

# Language attitudes toward some gendered words in English: A preliminary study

Megan Gold,\* Kristine Elisabeth Salvesen, Sara A. Obeid, Luke Viano  
Hawaii Pacific University, USA

## Abstract

This paper reports on English native and non-native speakers' attitudes toward the four words: *sexy*, *tomboy*, *slut*, and *gay*. The analysis paid particular attention to the gender indexed by the participants in their word use and to whether their attitudes toward each word were positive or negative. The results were correlated with the sex and ages of the participants, as well as with the participants' status as native or non-native speakers of English. This analysis suggests the presence of some semantic change, and, with some words, semantic degradation. With all four words, there was also evidence of sexist usage. While native speakers seem to be using the four words in slightly new ways, with accompanying differences in attitude, non-native speakers generally seem to retain old meanings and attitudes.

## Introduction

As teachers of English as a second or foreign language, we believe that understanding the different meanings that certain words carry will compel and enable us to teach the rich cultural meanings of the target words. Importantly, we can encourage our students to be open minded about words that they may view as carrying negative meanings or associating with only one gender.

In the English language, certain words have specific semantic features that identify them with either the masculine or feminine gender as a part of their basic meaning. This is often referred to as direct gender indexing (Meyerhoff, 2003). Direct gender indexing should not be confused with sex. Sex is biological and given by birth whereas gender is created as part of a social construct. Gender is a behavior that is learned and performed. In English, direct gender indexing allows one to identify a subject as either a man or a woman (*brother*, *aunt*, *actress*, *prince*, etc.) and often can carry positive or negative sentiment. For example, historically *mister* and *mistress* is a pair of neutral gendered words but now carry different connotations. The masculine word is seen as positive while its feminine counterpart is often used to refer negatively to someone who is having an extramarital affair. This shows that words go through semantic changes over time. This change can be positive where the word takes on a positive meaning or negative where the words shift to take on a more negative meaning, in a process called semantic derogation (Meyerhoff, 2003). Table 1 reproduces some examples from Meyerhoff (2003, p. 62) that demonstrate semantic derogation in English.

As shown in Table 1, the words *gay*, *girl*, *harlot*, *busy*, *tart*, *queen*, *whore*, and *wench* have all gone through semantic degradation. For example, during the time period between 893 and 900 the word *queen* used to refer to the king's wife of a high rank. After that the word started to gradually lose its positive connotation. In 1588 its meaning changed again. *Queen* began to be used as a term of endearment to a woman. Next, during the 1900s, the word started gaining a sexual yet positive meaning: an attractive woman or a girlfriend. Finally, in 1924 the semantic degradation occurred.



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Website: <http://www.hpu.edu>.

\* Email: [mgold@my.hpu.edu](mailto:mgold@my.hpu.edu). Address: TESOL Program, MP 441, 1188 Fort Street Mall, Honolulu, HI 96813, USA.

*Queen* started being used to refer to a gay man. Nowadays, the word is losing its negative meaning due to the change of the way people view homosexuality itself. Additionally, it is commonly used amongst some members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community when referring to themselves or their peers with endearment.

Table 1

*Semantic Derogation in English*

→ Semantic shift over time →					
<b>Gay(adj.)</b>	(persons) full of joy and mirth(1310) Addicted to social pleasures and dissipations(1637) (woman) leading an immoral life(1825)	Homosexual (1935)	Stupid, hopeless (1980s)		
<b>Girl</b>	A child of either sex e.g, knave girl(1290)	A female child, unmarried woman(1530)	A sweetheart, lady-love (1648)	A prostitute or mistress(1711)	A Black woman (1835)
<b>Harlot</b>	A low fellow, knave (1330)	A male servant (1386)	An unchaste woman, a strumpet (1450)		
<b>Hussy</b>	A mistress of a household, a thrifty woman (1530)	A (playfully) rude term of addressing a woman (17 <sup>th</sup> C)	A female of the lower orders, of low or improper behavior (18 <sup>th</sup> C)		
<b>Tart</b>	A delicious baked pastry (1430)	A young woman for whom some affection is felt (1864)	A female prostitute (1887)	A young favorite of an older man, a catamite, a male prostitute (1935)	
<b>Queen</b>	A king's wife, woman of high rank (893,900)	A term of endearment to a woman (1588)	An attractive woman, a girlfriend (1900)	A male homosexual (1924)	
<b>Whore</b>	A female prostitute (1100)	A woman committing adultery (1440)	A general term of abuse (1633)	A male prostitute (1968)	
<b>Wench</b>	A female child(1290)	A wanton woman (1362)	A servant (1380)	A working class girl (1575)	

In this preliminary study, we aim to first explore meaning shifts in contemporary American English through the language attitudes of its native speakers. Specifically, we surveyed people's positive and negative attitudes to some gendered words, namely, *sexy*, *slut*, *tomboy*, and *gay*. In doing so, we hope to explore the different meanings and connotations that these words carry. Second, we explore the extent to which the language attitudes by non-native speakers of English may mirror or deviate from these native speakers. Ultimately, we hope to demonstrate that understanding a word involves investigating its cultural and literal meanings, and learners of English as a second language can benefit from the type of survey that we conducted here.

### Method

We surveyed forty-two participants in order to get their impressions of these words. Twenty of the participants were non-native English speakers. Their ages ranged from the early 20s to early 50s, although most of them were in their 20s and 30s. Of the twenty participants, seven were males and thirteen were females. Most of the non-native English speakers had been residents in an English-speaking environment for at least 3 months; they were not mere tourists or visitors. The remaining twenty-two were native speakers. Nine females and thirteen males had ages that ranged from the early 20s to the late 30s. The participants were first asked about their age and nationality or the city and state they were from. Next, the participants were given each word one by one and asked to define it, use it in a sentence, and finally state their thoughts on the word: is this a positive, negative, neutral, or both positive and negative word. Participants often volunteered comments about the word in question, and we took notes of these comments as well.

### Analysis

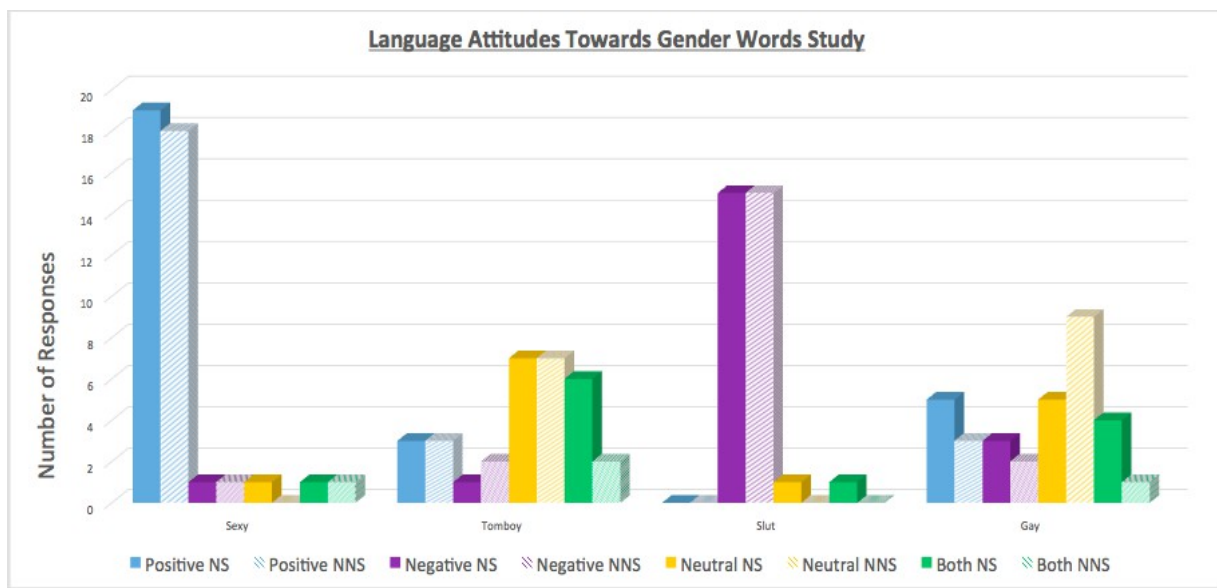


Figure 1. Speakers' Attitudes

Overall, the majority of speakers had positive reactions to the word *sexy* and negative reactions to the word *slut* (see Figure 1). This did not vary significantly from native to non-native speakers of English. On the other hand, the remaining two words, *tomboy* and *gay*, had much more

nanced and varied reactions among speakers. With all of these words, evidence of sexism in how the words were used abounded. However, based on the relative ages of the participants, some semantic shift was seen to occur with the two words *tomboy* and *gay*.

In order to investigate the participants' attitudes more closely and glean possible indications of change, we analyzed the results for each word individually.

### Sexy

The majority of both native and non-native speakers of English (constituting 64% of the total number of participants) associated the word *sexy* with women rather than men. For example, one of the male native speaker's definition of the word *sexy* was "attractive women but more so in an intimate way, usually pertaining to physical attraction but can also be non-physical." Furthermore, there seems to be a trend amongst native speakers in which male participants all used *sexy* to refer to women while female participants used *sexy* for both genders.

This tendency to associate *sexy* with women occurred with non-native speakers as well. A non-native speaker female participant defined it as "charming, attractive," she added "when I think of the word *sexy* I think of women more than men." In addition, those who used the word *sexy* to describe men tended to describe their actions rather than the man themselves. For instance, one of the participant's examples was that "it's *sexy* when a man does the dishes." This shows that the participant did not think of the man himself as being *sexy* but rather his actions were. Interestingly, the participant's example was of an action, *washing the dishes*, that is typically associated with women. The results for the word *sexy* are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

#### Speakers' Attitudes towards Sexy

<i>Sexy</i>	Native Speakers of English			Non-Native Speakers of English		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
positive	9	10	19	11	7	18
negative	1	0	1	0	1	1
neutral	1	0	1	0	0	0
both	0	1	1	1	0	1

As shown in Table 2, the results of the non-native speakers of English correlate with the results of the native speakers. Thus, we can infer that there is no measurable difference between how native and non-native speakers view this word.

### Tomboy

From analyzing the participant's attitudes towards the word *tomboy*, we found that 26% of the participants (14% of these were non-native speakers) had a positive attitude towards this word. 43% had a neutral attitude. Only 14% of the participants had a negative attitude toward this word. Those 14% consisted of people in their 30's and older. It is possible that the older participants' attitude toward the word *tomboy* had not shifted in the same way as the younger participants' attitudes had, namely, toward a positive attitude.

*Tomboy* is clearly going through a positive semantic change. Up until the advent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of feminism movement in the 1960s, *tomboy* had somewhat negative connotations. Its meaning reflected the opinions of those 30-year-old (and older) participants in the survey who felt that a woman dressing and acting like a man is a negative thing. Presumably these older interviewees were

raised and influenced by people (parents and others) who were from a pre-2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism generation.

Since the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism movement was about much deeper cultural changes than the legal issues of the 1<sup>st</sup> wave feminism movement (like women’s right to vote), this has included profound semantic changes including the meanings of words like *tomboy*. Crucially this change has been about positively embracing possible gender variations within a given sex. With *tomboy*, this means a woman can now more freely identify as such, including her taking on mannerisms and dress that traditionally have been considered male. This is possible, clearly, because of what was mentioned at the start of this paper: that gender is a social construct, whereas sex is biological.

Additionally, there was only a slight difference by one participant between the native and non-native speakers who thought the word was positive. We concluded that the non-native speakers in this study seem to hold a similar positive attitude as the native speakers toward this word.

Table 3  
*Speakers’ Attitude toward Tomboy*

<i>Tomboy</i>	Native Speakers of English			Non-Native Speakers of English		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
positive	3	3	6	2	3	5
negative	1	2	3	2	1	3
neutral	6	3	9	4	5	9
both	0	4	4	2	1	3

### **Slut**

76% of the participants associated the word *slut* with women. 35% of these participants were non-native English speakers while 40% were native speakers. Further, even though the remaining 24% have defined it as both men and women who has multiple sexual partners, they still used the pronoun *she* when they were giving an example. For instance, one of the participants defined the word *slut* as “A female or a male that sleeps around.” However, when she was asked to give an example using the word she said “She is such a slut.”

Some native and non-native speakers found this word to be neutral. Both groups of participants had nine members thinking the word was neither positive nor negative. For the native speaking respondents, this could be because of changing perceptions about appropriate sexual behaviors for women.

Table 4  
*Speakers’ Attitude towards Slut*

<i>Slut</i>	Native Speakers of English			Non-Native Speakers of English		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
positive	0	0	0	0	0	0
negative	10	10	20	9	11	20
neutral	0	1	1	0	0	0
both	1	0	1	0	0	0

The assumption that *slut* is associated mainly with women is clear evidence of sexism in the English language. Despite the positive semantic shifts brought on by the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism

movement (as with *tomboy* above) there are still plenty of words like *slut*, which have negative connotations predominantly for women. The word *slut* was used to refer to men with multiple sexual partners by 24 % of interviewees.

### Gay

The word *gay* is a clear instance of semantic change: sometimes positive and sometimes negative. According to Meyerhoff (2011), in 1310 the word *gay* was used to refer to a person who was full of joy and mirth. Then in 1637 it took on a negative meaning, describing someone “addicted to social pleasures and dissipations” (p. 58). In 1825 it began to denote a woman leading an immoral life. Finally, in 1835 it took on the meaning that we are all familiar with, referring to homosexuality. Today we still mainly use *gay* like this. However, a relatively recent semantic change has been occurring since the 1980s; some people have started using *gay* to refer to a person or thing that is stupid and hopeless (p. 58).

In general, it is reasonable that with the change in people's attitudes towards homosexuality, the word *gay* had taken on a more positive connotation. Our data bear this out: 29% of the respondents think the word *gay* is positive, while only 19% think it is negative. 38% think it is neutral, whereas 14% think it is both.

Thirteen of the non-native speakers believed that *gay* was a neutral word. This could be because they are more sensitive to cultural differences than the native speakers. Six participants found *gay* to be negative amongst the native speakers while only three of the non-native speakers thought the word was negative. Being more sensitive to a culture not their own, the non-native speakers may be more likely to not want to offend anyone.

Our data also revealed that the word *gay* presently might be undergoing semantic degradation. 21% of our participants (67% of this 21% were native speakers of English) defined or said that they use or have heard the word *gay* to mean *silly*, *wack*, *stupid*, *not cool*, and *lame*. 40% of the participants (71% of this 40% were non-native speakers of English) defined the word *gay* as happy. These two results indicate that non-native speakers either are more resistant to taking on language changes, or lag behind when it comes to this word's semantic change.

Table 5  
*Speakers' Attitudes toward Gay*

<i>Gay</i>	Native Speakers of English			Non-Native Speakers of English		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
positive	5	1	6	4	2	6
negative	2	4	6	0	2	2
neutral	3	0	3	5	8	13
both	0	5	5	0	1	1

### Conclusion

After analyzing the preliminary data, we tentatively concluded that peoples' attitudes toward the four words, *sexy*, *tomboy*, *slut*, and *gay*, are gender-based. Both native and non-native English speakers tended to associate either one gender or another directly when using these words. It seems that the majority of the time, more positive interpretations are associated with masculine gendered words

while negative associations are applied to feminine gendered words. Since there are some differences that can be noted based on the participants' ages, it was clear that these words have undergone semantic changes over time. We also observed that the non-native English speakers' use of these words did not reflect the semantic changes that seem to be occurring with native English speakers.

Examining the attitudes people have about these words themselves allows for us to see a glimpse into how society can influence changes in language over time. As teachers, we must be cognizant of our students' attitudes towards words. Students may bring negative interpretations with them from the L1, and as ESL or EFL teachers we must help them see another way of interpreting such words to make them positive. This can be done through increased cultural exposure, contextualizing language use, and through surveying words' meanings as perceived by native and non-native speakers of English, as we did in this paper. In doing so, we may be able to nurture students' abilities to use language meaningfully and sensibly.

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