

# Meanings, Ideologies, and Learners' Dictionaries

Rosamund Moon  
University of Birmingham  
R.E.Moon@bham.ac.uk

## Abstract

This paper looks at the treatment of ideologically loaded items in monolingual learners' dictionaries of English, and issues in the lexicographical description of their meanings. It begins by considering non-denotative meaning and the question of evidence; then considers a selection of entries relating to ethnocentricity, gender and sexuality, and age. Entries are drawn mainly from the standard British big five; the 1948 edition of Hornby; and two crowd-sourced dictionaries.

**Keywords:** ageism; critical lexicography; culture; ethnocentricity; gender; ideology; learners' dictionaries; meaning; sexism

## 1 Introduction

My talk at Euralex 2014 is concerned with the presentation of meanings in learners' dictionaries of English: in particular, the meanings of words which denote, represent, or reflect politicized concepts and phenomena – ideologically loaded items, totemic and socioculturally significant. Such words have been the frequent focus of linguistic investigations more widely, for example in corpus-led studies from a discourse analytic perspective, or sociological and cultural studies (Raymond Williams' discussions of “keywords” are a case in point). In relation to lexicography, ideology is where dictionaries collide with the social world: it brings in impolite and polite aspects of language, taboo items, evaluative orientation, connotation, and cultural allusion; the sublexicons, of course, of semantic fields such as politics, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on; and above all the role of lexis, an unstable and mutable role, in naming and othering.

Ideologically positioned meaning is central to the concerns of critical lexicography, and particularly important with respect to learners' dictionaries because of their positioning as global texts for a pluralist multicultural usership. It is a topic that regularly surfaces at Euralex congresses<sup>1</sup> – though historically, perhaps not as often as might be expected – and in lexicographical journals; it is covered, at least tangentially, in lexicographical manuals and metalexicographical monographs (Svensén 1993;

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1 Euralex papers include those by Coffey 2010; Hartevelde & van Niekirk 1996; Iversen 2012; Schutz 2002; Swanepoel 2010; van der Meer 2008; Veisbergs 2000, 2002, 2004; Whitcut 1983; and several due at Euralex 2014: see the Euralex database of past proceedings at <http://www.euralex.org/publications/> for these and other presentations on the topic.

Atkins & Rundell 2008: 422ff and passim; Landau 2001: 228ff and passim; Béjoint 2010), and more directly as the subject of a 1995 festschrift for Zgusta (eds. Kachru and Kahane). In returning to the topic today, I do not offer solutions, but there are, I think, a number of points that are still worth making in a 2014 context.

his written version of my talk provides an overview of topics to be discussed. In section 2, I look at non-denotative aspects of word meaning, the contribution of corpus evidence, and methodological issues; sections 3, 4, and 5 present and review a sample of words and dictionary explanations relevant to discussion of, respectively, ethnocentricity, gender and sexuality, and age/ageism. As a basis for observations, I draw largely on four current British monolingual learners' dictionaries of English (from Cambridge, Longman, Oxford, and Macmillan), specifically their free online versions as accessed in April 2014: by default, these four are the online learners' dictionaries referred to below. The fifth British learners' dictionary, *Cobuild*, is represented instead by its second print edition of 1995: partly because the current online version has restricted accessibility; partly because the 1995 text was based on an early version of the Bank of English corpus (BoE),<sup>2</sup> which I draw on below; and partly because of my own editorial involvement with the 1995 text (and as an editor of the first edition of 1987). Other dictionaries cited include the 1948 version of Hornby's first dictionary (ALD1); and the collaborative or crowd-sourced online texts *Simple English Wiktionary*<sup>3</sup> and *Urban Dictionary*.<sup>4</sup> It goes without saying that online dictionaries are complex multidimensional, multimodal texts, and although I focus mainly on linguistic explanations, examples, and labelling in my discussion, there are other parts of their entries where ideology is displayed and where othering may be performed.

## 2 Meanings: Culture, Connotation, Evaluation – and Evidence

In later sections, I will look at some words that are obvious sites for projection of contested and ideologically-bound attitudes. But many of the issues of lexicographical description overlap with more general issues of how and whether to represent non-denotative aspects of meaning, including connotation, evaluation, and culture. To demonstrate this, I want to look at the word *cardigan*, an item with a very clear concrete meaning and reference in the real world. It can be defined or explained straightforwardly, as in the current online entry in Oxford:<sup>5</sup>

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- 2 BoE is a 450-million word corpus, created by COBUILD at the University of Birmingham. 71% of its texts are British English, 21% North American, and 8% Australian, mainly drawn from the period 1990-2003; 86% of its texts are written, and the remaining 14% consists of transcribed spoken interaction and radio broadcasts.
  - 3 A simplified text, affiliated with Wiktionary, constructed with something of a controlled defining vocabulary, and claiming almost 22,000 definitions or "entries" in May 2014.
  - 4 In Fuertes Olivera's terminology, these are classifiable as "collective free multiple-language Internet reference works", in distinction to "institutional Internet reference works", which would include publisher-produced texts (2009: 103).
  - 5 To facilitate comparisons, here and below, I have standardized typography and layout irrespective of the original: headwords and phrases are in bold; where included, examples are italicized and set out on new lines; usage labels are italicized in parentheses.

(1) a knitted jacket made of wool, usually with no collar and fastened with buttons at the front where it is accompanied by a photographic illustration (and adverts from clothing companies). Compare Macmillan's online entry, which combines a broadly comparable descriptive and denotative explanation with a "cultural note":

(2) a jacket knitted from wool, that you fasten at the front with buttons or a zip  
Cultural note: cardigan

Cardigans are usually thought of as an old-fashioned, rather boring piece of clothing, worn mainly by older people.

We might dispute the explanations of cardigan (they can be made of fibres other than wool; not all cardigans have fastenings), as well as Macmillan's stereotyping comment (fashions change; babies, toddlers, schoolchildren wear cardigans), but there is an important point that even innocuous and simple items generate associations which reflect attitude and, in this case, ageism. Evidence for these associations can be detected in corpus data, as in this small sample from BoE, in particular the fifth, sixth, and seventh tokens:

this short green knitted dress and cardigan yesterday to promote the Irish  
Isabella was wearing a bulky cardigan with horizontal orange and red.  
Next. Not long ago a pure cashmere cardigan alone would have cost about £300.  
cardigan Invest in our classic cardigan and you'll wonder what you ever  
maths teacher who favours comfy cardigans and looks like the perfect grandad  
it. There are plenty of ladies in cardigans and old gentlemen in ties. It  
teeth; it meant shuffling around in cardigans and ranting about the youth of  
up the sleeves of her grey knitted cardigan and got to work. <p> Robina went  
for the day, or under a long cardigan for evening. This month we are  
was in the 80s, she wore a woollen cardigan buttoned to the neck and

Compare, too, two of the examples given in OED for the abbreviated form *cardy* (and discussion of middle-aged below):

(3) 1969 *Guardian* 3 Nov. 7/2 Grey gentlemen in shrunken cardies.

981 *Daily Telegraph* 29 Aug. 11/2 A flock of over-50s wearing pastel cardis and floppy hats.

Words that are more obviously politicized offer particular scope for critical lexicography: examination of differences between explanations in dictionaries, unpacking of attitudes projected towards the concept under definition, and dominant ethos of the lexicographers – or publishing/cultural context. For example, the four current online learners' dictionaries broadly agree on what materialism is (in the non-philosophical sense):<sup>6</sup>

(Macmillan)

the belief that money and possessions are the most important aspects of human existence

6 Cf. Williams 1988: 197-201; Bennett et al. 2005: 209-211.

(5) (Oxford)

(*usually disapproving*) the belief that money, possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values *the greed and materialism of modern society*

but while Oxford adds a usage label to reflect sociocultural attitudes towards materialism and an example that indirectly condemns by collocation, Macmillan offers no evaluation at all of materialism as a *modus vivendi*.

Distinctions in attitude towards a concept can be subtle, as in these entries for *equality*<sup>7</sup> in the online dictionaries:

(6) (Cambridge)

the right of different groups of people to have a similar social position and receive the same treatment:

equality between the sexes

racial equality

the government department responsible for equalities

(7) (Longman)

a situation in which people have the same rights, advantages etc

**equality of** All people have the right to equality of opportunity.

**equality with** Women have yet to achieve full equality with men in the workplace.

**quality between** equality between men and women

**racial/sexual equality** The government must promote racial equality.

(8) (Oxford)

the fact of being equal in rights, status, advantages, etc:

racial/social/sexual equality

equality of opportunity

the principle of equality before the law (= the law treats everyone the same)

Don't you believe in equality between men and women?

The entries are broadly similar, all using examples to indicate arenas in which equality is an issue, particularly gender and race. But comparison of the genus words in explanations raises the question of what equality actually is – *fact* implies that it is a principle achieved; *situation* is non-committal; only Cambridge's *right* suggests that it is more of an ideal than real or implemented in practice, something hinted at in the following small sample from BoE:

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7 Cf. Williams 1988: 117-119; Bennett et al. 2005: 109-111.

in an atmosphere of ease, equality and immense opportunities for the  
the Commission for Racial Equality and other ethnic minority and  
is further evident that political equality, co-existing with an increasing  
relationship characterized by equality, disagreement and conflict are  
aim of that document was to achieve equality for women by 2000. <p> The  
as a means of achieving human equality have been taken up by most of the  
movement to greater fairness and equality in schools seemed to go naturally  
to ensure that the new regime makes equality of opportunity, in terms of access  
I wish to take part. He believed in equality then and I believe in it now.  
in line with feminist notions of equality. Yet feminist therapists, most of

Top collocates of *equality* in BoE provide further data concerning its textual and contextual environments (see groupings below), and further hints of the elusive nature of equality:<sup>8</sup>

- (9) (arenas) gay, gender, homosexual, lesbian, men, race, racial, sexes, sexual, women  
(ideals and concepts) democracy, fairness, freedom, justice, liberty, rights  
(pressure groups and committees) campaign, commission, council, struggle  
(general items) commitment, economic, issues, law, legal, opportunity, political, principle\*, social, society, treatment

Similarly, to return to *materialism*, collocational evidence helps identify both semantic/philosophical contexts of occurrence and negative attitudes towards it, as in this from BoE:

- (10) (nouns) society, idealism, science, spirituality, greed, philosophy, hedonism, marxism, values, atheism, theory, feminism, selfishness, corruption, consumerism, ideology, capitalism, utilitarianism, pragmatism  
(prenominal adjectives) historical, dialectical, scientific, cultural, Western, crass, rampant, modern, new, gross, Marxist, atheistic, vulgar, subversive, secular

(further supported by lower-frequency collocates such as *self-interest*, *self-centredness*, *emptiness*, *godless*, *mindless*). At the same time, such evidence is a reflex of the discourse world of the corpus: a normative view that perhaps reveals more about prevailing attitudes in the language-owning culture at the time of data capture than about materialism itself. So there is a particular dilemma facing lexicographers attempting to deal with contested and ideologically loaded words: to balance a description of what data suggests about meaning with how in a postmodern inclusive society, the relevant concept “ought” to be regarded and represented. The English word *civilized* is another case in point: cf. Moon 1989: 88-90, and see discussion below.

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8 For discussion of the role of collocation and co-text in relation to meaning, see for example Hanks 2013; Leech 1981: 16ff; Louw 1993; Sinclair 1991, 2004.

### 3 Ethnocentricity

It goes without saying that racist terms have to be labelled clearly as offensive in learners' dictionaries. However, the problem of ethnocentricity extends much further than labelling, something that has been explored at length by Benson (2001) and in Ogilvie (2013), as well as in multiple critical linguistic/lexicographical papers, including Krishnamurthy's examination of the words *ethnic*, *tribal*, *racial* in corpus and dictionary data (1996) and, for example, Hornscheidt's with respect to colonialist words in Danish dictionaries. In my own 1989 paper on ideology and lexicography, I was particularly concerned with the word *civilized*, its meanings, and dictionary representations of meaning. Here is the relevant entry from *ALD1*:

(11) *civilize*

1 bring out from a savage and ignorant state; give teaching in art, science, culture, good government, good customs and manners.

2 improve and educate.

Many a rough man has been civilized by his wife.

A product of its time and purpose, this now raises all sorts of questions: the paternalism of *bring out*; the subtext of *savage*; the meaning of *good*; and so on (similarly in the second extended sense, the use of *improve* and the sexism of its example). Fifty years later, and drawing on BoE corpus evidence, this is *Cobuild2*'s explanation for **civilized**:

(12) 1 If you describe a society as **civilized**, you mean that it is advanced and has sensible laws and customs.

I believed that in civilized countries, torture had ended long ago.

≠ barbaric

2 If you describe a person or their behaviour as **civilized**, you mean that they are polite and reasonable.

I wrote to my ex-wife. She was very civilized about it.

*Advanced? sensible? is barbaric* really an appropriate antonym? and with the example in the second sense, do the implicatures make it seem as sexist as *ALD1*'s? The next entries are from two online learners' dictionaries (extended senses have been omitted here):

(13) (Macmillan)

1 a civilized country, society etc has developed an advanced culture and institutions

A civilized society does not solve conflicts in a way that causes so much suffering.

(14) (Oxford)

- 1 well-organized socially with a very developed culture and way of life  
the civilized world  
rising crime in our so-called civilized societies  
civilized peoples
  - 2 having laws and customs that are fair and morally acceptable
- No civilized country should allow such terrible injustices.

While examples demonstrate something of what's implied by *advanced*, *developed* and indeed *civilized* itself, the overall meaning is unclear, almost insiderist (only someone from a "civilized" society would identify with the description - a circularity of meaning that is as problematic as the circularity of inspecting entries for *advanced*, *barbaric*, *cultured*, *developed*, *primitive*, *savage*, *uncivilized* etc. in order to locate what *civilized* might mean). Meanwhile, corpus data reflects, inevitably, an anglocentric view of the world:

to think of human beings as all civilised but they're not. Some remain terrorism. We British, and all civilised countries, should back America a world where a man who, in any civilised country, would - even though his fortunate brethren the benefits of civilized culture. Though more successful ask itself the big question: If the civilised European can allow the to a world seeking reassurance that civilised governments and legislatures that no country could call itself civilised if the sick are refused medical bullet, prohibited for use between civilised nations but sanctioned for big-seeds and causes of conflict among civilised nations will speedily appear. Of them, they too, can usher in a more civilised order. The Chinese took on idealism can cause seemingly civilised people to misuse, even destroy, human rights violations in a civilised secular democracy. These are not that an important hallmark of civilised societies is the extent to which by such horror close at hand, a civilised society has a choice. It can act, taxation system. <p> Any civilised society should provide education one every civilised nation, every civilised state, including the great European Communism to be open and civilised. The phenomenon of Eurocommunism syndrome is one of the <f> civilized world's most common diseases. It too close. `We warn you that the civilised world objects to your aggressive I think that the free world, the civilised world, understands that this

This presents a near-insoluble problem: should an explanation in a learners' dictionary present this kind of traditionalist anglocentric monocultural world-view evident in corpus data, thus promoting a particular ideological stance? Should an apologist usage note be added? Should there be instead a broader, multicultural, universalist, non-elitist explanation, even at the expense of misrepresenting of what the English word is actually used to mean, what mindset it reflects?

With *ethnocentric* itself, Macmillan is clearest in indicating that it is a derogatory label for inegalitarian perspectives:

(15) showing a failure to recognize that other people's cultures are also important and valuable while Longman's usage comment could be misinterpreted (exactly what is being disapproved of?):

- (16) based on the idea that your own race, nation, group etc is better than any other – used in order to show disapproval:

and Oxford fails to indicate that ethnocentricity is evaluated negatively at all:

(17) based on the ideas and beliefs of one particular culture and using these to judge other cultures  
Of the many items in the English lexicon which have potential for ethnocentric and racist usage, an important subset includes *foreign(er)* and other words which contribute to the othering of non-natives and non-nationals – cf. a critical linguistic study by Gabrielatos and Baker (2008), who are concerned with the discursive representation of refugees and asylum seekers in news media (and incidentally in definitions). The following brief discussion looks at *alien*, *asylum seeker*, *illegal immigrant/alien*, *migrant*, *refugee* in recent/current learners' dictionaries. Explanations are broadly comparable, but what's especially interesting is the selection of examples, particularly where these, in the decontextualized world of dictionary text, seem hortatory or imply moralistic value judgements. For example, these are *Co-build2*'s entries:

- (18) migrant

1 A **migrant** is a person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work. The government divides asylum-seekers into economic migrants and genuine refugees.  
... migrant workers following harvest northwards.

- (19) s.v. **illegal** 2

**Illegal** immigrants or workers have travelled into a country or are working without official permission. > Illegal immigrants or workers are sometimes referred to as **illegals**.  
... a clothing factory where many other illegals also worked.

Examples in the following entries for *refugee* show typical collocations with *flee*, *flow*, *stream* etc. – collocates which have been shown elsewhere to contribute to the negative discursive construction of refugees as a social group (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008: 22ff; Semino 2008: 87ff):

- (20) (Longman)

someone who has been forced to leave their country, especially during a war, or for political or religious reasons:  
Refugees were streaming across the border.  
refugee camps

- (21) (Oxford)

a person who has been forced to leave their country or home, because there is a war or for political, religious or social reasons  
a steady flow of refugees from the war zone  
political/economic refugees  
a refugee camp

(22) (Cambridge)

a person who has escaped from their own country for political, religious, or economic reasons or because of a war:

Thousands of refugees fled across the border.

Compare too the subtexts of examples in these:

(23) **asylum seeker** (Cambridge)

someone who leaves their own country for their safety, often for political reasons or because of war, and who travels to another country hoping that the government will protect them and allow them to live there:

genuine/bogus asylum seekers

(24) **alien** (Longman)

1 someone who is not a legal citizen of the country they are living or working in:

illegal aliens entering the country.

(25) **illegal** (Longman)

(*American English spoken*) an illegal immigrant:

Illegals are still slipping through in unacceptable numbers.

Also relevant, though this cannot be discussed in detail here, are the subtexts, the intertextual implicatures, which are created through the links to thesaurus entries or lists of semantically related words that are triggered automatically by searches for specific words. For example, Cambridge's entry for *refugee* displays a set "Runaways and refugees", listing items *boat people*, *deserter*, *displaced person*, *escapee*, *evacuee*, *fugitive*, *political asylum*, *refugee camp*, *transit camp*. Of course, these features are intended for vocabulary extension work, but many such examples of "interesting" juxtapositions can be found in online learners' dictionaries: these, by association, reinforce both othering and sociocultural evaluations.

## 4 Gender and Sexuality

The asymmetries of gendered nouns in English, together with the gendered collocational/semantic preferences of adjectives, have been widely discussed. With respect to dictionaries, discussion has tended to focus on sexism in general, asymmetric definitions of paired male/female terms, and representation of men and women in examples: see, for example, papers by Graham (1975), Whitcut (1984), Landau (1985), Barnickel (1999), Connor Martin (2005), etc., particularly with reference to orthodox (= androcentric) dictionaries; Russell (2012) examines feminist dictionaries which provide something of a counterdiscourse.

Where pairs of English words for (human) males and females are concerned, the lexicographical challenge is to balance two conflicting ideas. First, men and women in the UK, as in so many other

nations, now have equal status legally and legislation protecting their rights. Second, the continuing disparities in practice between the lives of men and women, along with biological/physiological distinctions, are reflected in lexis and language use and in attitudes communicated through language. Thus decisions taken when designing and constructing entries for paired terms cannot just be linguistic decisions: they must inevitably be ideological as well.

A pair such as *boy* and *girl* demonstrate the issues. Their primary and simplest senses – non-adult male/female, son/daughter – are clear counterparts; however, their symmetry changes when they are used to refer to adults (cf. discussion by Caldas-Coulthard & Moon 2010; Holmes & Sigley 2001; Sigley & Holmes 2002). In particular, *girl* continues to be applied to young women, especially in their late teens and twenties, whereas *boy* is more likely to be replaced by another term: *young man* or informal *lad*, *guy* etc. Both *boys* and *girls* are used informally of groups of adult male/female friends, and groups of male workers (soldiers, police, fire fighters, sometimes factory operatives, etc.) or female workers (typically in low-status occupations). While these are infantilizing usages, they are also ambivalent: showing affection and solidarity if used by speakers who are part of the group concerned, or who position themselves as part of the group; but often paternalistic, condescending, or demeaning if used by outsiders or those with higher status.

It seems reasonable now to expect that dictionary entries for *boy* and *girl* would have parallel explanations for primary senses, then present information about the various usages that relate to adults, including register and potential for offence. However, there are some surprising asymmetries and inconsistencies. Those in *ALD1* in 1948 could be predicted:<sup>9</sup>

(26) **boy**

- 1 a male child up to the age of 17 or 18
- 2 a son (of any age)3 a male servant

(27) **girl**

- 1 a female child of any age; a daughter
- 2 a female child not yet grown up; one who is not yet married3 a maidservant
- 4 a girl or woman working in a shop, office, etc.5 (*colloq., vulg.*) a sweetheart

But there are also curious asymmetries in *Cobuild2*, written in the 1990s by a strongly pro-feminist team (as was the 1987 first edition):

(28) **boy**

- 1 A **boy** is a child who will grow up to be a man.
- 2 You can refer to a young man as a **boy**, especially when talking about relationships between boys and girls.
- 3 Someone's **boy** is their son; an informal use4 You can refer to a man as a **boy**, especially when you are talking about him in an affectionate way.

<sup>9</sup> Here and below, for reasons of space I have mostly omitted examples given in dictionary entries for *boy* and *girl*, though these too are interesting and very relevant to examinations of ideological stance and sexism.

5 You can use **boy** when giving instructions to a horse or dog.

(29) **girl**

1 A **girl** is a female child.

2 You can refer to someone's daughter as a **girl**.

3 Young women are often referred to as **girls**. Some people find this use offensive.

4 Some people refer to a man's girlfriend as his **girl**; an informal use.

Missing altogether is the use of *boys/girls* to refer to friendship groups, and the offensive, mainly old-fashioned American, use of *boy* to address an inferior. There seems no clear reason for the different wordings of *boy* 1, 3, and *girl* 1, 2; nor for the inclusion of sense 5 of *boy* (or conversely exclusion of a parallel vocative for female horses and dogs).

While current online versions of Longman, Macmillan, and Oxford have more symmetrical entries and explanations for at least the primary senses of *boy* and *girl*, Cambridge does not:

(30) **boy**

a male child or, more generally, a male of any age

Their little boy (= their young son) is very sick.

**the boys** a group of male friends(also **our boys**) an approving way of speaking about your country's soldiers

(31) **girl**

a female child or young woman, especially one still at school:

a daughter:

a woman worker, especially when seen as one of a group:

a group of female friends

Macmillan is representative of the other three in its parity and careful labelling (though it is still partially asymmetric); it also adds a usage note at **girl**:

(32) **boy**

1 a male child

a. a son

2 a young man

3 a man of any age, especially when you are talking about where he comes from

a. (*American, offensive*) an extremely offensive word used for talking to a black man, especially in the past

4 **the boys** (*informal*) a group of men who are friends

(*British*) the members of a sports team

5 used when speaking to a male dog or horse

6 a boy or man of any age who has a particular job

(33) **girl**

1 a female child

a. a daughter

- 2 a female adult, especially a young one. This use is considered offensive by many women
- a. **girls** used for talking to or about a group of women, especially by women who are the same age or older. This is often considered offensive when used by men
- b. (*old-fashioned*) a young woman who works as a servant or in a shop, office etc
- 3 a female animal, especially a pet

#### PHRASES

**my girl** (*British spoken*) used by some people when talking to a girl or woman who is younger than they are, especially to show that they are angry. This is usually considered offensive

**someone's girl** (*old-fashioned*) someone's girlfriend

#### Words that may cause offence: girl

People sometimes say **girl** to refer to a young adult woman, but this use may cause offence. Avoid using **girl** if it would seem wrong to use **boy** about a young man of the same age. Do not use **girl** about an adult woman.

Though such uses of *girl* to refer to adult women have been problematized and contested – as has *lady*<sup>10</sup> – not all anglophone adult women feel so strongly about the words, and may even prefer to be called a girl, or lady, rather than woman, according to situational context.

It is interesting to compare entries for **boy** and **girl** in these mediated publishers' texts with those in crowd-sourced *Simple Wiktionary*, which are indeed simple and mainly asymmetric. Here, examples are included as reminders of the stereotyping potential with such words:

#### (34) **boy**

1 (countable) A **boy** is a male child.

He had a pretty wife and two little ones: a boy and a girl.

My oldest son was a Boy Scout in England.

The boys basketball team won five games in a row.

Two teenage boys died in the crash.

A 12-year-old boy stands at the window and watches two men outside.

#### (35) **girl**

1 A **girl** is a female child.

Many girls like to play with dolls.

I have two children: a boy and a girl.

2 (informal) A female person of any age (even a woman).

The girls are going out tonight, do you want to come?

I really love that girl.

3 (informal) A female animal.

My cat is a girl.

She is a girl cat.

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10 See discussion by Lakoff (1975) and subsequent feminist linguists, who point out that *lady* trivializes even while apparently showing politeness and respect.

Where items referring to sexual behaviour and sexual preferences are concerned, comparisons between historical and current dictionaries show the extent of social change. For example, in all of the big five British learners' dictionaries, entries for *gay* give priority to the sense "homosexual", labelling as old-fashioned its sense "happy, cheerful"; the derogatory use of *gay* "stupid, absurd, inadequate", if included at all, is labelled as offensive. *Bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, same-sex, transgender* etc. are all routinely covered. Particularly interesting in April 2014 – at the time of writing, less than a month after same-sex marriage was legalized in the UK – is how far online versions of learners' dictionaries reflect this in entries for *husband, wife, marriage, married, marry*. For example, Longman and Oxford have primarily heteronormative, though symmetrical, explanations for husband and wife, while Cambridge (British English version only) has non-specific explanations but heteronormative examples:

(36) **husband**

the man that you are married to:

*I've never met Fiona's husband.*

(37) **wife**

the woman that you are married to:

*I met Greg's wife for the first time.*

*She's his third wife* (= she is the third woman he has been married to).

Macmillan's entries are also symmetrical and non-specific and include non-heteronormative examples (a change from its print edition of 2007, *MED2*):

(38) **husband**

a male partner in a marriage

Carole's husband died last year.

She isn't looking for a husband.

He may be separated from his husband and deported back to Venezuela.

(39) **wife**

a female partner in a marriage

I'd better phone my wife and tell her I'll be late.

a reception for the wives of the ambassadors

In April she became the proud parent of twins with her wife Alex.

The four online learners' dictionaries provide mostly non-specific explanations for *married, marry* and *marriage*, though often imply heteronormativity through choices of examples which indicate mixed-sex couples. However, Macmillan is explicit in extending its explanation (another change from *MED2*):

(40) **marriage**

the relationship between two people who are husband and wife, or a similar relationship between people of the same sex

*a long and happy marriage*

*Too many marriages end in divorce.*

**by marriage:** *I'm related to Bill by marriage* (= he is a relative of my husband or wife).

Compare the cultural information in entries and examples in *Simple Wiktionary*, which are almost entirely heteronormative:

(41) **married**

1. A man and a woman are **married** if they are husband and wife to each other. Usually when two people are **married** they live in the same house and they often have children. Two people have a special day to become **married**.

*I don't need to meet more young men – I'm already married.*

(42) **marry**

1 When two people **marry** they become husband and wife; that is, they become married. In many countries this is a legal agreement. In some cultures **marrying** is a part of the religion. **Marrying** is often done with a wedding (a special day for those people to marry).

*I cannot believe he **married** her when there are nicer girls out there.*

There are many other items which could be used to test how far dictionary texts represent attitudes towards sexuality and acknowledgement of changing paradigms, as realized in lexis and therefore in need of definition – not least *gender* itself, where all of the big four online learners' dictionaries currently offer purely male-female binary explanations of *gender*, though *gender* is now widely considered a social and cultural construction with non-binary variations. Oxford's explanation mentions the first of these points; of the dictionaries examined, but only *Simple Wiktionary* mentions both:

(43) (Longman)

the fact of being male or female

(44) (Oxford)

the fact of being male or female, especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences, not differences in biology

(45) (*Simple Wiktionary*)

1 A living thing's **gender** is its sex: male (man, boy), female (woman, girl), both, or neither.

3 (*psychology*) Someone's gender is whether they behave like a boy or girl. This is called masculine or feminine, and not the same as male or female. [*sic*]

We can expect dictionaries eventually to adapt to new norms more fully; at the same time, we have to acknowledge that some of these new norms are not universally accepted by any means, and may seem abnormal, even abhorrent, to some sectors of the global usership. Thus the changing mores and attitudes of the culture within which dictionaries are written – specifically here the community of native-speakers of British English – may be at odds with the mores and attitudes of the markets and readerships to which the texts are presented: an interesting tension between language, lexicography, and receiver. Is it possible that culture-specific splinter dictionaries, with different ideological per-

spectives, may develop, for example for/in cultures where homosexuality is illegal or stigmatized, or where women do not have equal rights? Should this matter? and who has the right to say it matters?

## 5 Representing Age

The last area I want to consider is age and ageism, as represented in dictionaries: the subject of a case study and part of an ongoing research collaboration into discourses of ageing. Particular sites for potential ageism are those adjectives and nouns which reference age directly, such as *young*, *old*, *teenager*, *codger*, though many other items embed or entail notions of age indirectly, including adjectives with age-related semantic preferences: see discussion in Moon 2014.

This written version of my talk looks at just two items to demonstrate the issues in an area that has been, metalexigraphically, underexplored. The first is *middle-aged* which, like *young*, *elderly*, *old*, is a generalized indicator of life stage. Since age labels carry evaluations – young is good, old is bad – any discussion of when a label begins or ceases to be appropriate is evaluatively loaded and ideologically weighted. Some dictionaries set time parameters for *middle age*, others are more vague; *Cobuild2* offers both strategies:

- (46) **Middle age** is the period in your life when you are no longer young but have not yet become old. Middle age is usually considered to take place between the ages of 40 and 60.

*Men tend to put on weight in middle age.*

These next entries and explanations are from current online dictionaries:

- (47) **middle age** (Cambridge)

the period of your life, usually considered to be from about 45 to 60 years old, when you are no longer young, but are not yet old:

*Once you reach middle age, you have to be sensible with your health.*

- (48) **middle age** (Longman)

the period of your life between the ages of about 40 and 60, when you are no longer young but are not yet old:

*Men who smoke are more likely to have heart attacks in middle age.*

- (49) **middle-aged** (Longman)

1 between the ages of about 40 and 60:

*a middle-aged businessman.*

- (50) **middle-aged** (Macmillan)

1 no longer young but not yet old:

*He seems prematurely middle-aged*

Oxford agrees with Cambridge as to age range, but while Longman agrees with *Cobuild2*, it does not agree with itself, since its online word focus feature for **old**, which appears automatically at **midd-**

**le-aged**, explains it as “aged between about 50 and 60 years old”. Examples, where included, sometimes have a hortatory flavour, or reference dullness and decline.

Dullness is more directly represented in subsidiary senses for *middle-aged* in learners’ dictionaries. The connotations of *middle-aged*, and its overall negative evaluation, in these senses are reflected in the following small selection of BoE corpus lines:

n’roll even, start to sound so middle-aged? <p> We’ll ignore the occasional  
with a son’s girlfriend. A middle-aged Conservative MP, the essence of  
tartly. Exactly: the balding, middle-aged fanclub is here early, packing DAT  
at his side, was a plump middle-aged lady in a brown jumper and navy-blue  
half the time!” <p> Meanwhile, middle-aged locals shuffle through the scene,  
<p> Wilson was a middle-sized, middle-aged man in a grey, herringbone suit. His  
a conversation between a middle-aged man and his wife about insurance.  
baldheads or of selfish middle-aged people.” Thomas Wentworth Higginson  
climbed out. An overweight middle-aged salesman trying to look slimmer in a  
into an outer office where a middle-aged woman sat at a secretarial desk

For example:

(51) (*Cobuild2*)

2 If you describe someone’s activities or interests as **middle-aged**, you are critical of them because you think they are typical of a middle-aged person, for example by being conventional or old-fashioned.

*Her novels are middle-aged and boring.*

(52) (*Cambridge*)

(*disapproving*) too careful and not showing the enthusiasm, energy, or style of someone young:  
*What a conventional, middle-aged attitude he has to life!*

(53) (*Longman*)

someone who seems middle-aged seems rather dull and does not do exciting or dangerous things:

*Living with Henry had made her feel middle-aged.*

(54) (Macmillan)

2 used for suggesting that someone's behaviour, clothes, etc. are boring and typical of middle-aged people:

*They are in their twenties, but have very middle-aged views.*

(55) (Oxford)

3 (disapproving) (of a person's attitudes or behaviour) rather boring and old-fashioned.

*He has a very middle-aged attitude to life.*

Perhaps Macmillan's example for its first sense seems to be semantically closer to its second sense; Longman's example provides a context of use, but nothing to distinguish *middle-aged* from *depressed*, *fulfilled*, *secure*, *young*, *happy*..., unless dullness is to be inferred from the name Henry (an unreasonable expectation). Compare too an entry in crowd-sourced *Urban Dictionary*, which in explaining its age reference also rationalizes its connotations:

(56) **middle aged**

- i. a period between early adulthood and old age, anywhere from 30 to 65 years old.
- ii. Something most people will not admit to being. (It sucks to be older than 29...)

Many other items, used to identify whole age groups or individuals within age groups, are also evaluatively charged and communicate attitude. *Youth* itself is ambivalent: sometimes a focus for nostalgia, the ideal, a life force; sometimes a focus for disapproval. Both evaluation and youth culture are bound up in its respelling *yoof*, my final example here, as in these BoE lines from journalistic media:

the computer games beloved of modern yoof. At the end we see him walking hand-competition striking a chord with yoof audiences who make the politically another attempt to hijack British yoof culture by taking over Arcadia, the have proved that, in an era where yoof is supposed to be paramount, age is me most by today's emphasis on Yoof is that when I was one of them it adduced, for not being attractive to yoof". Just how in touch with most yoof of a recent edition of the late night yoof prog will have spotted King (who West and amphetamine abuse. A great `yoof" read. <p> Bookshop To order these who are trying to get apolitical yoof to join the electoral register and having it better than the dole-bound yoof who came after them. They have a

The big four online learners' dictionaries all label *yoof* as informal and humorous:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. discussion of youth/youth in Bennett et al. 2005: 380-382; Thorne 2009: 343-5.

(57) (Macmillan)

(*British, very informal, humorous*) young people. This word is used especially on television, in the newspapers etc, as a humorous way of spelling the word 'youth'

(58) (Oxford)

(*British English, informal, humorous*) a non-standard spelling of 'youth', used to refer to young people as a group, especially as the group that particular types of entertainment, magazines, etc. are designed for

But humour is only part of the pragmatics of its usage, which also seems to involve contempt and trivialization – condescension is evident in the corpus lines above. The explanation in *Urban Dictionary* is more expansive and explicit:

(59) **yoof**

2 Cynical description for a style of marketing or programming created by establishment or corporate interests that seeks to identify with the under-21's and thereby sucker them into parting with their cash or individuality with its promise of street credibility or non-conformity. Media vehicles or brands that tell kids what to do by creating an ersatz peer group for them which they then feel they have to conform to.

As with *middle-aged*, this alternative lexicography affords insights into attitudes and connotation that are beyond the mandates and controls of conventional dictionaries: see Smith (2011) for discussion of *Urban Dictionary* and its significance as a lexicographical text.

## 6 To Conclude

I have looked at only a small selection of entries and, as I warned at the outset, I have offered no solutions. My intention was instead to emphasize the problems that persist, are perhaps insoluble, in the lexicographical treatment of a disparate range of items where ideology and institutionalized attitudes come into play. I have focused almost entirely on monolingual learners' dictionaries, but definitions and analyses in inventory/concise dictionaries, bilinguals, dictionaries for children or school students, are no less problematic, as critical lexicography has repeatedly found. There is massive potential in online dictionaries, including collaborative crowd-sourced dictionaries, for radicalism and inventiveness in entry design and for more effective representations of meaning – including the meanings of ideologically loaded words; but there is also potential for the filtering of world views, re-presentation rather than representation, in ways that may not seem desirable to us, here with our western perspectives and our own filtered views.

In his seminal paper on dictionary definitions, or explanations, Hanks says:

In the last resort, perhaps, all meanings are displaced, since all meanings rely on constructive interpretation by the hearer/reader, as well as by the utterer. If this is true, there is no such thing as literal

meaning, and a dictionary explanation is no more than a compromise with the impossible, a desperate attempt to state the unstateable. (1987: 135)

Yet desperate attempts go on, and meaning remains at the heart of any dictionary, of overwhelming importance. Over thirty years ago, Béjoint drew attention to his survey finding that “87% of the students [advanced learners of English] placed meaning among the three most often sought-after pieces of information” in a dictionary (1981: 215), substantially more than any other information type; at the same time, the highest-ranked cause of failed look-ups (29%) was “unsatisfactory definitions” (1981: 217), almost one in three.<sup>12</sup> Has the situation changed that much? Certainly with respect to ideologically loaded words, the difficulties of producing satisfactory entries are compounded by the complexities and instability of their meanings, the questions of stance and audience, and the balancing of what words mean with what they can be said to mean or be allowed to mean: moreover, the very process of composing entries for such words is essentially an ideological act. I may not have offered solutions, but I hope that at least I have demonstrated something of the nature, and seriousness, of the issues.

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<sup>12</sup> Other later surveys have still higher figures.

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