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Abstract

Previous American studies on university slang such as Pamela Munro's UCLA Project have stated that there are more derogatory terms to describe women than men, and that there are more complimentary and varied terms for men. In "The Semantic Derogation of Women" and "Gender Marking in American English," Muriel Schulz and Julia Penelope remark that women are mainly described in relation to men. Florie Aranovitch observes that women are labeled in positive and negative extremes in Munro's Slang U. Finally, Schulz and Penelope claim that men are mainly using the derogatory terms for women. The purpose of this original study is to investigate how gendered words are used in a Canadian university context, particularly in McMaster University of 2005. The McMaster survey reveals that the number of complimentary and derogatory terms used to describe men and women are almost equal, and that traditional stereotypes of men and women still exist but are more relaxed. Another interesting result is that women appear to be using derogatory terms as often, if not more than men. According to this study, the usage of gendered language in McMaster University does not privilege men and degrade women to the extent that was maintained in previous American slang studies.

KEYWORDS: gendered words, slang, swearing, lexicon, complimentary, derogatory

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Introduction

Like architecture, artwork, rituals and festivals, words are indicators of human culture. Words even have an advantage over physical objects as they can convey information about immaterial things, such as the thoughts, emotions, beliefs and values of their users (Eble, *Slang*, 1996:130). In order to better understand the culture of Canadian university students, this paper studies the lexicon of undergraduate students from a Canadian university situated in Hamilton, Ontario—McMaster University, in hopes of finding trends and drawing connections to other North American studies that would inspire new ideas about the culture and mindset of North American young adults. Particularly of interest is the use of gendered language among university students. In studying complimentary and derogatory terms to describe men and women, we acquire a better understanding of the students' views about both genders and about male-female relationships in their social milieu and in the greater society. By comparing the results from this study to studies done in the past, we can perhaps see how gender roles and relationships between men and women have evolved over time. As slang and swearing are common components of the linguistic repertoire of North American university students, this study will pay special attention to these forms of language.

Slang

Slang is an informal register found in languages. It is concerned with the use of trendy or nonstandard words, which assists in demarcating group membership (O'Grady & Archibald, 2004:426). Slang lexicon varies according to the concerns of the group using it (O'Grady & Archibald, 2004:426). For example, university students are preoccupied with their social life, reputation, relationships and schoolwork; consequently, their slang reflects this. Because slang is an informal and often vulgar form of language, it is generally associated with adolescents (O'Grady & Archibald, 2004:426). Many sociolinguists have observed that slang can be an indicator of rebellious feelings or intentional detachment of speakers from particular mainstream values (Finegan, 2004:335). The fact that slang is popular among teenagers and university students is understandable as they are in the process of exploring identities, securing their individuality, as well as proving themselves to the rest of society. However, slang is not only for adolescents; it is used by almost all members of a speech community in various informal situations (Finegan, 2004:335).

Another characteristic of slang is that it changes frequently. Within a generation, most slang items will either go out of style or become standardized and will no longer be considered slang (O'Grady

& Archibald, 2004:426). For this reason, it is important to study slang in order to understand trends and changing beliefs and behaviour.

Because slang is generally regarded as a low and undesirable or nonstandard¹ form of language, many dismiss it as a false form of language. Some dismiss slang terms simply because they are new and non-standard (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:16). Others dislike certain slang expressions because they are associated with a particular group to which they do not belong (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:16). As a result, slang has received only a limited amount of attention; however, this has improved over the past century due to several American sociolinguists.

Although some people object to slang, it continues to be a popular register of language, especially for adolescents and young adults. Slang makes one's speech lively, passionate and interesting (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:16). It creates humour, shows personality, simplifies speech and functions as a code to baffle those outside the group (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:87). People also use slang to show that they are in tune with the times. Because slang reflects the experiences, beliefs and values of its speakers, many students employ it to share common experiences with fellow peers and to consolidate their relationships (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:87). Since university slang does not include terms for everything students discuss, but only things that are frequently encountered by university students or that are important to them, analyzing these slang terms offers an intimate look at the beliefs, interests and concerns of university students.

Swearing

Like slang, swearing has a long history in the English language and yet it has been generally separated from the *proper* way of speaking and ignored in standard records of the language. Swearing and slang are often confused because they are both informal modes of language that are considered quite vulgar. However, while swearing always alludes to a cultural taboo, slang terms do not have this restriction (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:53). Swear words are usually not to be interpreted literally; they can be perceived as long-distance metaphors (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:53). A swear word is derived from taking a term that describes something unpleasant and assigning it to something else, thereby transferring the negative quality of the literal thing over to the other thing, person or situation, that is the word *shit*. Swear words can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes as well as to rouse a variety of emotions, such as the absurd, the amusing, the shocking, the casual, the violent and the impossible (Hughes, 1998:3).

People often swear to attract attention; they want to prove that they are cool, tough and assertive. This is called the covert prestige behind using these words (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:8). Unfortunately, swear words can be very rude and offensive, and thus its usage is frowned upon in many circumstances. On the other hand, swear words have the qualities of being expressive and all-encompassing, and are deemed valuable when there is not a more appropriate word at one's disposal to describe something (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990:63). Since swear words are well-known and widely used, they are good indicators of societal taboos and evolving attitudes about them.

Studies on Slang and Gender

The usage of slang has been very popular among North American college and university students from the mid-nineteenth century until today according to the evidence from past American studies (Eble, *Slang*, 1996:130). It is interesting that university studies done in the latter half of the nineteenth century revealed that slang vocabulary was mainly concerned with campus activities and

1. 'Nonstandard' is a common linguistic term for describing slang.

identities, and had little to do with denigrating minority or disadvantaged groups such as women (Eble, *Slang*, 1996:131). In the twentieth century there has been an extreme rise in negative terms for describing women, particularly in a sexual and objectifying manner². This rise is quite paradoxical, as the North American women's liberation groups have taken tremendous steps in the past century towards increased equality. Women have attained more power at work, at home and in academia. The notion that men and women are equal and thus should be entitled to receive equal rights has been widely publicized and generally acknowledged. Nevertheless, the vocabulary of North Americans seems to have regressed in this area of gender politics.

A great amount of work has been done on the inequality, in quantity and diversity, of positive and negative terms for describing men and women. Researchers have called to attention the many more negative terms for women than for men, and that the positive and negative terms used to describe women usually surround the topic of sexuality. In contrast, the terms for describing men in either a positive or negative manner tend to have greater semantic variety. Robin Lakoff, a pioneer of gendered language research, writes that this lexical inequality is a reflection of the status of women in Western society—women are only important to the extent of being valuable to men (1975:35). That is why women are generally identified in terms of their relationship with men (Lakoff, 1975:35).

This inequality between men and women was not so apparent in the language of North American university students a century and a half ago. Some of the first studies on university slang were B. H. Hall's *College Words and Customs* (1856), Lyman Bagg's *Four Years at Yale* (1871) and the novel *Student Life at Harvard* (1876). These three sources presented a slang vocabulary dealing with campus landmarks, competition among programs, appearing fashionable, eating, socializing, and a lack of studying. In comparison to recent studies, there are relatively few slang terms with sexual connotations. Comparing to today's standards, the university slang vocabulary during the mid-nineteenth century is both sparse in size and meaning, demonstrating the fact that higher-level education was rare.

However, during the 1880s and 1890s, twice as many students were enrolled in American universities. In 1895, Willard C. Gore of the University of Michigan carried out a methodical and extensive study of American student slang in his university. He asked two hundred undergraduate students to list and define student slang that was currently in use. Again, similar to the previous three studies mentioned, the 1895 Michigan list comprises of fewer than ten items that refer specifically to females, and there are almost no words which have sexual connotations. Five years after the Michigan study, Eugene Babbitt and other members of the New York branch of the American Dialect Society conducted a large-scale national survey of American university slang. Eighty-seven schools, including secondary and post-secondary institutions participated in the survey. Their responses are recorded in a thousand-word list accompanied by a seventeen-page analytical essay entitled "College Slang and Phrases" (Babbitt, 1900:5).

The results of the national survey are quite similar to those from the Gore study. Also, the general categories of university slang do not differ much from the mid-nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century. At the turn of the century, there still existed the polite reserve in slang that was present a few decades earlier. The slang list still consisted of only a few terms for women and groups that were discriminated against, such as Jews, Italians and African Americans. Babbitt

2. The author noticed this trend from Carl Pingry and Vance Randolph's "Kansas University Slang," Louis Kueth's "Johns Hopkins Jargon," Gary Underwood's "Razorback Slang," Connie Eble's *Slang and Sociability*, Muriel Schulz's "The Semantic Derogation of Women," Julia Penelope's "Gender Marking in American English," Florie Aranovitch's *The Portrayal of Women in the UCLA Slang List: a Reflection of Women's Status in Society*, and Laurel Sutton's "Bitches and Skankly Hobags."

claims that the lack of such words demonstrate that university students had not formed their own distinctive vocabulary for discussing these topics (1900:11). The use of offensive slang among students may have been much more restricted and controlled at the turn of the twentieth century when rules for behaviour were more severe. It is also possible that students felt uncomfortable reporting vulgar terms to people outside their own speech community, thus leaving Babbitt with a more polite but incomplete list.

During the twentieth century, a great transformation occurred in the university slang lexicon. A flood of terms was generated to describe attractive women or women with sex appeal. By 1926-27, a study on slang at Kansas University revealed terms for the 'loose women' and terms like *mean-baby* and *hot-sketch* to depict their sexual allure (Pingry & Randolph, 1928:220). "University of Missouri Slang" of 1931 found terms like *hot number* for an attractive woman and *giraffe* for someone who necks on the first date (Carter, 1931:204-6). The 1932 collection from Johns Hopkins contains three categories of offensive slang that were rarely reported in the past. The three categories include terminology for African Americans, effeminate males and sexual relations between men and women. The latter category is where the greatest increase occurred. According to the collection, 'a woman who is easily possessed' was a *cinch*, *pushover* or *sex job*; a 'loose woman' was a *bag*, *blimp* or *piece*; a 'sexually repressed male' was *horny*; to 'kiss' was to *mug*, *muzzle* or *smooch*; to 'have wandering hands' was to *develop* or *explore*; to 'copulate' was to *go the limit*; and 'women's breasts' were *big brown eyes* (Kuethe, 1932:329-36). By 1948, students at North Texas Agricultural College branded 'perfume' as *rape fluid*, called 'a girl who enjoys arousing a male' a *p.t.* (prick teaser), and depicted 'experiencing an orgasm' as *losing one's marbles* (Jarnagin & Eikel, 1948:249).

Following World War II, the GI Bill caused changes in the collegiate population of the United States and still shows its effects today. For example, American institutions of higher learning used to apply the philosophy of *loco parentis*, which meant that they had played a parental role toward students until this system was abandoned in the 1950s and 1960s (Eble, *Slang*, 1994:137). Consequently, many university rules for regulating student behaviour beyond the classroom were relinquished, for instance, curfews, dress codes, and mandatory attendance at church and assemblies (Eble, *Slang*, 1994:137). After this great change in higher education, Gary Underwood conducted a slang project at the University of Arkansas from 1970 to 1972 entitled "Razorback Slang." By the time he collected his list of 750 slang items, American university slang had categories familiar to more recent studies. For example, the Arkansas collection contains several synonyms for 'drunk' and 'vomit,' numerous terms for drugs or words derived from the drug culture, offensive terms for minorities, explicit words for sex, and terms with sexual implications for women. Overall, the terms Underwood reports from Arkansas correspond in meaning and effect with the terms in the University of North Carolina collection gathered by Connie Eble from 1972 to 1993.

Eble has made a significant contribution to the area of university slang. She has published almost annually on slang since her first publication on North Carolina slang. Her extensive study at the University of North Carolina consisted of over thirty students submitting lists of popular university slang from fall 1972 to spring 1993. From the surveys, Eble compiled a list of *top forty* slang terms each year. The forty most popular lexical items suggest a community of students concerned with relationships among people, especially with being accepted or rejected. The list divides almost equally between words with positive and negative associations. Also, the terms that have negative connotations are quite mild. None of the top forty negative labels is as vivid or offensive as derogatory terms that were less frequently reported, such as sexist *hosebag*, racist *porch monkey*, and homophobic *fudge packer*. Another difference from the current status of slang is that the sexual activity depicted among the most frequently submitted words is related to romantic pursuit, not to sexual intercourse (Eble, *Slang*, 1994:139-40).

Other slang studies were conducted in the final quarter of the twentieth century. The results give emphasis to the idea that language is “a male construct in which women are talked about and talked to but do not themselves speak” (Sutton, 1992:280). They also highlight Lakoff’s notorious assertion that “men are defined in terms of what they do in the world, women in terms of the men with whom they are associated” (1975:30), especially in a sexual sense. Muriel Schulz collected one hundred terms that convey women’s accessibility to men as sexual objects in “The Semantic Derogation of Women,” and Julia Penelope collected another two hundred in “Gender Marking in American English.” They found that these slang expressions are mainly used by men. Penelope calls this collection “Paradigmatic Woman: The Prostitute” and establishes a framework to define women in a male dominated world by cost, method of payment, and length of contract. In this world it appears that women exist solely to provide sexual favours for men. For example, people often call a woman who has sex with different partners without cost a *whore* or a *slut*. These are the most offensive terms to call a woman because a woman who does not value herself enough to get something in exchange for sex is viewed as cheap and pathetic (Penelope *Speaking*, 1990:121).

Munro began her well-known UCLA Slang Project in 1983. She collected slang expressions from her upper-level historical linguistics classes, and with the help of a group of dedicated students, organized an extensive database to examine semantic change. Most of their findings are published in Munro’s 1989 book entitled *Slang U*.

Analyzing Munro’s collection, Florie Aranovitch observed that the majority of terms used to describe women could be placed into a few basic categories: women as objects, women as prostitutes, women as dumb, and women as rude and evil³. She also points out that men employ most of these insulting terms. Aranovitch remarks that although certain terms to describe women could be classified as positive, the words themselves might still be degrading, for example, *freak* for an ‘attractive girl,’ *goddess* for a ‘female achiever,’ and *treat* or *filet* for a ‘cute girl.’ All these terms are supposed to be compliments, but they are actually suggesting that women are meat, prizes, abnormal or unattainable—all referring to their relationship with men. Another inequity suggested by the UCLA slang list is the fact that only 46 percent of the words describing men are negative in connotation compared to approximately 90 percent of the terms for women⁴. In addition, the positive terms for men are never demeaning, and the negative terms may even imply desirable characteristics from time to time. The slang vocabulary used to describe men does not focus on their attractiveness to women. On the other hand, most complimentary terms for women are associated with their attractiveness to men; if they are not considered attractive, they are perceived as fat, stupid, evil or licentious.

Laurel Sutton conducted an undergraduate slang survey at Berkeley in fall 1991 and spring 1992, and received very similar results to Munro’s study. The 1991 and 1992 slang lists are parallel in categories and numbers. Sutton’s survey also reports a greater number of negative terms for women than positive, and all the positive terms relate to women’s sexual allure. All the terms for women could be divided into a few categories: women who are ugly, fat, attractive, malicious, and the largest category—women who are sexually loose. There is also a separate category for identifying women in terms of their sexual organs—again, terms for objectifying women as sexual objects. Interestingly, all the nouns referring to ugly people except for one were all directed towards women. This demonstrates that women’s appearance is considered to be one of their most important traits in this speech community (Sutton, 1992:285-86).

3. All references to Florie Aranovitch’s figures and analyses are found in the manuscript of *The Portrayal of Women in the UCLA Slang List: a Reflection of Women’s Status in Society*, as cited on page 283-84 of Sutton’s “Bitches and Skankly Hobags.”

4. Refer to footnote 3.

The majority of slang studies have been interested in the differences between the lexicons used to describe men and women, but not the specific genders that are using them. Many of the recent studies have shown that there are many more derogatory terms for women than men, especially in relation to sex. They have also shown that there is a greater variety of terms to compliment men than women. It has also been generally maintained that men are denigrating women, and not women who are putting down themselves. However, the extent to which women use derogatory terms for women has not been studied in detail and has been left unclear. Nevertheless, Sutton contributed to the analysis by observing that both men and women use many of the same derogatory terms to describe women, although a few terms were used by either men or women in the 1991 and 1992 Berkeley study. Sutton also noticed that though *bitch* and *ho* generally have negative connotations and are usually used as insults, several women reported that *ho* and *bitch* were used between women as terms of endearment, but men never used them in this way (1992:288).

The McMaster study will continue to look at the different types of words used by men and women to describe the two genders, as well as to gauge male and female attitudes on gendered language. Little work has been done on slang and gendered language in Canada; therefore, this paper will serve as a model of comparison between Canadian and American university slang. This study examines the current slang lexicon among McMaster students in hopes of determining whether the trends from past studies are still current or whether certain language patterns and attitudes regarding gender roles have changed. Many people, especially women, have found the English language to be unbalanced and unfair in its depiction of men and women. Hopefully, by analyzing the general patterns and inequalities of gendered language, we will come to a better understanding of the social origins of gendered words and raise awareness about these issues.

Data Collection The Questionnaire

The data of this research paper was collected from a four-page questionnaire on gendered language completed by McMaster undergraduate students. The purpose of the questionnaire was to test for popular gendered words, the frequency of their use, the people employing them, and to gauge attitudes on gendered language. Another purpose was to compare the results from McMaster to those from other universities. The first section of the questionnaire asks for participant information (gender, program and level); the second section deals with situational uses of gendered terms. The third section involves listing complimentary and derogatory terms for each gender, and the fourth section asks for synonyms of common terms for characterizing men and women. The last section is comprised of short questions regarding the participant's opinions on and attitudes towards gendered words.

Informants

Fifteen males and fifteen females completed an anonymous questionnaire on gendered language at the McMaster Student Centre, a common meeting place for McMaster students. The participants, who were randomly selected between January 24 and 31 of 2005, were allowed to complete the questionnaire individually or with a group of peers of the same sex. To ensure comfort and anonymity, participants were given the option of filling out the survey on the spot or filling it out privately and dropping off their completed survey in a sealed envelope at the university's Modern Languages and Linguistics office⁵. The participants were all undergraduate students of various

5. Now called the Department of Languages and Linguistics.

programs and levels between the ages of 18 and 24. All participants were randomly selected; the only criterion that could eliminate a potential candidate was that of non-native fluency in English. A variety of students of different ethnicities and backgrounds answered the questionnaire. The informants of the questionnaire were selected to represent the undergraduate student body of McMaster University.

Data Analysis:

A Quantitative Comparison of Derogatory, Complimentary and Neutral Terms to Describe Men and Women

All the terms from the questionnaire were pooled and organized into nine categories: derogatory terms to describe only men, only women or both genders, complimentary terms for only men, only women or both genders, and the neutral terms were divided into the same gender subcategories. According to the data, there is approximately the same number of derogatory terms (98 for men; 97 for women), complimentary terms (49 for men; 44 for women) and neutral terms (6 for men; 5 for women) to describe men as to describe women. These results are very surprising considering that the recent American studies done by Munro and Sutton reveal that university students were using many more derogatory terms for women than for men. It is possible that the different results of the McMaster study are due to its small sample size. If not, the difference in observations is either related to the dissimilar perceptions of American and Canadian university students on men and women, or, it is indicative that women's status has improved in our society, and that men and women are being regarded more like equals. This is probable, as over the past few decades women have become an important part of the work force, have made great contributions to society, and are becoming perpetually more competitive in academia.

Under each descriptive category, the terms describing both genders ('derogatory' 142; 'complimentary' 89; 'neutral' 11) greatly exceed the terms characterizing either gender. The fact that McMaster students are using many of the same terms to describe both sexes means that their perceptions of men and women are not entirely polarized. This may also indicate that the distinction between the two gender categories is not as defined as it used to be in our society. Certain terms in the 'both genders' categories were only checked off once in the questionnaire for 'both genders' but are rarely used in this way—they are generally used to describe a specific gender. However, to keep a consistent standard for categorizing the terms, these terms are left in the 'both genders' lists.

While Munro and Sutton's studies report that there were more negative terms to describe women than positive, they never claimed a parallel scenario for men. However, the McMaster study observes twice as many derogatory terms as complimentary terms for only men and only women, and fifty percent more derogatory terms for both genders. Moreover, the number of neutral terms is very low compared to the submissions in the complimentary and derogatory categories (about a 1:10 to 1:20 ratio). McMaster students seem to label and address each other in extremes; they either give each other compliments or degrading insults, rarely any neutral comments. In this author's opinion, the disproportionate number of derogatory terms to complimentary terms indicates a social group that is highly critical of its members.

The Frequency in which the Informants Use and Hear Popular Gendered Terms

The analysis on the frequency of gendered word usage is based on the responses from Section III—Popular Terms of the questionnaire. In addition to asking the informants to list the most

popular terms for complimenting and putting down men and women, they were asked to indicate the frequency with which they use and hear these words. The three levels of frequency that they were able to choose from were 'never', 'occasionally' and 'often.' The responses are summarized in Figure 1 to show the different responses from men and women.

Figure 1

Frequency in which informants

		Total # Frequency of use		hear terms used		Informant's Gender
	Never	Occasionall y	Often	Never Occasionall y	Often	
Derogatory Terms 56	11	27	16	2 21	32	F
57	14	16	26	1 23	32	M

for Males

Total (F+M)

113

25

43

42

3

44

64

Derogato ry Terms 62	20	25	17	2	15	45	F
51	22	12	17	2	15	29	M

for Females

113

42

37

34

4

30

74

Total (F+M)

Complimentary
Terms

64

4

14

45

1

19

43

F

52

19

12

12

4

19

25

M

for Males

116

23

26

57

5

38

68

Total (F+M)

Complimentary
Terms

58

8

18

32

2

21

33

F

55

4

21

30

5

19

27

M

for Females

113

12

39

62

7

40

60

Total (F+M)

Viewing the chart (Figure 1) from top to bottom, it appears that men use derogatory terms to describe men more often than women do (under ‘often’: females 16 vs. males 26); and women use derogatory terms to describe women more than men do (under ‘occasionally’: females 25 vs. males 12). According to the results from the questionnaire, women tend to compliment men more than men do (under ‘often’: females 45 vs. males 12), but men and women tend to compliment women at about the same frequency (under ‘often’: females 32 vs. males 30; under ‘occasionally’: females 18 vs. males 21).

The observation that women are using more derogatory terms for women than men was unexpected given that past studies have demonstrated that it is the men who are putting down women most frequently. The reason that both men and women are frequently insulting people of their own gender is likely related to competition. There seems to be more competition within the genders today than in the past. If we only focus on the mass media, we notice the great explosion of good-looking men and women strutting around, competing for the attention of potential partners. Constantly observing all this beauty and perfection makes people feel inadequate and insecure. As a result, individuals want to be more fit, attractive, intelligent and successful than their competitors, which are often people of their own sex, in order to feel good about themselves and be accepted and admired by others. When there is increased competition, there is likely more tension among the competitors, thus the increase of verbal abuse among the members of each sex.

Another interesting observation is that men are being put down in general more often than women, and that women are being complimented overall more often than men. Comparing the sum of the ‘often’ and ‘occasionally’ columns of each descriptive category under ‘frequency of use’ shows how this observation was arrived at. These results are paradoxical given that several essays and studies on gendered language, such as Lakoff’s *Language and Woman’s Place* and Penelope’s “Gender Marking in American English: Usage and Reference,” have claimed that the English language is dominated by males. For the past century, studies like Munro’s UCLA project and Sutton’s 1991-92 Berkeley study have reported that the English language favours males with a long and varied list of terms to compliment men, and with a plethora of words to put down women. However, the McMaster study suggests that language appears to be gradually moving in favour of women. In the questionnaire, men and women’s speech is fairly balanced. Men and women are using more terms to put down their own gender and to compliment the other gender. The one major difference is that

while women are using a considerable amount of complimentary terms for both men and women, men are mainly complimenting women.

Descriptive Categories of Complimentary and Derogatory Terms for Men and Women

All the terms from the questionnaire are grouped into descriptive categories to compare the students' perceptions of each gender. The names of the descriptive categories are all listed in the y-axes of Figures 3 and 4. These two graphs compare the number of terms listed in each descriptive category.

Figure 2

Descriptive Categories of Derogatory Terms

Number of Terms

Aggressive
 Mean/Cruel Insensitive Prude/Obedient Worthless/Weak
 Naïve/Dumb
 Gay/Resembling
 other gender
 Unattractive
 Promiscuous Horny/Desperate
 Crazy Annoying Loser/Socially Inept
 Nerd Coward
 Try-hard/Uncool

 Emotional/ Highmaintenance

 Bad-ass
 Impolite Materialistic/Artificial Conceited Racist Term

0
 0
 5
 10
 15
 20
 25
 30

2
1
0
5
24
3
6
9

7

13

2
3

0
5
5
0
0
0
0
0
3

9

1

3
22
0
4
2
14
2
23
15
13
3
0
8
9
4
5
3
5
2

1
 3
 0
 5
 4
 8
 6
 11
 9
 9
 12
 10
 Men
 Women
 Both
 Categories
 Descriptive
 0
 0
 0
 0
 2
 14
 0
 0
 0
 6
 0

Viewing the graph of derogatory categories (Figure 2), there are 13 terms for describing aggressive men while there are none for describing only women. There are also a couple of terms for characterizing insensitive men but none for women. On this note, there are also quite a few terms to describe men who are cowards but none for women. From these categorizations, it appears that men are stigmatized as assertive and aggressive. Men are frequently criticized for their forceful behaviour and put down if they do not conform to this masculine archetype.

Although women are not depicted as aggressive in the questionnaire, informants listed almost twice as many ‘mean/cruel’ terms for women than for men (12 vs. 7). On the other side of the spectrum, women are also often referred to as ‘obedient/virtuous/prude’ in both a positive (5 terms) and negative manner (10 terms), whereas men are seldomly referred to in this way. This complies with the observation from Geoffrey Hughes’ *Swearing* that women tend to be dichotomized into polar categories—as either angels or witches (1998:217).

There is a great number of terms to describe socially inept men compared to women. For men, there are 3 terms in the category of ‘annoying,’ 9 in the category of ‘loser/socially inept,’ and 5 in the category of ‘try-hard/uncool,’ while there are only 2 terms used specifically for women in the category of ‘try-hard/uncool.’ This great imbalance in the figures may be an indication that society deems success, respect and social status to be more important to men than to women, hence the greater number of terms to criticize socially inept men. As men had a more prominent role in social and professional affairs in the past, it makes sense that success and respect are important ideals for them, and that attacking these ideals is an easy way of hurting their pride and dignity. Perhaps this is also the reason men are labeled as conceited more often than women (3 vs. 0).

There are many terms listed for attractive, unattractive and stylish men and women, but there are still considerably more terms for women (‘unattractive’ 9 vs. 3; ‘attractive’ 10 vs. 7; ‘stylish’ 6 vs. 4). (See Figures 2-3). Considering the great number of terms regarding appearance in general, this population appears to pay a lot of attention to appearances. Moreover, it appears that attractiveness is deemed a more important feature for women than for men, as there are more terms for describing women in this domain. While the data seems to indicate that men’s most prized possession is their status and success, women’s is their physical appearance.

Figure 3

Descriptive Categories of Complimentary Terms

Number of Terms

Attractive
Stylish
Charming/Promiscuous

Sociable/Fun/Popular Terms of Endearment Saviour/Protector Strong/Energetic Tough/Manly
Feminine
Rebel Confident/Bold Modest Obedient/Virtuous
Kind Funny
Ability
Intelligent/Hardworking

Sensibility Sophisticated
Laid Back General Compliments

0

Categories

Descriptive

0

5

10

15

20

0

0

10

2

5

6

0

1

0

0

0

1

1

1

1

0

1

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

1

0

0

0

1

1

1

1

4

1

1

1

0

0

0

0

1

1

1

2

2

0

0

0

2

2

19

17

2

4

10

5

5

7

6

10

15

14

16

Men

Women

Both

Several studies, including Munro's UCLA Project and Sutton's Berkley undergraduate study, have indicated that there is a more diverse vocabulary for describing men in a positive way than there is for women (Sutton, 1992:283-86). More specifically, the studies report that women's descriptions are basically limited to their attractiveness and obedience, while men's depictions encompass a greater range of words that describe their personality and talents. These observations do not entirely hold true in the McMaster study. In the graph of complimentary categories (Figure 3), one can see that there are many categories of words that are used for both genders, demonstrating that the portrayal of women has become more diversified. Although the depiction of men and women is not completely dichotomized, the terms that describe only one gender still show some of the traditional, polar stereotypes of men and women. The types of compliments restricted to women relate to their beauty, femininity, obedience, virtue, sensibility, confidence and intelligence, while the compliments restricted to men describe their attractiveness, kindness, humour, ability, strength, rebelliousness, masculinity and heroic qualities. On the whole, the depiction of men is slightly more diverse than that of women, but men's portrayal is also somewhat focused in a particular direction. Although women are still mainly portrayed as pretty and obedient (considering the great number of terms in these categories), their other qualities are also indicated.

Nevertheless, the dichotomy of terms to describe the genders still remains, and is evident in the categories depicting men's strength and women's weakness. There are only terms for men in the categories 'saviour/protector,' 'strong/energetic,' and 'tough/manly,' except for one word that is used for both genders in the last category—*strong*. There is also one category labeled as 'worthless/weak,' and there are 8 items for women in this category and 2 for both genders. This category includes terms that depict women as sexual objects, such as *easy*, *fuckable*, and a noun, *M.I.L.F.*, acronym for 'mother I'd like to fuck.' Some other terms in this category for women are just as degrading, including *slave*, *trash* and *victim*. The 'worthless/weak' terms for describing women are truly appalling. Not only do these words make women appear inferior to men, they present them in such a powerless and worthless way that they seem subhuman.

According to the questionnaire, some other stereotypes of women include being emotional, high-maintenance, materialistic, artificial and crazy. There are a great number of terms to describe only women in these categories (14 for 'emotional/ high maintenance'; 6 for 'materialistic/artificial'; and 4 for 'crazy') and yet there are no equivalent terms to describe only men, except 2 for 'crazy.' This indicates that women are expected to act in extremities—either highly emotional and inflammatory or lighthearted and superficially. These terms suggest that students believe that women's moods and attitudes fluctuate constantly, and that old stereotypes of women still exist.

The large number of terms for complimenting tough/manly men (6) and feminine women (5) indicate that the McMaster undergraduate community places a high value on performing one's gender role. The great number of derogatory terms for designating masculine or lesbian women (11) and effeminate or gay men (24) are also indicative of this attitude. However, it appears to be more important for men to adhere to the male archetypal standard than for women as there are more than twice as many terms to put down men for not living up to this standard.

The numbers from the 'promiscuous' and 'horny/desperate' categories provide some interesting results. There are many overlapping terms that describe both men and women as horny and promiscuous. However, the number of terms describing only men and only women basically interchange between the two categories. There are 9 terms that describe only men as horny/desperate, and 5 terms for only women. Contrastingly, there are 6 terms that are only used to call men promiscuous, while there are 9 for women. The figures identify the stereotype that men are more desperate than women, and that women are more promiscuous than men. For some reason, women are not expected to act horny or desperate; conversely, they are expected to refrain from sexual acts and protect their virtue. Therefore, the women who sway from these preconceptions by

engaging in courting and sexual rituals, with one man or several men, are considered wayward and are often critiqued for being promiscuous. However, it is considered natural for men to be horny and desperate, as indicated by the many derogatory terms that describe them in this way. Moreover, the men who are successful in finding a partner without appearing desperate but charming are generally complimented. Curiously, a man is even more highly looked upon if he forms relationships with more than one woman, as is demonstrated by the complimentary terms *mac daddy*, *pimp* and *lady's man*. There are 10 complimentary terms for only describing men as charming and promiscuous, but women have no equivalent terms. Consequently, there appears to be a double standard about the way men and women should behave. The figures demonstrate that it is acceptable, even commendable, for men to be with more than one woman, but it is frowned upon for women to be with more than one man. Nevertheless, the fact that there are many overlapping terms for putting down horny, desperate and promiscuous men and women suggests that people realize that women are now taking more initiative in sexual relationships, and that acting promiscuously is no longer entirely acceptable for men.

Overall, most traditional stereotypes of men and women have not changed from the past. However, many stereotypes of women have loosened to a certain extent, though not as many for men. For example, in this study women are described as intelligent, bold and tough, characteristics which were mainly attributed to men in the past. The data from the questionnaire reveals that there are many overlapping terms to describe both genders. The fact that there are many more derogatory and complimentary terms that describe both genders than any one gender suggests that men and women are being regarded on a more equal level.

The Informants' Opinions on Gendered Language

Section V of the questionnaire asked several questions to gauge the informants' opinions on gendered language. One of the questions asked the informants whether they thought that the current vocabulary for describing men and women was fair or adequate. The responses from the two genders were quite different. Whereas most of the women found the current vocabulary to be unfair (20% 'fair' vs. 73% 'unfair'), the men are divided almost evenly between it being fair and unfair (33% 'fair' vs. 40% 'unfair'). The difference likely relates to the fact that the vocabulary for gendered language has been biased in favour of men for a long time, and that both genders probably recognize this, especially after answering a lengthy questionnaire on gendered language. Since the language is favouring the male gender, it makes sense that a significant number of men would not have an issue with the language and consider it to be fair. Conversely, it also makes sense that women would be angry and indignant about the bias in language and deem it to be unfair.

Another question attempted to gauge how powerful the informants believe gendered words are. There was a gradient of five responses to select from, ranging from the gendered words being 'only playful' to 'only harmful,' and 'neutral' being the middle choice. Likely due to the explanation given above, the majority of women (53%) said that gendered language is 'more harmful than playful' in the questionnaire while the majority of men (47%) thought that it is 'neutral.' It is perfectly reasonable that women would take more offense to gendered remarks since they are generally made at their expense. It also makes sense that men would take gendered language more lightly because they are usually not the butt of the joke.

The next two questions are linked together. One question asked whether the informants think that gendered words influence the way people think about men and women, and the other question asked whether they think gendered language promotes sexism. For both questions, the majority of men and women agreed that gendered language does influence the way people regard men and women (both genders—73%), and more specifically that it promotes a sexist view of them (both

genders—80%). These responses offer an interesting lead-up to the last question, which asks the informants whether or not they think that society should try to change the vocabulary for describing men and women. The responses surprisingly contrast to a significant extent. Although both men and women feel that gendered language promotes sexism and influences the way people view the two genders, only half the men (47%) believe that the current vocabulary should be changed while the majority of the female informants (80%) feel this way. The data suggests that women are more aware of and sensitive about gendered remarks because they are the main ones being subjugated to the verbal abuse. Men are more accepting of the current gendered vocabulary either because they are not offended by it, because they realize that the language is constructed to their advantage, or because they just have not given it much thought.

The women's appeal to change the current gendered vocabulary seems legitimate, as it appears biased against women. However, some people may argue that women are just being over-sensitive and that the current gendered vocabulary is fairly balanced. Moreover, the data from the McMaster study can support this statement to some extent. The results from 3.1, which compare the number of complimentary and derogatory terms for men and women, suggest that in terms of quantity at least, the gendered language at McMaster University is quite equitable between men and women. However, stereotypes still exist between genders.

Furthermore, comments that were made by informants in this section reveal that several men and women recognize that it is impossible to change our vocabulary, that language is a part of our culture and mindset, and evolves along with other elements in the society. They also recognize that a balanced, bias-free language is probably unattainable in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

The McMaster study shows some significantly different results from those reported in previous university slang studies in the United States. The data reveals that the number of complimentary, derogatory and neutral terms used to describe men and women are almost equal, which may be an indication that women's status has improved in our society, and that men and women are being regarded on a more equal level. Nevertheless, traditional stereotypes of men and women still exist and are still firmly impressed in students' minds. Even so, perceptions of men and women appear to have become more liberated as indicated by the fact that many terms which were traditionally used to describe only one gender are now crossing the gender boundary to describe both sexes in the McMaster study. The greatest change seems to have occurred among the users of gendered language. It is no longer only the men who are putting down women; women are using derogatory terms toward women as often, if not more than men. According to the study, there appears to be more verbal abuse within each gender than between them, which is probably related to what could be considered a great amount of competition among each gender today, particularly among students. In the past, swear words and offensive language in general were mainly used by men, but today women appear to be using gendered language, in a positive and negative way, more expressively than men. According to the McMaster study, women are showing greater confidence and agency in their language use, and the current gendered vocabulary is more balanced for men and women. In conclusion, the usage of gendered language in McMaster University, according to this study, does not privilege men and degrade women to the extent that was described in past American slang studies.

This paper outlines many changes in gendered language that have occurred since the most recent large-scale studies have been conducted. Although these changes seem to make sense in light of the current social situation and changes that have occurred over the past few decades, the data was collected from a fairly small sample size of thirty students from a university accommodating roughly

fifteen thousand undergraduate students. As well, the time frame in which the study was conducted was fairly short. Due to these factors, further research with larger sample sizes and longer periods of data collection is required to ascertain that the data from this study is representative of real trends occurring on the McMaster campus or in the broader speech community. Also, more slang studies should be conducted at different Canadian universities to uncover common trends and differences. Moreover, these studies should be done frequently in order to keep better track of the rapidly changing trends in university slang.

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