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***LOW WENCHES AND SLATTERNLY QUEANS:
ON DEROGATION OF WOMEN TERMS***¹

Towards the tradition of diachronic semantics

The main aim of any study in **diachronic semantics** is to examine how new meanings arise through language use, especially the various ways in which speakers and writers, influenced by many linguistic and extra-linguistic factors, experiment with the use of words and constructions in the flow of strategic interaction with addressees. Although the study of meaning alterations is considered to be one of the oldest branches of systematic inquiry, going back in history to classical India and Greece, it was only in the 19th century that semantics emerged as a significant division of linguistics and received its present-day name. Questions revolving around the subject of diachronic lexical semantics, particularly about its mechanism, causes, and regularities have, at different stages in history, attracted various degrees of scholarly attention.

Early historical linguists such as Bechstein (1863), Paul (1880), Bréal (1879), and Trench (1892) were fascinated both with meaning and its development, and investigated the ways in which languages change or maintain their structure during the course of time. The so-called diachronic approach to language became more widely adopted during the second half of the 20th century and appeared to be advantageous to the study of semantic alterations since it provides a historical context for an interpretation of semantic change. The first to argue that language can be approached from two basically different and equally legitimate points was the Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure. In his treatise *Course de linguistique generale* (1916) the author mentions the **synchronic** or descriptive approach which analyses a language as it exists at a particular moment, ignoring its antecedents, and the **diachronic** or historical

¹ The author is greatly indebted to **Prof. Grzegorz A. Kleparski** for valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper, without which it would never have acquired its present shape.

approach which traces the evolution of various language elements. Both these approaches, the author continues, complement each other, yet great care is needed in dealing with them. The semanticists of today (see, for example, Klepanski (1986,1990) point out that the second decades of the 20th century have truly witnessed an unremitting and marked decrease in the number of publication on the problem of semantic change. Added to that, they lament the fact that modern linguistics of the Chomskyan era was overwhelmingly absorbed in synchronic analysis and hardly bothered with diachronic changes in lexical meaning. Williams (1976:461) observes that:

Despite the increasingly intense interest in theoretical descriptive semantics, theoretical historical semantics continues to languish in the backwaters of lexicography and comparative philology, or in the shallows of histories of the English language.

Starting from the early 1980s though, the issues of diachronic semantic change have been extensively treated by a number of European and American scholars, such as for example Geeraerts (1983, 1985a, 1985b, 1987a, 1988, 1997) and Schultze (1992) and, in Polish tradition by, among others, Kardela (1988, 1992a, 1992b, 1994a, 1994b), Kardela & Klepanski (1990), Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1992), Łozowski (1994a, 1994b, 1996) and Klepanski (1986, 1996, 1997). Yet, in spite of those numerous publications it is still fairly obvious that monographs dedicated to diachronic semantics are relatively exiguous and the problems they discuss are not infrequently given incomplete and superficial treatment. The tables of contents of some otherwise respectable handbooks of language and language development may be a further proof that very little attention is paid to the problem of semantic change (see for example, Lehmann (1973), Bynon (1977), Lyons (1977)). Moreover, any academic discussion they offer tends to rely on conventional, mainly antiquated frameworks (see, for example, Siatkowska (1971), Masłowska (1986)) and, therefore, constitutes mere verifications rather than steps forward.²

More recently, Klepanski (1990) in his specialized study *Semantic Change in English* proposes an analysis of the semantic history of a group of lexical items in the field **HUMAN BEING** which have undergone evaluative development of meaning. The objective the author pursues is to show that studies of semantic change do not necessarily have to be anecdotal and superficial. The method of partitioning meanings into criterial components, which he adopts, proves to be beneficial because it enables the analyst to trace

² Obviously, one of the reasons responsible for this state of affairs is that, of all areas of language, meaning seems to be the most intractable, even as regards its very definition; it is not at all clear what we want to know when we ask what a word means (see Williams (1976:461)). Furthermore, even if one takes a specific attitude to the question of meaning, any attempt to formalize meaning, and its development in the course of time, is certainly a difficult and laborious task.

the run of semantic developments in a precise and minute manner. In turn, Kleparski (1997, 2002a) is one of the few scholars (see also Sweetser (1990), Geeraerts (1997) and Łozowski (2000)) who believe that broadly understood cognitive linguistics offers the means by which historical semantic changes can be studied more successfully.

Derogation of WOMEN TERMS in a cultural context

While communicating with others we are mostly unaware of the history of our language, not to mention any historical semantic changes of the vocabulary we are employing in our daily communication. This gap, however, does not matter too greatly since one of the most significant functions of language is to communicate ideas. In a situation when both the addresser and addressee perceive things similarly it is not their concern that, say, a word which is now for instance both female-specific and opprobrious was once non-gender specific and non-abusive. Another function of human language, except communication, is to express shared assumptions and transmit implicit values and behavioural models to those who use it. Hence, as a powerful conceptual force language is a transmitter of society's deep biases and provides a means of conditioning our thoughts. Let us refer at this point to Mills (1989:xi) who provides a down-to-earth yet illustrative example of ordinary words for a female person such as *woman* and *girl*. When the words acquire the additional commonly understood meanings of 'mistress' and 'prostitute', as – in fact – they did in the history of English, an attitude towards women held by some members of society becomes – somewhat naturally – part of the experience of all members of that society.

Miller and Swift in their *Words and Women* (1976:50) provide further evidence saying that when parents or teachers tell a boy not to cry because it is far from being *manly* or praise a girl for her *feminine* way of dressing, they are simply using the words *manly* and *feminine* to reinforce the categories our culture has assigned to males and females. Inevitably, in such situations language immediately becomes the expression of current societal values and a part of culture. As Bynon (1983) accentuates:

[...] the lexicon is the part of a language which has the most direct links with the spiritual and material culture of its speakers and [...] semantic developments may only be comprehensible by reference to the cultural background.

Linguists keep on arguing about the precise nature of the interaction between language, thought and this cultural background, however it seems fairly self-evident that language as a mirror of societal dispositions does both reflect and help to perpetuate deeply held cultural attitudes. As Bosmajian (1974:90) emphasizes *among these attitudes – and this is an area that traditional linguists*

have hardly touched upon – are those concerning the relationship between men and women. Mills (1989), the author of *Woman Words, a Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society* concentrates on the semantic histories of words which relate to women and attributes the semantic change they undergo mostly to social and cultural determinants. By selecting certain women words, and exploring how, when and perhaps why these words changed their meaning, the author finds a means by which to examine the balance of power between the genders within – what she refers to as – anglophone patriarchal society. In her book she proves beyond doubt that:

[...] the term for the female is likely to become pejorative, likely to acquire negative sexual connotations, and once it is attached to the female is unlikely to be transferable to a male (unless to express contempt) (Mills 1989:xiv).

Both Mills (1989) and other feminist sociolinguists over the course of the last few decades have attempted research tasks that they believe confirm the conclusion that women are routinely discriminated against in English-speaking society. Analysing the history of verbal derogation, they point to the words which relate to women, as well as the words used to describe society as a whole, as indications that the English language, and therefore English-speaking culture, is biased towards males and cultivates the oppression of women. To this end, Bosmajian (1974:90) visualizes the whole situation saying that *the language of sexism relegates women to the status of children, servants, and idiots, to being the 'second sex' and to virtual invisibility*. Inevitably, words used to describe women are systematically degraded and – therefore – they may be said to serve as an instrument by feminist sociolinguists to denote an inherent sexism in the English language.

Note that word pairs such as *master/mistress* and *sir/madam* are striking examples and epitomize this all-pervading sexism. They are the examples of changes in meaning according to their gender assignment and follow a pattern which Miller and Swift (1976:57) call **semantic polarization**. In a nutshell, the authors state that if the words acquire a sense that is related more to one sex than the other, they tend to fit into and reinforce the male-positive-important and female-negative-trivial cultural categories. Historical dictionaries show that all of the words in question once held positive connotations but, while the masculine forms have retained their original respectable senses, their feminine equivalents have degenerated to become terms of sexual abuse. Feminist researchers conjecture that such pejorations clearly indicate that the status of women in English-speaking society is relatively low and hence the language, as a mirror of societal attitudes, is not fair to women, to say the least.

Mills (1989) is by no means the only one who deals extensively with the issue of pejorative developments. This category has long attracted much scholarly attention simply because there are many more changes that give rise to

depreciation or pejoration of meaning than those which result in the appreciation or amelioration of the sense. In linguistic literature there are many definitions of **pejoration**, but they tend to revolve around a process by which a word's meaning worsens or degenerates, coming to represent something less favourable than it originally did. For example, the adjective *lewd* was originally used in the sense 'laymen as opposed to priests'. The word underwent pejoration to mean 'ignorant', then 'base' and finally 'obscene', which is the only surviving meaning thread in Mod.E. usage.³

Other extensive studies of pejorative developments are those of Bechstein (1863), Müller (1865), Schreuder (1929), and Kleparski (1990). The last author mentioned here examines a group of negatively loaded lexical items in the domain of **HUMAN BEING** and formulates some observations crucial to the nature of the process of pejoration of meaning. Kleparski (1990) points out that this process is both gradual and directional and he distinguishes its diverse phases:

- 5) social pejoration,
- 6) aesthetic pejoration,
- 7) behavioural pejoration,
- 8) moral pejoration.

Even cursory examination of the dictionary data available allows one to conclude that the mechanism of pejoration affects various subsystems of the lexicon, i.e. nouns, e.g. *leman* ('sweetheart' > 'unlawful mistress') or *mistress* ('woman who has care or authority over children' > 'woman who illicitly occupies the place of wife'), verbs (which are scarce to find) and adjectives, e.g. *base* ('low in the social hierarchy' > 'dishonourable') or *lewd* ('not in holy orders' > 'unchaste'). However, it is the category of nouns that is the subject particular to all kinds of evaluative developments. Analysing the particularly copious growth of lexical items within this category Kleparski (1990) proves that if the lexeme contains some evaluatively negatively charged elements, these are most frequently:

1. **socially negative elements**, e.g.:

villain ('simple-minded peasant' > 'wicked, deprived person'),
wretch ('banished one' > 'miserable or mean, despicable person'),

³ With reference to the pejorative development of *lewd* Stern (1931) states that since people outside holy orders in the Middle Ages were by and large illiterate, by referring to the circumstances of the referent *lewd* acquired the meaning 'unlearned, untaught' and later started to be applied to sexually promiscuous people.

boor ('man of country origin' > 'unrefined, unmannered man'),
caitiff ('captive' > 'despicable, cowardly person'),
blackguard ('servant of low degree' > 'scoundrel'),
flunkey ('servant in livery' > 'person who behaves obsequiously to persons above him'),
varlet ('servant, attendant' > 'rogue, knave'),
swabber ('one who mops the floor' > 'low unmannerly person'),
ribald ('retainer of the lowest office in a noble household' > 'knave, rascal'),
peasant ('country person, rustic' > 'uncouth, crude, or ill-bred person, boor'),
harlot ('person of unsettled life' > 'unchaste woman'),
cotquean ('the housewife of a cot or labourer's hut' > 'coarse, vulgar woman').

and much less frequently:

2. **aesthetically negative elements**, e.g.:

slut ('untidy, slovenly woman' > 'sloppy woman, prostitute'),
slattern ('untidy, slovenly woman' > 'sloppy woman, prostitute'),
drab ('dirty, untidy woman' > 'unchaste, disreputable woman').

or, even less frequently:

3. **behaviourally negative elements**, e.g.:

minx ('mischievous girl' > 'unchaste woman').

Also, if an original evaluatively neutral or positively loaded lexical unit begins to combine with evaluatively negative elements, these are most frequently:

1. **socially negative elements**, e.g.:

wench ('child' > 'woman, especially unchaste, disreputable or of low social status'),
hussy ('female head of the household' > 'female of low social status' > 'cheeky, disreputable woman'),
girl ('a child of either sex' > 'maid-servant' > 'prostitute' as, e.g. *girl about* (or *of*) *the town* and *girl of ease*),
churl ('male human being' > 'man of the low social status' > 'base, rude man'),
knave ('boy' > 'boy employed as servant' > 'base and crafty man').

and less frequently:

2. aesthetically or behaviourally negative elements, e.g.:

mopsy ('pleasant, pretty person' > 'slatternly, untidy woman' > 'spiteful, unchaste woman'),

quean ('woman' > 'bold, impudent woman')>1) 'spiteful, unchaste woman'
2) 'effeminate homosexual').

Kleparski (1990) concludes that there is a prevailing tendency for those words which at some stage of their development possess socially negative elements built into their semantic structure to pass into the sphere of behavioural or moral opprobrium, e.g.:

harlot ('person of unsettled life' > 'unchaste woman'),

wench ('child' > 'female of low social status' > 'woman, especially unchaste, disreputable or of low social status'),

hussy ('female head of the household' > 'female of low social status' > 'cheeky, disreputable woman'),

girl ('child of either sex' > 'maid-servant' > 'prostitute' as, e.g. *girl about* (or of) *the town* and *girl of ease*),

cotquean ('the housewife of a cot or labourer's hut' > 'coarse, vulgar woman'),

villain ('simple-minded peasant' > 'wicked, deprived person'),

wretch ('exile, outcast' > 'evil person'),

boor ('countryman' > 'unrefined, unmannered person'),

caitiff ('captive' > 'despicable, cowardly person'),

churl ('male human being' > 'man of the low social status' > 'base, rude man'),

knave ('boy' > 'boy employed as servants' > 'base, crafty man'),

flunkey ('servant in livery' > 'person who behaves obsequiously to persons above him'),

blackguard ('servant of low degree' > 'scoundrel'),

peasant ('country person, rustic' > 'uncouth, crude, or ill-bred person, boor'),

ribald ('retainer of the lowest office in a noble household' > 'knave, rascal'),

swabber ('one who mops the floor' > 'low unmannerly person').

Furthermore, those lexical items which at some stage of their evolution possess aesthetically or behaviourally negative conceptual elements tend to pass into the sphere of moral opprobrium, e.g.:

minx ('mischievous girl' > 'unchaste woman'),

mopsy ('pleasant, pretty person' > 'slatternly, untidy woman' > 'spiteful, unchaste woman'),

quean ('woman' > 'bold, impudent woman')>1) 'spiteful, unchaste woman'
2) 'effeminate homosexual'),

slattern ('untidy, slovenly woman' > 'sloppy woman, prostitute'),
slut ('untidy, slovenly woman' > 'sloppy woman, prostitute'),
drab ('dirty, untidy woman' > 'unchaste, disreputable woman').

Within the evaluative scale adopted, Kleparski (1990) stresses that moral pejoration may be treated as the final and most extreme stage in the evaluative evolution in the pejorative direction. Therefore, it is of no surprise to discover that this final stage is perfectly reflected in the largest category of words designating humans in sexual terms, that is in the quantum of historical synonyms linked to the category **PROSTITUTE**. Farmer and Henley (1965) have collected five hundred terms which are synonyms for *prostitute* and only sixty-five synonyms for *whoremonger*. Schultz (1975:72) who restricted her inquiry only to those terms which have undergone the process of pejoration or amelioration has located roughly a thousand words and phrases describing women in a sexually derogatory manner.

Schultz (1975) was the first one to affirm that even perfectly innocent terms designating women can acquire negative elements, at first perhaps slightly disparaging, but after a period of time becoming strongly abusive and ending as a sexual slur. Kleparski (1990:149), however, verifies this observation making it more specific in saying that many words which are negative at present were – at one point of their history – positively loaded, functioning, for example, as terms of endearment, e.g.:

leman ('sweetheart' > 'unlawful mistress'),
mopsy ('pleasant, pretty and beloved person' > 'spiteful, unchaste woman'),
paramour ('beloved one' > 'illicit, especially female partner'),
tart ('sweetheart' > 'unchaste disreputable woman'),
Kitty ('sweetheart' > 'slattern, mistress, prostitute'),
Biddy ('sweetheart' > 'slattern, mistress, prostitute'),
Gill ('sweetheart' > 'slattern, mistress, prostitute'),
Polly ('sweetheart' > 'slattern, mistress, prostitute').

Kleparski (1990) observes that there is an overwhelming tendency to derive negative meanings from the domain of **ANIMALS** which both he and other analysts prove in a number of publications dedicated to **zoosemy**, that is animal metaphor (see, for example, Kleparski 2002, Kiełtyka and Kleparski 2005a, 2005b, Kiełtyka and Kleparski (forthcoming)). Finally, the author formulates another observation pertaining to the semantic history of such words as:

jade ('horse of inferior breed' > 'disreputable, worthless woman'),
shrew ('shrew mouse' > 'malicious, vexatious woman'),
harlot ('person of unsettled life' > 'unchaste woman'),

paramour ('beloved one' > 'illicit lovers taking the place of a husband or wife' > 'illicit, especially female partner'),
nag ('inferior or unsound horse' > 'paramour'),
concubine ('male paramour' > 'woman who cohabits unlawfully with a man'),

that – historically speaking – first combined with negatively loaded elements and then narrowed their meaning and came to denote women exclusively. All in all, when we try to grasp the gist of Kleparski's (1990) analysis we may conclude that – within the category of pejorative developments – there seem to emerge four evaluative stages, that is:

2. **neutral > pejoratively loaded sense, e.g.:**

villain ('inhabitant of the villa' > 'wicked, deprived person') or *boor* ('man of country origin' > 'unrefined, unmannered man') or *hussy* ('female head of the household' > 'unchaste, disreputable woman') *knave* ('boy' > 'base and crafty man'),

3. **pejoratively loaded > more pejoratively loaded sense, e.g.:**

harlot ('beggar, vagabond' > 'woman of loose morals') or *drab* ('dirty, untidy woman' > 'unchaste, disreputable woman'),

4. **positively loaded > negatively loaded sense, e.g.:**

quean ('woman' > 'spiteful, unchaste woman') or *bully* ('beloved, dear person' > 'violent tyrannical man') or *nymph* ('young, beautiful woman' > 'prostitute'),

5. **positively loaded > neutral sense, e.g.:**

lady ('woman, especially of high position or noble manners' > 'woman').

When we narrow our perspective to the derogation of lexical items linked to the category **WOMEN TERMS** it is essential to refer once again to a recognized feminist author, that is Schultz (1975), who in her influential work *Semantic Derogation of Women* formulates a number of interesting observations and critique of what appears to be the almost ritual debasement of words used with reference to women. Thus, the largest section of her work is devoted to tracing words that have gradually come to mean 'prostitute' or 'sexually promiscuous woman'. The author demonstrates and documents categories of

such pejorative developments (women titles, female kinship terms, terms for domestics, endearment terms, terms for young girls and women, horse-related metaphors, terms for middle-aged and older women, and terms for fat and sloppy women). As the first category Schultz (1975) enumerates what seems to be the least offensive form of derogation, that is the pejoration of WOMEN TITLES, which – as the dictionary data abundantly shows – is historically more likely to occur than in the case titles referring to men. This process, which she calls **democratic levelling**, takes place when a word once restricted only to those of high rank becomes universally applicable. It should be stressed that this form of deterioration is not necessarily abusive or insulting, yet it helps to assert that women are not fit to hold high office or positions of power.

Examples of originally parallel masculine/feminine gender pairs are: *lord/lady*, *governor/governess*, *marquis/marchioness*, *baronet/dame*, *courtier/courtesan*, *sultan/sultana*, *duke/duchess*. Undoubtedly, *lord* is still reserved as a title for deities and men of noble rank, especially in British English, but any woman may call herself a *lady* even those who are referred to as *cleaning ladies*, *washer ladies* let alone *lady of the night*. Etymological sources tell us that originally *lady* denoted ‘a woman of higher position and noble manners’ or ‘a woman whose manners are characteristic of higher society’ and conveyed a degree equal to that of *lord*. Mills (1989:133) points out that:

Like ‘madam’, ‘miss’, ‘mistress’ and countless other woman-related words, ‘lady’ travelled the path so often followed by pejorated terms designating a woman. As they degenerate they slip past respectable women and finally settle upon those involved in illicit sex.

To pursue this issue further, according to Bosmajian (1974:96) the idea that women are to play a subservient role and not to be taken seriously has been perpetuated through the historical use of the word *lady*. One might, at first glance, think that referring to a woman as a *lady* is something either/both complementary or/and desirable. Upon closer examination of its semantics, however, *lady* turns out to be a verbal label connoting the non-seriousness of women.

While *governor* degenerated briefly in the 19th century Cockney slang, however, it still refers to ‘a man who governs, especially someone invested with authority to execute laws and administer the affairs of a state, province, etc.’ the corresponding *governess* is merely ‘a female teacher or instructress, especially one employed in a private house’ operating in a realm much diminished from that of Queen Elizabeth I, who was acknowledged to be ‘the supreme majesty and governess of all persons’ (see the *OED*). Mills (1989) stresses the fact that the reason for this declining power of women from positions of high rank and status to the relatively lowly position of paid employee in the private house or schoolroom is the enforced domestic servitude of women in society. In a similar manner, *marchioness* acquired in the 19th century the meaning of ‘maid-of-all-

work', while *marquis* has never lost its generally respected high-placed position. Similarly, only a few are entitled to be called *baronet* as it means 'lower in rank than a baron', and only a few wish to be called *dame*, especially in British English. Observe that in its earlier usage *dame* was partially synonymous with *lady*, *mistress* and *housewife*, however, unlike them *dame* never acquired negative sexual overtones, although nowadays, as a general term, it is clearly opprobrious. In turn, *courtesan* entered English in the 15th century to mean 'one attached to the court of a prince'. The original sense, however, dropped out of use and it became morally pejorative and female-specific meaning 'prostitute'. Thus, as Schultz (1975:65) says *we might conceivably, and without affront, call the Queen's Equerry a courtier, but would we dare do the same with a courtesan?* Also, *sultana* developed in the 18th century the meaning of 'mistress'. Truly exceptionally, both *duke* and *duchess* acquired in the 18th century the meaning of 'person of imposing or showy appearance'.

Mills (1989:203) provides other illustrative examples of feminine designations which have degenerated while their corresponding masculine terms have remained untainted, i.e.: *queen/king*, *prince/princess*, *Mister/Mistress*, *Sir/Madam*, *monk/nun*. The author points out that male terms retained their original, respectable associations, while the feminine forms have undergone pejoration and have become linked to the notion of sexual promiscuity and/or other negative social/behavioural/aesthetic characteristics at some point of their history. Let us examine another quote on this point:

'Mistress' has often been seized upon by feminists as an example of what Muriel R. Schultz calls a rule of semantic derogation of women, meaning the devaluation of woman-related words through the pejoration and acquisition of negative sexual connotations, a process which is seldom discernible in the male-equivalent words or in the man-related words (Mills 1989:165).

It has been also observed in the literature of the subject (see, for example, Kleparski (1990)) that the *queen/king* pairing reveals a tendency in the English language for man-related words to shift to the category of compounds, while the feminine word seems to be a dead end: 'a queen may rule a kingdom but never a queendom'.

Another group of women terms which has also been subject to dramatic derogation is the group of **FEMALE KINSHIP TERMS**, which – again – is kind of pejorative evolution in which the corresponding male terms seem to remain untouched. And so, *wife* entered the English lexicon to mean 'woman' or 'an adult female' and with the flow of timer it specialized to signify 'a married woman', and – at the final stage of pejorative development – degenerated and became a euphemism for 'a kept mistress' or 'concubine' in the 15th century. The originally neutral *niece* has become a euphemism for 'a priest's illegitimate daughter' or 'concubine'. Somewhat more dramatically, *aunt* was generalized first to stand for 'an old woman' and then 'a bawd or a prostitute'. According to

Schultz (1975:66), even mother was used as a term for 'a bawd' and sister⁴ as a term for 'a disguised whore' in the seventeenth century.

It seems fairly obvious that terms linked to the lexical subfield **WORKING WOMEN TERMS** are also more susceptible to pejoration if they denote females (see Kleparski 1990). And so, *hussy* continues the O.E. form *huswif*, from which the English *housewife* is derived and at one time the word simply denoted the 'female manager of a household'. Kleparski (1990) points out that *like many other gender-specific lexical items hussy started off as a term with, if not evaluatively positive, then at least neutral elements, which were gradually replaced by evaluatively negative ones*. Its degeneration was gradual as the word first declined to mean 'a rustic woman' or 'a woman of low or improper behaviour or of light character', and later it also acquired negative sexual connotations with the effect that it came to be used in the sense 'a pert or mischievous young woman', a synonym for a *minx*. At the terminal stage of its pejorative downfall it reached its nadir and started to be used in the sense 'a lewd, or brazen woman, a prostitute or jade'. Schultz (1975:66) also points out that such terms as *laundress*, *needlewoman*, *spinster* and *nurse* have all, at some time, been employed as euphemisms for 'a mistress' (in the sexual sense) or 'a prostitute'.

In their original employment, 'a laundress' made beds, 'a needlewoman' came in to sew, 'a spinster' tended the spinning wheel, and 'a nurse' cared for the sick (Schultz 1975:66).

However, all of the words in question apparently acquired secondary duties in some households, because they all became euphemisms for the oldest female profession at some point in their historical development.

Strangely enough, even words that may be grouped under the label **WOMAN ENDEARMENT TERMS** frequently collocate to the word *prostitute* as well. It is interesting to observe that such terms, which are meant to stress those things (most) men appreciate, often become associated with some degraded or shameful profession. And so, for example, *Dolly*, *Kitty*, *Biddy*, *Gill* (or *Jill*), and *Polly* began as general pet names derived from nicknames, or terms of endearment for a woman and then degenerated to mean 'a slattern', 'a mistress', or 'a prostitute'. According to Mills (1989):

[...] there are no examples of a male personal name passing through the same process of pejoration – although in the USA John (i.e. Doe) became a prostitutes' slang term in the C20th for 'a male client' (and Jane became slang for 'a prostitute').

Jug and *Pug*, both originally terms of endearment, degenerated and today they are used to apply contemptuously to 'a mistress or a whore'. *Mopsy*, a term of endearment still found in Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit*, for centuries also meant

⁴ Underlines mine.

‘a slatternly, untidy woman’ (Schultz 1975:67). *Mouse* began as a playful endearment, chiefly addressed to a woman but pejorated to such an extent that it became a police slang term for a woman, especially ‘a harlot arrested for brawling and assault’. It is surprising that even the very term *sweetheart* meant ‘one loved illicitly’ in the 17th century, although it has largely ameliorated since. MacDougald (1961:594) describes the line of development all of these endearments seem to have followed: *Tart*, the name for a ‘variety of pastry; a pie with a sweet filling’ with its agreeable taste associations, came to be used as an epithet for a dear one, usually young female, next to young women who were sexually desirable, and then specifically to women who were careless in their morals (‘woman of loose morals’), and finally – more recently – to women of the street (‘a prostitute’).

If many endearment terms for young girls have pejorated to become abusive or disparaging epithets, so have terms linked to the category **GIRL/YOUNG WOMAN**. *Doll*, a pet form of Dorothy, was originally applied in the sense ‘a young woman with a pretty babyish face’, then became an insulting epithet for women generally, and finally started to be employed in the sense ‘a paramour’. *Minx* in its historically primary meaning was used for ‘a flirtatious, pert, young girl; hussy’ and this meaning is current in Mod.E., despite its derogatory sense of ‘a lewd or wonton woman’. *Nymph* and *nymphet* were both originally used with reference to attractive young girls or women. With time *nymph* became a euphemism for ‘prostitute’ in such phrases as *nymph of the pave/pavement* and *nymph of darkness*, while *nymphet* suggests sexual connotations meaning ‘a sexually precocious girl; a loose young woman’. *Peach* has long been used as a metaphor for ‘a luscious, attractive girl or woman’ and at the beginning of the 20th century pejorated to mean ‘a promiscuous woman’.⁵ *Broad* in its original meaning was used with no offensive connotations for ‘a young woman or a girl’ (*Wentworth and Flexner*, 1960), but it became A.E. slang for ‘a promiscuous woman considered unworthy of respect’ or openly ‘a prostitute’. *Floozie*, was first used in the sense ‘an attractive young woman of loose morals’ and, in slang usage, it was employed in the sense ‘a dissolute and sometimes slovenly woman’. Later it pejorated in somewhat different direction to mean ‘an undisciplined, promiscuous, flirtatious young woman, especially a cynical, calculating one who is only concerned with having a good time or living off the generosity of men; a cheap or loose girl or woman’.

⁵ *Tart* and *peach* are but two cases of the phenomenon which Kleparski (1988) refers to as **foodsemy**, that is metaphorical use of food terms with reference to people. Other examples that may readily be quoted are *big cheese* used in the sense ‘important, respectable person’, *applepie* used in the sense ‘dear beloved person’ or *crumpet* which is used in the meaning ‘sexually attractive female’.

Even the central word *girl* has a long history of both specialization and pejoration. It entered English to denote first ‘a child of either sex’, then it was used to mean ‘a female child’ and later ‘a maid-servant’ and finally – with the progress of pejorative evolution – it acquired the senses ‘a prostitute’, ‘a mistress’ or ‘the female sex-or that part of it given to unchastity’. Note that today, unless contextually, *girl* is free of evaluatively negative elements (though the diminutive form *girlie* has certain sexual connotations built into its semantics), and you can freely call a female child, a *sweetheart*, or even a woman a *girl* without risking any insult.

As observed by many of those dealing with the subject of semantic change, for example Kleparski (1988, 1990, 2002), Kiełtyka and Kleparski (2005a, 2005b), there are many horse-related metaphors – for which the term **zoosemy** is employed – which usually originate as mild or contemptuous designations for women and subsequently derogate to become terms of abuse with negative (most frequently) sexual meaning. Notice that the connotations of a tired old horse were used to denigrate all women, not only those old and tired ones. And thus, for instance, *harridan* originally meant ‘a worn-out horse’. Later, it came to be used in the sense of ‘a gaunt woman’ and – with the progress of pejoration – ‘a decayed strumpet’ which clearly suggests that an ageing prostitute was regarded as no better than rotting vegetable matter. Finally, the sense of the word underwent a further transformation to mean ‘a miserable, craggy, worn out harlot, fit to take her bawd’s degree’.⁶ Another example of similar kind is *jade* which in its historically primary sense denoted ‘a poor or worn-out old horse’. At a certain point of its history the word began to be used as a contemptuous epithet for women, however, meaning ‘a worthless or disreputable woman’, and eventually ended up as a synonym for *whore*. A *hackney* (or its abbreviated form *hack*), in its historically primary meaning was used with reference to ‘a common riding horse, often available for hire to draw passengers in a coach’. At the later stage of semantic evolution its meaning was extended to encompass, with derogatory connotations, anyone who hires himself out (hence *hack writer* or *fee-for-service writer* and *low-level political time-server*), but – when used for women – it acquired openly sexual overtones as a metaphor for ‘a woman who hires out as a prostitute’ or ‘a bawd’. Finally, let us quote the example of *tit* that originally denoted either ‘a small horse’ or ‘a small girl’, but at a later stage of semantic evolution later degenerated to mean ‘a harlot’. Though the conclusion may sound somewhat sweeping, one might say that all the examples of zoosemic development quoted above seem to indicate that a woman is a ‘mount’ to be mounted and to be ridden (and overridden) by a male rider.

⁶ Compare the figurative use of Polish *szkapa* ‘mare’ used derogatively in the sense ‘old, worn-out woman’.

In English there are few words linked to the lexical subfield MIDDLE AGED/OLD WOMAN and those which have occurred throughout the history of the language have taken on – almost as a rule – unpleasant connotations. Schultz (1975:68) says that *even a relatively innocuous term like dowager is stigmatized. Beldam⁷ is worse*. It is formed by combining the English usage of *dam* ‘mother’ with the element *bel* indicating the relationship of a grandparent, and it simply meant ‘grandmother or still more distant ancestress’ at earlier stages of the history of English. It was later generalized to refer to any ‘woman of advanced age’, and – as frequently happens with words indicating ‘old woman’ – the word underwent pejorative downfall to be used with reference to ‘an old, loathsome, spiteful woman; a hag’. *Hag* itself originally meant ‘a witch’ and later acquired a debased sense ‘an ugly, repulsive old woman’ often linked with the strong implication of viciousness or maliciousness.⁸ *Bat* may be said to have followed the opposite line of semantic development. The 19th century edition of *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* defined the meaning of *bat* as ‘a low whore: so called from moving out like bats in the dusk of the evening’ (Mills 1989:16). In the 20th century the word lost its sexual connotations though it remained in the sphere of female opprobrium; it is a generalized form of abuse meaning simply ‘an unpleasant woman, unattractive’.⁹ Originally, *bag* denoted ‘a middle-aged or elderly slattern’, and later there developed the sense ‘a slatternly or part-time prostitute’. In A.E., during the course of the 20th century the sense of the word ameliorated slightly and – at present – it is still used derisively to refer to ‘an unattractive woman or girl’ or ‘an ugly or bad-tempered woman’. Schultz (1975) observes that there are very few terms for old people of either sex in English *however, the few terms available to denote old men [...] are less vituperative than those denoting women*.

Also, those terms which originally designate fat and sloppy women tend to undergo the process of pejoration (which Kleparski (1988, 1990) refers to as *aesthetic pejoration*), and acquire negative sexual overtones at one point of their historical evolution. Etymological inquiry into the history of such words as *blowzy*, *cow*, *slattern*, *slut* and *sow* suggests that the physical attribute of fatness in a woman has usually been associated with uncontrollability, promiscuity and general disparagement.¹⁰ Mills (1989:241) provides some further observation saying that:

⁷ Underlines mine.

⁸ Stanley (1973) records it as a synonym for *prostitute*.

⁹ The process of degeneration was so far-reaching that in the 1960s *bat* as an epithet for a woman was banned on television in the USA.

¹⁰ This seems to hold true for many European cultures though the negative view of overweight is far from universal. In Africa female fatness is the symbol of (sexual) attractiveness, if not beauty.

Many words in English with connotations of female untidiness and/or a lack of sense of direction or purpose have resulted in their being used to describe a 'prostitute'. A woman who does not seem to know that her place is in the home becomes a threat to the need for order: a disorderly woman can only be a 'wanton', a 'slattern,' etc.

To illustrate his point, Schultz (1975:68) lists the following words as evidence: an originally epicene in its metaphorical application *cow* 'a clumsy, obese, coarse, or otherwise unpleasant person' degenerated further and became female-specific abusive epithet for 'a degraded woman' and eventually 'a prostitute'. In the 20th century the word acquired yet further negative connotations of coarseness, obesity and general loathsomeness: the very antithesis of the delicate, slim, feminine ideal.¹¹ *Drab* in its historically original sense was applied to 'a dirty, untidy woman', but its semantics degenerated further to mean 'a harlot or prostitute'. Both *slut* and *slattern* were originally used in the meaning of 'woman of negligent, untidy appearance', and both of them later acquired the sense of 'unchaste, disreputable woman' and are currently polysemantic, meaning either 'woman of negligent, untidy appearance' or 'unchaste, disreputable woman'. *Trollop* has always had negative connotations linked to it, but not always sexual ones; at the beginning of the 17th century it meant simply 'a slovenly woman' though today it is used with a heavy morally negative load 'a woman who is promiscuous or vulgar, a prostitute'. Mills (1989) points out that it was probably the connotation of disorderliness which resulted in the use of *trollop* in the 19th century for 'a large piece of rag, especially wet rag' (*The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*) and, in Scot.E., according to what Mills (1989) says, 'a large, unseemly, straggling mass of anything'. Another case in point is the history of *mab* originally used in the sense 'a slattern' and then – with the progression of pejorative load – 'a woman of loose character'. Notice that the semantics of the word seems to have withstood the third logical step of degeneration in B.E. (singled out by Klepanski 1990), though in A.E. it is also used as an abusive epithet for a prostitute.

To many linguists the very fact that the quantum of pejorative developments exceeds substantially that of ameliorative ones constitutes a definitive semantic rule, which – on closer inspection – turns out to be somewhat simplistic. They all agree that the semantic derogation of woman-related words does indeed constitute – if not an exceptionless law in the sense of *Junggrammatiker* – then at least a very strong tendency. And here Mills (1989:xiv) provides us with a representative list of exceptions: *crumpet* which has recently been appropriated by women to refer to men; *dowager* and *bride* which have never developed

¹¹ See also German *Kuh* ('cow' > 'foolish female'), Dutch *koe* ('cow' > 'clumsy person'), Polish *krowa* ('cow' > 'fat, awkward woman'), French *vache* ('cow' > 'nasty person') discussed in Klepanski (1988 and 2002).

negative sexual connotations; *jilt*, once female specific, has ameliorated and become non-gender-specific; *bat* which has lost its overt sexual connotations.

Towards the causes of derogation of WOMEN TERMS

As hitherto mentioned, the process of deterioration of sense is far more common since there are many more words which are susceptible to acquire some negative connotations over the course of time. In this context one may address the following question: *What are the causes triggering these pejorative extensions?* As regards the causes of ameliorative and pejorative developments, Dr Johnson in the Preface to his *Dictionary* mentions the relation of cause and effect between the morality of nations and their languages saying that *Tongues like governments have a natural tendency to degeneration [...]. It is incident to words as their authors to degenerate from their ancestors.* In a likewise manner, in the early linguistic literature Trench (1892) believes that it is the morality and immorality of people that is responsible for the fate of lexical items.¹²

Stern (1931:411) says that pejorative developments are more emotive in character than ameliorative ones and that the causes triggering pejorative extensions are to be sought in circumstances when the user of a language finds one of the characteristics of the referent disadvantageous, contemptible or ridiculous.

More recently, according to Kamboj (1986), the motive force behind a large number of evaluative developments in pejorative direction is **euphemism** or **pseudo euphemism**.¹³ In other words, in our day-to-day communication a tabooed word or phrase tends to be pushed aside and a neutral term is used in its stead. Yet, after some time the new less offensive term also, being directly associated with the new idea which it was designed to veil, ceases to be felt so. Thus, in turn, the depreciation of the new term takes place. Bréal (1897), in his pioneering classic, *Essai de Semantique* analysed the semantic tendency of deterioration and attributed this tendency to *the nature of human malice, the spirit of the narrators* and to *false delicacy*. In line with his psycholinguistic-oriented explanation he argued that:

¹² To this question Trench (1982:77) devotes a special chapter in which he complains: *[...] I would bid you to note the many words which men have dragged downward with themselves, and made more or less partakers of their own fall. Having once an honourable meaning, they have yet with deterioration and degeneration of those that used them, or of those about whom they were used, deteriorated and degenerated too.*

¹³ Similarly, Schreuder (1929:59) says that euphemism is the most potent factor in the rise of negatively loaded meanings.

The so-called pejorative tendency is the result of a very human disposition which prompts us to veil, to attenuate, to disguise ideas which are disagreeable, wounding or repulsive[...] There is nothing in it all save a feeling of consideration, a precaution against unnecessary shocks, a precaution which whether sincere or feigned is not long efficient, since the hearer seeks out things behind the word, and at once identifies them (Bréal 1897:100–101).

And here Schultz (1975:72) might again be referred to when she observes that many terms denoting ‘woman of the night’ have arisen as a corollary of the operation of euphemism justified by the reluctance to name the profession in question outright. The author stresses the fact that the majority of terms, however, are **dysphemistic**, not euphemistic. For instance, the bulk of terms cited by Farmer and Henley (1965) as synonyms for *prostitute* are clearly derogatory: *broadtail, carrion, cleaver, cocktail, flagger, guttersnipe, mutton, moonlighter, omnibus, pinchprick, tail trader, tickletail, twofer, and underwear*, to mention but a few.

Another highly probable source behind pejoration of sense is, as both Ullmann (1957) and Schultz (1975) call it, the association with a **contaminating concept**. When a word, time and again, is used in the association of other word/words which denote disagreeable, obscene, offensive and degraded objects or ideas, it eventually tends to degrade or depreciate its sense. Schultz (1975:71) says that in the case of association there is ample evidence that contamination is a factor. Be that as it may, men think of women in sexual terms regardless of the context, and – as a consequence – words with even the slightest of female connotations are virtually synonymous with sexual imagery. The perfect examples of the process of contamination are histories of words like *female, lady* and *woman*. Schultz (1975:71) points out that *woman* was avoided in polite circles two centuries ago, *probably as a Victorian sexual taboo, since it acquired the meaning of ‘paramour or mistress’ or the sense of intercourse with women when used in plural, as in ‘Wine, Women, and Song’*. It was frequently substituted with *female* but – simultaneously – acquired certain disparaging overtones. The *OED* records *female* as a synonym *avoided by writers*, and *Webster’s Third International* identifies it as a disparaging term when used with reference to women. Later, it was substituted in the 19th century with *lady* but this term also, as Mills (1989) points out, in various compounds terms, such as *lady of the night, lady of pleasure* and *ladybird* served as a euphemism for ‘a whore’ and was again replaced by *woman*, newly rehabilitated.

As Ullmann (1967:231–32) suggests, the third important reason attributable to the development of women terms in an unfavourable direction is **prejudice**. And here, in turn, another question to be addressed is: *What is the source of this prejudice?* Several scholars have concluded that it is fear, resulting from a supposed threat to the power and superiority of the male. Arguing along these lines, Fry (1972:131) claims that jokes about the relationship between the sexes, especially the frankly sexual jokes, indicate that men’s power and control might

be questioned because the male is biologically inferior to the female in several respects. In other words, they reveal an awareness and concern or even anxiety about the general existence of biological disadvantages and frailties. Grotjahn (1972:53) believes that the cause of prejudice is what he refers to as sexual inadequacy between the sexes. That is the reason why man's fear of woman is basically sexual, which is, in turn, perhaps the reason why so many of the derogatory terms for women acquire sexual connotations.

Conclusion

Taking into account the cases discussed and quoted above, as well as the *causa movens* of the semantic devaluation of words, it is patently obvious that the plethora of evidence on this subject is heavily weighted culturally, thus revealing the so called **double standard** by which society differentially judges male and female looks/behaviour. This alleged 'superiority' of men and 'inferiority' of women may be observed throughout history and is definitely connected with different role assignments which in turn are perfectly incorporated into all forms of verbal and written communication. It is a fact that men are considered to be the creators of English since they have played a dominant role in almost all fields of life, *ergo* examining language regarding women it is possible to learn a great deal about the fears and prejudices men hold about women.

The material analysed in this work proves a close relationship between culture and all forms of communication and – above all – it seems to provide clear examples of the almost ritual debasement of words which refer to women. This process, which is known as pejoration or derogation of words, has long attracted the attention of linguists for the simple reason that it is a far more common occurrence than that of amelioration of the sense. As Kleparski (1990) emphasises, the process of pejoration of meaning is gradual and directional and the author distinguishes its four main stages, that is: 1) *social pejoration*, 2) *aesthetic pejoration*, 3) *behavioural pejoration*, and 4) *moral pejoration*. The idea of describing the changes in meaning as directional was based on his observations such as the presence of socially negative components often precedes the association of a lexeme with behaviourally negative components or morally negative components (see the development of, e.g. *villain*, *wretch*, *boor*, *caitiff*, *harlot*, *slut*, *slattern*, *drab*). Furthermore, there is a *prevailing tendency* for those lexical items which at some stage of their development possess aesthetically or behaviourally negative elements to pass into the sphere of moral opprobrium (see, e.g. *minx*, *mopsy*, *queen*, *slattern*). Finally, Kleparski (1990) notices that *moral pejoration* is the final and most extreme stage in the evaluative development in the pejorative process. This conclusion is definitely

not groundless especially with regards to the large category of words designating women in sexual terms.

On the basis of dictionary data it becomes evident that the mechanism of pejoration affects different subsystems of lexicon, i.e. nouns (see for example *mistress*), verbs (scarce to find) and adjectives (see for example *base*), however it is the category of nouns that is most susceptible to pejorative extensions. Within the latter group of **WOMEN TERMS**, according to Schultz (1975), a few types of degeneration might be enumerated: women titles (see for example *lady, queen*), female kinship terms (see for example *wife, mother*), terms for domestics (see for example *housewife, spinster*), terms of endearment (see for example *Dolly, Kitty*), terms for young girls and women (see for example *Doll, nymph*), horse-related metaphors (see for example *harridan, jade*), terms for middle-aged and older women (see for example *beldam, bat*), and terms for fat and sloppy women (see for example *cow, slut*). Investigating this particularly numerous group of lexical items that designate members of the female sex, we might conclude that the English language does contain a substantial number of female terms which were once neutral or positive and which – with the passage of time – acquired debased and often sexual connotations at some point of their existence. Exemplary words and their evolutionary paths under each of the above sections prove that words pertaining to women are systematically degraded often to become terms of sexual abuse, while their male equivalents retain their original positive senses.

It is possible to adduce a good deal of evidence in support of this claim, but here we remain on somewhat shaky ground if we are to insist on asserting that it is a rule that female terms either have or always develop negative senses. According to many, language is an oppressive tool only in the minds of oppressors who aim/wish to oppress. Even if this is so, others say, it can provide a perfect tool in the struggle against patriarchy and any form of female discrimination.

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