

# Language of Ignorance: Dysphemistic Language, Gender, and Temporality

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## 1. *Introduction*

Slang is often offensive. One of its primary purposes is to talk casually about socially-charged topics that *proper* language would not go near. When this is the case, slang crosses over into the realm of dysphemism – language that takes something neutral and makes it derogatory, even taboo. With no official authorities policing slang, the boundaries of what can and cannot be said are loose, which makes it both liberating and dangerous. Slang often ends up being harmful, specifically to already-disadvantaged groups of people. Being aware of this tendency, I decided to explore the use of slang by Boston College undergraduate students to investigate whether it contains a high degree of sexist language, with the prediction that many slang terms used on the BC campus are derogatory towards women. Though I set out to explore use of *slang* on campus, the corpus that I ended up collecting would be more accurately described as dysphemism. In analyzing the data, I examine not only how sexism manifests in this type of language but also how consciously this process takes place. Furthermore, an additional property that I had not originally considered – temporality – is discussed, and these two axes of analysis (gender and temporality) overlap to produce noteworthy generalizations.

## 2. *Methods*

### 2.1 *Subjects*

The subjects of my study are English-speaking Boston College students, all between the ages of 18 and 22. I worked with a total of fourteen participants; however, one participant's responses were excluded from the analysis due to a failure to follow directions. Of the thirteen remaining, 62% were women

and 38% were men. To recruit subjects, I introduced the idea in person first and then electronically sent them the Qualtrics questionnaire.

## 2.2 Materials

I conducted my research through a Qualtrics questionnaire, which asked each participant to give eight pejorative slang terms and then asked a number of follow-up questions based on the participant's individual list. The questionnaire consisted in the following eleven questions:

1. Please give some information about yourself.
  - a. Age
  - b. Gender
  - c. Are you currently a BC student?
2. What are eight pejorative slang terms commonly used to describe a person? This can include nouns, adjectives, and verbs as well as phrases. Note: a noun is a person, place, or thing; an adjective is an attribute or describing word; a verb is an action or occurrence.
3. Please write a sentence using each of these words. Make sure each sentence has a clear subject and gives some context to the meaning of the word.
4. Imagine you are gossiping with friends about another person. Give an example of something you or someone else might say to talk negatively about a person, using three of the terms you listed.
5. In what contexts or company would you use each word?
6. Is there a positive (non-pejorative) way to use any of these words? Please describe any that apply.
7. Which are the three most offensive of the terms you have listed?
8. What do you think makes people choose to use certain slang insults over others? Or do they not put any thought into their choices?
9. Of the words you listed, please group each of them into one of the following categories: masculine, feminine, or neutral.
10. How often do you consider the literal/historical/true meaning of a word before using it?
11. Is slang sexist?

### 2.3 Procedure

The majority of my research was done through the Qualtrics survey. I sent the survey to willing participants over email, and they usually completed it within a day or so. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, as the survey did not record names or personal information besides what was explicitly asked. By using Qualtrics rather than a hand-written, in-person questionnaire, I avoided one of the issues I originally foresaw: participants might have been uncomfortable answering questions about socially-charged language, had I been watching them fill out the survey. Left to their own devices, subjects were able to speak freely. However, the observer's paradox may have still made an impact, as it could with any survey, if participants chose to list only the words that they believed the researcher wanted to hear. Perhaps these were the words that were neither too benign nor too offensive – notice, for example, the distinct lack of racial slurs, which might have been deemed too taboo for the survey. Furthermore, because offensive language is typically used only in moments of heated passion, it might have been difficult for people to imagine their reactions to such scenarios without a real emotional stimulus. To mitigate this, I added Question 3 to simulate the sort of situation in which such language might be used. Lastly, I did not want participants to be aware in advance that the survey was largely focused on sexism in language, as it might influence the kinds of words they would be willing to provide. Thus, I did not ask explicit questions about gender until the very end.

After receiving the results of the survey, I looked for a number of patterns in the data: to begin with, frequency, genderedness, and offensiveness of the most popular terms. In doing my analysis, I came across an additional and unexpected pattern in the data: certain words refer to a temporary state, while others refer to a permanent attribute – a feature I describe as temporality. Finally, further historical research on the context and background of certain terms helps to study the gendered usages of each word over time.

## 2.4 Results

The first feature to examine is the overall frequency of appearance of each word. The two most frequently occurring words were *bitch* and *asshole*, each used by 9 out of 13 participants. Following these were *dick* and *slut*, each used by 6 participants. Next was a tie between *douche* (or one of its variants – *douche bag* and *douchey*) and *whore* (or its variant *ho*), each used by 5 participants. Next was *fag*, used by 4 participants, followed by a three-way tie: *cunt*, *gay*, and *fuckboy* (or *fuckboi*), used by 3 participants each. Figure 1 shows the ten most popular words, listed in order of number of appearances. Figure 2 shows terms used by only 1-2 participants, which I decided not to include in the analysis because they seemed to be anomalies.

Figure 1

Bitch	9
Asshole	9
Slut	6
Dick	6
Douche/douchey/douchebag	5
Whore/ho	5
Fag	4
Cunt	3
Gay	3
Fuckboy/fuckboi	3

Figure 2

Dickhead, Pussy, Nincompoop, Basic, Jerk, Idiot, Motherfucker, Retard	2
Loser, Thot, Skank, Prick, Butthurt, Bourgie, Shady, Fat, Fucker, Dumbass, Preppy, “sucks,” Tool, Stupid, Poser, Gold digger, Ugly, Piece of shit, Sloppy, Ass, Hag, Dummy, Lax/polo bro, Ninny, Butt, Loose, Bastard, Dyke, Cocksucker, Hot, Princess, Slapdick, Weiner, Thirsty	1

To explore the results of my hypothesis on the sexist nature of slang, Questions 3 and 9 are most pertinent. Question 3 asked participants to write a sentence for each word, using a clear subject. Some participants managed to avoid gendering their subjects, for example by using first and second person pronouns or determiners like “a/an” or “some.” Figure 3 shows the percentage of sentences for each word in which the subject was feminine, masculine, and neutral. Evidently, gender-neutral sentences were common for almost every term.

Figure 3

Word	% sentences with feminine subjects	% sentences with masculine subjects	% sentences with neutral subjects
Bitch	56	0	44
Asshole	0	44	56
Slut	67	0	33
Dick	0	50	50
Douche/douchey/douchebag	0	80	20
Whore/ho	100	0	0
Fag	0	75	25
Cunt	67	0	33
Gay	0	33	67
Fuckboy/fuckboi	0	67	33

When asked in Question 9 to place each term into the category masculine, feminine, or neutral, it was clear that the majority of words are considered “neutral” (56 out of 130 words), but that “feminine” (40 out of 130) words outnumber those that are “masculine” (34 out of 130). Figure 4 shows the distribution of gendered ratings per word, for each of the ten most common words. Following these categorizations, there were four purely-feminine and four purely-masculine words, one mostly-neutral word, and one that is both feminine and masculine.

Figure 4

Word	% rated feminine	% rated masculine	% rated neutral
Bitch	100	0	0
Asshole	0	33	67
Slut	100	0	0
Dick	0	100	0
Douche/douchey/douchebag	0	100	0
Whore/ho	100	0	0
Fag	0	100	0
Cunt	100	0	0
Gay	33	67	0
Fuckboy/fuckboi	0	100	0

Question 7 presented another factor, asking participants to choose the three most offensive of the eight terms they had listed. The results show that 6 out of 13 participants listed *bitch*, ranking it as the decidedly most offensive word found in the survey. In second place was *fag*, listed by 4 out of 13 participants,

followed by a four-way tie of *cunt*, *douche(y)*, *whore*, and *asshole*, each listed by 3 out of 13 participants. However, participants' ratings of offensiveness were limited by the original lists they had created. Thus, relative offensiveness can be calculated as well, which looks at how many participants who listed  $x$  at all also listed it as one of the most offensive. Figure 5 demonstrates the results of both measures of offensiveness.

Figure 5

Word	# times listed in top-three most offensive	% users of $x$ who listed $x$ in top-three most offensive terms
Bitch	6	67
Asshole	3	33
Slut	2	33
Dick	0	0
Douche/douchey/douchebag	3	60
Whore/ho	3	60
Fag	4	100
Cunt	3	100
Gay	1	33
Fuckboy/fuckboi	0	0

The final question asked participants to decide whether or not slang is sexist, a closed-ended question with only two possible answers: yes or no. Out of 13 participants, 11 responded affirmatively, an overwhelming 85%. Only two participants gave a negative response, one male and one female.

In addition to the results regarding gender, we can also analyze the data in terms of temporality. Certain words are used to refer to a transient state, while others are used to denote permanent characteristics. I determine a usage as stative rather than attributive by the existence of a form of *to be* acting as a complement to the main verb, as in the example “You’re being a real jerk right now,” indicating that the title *jerk*, in this case, is held only temporarily. Stative uses of words were in general far less common in the data than attributive uses, accounting for only 16% of all sentences. Figure 5 displays the exhaustive list of stative sentences that appeared in the data. Then, in Figure 6, I have broken down the percentage of the total uses of a particular

word in which the word was used to denote temporary state. Clearly, some words are used in this way more often than others.

Figure 5

<b>Sentences demonstrating stative qualities</b>
Stop <i>being</i> a dick and just make money.
My teacher is <i>being</i> a fag because he made me edit my paper.
You're <i>being</i> a real jerk right now.
Steve was <i>being</i> such a dick at the game, pushing everybody around and yelling.
He wouldn't get on the roller coaster with us because he was <i>being</i> a pussy.
Last night this kid on Xbox live was <i>being</i> so gay, he kept killing me over and over.
Don't <i>be</i> such a bitch, just get over yourself.
Stop <i>being</i> a pussy
Stop <i>being</i> a dickhead
Stop <i>being</i> an asshole
Quit <i>being</i> a Slapdick
Give me my pencil back, you don't have to <i>be</i> a dick Rob.
Don't <i>be</i> such a dick to him, he's trying to be nice.
You don't have to <i>be</i> such an asshole.
You are <i>being</i> such a butt right now.
Stop <i>being</i> such a weiner.
That person who did something mean is <i>being</i> a jerk.

Figure 6

<b>Word</b>	<b>% total stative uses</b>
Bitch	11
Asshole	22
Slut	0
Dick	67
Douche/douchey/douchebag	0
Whore/ho	0
Fag	25
Cunt	0
Gay	33
Fuckboy/fuckboi	0

### **3. Discussion**

My hypothesis that the slang of Boston College students is derogatory towards women is corroborated by the data, but there also arises additional information about the nature of this type of language. To explore the role of gender, I was able to make generalizations from the patterns in the data,

which I supplemented by researching the underlying histories of the most common words. One facet of the data that I had not predicted to find was temporality – the ability of a word to be used in reference to either a temporary state or a permanent attribute – which added a fascinating new dimension to my analysis.

The relevance of gender and sexuality in this body of dysphemistic language is clear. First of all, a common feature of the most frequently-occurring words is that they are all in some way sexual, either by referring to a sexual organ (*asshole*, *dick*) or some sort of sexual behavior (the clearest examples being *slut*, *whore*, and *fag*). Because dysphemism is so closely linked to taboo topics, one of the most common being sex, this is not surprising. Taken one step further, the nature of these terms is not only sexual, but also gendered, in that they tend to be used in describing either women or men exclusively. From responses to Questions 3 (asking participants to use the word in a sentence) and 9 (asking participants to categorize the word as feminine, masculine, or neutral), it is clear that most of the words carry either feminine or masculine associations. While the discrepancy between Figures 3 and 4 above points to a disconnect between how people mentally classify words and how they actually use them in context, both tables demonstrate that there are indeed gendered ideas linked to each word.

To begin, *bitch* was rated as “feminine” by 100% of its users, making it one of the most obvious examples of a word that is used with reference to women. Still, the example sentences showed less clarity: only 56% of uses were with feminine subjects, while the remaining 44% were neutral or ambiguous. Historically, the word has always been gendered: coming from Old English *bicce* for “female dog,” the modern form has been in use since at least 1400 to describe a woman in a derogatory way, implying that the woman is worth no more than a female dog used for reproductive purposes (Harper, 2015). Gendered example sentences included, “My teacher is a bitch because she made me question my values,” “She is such a bitch for assigning all this work,” “Sometimes a girl acts like such a bitch when she’s catcalled,” “Megyn



Kelley is a total bitch,” and “Maddy didn’t give me the homework, what a bitch.” Non-gendered uses included “That bitch stole my seat,” and “Don’t be such a bitch, just get over yourself.”

Many of its uses attribute the name *bitch* to a person who did something to make the speaker’s life more difficult (i.e. making one doubt oneself, assigning homework, not doing the speaker a favor, and taking the speaker’s seat). It is noteworthy that this use of “[female] person who got in my way” seems to be the primary use among the participants. Another popular use of the word is in describing a person who is subservient or weak (as seen in the final example above), but this usage is still related to the above meaning – to call someone a *bitch* is a means of asserting one’s dominance, especially if that supposed dominance has been threatened. Because no participant gave sentences with a masculine referent, we can assume that part of this need to assert dominance stems from the fact that the “bitch” in question is a woman or at least a non-masculine man. There is an apparent societal norm at play, that women are not expected to do what they want, and thus when a woman does do so, she is attacked with such language. Perhaps if women’s agency were not constantly being questioned, it would not come as such a shock when women actually do what they want, and this word would be used less frequently.

Because this word is so common, it was surprising to see it listed as the most offensive word by two-thirds of its users, but this suggests that there is a disconnect between those who still find the word highly offensive and those who have allowed it to diminish in harshness, perhaps due to the positive uses that exist alongside the negative. Question 6 provided examples of “positive” uses such as *bitchin’* and *bad bitch*, with the caveat that such forms should be reserved for usage by women only and among close friends. Perhaps there can be no largescale reclamation of the word until its negative uses, and the ideology underlying them, have died out.

Next, *asshole* is an unusual case, in that it is the only word which anyone categorized as “neutral” in Question 9 – and two-thirds of its users were in

agreement about this. The remaining 33% classified the word as “masculine.” In usage, a 56% majority of sentences were gender-neutral or ambiguous, while 44% were masculine. The word has historically been used in a masculine way, ever since its change from exclusively referring to a body part to coming to mean a contemptible (male) person during World War II; likely because it was a GI term, its only usage would be in reference to men (Vuolo, 2012). However, these participants demonstrate that it is more often a gender-neutral term than a purely masculine one. From the examples, it seems like a rather vague insult that can be used in myriad situations, such as, “He’s such an asshole,” “I know Bob is really good-looking, but I also think he’s an asshole,” “You don’t have to be such an asshole,” and “Stop being an asshole.” In all of these cases, whether masculine or neutral, we do not see a clear action that was performed in order to make this person seem like the “asshole”; in fact, it is always quite vague what the person did to deserve this title.

Furthermore, although *bitch* and *asshole* appeared an equal number of times in the data, the latter came up only half as often in the most offensive terms. Only one-third of its users chose *asshole* as an offensive term. The word may be ubiquitous, but it is not seen as particularly harmful. One participant explained that “if someone is ‘an asshole,’ chances are they are just a combination of mean and socially unaware. The person in question probably makes mean-spirited jokes or puts others down in a way that consistently hurts the feelings of the people around them.” This participant suggests that being an asshole is a common, yet only temporary, status that anyone can inhabit from time to time. The idea that anyone can become an asshole in one moment and stop being an asshole in the next (which is why example sentences specify to stop “being” an asshole) leads to examination of another feature of the data: temporality.

Both *bitch* and *asshole* are used in either a temporary or a permanent way, according to the data. Following Figure 6, *asshole* is used in a temporary way twice as often as *bitch*. Perhaps the fact that it is twice as likely to denote a

transient state is tied to the fact that it is half as likely to be considered offensive. Further examination of the effects of temporality in the following sections will illuminate this trend more clearly.

The next most common words will be discussed in relation to each other, starting with *slut* and *dick*. A *slut* is decidedly female – 100% of participants agree, although one-third of uses in sentences were ambiguous with respect to gender. On the other hand, a *dick* must be male according to 100% of participants, though half of sentence uses were gender-neutral as well. The two words are both highly gender-specific, and have been so historically, but the similarities end there. *Slut* has been around since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and it is suspected to have been a cognate to German *Schlutt* meaning “a slovenly woman,” following the pattern of Germanic words in *sl-* that mean “sloppy.” The use specifically with reference to sexual proclivity did not arise until the 1960s (Harper, 2015). *Dick* originally meant “fellow, lad, man” in the 1550s and did not come to mean “penis” until the late 1800s (Harper, 2015). The meaning “stupid or contemptible person” has been around only since the 1960s (O’Conner & Kellerman, 2011). Thus, one of these words has a long history of being pejorative, while the other is a more recent development. Perhaps this would explain why one-third of respondents who discussed *slut* found it to be offensive, while not a single participant deemed *asshole* as such.

Example sentences provide further enlightenment into the differences between these terms, especially if we consider the axis of temporality. Uses of *slut* almost always pertained to sex, as in “Macey slept with two guys already, such a slut,” and “Becca is a slut; she slept with four guys last night.” Note that there is no male equivalent to the word *slut*, as being made to feel ashamed of their sexual agency is a quality reserved only for women – again, thanks to societal norms. Example sentences of *dick*, on the other hand, included, “Steve was being such a dick at the game, pushing everyone around and yelling,” “Give me my pencil back, you don’t have to be a dick Rob,” and “Don’t be such a dick to him; he’s trying to be nice.” While *dick* is a similar insult to *asshole*, these sentences actually give some context as to what

makes one warrant the title – pushing everyone around, taking something from someone, and so on. In the case of both words, a temporally-specific event is what causes the insult to be thrown – someone’s behavior in a specific instance makes them worthy of being called either *slut* or *dick*. However, in terms of the actual language, one of these words is used almost entirely in a temporary way, while the other is never. Following Figure 6, *dick* is used statively 67% of the time, while *slut* is never used in this way, instead always denoting a permanent attribute. Although both words describe a person’s temporary behavior, one brands a person as permanently tainted, pointing again to the cultural norm which punishes women for their actions more harshly than men.

*Douche* and *whore* were also equally prevalent to one another, despite their differences. *Douche* is rated as masculine by 100% of its users, although the example sentences in which it appears are 80% masculine, 20% neutral. In its literal sense of “vaginal cleanser,” the word *douchebag* has existed since the 1800s. The American English slang usage arose around the 1960s (Harper, 2015). The Oxford Dictionary defines the current usage as “an obnoxious or contemptible person, typically a man” (“Douchebag,” n.d.). Why this word with clearly feminine undertones is used to describe men is not clear, but perhaps it suggests a male desire to separate oneself from the feminine – similar to the way *bitch* can be used to put a man down. *Whore* is the one term for which the example sentences from Question 3 and the categorization from Question 9 are completely consistent: 100% feminine on both accounts. The historical development of this word is also probably the most consistent, as *whore* has been used since the 1500s to describe a “prostitute” or “harlot,” evolving from the Old English *hore* of the same meaning (Harper, 2015). For an example of how *douche* is used is, see: “He cheated on his girlfriend because he’s a douche bag.” Example sentences for *whore* were equally unsurprising, such as “She’s such a whore, she slept with four guys in the first week.” Regarding both *douche* and *whore*, 60% of users of each ranked it as an offensive term, leaving both terms somewhere in the middle on the offensiveness scale. Similarly, neither term was used even once in a stative

way, indicating once again the relationship between offensiveness and temporality.

Moving on, *fag* was rated 100% masculine, but like the other masculine terms, it appeared in a mix of both masculine and gender-neutral sentences. This word introduces a further complication, which is that it tends to be used for subjects who are male yet not considered “masculine,” making the categorization schema for this word particularly difficult to interpret. Furthermore, the word itself is fraught with disturbing historical circumstances. *Fag* is a shortening of *faggot*, which has been in use to describe a homosexual man since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, it evolved from the original meaning of “bundle of sticks,” because of the heretics burned alive in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, including women and gay people (Harper, 2015; Weeks, 2011). In its modern use, *fag* is used not only to refer to actual gay men (derogatorily) but also to call into question the masculinity of straight men, as observed in the Pascoe (2007) ethnography *Dude, You’re a Fag*. The way my participants used the word demonstrate this meaning: “That boy over there who doesn’t play sports and wears skinny jeans is a fag.” Although only four participants provided *fag* on their lists, 100% of them considered it an offensive term. Thus, this word still carries a powerful connotation, despite being less and less common in everyday speech. However, one of the four participants used this word in a stative way. For future research, it would be worth looking into whether the intentionality of the speaker to describe a gay man or simply a straight man deviating from culturally acceptable behavior has an effect on the word’s temporality. I would predict that the word is not used in a stative way when actually being used as a slur for gay men, but rather that its stative use is directly tied to its purpose in insulting a heterosexual man for exhibiting some sort of feminine behavior.

Of the last three common words, there is less of import to be said, but they should not be left out. *Cunt*, *gay*, and *fuckboy* each appeared only three times in the data. *Cunt* was rated feminine by 100% of its users, and it was applied in sentences as feminine 67% of the time, neutral the remaining 33%. *Gay* was

rated as masculine by 67% and feminine by 33% – here some confusion may have arisen, as the word tends to be used for subjects who are perceived to be inadequately embodying masculinity, a feminine type of masculine. In sentences, it was used with a gender-neutral subject in two-thirds of cases and with a masculine subject in the remaining third. *Fuckboy*, a newer addition to the college lexicon, was rated 100% masculine, with two-thirds of sentences explicitly masculine and one-third neutral. Of these three words, two appeared on participants' lists of offensive terms, while *fuckboy* was not. Only one user of *gay* called it offensive – probably because the word is, these days, typically used in a non-pejorative sense, and it is not thought of as an insult by many. However, *cunt*, noticeably, was considered offensive by all of its users. Even though this word is not very common, it still carries a rather harsh negative connotation. Of these three words, the only one to appear in a stative way was *gay*, and I attribute this to the same rationale as *fag* above.

The preponderance of gendered words in the dysphemistic lexicon of BC students is evident. Indeed, the data confirm the presence of a greater amount of “feminine” than “masculine” words, although the “neutral” category, which contained a higher number than either other category, obscures the significance. It is likely that some confusion arises from the term “neutral” itself, which is an easy way to dismiss an unclear term rather than classifying it accurately. Another term such as “neither” or “both” might have been more effective. However, it is also clear that mental associations of gender do not always come through in how words are used spontaneously, since the number of gender-neutral uses in sentences is much higher than that of the explicit categorizations. Looking into the other features of these terms, it is clear that there is indeed an interplay between offensiveness and temporality. It is more likely for a word to be seen as offensive if it can leave a more lasting mark on the individual in question. That the most offensive words are those which refer to either women or non-masculine men also corroborates my hypothesis that there is a propensity towards sexism in dysphemism. It also points to the fact that sexism and heterosexism go hand in hand, as words like *bitch* and *cunt* (typically used to describe women) appear alongside *fag* (typically used to

describe gay men). Thus, the data appear to be in agreement with the 85% majority of participants who answered question 11 affirmatively: slang is sexist.

#### 4. *Conclusion*

The results of my survey followed my expectations, as the body of dysphemistic language I have gathered shows a considerable bias against women and non-masculine men. Although these data come from a small pool of participants, they indeed reflect greater societal trends. While there are slang words in existence that describe both men and women, those which describe men are not received as harmfully as those which describe women, unless they point to a man's failures with respect to hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, when a term is derogatory towards a woman, it almost always attacks her for behaving too much like a "man" – that is, being assertive (*bitch*) or being sexually active (*slut*). The implications of this are such that a woman cannot freely make choices without expecting judgment from peers. This is just one way in which language use in society reflects the greater problems we face as a culture, in this case, a culture which still lacks gender equality.

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