfully prototyped by the Chinese pharmacist Hon Lik (Lik, 2003).

Even at the present, the evolution continues. The market is broadening and e-cigarettes become more elaborate as the technology further establishes itself. In gaining strong grounds, one finds that the push to distinguish “vaping” from smoking has become a sort of priority. This can be observed through the many models of electronic cigarettes that no longer resemble cigarettes in any form, but also from the terms that have arisen in place of “electronic cigarette”, such as the shortening of it to “e-cig”, the semantic broadening of “vaporizer” and the later abbreviation to “PV” (personal vaporizer).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> There are many additional terms for vaping devices, depending on the level of detail one wants to use, such as “mods”, “APVs”, and “cig-a-likes”. It can even be taken further with terms such as “vape-



This pull to dissociate “vaping” from smoking is not just some universal marketing scheme, but it actually has been the strongest current carrying the invention since its inception. All of the electronic cigarette inventors mentioned earlier had the same goal: getting people to abandon cigarettes. For example, Hon Lik, the pharmacist, devoted his career to creating the electronic cigarette after his father died of lung cancer due to smoking (CASAA, 2016). Gilbert no different, who desired to “provide a safe and harmless means for and method of smoking by replacing burning tobacco and paper with heated, moist, flavored air” (Gilbert, 1965). The same for Ray and Jacobson (Dunworth, 2014). All of their careers were dedicated to designing a technology that could save people’s lives - if that isn’t inspirational, it at least deserves sympathy. Yet, somehow, their altruistic vision has earned itself just the opposite.

So, we must ask ourselves, why? Why is there such an intense dislike towards what was once just a possible solution to the dangers of combustible tobacco? Well, it seems to stem from the fact an exclusive community has emerged with “vaping”. There is a certain connoisseurship that forms when one puts down the square and picks up the flute. One fraction of this is bad etiquette. Within the “vaping” community, these individuals are recognized with labels such as cloud chasers (people who blow huge clouds while vaping), bulletproof smokers (anyone who smokes/vapes any substance in a public place that doesn’t stopped when asked), even vapeholes (self-explanatory). They are disliked within the community as much as out of it yet have a strong hold on the internet and the public eye. This attention gave life to the stereotype that is now attributed to every “vaper”, no matter their character.

How is it that this single portion of “vapers” have come to represent the whole mass of people who “vape”? For a conclusive perspective, we turn to Reddit. As explained by the top comment on the thread “why do I keep hearing people make fun of vaping” (2015), it’s the Vegan Effect:

[–] pathein\_mathein 3364 points 2 years ago

The Vegan Effect - A lot of people who get into it, really get into it, and want to tell you all about it and how wonderful it is. All the time. With terminology and levels of detail that are just excessive.

The post reveals something interesting about the hatred of “vaping” - it stems from communication. Furthermore, communication alone is not the problem, but that which is being communicated is hated, too. So, “vape” is hated, because the words people say, how they say them, and the extent to which they say them are hated – it’s like hate-ception. But, how excessive can the terminology and details really be to generate such strong resentment?

Let’s take a look. “Going digital”, assembling a “mod”, choosing an “atomizer”, forming a preference for “propane glycol” or “vegetable glycol”: this is not even an eighth of the new terms and phrases you stumble upon on the vaping-side of the internet. In fact, it is not enough that entire apps and blogs are devoted to the mechanisms of vaping, but some include “vaper dictionaries” for newcomers. There are many sites with tabs such as “Vaping Glossary”, “The A-Z of Vaping”, even one called the “Language of Vaping”. Each contains long lists of terms both technical and juvenile, subjective and objective.

Below is a glance at the words specifically related to “vape” on these pages. Variation across glossaries is common and due to the attitude of each blog:

---

pens”, “mechanical mods”, “custom mods”, “box mods”, “tube mods”, and “torch mods”.

**vapemeet** : a vapers' get-together, generally small in scale as vape-fests provide the large-scale meeting opportunities. Local vapemeets might only consist of five people in a pub, but can run to thirty or forty on occasion.

**vapefest** : a large-scale vape meet, a vapers' convention. A typical vape-fest lasts two or three days; although popular in cities, a vape-fest (especially in the US) might be located in a resort location such as Vegas or a Florida beach resort. These large-scale vapemeets are important get-togethers for the community, since most activity takes place online and there need to be conventions where vapers can meet those from afar face-to-face, to network, discuss issues, and hold organised meetings. Local vapemeets perform some but not all of these functions.

Interesting vape-fest factoid: Bill Godshall, the world's most active anti-smoking harm campaigner, attended a vape-fest in the US where 300 people vaped constantly in a room, mostly using high-power devices. He reported that the atmospheric effects were so negligible that it was virtually unnoticeable, and caused him no problem whatsoever. (This is the person who has been the most active anti tobacco corporation campaigner in the world for decades, and who has helped frame many of today's smoking control laws; there is an argument that he has had more influence on smoking regulatory issues than any other single person.)

**Vapemail** - After numerous days of online tracking and mailbox check, this is the delivered parcel or envelope containing vaping hardware and or e-liquid. *Credited to Toronto\_Mike*

**Vapocation** - A vaper's well deserved vacation where he/she will nervously take too much e-liquid and batteries on their travels without incident. *Credited to Toronto\_Mike*

**All Day Vape** – The e-liquid that a vaper personally enjoys over any other; one that can vaped for long periods of time without getting tired of the flavor or experiencing **vaper's tongue**.

Vaparator: An individual who reviews and rates electronic cigarettes and accessories.

Vapaseur: An individual who vapes more often than average but not as much as a vapaholic.

Vapatator: Another term for a more advanced vaper.

Vape / Vaping: The practice of using electronic cigarettes.

Vape Butter: The sticky residue that builds up on an atomizer; caused by continually overfilling cartridges or improperly mixing your own e-liquid.

Vape City: A slang term used to know someone who is going to try out his new electronic smoking device for the first time; specifically individual who receives their kit but have to wait for some time before getting to it.

Vape Head: An individual who has designed and built his own vaping device.

Vaped Out: An individual who has reached the limit of his vaping during any given time period.

Vapemeister: Someone who possesses a lot of knowledge in the area of vaping.

Vapeology: A slang term used to note the specific vocabulary and terminology of vaping.

Vaper: A term used to denote someone who uses electronic cigarettes.

Vaping Device: Yet another term to describe e-cigs, e-pipes, e-cigars.

Vapist: A term (made up by me) to denote someone who uses electronic cigarettes.

Vapoholic: A term to denote someone who vapes incessantly, the point of compulsion.

Vapolicious: A slang term referring to e-liquid that is especially a good tasting.

Vapophile / Vapophilic: An individual who practices vaping to the point of obsession

Vapophobe / Vapophobic: An individual who is fearful or adverse to vaping, electronic cigarettes, and the culture surrounding it.

Vaporama: The practice of getting together with other vapers to sample one another's VJs

What are the goals of all of these sites? According to Daniel S.'s list on best-e-cigarette-guide.com, it is to keep up with the constantly evolving terms that emerge with innovative new e-cigarette products – as the most popular vaping terms “move from vaper-speak to the vernacular” (S., 2017).

This gets us back to the phenomenon we have been discussing all along – people who “vape” use an extensive lexicon that is nearly incomprehensible to outsiders when discussing their habit. This trove of knowledge uniting “vapers” almost inevitably results in others being excluded – in fact, this does not come as a shock. The existence of a vernacular strengthens the bonds within almost every discourse community and likewise, all communities possess a tendency to attract negative views. No matter whether it is veganism, vampirism, or video games; when members of a community use inside terminology to establish authority when discussing their discourse with outsiders, their expertise often backfires, leading them to be indexed as losers, pretentious, or plain weird.

So, whether turned off or plain irritated by the overflow of information, a gap is formed between “vapers” and outer society, and it is that distance which creates grounds for false impressions, rumors, and judgment. This is further reinforced by continued alienation and internalization of insults. With no interaction with people who are actually “vaping”, all “understandings” of the “vaping” community are formed by those who only observe the attention-seekers, memes, and the terrible marketing that crops up online. Thus, the dislike of “vaping” evolved into what we have today – an activity being stigmatized as another classifying feature of men’s rights activists, right besides fedoras and neck beards (Smith, 2015).

Outside of all of the stigmas, one finds that “vaping” communities are not inherently exclusive, it is more than no one wants to listen to them in the first place. However, if one were to listen, they would quickly realize that Gilbert, Jacobson, and Lik’s vision was never lost. A 2017 study found that e-cigarette users were more likely than non-users to attempt to quit smoking, and more likely to succeed in quitting (Zhu et al., 2017). What is more, another study this year used a statistical simulation model to show that a strategy of replacing cigarette smoking with e-cigarette use would yield substantial life year gains, even under pessimistic assumptions regarding cessation, initiation, and relative harm (Levy et al., 2017).

The internet provides endless reinforcement of the fact their vision lives on. A browse through online “vaping” blogs actually reveals countless entries, articles, and comments not about starting “vaping” – but about quitting cigarettes. Titles like “How to Quit”, “Why Quit”, and “My Journey to Cessation” are scattered across the web. The essence of most e-boards, blogs, and Youtube channels is to promote the sharing of useful information and to bridge relationships between like-minded individuals who are looking for support. Even the details from the original question on the Reddit thread mentioned earlier had a bit more to say on the matter (2015):

Vaping has helped many of my friends quit smoking, so why is vaping looked down upon? It seems like a logical and more healthy alternative to tobacco, but I've heard people call it classless and say it looks dumb. I think I'm missing something...

Hating all people who “vape” is as ridiculous as believing all people who smoke pot are a part of the “420BLAZE IT” community, as pointed out by another Reddit user (2015). Sure, there are uncouth and annoying individuals out there, but at its core, “vaping” has allowed for many others to come together in a positive way for the sake of a healthier life. Is it good for you? No. However, it is agreed to be less harmful than cigarettes, so people take the risk. With this struggle in mind, “vapers” should if anything be pitied, not ridiculed.

In the end, our choice of words reflects the paradoxes of our culture – the same minds that can advocate, collaborate, and contribute change to the world can also downplay, degrade, and distract themselves from the essence of it. “Vaping” emerged out of a desire to diverge from cigarette smoking.

It's as simple as that, but the word has come to represent hardly more than controversies and conspiracies. As the vast stream of jokes, jabs, and insults crop up on the internet, the reality of why many people choose to "vape" is blurred and forgotten. While the ultimate effects of "vaping" remain unclear, our uncertainties should not hinder us from at least attempting to understand the motivations of the millions of individuals who decide to start. Every "vaper" has their own reasons, and they aren't always as terrible as you think.

## References

- CASAA. "Historical Timeline of Electronic Cigarettes." Consumer Advocates for Smokefree Alternatives. Dec. 2016. <http://casaa.org/historical-timeline-of-electronic-cigarettes/>.
- Dunworth, James. "The True Origins of Vaping - It All Started in the 1970's." Ashtray Blog. 16 June 2014. <https://www.ecigarettedirect.co.uk/ashtray-blog/2014/06/vaping-origins-1970s.html>
- Gilbert, Herbert A. Smokeless Non-tobacco Cigarette. Gilbert, Herbert A., assignee. Patent US 3200819 A. 17 Apr. 1965. <https://www.google.ch/patents/US3200819>
- (HHS) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "The Health Consequences of Smoking: 50 Years of Progress. A Report of the Surgeon General". Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health. Jan. 2014. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK294310/>
- Levy, David T., et al., "Potential Deaths Averted in USA by Replacing Cigarettes with E-Cigarettes" Tobacco Control 02 Oct. 2017. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2017-053759
- Lik, Hon. Electronic Cigarette. Ruyan Investment (Holdings) Limited, assignee. Patent US 8511318 B2. 29 Apr. 2003. <https://www.google.ch/patents/US9717279>
- Oxford. "The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year Is... Vape." OUPblog, Oxford University Press, 17 Nov. 2014, [blog.oup.com/2014/11/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-vape/](http://blog.oup.com/2014/11/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-vape/)
- S., Dan. "E-Cigarette Glossary | Dictionary of Popular Words and Acronyms Related to Vaping." Best-E-Cigarette-Guide. 12 Sept. 2017. <http://best-e-cigarette-guide.com/e-cigarette-basics/the-language-of-vaping-a-glossary-of-popular-words/>.
- Schiavenza, Matt. "The Word of the Year Is a Total Drag." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 18 Nov. 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/11/oxford-dictionary-names-vape-as-2014-word-of-the-year/382919/>
- Smith, Jack, IV. "Vaping Could Actually Save the World - But There's One Thing Holding It Back." Mic. Mic Network Inc., 26 Oct. 2015. <https://mic.com/articles/125151/we-get-it-you-vape#.8feHkeVSD>.
- Urban Dictionary. <https://urbandictionary.com>
- "Why Do I Keep Hearing People Make Fun of Vaping? • r/OutOfTheLoop." Reddit, 8 Oct. 2015. [https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/3nz5sz/why\\_do\\_i\\_keep\\_hearing\\_people\\_make\\_fun\\_of\\_vaping/](https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/3nz5sz/why_do_i_keep_hearing_people_make_fun_of_vaping/)
- Zhu, Shu-Hong, et al. "E-Cigarette Use and Associated Changes in Population Smoking Cessation: Evidence from US Current Population Surveys." BMJ, 26 July 2017, doi:10.1136/bmj.j3262.
- Images:  
<https://theawesomedaily.com/26-we-get-it-you-vape-meme-pictures-that-are-worst-than-selfies/>  
<http://liquid-news.com/e-zigaretten/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/smokeless-cigs-they-satisfy.jpg>



# Vintage

Grace Fusani

Cite as: Fusani, Grace. 2021. Vintage. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 334-337.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

There is a store close to my house called Now and Then. It is a shop that only sells “vintage” wares such as old styles of hats, gloves, or clothing. Among the “vintage” clothing there are also typewriters, dollhouses, and other objects that we associate with the past. Until writing this paper, this was the only definition of “vintage” that I knew - a word that invokes the nostalgia as old knick-knacks often do, or a desire for ages past. To many young people, this is the primary definition. However, the word “vintage” first meant to gather grapes. How did “vintage” shift all the way from grape-yielding to aged artifacts?

According to Online Etymology Dictionary, “vintage” comes from the Anglo-French *vintage*, which comes from the Old French word *vendage/vendange*, meaning to yield from a vineyard or vine-harvest. The root of this Old French word is the Latin word *vindemia* which is related to *vinum*, ‘wine’, and *demere*, ‘to take off’. Therefore, *vindemia* literally means to gather grapes in order to make wine.

If you do a quick search in the Oxford English Dictionary, the first definition of “vintage” that will pop up is as a noun meaning the product of a vineyard, first recorded around 1450. This is by far its earliest definition, but as the years go on, the word starts to collect and alter its meanings. Primarily, it used as a noun, but from the late 1500s to the late 1800s, it also functioned as a verb, to vintage, meaning to make wine from the grapes on a vineyard. Because of its association with the making of wine; it eventually came to also mean the year in which the wine was produced, the season it was made, its quality, or even just wine itself. This shift first occurs in the early 1500s, where it comes to signify more specifically that the harvest of these grapes was for wine. For example, “Never did ... the vines yield a more luxuriant vintage” [1]. As we creep into the 1600s, it also denoted wine itself and the season that it is made. In the 1700s, the first finely aged wines appeared, and “vintage” acquired the meaning of being an adjective to describe the year from which the wine came which had the connotation that this was a particularly well-done wine. For example, “Characteristic and impish Lowry of a fine vintage year 1960” [2].

Seeing that it now can express the year from which wine was created, it is not surprising that “vintage” came to signify, in the late 1800s, the time in which a person was born, and soon after in the early 1900s, the time or period in which a thing was made or produced.

1883 *Sunday Mercury* (N.Y.) 23 Sept. 6/4 ‘I want to sue a man for breach of promise,’ said a maiden of the vintage of 1842, coming into a lawyer’s office.

1931 F. L. Allen *Only Yesterday* vi. 129 Harding had no sooner arrived at the White House than a swarm of practical politicians of the McKinley-Foraker vintage reappeared in Washington.

1945 A. L. Rowse *West-Country Stories* 2 He was..a benevolent pluralist of a rich vintage.

1967 J. M. Argyle *Psychol. Interpersonal Behaviour* iv. 79 In many cases the hero has a well-defined style of social behaviour—compare..the cowboy of 1890 vintage.

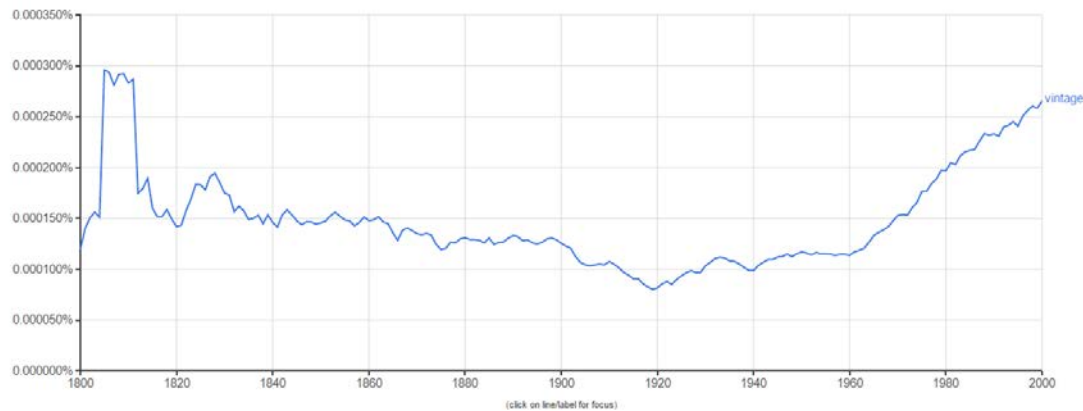
One of the more prominent examples of this is the way the everyday car enthusiast uses “vintage” to describe a certain type of car, one that was manufactured any time between 1917 to 1930. This is

the beginning of the semantic shift from being a noun to being primarily an adjective in contexts such as vintage wine, vintage clothing, and vintage cars. It now transforming into adjective meaning classic. To see how people view vintage today, I also went to Urban Dictionary, which states that the current definition of *vintage*: too old to be considered modern but not old enough to be antique. This translation of “vintage” as classic is seen as early as the 1970s, when it was used to describe the best period of someone’s work or a characteristic behavior of said person.

*1972 Guardian. 25 Jan. 9/3 It was pure vintage Deauville to the background of Henry Hall type music.*

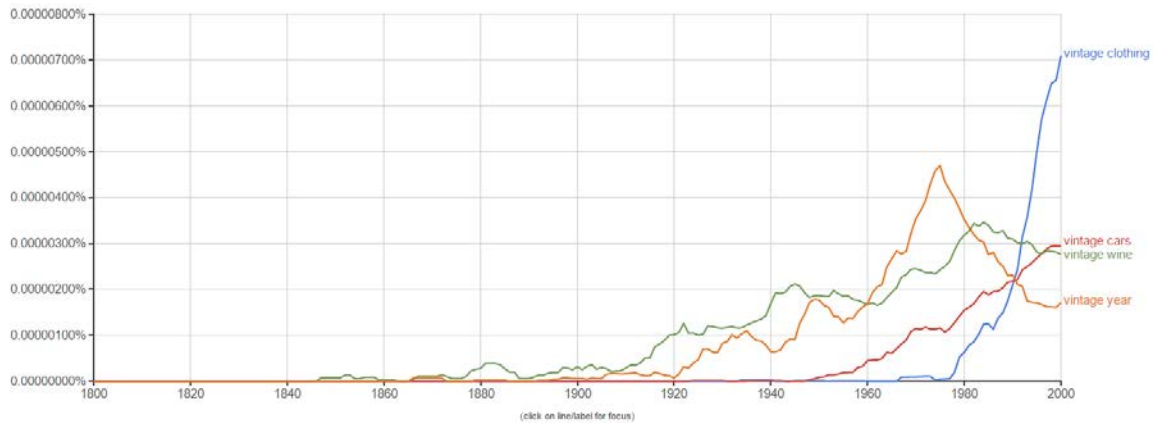
*1977 D. MacKenzie Raven & Kamikaze i. 20 The Pole's..tone was compassionate. 'She is in love with me.' This was vintage Zaleski. 'Of course,' said Raven.*

Now that the word “vintage” means classic, it soon was applied to old-fashioned items such as clothing or jewelry, because people always think of them as classic. The same concept applies to furniture. People now roam the streets for a “vintage” dresser or anything that has an older production date. As seen on Google Ngram Viewer, the word “vintage” was most popular when vineyards first came to America, in the early 1800s, when it used both as a noun and a verb, and today, as an adjective for clothing or wine.



After vineyards came to the US, the talk dies down after a little while until the 1920s, which is when Prohibition begins. Although alcohol was then banned, there was more talk of it because, who doesn’t like to talk about what they’re not allowed to do? From here, it climbs steadily until it really takes off in the 1960s since at this point it is used to describe a whole plethora of things, including wine, clothing, birth, and vehicles.





As seen in the Google Ngram Viewer graph above, the senses of vintage that use it as an adjective for describing wine have all increased until about the 1980s until they start to decrease in frequency, while “vintage” when used to describe cars or especially clothing, start off as nothing but has now skyrocketed. This is because vendors love to tack on the word “vintage” to knock up the price of things and shopping “vintage” has become a very big trend. When asking the people in my life what they think of when they hear the word “vintage”, they mostly come up with wine and clothing and clothing more so than wine. This is because, in the world I live in, the world of a 19-year-old college student; “vintage” clothing, or “vintage” fashion in general, is a fairly popular trend. It dates back to the 1990s and has only grown since then. People, usually of the middle class, buy “vintage” clothing, jewelry, shoes, etc., and use it as a form of expression, a form of authenticity. They are almost performing, showing their fashion off to the world in a very unique way, saying, “I am different, hear me roar”. I personally, do not own a ton of “vintage” fashion items, but I really appreciate them because they are made much more for my body type than today’s fashion. This is also something that draws women to “vintage” dress, because it helps them find curvy clothing in a world of skinny. The search for “vintage” dress used to be a hunt for the best items, going store to store to find them, but now there are stores dedicated to solely “vintage” clothing and even Etsy, a website that offers everything from homemade soap to crafted engagement rings. It has really revolutionized into this subculture that even spurred another subculture called steampunk. Steampunk is basically Victorian Era clothing and gadgets with a Sci-Fi influence but many people take it upon themselves to make it their lifestyle, not just a fashion choice. Steampunk uses both the old, and the new, so only half of it is related to “vintage” but is nonetheless interesting (Veenstra and Kuipers).

Today, “vintage” is found mostly in retail venues and in hipster-esque bohemian culture. It is commonly found in small businesses, artisanal shops or second-hand stores, and is used as a label to denote an older item. Vintage stores are similar to antique stores except they have more of an aesthetic that young adults desire. Many people desire to live in a time period other than their own; it calls to them, luring them with the thought that some other age can offer adventure and a sense that the world was better as it was. This is what draws certain people to this concept of “vintage” clothing or “vintage” books or anything of the like. They wish for an escape or perhaps just to be different. I, personally, feel very connected to decades past and I love the idea of “vintage” items. These things have history, they have a story, and for some reason make you feel special and intelligent by owning them. Young people wish to appear more knowledgeable and interesting and this is why this trend has become so popular - not just because it increases the product’s value, but because this label also makes people feel something.

While doing this essay, I learned so much about the word “vintage”. I had no idea how much it was associated with wine and grape picking or even that it described a certain type of car. It was so

interesting to see a word change from a noun to an adjective over 200 years and how many individuals know so little about words and their past functions. “Vintage” has transformed from a part of wine culture to a fashion statement and a broader, classic view of the past. We as a society have started to place a greater emphasis on the way things used to be. Nostalgia has always been present in people’s lives, but now it has become a central aspect of American culture. It has spilled into my life and I am sure it will continue to drip into the lives of people around me for years to come.

## References

"PFW — Coming Soon." PFW — Coming Soon, [www.winepros.org/wine101/history.html](http://www.winepros.org/wine101/history.html).

"Urban Dictionary: Steampunk." Urban Dictionary, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=steampunk](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=steampunk).

"Urban Dictionary: Vintage." Urban Dictionary, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=vintage](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=vintage).

Veenstra, Aleit, and Giseline Kuipers. "It is not old-fashioned, it is vintage, vintage fashion and the complexities of 21st century consumption practices." *Sociology Compass* 7, no. 5 (2013): 355-365.

"Vintage". Online Etymology Dictionary. [www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=vintage](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=vintage).

"Wine History". [winehistory.com.au/](http://winehistory.com.au/).

# Winningest

Melissa Ashford

Cite as: Ashford, Melissa. 2021. Winningest. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 338-349.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).



“Oh the places you'll go! There is fun to be done! There are points to be scored. There are games to be won. And the magical things you can do with that ball will make you the winning-est winner of all.”

– Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

## winningest

adjective | win·ning·est

: having the greatest number of wins : most successful

(Dictionary.com)

## Winningest

An unusual adjective that refers to both the subject and the author simultaneously.

Of the subject: Having the most wins.

Of the author: Being an idiot who can't be bothered to look up a real word.

*"Michael Phelps is the winningest athlete in Olympic history"*

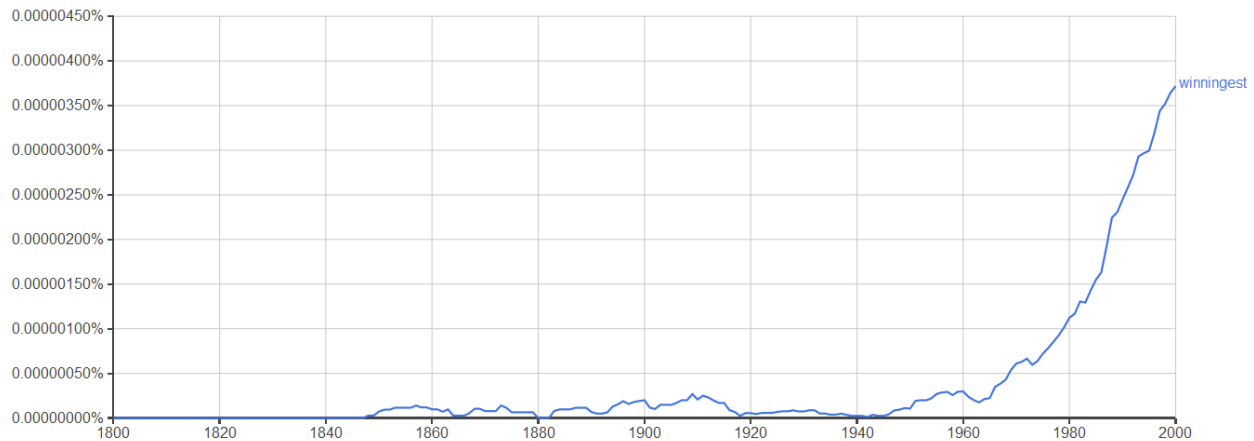
by Tom2003 August 20, 2008

(Urbandictionary.com)

'There's something faintly juvenile sounding about the word "winningest." What's wrong with saying "the coach with the most wins" or "the most successful coach" or "the coach with the best record"? But in fact it's a legitimate word. it's been around for hundreds of years, first in the sense of most attractive and later in the sporting sense.'

--- Patricia T. O'Conner 2007, from *Is "winningest" a loser?*

I seek to ask and answer the question: what is it about "winningest" that makes people wonder, "is it a real word"? In the sports world, "winningest" is a fairly familiar term. While not encountered everyday certainly almost anyone interested in sports, especially American sports, has come across the term. A merging of the root word "win", with endings "-ing" and "-est" added, the term is used to describe the most successful member or team out of a given group. Often applied in sporting environments, the term is not unheard to be used to describe other successful groups such as political candidates. So, is "winningest" a word?



The history of the word "winningest" begins in the early 1800's.

I do not hold it so discreet : But a good face,  
gentlemen,  
And eyes, that are the **winningest** orators,  
A youth, that opens like perpetual spring,  
And, to all these, a tongue, that can deliver  
The oracles of love—

This is a passage from "The False One" by Francis Beaumont John Fletcher in 1804. There is a different meaning here closer to "to win over", nothing to do with sports and scoring the point, closer to the use of "winning/most winning" which appears much earlier in history and is used in similar fashion to express the trait of having charisma.



Overwhelmingly “most winning” was used before 1995. In these instances, the word was used to mean “charismatic”, as in that first recorded instance. “Winningest” meaning “the most wins” has generally overtaken the usage, though of course the older meaning of “winningest” is still around.

**1** *always used before a noun* : relating to or producing a win


- the *winning* lottery ticket
- She scored the *winning* goal.
- The team is on a 12-game **winning streak**. [=it has won 12 games in a row]

**2** *always used before a noun* : successful at something

- They were a *winning* marketing team.

**3** [more winning; most winning] : pleasing or attractive to other people

- a *winning* smile
- Chocolate and mint is a *winning* combination.

— **winningly** /'wɪnɪŋli/  *adverb*

- He smiled *winningly*.

Winningest was derived from “winning”. Here, we can see the proposed meanings of both winning and winningest intercept.

"most winning"



Web News Images Shopping Videos More Search tools

About 330,000 results (0.40 seconds)

### Winningest | Define Winningest at Dictionary.com

dictionary.reference.com/browse/winningest Dictionary.com

most winning or charming: the winningest smile in town. Origin of winningest. Expand. 1970-1975. 1970-75; winning + -est<sup>1</sup>. Dictionary.com Unabridged

### Winningest - Grammarist

grammarist.com/words/winningest/

Yet despite the existence of grammatically unquestionable alternatives (most winning, best), winningest is deeply entrenched in sports commentary and is not ...

Even searching for "most winning" brings up "winningest" as the first result, along with a justification as to how it is in fact a word. In fact, this seems to be a common trend for the word. "Winningest" seems to exude un-confidence. Almost any mention of the word that is not in the direct context and immediately the writer will insist, with varying degrees of derision, "No really, it's a word!"

"Winningest" begins its printed life as a sporting term in the 1940's, first in a Western Michigan College football handbook, then in 1943 in a bus transportation handbook, 1945 in LIFE advertising a pie recipe, and then debatably in the 1948 Boston Braves roster list from 1871-1948. The publication is from the 1871-1954 version, but this seems to be an updated version of the previous publication as it lists its first publication date as 1948.

It won 13 games and lost 4, the four by a total margin of 10 points.

One of the "winningest" records that have been piled up over a long period of years in state high school competition is that which has been achieved by

**Title of "Winningest Contributor" goes to D. Kaufman, assistant to the superintendent of Montreal Tramways' Autobus Depart. This month's winning entry brings Mr. Kaufman his third \$25 War Bond.**

Because I know how every woman loves compliments—I want to tell you the secret of the spiciest, fruitiest, compliment-winningest mince pie that ever came out of your oven.

TABLE 1  
BRAVES WINNINGEST PITCHERS, YEAR-BY-YEAR





This ad appears in Life magazine from Feb 18th 1952, quoted, as: "Bellanger 99... 1951's 'Winningest' car used champions exclusively!" It was duplicated in Newsweek and Popular Science around the same time. This is an advertisement for spark plugs, using Belanger's 1951 Indy 500 win to promote the product. The quotation marks used tell me that it was still a very new word, one with little popular legitimacy.

This trend of obscurity continues for a while. Life continues to use it, Popular Mechanic picks it up, as do Jet, Boy's Life, and Ebony. It appears in a few other publications, but Life was overwhelmingly at the forefront of promoting the word in print form. It's in the 70's where the word really begins to take off, word instance jumping up as it's used more and more by various publications. Popular Science gives it whirl again, and even Princeton makes use of the word to describe its own teams

These dates give "winningest" over 200 years of history, beginning with the "charismatic" meaning, and over sixty with the "most winning" capacity. But these are just some facts. What do English-speakers have to say about it?


'Winningest?' No. BAD colonists.

Chipps Chippendale (2001)

Even after 50+ years of being thrown about in the American sports world, arguments about its validity still go on. British English speakers seem to be particularly against its use. Most complaints boil down to “Isn't such and such a better word?”

“Winningest” seems superfluous at best, and an insult to the English language at worst. Take this example conversation from 2008 from the thread "Did you know 'Winningest' is a word?" on the forum [digitalspy.co.uk](http://digitalspy.co.uk)

## Did you know that "winningest" is a word?

 1 of 2 1 2 >

Thread Tools ▾ Search this Thread ▾


13-08-2008, 21:33 #1

**ustarion**  
Forum Member  
Join Date: Jan 2008  
Posts: 13,967

**Did you know that "winningest" is a word?**

As in Michael Phelps is the most winningest Olympian. When I saw it, I thought the editor had just made it up.

Are there any words that you thought weren't words that are, or vice-versa?



Please sign in or [register](#) to remove this advertisement.

**lambing**  
Posts: n/a

It's a ridiculous word, insults the english language and I suspect the commentator said it without thinking so now it's suddenly 'acceptable'. It shouldn't be.

If a child wrote that in an essay it would be dismissed.

Stupid.

**ayrshireman**  
Inactive Member  
Join Date: Sep

It may be in our dictionaries, but it is in origin an American word, and not one used by British people.

Thankfully, as it is a dreadful word, and I wish Americans wouldnt use it either.

**scoot70**  
Inactive Member

It must be an American word. Ive heard it used in American football before. Someone was the most winningest Quarterback or headcoach, something like that

**mb@2day**  
Forum Member

I have heard winningest used before in a jocular context but not for about twenty years.

**blueblade**  
Forum Member

Not a word I'd previously encountered, and not one I'll be using.

**PJ2**  
Inactive Member

I've just heard an American sports commentator say this for the first time. 🤔 lol

People have a lot of questions about the word.

**Espresso**  
Forum Member

Join Date: Jul  
2005  
Posts: 16,522

If "winningest Olympian" is supposed to mean the person who has won the most medals at the Olympics, then I suppose I can see how it makes a sort of sense for this Phelps character.  
In which case, why not just call him the best Olympian?  
Is that too easy?  
Or just not language stranglificationary enough?

Note that this is the only known recorded instance of the word "stranglificationary."

**Ignazio**  
Forum Member

Join Date: Jan  
2008  
Posts: 17,072

What on earth is wrong with most successful?

I am not a pedant but it does grate when 'est' or 'ness' is used as a suffix to create such clumsy words - and does suggest a lack of vocabulary.

Why *humbleness* instead of humility?  
Why *bestest* instead of best?

**LeftCoastal**  
Forum Member

Join Date: Jun  
2006  
Posts: 662

Aren't all words made up?

The discussions seems to be about whether people accept the meaning that some have given to the word "winningest."

This word is almost exclusively used in a sports context; it's just a short-hand for "has won the most."

I don't see the problem. Everyone here knows what the suffix "est" means, and they know what the root "win" means; so even if it's unfamiliar, if you understand its meaning, does that not make it a word?

Winningest is a "sportsism."

A voice of reason cries out into the dark reaches of the internet!

**skp20040**

Forum Member

Nothing wrong with words evolving , but there are just some new words that are just wrong , and winningest is one of them, it just sounds stupid.


And is quickly shot down.

American discussion seems to be kinder. Take for example this conversation from the message boards at Straightdope.com, "Is 'winningest' a real word?". 01/25/2012

01-25-2012, 08:05 PM		#1
<b>Arnold Winkelried</b> Charter Member Charter Member	Join Date: Oct 1999 Location: Irvine, California, USA Posts: 14,822	
<b>Is "winningest" a real word?</b>		
The other day, on the front page of the LA Times, an article about the death of american college football coach Joe Paterno used the word "winningest". That word has always grated on me. Hence the poll. Needless to say, I voted No.		
P.S. I checked in Merriam-Webster, and they have "winningest" as a valid word, dating from 1972.		
01-25-2012, 08:10 PM		#2
<b>RealityChuck</b> Charter Member	Join Date: Apr 1999 Location: Schenectady, NY, USA Posts: 37,428	
The OED gives it as 1974.		
But certainly it's a real word. You understand its meaning, don't you? People use it in speech, don't they?		

While the OED doesn't list "winningest" on its own, it does list in under winning.


01-25-2012, 08:16 PM #3

**John DiFool**  Guest Join Date: Jun 2006

It's a verb which has been adjctified (which can weird language a bit, but is technically legal).

What constitutes an illegal word? Who enforces it? Will I go to jail if I use an illegal word, or will I just be publicly ostracized?


01-25-2012, 08:21 PM #4

**Ximenean**  Guest Join Date: Aug 2001

It has to be the case that enough people use it, though, and that is not the case here, in the UK. I mean, obviously we can work out from context that it means "winning the most" or something, but it still sounds like a non-word to us. I guess the OED includes a large chunk of North American English.

Merriam-Webster, dictionary.com, and Oxford dictionaries also list "Winningest".

01-25-2012, 08:36 PM #5


**Thudlow Boink**  Charter Member Join Date: May 2000  
Location: Springfield, IL  
Posts: 20,010

It's a perfectly cromulent word.


And then, of course, there is this lovely description courtesy of the Simpson's (please note the location). "Cromulent" being a word introduced during the Simpson's episode "Lisa the Iconoclast" that was meant to sound like a real word, without being one, and meaning: (humorous) Fine, acceptable or normal; excellent, realistic, legitimate, or authentic. (Wiktionary.org)

People have put a lot of thought into the word, discussing its origins, history, and parts of speech, all of which are identifiable in some way.

01-25-2012, 08:45 PM #7

**guizot**  Member Join Date: Mar 2005  
Location: An East Hollywood dingbat  
Posts: 6,897

Quote:

Originally Posted by Ximenean  [View Post](#)  
I guess the OED includes a large chunk of North American English.

And why on earth would they do that?

*Winning* of course is a perfectly accepted adjective: *She has a winning smile*. Probably the issue is that here it takes a semantic twist, in order to refer to a competitive context. Still, it's not unusual for this connotation: *They're a winning team*.

It also might seem awkward because typically (with notable exceptions) superlatives formed from stems with more than one syllable take a construction with *the most* (*the most winning, the most cunning, the most stunning* etc.).

A salient, though sarcastic point. Is the word just too American for British English speakers?

01-25-2012, 08:50 PM

#8

**Trinopus**  
Member

Join Date: Dec 2002  
Location: San Diego, CA  
Posts: 15,695

Weird, though, that no one ever says "Winner."

"Okay, they aren't champs, but they made it to the play-offs, so their a winner team than most of the others..."

Are there other words where we have a superlative but no comparative?

Anyway, I voted "not a real word" in the hyperformal sense of "not recognized by the grammar wonks at Harvard," but **Thudlow Boink** wins the thread.

Debate rules strong.

01-25-2012, 09:12 PM

#12

**Ximenean**  
Guest

Join Date: Aug 2001

Quote:

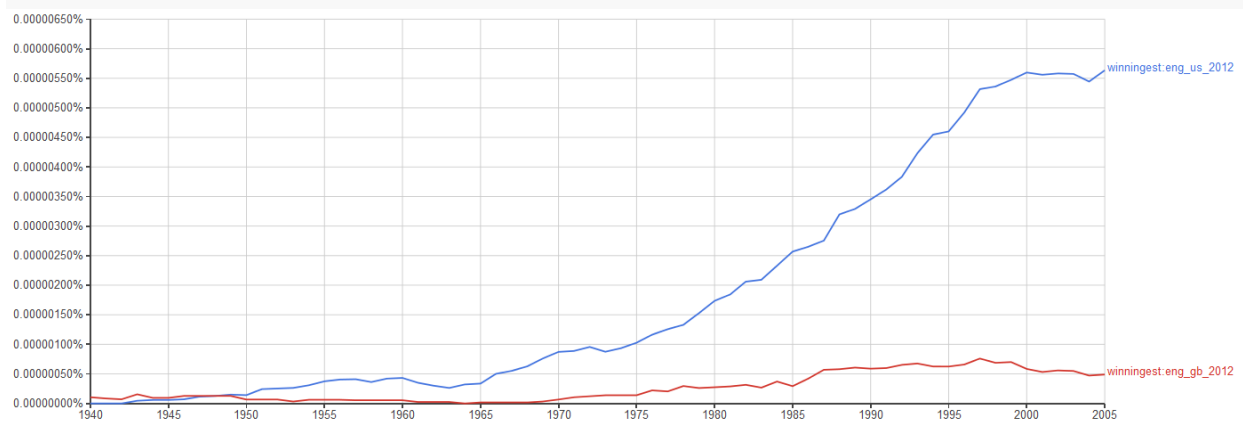
Originally Posted by [rachelellogram](#)

Why? Not even Merriam-Webster lists "common usage" among its [definition](#) for "word." But if we run with your interpretation, at what point do words that have fallen out of common use (like, say, [wont](#) or [betwixt](#)) suddenly become non-words? Curious minds would like to know! 🤔

In fact, any Doper could make up a word that nobody has ever said or heard before, and type it on this page, and it would still be a word as long as it's logical and has a divivable meaning. Like, I dunno... *Marveltastic?* *Fabulicious?* *Kittyriffic?*

I'm not sure what your examples, such as "kittyrific", would mean. That's the point - words become words when enough people agree that they mean something. "Enough" is a grey area, but I hope we can agree that "kittyriffic" does not qualify.

Likewise, in British English, "winningest" does not qualify, because nobody ever says it.



While British English users may not use it often, it is in use, as the above Ngram shows.

User Trinopus of San Diego spends time here enumerating other instances with English where they respond, giving numerous examples in English usage where few say the words, or the words are "made-up" and from popular media, citing the "cromulent" example from above, yet the words are understood anyways.

The question they're asking is, is "winningest" a word? Are the Brits right and it's an awful tragic phenomenon in American English? Or do the Americans have it, with the word being a quaint, yet perfectly cromulent, representation of American English's oddities? I think this quote from Sarah Belliston of the Grammarist sums up the answer fairly succinctly:

*"Most participial adjectives are made comparative and superlative with more and most. For example, we say more troubling and most sickening instead of troublinger and sickeningest. So, to many English-speakers, the superlative adjective winningest—meaning having the most wins—sounds wrong. And indeed some peevisish grammarians hate the word. Yet despite the existence of grammatically unquestionable alternatives (most winning, best), winningest is deeply entrenched in sports commentary and is not going away any time soon. Those who dislike it might as well get used to it."*

--- Sarah Belliston, Grammarist.com

"Winningest" is in use, and is a part of culture. People may not like it, but the word is on the rise and doesn't look to be going anywhere anytime soon. So why does winningest cause such debate?

Let's begin with intelligibility. Win, -ing, and -est are important, and often used, parts of speech in English. This tells me that the word is generally understandable, that the components of the word itself lends some idea as to the meaning. Context is also important, and "winningest" is almost exclusively used in American English as a sports term, further clarifying the meaning. This determines that the word is generally understandable, but is that all that makes a word?

Examining the word itself as a concept winningest seems to be universally considered a "silly" word and seems to be its main detractor. So why is this? It may be at least in part because words like "winning" usually use "most" as the superlative of choice, an issue touched upon in the debates. However, it is not the first or only instance of an "unfitting" word taking on the -est superlative. "Darlingest" came into a short popular usage in the 1920's and has been featured in the musical Wicked. "Charmingest" was also a popular word in the late 1800's and early 1900's, easily beating out "winningest" as "most charming".

Perhaps redundancy will hold a clue. After all, as various users point out, there are many different ways to convey the same meaning, "most wins" being the obvious. Yet there is a surplus of redundant, superfluous, extra, inessential, verbose vernacular in English. These words are considered to be unique, even though their meaning is the same, the context in which they are used varies. Redundant is almost accusatory, superfluous a little gentlemanly, and extra's the popular one, sometimes a budding entrepreneur. Likewise, "winningest" fits its own linguistic ecological niche, becoming more active, less round-a-bout, and more specific than "most winning", "most successful", or "best".

Ximenean mentions that "winningest" doesn't qualify because no one in British English uses it, which while debatably true, doesn't explain cases of a word such as petrichor, which Ngram can't find instances of, and yet has the honor of being used in scientific publications, and articles with titles like "Nature of argillaceous odour", itself made up of words not often used in the English language. Is it because the word is just too American? Yet, this specific British English user was exposed to the word, understands the word, and uses the word in debate.





Is “Winningest” a case of journalist "dirty fingernails" fallacy as mentioned in Language Myths? The word is spread almost exclusively through sports magazines and news outlets like Life, Jet, Black Belt, and other sports and sporting related publications. Sports news is considered "...sloppy, lazy, low prospects, easy, and even intrusive..."

Related to the dirty finger nails fallacy and its scarcity in use is its comparative etymology. Latin and Greek are the de facto "science" languages, the languages used to concoct new terms for new discoveries. These languages were, and in many ways still are considered "logical", they're the languages of culture, art, and philosophy. They are used to create new lexicon for the medical and scientific community, cooked up when a new discovery crops up, often by the discoverer themselves. "Win", on the other hand is Germanic, and "winningest" came from that ugly, colloquial root, used by sports fans and reported by the news media. Thus, even though a word like "argillaceous" (from the Latin for clay, and the English root for "of the nature of") may not be used often, because of its roots and heritage it enjoys a better reputation than "winningest".

British English speakers seem to hold particular contempt for the word. Coming from "the colonies" where English goes to die according to some British English speakers, it's even more of an insult there than it is here. From our habit of using brand names to describe generic goods, (Hoover over vacuum, Kleenex over tissue, Tylenol over paracetamol) to our sloppy use of grammar and syntax, (Could care less, or couldn't care less?) and beyond. British English speakers (and vice versa) find the gaps in our shared languages insurmountable. We are a "low-brow" class of speakers.

In conclusion, why does “winningest” leave such a bad taste in people's mouths? “Winningest”, because it is a sports term, because it comes from the "colonies" and wasn't cooked up in a lab, because it has strange syntax, and stands alongside other, "better" choices, makes this word a miss for a lot of people. Silliness may be subjective, but the debate over how acceptable the word is still continuing, and these conversations are the culture that decides a word's place in language, how the word is accepted and where it should and should not be used. User lambing's hypothetical child may very well be graded badly for the use of “winningest” in an academic essay, but the sports media and its fans will continue to promote the word, to give it legitimacy, and to make it stick in English usage.

## References

- Alden Sing, "Where Lies the Reputation of a Sports journalist?" B and O Magazine, Volume 28.  
 Baltimore and Ohio Railroad., 1942
- The Borden Co. "The Borden Co. Advertisement." LIFE Magazine, 5 Dec. 1949, p. 27.
- Bus Transportation, Volume 22
- Chipp's Chippendale "Us Uk" <http://www.bikereader.com/contributors/Chippendale/usuk.html>

"Cromulent", Wiktionary.org, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/cromulent>

"Did you know 'winningest' is a word?", digitalspy.co.uk,  
<http://forums.digitalspy.co.uk/showthread.php?t=872826>

"Is 'Winningest' a real word?", Usingenglish.com,  
<http://www.usingenglish.com/forum/threads/124754-Is-quot-winningest-quot-a-real-word>

"Is Winningest a real word?", straightdope.com  
<http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=639718>

James Harbeck, "winningest", <https://sesquiotic.wordpress.com/2014/01/31/winningest/>

Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill, Language Myths, Penguin Books

Merriam Webster, "winningest", <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/winningest>

Sarah Belliston, "Winningest", grammarist.com <http://grammarist.com/words/winningest/>

Simpsons, Fox, "Lisa the Iconoclast" 1996

Theodor Seuss Geisel, Oh the Places You'll Go (Random House 1990) (screen shot from:  
<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/93279-oh-the-places-you-ll-go-there-is-fun-to-be> )

Tom2003, "Winningest", urbandictionary.com,  
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Winningest>

Western Michigan College News Magazine, Volumes 1-4

Western Michigan College of Education, 1942

McGraw-Hill, 1943 - Bus lines

# Xerox

Sara Bugamelli

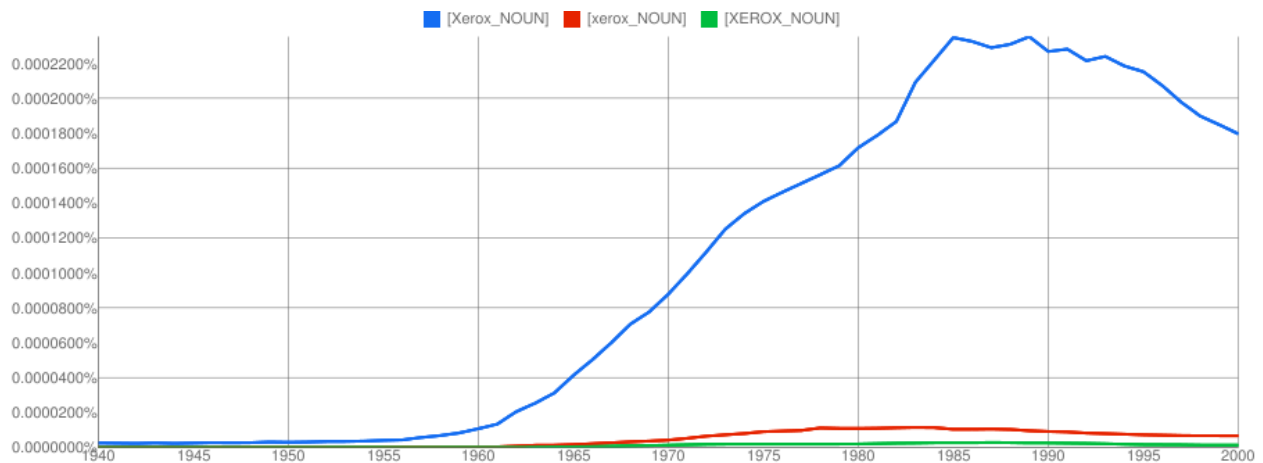
Cite as: Bugamelli, Sara. 2021. Xerox. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 350-358.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The first xerographic copy was produced on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1938 in Astoria, Queens by Chester Carlson with the help of his assistant, Otto Kornei. Carlson, who had been working on developing this technology for almost five years, was ecstatic about his new breakthrough; however, Kornei did not share his enthusiasm and was disappointed by the image. Kornei originally agreed to work for Carlson for six months for \$90 a month plus 20 percent of the first \$10,000 and 10 percent of all net proceeds afterwards from Carlson's invention. Following this six-month period, Kornei and Carlson parted on good terms and, because of his lack of enthusiasm for the project, Kornei even decided to give up the royalties that Carlson originally offered him. In 1947, Carlson began earning royalties for his invention and by 1968 he was estimated to be worth over \$150 million by *Fortune*, although Carlson claimed the magazine's figures were off stating, "I belong in the 0 to \$50 million bracket" (Owen 2004: 260). Needless to say, Kornei regretted his decision to give up his share of the royalties.

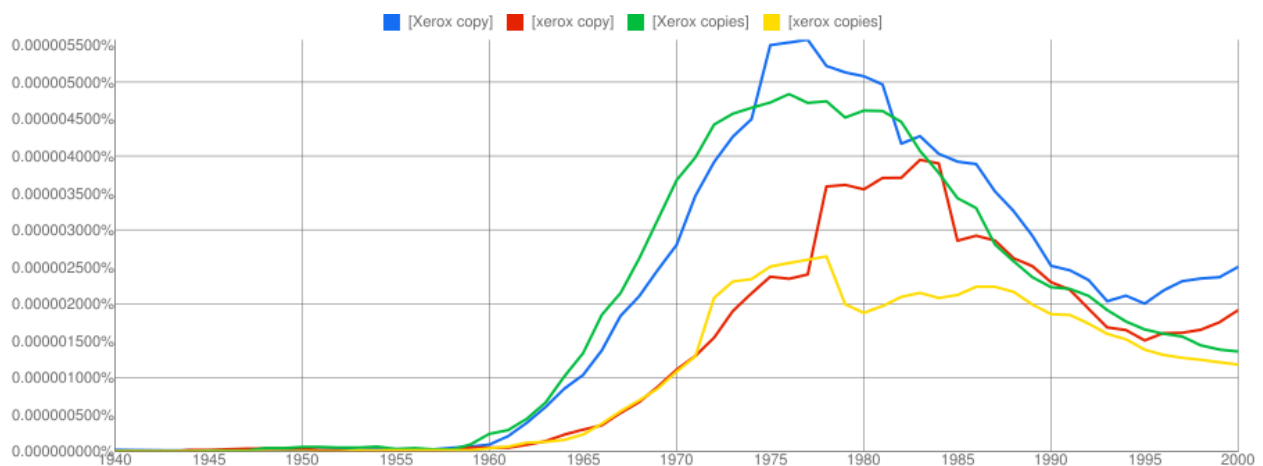
The reproduction of the written word is not a new process, but xerography is unique in that it has not been surpassed by new technology since its conception. This revolutionary process allowed for copies to be made easily, efficiently, and faster than any reproduction had been previously produced. The word xerography is a combination of the Greek words "xeros" and "graphein," which literally translates to "dry writing." In reproduction processes previous to xerography, wet ink was used, at first by scribes who would make handwritten copies, and later, following the invention of movable metal type by Johannes Gutenberg, which made the process much more labor intensive and slow because the ink needed time to dry. In contrast, xerography required no drying time, which dramatically increased the speed at which copies were produced. Similarly, xerography did not require expensive, chemically treated paper and instead utilized ordinary paper, which made the ability to make copies simpler and more accessible to the average person.

The ease and accessibility of the Xerox copier is what made it as successful as it was and transformed the Haloid Photographic Company into a multi-billion-dollar global technology enterprise now known as the Xerox Corporation. The word "xerox" is chronologically linked to the invention of xerography and to the Haloid Photographic Company's choice to change its name to Haloid Xerox in 1958 and again in 1961 to the Xerox Corporation.



**Figure 1: Xerox vs. xerox vs. XEROX**

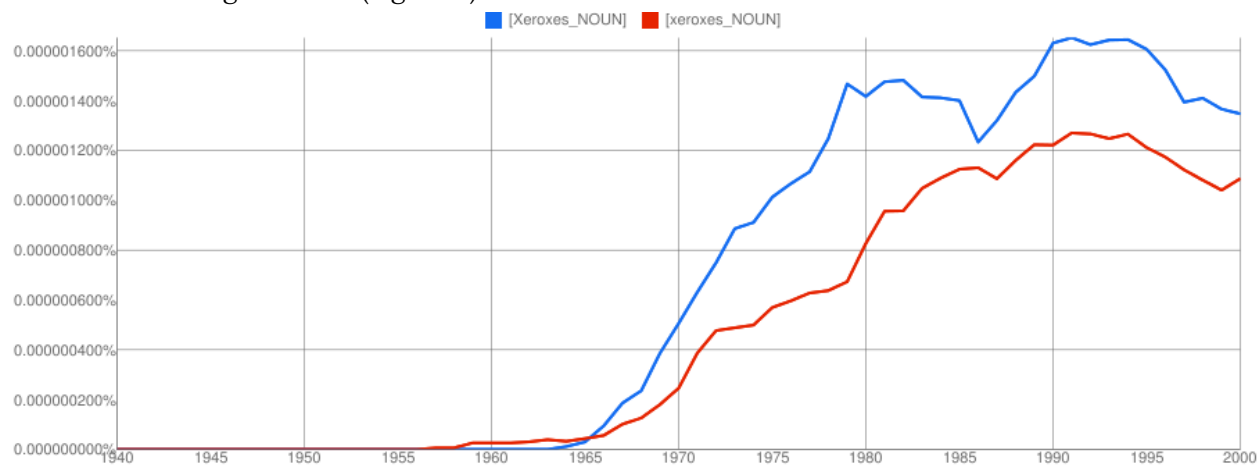
Figure 1 shows that the most common usage of "xerox" is as a capitalized proper noun (Xerox), most likely in reference to the corporation. "Xerox" is the most common usage of the word usually in reference to the Xerox Corporation, and also as a modifier for the words copy or copies (Figure 2). For example, in 1971 Albert Goldman used the term in his book *Freakshow*, "The sight of a stack of fresh Xerox copies would make his day." (Goldman 1971: 219). Also, in Jonathan Ryder's book *Trevayne* in 1973, the word Xerox is again used to describe a copy that was made, "The second was a Xerox copy of the names Andrew had given Frank Baldwin almost two weeks ago -- before the terrible events at the Plaza" (Ryder 1973).



**Figure 2: Xerox copy vs. xerox copy vs. Xerox copies vs. xerox copies**

However, over time it appears that the word "xerox" was sometimes used to replace the word "copy" altogether rather than to modify it. For example, in 1977 Harry Harrison replaces the word "copy" with "Xerox" in his book *Skyfall*, "Instead of bringing the raw data to the President the Information Officer in the White House made a xerox of the southern half of England and drew a red circle with a felt tip pen on the site" (Harrison 1977). Another interesting thing about this example is that Harrison does not capitalize "xerox" in this sentence, while in almost all other examples of "xerox" being used to replace copy other writers do choose to capitalize the noun. For example, in Judith Krantz's 1980 novel *Princess Daisy*, uses the proper noun, "Hubie, you've got not one, not two, but three -- count them -- three-walled sets to build. Nobody's seen three-walled sets used in a year, so get lost, you know what you have to do -- here's a Xerox of the story board" (Krantz 1980). Harrison's choice not to capitalize "xerox" appears to be an anomaly in regard to its use as a noun because in

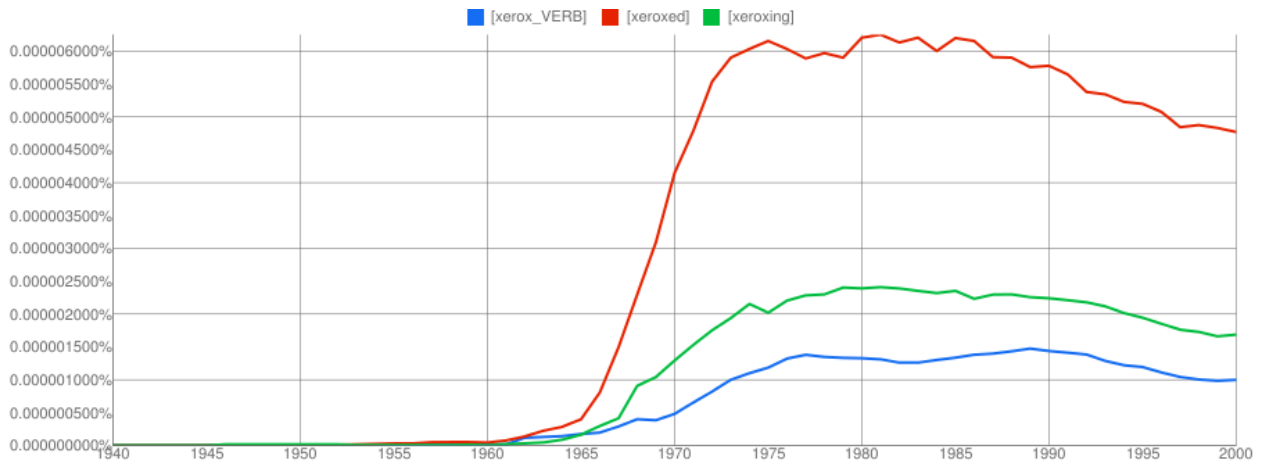
almost all other instances it is capitalized by other authors. This is most likely because the word will be forever linked to the Xerox Corporation and its products and is in fact trademarked by the corporation as a proper noun. In contrast, when “xerox” is made plural (xeroxes) it is not capitalized as often as its singular form (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Xeroxes vs. xeroxes**

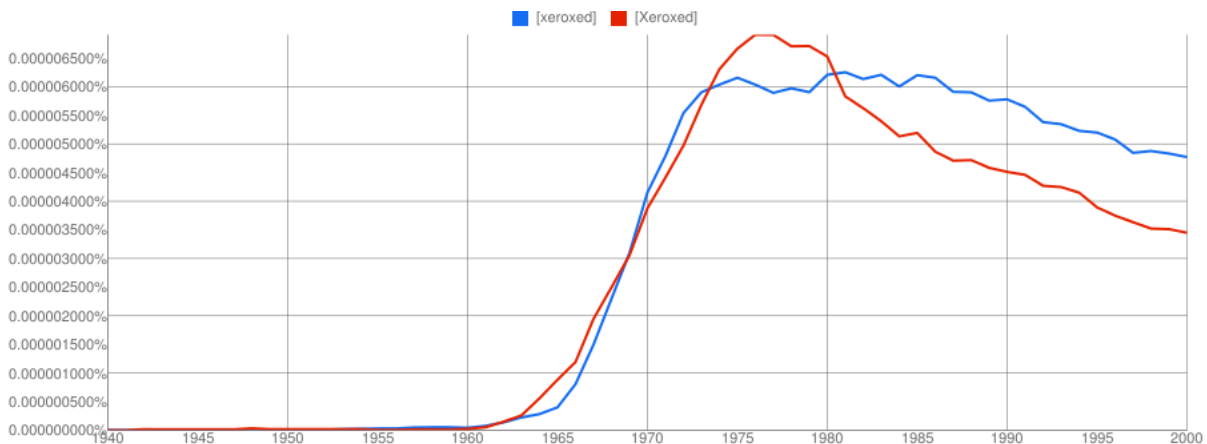
While the usage of “Xeroxes” is still more common than “xeroxes,” the frequency of their use is much more similar than the use of “Xerox” and “xerox.” Other written examples also reflect the intermittent usage of both of these plural forms. The *Corpus of Historical American English* contains two instances of the word “Xeroxes” between 1970 and 1978, while “xeroxes” is used once. Similarly, between 1993 and 1998 there were three examples of “Xeroxes” versus two of “xeroxes”. Both of these examples reflect the chart shown above, mimicking the fact that “Xeroxes” is used more often, but it is not significantly more common than “xeroxes”. It may be that because “xeroxes” is not the name of a company, its use as a proper noun is not as automatic for writers; therefore, it is not subjected to the same grammatical rules as the singular form.

As Xerox brand copy machines became more accessible and more popular among consumers, the word “xerox” began to describe not only the copies produced from Xerox products, but also the action of making copies. The success of the Xerox Corporation is almost unparalleled throughout history, with *Time Magazine* reporting in 1965, “Everyone aims to duplicate the success of Xerox, whose sales since 1960 have multiplied from \$40 million to almost \$400 million, and are expanding 50% yearly” (What’s up, copycat? 1965). The financial success of Xerox was also reflected in the increasing number of copies being made worldwide since the invention of xerography and the introduction of the Xerox 914 copy machine with nine and a half billion copies in 1965, five hundred and fifty billion in 1984, seven hundred billion in 1985, and over two trillion in 2004 (Owen 2004: 282). This significant jump in the sales and usage of Xerox products has a direct correlation to the increase in the use of the word “xerox” as a verb around the same time.



**Figure 4: xerox (VERB) vs. xeroxed vs. xeroxing**

Both Figure 4 and other sources show that “xeroxed” is the most common verb form. Also, just as with the word “xeroxes”, both the capitalized and uncapitalized versions of “xeroxed” are used (Figure 5). However, in the case of this particular verb form there is little difference between the frequency of usage of these two forms of “xeroxed”.



**Figure 5: xeroxed vs. Xeroxed**

Other sources also confirm that the increase in the use of the word “xerox” as a verb is correlated with the dramatic increase in sales during the first half of the 1960s, as well as the somewhat equal usage of both “xeroxed” and “Xeroxed.” One of the earliest uses of the verb form of “xerox” is in the minutes of a meeting held by the Association of Research Libraries on June 8, 1960, “It is estimated that to date more than 5,000 monographs and more than 1,000 serial titles have either been microfilmed or xeroxed under this program” (Association of Research Libraries 1960: 6). This same document contains multiple uses of the word “xeroxed” as well as “xeroxing,” with both remaining uncapitalized. When this document was written the Haloid Photographic Company had not yet changed its name to Haloid Xerox, which would happen the following year, so it would seem that before the word “xerox” became part of the name of a company people did not feel the need to capitalize it. Another example of this is from the New Zealand Journal of Geology and Geophysics published in 1964, “Once the catalogues have been produced, there is no need to refer to the cards themselves, and ‘xeroxed’ copies of the catalogues can be sent to different offices and officers” (Reed



1964: 574). Not only does this show the worldwide impact of the Xerox Corporation, but it also shows that the term “xeroxed” was relatively new because the author chose to put it in quotation marks.

However, following the renaming of the company and the substantial increase in sales the company experienced during the mid to late 1960s, the capitalized form became more prominent and the use of quotation marks was nonexistent. For example, Norman Cantor used “Xeroxed” to replace the word copied in his book *The English* in 1967, “And even if all the documents were Xeroxed, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries would still be unattractive” (Cantor 1967). Also, in 1980 Anne Tyler included it in her novel *Morgan's Passing*, “Should I be the one to get it Xeroxed?” (Tyler 1980). The use of the word “xerox” as a verb continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well, with the Corpus of Contemporary American English reporting 48 uses of “Xeroxed” between 2000 and 2011. However, in the same way that “xerox” was used to modify the words copy or copies, the word “xeroxed” was used to modify anything that had been photocopied. For instance, in an article in Harper's Magazine, Alan H. Grossman uses the word to describe copies, “One of seven Xeroxed copies was shown to Nixon's law partner and campaign recruiter, Leonard Garinent, who hired Treleven as Nixon's creative director of advertising” (Grossman 1971). Moreover, both the noun and the verb form of the word “xerox” are used in similar ways whether it be to describe or represent the act of photocopying or the photocopy itself.

According to the International Trademark Association a trademark becomes generic when “the public comes to understand the trademark to be the name of the product itself as opposed to identifying an exclusive source of the product” (International Trademark Association). The growth of the Xerox Corporation caused the growth and transformation of the word “xerox” to become synonymous with copies and copying. This commonplace use of the word “xerox” has led the corporation to fight against the potential loss of their trademark by taking out print advertisements informing people of the impact their use of language could have on Xerox.



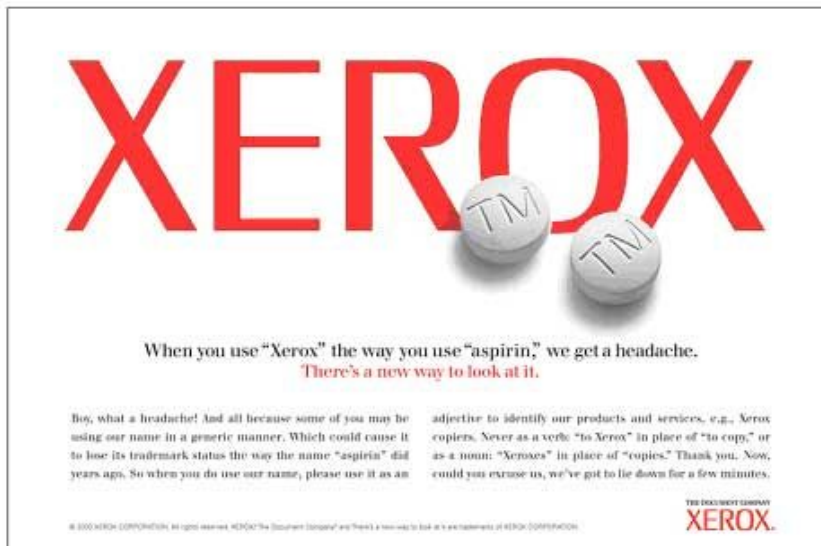
If you use “Xerox” the way you use “zipper,” our trademark could be left wide open. **There's a new way to look at it.**

No one likes to have their name open to misuse. Which is what happens when you use our name in a generic manner. Basically you're pulling it in a compromising position which could cause it to lose its trademark status. That's what happened to the name “zipper” years ago. So when you use our name, please use it as an adjective to identify our products and services, such as “Xerox copiers.” Never as a verb: “to Xerox” in place of “to copy,” or as a noun: “Xeroxes” in place of “copies.” Now that you're aware of all this, that should just about zip things up. Thanks.

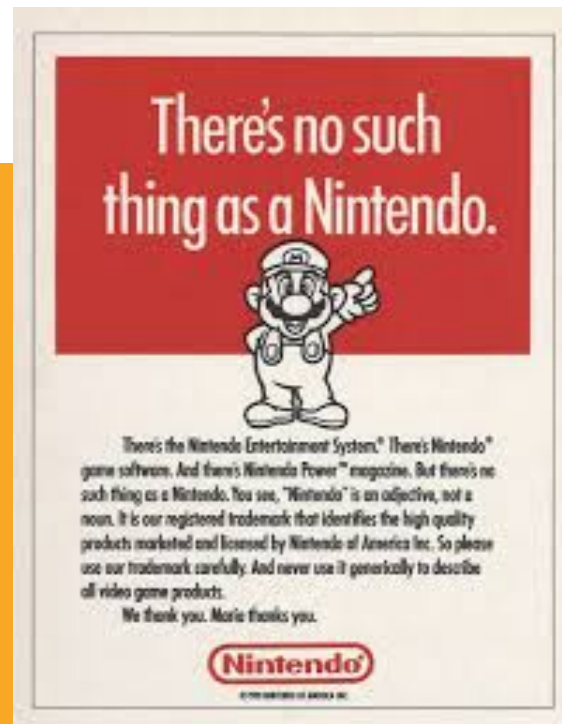
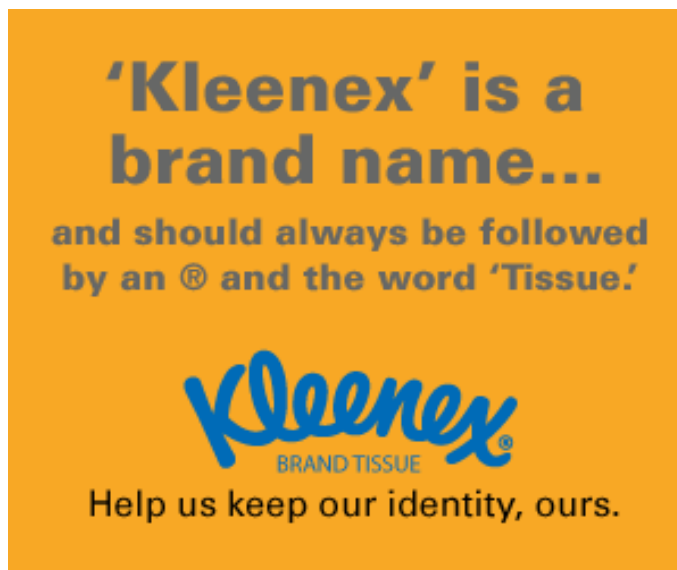
**XEROX**

[xerox.com/learn](http://xerox.com/learn) 1-888-ASK-XEROX or LEARN | Technology | Document Management | Consulting Services

© 2008 XEROX CORPORATION. All rights reserved. XEROX and There's a new way to look at it are trademarks of XEROX CORPORATION in the United States and/or other countries.



Generic trademarks are more common than most people might realize, and Xerox uses the words zipper and aspirin as examples of words that were once trademarks but are now considered commonplace words. Other examples of generic trademarks are cellophane, kerosene, heroin, landromat, and videotape. Just as the Xerox Corporation has fought against becoming a generic trademark, other brands such as Kleenex and Nintendo have also taken out print advertisements to remind people of the language they are using.



Although the word "xerox" is still a legal trademark of the Xerox Corporation, it is clear that its use as a generic term is common and recognized by many, including the Oxford English Dictionary. The OED lists the word "xerox" as both a noun and a verb, and includes the generic use of the word as part of the definition. For the noun form, both the capitalized and uncapitalized spellings are

included (the capitalized spelling is used for the heading of the entry) and the definition is listed as, “A proprietary name for photocopiers; also used loosely (*attributive* and *absolute*) to denote any photocopy”. For the verb form, both the capitalized and uncapitalized spellings are included as well, except in this case the uncapitalized spelling is used as the heading for the entry, and the definition is listed as, “To reproduce by xerography; to photocopy”. Other languages besides English have also adopted to colloquial use of “xerox”, such as Portuguese, which has adopted the verb “xeroxar” to mean “to photocopy” (Google Translate). Furthermore, despite the Xerox Corporation's (currently successful) efforts to maintain their trademark, it would appear that the word “xerox” has become part of the lexicon of human language.

After the presentation of this information, an important question arises: Why do trademarks become generic? Although this is not always the case, certain trademarks are sometimes more common than the generic terms that they represent, which is true of the trademarked words, such as Post-it, Scotch tape, and Styrofoam. From the following charts (Figures 6, 7, 8) it can be seen that these trademarked names are used more often than the actual names of the product itself.

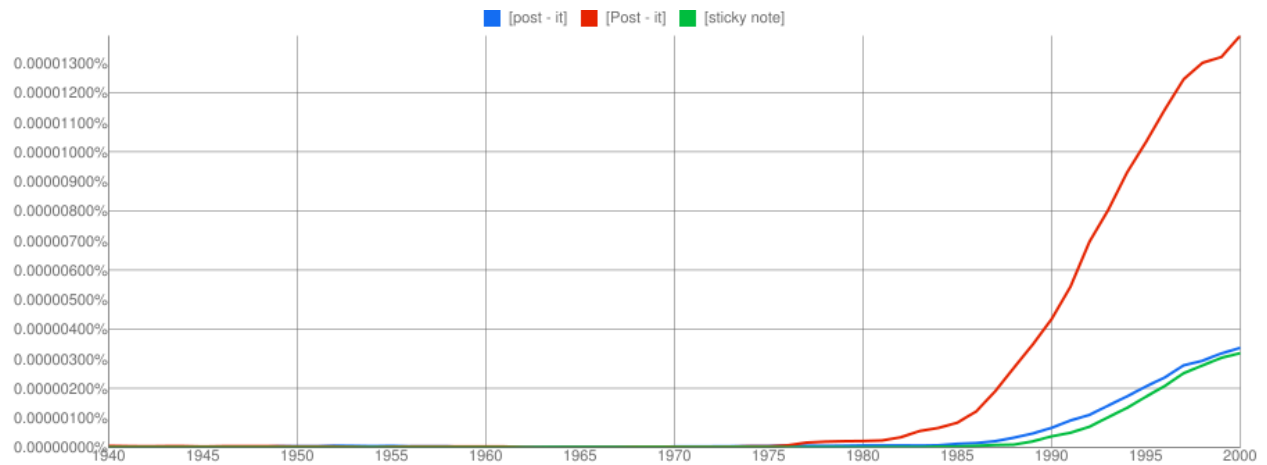


Figure 6: post-it vs. Post-it vs. sticky note

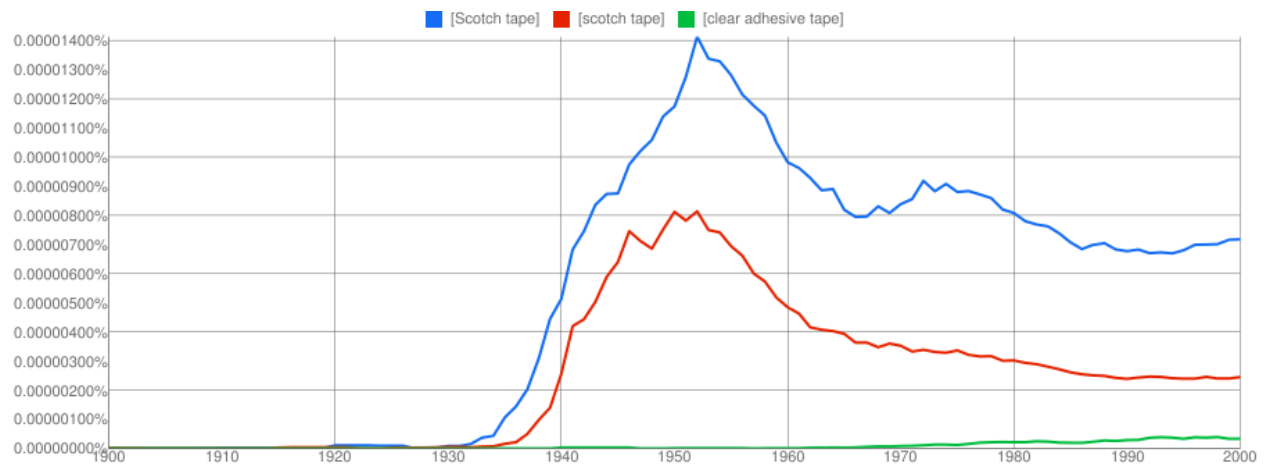
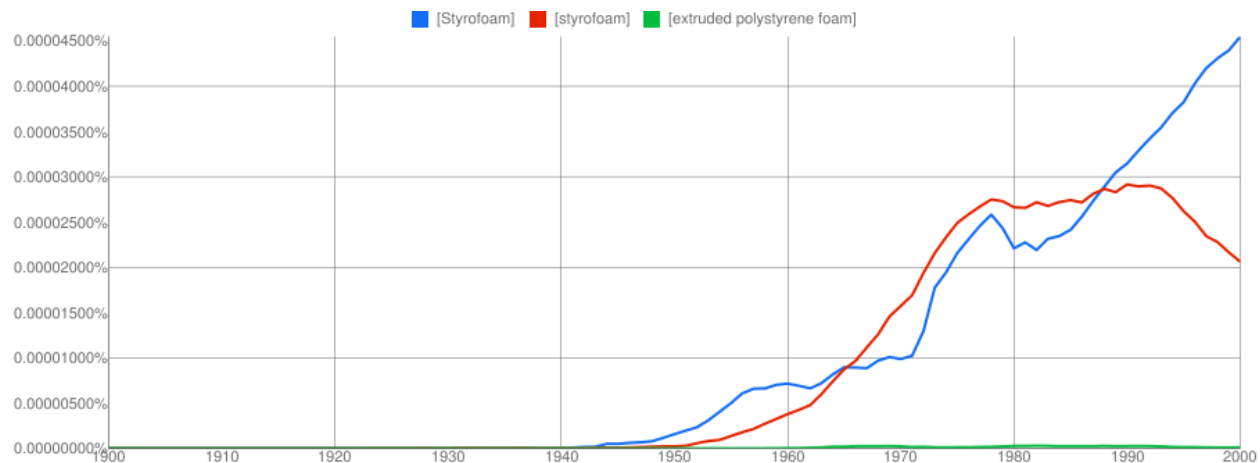


Figure 7: Scotch tape vs. scotch tape vs. clear adhesive tape



**Figure 8: Styrofoam vs. Styrofoam vs. extruded polystyrene foam**

One of the reasons that these trademarked names are used more often than their generic counterparts could be that as the popularity of the product itself increased so did the use of the trademarked word, as was the case with the word “xerox”. However, the reverse is also possible. The purpose of trademarks is to equate a product with a certain company and a certain amount of quality to convince consumers to buy it, so it is possible that companies want consumers to use their trademarks as often as possible (as long as they keep their trademark) to encourage consumers to purchase their brand of a certain product because the trademarked name is more recognizable to the consumer. This was not always believed to be true, but the consistent use of trademarked names for generic terms seems to suggest otherwise. For example, the Xerox Corporation considered trademarking the word xerography, but the head of sales and advertising, John Hartnett, warned against it saying, “Don't do *that*. We want people to use the word.” (Owen 2004: 145). Little did he realize that people would use the word “xerox” to the point that the company would feel threatened enough to take out trademark awareness advertisements. Therefore, the use of trademarked terms for generic items could be seen as a perpetuation of consumerism because it makes a particular brand more recognizable to consumers, and therefore makes them more likely to purchase that brand because they are familiar with it.

The word “xerox” has been molded and manipulated by human language in several ways since Chester Carlson made the first xerographic copy in 1938. For those who have strictly inhabited a post-Xerox world, it is easy to forget that language itself was the first copier invented by humans, “the device by which an idea of yours becomes an idea of mine. We are distinct from chimpanzees because speech, through its irrepressible power of reproduction, multiplied our thoughts into thinking” (Owen 2004). It is through the power of language that humans are able to create a word like “xerox” and change it to mean what they want it to, no matter who claims to own it.

## References

- “What's new, Copycat?” Time, November 5, 1965.
- Cantor, Norman. *The English*. Simon and Schuster, 1967.
- Corpus of Historical American English. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>
- Goldman, Albert. *Freakshow: The Rocksoulbluesjazzsickjewblackhumorsexpoppsych Gig and Other Scenes from the Counter-culture*. Atheneum, 1971.
- Google Translate. <https://translate.google.com/>

Grossman, Alan H. *China & the U.S. Harper's*, 1971-10, p. 86-94.

Harrison, Harry. *Skyfall*. Atheneum, 1977.

<https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-OFkyMPtTxbk/UHyvDXsd3NI/AAAAAAAAAB9g/834out1RmvA/s1600/Xerox-aspirin-ad.jpg>

<https://spicyip.com/2012/10/guest-post-xerox-is-not-genericyet.html>

<https://www.cbc.ca/ageofpersuasion/episode/season-5/2011/05/06/season-five-genericide-when-a-brand-name-becomes-generic-1/>

<https://www.kotaku.com.au/2014/07/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-nintendo/>

International Trademark Association.  
<http://www.inta.org/TrademarkBasics/Documents/INTAGenericidePresentationMar2012.pptx>

Kleenex Advertisement Google Images  
<http://www.cbc.ca/ageofpersuasion/Kleenex%20trademark%20ad.gif>

Krantz, Judith. *Princess Daisy*. Crown, 1980.

Minutes of the 55th Annual Meeting of the Association of Research Libraries, June 18, 1960, Montreal, Canada. Association of Research Libraries, 1960.

Nintendo Advertisement Google Images <http://images.huffingtonpost.com/2014-08-04-TheresNoSuchThingasaNintendo.jpg>

Nintendo Advertisement Google Images <http://images.huffingtonpost.com/2014-08-04-TheresNoSuchThingasaNintendo.jpg>

Owen, David. *Copies in Seconds*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

Reed, J. J. "Machine-punched cards for cataloguing rocks and minerals." *New Zealand Journal of Geology and Geophysics* 7, no. 3 (1964): 573-584.

Ryder, Jonathan. *Trevayne*. Bantam, 1973.

Tyler, Anne. *Morgan's Passing*. Berkley Books, 1980.

# Ye Olde

Gavin Redding

Cite as: Redding, Gavin. 2021. Ye Olde. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 359-364.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

This paper will investigate the emergence of the phrase “ye olde” and the different meaning that it assumes. Specifically, this paper will first antedate the phrase, then explore the changes in usage of the phrase. When it comes to the meaning of the phrase, Oxford English Dictionary (OED) states the following, “Employed esp, commercially to suggest (spurious) antiquity in collocations the other words of which are often also archaistically spelt” (Oxford English Dictionary). Additionally, the OED suggests the etymology of “ye” as a variant of “the” (Oxford English Dictionary). This claim seems to hold up as according to another citation in the OED for the entry “zed”, a Middle English dictionary, in about 1425, states “We have in oure langage too lettres more þane þei in here, þat is to sey, y [i.e., þ] & z, which is called thorn and zedde” (Oxford English Dictionary). This statement confirms that “the” could have been written as “ye” prior towards any regularization of spelling, making the hypothesis posited in the earlier entry likely.

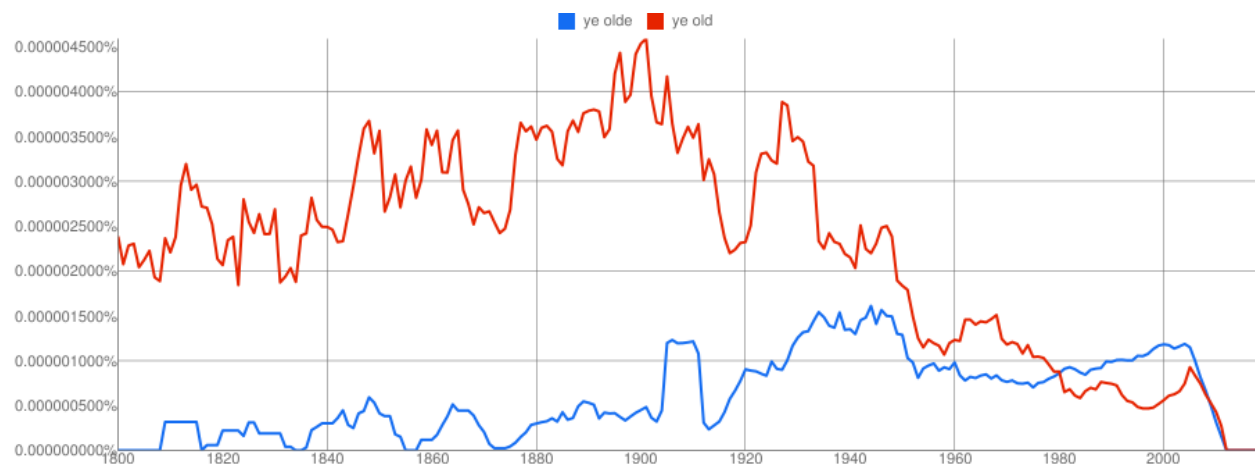
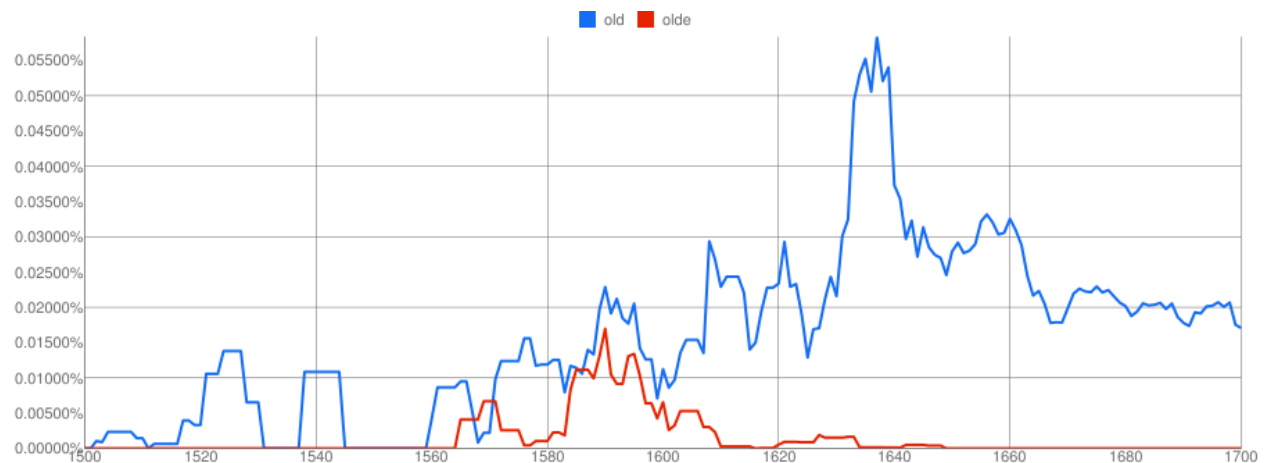


Figure 1: Ngram: ye olde vs. ye old



A brief note should be made about the differing forms of this phrase, “ye olde” and “ye old”, it would seem in the modern period the form “ye olde” is all but ubiquitous, but this may not have always been the case. Rather, according to **Figure 1**, the form “ye old” was more common at one point in time. According to Google Ngram the form “ye olde” overtook the more common “ye old” at some point in the 1980s. This is especially interesting considering, according to Google Ngram viewer, the form “old” appears to have been a much more popular form than “olde”.



**Figure 2: Ngram: olde vs. old.**

According to **Figure 2**, save for a brief period around the 1570s which by all accounts appears to be an anomaly, “old” was always a much more common spelling. It is of course possible that at some point prior to the 1500s, a period Google Ngram has little data on, that “olde” was more popular, but given the fact that **Figure 2** does not track many uses of “olde” prior to 1560, this seems like an unlikely situation. Taken altogether, why then did “ye olde” become the most popular form in the modern era? Whilst it is hard to identify a specific causal factor, one possible answer may lie in the phrase itself. “Ye” as an alternative form of “the” already suggest antiquity, calling back to a period in English orthography when “ye” substituted the thorn, as evidenced by the earlier mentioned middle English dictionary cited in the OED (Oxford English Dictionary). It is possible that the alternative form of the word “old” changed to “olde” to be synchronous with the first element in the phrase, as the current form, with both component parts, suggests a period in the English Language when spelling was not standardized. This seems likely considering the phrase, as will be discussed, is often used to evoke an older period of history, which the archaic spellings suggest.

In antedating “ye olde”, I have sought after clear examples wherein the phrase has started to take its modern form; this largely means looking for examples where “ye” occurs alongside “the”, in order to find a period in time where “ye olde” is now a phrase with a meaning distinct from “the old”. Such an inquiry excludes examples that are merely quoting from older reports. The earliest example cited in the OED is an example from a work by Warwick Wroth called *The London Pleasure Gardens of The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford English Dictionary). Whilst this example is an earlier one, this paper suggests that the phrase can be antedated even earlier.

The oldest example I could find wherein “ye olde” was used, that fits the criteria laid out earlier, is a work entitled *Merrye Engluade: or, the Goldene daies of goode Queene Besse*. The author George Olivier, a Catholic historian, wrote the work in 1841. The basic plot of the novel details the persecution of Catholics in Cornwall (Cooper). In this work we see multiple examples such as, “I mervailedd as I sawe Gervase laffe when thatt hee spake to ye olde beldame...” (Oliver 249). I should note some limitations to this example. Firstly, in other instances throughout the work the author frequently uses “ye” for “the”. However, the work appears to be written during a time when using “ye” was a

construction of the past. In fact, in the introduction to the work Olivier reveals his motivation to lampoon the idea of “Merry England”, an ideological construction that posits England as a superior country and unique country compared to others (Oliver vi-vii). Throughout the novel the author makes use of an English that is antiquated. In using “ye” the author has indexed “Ye” as being a construction that belongs to the past, and in some ways suggests this ideological construction of “Merry England”. This is important because even though the work is written as if it is from the past, it is a case of a modern, for its time, writer creatively using a past construction in new ways.

While the previous example shows a clear connection between “ye olde” and the past, it is not a clear, unambiguous use of “ye olde” on its own without other uses of “ye”, that is it is not a unique phrase unto itself. Rather, the earliest example I could find is in the revised and enlarged version of the story *The Traits and Stories of Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese* by Thomas Wilson Reed, published in 1866. In the introduction of the enlarged edition, the reader is informed the story is about an old tavern named “The Cheshire Cheese” (Reid viii). The usage of “ye olde” in referring to the tavern is notable because this is a usage that is common in the contemporary period, an establishment being referred to as “ye olde\_”. If the introduction is to be believed (although by no means a given), the book was quite popular, as was the tavern, which may be a causal factor in the phrase spreading. Alternatively, the phrase could have already been in use prior to this and this is the earliest extant example, so far found, of the construction. Either way, it is notable that this example predates the earliest example in the Oxford English Dictionary by a couple decades.

The next example this paper traces is in a historical work by Warwick Wroth, from The British National Museum, called *The London Pleasure Gardens of The Eighteenth Century*. It is worth noting that this is the earliest usage that the Oxford English Dictionary suggests as mentioned earlier. As the title suggests, the work is an attempt to provide a history of the London Pleasure Gardens, that is public gardens (Wroth v). Relevant to this paper, there is a section on a public house (pub) called “Ye Olde Bagnigge Wells”. It appears the establishment was at first a residence with a garden that was opened to the public in 1759 (Wroth 57). Sometime after 1760 the place became a popular resort (Wroth 58). By 1810, the place is associated with lower class visitors, and by 1813 the leaser declares bankruptcy and the house is auctioned (Wroth 64). After further detailing the fortunes of the place, the history of the place end with an important passage relevant to the object of this paper’s investigation, “Shortly afterwards, the present tavern was built; Mr. Negus a name suggestive of other days, being the tenant in 1850” (Wroth 66). Assuming the history sketched out in the history is correct, the name of the place was established at some point around 1850, nearly contemporary with the *Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese*. Furthermore, the history explains that the name was suggestive of other days, a fact important because this is the usage of “ye olde” familiar in the present day, naming an establishment to evoke an idea of the past. The context in which the phrase is used also serves the purpose to draw people into the pub, specifically to spend money at a business. Essentially, in naming the pub, the phrase “ye olde” is being used to market the establishment by pointing towards the past, perhaps a better time. It is notable that the other example of the phrase is for another tavern in *Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese*. Whilst we are not left with as strong evidence as the case for the pub, naming the tavern in such a way would also suggest that evoking the past served as a way of marketing and getting people to come to the establishment. In essence, the context in which “ye olde” first appears is a form of advertising for establishments where people spend money. I would posit it is no accident that the phrase occurs during a time, the mid to late 1800s, of increasing urbanization and commerce.

Of course, the trend of using “ye olde” for naming businesses continues beyond this point, but this paper wishes to investigate how the usage changes, as such an interesting innovation occurs by the 1950s. In a 1951 crime novel called *Operation Pax* by Michael Innes the following quote appears, “Not a tourist centre. Nothing ye olde.” (Innes 212). An important change in usage has occurred here. No longer is “ye olde”, as an adjective phrase, occurring directly before a noun in the name of an establishment. Rather, the phrase now appears independent of any sort of proper name of a business.

Still, a strong connection is established between the phrase and commerce. Specifically, the phrase relates to tourist centers, or tourism more broadly speaking. Such facts suggest a social context in which the term is used for buildings that would serve as popular tourist attractions, furthering the commodification of the term. The usage of the term also suggests that now, it was a cliché of this period, something to be expected at any sort of tourist location.

Moving into contemporary usage, if we take a look at social media, we see that “ye olde” has changed further in usage. We see an interesting example in **Figure 3**.



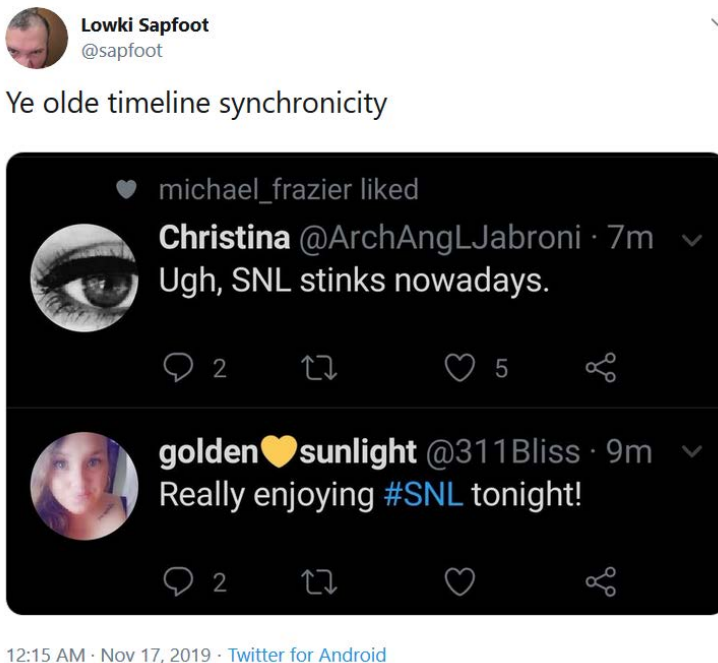
**Figure 3: Ye Olde Tires.** Source: <https://twitter.com/PeterCBC/status/1196217190531391488>

In this instance, “ye olde” is used to modify studded tires. In the context of the tweet, rubber tires outperform studded tires, therefore studded tires are inferior. Here the phrase is suggesting that the tires are not merely old, but specifically familiar and outdated, with a negative connotation. If the past is now viewed in a negative light, this would suggest a changed view of modernity, or at least an alternative view than the one offered by taverns trying to market some imagined past. This usage retains the evocation of the past, but rather than being viewed as a positive thing, something that can be commodified, the past is now a negative attribute, implying that people should move on from the past. We see further an example of this in **Figure 4**.



**Figure 4: Ye Olde Unionbusting.** <https://twitter.com/mightbeolivia/status/1195077187331866624>

“Ye Olde Union Busting” is not connected to any sort of business marketing or tourist attractions. Rather, we see the phrase modifying the action of “union busting”. The way the poster is using this phrase suggests that the action is something to be expected and familiar, and outmoded and negative.



**Figure 5: “Ye Olde Timeline”.** Source: <https://twitter.com/sapfoot/status/1195933341784035328>

The term is seen to be subject to further semantic shift in **Figure 5**. The tweet does not suggest any obvious case of the situation being old or archaic in a negative sense. The situation presented is a humorous one and relies on a cultural knowledge of twitter timelines and discourse surrounding popular media, suggesting what is occurring is something that happens frequently. This is the common thread amongst all the newer usages of the term, a sense of familiar, whether negative, positive, or neutral. It is not hard to see why a phrase that originally served to evoke the past would become to be associated with familiar, not only did the phrase itself become something of a cliché, but history itself is often seen as familiar, and something shared in common, a sentiment it appears these posts are tapping into.

The object of this paper was twofold: first, tracing the origins of the phrase “ye olde” and second, looking at the evolving usage of the phrase. In taking a brief look at the phrase “ye olde”, we see that it has not remained static. Rather, the phrase is dynamically changing in meaning, connected with wider social trends in the usage of the phrase. The phrase was born in a commercial context and is strongly associated with such situations. However, underlying all usages is a relationship with the past, whether it is being commodified or not.

## References

- Cooper, Thompson. “Olivier, George (1781-1861)”. In Lee, Sidney (ed.). *Dictionary of National Biography*. 1895, London, Smith, Elder & Co.
- Innes, Michael. *Operation Pax*, 2001 edition, House of Stratus, Cornwall, UK. Originally published 1951.
- @mightbeolivia. “ye olde unionbusting tactic.” Twitter, 3:32 PM, Nov 14, 2019, <https://twitter.com/mightbeolivia/status/1195077187331866624>
- Olivier, George. *Merrye Engluade: or, the Goldene daies of goode Queene Besse*, Charles Doleman, London, 1841.
- @PeterCBC. “Tire Companies have invested a lot in creating modern rubber compounds that stay sticky in cold temperatures, to the point that they now outperform ye olde studded tires.” Twitter, 7:02PM Nov. 17, 2019. <https://twitter.com/PeterCBC/status/1196217190531391488>
- Reid, Thomas Wilson. *Traits and Stories of Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese*, edited by A.W. Allen, Enlarged Edition, London, January 1866.
- @sapfoot. “ye olde timeline synchronicity” Twitter, 12:15 AM, Nov. 17, 2019, <https://twitter.com/sapfoot/status/1195933341784035328>
- “ye olde”. Oxford English Dictionary, 1989.
- “Zed”. Oxford English Dictionary, June 2018.

# Yoink

Jessica Beatty

Cite as: Beatty, Jessica. 2021. Yoink. In *The Lexiculture Papers: English Words and Culture*, Stephen Chrisomalis (ed.), pp. 365-369.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Slang is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense” (OED). It is important to clarify that in modern linguistics, those who choose to incorporate slang into their speech are no less intelligent or educated than those who choose not to. In fact, one may find it difficult to avoid using slang completely.

The focus of this paper is on the term ‘yoink’. The etymology, use, and cultural significance of the word will be explored. Ultimately, this research serves to investigate why ‘yoink’ is often onomatopoeic accompaniment to a verbalized action. In other words, why is it often the case that when a person says ‘yoink!’ they mean to exclaim the action they are taking?

## Etymology

Yoink (/jɔɪŋk/) is not yet in any major dictionaries, but is defined in multiple ways in the Urban Dictionary in user-supplied definitions. The first category of definitions use it as an onomatopoeic verb, “to make a yoink sound”. Other notable onomatopoeic definitions include “an action that impacts on something, especially if it is sudden”, “to kill”, and “accompanying or describing a yank, or snatch”. The second category of definitions are verbs, falling together to mean “to yank, snatch, steal, take, and/or win”. The Urban Dictionary had these two definitions available, with the first having 169 upvotes, and the second having 3,700 upvotes (upvotes indicate votes of legitimate accuracy or support of a definition in the Urban Dictionary by its’ users). “Yoink, being the opposite of yeet, means grabbing something, and whatever it is you are “yoinking”, all depends on how the word was used”. “An exclamation that, when uttered in conjunction with taking an object, immediately transfers ownership from the original owner to the person using the word regardless of previous property rights”. While this work will discuss all these definitions, the final definition from Urban Dictionary is the definition where the central focus of this paper lies.

## Usage

The word itself carries many meanings, the majority of which are similar to one another. First, the less common usages will be discussed. The earliest uses of the word arise in the mid-1950s, describing the sound that some animals make, “the pigs—a big drove of them—were yoinking for their feed” (Trefflich and Kendrick 1954: 207). The more widely used onomatopoeia for the sound a pig makes is ‘oink’, but ‘yoink’ is so closely related to oink in phonological terms that this usage is logical.

Another example of ‘yoink’ being used as a sound word lies here, with an excerpt from a 1956 novel, “I stood fascinated down at the Reptile Institute listening to Ross go, “Yoink yoink” and seeing a sixteen-foot lovesick alligator, dripping affection, crawl up toward him out of a greenish little pond” (Shoebottom 1956: 2). The sound that pigs make and the sound that alligators make are not similar. Alligators produce a deep, gurgling sound more akin to a tuba being blasted through bathtub water than to a pig. No other instances of these “animal sound” usages were found, especially not in



contemporary diction. Regardless, these usages are some of the first for the word 'yoink' and fulfill the need to describe a sound.

A definition that stands out drastically from the other definitions is "to kill". This seems drastically different when compared to the other definitions, which mostly mean "to steal". One instance of this is in the popular video game Halo: Reach with the Yoink Medal, "Yoink is a multiplayer, campaign and Firefight medal in Halo: Reach that is awarded for killing an enemy while they are in the process of being assassinated" (Halopedia). This definition can be more clearly linked to the "to steal" definitions by describing it as the yoinking -or stealing- of a life. This definition is less commonly used, as the author was only able to find its usage in Halo: Reach, which debuted in 2010, and a small number of novel excerpts from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

'Yoink' also means to steal, snatch, and otherwise take possession of something, "Like, yoink! My phone now! But you saw me take it, so that makes it okay", is what a fourteen-year-old said to the author after she asked him to explain what 'yoink' meant. This definition is also the first one that arises from Google when one searches simply 'yoink'. It is evident from investigation that the "to kill" and "animal sound" definitions have fallen out of use, and that the most widely used form of 'yoink' is of the "to steal" variety.

## Yoink vs. Yeet

Understanding the definition of yoink as the deliberate taking of something, it is worth mentioning its counterpart; 'yeet'. 'Yeet' is a verb which means "to move quickly, or to throw an object a long distance or with a sudden or forceful motion". Meme culture is a grouping of ideas that discuss our culture, cultural phenomenon, thoughts, and ideas through humor and the repetitive use of picture aids to describe these concepts. 'Yeet' was popularized in the mid-2000s through meme culture, which has had a significant impact on the popularity of these two words. It is widely accepted that 'yoink' and 'yeet' are direct opposites due to their correlations with the words take and throw, respectively.

Figure 1 shows the number of searches that Google Trends documented for the word 'yeet', in red, and the word 'yoink', in blue. 'Yeet' is evidently searched more on Google than 'yoink' is. This could be attributed to 'yeet' being coined much later than 'yoink' was, and because 'yeet' came into existence through the social medium Vine. 'Yeet' is also a word that one exclaims while taking the action of 'yeeting'- throwing- an object. People exclaim 'yeet' to draw attention to their action and to ensure that the general public is aware of a projectile being present. This is similar to the concept of lumberjacks yelling "timber!" when felling a tree.

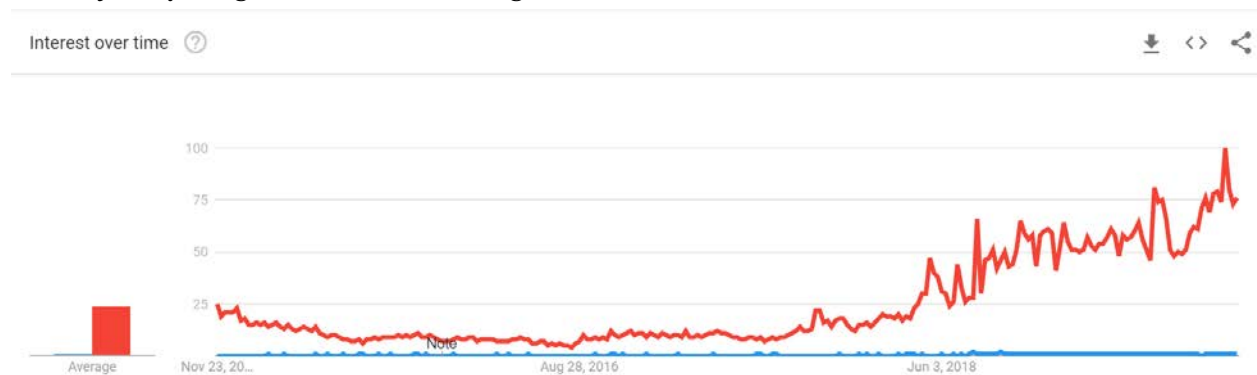


Figure 1: Google Trends for 'yeet' (red) and 'yoink' (blue)



**Figure 2: The Lord yeeteth and the Lord yoinketh away**

Figure 2 shows a beautiful embroidery of the phrase “the Lord yeeteth and the Lord yoinketh away”. This is a play on the biblical saying “the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.” This is a phrase that is often used in meme culture, and further displays the opposing natures of ‘yeet’ and ‘yoink’.

## **The Simpsons**

‘Yoink’ is contemporarily drawn from the pop culture television series *The Simpsons*. The show began in 1989 and is still creating new episodes at the time this essay is written. That accounts for 30 years of production, fans, and above all, influence from the series into mainstream society. Having already investigated the less-influential definitions of ‘yoink’, now it is time to begin discussing its’ cultural significance.

*The Simpsons* is a well-known sitcom about a family living their lives in a town called Springfield. The family members and their friends become caught up in all kinds of mischief and resolve most of those situations by the end of each episode. A word commonly used by characters in the show is, in fact, ‘yoink!’ Figure 3 shows an example of how ‘yoink’ is used in conversation.



**Figure 3: “And, look, you’ve saved more than a hundred dollars! I found it in your pants.” – Marge Simpson. “Yoink!” – Homer Simpson”**

As this example shows, characters exclaim “yoink!” when they are stealing, yanking, snatching, or taking an object from another character. The word is not being used as a verb; Homer did not say “I am yoinking this from you”. Neither is it being exclusively used as onomatopoeia, because the sound of him taking the money is not ‘yoink’, but more likely a ‘swish’ sound.

### **Action sound**

When used in the popular “to steal” manner, ‘yoink’ is a verb, but this word is not conjugated and used as a verb as often as it is merely exclaimed. ‘Yoink’ is mostly used as an onomatopoeia for the action of ‘yoinking’. Returning to a quote from the Etymology section, ‘yoink’ is “An exclamation that, when uttered in conjunction with taking an object, immediately transfers ownership from the original owner to the person using the word regardless of previous property rights.”

From this definition and the example that Mr. Simpson shared, it is pondered why people choose to say this. It is rare that a word is used in such a way. When cooking an egg, one does not say “fry”. As when one plays hide-and-seek, they do not say “hide” as they are hiding or “seek” when they are looking for others. Most onomatopoeia describe the sound that an action, creature, or object makes. Such as birds making a “caw” sound, or babies going “waaaah” when they cry. ‘Yoink’ is distinct from these examples.

When stealing something, the person stealing the object is doing so without the owner’s permission. Otherwise- if the owner knew of the person’s action- most people would call this action ‘borrowing’. ‘Yoink’ is exclaimed when a person takes another individual’s belonging(s) while that individual is present. Often, ‘yoink’ is exclaimed when the owner is holding the belonging, as with Marge Simpson and the money, as Homer Simpson takes the money and says ‘yoink’. Had Homer decided to take this money while Marge was not present, it would be far less likely that he would say ‘yoink’ aloud to himself. This is because ‘yoink’ is verbalized to let the owner know that their item is being taken from them.

## Pragmatic context

Why do this though? Revisiting what the author's fourteen-year-old friend had to say will provide some insight: "Like, yoink! My phone now! But you saw me take it, so that makes it okay". He clarifies that even though the item is being stolen, since he said 'yoink' along with this otherwise frowned upon action, the negativity associated with stealing is neutralized. This is only the case when the owner is both present and aware of the implied playfulness the word 'yoink' brings to the action being taken. It is from this final, pragmatic explanation that an answer can be drawn to the question; why do people say 'yoink' when they are 'yoinking' something?

'Yoink' is exclaimed when a person is stealing an object to show that the person stealing the object is doing so in a playful, nonthreatening way. A 'yoink' often is meant to be an action of humor, and not one of sincere theft. This is the same concept as 'yoink's' antonym, 'yeet'. Both words are exclaimed to elicit a laugh or sense of enjoyment from the onlookers and owners of the items being 'yoinked' or 'yeeted', respectfully. This is known from the contexts in which 'yoink' is being used, and the examples mentioned in this paper. *Vine*, *The Simpsons*, and meme culture are all sources of entertainment and humor. The play on words "the Lord yeeteth and the Lord yoinketh away" is meant to be comedic, not disrespectful to religion. 'Yoink' is in this way a sarcastic action. The 'yoinker' is stealing, yes, but they mean to do so lightheartedly and in a way that begs forgiveness. The 'yoinker' means to let the owner and surrounding individuals know that they are not permanently stealing the object, but rather are trying to fulfill a comedic relief.

## Conclusion

This paper has spent time discussing the word 'yoink'. Its many definitions, uses in contemporary life, cultural significance, antonym, and pragmatic meaning have all been researched and addressed. Words are best understood by the contexts they are used in, and how individuals in society define them. 'Yoink' is a word that, when used in the context of taking an object from an individual, is meant to negate the owner's negative feelings, and to display a sense of sarcasm to the action of theft. This research provides insight into how culture, language, and pragmatics change social interactions and social meanings in linguistic ways. Hopefully, the research laid here can guide future academics into the world of linguistics.

## References

"Urban Dictionary: Yoink." *Urban Dictionary*, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Yoink](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Yoink).

"Yeet." *Wiktionary, the Free Dictionary*, [en.wiktionary.org/wiki/yeet](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/yeet).

"Yoink." *Halopedia*, [www.halopedia.org/Yoink#cite\\_note-1](http://www.halopedia.org/Yoink#cite_note-1).

"Yoink." *Wiktionary, the Free Dictionary*, [en.wiktionary.org/wiki/yoink](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/yoink).

H. Minar Shoebottom, *Anaconda: Life of Marcus Daly, the Copper King*. Mechanicsburg PA: Stackpole, 1956.

Henry Trefflich, Baynard Kendrick, *They Never Talk Back*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954.

(Figure 1) <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=US&q=yoink,yeet>

(Figure 2) <https://gramho.com/explore-hashtag/yoinketh>

(Figure 3) <https://deadhomersociety.com/tag/duffless/>