

Labeling of Pejorative Terms in a Dictionary of College Slang

Don R. McCreary
The University of Georgia
Department of English
Athens, Georgia, 30602 US
mccreary@uga.edu

Abstract

This paper explains the rationale for the implementation of a labeling system for a dictionary of local campus slang. This dictionary, titled '*DawgSpeak*', is a continuing project in the author's undergraduate course in lexicography. The 1007 terms already compiled in this dictionary cover several sensitive subjects that may be perceived as rude and offensive; however, the entries do not have any labels or usage notes. Since the definitions are all written in the sentence definition style of COBUILD, the labeling for usage should also follow this style. The students found that COBUILD's use of phrasal and full sentence usage notes was effective and essential for certain entries. Although occasional use of brief intra-sentential usage notes seems to be a more efficient treatment for many entries, these were more difficult to write. The students preferred lengthier sentences with more detailed explanations of usage. They also found that since individual perceptions of the offensiveness of the terms varied widely, it was very challenging to briefly indicate contextually appropriate usage.

1. Introduction

According to Burkhanov (2003:108), 'metalexigraphy has to develop...analytical tools...to investigate pragmatic aspects of meaning and usage....' This paper is a preliminary attempt to develop tools that students can adopt to treat usage. When eighteen and nineteen year old first year students attend college, they come into contact with a new subculture and a local variety of speech that is usually called college slang. As one may note from the three entries below, a label or usage note may be helpful, even essential. The newcomers to campus need to know which 'linguistic expressions are more acceptable than others in particular culturally-significant situational contexts'. (Burkhanov 2003:106) In order to illuminate the problem, three near synonyms follow:

friends with benefits (idiom). If two people are **friends with benefits**, they are not romantically involved but they hook up on occasion. *Tom asked if we could be friends with benefits after we broke up, but I said 'no'.*

Usage: This term is humorous for most listeners.

butt buddies (noun). 1 When you call two people **butt buddies**, they are inseparable friends. *Jimmy and Steven watch the game together every Sunday because they are butt buddies.* 2 If two people are **butt buddies**, then they are friends who resort to each other for

sex, but are not technically dating each other. *Butt buddies are people who like to have intimate fun without the hassle of a commitment.*

Usage: This term may be offensive and should be used with caution.

fk buddies** (noun) When two people are **f**k buddies**, they are having casual sex without a relationship. The term is akin to **friends with benefits** and **butt buddies**. '*Dan's a great guy but he's not my boyfriend. We're just f**k buddies until someone better comes along*'.

Usage: This term is offensive and is only used between close friends.

These three terms highlight the problematic nature of usage notes. For some students *friends with benefits* would only be used in a mocking and disparaging way, but for many it seems to be humorous. For more than a few students, *butt buddies* implies gay behavior and is exclusively used to describe intimate male friends. For others, this term is merely humorous and is unisex in its application, however, it may imply anal sex. Most of the students perceive *f**k buddies* (a newer term for the third edition not yet in *DawgSpeak*) as offensive simply because of the use of the F-word. However, a few see it in the same light as the other two, merely humorous in tone. From this, we can see that perceptions of these three near-synonyms are varied among the undergraduate students.

This paper is based on a dictionary of local campus slang used at the University of Georgia that I have had my students in my Lexicography course compile, write, and expand. It was first compiled and completed in the spring of 2001 with approximately 700 entries and was upgraded and expanded in the spring of 2003 with 1007 entries. I taught this course in the spring semester of 2004 from January to mid-May, and this class added over 300 new terms. This dictionary, titled '*DawgSpeak*', can be viewed online in the website of my English department at the University of Georgia at this address: <http://online.english.uga.edu/~dawgspeak/>. COBUILD style sentence definitions were chosen to define all of the terms due to their readability and efficiency treating phrasal expressions. The class, all third and fourth year students expanded the usage notes, sub-senses, and etymology. Of these improvements, the expansion with new updated terms and the usage notes are what make this edition qualitatively different from the first two editions. However, devising a system that many students can use accurately has proven to be problematic since many of the terms are pejorative and sexist for some readers, but not for others, as we noted above.

The eighteen year old target audience, although they may relish the thought of using 'friends with benefits' and 'f**k buddies' at just the right moment, need guidance on when and where these terms are most appropriate and when to avoid using them. Even words that are seemingly neutral in tone might need usage notes. Here are two more terms, *pomo* and *cancer stick*, that also need a usage note or label:

pomo (adjective) If a piece of academic writing is **pomo**, then it is postmodern and consists of long sentences that do not make a lot of sense. **Pomo** is usually found in literary criticism. *In literature class we kept on reading these pomo papers about the empowerment of the proletariat and dialectic movements in modern detective stories.* Usage: This term can be perceived as a friendly term of abuse or derisive to people who write postmodernist criticism. Readers: Please note this was written by a 20-year-old!

cancer stick (noun) When someone says **cancer stick**, they are referring to a cigarette. Look at that smoker. That **cancer stick** will kill him but he doesn't seem to care.

Usage: This term is used sarcastically and is often used by a non-smoker when criticizing a smoker. This term is not offensive, but it can annoy a smoker.

2. Labeling Derogatory Words

Norri (2000:80) described the unsystematic variation in labeling with the slang term for a French person, a *frog*. These variations include: a derogatory word for a French person (CED), an informal use that some people find offensive (COBUILD), a contemptuous name for a French person (ChD), derogatory (COD), chiefly derogatory (LDEL), offensive (OALD), offensive slang (AHD), disparaging and offensive (RHD), usu. taken to be offensive (Webster's 3rd), and a term of contempt for a Frenchman (OED). Although these usage notes sound a common theme, we can see that the perceived degree of offensiveness is a relative notion. On the other hand, the labeling that ten monolingual English dictionaries have used can be divided into two opposing groups of terms according to Norri, one indicating the user's attitude (the transmitter) and the other indicating the attitude of the person addressed (the receiver). For the speaker or user of the term, the usage labels for derogatory terms include ten terms: derisive, derogatory, disrespectful, contemptuous, sarcastic, disparaging, rude, disapproving, humorous, and jocular. For the person addressed, the receiver or listener, these dictionaries include six terms/phrases: offensive, insulting, abusive, demeaning, causing offense, and perceived as offensive. (Norri 2000:77) In the Macmillan (2002), we find 'offensive, an insulting word for a French person.' In addition, the OED has a wider range of labels: term of contempt (*frog*), term of reprobation, patronizing or mildly offensive (*darky*), term of reproach, term of abuse, contemptuous ethnic abuse (*nigger*), and a mild or even friendly term of abuse (*for clot*). (Norri 2000:84)

In addition to the usual topics for slang use, the lexicography students have added these categories since *DavgSpeak* has many terms in each.

1. sexual behavior and orientation
2. drinking behavior
3. menstruation
4. rap music (hip-hop) influenced expressions
5. terms describing emotional or physical relationships.

If the online *DavgSpeak* were consulted, the reader could see that the category menstruation has consistent usage advice, since usage is specified by gender, advisedly limiting the terms to females only. For example, we see the following:

special friend (noun) If a girl says to another girl that her **special friend** is visiting, then she is menstruating. *Leeza said her special friend was visiting so she had to buy pads.*

For *special friend*, the intra-sentential usage note inside the definition was an efficient treatment. The other four categories, however, do not have any more consistency than do the English dictionaries in their treatment of *frog*. Taking the last category, 'emotional or physical relationships', as an example, we can examine, in addition to *butt buddies* and its two synonyms above, three more terms for their relative degree of offensiveness.

flavor of the week (noun). If someone is a **flavor of the week**, then they are the latest romantic interest in another's life, and will be out of the picture shortly. *Have you seen Robin's newest flavor of the week? I gather she's in the mood for Mexican.*

Usage: This term may be mocking and derisive.

Note sense 2 in the entry for *tight* below:

tight (adjective). 1 When something is **tight**, it's extremely cool or phat. *I just installed my stereo system. Come check it out I have some tight speakers, man.* 2 When you are **tight** with someone, you have a close friendship with the person. *Jake and Ted are so tight, they do everything together.* 3 If a person is **tight**, they are both attractive and have a nice figure. *The professional beach volleyball player is tight.*

Usage: This term is neutral in tone, but sense 2 should be used with caution.

shack up (verb). 1 When a girl **shacks up** with a guy, she stays the night with him, usually in his fraternity house or apartment (or occasionally his dorm room). *Phil drove Beth back to her house for her 8 AM, because she had shacked up with him the night before.* 2 If someone is **shacking up** with a person, they are living in that person's home in a temporary arrangement. *Jill shacked up with Jerry until they broke up. Then she found her own apartment.*

Usage: This term may be offensive to some, particularly if aimed at the female who shacks up.

The reader should note that the first usage note employs the speaker's intent, 'mocking and derisive', as its focus, the second seeks a middle ground that may be illusory, and the third uses the listener's perception, 'offensive to some', as its starting point. For *flavor of the week*, the note, 'potentially hurtful and possibly offensive' could be added to shed light on the listener's perception. For *tight*, this potentially intimate relationship could be highlighted and enhanced with a more revealing example sentence. For *shack up*, the speaker's intent could be illustrated with a note such as 'mocking' or 'disrespectful'. In the lexicography class, we discussed the notions of the speaker's intentions and the listener's perceptions, and the students thought that the listener's perceptions should be the focus for most of the terms. Putting this into practice, however, was quite challenging.

3. COBUILD's Usage Note Treatment

Based on my conversations about the slang terms with the undergraduate students who took my courses on lexicography in 2001, 2003 and 2004, a more simplified system of labeling and usage notes is needed in order to give proper advice to the first year students. Since *DawgSpeak* uses sentence style definitions and the students have studied Hanks' explanations and the front matter in COBUILD at some length, it was natural for us to also look at COBUILD's treatment of usage. If we examine a number of the usage notes in COBUILD, we find two techniques. The first is to add a phrase that indicates four levels of offensiveness, depending on the degree of pejoration. For a less pejorative term, the phrase 'an informal use that some people find offensive', is used. For a very pejorative term, 'a rude and offensive use which you should avoid', is used. The second technique is to insert

wording into the sentence definition to indicate appropriate usage. This occurs in the entries for *ass*, *twerp*, and *shack up*, which are given below:

ass 2 In informal English, if you say that someone is an **ass**, you dislike them, because they say or do silly things. *He was generally disliked and regarded as a pompous ass.*

twerp If you call someone a **twerp**, you are insulting them and saying that they are silly or stupid; an informal word.

shack up. If you say that someone **has shacked up** with someone else or that two people **have shacked up** together, you disapprove of the fact that they have started living together as lovers; an informal expression. (COBUILD 2nd Ed., 1995) (my underlining)
The term, ‘Pragmatics’, is also listed in COBUILD’s third column to alert the reader. This second technique, the insertion of usage information into the definition, was attempted but the students found it to be challenging. We can see this used with two more terms in *DawgSpeak*, *queen* and *buddy*:

queen (noun) A queen is a very effeminate and bitchy gay man. *Matt is such a queen.*
Usage: The speaker’s intent is insulting.

In the second draft of this entry, the sentence definition included the usage note:

queen (noun) If someone calls a male a queen, they mean in an insulting way that he is a very effeminate and bitchy gay man. *Matt is such a queen. He wiggles his ass when he walks he’s always limp-wristed, and if you say anything to him, he’ll bitch you out.*

Another example of the difficulty can be seen with the term, *buddy*:

buddy (noun) If you refer to someone as buddy, you are making reference to a male, often speaker intent is mocking. This first draft was then changed to: ‘If a guy calls another guy buddy, he is mocking him or insulting him’. *Did you see Professor Smith today? Buddy got a bad haircut!*

Rather than incorporating the usage into the sentence definition, the students preferred to add a short sentence following the example sentence. If we look at a few examples of this in COBUILD, we can discern a four step progression in the level of offensiveness. First, we find ‘an informal word’ for *twerp*, second, some middle ground is carved out with a little hedging, ‘an informal use that some people find offensive’ for the following terms, *bastard*, *bugger*, *bugger off*, and for *frogs* (French people). Third, we find ‘a rude and offensive word’ for *slut*, ‘you should avoid this use’ for *bitch*, and ‘an offensive word’ for *whore*. In the fourth category, we find the strongly worded advice ‘a rude and offensive use which you should avoid using’ for *son of a bitch*, *prick*, and for *wanker*. In these usage notes, the readers may wonder, according to their own perceptions, how COBUILD decided that *slut* and *bitch* should have different usage notes from that for *whore*.

4. One Solution: Lengthening Usage Notes

In order to cope with the complexities of usage, many students felt that longer explanations were necessary to illuminate the tone and correct usage for many slang terms. We can examine three that they wrote, *janky*, *Azn*, and *gayborhood*, since all three take note of both the users and the target or object addressed:

janky (adjective) If you call a guy **janky**, you are saying that he is extremely unappealing, repulsive, or otherwise unattractive to the point of being gross. *This janky guy was all up on me last night at Annex. His breath smelled so bad I thought I was going to puke.*

Usage: This term is used almost exclusively by girls in a derogatory manner and is very insulting to the person being described.

Azn (noun) **Azn** is a shortened version of the word Asian used in written/internet media and chat. *Yeah, I'm straight from Korea. Azn pride!*

Usage: It is used mainly by those of Asian descent; however, it is generally meant in a mocking or sarcastic tone if used by members of other ethnic groups.

gayborhood (noun) When someone refers to a residential area as a **gayborhood**, they mean that the neighborhood community is predominately gay. *George moved into a neighborhood whose residents were predominately gay and was welcomed with a hearty 'Welcome to the gayborhood!'*

Usage: This term is mildly offensive, especially to those who are gay. Yet among gay people, the term is used jokingly and is often perceived to be humorous.

5. Conclusion

We can see that the variety of terms, ranging from *friends with benefits* to *pomo* to *gayborhood* makes any system, even COBUILD's elaborated four level system, less than effective. Even when a four level system is used with *twerp* 'an informal word' at level one and *son of a bitch*, 'a rude and offensive use which you should avoid using,' at level four, we can see that the expressions *friends with benefits*, *tight*, *butt buddies*, and *f**k buddies* may not dovetail so neatly into this system. The problem is obvious since the level of offensiveness is in the eye of the beholder. Arguably, the term *f**k buddies* is the most offensive of the terms above, but it may sound quite inoffensive to many nineteen year olds. As Norri concludes, this task is a challenging one, a challenge that Dr. Johnson felt nearly two hundred fifty years ago and one that continues to be problematic today. '[The] dictionary-maker evidently has to keep in mind a whole range of sensitive issues if the outcome is to be an accurate description of current usage'. (Norri 2000:94)

References

- Burkhanov, Igor.** 'Pragmatic Specifications: Usage, Indications, Labels, Examples; Dictionaries of Style, dictionaries of Collocations' in P. Van Sterkenburg (ed.), *A Practical Guide to Lexicography*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- McCreary, D. R.** (ed.) 2003. *DawgSpeak: The Slang Dictionary of the University of Georgia, 2nd Edition. The 3rd Edition is forthcoming*. Athens, Georgia: The University Bookstore and online at <http://online.english.uga.edu/~dawgspeak/>
- Norri, J.** 2000. 'Labeling of Derogatory Words in Some British and American Dictionaries.' *International Journal of Lexicography*. 13.2: 71-106.