“You Call Me a Bitch Like It’s a Bad Thing”

A Study into the Current Use and Semantic Properties of the Noun *Bitch*
Abstract

This paper analyses and discusses the present-day use of the noun *bitch*, as the term in contemporary usage seems to have started to deviate from the lexical definition. Traditionally considered an insult when applied to a woman, *bitch* has recently started being used as a self-imposed label rather than an applied one. Such a phenomenon indicates reappropriation, a negotiation of the meaning and semantics of a word. The purpose of this study is to investigate the origin and semantics of the term, as well as its historical usage and developments. Of particular interest and significance regarding the semantic development of *bitch* are social and extra-linguistic factors such as political movements, as will be evident from the results presented. Additionally, the present-day use of the term is analysed using lexical semantics and corpus linguistics, with the adjective collocates of the term retrieved from two corpora. Further, contemporary music lyrics are quoted and analysed to lend further support to the corpus findings regarding the present-day use, as well as the indicated semantic change and reappropriation. The results indicate that the term *bitch* is undergoing a reappropriation and is currently used both as a derogatory and self-empowering term. It is hoped that this paper will give insight to the phenomenon of reappropriation and the connection between social and linguistic change, as well as the importance of context in determining the meaning of a term.

Keywords

lexical semantics, semantic prosody, semantic change, corpus linguistics, reappropriation
Table of Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
   1.2 Aim & research questions ......................................................................................... 2

2. Theoretical background ................................................................................................. 2
   2.1 Lexical semantics & corpus linguistics ................................................................ 2
       2.1.1 Collocates ...................................................................................................... 3
       2.1.3 Semantic prosody .......................................................................................... 4
   2.2 Semantic change ....................................................................................................... 4
       2.2.1 Reappropriation .............................................................................................. 6
   2.3 Swearing .................................................................................................................... 7

3. Method & material .......................................................................................................... 10

4.1 Historical developments .............................................................................................. 12
   4.2 Collocates ................................................................................................................ 15
   4.3 Top collocates of bitch ............................................................................................ 15
   4.4 Analysis of collocates related to reappropriation ...................................................... 20
       4.4.1 Slang: bad, baddest, basic, real ..................................................................... 20
       4.4.2 Sexuality: sexy, dirty, nasty, frigid ................................................................ 23
       4.4.3 Independence: bossy, unapologetic, selfish, tough, rich, inner ...................... 25
       4.4.4 Monsterization: evil, cold, cold-hearted, heartless, rude, crazy, raging, goddamn, goddamned ............................................................... 28

5. Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 31

References ......................................................................................................................... 34
1. Introduction

If a bunch of guys are calling me a Bitch, I know I must be hitting a nerve, if they start calling me a Heartless Bitch, I know I've got them running scared, but the best part is when they call me a Cold, Heartless Bitch (my brother's personal favorite), because they know I am someone they will never be able to subjugate. (Dana)

_Bitch_ has for almost the entirety of its existence been considered a derogatory term, but the introductory quote suggests that there are other interpretations of what a _bitch_ actually is. Not being able to subjugate someone is hardly something considered an insult or a derogatory slur. Further, as an avid listener to hip-hop and rap music, where the term bitch is often used by women about themselves, I sensed that there must be more to the term than the dictionary definitions, as _The Oxford English Dictionary_ (henceforth abbreviated _OED_) states that _bitch_ is “Applied opprobriously to a woman; strictly, a lewd or sensual woman. (...) esp. a malicious and treacherous woman (...) outstandingly difficult or unpleasant”, and the _Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English_ describes the term as “an insulting word for a woman that you dislike or think is unpleasant – also used humorously between friends”. Further, _The Urban Dictionary_ definition reads “Annoying or whining female” or “A woman that doesn’t give a flying f*ck anymore and that can and will be cruel to men”.¹ In the lexical definitions, any sense but the derogatory one is reflected only in the Longman dictionary, and there is no mentioning of a _bitch_ as something positive or empowering, as suggested by the author of the introductory quote. The lexical definitions alone seem far from something anyone would wish to be called or refer to themselves as, and this suggests that the positive aspects of the word are found within its extra-linguistic qualities and associations rather than the lexical definitions.

According to Hughes (2006), _bitch_ has in modern English gone through some generalization, meaning that the word has gone from being a noun insulting only women to also include

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¹ Notable here is that the _Urban Dictionary_ is not a dictionary regulated by any linguistic governing body but rather an online source to which users can supply their own definitions and have them voted as good or bad by other users. The definitions chosen are the top two considered relevant for this study and have 11 787 and 12 145 positive votes respectively, listing them as the 3rd and 4th best definitions. This source has been included in this study due to being a usage-based authority.
application to men as well as unpleasant or difficult situations, places and complaints. Further, it can be used as a verb, with the meaning of complaining, criticizing or whining. Additionally, Hughes states that “a ‘shift to opposite’ is also apparent in that bitching and bitchin’ can be used to mean ‘very good, wonderful or excellent’, a sense recorded from about 1957” (p. 24). This “shift to opposite” is precisely what the introductory quote suggests about bitch as a noun referring to women. This could be a sign of an ongoing reappropriation; an attempt of the actual or potential recipients of a slur to change the emotive meanings and associations connected to the term from negative to positive, as happened with the term queer. The noun originated as a term meaning to despise the queer’s distinctiveness, yet now it refers to celebrating that very distinctiveness (Galinsky, Groom, Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2003, p. 231).

1.2 Aim & research questions

The aim of this study is to analyse the current usage of the term bitch, by comparative analysis of its origin, historical use and more recent corpus data. This will be done by employing lexical semantics, analysing the semantic prosody and semantic change of bitch. The main research questions in this study are as follows:

(1) How has the meaning and use of bitch developed into its present-day usage?
(2) Which are the top collocates of bitch?
(3) How do the adjective collocates of bitch modify the meaning of the noun?
(4) Do any of the collocates suggest an ongoing reappropriation and in what way?

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Lexical semantics & corpus linguistics

Lexical semantics studies the meaning relations words have “with each other and the meaning relations that words have with extra-linguistic reality” (Jackson, 1988, p. 247). That is, there is more to words than their lexical definition; the relationship they have with other words and the world of language outside linguistics, so called extra-linguistics, play a large part in
determining what they truly mean. Extra-linguistic aspects are associated meanings, such as nurse being typically associated with women rather than men, speaker attitude, meaning whether the speaker has a positive or negative attitude in the discourse and the speaker’s intention; what the speaker is attempting to accomplish with the words used. One of the methodologies used to investigate these meanings and qualities is usage-based corpus linguistics, in which large amounts of authentic language data is empirically analysed to learn about the meanings and use of language (Stubbs, 2002, p. 20). The central aim of corpus linguistics is to learn more about language and gain understanding of how the language works (Lindquist, 2009, p. 1). Corpus linguistics is particularly useful for keeping track of language development over time, and since any results can be verified by another user performing the same search, it is considered highly reliable (Lindquist 2009, p. 9; Stubbs 2002, p. 50).

2.1.1 Collocates

A collocate is a word which tends to appear in conjunction with another word, and this syntagmatic relation is called a collocation. In corpus linguistics, the basic assumption is that frequent collocations are linguistically significant (Stubbs, 2002, p. 29). Famous linguist Alan Cruse (2004, p. 99) quotes William Haas as saying “Don’t look for the meaning–look for the use” in explaining that collocates can shed light on both the lexical and contextual meaning of a word. Michael Stubbs (2002) describes the methodology and principle of collocate analysis as the “description of speaker attitude and discourse function” (p. 88), meaning that the attitude of the speaker as well as the intended meaning of the discourse can be determined from which words are used in it. Using undergo as an example, he presents results of 1,205 occurrences of undergo in the Cobuild 1995b corpus, with the top 20 collocates listed by frequency. For example, surgery occurs in a collocation with undergo 108 times, and test in the singular occurs in the same manner 41 times.

\[
\text{undergo 1,205 < surgery 108, tests 67, treatment 62, change 53, training 43, test 41, medical 40, before 37, changes 35, operation 34, women 31, forced 26, further 25, testing 25, major 24, examination 23, extensive 21, heart 20, required 19, transformation 17>}
\]

With this example Stubbs shows that to undergo something is typically to involuntarily (forced, required) go through something serious (major, extensive) and unpleasant, often a medical procedure (surgery, operation).
2.1.3 Semantic prosody

One of the analytic concepts used within lexical semantics is semantic prosody. Semantic prosody describes how words which in themselves may seem neutral can be shown to be perceived as positive or negative through collocates and therefore express the user’s attitude towards and intention with the discourse. Continuing Stubbs’ example of undergo, the collocates indicate that if someone says they are to undergo something, the utterance can be interpreted as the speaker having a non-positive attitude towards the coming event. However, this is not the entirety of the meaning of undergo, as it can also be used in other, positive contexts, e.g. in conjunction with the collocates transformation and change, which could indicate personal or other development and evolution. However, the considerable majority of the lexical variations of undergo are those of something negative, involuntary, uncomfortable and serious. Hence, undergo in use shows properties that are in no way conveyed by its lexical definition, and its collocates can be said to add additional, extra linguistic meaning to the word. Thus, one could even go so far as to claiming that the cultural associations and extra-linguistic qualities of a word are of equal if not greater importance than its lexical meaning when determining how it should be properly used: “sometimes these ‘emotive’ overtones have been more important in a word’s use than the denotation” (Jackson, 1988, p. 59). However, the connotations, or personal and emotional associations, of a word vary between language users and are often thought of as subjective as they convey attitude and intention, but not fact. For instance, the use of super conveys the opinion of the speaker about something, but super itself has little denotational meaning (Stubbs, 2002, pp. 34-35). The analyses often lead to many hidden associations in language being found. As an example, Stubbs (2002) gives his own study of the lemma CAUSE, which had only words with unpleasant meanings amongst its 50 most frequent collocates, showing very clearly that the semantic pattern “(‘bad things get caused’), which is realized by considerable lexical variation” (p. 47).

2.2 Semantic change

Semantic change is the evolution of word usage. This evolution may lead to a meaning drastically different from the original one or a word acquiring additional meanings while
retaining the original one (Semantic change, 2017; Wijaya & Yeniterzi, 2011). For example, the word *egregious* originally denoted something distinguished or excellent. Then a little over a century into its use it started being used in an ironic sense, which eventually led to the meaning changing completely and consistently, and since the late 1600’s it has predominately meant something bad or flagrant (*The Online Etymological Dictionary* [ETY]; OED). Stern (1931) describes semantic change as well as semantic stability as something completely natural and normal. This relationship between change and stability is challenged when a word is used to express a new meaning. Should it happen once, by a single individual, this means nothing to the language; were this the case, no one would ever know what any word meant as each individual language user would define every word for themselves. This represents semantic stability. However, once a new meaning of a word is used repeatedly by many language users, making the incidental use a habit, a permanent connection with the new meaning is established and thus semantic change occurs (pp. 163-164). Stern describes seven classes of sense change; however, as this study aims to analyse the sense change of *bitch*, only the senses deemed applicable to this noun’s sense change will be discussed.

Nomination is described as semantic change through a transfer, in which a word for something is intentionally transferred from one source meaning to another by metaphoric extension (Stern, 1930, p. 167). Traugott (1989) concurs that that metaphoric processes are major factors in semantic change and describes this as using a concrete meaning to describe an abstract one, applying selected parts of the identity from the source term to the target term to convey the speaker’s attitude (pp. 34, 49, 51). This was done with *bitch*, i.e. the erratic behaviour of a dog in heat was applied to human women (Hughes, 2006, p. 24).

Further, Stern (1930) described substitution as sense changes due to extra-linguistic causes, described as “cultural factors, which lie altogether outside language and the speech activity. Language registers only the change” (p.166). The noun *ship*, he argues, may have had unknown meanings in an era before the invention of the various sorts of ships used today, and will undoubtedly gather new meaning in the future as new types of ships are invented. The meaning instead tends to be based on the language user’s “subjective belief state/attitude towards the proposition” (Traugott, 1989, p. 35). There are several consequences of sense change, one of which is pejorative or ameliorative development, meaning loss or increase in quality respectively. Approximately a third of the pejorative changes seen in language are due to some form of human or social prejudice, which has “deformed the meaning of many
words” (Ullman, 1962, p. 232). For instance, the Latin villanius, meaning “inhabitant of a farm (villa)” has in English developed into the pejorative term villain. Ameliorative developments typically generate less attention than pejorative ones and “may come about by a simple association of ideas” (Ullman, 1962, pp. 232-233), and due to social factors. An example is the Latin minister, which meant “attendant”, but with the social status religion held, the sense of minister in English – servant of the Lord – experienced ameliorative development (Ullman, 1962, p. 234; ETY).

2.2.1 Reappropriation

Reappropriation is “the phenomenon whereby a stigmatized group re-values an externally imposed label by self-consciously referring to itself in terms of that label” (Galinsky et al., 2003, p. 221), meaning that a pejorative term used to label a group starts being used by the group itself in a positive sense. Imposing a derogatory label “can serve to strengthen and justify inequities in status, keeping the labelled person in a subordinate position” (Galinsky et al., 2003, p. 222), meaning that the slur functions as a tool of oppression, creating stigma around the labelled group. Derogatory labelling reduces the person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3), and summoning stigma by name-calling, suggesting that the stigmatized group has (or is believed or perceived as having) characteristics devalued in a particular social context, is often strategically successful. However, as both stigma and the meaning of the labels depend on context (Galinsky et al., 2003, pp. 223-226), altering the context allows the meaning of the label to be negotiated.

Using the label as a means of self-reference can function as a form of empowerment, even if only symbolically. For example, the term queer originated as a deliberately offensive term for the gay community, but as proud members of the gay community started using the term about themselves in the 1990’s, refusing to acknowledge the term as demeaning, the prejudicial functions of the term were undermined. Through this reappropriation, the distinctive implications of homosexuality in the word queer were not disputed, but the connotative meaning was. The feature of non-conformity which had been the core of the demeaning intention of the term, the exception from the heterosexual norm, was instead asserted as a positive exceptionality, something unique to be celebrated (Galinsky et al., 2003, pp. 231-234). With queer, this positive non-conformity and exceptionality has contributed to the
present-day meaning of the word as an umbrella term for several sexual and gender minorities.

2.3 Swearing

The concept of profanity and swearing has played a large part in the establishment of non-imperial, non-colonial American English. Clearly distinct from the Puritans and their plain and humble speech, profanity was a factor in the American people establishing their own linguistic freedom and identity: “the early Americans showed that spacious disregard for linguistic nicety which has characterized their descendants ever since” (Hughes, 1991, p. 166). Mohr (2013) picks up on this and describes the claims of Brophy and Partridge, who in 1930 stated that swearing during WW1 was so common that the use of fucking merely constituted “a warning that a noun is coming” (p. 228). Further, Hughes (1991) states that during the 1960’s, the “floodgates opened” for swearing (p. 200) and through the various political movements of the time, people would through profanity distance themselves from the Puritan values and language use, further intensifying the traditional American linguistic tradition. Swearing was becoming a political tool and this radical shift in acceptance and public usage cemented swearing as a part of everyday language. According to Mohr (2013), a 2005 study showed that swearing increased the believability of a statement; the same statement devoid of the swear words was considered less credible by the informants (p. 186). Hughes (1991) summarises the historical journey of swearing: “the profusion of foul language and swearing in modern times represents the ultimate triumph of informal language over formal, a development which can be paralleled in many areas of social change” (p. 256).

Stapleton (2003) states that women engaging in swearing are actively “transgressing cultural stereotypes and expectations of femininity” (p. 22). Further, the traditional feminist view is that swearing, as all language, stems from a patriarchal standpoint and that a prevalence of expressions of femininity and female anatomy exists (take for instance pussy for a weak or feeble person) and these terms of femininity have a stronger pejorative effect than those based on male characteristics or anatomy; compare bitch and pig, for instance (Hughes 1991, p. 207). According to Hughes (1991), the feminine application has always been predominant in abusive language, a so called “feminization of the monstrous”, suggesting that the pejorative semantics of feminine terms are considerable” (pp. 220-223). Further, masculine traits are
often used as compliments, such as someone “having balls” as an expression of them being courageous (Hughes, 1991, p. 209). This lack of negative connotations for swear words based on male body parts, such as *bollocks*, is confirmed by Stapleton (2003), who also quotes Fine and Johnson’s “one type of obscenity that remains powerful and taboo” statement regarding vaginally related swear words. (pp. 26-27). Both linguists state that plenty of previous research has shown that swearing has always been considered a typically male practice which women do not partake in, and that swearing in the vicinity of a woman is impolite, with women swearing being completely unacceptable (Hughes, 2006, p. 502; Stapleton 2003, p. 22). However, one of the consequences of the feminist movement has been a more liberal attitude towards swearing, particularly among women (Hughes, 2006, p. 509). Simone de Beauvoir said that language and thus also swearing “is inherited from a masculine society, and it contains many male prejudices (...) Women simply have to steal the instrument (...) Steal it and use it for their own good” (Jardine, 1979, pp. 229-230). Regarding the recent use of *bitch*, this stealing “the instrument” is highly applicable.

2.4 Etymology of the noun *bitch*

Etymology can be described as the origin, history and evolution of a word. By analysing where a word originates and how it has been used in comparison to how it is currently used, one can gain knowledge of the evolution and organic development of the word within the language. Simplified, etymology is the study of how a word has functioned and what its possibly different meanings or functions have been throughout its lifetime.

The noun *bitch* has been present in the English language from ca the year 1000 in the sense of a female dog; as a contemptuous term for women since approximately the year 1400 (*ETY*). The early application of the term to what was considered promiscuous or sensual women was thus that of a suggested behaviour like that of a female dog in heat (Hughes, 2006, p. 24).

Looking at more recent developments, the term has steadily increased in usage during the last 30 years of the 20th century and has since its appearance in *The BITCH Manifesto* by Jo Freeman (1970) stayed a common word in the English language. *The BITCH Manifesto* is a 1970 feminist text considered an early example of language reclamation by a social movement, and stated that the slur *bitch*:
(...) is a popular derogation to put down uppity women that was created by man and adopted by women. Like the term "nigger," "bitch" serves the social function of isolating and discrediting a class of people who do not conform to the socially accepted patterns of behaviour. (p. 5)

Notable is also that the use of *bitch* on American television tripled from 1998 to 2008, growing from 431 uses to 1,277 uses on prime-time television shows. Additionally, the number of television shows in which the word was used increased from 103 to 685. Thus, whilst the 1998 shows seem to have used it more frequently per episode, the overall spread of the word had increased in 2008 (Wyatt, 2009). In 2012, the word was even officially un-bleeped on American television, which could indicate that it is actually losing its swearword status (McNamara, 2012). A 2007 song by pop star Britney Spears, the epitome of the all-American girl, featured the word, another indication of the word going mainstream and gaining general acceptance (Pardes, 2014). One of the reasons for this usage explosion could be the echoes of the initial reappropriation attempt by Freeman (1970). In 1996, *Bitch Magazine* was founded and in a 2006 interview, co-founder Andi Zeisler stated:

> When we chose the name, we were thinking, well, it would be great to reclaim the word “bitch” for strong, outspoken women, much the same way that “queer” has been reclaimed by the gay community. That was very much on our minds, the positive power of language reclamation. (Solomon, 2006)

The timeline of *Bitch Magazine* coincides with the increased commercial media use of *bitch*. The emerge of the magazine itself is most likely not the reason; however, these two events occurring at the same time indicates that there was at the time indeed some form of reappropriation and change in language status for the word *bitch.*
3. Method & material

For the analysis of the material collected for this study, an approach of corpus based linguistics, lexical semantics and semantic preference and semantic prosody was employed. The lexical meaning and origin of the term were retrieved from several dictionaries, to ensure a representative result: The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), The Urban Dictionary and The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. To further investigate the original meaning and possible evolution of the term and its usage, etymological information was sought and collected from The Online Etymology Dictionary (ETY), the outcome of which has already been presented in the background section. In addition to the etymological information, a corpus search for the evolution of the usage of the word in English was performed in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) for the historical use of the word since the 1820’s. To verify the statistical data from COHA, the Google Books corpus was consulted. The so-called Google Books Ngram Viewer searches all the books available at Google Books (over 25 million titles as per October 2015) for instances of the search term. The corpus provides a search range between the years 1500 and 2008. Together, the corpora yield a theoretical time frame for this study from 1500 to February 2017. However, the Google Ngram data relevant to this essay was restricted to that of 1900 onward. This extensive background information was then used as a foundation of the analysis of the current use of *bitch*.

As analysing lexical definitions and past usage gives only a limited insight into the current usage of the word or its contextual meaning, examples of the word in context were required to analyse the lexical surroundings of the term. For this purpose, the collocates of the noun *bitch* were analysed. The collocates were retrieved from the two largest online corpora available, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), consisting of 520 million words, and The NOW Corpus (NOW), containing over 4 billion words. All the data available in COCA is of authentic language produced by native speakers and consists of a variety of texts, such as newspapers, magazines, fiction, academia and transcriptions of spoken language. NOW contains data of actual language use as well, though focuses on newspapers and magazines, meaning that the two corpora differ in content; NOW has less varied content when compared to COCA, yet could be argued to contain data more relevant to actual everyday language use.
Two searches for the attribute adjective collocates of the noun *bitch* were performed, i.e. for the adjectives immediately in front of the sought noun to ensure that only collocates describing the actual focus word appeared, once sorted by frequency and once by relevance. The frequency search was restricted to collocations with a Mutual Information score of 5 or higher. Mutual Information score is a score calculated by an algorithm in the corpus, and an MI score of three or higher is stated to indicate that the words have semantic bonding, and that they tend to appear in juxtaposition. The higher the MI score, the stronger the semantic connection and the more likely the words are to appear with one another. Simplified, collocations which occur in both searches can be said to be specifically significant. The relevance search was set to include collocates with a minimum frequency of 10. This search restriction was applied in order to ensure that the search results were relevant and to avoid unnecessary manual sorting. To put it simply, collocations which occur in both searches can be said to be specifically significant. Results appearing with high frequency may sometimes be discounted as relevant collocations, e.g. when it comes to articles or other function words which say little or nothing about contextual meaning. Likewise, collocates of extremely high relevance may be misspelled words, or words which appear only in a single occurrence in connection with the sought word, etc.

Due to the *COCA* search results being quite limited, with the relevance search cut short at 16 collocates due to the rigorous search restrictions, as well as the corpus only stretching to 2015, an additional search was performed in *NOW*. *NOW* is continuously updated and has results from 2010 up to the day prior to the search being performed, and as the present-day use of *bitch* is the focus of this study, both corpora were deemed necessary to ensure a representative result. The *NOW* search was performed in the exact same manner as the *COCA* search and the results thus consist of the top twenty collocates, restricted by frequency and relevance.

The results are displayed in tables and sorted into columns according to frequency, relevance and MI score. The frequency column represents the number of instances the collocate word appears in conjunction with the sought word, and the *All* column shows how many times the collocating word appears in total throughout the corpus. Following is the percentage column, indicating the share of a word functioning as a collocate of *bitch* in relation to the overall number of occurrences of that word. Further, the corpora also provide whole sections of texts in which the search term was found, such as segments of articles etc., some of which were analysed to gain further insight into the current use of the term in context. As the appearance
of *bitch* in a positive sense predominantly seems to appear in music, contemporary song lyrics containing the term *bitch* in conjunction with the collocates modifying the term in a reappropriative sense were analysed to support the corpus findings. All such lyrics were retrieved online from various music lyric sites.

4. Results & analysis

4.1 Historical developments

The total number of appearances of *bitch* as a noun in *COHA* is 3518 over 19 decades. In the beginning of the 18th century, the term *bitch* was not commonly used as an insult to women. Almost all the appearances from the 1800’s refer to a dog, with some occurrences of the slur *son of a bitch*; in fact, there is only one mention of *bitch* referring to a woman prior to 1914, namely in *Wuthering Heights* from 1848. However, after the first two decades of the 20th century, the use drastically shifted toward the derogatory meaning of *bitch*. This drastic increase in the use of the term occurred, perhaps not quite coincidentally, with the age of women’s suffrage. The 1920’s saw the meaning in reference to dogs manifested in 61.5% of the occurrences in *COHA*, and in the decades that followed, the use of the term with its new pejorative meaning increased whereas the original canine-related meaning became practically obsolete. In the 1930’s, 44 out of 178 total occurrences of *bitch* referred to a female animal, making up a total of 24.7%. In the 1950’s, this had dropped to 7.3%, and in the 1970’s to 2.3%. In the 1990’s, only 7 out of 519 occurrences of *bitch* referred to dogs – making up a mere 1.3%
Table 1. Frequency of the noun *bitch* in COHA per decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Size of section</th>
<th>Per million</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>18.6</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>178</td>
<td>24.6</td>
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</table>

To confirm the frequency numbers, the Google Books corpus was consulted.

Figure 1. Historical use of the noun *bitch* between 1900 and 2008 in Google Books Ngram Viewer. The percentages on the left side of the column represent the share of the hits in comparison to the total number of words available in the Google Books corpus.

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Note that the COHA data refers to the average per million of the entire decade. This could have been further analysed per year; however, such an extensive analysis was deemed outside the scope of this study.
Figure 1 lists the use of *bitch* in English between the years 1900 and 2008. The 1960 occurrences of *bitch* made up approximately 0.0002% of the total number of words in Google Books, and in 2008, *bitch* accounted for 0.005% of the total amount of words in the corpus. With a clear connection between the women’s rights movements of the 1920’s and both increase in use and shift in meaning of the slur, it is not surprising to see such a development repeated in the 1960’s and the midst of the second-wave feminist movement.

After the ratification of the 19th amendment of the US constitution in August of 1920, granting women the right to vote, the derogatory meaning of the word came to dominate the use of it to the extent that the literal, original meaning of the word, i.e. that of a female animal, became scarce in use, with several euphemisms for the mother of puppies emerging (Hughes, 2006, p. 24). During the second wave of increased usage during the late 1960’s onwards, the word took on a new connotative meaning as a term of self-empowerment.

Freeman (1970) described in *The BITCH Manifesto* that

(...) a Bitch is a threat to the social structures which enslave women and the social values which justify keeping them in their place. She is living testimony that woman's oppression does not have to be, and as such raises doubts about the validity of the whole social system. Because she is a threat she is not taken seriously. Instead, she is dismissed as a deviant. Men create a special category for her in which she is accounted at least partially human, but not really a woman. (p. 6)

The acknowledgement of the derogatory nature of the word and how it had up until this point been used to segregate is an interesting factor in the use of the term today, and the lexical meaning of the word as presented in the introduction. The manifesto’s statements of women’s oppression and the derogatory labelling as mentioned by Goffman (1963, P. 3) can easily be applied to the suffragettes, as well as the women of today not conforming to a male set norm. Freeman also distinguishes between *bitch* in the traditional pejorative meaning and a *Bitch* with a capital *B*, seemingly to differentiate the nature and characteristics of whom she speaks from those imposed by the use of *bitch* as a derogatory term. This is an indication of an attempt of reappropriation. In the words of Galinsky et al. (2003), “reappropriation through self-labelling may be as much a marker of increased status as a cause of it” (p. 249), so the use of the term for the own group creates a sense of belonging, bringing the non-conformities together and increasing their self-esteem as well as fuelling the fire in them burning for
change. An example of this is the 2012 song *You Call me a Bitch Like it’s a Bad Thing*, by the band Halestorm, in which the recipient of the slur wears the word like a badge of pride, stating “I love when you call me a bitch like it’s a bad thing” (Hale, Calitri & Briley, 2012). The lyrics declare that the recipient not only refuses to acknowledge the term as a slur but also seems to enjoy the label, further distancing the word from its original derogatory sense and hurtful intention, which is indicative of reappropriation.

4.2 Collocates

A search for *bitch* as a noun in *COCA* yielded 5,100 hits. How many of these refer to a woman rather than a man, place, female dog or other is indeterminable by such a search. *Bitch* is used to refer to men, such as in the term *son of a bitch*[^4], by which the male recipient is insulted by proxy of his mother. Thus, the insult is aimed at the man but does not refer directly to him, but rather his female parent. The insult originally meant “the son and heir of a mongrel bitch” (Hughes, 1991, p. 166), implying that the recipient was an illegitimate child of a woman considered more impure and indecent than a whore (Hughes, 2006, p. 24), something which in the past was a social stigma. Today, the use of son of a bitch is more commonplace and has practically lost its derogatory sense, often being used as a term of endearment used between people who respect one another greatly (Hughes, 1991, pp. 168-169). *Bitch* can also refer to items and places, as in *math is a bitch* (where *bitch* represents a difficult task or hurdle), or *let’s blow this bitch* (with *bitch* representing a physical place), it is difficult to determine which of these is the most common. Thus, a closer look was taken at the adjective collocates of the noun.

4.3 Top collocates of *bitch*

In both the *COCA* and the *NOW* search, 16 of the top collocates are exact matches in the frequency and relevance searches, albeit not all in the same order. The results of these searches are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Cross-referenced, all the collocates of both *COCA* searches and all the collocates in the *NOW* frequency search appear at least twice. Both these

[^3]: Search string: *bitch_nn* (i.e. POS noun.ALL).

[^4]: *Son of a bitch* occurs 1,355 times in *COCA*, representing a third of the total number of occurrences of *bitch*. 

15
results indicate that the collocates are not only common but semantically bonded with *bitch*, and thus can be considered meaningful for determining the meaning of the noun *bitch*. Notable is also that when looking at either the frequency or the MI scores in each table, collocates present in one but missing in the other can be deemed to be precisely outside of the search scope (top 20 hits). For instance, the collocate *cold hearted*, place 2 of relevance in *NOW* yet not visible in any other search, has an MI score of 12.36 and an absolute frequency of 10 occurrences. Since the collocate with the lowest frequency among the top 20, *raging*, has a frequency of 16, this lets *cold-hearted* fall outside of the list. The same applies to relevance collocates 4 and 7, *frigid* and *bossy* (22 and 25 in the *NOW* frequency search).

Table 2. Adjective collocates of *bitch* in COCA sorted by frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>Frequency as a collocate of <em>bitch</em></th>
<th>Total frequency in corpus</th>
<th>% of total frequency as a collocate of <em>bitch</em></th>
<th>Mutual Information score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>little</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>375,851</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>old</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>234,539</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>stupid</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>16,466</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>fucking</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8,867</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>9.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>crazy</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28,578</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>6.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>real</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>162,100</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>rich</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>44,637</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>201,438</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>3.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>236,137</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>rude</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4,063</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>8.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>dumb</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6,414</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>8.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>fat</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>50,025</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>skinny</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6,169</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>7.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>selfish</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3,217</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>8.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>tough</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42,483</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11,034</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>6.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>cold</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>66,642</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>heartless</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>10.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>goddamned</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>9.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>goddamn</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3,817</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>7.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Adjective collocates of *bitch* in *NOW* sorted by frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>Frequency as a collocate of <em>bitch</em></th>
<th>Total frequency in corpus</th>
<th>% of total frequency as a collocate of <em>bitch</em></th>
<th>Mutual Information score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>little</em></td>
<td>232</td>
<td>1,386,517</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>5.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>bad</em></td>
<td>82</td>
<td>654,844</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>5.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>white</em></td>
<td>67</td>
<td>718,535</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>5.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>stupid</em></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68,947</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>8.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>crazy</em></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>117,334</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>7.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>fat</em></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>112,437</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>7.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>basic</em></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>277,477</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>6.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>skinny</em></td>
<td>58</td>
<td>17,563</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>10.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>fucking</em></td>
<td>56</td>
<td>19,090</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>10.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>dumb</em></td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23,911</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>9.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>sexy</em></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43,894</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>8.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>evil</em></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>101,371</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>7.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>unapologetic</em></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4,354</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>11.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>rich</em></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>249,670</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>5.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>inner</em></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>72,142</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>7.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>baddest</em></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1,172</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>12.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td><em>ugly</em></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>55,582</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>6.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td><em>nasty</em></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>37,698</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>7.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td><em>dirty</em></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70,023</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>6.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td><em>raging</em></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19,598</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>8.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two frequency searches show a result of 10 collocates shared; in other words, half of the search results in each corpus are mirrored in the other. *Little* is the most frequent collocate by far in both searches; however, as *little* is a very versatile and often used adjective with over 375,000 occurrences in *COCA* and almost 1.4 million occurrences in *NOW*, the 125 and 232 shared respectively with *bitch* make up only 0.25% of the total occurrences in the corpora⁵.

Tables 4 and 5 show the results of the searches sorted by relevance. Here, a similar pattern is visible: 8 of the collocates are present in both corpora. However, as the *COCA* search was cut

---

⁵ The mean value of 0.2% and 0.3% is 0.25%.
short at 16 items due to the search restrictions, this is half of the collocates all the same. As the two corpora are of significantly different size, such a high similarity in results is a good indication of a representative result. As the use of the word has increased significantly in the past few years, the fact that the corpora cover different time periods could partly explain the differences in results.

Table 4. Adjective collocates of *bitch* in *COCA* sorted by relevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>Frequency as a collocate of <em>bitch</em></th>
<th>Total frequency in corpus</th>
<th>% of total frequency as a collocate of <em>bitch</em></th>
<th>Mutual Information score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>fucking</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8,867</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>9.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>rude</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4,063</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>8.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>selfish</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3,217</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>8.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>stupid</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>16,466</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>dumb</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6,414</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>8.20</td>
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<td>6,169</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>7.99</td>
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<tr>
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<td>crazy</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28,578</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>6.92</td>
</tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11,034</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>6.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>rich</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>44,637</td>
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<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>fat</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>50,025</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>little</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>375,851</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>tough</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42,483</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>old</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>234,539</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>real</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>162,100</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>4.01</td>
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<td>black</td>
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<td>201,438</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>3.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>236,137</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

6 The *COCA* relevance search only displayed 16 results after the restrictions set for the corpus search.
Table 5. Adjective collocates of *bitch* in *NOW* sorted by relevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>Frequency as a collocate of <em>bitch</em></th>
<th>Total frequency in corpus</th>
<th>% of total frequency as a collocate of <em>bitch</em></th>
<th>Mutual Information score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>baddest</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1,172</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>12.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>cold-hearted</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>697</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>12.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>unapologetic</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4,354</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>11.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>bossy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2,097</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>10.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>skinny</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>17,563</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>10.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>fucking</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>19,090</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>10.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>frigid</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4,716</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>9.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>dumb</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23,911</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>9.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>stupid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68,947</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>8.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>sexy</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43,894</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>8.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>raging</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19,598</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>8.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>fat</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>112,437</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>7.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>selfish</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25,095</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>7.67</td>
</tr>
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<td>crazy</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>117,334</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>7.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>nasty</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>37,698</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>7.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>inner</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>72,142</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>7.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>evil</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>101,371</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>7.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>55,582</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>6.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>dirty</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70,023</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>6.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>basic</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>277,447</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>6.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the collocate search thus show that there is great agreement between the two corpora as to which adjectives occur with *bitch*, even though there are also significant differences; for instance, the most relevant *NOW* collocate *baddest* does not appear at all in the *COCA* results. Further, the collocates seem to refer primarily to appearance and bad behaviour or characteristics. There are a few traits of positivity, though: they occur in *rich*, referring to heightened social status, *sexy*, describing attraction, *tough*, indicating tenacity, and *inner*, suggesting self-restraint. There is one instance of an intensifier (*fucking*) and slang (*baddest*). As this study focuses on the use of *bitch* in the sense of reappropriation, collocates such as *little, old, ugly, fat, stupid, skinny, white, black* and *dumb* have been excluded from
deeper analysis. These adjectives do indeed describe the present-day derogative usage of *bitch*, and testify to the speaker's perceptions regarding the age, level of intelligence and appearance of the *bitch* referred to. Lastly, the intensifying adjective *fucking* has been omitted from analysis as it does not add anything other than emphasis to the noun; the semantics of *bitch* itself remain unaltered. It could of course be argued that the use of a swear word such as *fuck* reinforces the severity of *bitch*; however, whether *bitch* is a term of force or not is not argued in this study, and as *fucking* is one of the most versatile swear words in English and, as an adjective, applicable in both positive and negative contexts, it is not deemed to alter the semantic properties of *bitch* enough to warrant further analysis in this study. Thus, the analysis of the collocates has been limited to those considered relevant for determining any signs of reappropriation.

4.4 Analysis of collocates related to reappropriation

The collocates considered particularly interesting for the purpose of studying the word’s reappropriation have here been divided into four groups for analysis: Slang, Sexuality, Independence, and Monsterization.

4.4.1 Slang: *bad*, *baddest*, *basic*, *real*

The NOW corpus search yielded high numbers for the slang term *bad* and superlative *baddest* in collocations with *bitch*, as well as for *real* and *basic*. *Real* and *basic* are classified as slang terms in this study based on the context in which they occurred as collocates of *bitch* in the corpora, and this definition will be further elaborated on in the analysis. COCA also shows high numbers for the slang term *real*. The difference in collocates between the two corpora could be explained by their difference in context, with NOW having more magazine and current event data, as well as the search restrictions. As COCA contains more academic and formal data, it is plausible that slang is less frequent. *Bad bitch* and *baddest bitch* do occur in COCA, though yielding only 4 and 3 hits respectively7. *Bad bitch* would at first seem a negative term, as *bad* traditionally refers to something unpleasant, taking the comparative form *worse* and the superlative *worst*. However, *bad* in this instance does not correspond to

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7 *Bad* and *baddest* rate 29 and 42 respectively in frequency with MI scores 1.87 and 10.74 respectively (COCA).
the standard lexical definition as the antonym of *good*, but rather the slang definition commonly used in popular culture, described as ‘excellent, formidable, determined’ and used to show approval (Longman; *OED*). We are thus dealing with two meanings of *bad*, the first being the traditional *bad* referring to something ‘unfavourable, inadequate, not good’ etc., with the comparative *worse* and superlative *worst*. The second, more recently emerged meaning of *bad* as in ‘tough, not to be trifled with, worthy of awe’ etc., takes the comparative form *badder* and superlative *baddest*. The newer addition is not typically considered Standard English, yet is quite commonly used in present-day English. Consider the explicit definition conveyed in the lyrics of hip-hop legends Run-D.M.C.’s 1986 song "Peter Piper": "He's the big bad wolf in your neighborhood / not bad meaning bad, but bad meaning good" (McDaniels & Simmons, 1985). According to the *OED*, the use of *bad* as a slang word with positive connotations first appeared in the mid 1900’s. However, the use of it was scarce until the 1980’s, when hip-hop music popularized it, as in the above song lyrics. In conclusion, *bad* has evolved from its original meaning of something of poor quality or morality to also include connotations of admiration, positive non-conformity and street credibility. In conjunction with *bitch*, this second, positive meaning is predominant. Out of the 84 occurrences of the collocation *bad bitch* in the *NOW* corpus, only 6 were not of the slang type, making 93% of the hits refer to something positive.

When comparing the frequency of *baddest* on its own with *badder* in conjunction with *bitch*, it is apparent that this collocation is a quite recent phenomenon. Exploring its existence in *NOW*, there are no occurrences prior to 2012 and in COCA only three in total. Figure 2 shows no usage at all until 1980, with a dramatic and consistent increase since the late 1990’s. Generally considered one of the first occurrences of *baddest bitch* is artist Trina’s 1999 song “Da Baddest Bitch” (Pardes, 2014).
Figure 2. Timeline of the use of baddest *bitch* in Google Books Ngram Viewer.

In comparison, *basic* is often used as a counterpart to *baddest* in conjunction with *bitch*. *Basic* is used to modify *bitch* to mean someone not standing out of the general mass, as exemplified in example 1:

(1) the increasingly popular term "basic bitch," an epithet used to describe young women who embrace, with unapologetic zeal, anything and everything mainstream (*NOW*)

and in the 2016 song *Bad Bitch* by female rapper Dreezy:

(2) Bad bitch/I'm slaying all these hoes, I'm a savage/Ain't with no basic shit, I'm not your average (...) Got her own and a crib, now that’s a bad bitch (Sledge, 2016)

Google Ngram shows no findings for *basic bitch*, which indicates that this term is not present in any literature from before 2008. From looking at the corpus hits, it seems that the collocation *basic bitch* represents very recent usage, with no appearances in either corpus prior to 2012.

*Real* is in this context used as a slang term for ‘strong and powerful’, much like *baddest*. Note that there is no mention of a ‘fake’ *bitch* among any of the collocates, implying that *real* is not used in the sense of ‘factual’; it is a reinforcing positive adjective much like *bad*. Defined as “The action of being true to the code of ethics of one's self, culture, and environment” (Urban Dictionary), *real* as in for instance *keeping it real* doesn’t mean that other people live pretend lives; it testifies to the authenticity of the life choices by the *real* person. In this instance, as suggested by the 2012 song *Real Bitch*, the term manifests independence and success:

(3) Um, a real bitch/She has to have/Her own motherfucking vehicle
And of course she paying for that motherfucker cause she a real bitch (Bennet, Long & Turner, 2012)
Thus, the collocates in this section indicate a positive use of *bitch*, which confirms that there is an ongoing reappropriation.

4.4.2 Sexuality: *sexy, dirty, nasty, frigid*

As *bitch* originated from describing a dog in heat, the female canine fertility period, and was used to metaphorically refer to a sexually active woman, for good or bad, it is not surprising to find several collocates referring to sexuality among the top collocates: *sexy, nasty, and dirty* are present in both the frequency and relevance top 20 of the *NOW* search, with *frigid* also appearing in the relevance search, left out from the frequency table due to its low frequency of 13. These four collocates appear in COCA but in very low numbers. Despite this, they all have an MI suggesting semantic bonding and thus confirm that the *NOW* search results are representative.

*Sexy* suggests a positive aspect, namely desirability, as the following corpus examples illustrate:

(4) The sexy bitch understands and embraces the concept of sexual power and lets it fuel her confidence. But, more importantly, she brings that confidence to life outside of her bed (*COCA*)

(5) I turned to a female colleague and asked her whether she'd mind if I called her a sexy bitch every once in a while. She said she wouldn't if I really meant it. (*COCA*)

(6) "You are one sexy bitch." Kerry grinned broadly and shut the door to Samantha's bedroom. She leaned back and folded her arms to get a better look at the bride. "Seriously, does Malcolm know how freaking lucky he is?"

(*COCA*)

Further, the collocation occurs in David Guetta’s 2009 song *Sexy Bitch*:

(7) I'm tryna find the words to describe this girl without being disrespectful

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8 *Dirty*: 6 occurrences, MI score 5.38, *sexy*: 3 occurrences, MI score 5.32, *nasty*: 2 occurrences, MI score 4.94, *frigid*: 1 occurrence, MI score 5.93
Damn girl/Damn who's a sexy bitch (Guetta, Tuinfort, Thiam, Sindres & Vee, 2009)

As the lyrics mention an attempt to describe a woman without being disrespectful and then deciding on *sexy bitch*, there is a strong indication that this is a positive term.

*Dirty* and *nasty* are traditionally pejorative words, though can as slang words function just like *bad*, and be used to convey sexual prowess. The Urban Dictionary describes *dirty bitch* as a woman who loves sex and enjoys having it, and a *nasty bitch* as a woman up for trying anything sexually. As female sexuality has traditionally been considered negative and shameful, hence the reference to a dog in heat, it should be of little surprise that these typically pejorative terms appear in conjunction with *bitch*, even if to describe something positive such as female sexual liberation. However, all the occurrences of both *nasty bitch* and *dirty bitch* in both corpora are in a derogatory sense, such as examples 8 and 9:

(8) Mr Evans said Spaven reacted furiously, calling her a “c***, dirty bitch and slag” *(NOW)*

(9) What's more, our Chyna sources say Tyga and his crew have been on a campaign to destroy her reputation, calling her a "drunk whore," "deadbeat mama" and "nasty bitch." *(NOW)*

However, in music, there seems to be a different use of the terms. Hip-hop artist Big Hooch illustrates the positive sense of *nasty bitch* in his 2010 song “Ughh (She Nasty)*:

(10) I got a fetish for a nasty bitch (...) Shit I love a nasty bitch, she a sex game crazy (...) If you a nasty bitch don’t be shame, do your thing/cause these stuck-up hoes got a lame sex game *(Johnston, 2010)*

And the 2011 song *Dirty Bitch* by Lady Tragik uses both *nasty* and *dirty* as positives:

(11) you want it bad you want my love gun so come here baby/be my nasty be my dirty dirty dirty bitch *(Carcagno, 2011)*

Meanwhile, *frigid* meaning ‘unable to get aroused sexually’ is similarly applied to women by rejected men; that is, an unwillingness to engage sexually with someone can lead the scorned party to deem the woman unable or unwilling with respect to any sexual engagement whatsoever. An example of this is found in *the corpus*:
(12) Hey, you're going in the wrong direction, the party's this way'. The woman keeps walking. At this point another team mate shouts, 'Fine frigid bitch, we don't want your gash anyway' (NOW)
as well as in 2013’s *Rap for Rejection* by singer Kate Nash:

(13) I'm a stupid whore/And a frigid bitch/Now can you make up your mind/And tell me which is which /Oh, now I get it/You think I'm ugly/Yeah, tell your friends/How you never wanted none of me (Nash, 2013)

This unwillingness to participate in sexual activities and the suggested frigidity may also be implied to be purposefully malicious, as the *bitch* using her sexuality as a weapon or a means of punishment or reward for men.

The collocates relating to sexuality, bar *frigid*, suggest an ongoing reappropriation, not only for the term *bitch* but perhaps the overall view on female sexuality. *Frigid* seems to be used as a slur for when a *bitch* simply does not yield her sexuality to a man, suggesting that she has a physical shortcoming or anomaly rather than free will. Thus, frigid itself may not indicate reappropriation, yet the contextual use in examples 12 and 13 indicates free will when selecting sexual partners rather than subordinately following requests, which is indicative of independence.

4.4.3 Independence: *bossy, unapologetic, selfish, tough, rich, inner*

The collocates *bossy, unapologetic, selfish, tough and rich* all manifest traits of independence and are typically not particularly malicious or negative traits. However, these traits, when found in women, are often what qualifies them as *bitches*. As an example, the following example implies that *tough* is a term applied to a woman refusing to be conquered or defeated:

(14) A lot of people think she's a tough bitch, but that's just because they're not used to being challenged. (*COCA*)
An interesting collocate is *bossy*, which is also known as “the PG-version of ‘bitch’” 9 (Pardes, 2014). Self-proclaimed bitch Nicki Minaj uses the collocate in describing self-reliant women in the 2013 song *My Nigga*:

(15) I just come through with a couple bossy bitches / They get money, too, they some “don’t cross me” bitches (K. Jackson, Jenkins & Lamar, 2013)

The ongoing *Ban Bossy* campaign in the US aims towards ending the use of the term *bossy* about assertive girls and encouraging girls to be leaders, as the campaign claims that studies have shown that girls fear being called *bossy* when showing initiative.

Musical artist Madonna, who released a song entitled *Unapologetic Bitch*, said in a 2015 interview that “If I say to you, ‘I’m a badass bitch’, I’m owning myself, I’m saying ‘I’m strong, I’m tough, and don’t mess with me’” (Grigoriadis, 2015). These traits of independence in association with the word *bitch* date back to the semantic change and labelling of the early 1900’s, where the participants of the suffragette movement were considered cruel and misandrist, as opposed to the present day, when women’s rights and liberties are established as human rights.

Similarly, *selfish* is a derogatory term in the corpora, particularly in conjunction with *bitch*. However, as example 16 shows, this alleged selfishness is actually often simply taking a stand for one’s own wishes:

(16) When Tripti, an active blogger, mentioned in one her [sic] blogs that she was keener to relocate to India than her husband, she got several hate mails saying that she was a selfish bitch; that she had no right to dominate her husband and that she was making him relocate when he didn’t want to. (*NOW*)

Note that the woman in the example had not forced or “dominated” her significant other to do anything; she merely expressed her own wishes and the alleged selfishness appears to be present only in the attitude of the people who sent the hate mail.

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9 “PG-version” refers to *PG*, short for ‘Parental Guidance Suggested’, a classification rating for movies applied by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). The rating indicates that the material is child friendly.
*Rich* is typically not considered a pejorative term, as it merely indicates wealth; however, the collocation *rich bitch* seems to indicate negativity. Most of the instances of the collocation in the corpora indicate jealousy and animosity, as in example 17:

(17) Martha Stewart has become the engine of enormous class antagonism. Everybody who hates rich people can dump on the rich bitch (*COCA*).

Interestingly, *rich* does not say so much about the properties of the *bitch* herself. The addition of *bitch* is what makes *rich* negative in this instance; the only negative aspect here seems to be the financial independence of a woman. Further, *rich bitch* constitutes a rhyme and could thus be appealing partly for the reason of sounding attractive. The aspect of wealth is found in *real bitch* as well, though in that case the financial aspect is combined with street credibility and a certain type of attitude and lifestyle; associating *bitch* with only wealth and not street credibility or success seems to make the connotation of *rich bitch* the opposite of that of *real bitch*.

Finally, the corpus examples of *inner* suggest that being a *bitch* is something natural as well as something one should not show; much like female sexuality. Examples 18 and 19 suggest a meaning linked to the collocation *tough bitch*, indicating tenacity, self-empowerment and strength:

(18) Once a woman embraces her inner bitch, Coffey says, it shifts power in her favor. She feels a lot more confident and better about herself. # Strong women can't be put off by people who complain they are intimidating. (*NOW*)

(19) Embracing your inner bitch "just means that you're taking power for yourself," she says. "It's very empowering". (*NOW*)

The collocates of independence suggest that the derogatory sense of *bitch* is still widely used, but also that the aspects and associations included in the derogatory sense are not completely negative.
4.4.4 Monsterization: evil, cold, cold-hearted, heartless, rude, crazy, raging, goddamn, goddamned

The corpora searches yielded several instances of collocates describing undesired traits. *Evil, cold, cold-hearted, heartless, rude, crazy, raging, goddamn* and *goddamned* all indicate a flawed or malicious character, as was the intention behind the use of *bitch* itself when the meaning changed into a derogatory slur. These collocates emerged in all four corpus searches and can thus be said to be of importance to the present-day use and semantics of *bitch*. As the introductory quote on page 1 stated that a cold, heartless bitch is “someone they will never be able to subjugate” (Dana), a collocation of *bitch* and any one of the adjectives *cold-hearted, cold or heartless* shows similarity to the group of collocates in the independence category: describing a person who will not be repressed or held down. However, the present group of collocates carries a strong sense of malice, indicating that the *bitch* has some intention of being the opposite of charitable rather than of being independent.

The collocates *cold-hearted, cold and heartless*, are particularly interesting for several reasons; not only do they refer to the person as having a dysfunctional or missing vital part of the anatomy, but also effectively de-humanise her. As Hughes (1991) states, there is a semantic link between the monstrous and the feminine, as “woman is categorized as something alien” (p. 221). He goes on to list examples of feminized evil with anatomically deformed traits, such as the siren, a seductive monster of woman merged with animal, the classic mermaid, as well as the *harpy*, “a fabulous monster, rapacious and filthy, having a woman’s face and a bird’s wings and claws” (p. 221).

Likewise, referring to a person as *cold*, particularly a woman, is a manner of describing her as a non-woman, as the general and normative stereotypical image of women describes them as warm, loving, sensitive creatures. The following example also shows how this idea of heartlessness is associated with not pleasing a man:

(20) Rushing off the phone or flitting over to the next conversation could crush his ego or, worse, make you look like a cold-hearted bitch. (COCA)

Notable here is also that *cold* can be used much like *bad*, as a positive, meaning ‘admirable or awesome’; in slang terms considered an intensified version of the positive adjective *cool* – “the coolest level of cool” (Urban Dictionary). This is exemplified in corpus example 21:
(21) she was once described by Queenie as a “stone cold bitch who loves hard drinking, big d---s and trouble.” (NOW)

“Loving trouble” indicates a person of less noble intent, though there is also a connection to sexuality here with the reference to male anatomy. However, this is the only example in either corpus which uses the term in a positive sense; all other instances, such as example 22, are pejorative:

(22) Wow, you are one cold bitch, no wonder he blew his brains out. (COCA)

*Rude* can, much like *bad*, mean both something ‘cool, hot or awesome’ as well as the original sense of uneducated and ill-mannered (*Urban Dictionary; ETY*). The term “rude boy” or “rude girl”, used about desirable and street wise, accomplished people, originates from the Caribbean expression *rude* meaning “cool” (*Urban Dictionary*). However, in conjunction with *bitch* there seems to be no indication of the positive use of the term, and thus it has here been analysed in its original meaning: describing someone mean and devoid of manners, as per example 23.

(23) He knew what that meant. It meant that the rude bitch’s transgression was not merely bad manners. It was a sinful act. (COCA)

Thus, the mentioned collocates can be summarised as modifying the *bitch* into something not only difficult or salacious, but in fact a person willing and able to go to any lengths to incur damage and destruction. However, how much this description reflects reality is questionable, as seen in the examples, and seems to be more reflective of speaker attitude, attempting somewhat of an opposite of the feminization of the monstrous, as per Hughes (1991, p. 21), namely a monsterization of the feminine.

Taking malice one step further, there are four collocates of a damnatory aspect, *evil, goddamn* and *goddammed*, as well as collocates of monstrous behaviour, namely *raging* and *crazy*. These suggest similar transgressions as the malicious collocates, however reach a new level of monsterization as they suggest madness, rage and religious damnation. *Evil* seems quite straight-forward, describing an intention of being the opposite of a good person. This is further illustrated in example 24, describing a physically abusive mother:
Described as "an evil bitch" by one daughter, she admitted eight offences of assault and neglect between 2002 and 2009. (NOW)

The expression goddamn stems from damn and thus has religious origin, referring to the damnation of the soul and being condemned by God. The definition of the verb damn in the *Etymological Dictionary* defines it as "to condemn", derived from the Latin damnare "to adjudge guilty; to doom; to condemn, blame, reject". The Latin term then went on to acquire a legal sense of "pronounce judgment upon". The adjective damn is short for damned, and has been used in the shortened form since the late 1700’s (ETY). Hughes’ (1991) idea of the feminization of the monstrous are indicated as being reversed here: by using terms of ungodliness, judgement and damnation, a monsterization of the female and the feminine occurs, demonizing the bitch and proclaiming her a sympathiser of Satan. The term dragon was associated with Satan prior to taking on a feminine specialization (p. 221), further linking the two. This indicates a close link with evil and it is quite possible that similarities could be drawn, as per example 25:

(25) “That goddamn bitch Dorothy Parker," Hellman told a friend. "I paid her hotel bill for years, kept her in booze, all on the promise she would leave me the rights to her writing.” (NOW)

The previously mentioned references to deformed women monsters such as the harpy and the siren, leading (mostly) men to death and doom, are also highly applicable here; the already damned bitch dragging others down with her or infecting others. This infectious aspect connects to the collocation raging bitch, as raging stemming from Latin rabies, meaning ‘madness’ or ‘fury’ as well as being the present-day name of the deadly infectious disease. Crazy is also an adjective frequent in slang as something positive, meaning adventurous or spontaneous; however, in the corpus, the collocations with bitch seem to exclusively refer to a purposefully mean or spiteful person:

(26) She's the one who talked him into trying to kill his wife... I think we got one smart, crazy bitch out there. (COCA)

The term raging bitch thus seems to refer to the characteristics of a rabid dog, as example 26 illustrates:
"When I'm angry I turn into a raging bitch and hopefully this camp will erupt into chaos because if there's one thing I know it's that I can rule in chaos," said Colton. (NOW)

The use of a collocate which directly de-humanises the woman, or bitch, and describes her as a rabid animal is effective monsterization. As a mad animal cannot be said to have manners nor really be good or bad but simply driven by (sometimes murderous) instinct, it is a way of further insinuating the monsterization and comparisons to part human, part beast creatures, such as the harpy (Hughes, 1991, p. 221). Further, the statement in example 26 is made by a man, intensifying the de-humanisation as he is speaking of a bitch as an alternate creature, as another being he effectively turns into. Thus, the four collocates crazy, raging, goddamn and goddamned suggest that the original sense of bitch as a slur is still highly applicable.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study have shown that the use of bitch has both significantly increased and undergone semantic change, first with its initial semantic change in the 1920’s and later during the 1960’s, when the second wave of feminism attempted to initiate a reappropriation of the word. Between 1920 and 2007 the use of bitch increased by nearly a thousand percent. This increase is also reflected in popular culture, with the use of bitch tripling on television, undergoing an “un-bleeping” and frequenting popular music, even by household-name artists such as Britney Spears. Further, the introduction of the collocate baddest added to bitch, constituting an entirely new term for conveying independence, skills and self-confidence, marks another step in the development of the semantic prosody of the term. Before the turn on the 20th century, the term baddest bitch did not even exist, whereas now baddest is one of the most frequent and relevant collocates, which along with the other positively connotative collocates indicates a reappropriation of the term and an emergence of positive speaker attitude.

Additionally, the term has been used by the feminist movement since the 1960’s as a weapon to counteract the classic damsel-in-distress trope, setting the free, independent woman demanding inclusion in society against the domesticated housewife devoid of basic voting rights. In Galinsky’s (2003) words, “The true power of reappropriation can be shown when
the group at large reappropriates a label, potentially forcing a larger cultural shift in the meaning of the label, and potentially in the social standing of the group (p. 251).

It is evident from the findings that a word can present itself at two completely different semantic points due to its movements up and down the social scale, and that this is applicable to *bitch*, as the word currently triggers both positive and negative associations. With *bitch*, as indicated by the collocate analyses, there seems to be a strong ongoing reappropriative force and a “shift to opposite”, in Hughes’ (1991) words.

The analyses in this study indicate that the extra-linguistic associations of *bitch* as per its collocates and contextual use, yet outside its lexical definitions, are independence, non-conformity, self-confidence, sexual liberation and strength. However, whether these qualities are positive or negative in the mind of the speaker seems far more difficult to determine, as this comes down to individual language user intent. For instance, the aspects of non-conformity are what started the use of the term as a slur in the first place, and was not at all intended as a positive trait at the time; likewise, those comfortable with set norms are likely to view non-conformity as something negative.

Discussing the term’s semantic prosody (presumably without being aware of the concept), frequent *bitch* user Kanye West pondered the term on Twitter in 2012, proposing that:

> Perhaps the words BITCH and NIGGA are now neither positive or [sic] negative. They are just potent and it depends on how the [sic] are used and by whom? (West, 2012)

It is indicative of the collocate findings that that the word itself indeed is potent but cannot be determined as good or bad out of context. The intentions behind its use seem to be dependent on the adjectives surrounding it. As West suggested, perhaps the word itself is slowly losing its own meaning, and while it remains a “potent” lexeme, it has become more dependent on its surroundings. It seems the semantic prosody of *bitch* is to express a strong attitude, much like Stubbs (2002) described *super* (p. 35), but whether the attitude expressed is positive or negative is indeterminable without context.
This study has shown that not a single collocate can be said to link exclusively to the noun *bitch* in the sense of a female dog, suggesting that this definition of the term, despite being the first one suggested in the dictionaries, is nowadays rendered almost obsolete. On the contrary, the results of this study strengthen the perceived ongoing reappropriation of *bitch*. There is some ongoing debate regarding the use of *bitch* as a term of self-empowerment, an issue this limited study has unfortunately not been able to address. If the debate and research on the term is to move forward, a better understanding of using such a potent word needs to be developed, and it is recommended that future research assess the effects of using a word during its reappropriation, i.e. what effects the use of a word which can be interpreted both positively and negatively may have. In conclusion, here is also a need for further research into the subject of how “the profusion of foul language and swearing in modern times represents the ultimate triumph of informal language over formal, a development which can be paralleled in many areas of social change” (Hughes, 1991, p. 256) and how such development affects language as a whole.
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