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Trends in Pejoration of Female-Related Terms of Abuse in English

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Introduction

Language is strongly dependent on its socio-historical context. As people change, so does the language they use. Semantic change is a common change in languages. While semantic change takes many forms, one of the most prominent is *pejoration*. Pejoration is when a word's meaning is neutral in origin and gains a more negative meaning over time. In general, pejoration happens more often than its opposite (*amelioration*), but this trend is particularly salient in words that are female-specific.

Scholars have noted the trend for words to become negative once they gain a female-related association, either in their origin or over time (Miller and Swift, 1976; Kochman-Haladyj, 2007). Kochman-Haladyj and Kleparski (2011) found over 70 words for *girl/young woman* and *woman* that have been perorated in the English language but found only 5 words that have been ameliorated. Several sources have also noted that there are, generally, more negative words about women than there are about men, with some sources saying unfavorable terms for women outnumber male terms by five to one (Mills 1989; Beirne 2019; Hughes 2016). This trend is also found in many languages, especially those that exist within patriarchal societies, such as German *Dirne*, which originally meant 'unmarried woman', and now means 'prostitute' (Kochman-Haladyji & Kleparski 2011).

Research questions

- What common female-related terms of abuse in English like *bitch* or *cunt* have undergone semantic pejoration?
- Why do female-related terms tend to pejorate?
- What trends in the pejoration of female-related terms are there?

Methods

Performed diachronic semantic change analysis using four dictionaries and six sources to track the history of female-related terms of abuse in English. Four specific terms were chosen for subsequent analysis: *bitch*, *cunt*, *harlot*, and *slut*. The qualitative data was then compared to generate general trends.

	<u>Bitch</u>
c. 1000	OE <i>bicche</i> 'female dog' ON <i>bikkja</i> 'female dog'
1400's	> 'a lewd, sensual woman' also gained male use
1800's	'female dog' use dies out in literature
1900's	> 'a sensual woman, malicious or treacherous woman'

- ON use also had metaphorical expression for behavior of a dog in heat (OED)
- Noticeable trends: zoosemy and behavioral pejoration

	<u>Cunt</u>
1230	'the female genitals; the vulva or vagina' Gropecuntelane, Oxford, UK
1663	'a woman as a source of sexual gratification; a slut' (OED)
1700's	All street names with <i>cunt</i> were changed 'a nasty name for a nasty thing' (Grose, 1788)
1850's	Gained male use
1920's	'a despised, unpleasant, or annoying place, thing, or task'

- Pejorative meaning from conies – a type of small rabbit
- Rabbits often represent fecundity, meaning prolificity in women, animals, and plants
- Noticeable trends: zoosemy, pseudo-euphemism, and behavioral pejoration

	<u>Harlot</u>
c. 1225	Old French 'young fellow, knave, vagabond'
1300's	Harlotry = "buffoonery"
1440's	Gained female use
1500's	> 'an unchaste woman, a prostitute'
1659	Harlot-house: 'a brothel'

- A pejorative in origin, gained a more negative and sex-specific meaning over time
- Noticeable trends: social pejoration, pseudo-euphemism

	<u>Slut</u>
1400's	'a woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance; a foul slattern*'
1500's	'a bold or impudent girl' OED 'a saucy or brazen girl' Webster
1600's	'A woman of a low or loose character; a bold or impudent girl; a hussy, jade'
1800's	'a sloppy woman, a prostitute'

- *Slattern: a woman or girl of dirty untidy and slovenly in person, habits or surroundings; a slut
- *Slatter-*: to spill or splash awkwardly, to slop
- Behavior of liquids compared to behavior i.e. *sloppy*
- Noticeable trends: aesthetic pejoration, association with fatness (Mills 1989)

Trends and Conclusions

Female-Related Terms	Pejorated Terms
Virgin-Whore Dichotomy	Zoosemy
Semantic Polarization	Pseudo-Euphemism
	Pejorative Tendency

- Most female-related terms of abuse deal with sexual activity (or lack thereof)
- Semantic polarization: words related more to one sex reinforce male-positive-important and female-negative-trivial cultural categories i.e. master/mistress, lord/lady (Miller & Swift, 1976)
- Zoosemy: metaphorical extension of animal characteristics onto human behavior, common
- Pseudo-Euphemism: attempts to make something sound better, but are actually derogatory i.e. *prostitute* as a euphemism for *sex worker*
- Pejorative Tendency: human disposition to disguise ideas that are "disagreeable, wounding, or repulsive", is found throughout human language (Kochman-Haladyj, 2007)
- The words in this study show that female related-terms pejorate, most often, due to zoosemy, pseudo-euphemism, and a natural linguistic tendency for words referring to taboo things to pejorate

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