A diachronic study of the semantics of the adjectives *mean* and *gay*

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Abstract

This essay explores the semantic change of the adjectives *mean* and *gay* from the 1920s to the 2000s. This was done by going through concordance lines which was collected from the Time Corpus. The aim of the paper is to investigate if there has been any change of meaning of the two words, and if that is the case how have they changed. The results showed that both words have had a tremendous change in meaning, the most prominent one being the adjective *gay* which has gone from denoting something or someone who is happy to referring to a homosexual person. The adjective *mean* has also had a change in meaning, or has rather gained several new meanings along with the original one.

Keywords: semantics, corpus, change, adjective,
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1. Introduction

Language change is, according to many linguists, inevitable (Aitchison 2001:3) and the English we know and love today has developed and evolved quite remarkably since it was used as a language for the first time. The history of the English language is divided into different periods, more specifically Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English and Late Modern English. A minor presentation of these periods will come later in the essay. Indeed, it is a very interesting language since one of the earliest versions of English is said to have been created as early as in the 5th century AD.

What could be more exciting than to investigate real language change? Language – as any living thing, is in constant change and knowledge about the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ will be helpful for future researchers and linguists. Thus, language change, or rather semantic change, is exactly what will be studied and discussed in the following pages.

2. Aim & Scope

The aim of the present study is to give an account of the semantic development of two different words: *mean* and *gay*. These words were chosen because I knew that a change had happened but I wanted to see when and how. Have they changed over the years, and, if so, in what way?

In order to meet this aim I will discuss the following questions:

- What did *mean* and *gay* mean originally?
- Have the words changed in meaning over time and if so, how have they changed?

In this study, only American English will be studied and discussed.
3. Material & Method

The primary material used for this present study is collected from the web-based Time Corpus (http://corpus.byu.edu/time/). This is a corpus with American English from the Time Magazine and this stretches from the 1920s until today and it is constantly added to. The reason for choosing this particular corpus is that focusing on one variation of English might give more interesting and more in-depth results than if one would compare different Englishes with each other.

Using a web-based corpus is very valuable to a certain extent, since it is continuously added to at the same time as it covers a continuous period of time. This is to be seen in comparison to standard corpora which normally contain data from a particular delimited period in time (Lindquist 2009:187). This aforementioned aspect makes web-based corpora ideal for diachronic study of change. However, due to the massive amount of data on the internet and the ever-changing ability of it, the numbers and figures obtained, especially if they are from a search engine, must be taken with a pinch of salt.

A drawback of using a web-based corpus is that it leans against the researcher’s views (POS-tagging) and opinions entirely, thus it could be rather biased. According to Lindquist, POS tagging is explained as part-of-speech tagging where every word in a corpus is tagged with a certain word class or function. (Lindquist 2009:43-8) To prevent this partiality from happening, the results will be checked several times to ensure that the data is not corrupt in any way.

In order to continue reading the essay, the term concordance line must be defined. According to Lindquist (2009:5-7), a concordance is “a list of all the contexts in which a word occurs in a particular text” and this is the definition that will be held throughout the paper.

In the study there will be concordance lines with a total of 450 lines for each word (mean and gay) which means that 50 lines were collected for each decade from 1920 – 2000. All in all there will be 900 concordance lines collected.
The concordance lines collected for this study only contained the adjective sense of the words *mean* and *gay*. And once the lines were gathered they were analyzed and categorized in terms of the sense they expressed.

In order to determine if semantic change has occurred, an initial definition of the respective word must be applied and that came from the Online Etymology Dictionary (TOED) and The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (CODEE). The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English was also used, but rather sparingly.

The words chosen for this particular study are both adjectives. According to Estling Vannestål, an adjective is

“a word that usually describes a quality (honest), state (hungry), origin (American) etc. of a noun or a pronoun referring to a person, thing, phenomenon, event, etc.”

(Estling Vannestål 2007: 219)

As the extract above shows, adjectives are an important aspect of language because they can be used in a variety of situations. The study focuses on adjectives (*mean* and *gay*) because they tend to change more frequently in a language since adjectives belong to an open word class and new adjectives can be added when necessary. (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/wordclas/open.htm)

4. Theoretical background

Language change can be studied in terms of any linguistic aspect – syntax, morphology, phonology, semantics, or pragmatics – the possibilities are many. The focus in this essay is the semantic aspect. Consequently, I will discuss this area of linguistics in some further detail in the following passage.

The term “Semantic(s)” was first used in 1883 by a French philologist called Michel Bréal, who is now thought of as the founder of modern semantics (Aitchison 2001:121-2).

Regardless of whether or not the term (i.e.semantics) is familiar, there is no doubt that the phenomenon itself constitutes an important part of language use, language development and
language change. The term has been explained and defined in numerous ways, although the most common explanation is to ‘study the meaning of words, phrases and sentences, i.e. the meaning of language’ (Yule 1996:114, Longman 2005: 1491, Katamba 2005:4).

As has already been pointed out, the main focus of this study is on semantic change, more precisely on change in the meaning of two different words over time.

According to Katamba (Katamba 2005:174-5), it is very uncommon for new words to simply emerge but it is more common that already existing words acquire new meanings and connotations.

There are two common occurrences when talking about semantic change; semantic widening and semantic narrowing. (Katamba 2005:174-5) The former, widening, happens when a word has a specific meaning and then it somehow evolves into a more generic meaning. For example, the example of dog(ge) which from the beginning referred only to a certain breed of the animal, but which nowadays is used to refer to any kind of dog. (http://www.bookrags.com/tandf/semantic-change-1-tf/)

The latter, as the name suggests, is the opposite of widening. This phenomenon happens when a certain word goes from having a broad and general meaning to having a much more specific one, as in the example of deer. This word meant ‘four-legged beast’ from the beginning, but we nowadays know the word as denoting only a certain species of animal. (Katamba 2005:174-5, http://www.bookrags.com/tandf/semantic-change-1-tf/)

Another scenario might be that the meaning has changed over time and thus the positive inclination of the word might have become negative or vice versa; (Pejoration vs. Amelioration) (Katamba 2005:176).

5. Background of the English Language

5.1. Background

In order to understand how words change and how it is that we speak the English that we do today, a short, but to the point, description of the history of the English language will be
provided. A short subsequent description of how American English came into existence will also be offered since this is the variety focused on in the present study.

This section might not be crucial to the study itself, but it is here to give a solid ground to stand on when reading the rest of the paper.

- Figure 1. Proto-Indo-European language tree with its significant languages

(http://www.answersingenesis.org/tj/v14/i2/languages.asp)

In Figure 1, the Indo-European language tree is featured. Proto-Indo-European, henceforth PIE, is the parent language of all European and Indian languages. It has been reconstructed along the lines of comparative reconstruction, which contrasts and compares the different modern languages and then tries to sort out features which are similar and features that are different so as to trace them back to a common origin. (Yule 1996:214-217)

As can be seen from the language tree figure, modern day English is derived from the Germanic languages, more precisely the West Germanic branch. The Germanic languages are rather closely related to each other since they have a common ancestor, but only to a certain extent.
English language history began around 500 AD. Three Germanic tribes, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes invaded and conquered what is today called Great Britain (Yule 1996:218, Ljung 2003:26). The tribes allegedly killed the Celtic residents that inhabited the area and/or pushed them further north toward today’s Ireland and Scotland. (Svartvik & Leech 2006:18)

The tribes spoke a blend of different Germanic dialects and regional varieties, but they were still able to understand each other and this mix of languages is what they later named **Englisc** (Ljung 2003:26, Yule 1996:218). The further invasion by the Vikings, and the implementation of Christianity changed the language even more and brought with them many Latin and Old Norse words. This early version of English is called **Old English** and it lasted until approximately the 1100s.

The next period in English language history has come to be known as **Middle English** and was present between the 1100s and ca 1500s. A very important factor here was the invasion by the Normans in 1066 (Svartvik & Leech 2006:36).

This era brought with it many French loanwords and phrases but also a simplification of the inflectional pattern, which at this time was overly complex (Svartvik & Leech 2006:36). In this period the Great Vowel Shift also occurred, changing the long vowels in the language. Incidentally, some vowels actually dropped off the chart and became diphthongs. (Svartvik & Leech 2006:61, Aitchison 2001:185-6)

**Early Modern English** is the subsequent period of English, it roughly encompasses the years from the 1500s to approximately 1800s. This was a time when the language pot was boiling and events and cultures and language all mixed together. At this point, Britain was a Super Power with a royal fleet probably as big as the rest of the worlds fleets put together. This meant that the Brits had contact with and mixed with many different cultures and languages. (Englishclub 2010)

The English Renaissance (ca 1500s-1600s), with all its classical learning and teaching, was a great factor to the vast borrowings from Greek and Latin. Together with the invention of the printing press made this a rather turbulent period for the English language. There was now a question of what variety of English should be used as the standard since there now were different geographical varieties all over Britain (Svartvik & Leech 2006:46-7). However, one
version was settled for and the first real dictionary of the English language was printed as early as in 1604 (Englishclub 2010).

Another very famous dictionary was called *The Dictionary of the English Language*. It was published in 1755 by the author Samuel Johnson. This was the first of its kind and it was also very comprehensive (Svartvik & Leech 2006:64-5).

Last but not least is the period we call *Late Modern English*. This era begins at around the 1800s and continues on to today (Englishclub 2010). This period is probably the least volatile in the history of the English language. There are no dramatic changes or great influences like Latin, Old Norse, or to some extent, Greek (Svartvik & Leech 2006:65). The greatest difference between Early Modern English and Late Modern English is said to only be one thing, namely vocabulary.

Even though the time period from approximately the 1800s and onward was the most stable, one great change is the fact that English nowadays has become the *lingua franca* of the modern world, just as Latin was during its days of glory. A *lingua franca* is, according to the Longman Dictionary, the “language used between people whose main languages are different” (Longman 2005:942).

### 5.2. American English

All the developments in the history of the English language aside, the most important development by far in the English language is when it came to the United States of America (Svartvik & Leech 2006:72). The development into American English began when Britain was at its peak as a Great Power and set sail for the Promised Land on the other side of the Atlantic. The earliest settlement was Jamestown, where all sorts of people ended up; haunted Puritans, convicts, settlers, agricultural people and so forth. The people who came were mainly from the south-west border of England and they were poor and for many of them, this new land was the only way out. The people later mixed with the Native Americans and they brought African slaves with them as well which then changed and developed the American English further. The first real American English word is said to be *corn*, a synonym of the British English word *maize*. (Svartvik & Leech 2006:72-7)
6. Results & Discussion

In the first part of this section the results of the study will be provided. Mean and gay will be divided into two separate parts, showing results decade by decade from the 1920s until 2000. Small discussions on specific interesting results will be presented as well.

The second part of this section encompasses the discussion of the results shown in the first section. Here, examples will be dealt with more in-depth and relevant discussions about semantic change will also be featured.

6.1. Results

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the word etymology means “the study of the origins, history and changing meaning of words” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2005:599)

It is a very fitting description since it practically entails everything that this study claims to encompass. In order to carry out semantic analysis, a very brief history of the origins of the two words will be provided.

Mean

The original meaning of the adjective mean can be found by tracing back the steps to the Proto-Indo-European. One should however bear in mind that the forms of the word are obviously hypothetical since Proto-Indo-European is partly based on guesswork. The hypothesised base form of mean is komoini or commoinis which meant ‘common’ or ‘general’ (CODEE, TOED). The Old English version of the word is gemme whereas the Middle English is mene. During these times, the meaning of mean stayed the same, but in the Middle English period, somewhere in the 1300s it had a change in meaning to denote something poor or bad. Thereafter, it went on to mean “nasty” and “terrible” in the 1600s. There is also a case of reverse meaning where mean actually means something good and brilliant, e.g. She plays a
*mean violin*. However, this phenomenon was not noted until the 1900s (CODEE, TOED).

The total number of concordance lines in the Time corpus for the adjective *mean* was 1177. In the material gathered for the present analysis, there were 450 concordance lines starting from the 1920s through to the 2000s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean: frequencies of sense</th>
<th>1920s</th>
<th>1930s</th>
<th>1940s</th>
<th>1950s</th>
<th>1960s</th>
<th>1970s</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Good’:</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Evil’:</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Time’:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Average’:</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Little’:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Terrible’:</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Other’:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Table 1. Frequencies of the 7 different senses of *mean* found in the sample of 450 sentences

*Mean* was divided into seven different senses; ‘good’, ‘evil’, ‘time’, ‘average’, ‘little’, ‘terrible’ and ‘other’. The ‘good’ sense refers to *mean* when it is used as a positive adjective, i.e. to state that something is good, not bad. The ‘evil’ sense is rather straightforward and means just what it says; *mean* is used to denote something bad or unpleasant. The ‘time’ sense is also very to-the-point since it refers to when the adjective is used as describing different sets of time, e.g. Greenwich mean time. The ‘little’ sense denotes the sense in which *mean* is used to describe something that is little, or a small part of something. The ‘terrible’ sense is used when *mean* refers to something that is tremendous or of great proportion. The sentences which were categorized under the sense of ‘other’ are those which cannot be analyzed since they are either tagged wrongly or are part of a word construction, for example compounds.
1920s

In the 1920s, *mean* in its ‘inverted’, or ‘good’ sense was used 18 times. The most frequent sense was the ‘evil’ sense which had 23 occurrences. The other senses were not as frequent; the ‘average’ sense scored 2 and both the ‘time’ and ‘little’ sense scored 1.

“who have to fasten innumerable buttons before their dress is complete.

Fashions are no mean part of civilization. But report them as news, not for the purpose of”

- Example 1

This particular example was rather difficult to interpret since it can be interpreted in different ways. At a first glance, when just looking at the part “Fashions are no mean part of civilization”, *mean* could be interpreted as ‘great’ or ‘big’; fashions are no big part of civilization. However, one has to look at the whole context in which *mean* appears and when that is done, the foremost interpretation would be ‘little’ since the author is talking about clothes and that it in fact is “no little part of civilization”. To support this, the author then goes on to state that fashion should not be reported as news even though it is a huge part of society today.

1930s

Here, as in the 1920s, the ‘evil’ sense prevails once again with 25 occurrences which means that half of the concordance lines had this meaning. Runner-up in this period was the ‘good’ sense which had 11 instances and the sense of ‘time’ scored 6. Last but not least, the ‘average’ sense had 4 occurrences.

“a little before 7:30 p.m. mean or sun time. The difference between mean and standard time must be calculated for every community. Morning twilight begins this week”

- Example 2

In example 2, *mean* is used to describe the differences between two ways of measuring time, for example Washington Mean Time, Local Mean Time and Greenwich Mean Time.
1940s

This is an interesting period since the ‘evil’ and ‘good’ senses are practically side by side. The former had 17 occurrences whereas the latter has 18. There is no ‘time’ sense at all, but the ‘average’ meaning scored 2 instances and there is also one sense of ‘terrible’ featured in these lines.

“fly. The Italians, clumsy at patrolling and clumsier at countering it, suffered **mean** casualties. # These patrols were not of great military consequence; they were of”
- Example 3

The ‘terrible’ aspect in this sentence is found in the adjective at hand; **mean**. The author writes about the silly Italians who cannot protect their own people and therefore suffer terrible and tremendous losses of human lives.

1950s

In the 1950s, there were 16 senses of the “evil” form and 12 senses of the “good” form. The only other sense that appeared here was the “average” sense which had 3 instances.

“Regarding Professor Garrett’s criticism of Dr. Gilliland’s finding that white babies scored a **mean** I.Q. of 103 and that Negroes earned 105.6 TIME, Sept. 17, may I”
- Example 4

The adjective use of **mean** here is in the sense of ‘average’ or medium.

1960s

This period differs somewhat from the others since it is here that the evil sense starts to occur much more frequently than before, namely 35 times. The ‘good’ sense only appears 7 times, the ‘time’ sense 1 time which the average has as well.
“was the same sort of fellow. He was a good chess player and a mean hand at the piano, and he made a hobby of hypnotism. At the”

- Example 5

The ‘good’ sense is shown in this example where mean actually means that the man discussed in the extract is a very good piano player as well as chess player.

1970s

29 instances of the sense meaning ‘evil’ can be found in this decade whereas the ‘good’ sense of mean is only found 7 times. The ‘time’ sense has 2 occurrences and the ‘average’ has 1.

“); white men secretly want black women (74%); whites have a mean and selfish streak in them (65%); whites are physically weaker than blacks”

- Example 6

As can be seen in example 6, the sense of mean here denotes the characteristic of a person as being ‘evil’ and unpleasant, i.e. the opposite of nice.

1980s

This period is not too different from the above mentioned period of the 1970s. The ‘evil’ sense triumphs once again with 34 instances which is more than half of the lines in said period. Next in line is actually the ‘average’ sense with 5 occurrences and the ‘good’ meaning only scores 3. The ‘time’ sense occurs 1 time.

“role in Voyagers!, a man-lost-in-time rehash. It will require him to look mean and wield a big sword. Is it possible to typecast an actor so early”

- Example 7

Here, it is not too difficult to understand why the mean in the sentence means ‘evil’ or rough and unpleasant. The author talks about the role that some actor is going to portray and s/he needs a particular actor since he is apparently very good at playing evil.
1990s

Even if this is a more modern period, the division of the senses is still approximately the same as the ones before. The ‘evil’ sense has 39 occurrences; the ‘good’ sense has only 6 whereas the ‘average’ sense scored 2 instances. The ‘time’ meaning has 1 concordance line.

“the death certificates of 987 men and women in Southern California and found that the mean age at death was 75 for right-handed people and 66 for lefties. One reason”
- Example 8

In this example, the adjective *mean* has the sense of ‘average’ or medium. It is stated that there are different averages in terms of life-span in humans depending on if you are right- or left-handed.

2000s

The last period and the most recent one is the 2000s where there were 36 instances of the “evil” sense and 3 occurrences of the “good” meaning. The “average” sense had 4 instances.

“be somebody pretending to be somebody, “says Handler, who also plays a mean accordion for them” It’s a lot of fun.” # --”
- Example 9

This is one of the sentences where the adjective *mean* is ‘good’ in its sense. Handler does not play something ‘evil’ on the accordion, but he is rather very good at it and probably plays quite brilliantly.

*Gay*

This particular adjective is not as straightforward as *mean* since its derivation is debated. The oldest meaning found is from the 1100s where it meant merry and happy (CODEE, TOED). This sense probably stemmed from the Old French word *gai* which meant the same as stated above; mirthful and merry. However, some etymologists claim that the word could have come from either the Frankish word *gahi* or the Old High German *wahi* which meant pretty. Another sense is the one denoting something fancy or showy which was first sighted in the
1300s. Exactly when the word *gay* was first used to refer to a homosexual person is not clear, some etymologists claim is was not used until 1933, when it was first published in a dictionary (CODEE, TOED). Others also say it was used as early as in the 1890s, but whichever side one stands on, it does not matter since the first real evidence that *gay* was used to denote a homosexual person was in *The Dictionary of American Slang* from 1920.

The total amount of concordance lines of the adjective *gay* was 3685. In the material gathered for the analysis of the meaning of *gay*, there were 450 concordance lines starting from the 1920s through to the 2000s. This can be seen in Table 2 below.

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Happy’</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Showy/fancy’</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Homosexual’</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Other’</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>50</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Table 2. Frequencies of the 7 different senses of *gay* found in the sample of 450 sentences

There were three senses to be found in the sample of the word *gay*; ‘happy’, ‘showy/fancy’ and the ‘homosexual’ sense. The ‘happy’ sense refers to sense in which *gay* is used to describe something or someone that is glad or cheerful. When someone or something is described as being rather boastful or flamboyant, the ‘showy/fancy’ sense is used. Last but definitely not least, the ‘homosexual’ sense of *gay* is used when talking about someone who is attracted to the same sex.

1920s

In the 1920s, the adjective *gay* is used mostly in the sense of ‘happy’, namely 43 times. The only other sense which appeared here is the ‘showy’ sense which scored 7.
“temperamentally a dictator who believes himself destined to rule the world. Zinoviev is a gay liver, a lover of wine, champagne and good cheer. He has suffered”

- Example 10

As can be seen in the example, the adjective gay more or less describes the life of this man. It would suggest that he lives very ‘fancy or showy’ and that he is not afraid to indulge.

1930s

This period does not differ from the previous one as much. The most frequent sense is the ‘happy’ one with 46 instances and the second one is the ‘showy/fancy’ sense with 7 instances.

“pioneering westward. Studious, ambitious, active, Hayes was “of a rather gay nature, a good talker, fond of men and fonder of women.””

- Example 11

This concordance line was extremely hard to interpret since it could be interpreted through so many angles. The adjective gay could be seen as denoting a very happy man which likes to talk to people, of both the male and female sex. It can also denote that he was gay as in homosexual since it says that he was fond of men. However, it does say in the end that he was fonder of women, so in this case it probably is the first interpretation, but one can never be quite sure.

1940s

In the 1940s, the only sense that was frequent was the ‘happy’ sense.

“She did and said whatever she liked, and Grandma liked it carnal. Her gay married daughter ran her a close second. And her tough granddaughter was never”

- Example 12

This example is rather ambiguous and therefore interesting. On the one hand it could be interpreted that the daughter is just very happy and full of life. Furthermore, the daughter is said to be married so it would not suggest that it meant the ‘homosexual’ sense. However, the word carnal makes it a whole other story since it means something in the likes of sexual pleasures of the body and the fact that the extract says that the apple does not fall far from the tree, one might suggest that the gay here might denote homosexuality even though the person
in question is married. Despite all of this, there is nothing that *clearly* states that the daughter would be ‘homosexual’, so in the end the adjective *gay* is interpreted as ‘happy’.

1950s-1960s

In this period (1950s), the only sense that was present was the ‘happy’ sense.

- Example 13

_Gay_ is used in its ‘happy’ or glad sense in the example above. The paper set out to be very funny in its contents, but also to have a clever sense of humour and not be clownish.

What is funny, this period (1960s) follows the last one to the letter; only one sense of _gay_ is detectable, namely the ‘happy’ sense which means that all of the concordance lines (50) have this sense.

- Example 14

As the example shows, _gay_ is here compared and contrasted with dismal which makes it easier to see that the adjective denotes the ‘happy’ sense.

1970s

Around this time, the pattern that has been prevalent in the former decades starts to change. The ‘happy’ sense is no longer the norm but rather the ‘homosexual’ sense; 16 resp. 31. The other category scored a meagre 3 instances.

- Example 15

“. Marching up Manhattan’s Sixth Avenue, the phalanxes chanted: “Two-four-six-eight, _gay_ is just as good as straight!” or “Ho-Ho-Homosexual! With cause”
Here, the word *gay* very much denotes the ‘homosexual’ sense of the adjective, the word *homosexual* is actually in the sentence as well, clarifying even more.

1980s

The most prominent sense in this decade was the “homosexual” sense which had 43 instances. Far behind was the “happy” sense with only 4 instances.

“. Arnold’s occupation is a drag queen; he sings torch songs at a Manhattan *gay* bar called the International Stud. As the first play opens, he is sitting”

- Example 16

As can be seen in the example above, the sense of the adjective *gay* in this particular sentence is ‘homosexual’. If the sense cannot be determined based solely on the word *gay* here, the word drag queen clearly would give it away.

1990s-2000s

Both the 1990s and the 2000s have the same number of senses altogether as well as the same division of the senses; all of the *gay* adjectives have the “homosexual” meaning.

“The fashion industry is especially vulnerable to AIDS because it employs the talents of many *gay* men, from top designers to hairdressers, makeup people and assistant window dressers”

- Example 17

This example is from the 1990s and it specifically talks about ‘homosexual’ men and how they allegedly spread AIDS throughout the fashion business. The sense of the adjective *gay* is ‘homosexual’.
“Vermont isn’t about to legalize gay marriage. That’s what the state’s lawmakers were insisting last week after its”

- Example 18

The sentence is from the beginning of the 2000s and here the author specifies that the state of Vermont is not going to legalize marriages between homosexual people which then means that the sense of gay here is ‘homosexual’.

6.2. Discussion

In this section I will discuss and analyze more in-depth the most interesting findings made in the previous section.

Mean

The following discussion is based on the previous results and to make it easier, a diagram of the different senses is provided below.

- Diagram 1. Division of the 7 senses of mean between 1920s – 2000s
As can be seen in the diagram, the ‘evil’ and ‘good’ sense was used almost equally with 23 instances of the former and 25 instances of the latter in the beginning of the 1920s. In the next decade, the usage of the ‘good’ sense drastically goes down to 11 whereas the ‘evil’ sense basically stays the same, 25. The ‘time’ sense is at its peak here in this period with 6 instances. Something happens in the 1940s which affects the usage of the senses and the ‘evil’ and ‘good’ senses have yet again very similar usage; 18 and 17. In the 1950s, the usage of the main senses, ‘evil’ and ‘good’ goes down a bit (16 vs. 12) whereas the ‘average’ sense rises to 3 instances.

In the 1960s, as well as in the 1930s, something happens that affects the usage of the senses. Here, the ‘evil’ sense increases and scored 35 instances whereas the ‘good’ sense only scores 7. There were also 1 ‘time’ sense and 1 ‘average’ sense in this period. This pattern continues in the next decade, 1970s, but the ‘evil’ sense goes down somewhat, from 35 to 29, on behalf of the ‘time’ sense which went up to 2 occurrences. In the 1980s, the ‘good’ sense hits rock bottom in terms of occurrences with a meagre 3 instances whilst the ‘evil’ sense prevails rather easily with its 34 instances. Here, the ‘average’ sense is blossoming with a score of 5.

The ‘little’ and ‘terrible’ senses were only used once each, ‘little’ in the 1920s and ‘terrible’ in the 1940s.

What can be said about these results is that throughout the 1900s, the sense of *mean* has been changing; at some points dramatically, whilst at some points not so much.

The ‘evil’ sense was the most used meaning of the adjective *mean*. All in all, half of all occurrences of the adjective were the ‘evil’ sense. According to Raymond Hickey (http://www.uni-due.de/SHE/HE_Change_Semantic.htm), bad meanings or senses seem to triumph over good ones, and that might be true here since the evil sense is actually winning a land-slide victory over the other senses throughout the 1900s.

The low frequency of the ‘evil’ sense of *mean* in the 1940s and 1950s might have something to do with the World War II. People probably wanted to write about something else than the misery and hopelessness that occurred around them at that time. However, it could also have been the other way around with high frequency of the ‘evil’ sense since the papers probably wrote a great deal about World War II, but the low frequency does speak for itself here.
The inverted or ‘good’ sense of *mean* started out very strong, but after the 1940s it began to decline and is today almost unheard of. That might be due to the fact that it is nowadays thought of as rather old-fashioned and outdated and that is probably why it is not used as much today. With that being said, there is no real evidence that this type of sense is not used. (http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=281361)

The ‘time’ and ‘average’ sense had their peaks; 6 resp. 5, but they are still not used frequently at all. The former is actually just frequent in 6 of the 9 periods and in the others it only has 1-2 instances. This means that the senses are not used frequently at all which would suggest that they have never been as popular as the other senses of the adjective.

The adjective *mean* have many different types of senses, and they have changed over time to become what they are today. However, most of the senses were actually there from the beginning, so one cannot positively deduct that e.g. widening has taken place, even though it is the most probable change in this word.

**Gay**

The following discussion will be based on the results from the previous section and a diagram of the senses is provided below to make it easier to follow.
This word has undergone a complete 180-degree turn from its original meaning of happy. As Diagram 2 shows, at the beginning of the century, in the 1920s, the sense of ‘happy’ was most frequently used, holding almost 100% of all the instances of the adjective.

The ‘showy/fancy’ sense is mostly used in the 1920s and it had some occurrences in the 1930s as well, but after that it disappears from the radar wholly. This sense was rather difficult to attain since almost every single one of the sentences that I determined had a ‘showy/fancy’ sense could easily have been interpreted as ‘happy’ instead. This is probably why the sense is not as popular as the happy one.

“What a genius for cooking. ‘The entire atmosphere of the place would be “gay, spirited, diverting”; above all, “decent. “Their club”

In this example, the adjective gay can be interpreted as ‘fancy/showy’ since they are talking about a club and how it should be seen. The sense could definitely be ‘happy’ as well, although the word decent is a rather serious and respectable word and that leads me to believe that the sense is ‘showy/fancy’ rather than ‘happy’ since a club wants to be well respected rather than have a reputation for being flamboyant or over-the-top.

The most interesting change happens between the 1960s-1980s when the ‘happy’ sense in time switches places with the ‘homosexual’ one. The change starts at the beginning of the 1960s and then in the 1970s, the ‘happy’ sense occurs 16 times whereas the ‘homosexual’ sense occurs 31 times. In the 1980s, the change is almost complete; the ‘happy’ sense scored a meagre 4 whereas the ‘homosexual’ sense scored 43. From the 1990s and onward the ‘homosexual’ sense is the only one present in the sample.

The dramatic change mentioned above might be due to the fact that at that time, the gay community started to expand and the Gay Liberation took place which altered the views and perceptions of many people (http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_agen.htm). The adjective gay was now used to denote someone who likes someone of the same sex.

As can be seen in Diagram 2, the ‘homosexual’ sense was not utilized until the 1960s, but there was one interesting sentence in the 1930s.
“pioneering westward. Studious, ambitious, active, Hayes was “of a rather gay nature, a good talker, fond of men and fonder of women.””
- Example 20

As mentioned earlier in the results section, this was another difficult sentence to interpret. You had to read it over and over again to get a grip of what the author is trying to say. In my analysis, I have put this sentence in the ‘happy’ category because it is so unclear; the man in the extract could very well just be a happy man who likes his friends, but he could very well be attracted to men as well as women. (This sentence is rather interesting since the homosexual sense of gay (according to some) is found as early as the 1890s (CODEE, TOED). This means that the sense has been around for a very long time so terms of this aspect, the word gay in the sentence might have the ‘homosexual’ meaning).

The findings here are similar to those stated by Ljung and O’Grady; this particular word has definitely undergone some great changes during its lifetime, and will perhaps even change more in the future (Ljung 2003:156, [http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/linguistics/content/cat_020/07%20Historical/07_ogrady_semanticchange_ms.pdf?v=chapter&i=07020.06&s=07000&n=00020&o=).}

7. Conclusion

“This time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law”
- Ferdinand de Saussure

(Saussure 1916:77)

This is a very famous quote from the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and it does speak the truth. Language change is very interesting since it occurs all over the world, all the time, and has done so since the birth of language. Change will always occur in a language because time changes people, people change society, society changes language and so forth – this is an inevitable truth. Everything in the world changes sometime and language is not an exception (Aitchison 2001:1-6).
The semantic change of the words *mean* and *gay* that has been presented in this study might not be revolutionary and to fully understand the phenomenon, more thorough and in-depth research should be conducted.

Language change then, can be a very complicated phenomenon. Linguists and researchers worldwide are in disagreement regarding how and why change in language occurs and there have been many suggestions and theories throughout history, some more satisfactory and some less plausible, and there is only one thing to be certain of here: they agree to disagree (Aitchison 2001:134-5).

8. References

8.1. Book references


Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1916. *Cours de Linguistique Générale.*


8.2. Internet references

Example 4: No further information [Accessed 2011-01-02]


