

On Connotation, Denotation and All That, or: Why a *Nigger* Is Not a “Black Person”

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In my paper I intend to demonstrate that it is, in the case of monolingual dictionaries, preferable to incorporate usage labels like formal, vulgar etc. in the sense definitions themselves instead of making them almost invisible by hiding them in the margins of the entries. I will also argue that it should be attempted to make clear exactly why a lexical item is said to be e.g. humorous.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades there has been a growing awareness that language can hurt, especially those who are vulnerable because they belong to suppressed minorities (or even powerless majorities) or to groups who deviate from the norm because of their sexual orientation, physical appearance or anything else which makes them stand out from their surroundings. As we all know, language is a perfect instrument for abuse and insult, denigration, scorn, belittlement and any other kind of iniquity. We will have to accept that such attitudes will never go away, but we do have to make the effort to show them up for what they are, and the least lexicographers can do is to point out that certain words¹ are less than objective descriptions, and reveal more about their users and their attitudes. To restrict myself initially to the five main English learner’s dictionaries, it should be noted that they have been outdoing each other in political (and lexicographical) correctness: it is very hard these days not to notice that certain words are “offensive” or “taboo” and “should not be used”.

2. A case study: the word *nigger* and similar terms

Let us look at a word from an extremely sensitive area: racist terms (or “ethnic slurs”), and see how dictionaries have coped with them. The word I would like to focus on here is: *nigger*. We read the following definitions: “(*taboo, slang*) a very offensive word for a black person” (OALD7), “*taboo* a very offensive word for a black person. Do not use this word” (LDOCE4), “OFFENSIVE a black person” (CALD), “**Nigger** is an extremely offensive word for a black person. (VERY OFFENSIVE)” (COBUILD4), “*offensive* an extremely offensive word for a black person” (MEDAL). There is no escaping the conclusion that this word will offend, for all five use the word “offensive”, either as a label or incorporated in the definition, and occasionally both strategies are employed simultaneously. Another remark to be made is that, with the exception of CALD, the rest call it “*a word for a black person*” (my emphasis), and not simply “a black person” (CALD). This is significant, because a totally harmless word like *book* does not receive this treatment: a *book* is what the definitions say it is, and is not “a word for”.

What is also intriguing is that none of the five definitions so far tells us exactly why the word *nigger* is so offensive: the dictionaries wisely warn learners off this obnoxious word, but do not explain at all *why* it is so obnoxious. Since the word is “in”, it is obviously a word that is used and should be known, but *who* use it, and *why*, and *what* is the offense? For, clearly, there seems to be nothing wrong in stating that a person is black—or is there?

¹ It should here and in the following pages be remembered that where I informally use ‘word’ I in fact also mean “lexical item”, which of course may be a multi-word lexical item.

Let us, for enlightenment, look at another obnoxious word: *slut*. This is variously defined as: “(disapproving, offensive) 1a woman who has many sexual partners 2a woman who is very untidy or lazy” (OALD7), “*taboo informal* a very offensive word for a woman who has sex with a lot of different people. Do not use this word” (LDOCE4), “(SEXUALLY ACTIVE WOMAN)... VERY INFORMAL DISAPPROVING a woman who has sexual relationships with a lot of men without any emotional involvement; (LAZY WOMAN)... UK VERY INFORMAL DISAPPROVING a woman who is habitually untidy and lazy” (CALD), “People sometimes refer to a woman as a **slut** when they consider her to be very immoral in her sexual behaviour. (OFFENSIVE) *disapproval*” (COBUILD4),² “*offensive* an insulting word for a woman whose sexual behaviour is considered immoral **a.** an insulting word for a woman who looks dirty and untidy” (MEDAL).

Here we do see some indications why the word is considered “offensive”: we hear about disapproval (OALD7, CALD, COBUILD4) directly in the labels, and more implicitly in what most people will presumably qualify as descriptions with negative impact: “many sexual partners” and “very untidy or lazy” (OALD7), “a woman who has sex with a lot of different people” (LDOCE4), “a woman who has sexual relationships with a lot of men without any emotional involvement” (CALD), “very immoral in her sexual behaviour” (COBUILD4), “a woman whose sexual behaviour is considered immoral” and “dirty and untidy” (MEDAL). Here LDOCE4 seems the least clear in its moral condemnation, but all five of them do give more or less clear reasons for the negative impact of *slut*, even in their definitions. Lastly, two dictionaries distinguish again between the human being herself and the “word for” her (LDOCE4, MEDAL), while COBUILD4 speaks of “refer to”, which may amount to the same.

With respect to the labels/words *offensive* and *disapproving* it should be added that for the former it is not made clear *who* is offended (the person referred to or the person addressed), but that at least the speaker must be assumed to want to create a certain effect in his interlocutor(s), whereas in the case of the latter it is the speaker himself who expresses the effect the concept symbolised by this word has on him or her. We can, in other words, already make a difference between *speaker-oriented* and *interlocutor-oriented* labels.

Returning to *nigger*: why is *slut* given such a different treatment? As we all know, *nigger* derives from Spanish *negro*, and simply originally means “black person”, but (see online *Wiktionary*):

The term “nigger” has taken on pejorative qualities as it implies not only darkness of skin, but a *general lack of intelligence and sophistication*. At the time of the word’s origin, various English speaking North American settlers who set cultural standards considered black people *fundamentally inferior and less civilized*. The term is generally considered offensive to black people not only because it singles them out on the basis of their skin colour, but also, because of its origin, *it carries connotations of slavery, inferiority and oppression* [my emphasis].

I think we have here hit on a major difference: in the case of *slut* it is not so easy to associate directly observable physical characteristics with the intended slur, whereas in the case of *nigger* the very skin colour is an extremely convenient peg to hang on all kinds of (in this case implicit) prejudices. If this is true, there should be more racial slurs not only so defined, but even signifying a physical characteristic directly.³ Let us look at *darky/-ie*, which as an ethnic slur also obviously refers to a physical characteristic. We find the following for this: “(taboo, old-fashioned) a very offensive word for a black person” (OALD7), “*taboo old-fashioned* a very offensive word for a black person. Do not use this word.” (LDOCE4), “OFFENSIVE OLD-FASHIONED a person who has black or brown skin” (CALD), “*offensive* an extremely offensive word for a black person” (MEDAL), COBUILD4: not in. Here, CALD is, again, the

² No second sense distinguished!

³ It is, by the way, questionable if today the word *nigger* is still understood as having the etymological meaning “black person” itself, so that the definition seems to be slanted rather towards its etymology and less to its true meaning.

exception in not using the phrase “word for”. But again the definition proper is focused on the colour of the skin, and not on what is really meant by this word, and again it remains unclear why the word is so insulting. We are only told *that* it is insulting. My hunch is that the extreme sensitivity of these slurs coupled with a certain amount of political correctness on the part of the lexicographer, is responsible for *not* defining what these words really mean. In addition, moreover, in the past these views of “inferior” races may have been felt to be so self-evident, that lexicographers did not even bother to put them into words.

Now, if there is a word like *darky*, there must also be offensive words for white people, one of course being *whitey*: “(slang) an offensive word for a white person, used by black people” (OALD7),⁴ “an offensive word for a white person or white people in general” (LDOCE4), “OFFENSIVE a white person” (CALD),⁵ COBUILD4 not in, “*Am E* an offensive word for a white person” (MEDAL). Interestingly, OALD7 is the only one to add “used by black people”, though it does not add “used by white people” after *darky*. This is a little strange, since OALD7 does not add, after *nigger*, “used by white people”.⁶

It is, however, an important addition, since this fact is part of the meaning of the word: it is how members of one group refer negatively to members of another group.⁷ The phrase “used by black people” is significant in that it points up one of the major aspects of ethnic slurs: social exclusion or social distancing (carried out actively by those in power, or suffering this passively by those not in power), and more generally: feeling or wanting to feel different from or better than other groups because of fear, envy (moral, intellectual, military, religious, cultural, economic, etc.), superiority. By then, we are of course entering the field of slurs in general.

This means that to gather the precise meaning of such words from their definitions, we should in the relevant cases be told (1) that the word is used by members of one group to refer to members of another group, and (2) that the insulting, offensive, rude etc. character of such references derives from the semantics on which the judgmental feelings of the group using such words are based. Thus, a first attempt at a more complete definition of *nigger* might run like this: “an offensive and insulting word for a black person, belonging to an inferior race, as believed by some white people who use this word”.

The following remarks can be made about this provisional definition:

- “offensive and insulting”: such and similar terms—which can in addition be given as labels, as some dictionaries tend to do—describe both the intentions of the users of these words and the reactions of those to whom they are applied as well as of others disagreeing with the semantics of this word. We might interpret “insulting” as the speaker’s PURPOSE and “offensive” as the EFFECT in the hearer.
- “word for”: perhaps it is a good idea to use this phrase for those cases where the semantic definition is to be shown to be subjective, judgmental and/or attitudinal, as opposed to definitions of words that can be described in much more objective ways (e.g. *book*). Hence this phrase might be used as a SIGNAL OF ATTITUDINALITY; this is more like a metatheoretical device than part of the semantic description proper, as in a way all words are “words for”.

⁴ Exactly the same definition is given for the practically synonymous term of abuse *honky*.

⁵ Again, the only one to leave out “a word for”.

⁶ Morphologically, it should be noted that *whitey* shares with *darky* the diminutive ending, which often has pejorative overtones.

⁷ This may explain why such words are sometimes seized on by the group the slur was intended for, and is then used in a non-insulting *reversed* sense, often even proudly it seems in order to stress group identity and pride in belonging to that group: the word *nigger* as used by black people themselves seems to be a case in point. A well-known example from Dutch history is the name *geuzen*, from French *gueux* ‘beggars’, a name applied by the Spanish authorities in Brussels to the rebels during the early years (1566 and after) of the rebellion against Spain, but which they adopted as a proud epithet.

- “a black person”: the more “objective” part of the semantics—if one likes to put it like that, it is the “denotative” part. However, as remarked above, it depends on the user’s point of view whether this is considered the more objective part. To racists, being “black” may well imply more than just skin colour. That is, the prejudices of some people will not make a difference between (informally) the “referent” and their ideas ABOUT the referent—which is obviously precisely the problem prejudices cause.
- “belonging to an inferior race”: this is the subjective part of the definition, see below. These words are ultimately the reason for the rude or insulting character of the word. This would by some people perhaps be called the “connotative” part of the definition. However, it seems to me that for those using this term this is part of the core meaning of the word *nigger*, and for those people there is nothing incidental, inessential or subjective about it. Therefore, this part of the definition might be called the JUDGEMENTAL BASIS rather than the connotative part.
- “as believed by”: signals the subjective and attitudinal character of the previous part of the definition. It has a similar function to “a word for”.
- “some white people who use this word”: this is an important aspect of the semantics of slurs; it should be made clear *who use* these slurs, and *why* (see above). These words constitute the USER GROUP DEFINITION. If necessary and possible, the exact meaning of ‘some’ should also be clarified. Obviously, when the word is adopted by others, e.g. by the “niggers” themselves, the content of the word changes, and may in fact be reversed, as remarked on in note 7. This phenomenon becomes easier to explain in the framework adopted above: since people normally try to keep some self-esteem, they will strip off aspects of meaning such as the insult, and reverse or ridicule negative judgements, making the word into something like a proud and defiant badge of honour, also showing group solidarity (cf. Landau 2001: 233).

Briefly summarising, after our discussion of *nigger* we have now the following categories in the semantic definition of *nigger*: the intentions of the user and the reactions of the addressee; the signal for the non-objective character of the word in the phrases “a word for” and “as believed by”; the objective part of the semantics of the word, contrasted with the non-objective part of the semantics, as signalled by the phrase “as believed by”; and an indication of the group holding the subjective views.

3. A more general perspective

From the wider perspective of how people and phenomena are pigeonholed in various other ways, we might here think of e.g. WHITES (American whites etc.), AUSTRALIANS, IRISH, AMERICANS, WOMEN, CHILDREN, OLD PEOPLE, NON-STANDARD SPEAKERS, members of a particular SOCIAL STRATUM (think of sociolects etc.), speakers of REGIONAL DIALECTS (so labels like regional etc.), YOUNG PEOPLE (think i.a. of slang perhaps), OLD PEOPLE (old-fashioned, obsolescent, old use?), MEN/WOMEN/CHILDREN etc. With respect to the user’s *intentions* (or perhaps more generally attitudes) we might think of labels like (DIS)APPROVING (PEJORATIVE), SCORN, CONTEMPT, DERISION, DISPARAGEMENT, DEROGATION (DEROGATORY) etc., and also OBSCENE (if the intention is to shock), VULGAR (*idem*), while the *effect on the listener* would be summarised in e.g. INSULTING, OFFENSIVE, but the borderline between intention and desired effect is not always easily drawn in the case of these labels.

It should, however, be realised that there are more (categories of) labels, or possible labels, not mentioned so far, and on the other hand many more feelings and attitudes that have not so far been given traditional labels. Let us look at some of these various categories of feelings.

It seems to me that when it comes to user’s attitudes, feelings and hence also indications of user groups there are many more things to be said, and that in many cases there are no traditional labels associated with these. Consider the word *babe*, defined in OALD7 as “(slang) a word used to address a young woman, or your wife, husband or lover, usually expressing affection but sometimes considered offensive if used by a man to a woman he does not know.” The

traditional labels that can be extracted here are of course ‘slang’ and ‘offensive’, but is there a commonly used label ‘affectionate’, which it seems to me clearly is a category of attitudes that is not unique to this word? And what are we to do with the very specific definition of the user group ‘a man to a woman he does not know’, which we might generalise to ‘a word used to someone one does not know’? From the other learner’s dictionaries emerge familiar labels like ‘spoken’ and ‘informal’, and also ‘American spoken’ and ‘American informal’, but also phrases ‘an affectionate way of addressing x’ and similar phrases. In the case of *girlie* we find ‘not polite, an offensive word used by men when talking to a woman’ (LDOCE4), which explicitly draws attention to how one type of user addresses a class of persons. Under *bitch* we find something new in LDOCE4 ‘an insulting word for a woman that you dislike or think is unpleasant—also used humorously between friends’, where the part after the dash give very precise information who uses it to whom for what purpose: *humour*, which occasionally is honoured with the label ‘hum(orous)’. In the case of *tart* COBUILD4, in addition to the label ‘disapproving’, uses the word ‘criticise’ in the definition itself, which seems to me to be a judgment or attitude that undoubtedly will apply in more cases. Under *old codger* we find OALD7 ‘*old codger* an informal way of referring to an old man that shows that you do not respect him’, where this is in addition to the label ‘informal’ itself, and also indicates an attitude of *disrespect* (also in COBUILD4 here), which is no doubt another recurrent type of attitude. The abusive ethnic slur *frog*, called informal and offensive, is given the additional warning by LDOCE4 ‘Do not use this word’. This warning it also gives for e.g. *fanny* and *dyke*, but then these are also called ‘taboo’. COBUILD4 tends to use the word ‘approve’ quite a lot where the others do not tend to do so, as in *austere* ‘If you describe something as **austere**, you **approve** of its plain and simple appearance’. It seems to me that the label ‘approving’ is only infrequently used in other dictionaries. There are the opposite cases of disapproval in COBUILD4: ‘If you say that someone **is associating with** another person or group of people, you mean they are spending a lot of time in the company of people you do not **approve** of’, which shows that this expression has a negative impact.

However, these do not by a long chalk exhaust all possible label-like characterisations in sense definitions. Words may be used to express the speaker’s feelings and attitudes like anger, hurt, indignation, compassion, irreverence, a jocular, humorous or facetious attitude, and so forth. The words used to the hearer may try to express esteem, a polite or impolite or rude attitude, a sexist or racist attitude. Perhaps the label ‘euphemistic/euphemism’ could also be considered to belong here, since it seems intended to spare the listener’s feelings. The speaker may use words that try to induce in the hearer feelings of shame, laughter, compassion, offense, shock (taboo?).

Apart from all these feeling-related descriptions there are characterisations of words which need not be based on the speaker’s intentions (though they may be). We might think of words being restricted temporally: old-fashioned, dated, archaic, obsolete, old use. There are also words that are geographically restricted: regional, Irish, American English etc. Next we may mention words restricted to a certain subject, like the specialised terminology of astronomy, science, chemistry, physics, sports, medicine etc. and indications of words restricted to what is commonly called a particular ‘style’ or perhaps ‘genre’: literary, formal, informal, written, spoken, colloquial, vulgar, obscene, literary, poetic, etc., of which ‘written, spoken’ may also be used as labels to describe the channel of communication: spoken, written, ‘texting’ etc.

This leaves us with labels like ‘slang, argot, cant’, which assign words so labelled to a certain part of the vocabulary, but by doing so also seem to simultaneously define the user group, that is, speakers outside the ‘mainstream’ users of language. To some extent words so labelled have the added function of group strengthening and group defining: they confirm and express solidarity, the ‘us’ feeling (cf. Van der Meer 2005).

4. The necessity of labels

The reason why I have discussed all the above label-like qualifications is that this shows that covering all this information by means of labels only is not very effective, since we would need too many of them. Numerous labels, often even abbreviated, are a strain on users’ memories.

This, coupled with the well-known tendency to ignore them, does not make labels an effective way of conveying information. Since in my view, the information contained in labels is an essential part of a lexical item's semantic definition and certainly not something marginal (as labels literally are!), it seems much preferable to me to incorporate this information straightaway in the sense definitions themselves. For, I stress again, the offensive character of the word *nigger* is part of its semantic core, while parking it in a label tends to blur the obnoxious part of its semantics. Moreover, I repeat, labels tend to be ignored, especially when they are abbreviated.

It should, additionally, not be forgotten that in many cases the label, i.e. alternatively the label-replacing part of the definition, depends on the point of view of the dictionary, which is of course the point of view of the compilers. Thus, "regional" or "non-standard" are typically stances taken by the standard-speaking compilers, who may therefore in many respects not be typical of the entire language community. Nor need many "offensive" or "vulgar" words necessarily be offensive to certain groups of speakers, but only to those who might be termed "politically correct" and who in this respect wield a certain amount of power over the language if they happen to be lexicographers.

5. Labels or sense definitions? Some more cases studies

I will now look at a number of words with "attitudinal" semantic characteristics to see if we can glean any useful methods for ridding ourselves completely of labels by means of incorporating their semantic import in the definitions themselves.

First of all I would like to have a look at words that used to be variously labelled as "formal", "old-fashioned" or "euphemistic". An example could be *member* for "penis", in LDOCE4 labelled "formal", but in OALD7 we read instead "People say "member" to avoid saying "penis". Here, as it were, we are told in commendably simple but clear label-free terms that if we want to avoid a word that might raise some eyebrows, there is a way out, even though the Latin word *penis* itself is relatively harmless, as opposed to less polite words like *cock* or *prick*, both of which are labelled as "taboo, slang". If OALD7 had been consistent it would have said in the latter cases something like "an impolite or rude word for *penis*", using the technique suggested above of using "word for" followed by the more objective "default" word *penis*.⁸

Words like *penis*, and other expressions for body parts and bodily functions, though Latin really, are still slightly embarrassing, and therefore people keep looking for less risky circumlocutions, as for instance for *urinate*, which may be replaced by *relieve oneself*, defined in OALD7 as "a polite way of referring to going to the toilet", while CALD has "POLITE WORD FOR urinate". Under *piss*, OALD7 defines it with the default term "to urinate", subsequently suggesting "a more polite way of expressing this is "go to the toilet / loo" (BrE), "go to the bathroom" (NAMe) or "to go" ", which is basically again the "word for" technique.

Another area that often causes embarrassment or pain are death and dying. Even though the word *die* itself might be considered a relatively harmless default term, it is often avoided by means of less direct terms, such as *pass away*, in OALD7 defined as "to die. People say "pass away" to avoid saying "die", and LDOCE4 has "to die—use this when you want to avoid saying the word *die*". Obviously, less sensitive expressions like *croak* or *kick the bucket* etc. are often provided with labels like 'slang', "humorous" or "informal".

A wonderful label-free example of how to deal with fuzzy and woolly indirect circumlocutions we find in LDOCE4 under *massage parlour*: "a brothel (=place where people pay to have sex—used to pretend that it is not a brothel", where again the default term is given (*brothel*, with the implied "word for" technique), the replacing expression and the reason for this.

⁸ I expressly use the term "default" here because the definition "word for" should imply there is an alternative word, or expression, for the to be defined item.

People have always been great inventors of terms to replace more direct words they wish to avoid for reasons given above as well as of terms they prefer to use for other reasons, such as the desire to be rude, to insult or to sound jokey or funny. An example of the first category are rude words for part of the body or rude references to certain despised nationalities, such as *gob*, OALD7 “(BrE) a rude way of referring to a person’s mouth” (with again a kind of “word for” definition, rather lamely labelled as ‘slang’ in CALD, and *yid*, OALD7 “(taboo, slang) a very offensive word for a Jewish person”, while an example of the second category might be *sleuth* defined in OALD7 as “(old-fashioned or humorous) a person who investigates crimes SYN DETECTIVE: *an amateur sleuth* ◊ *Agatha Christie’s super sleuth, Hercule Poirot*”, though again, as said before, the reason why this is “humorous” is not given, though I would still consider this part of its core sense.

Though I have so far pretended that the “word for” technique for words with an attitudinal “handle” is always available, there are many cases where this is not the case, because there simply is not a default term. Take for example *bluestocking*, for which there is no default word, but only a definition. Thus, LDOCE4 defines it as “a woman who is more interested in ideas and studying than in parties, men etc.—sometimes used to show disapproval”, where the—for some male chauvinists—hidden or implicit disapproval in the first part of the definition is made explicit in the part after the dash. CALD does something similar: “OLD-FASHIONED an intelligent and highly educated woman who spends most of her time studying and is therefore not approved of by some men”. If there is disapproval, there is of course also approval and it especially COBUILD4 that incorporates this attitudinal aspect in its definitions, as in *austere*, “If you describe something as **austere**, you approve of its plain and simple appearance”. COBUILD4 chooses to be very explicit, where the others imply this approval. OALD7 says for *comeuppance*: (*informal*) a punishment for sth bad that you have done, that other people feel you really deserve”, with an implicit judgment of approval, while COBUILD4 again consistently spells it out: “If you say that someone has got their **comeuppance**, you approve of the fact that they have been punished or have suffered for something wrong that they have done”. If the societies using these dictionaries can still rely on a shared system of norms and values, such judgments need perhaps not be spelled out. Take the case of *thoroughgoing*: a society valuing thoroughness and attention to detail will implicitly read “approval” into the OALD7 definition “very thorough; looking at every detail”, and does not need this explicitly stated, as in COBUILD4. Incidentally, OALD7 frequently makes this attitudinal judgment explicit by means of a label “approving”, as in *thoughtful* and *tireless*.

However, in the following cases it does often seem quite possible to use the “word for” defining technique, which would then allow us to incorporate the label, or words of similar meaning, in the definition and drop the label itself in cases like the following:⁹ *nonstandard, informal, slang, vulgar, obscene, offensive, disparaging, obsolete, archaic, literary, spoken, written, poetic, regional, chiefly American etc., dialect, Canadianism etc., old-fashioned, obsolete, facetious, humorous*. It is obviously to be understood that this technique means that there is a kind of (“neutral”) default term which can replace the to be defined lexical item. Thus, in a British dictionary *fall* or *faucet* would have to be defined as “American word for *autumn*” or respectively for “*tap*”. If there is no default term, despite the fact that for example the label *slang* or *dialect* is used, this would most likely mean that the label *slang* is incorrectly or too vaguely used. If the RHD defines *gremmie* as “a novice surfer or one with poor form” and in addition calls it “slang”, this is not in accordance with the notion often accepted (Van der Meer 2005) that slang words are an *alternative* vocabulary, used by designated groups—for the simple reason there is no alternative term: it is simply a kind of technical or insider term. And if a dictionary were to include e.g. a default-less dialectal word, this would either mean that strictly speaking the word should not have been listed in a standard language source *or* that it has been borrowed into the standard language and has consequently lost its genuine dialectal status.

⁹ Obviously, it might also be decided to keep labels in conjunction with the definitions themselves.

In all other cases (when “word for” is not really usable) label-like information should still be incorporated into the definition. Thus, CALD defines *amazon* as “*humorous* a tall strong or forceful woman”,¹⁰ but there is apparently no default lexical item, for this is a definition. If we in such cases wish to incorporate the label-based information in the definition, we might try something like “a WORD USED AS A HUMOROUS REFERENCE TO a tall strong or forceful woman”. However, the reason why this is “humorous” is—despite my desideratum at the start of this paper—not made clear. In principle this would not be impossible here, with a reference to Greek history and the world of the ancients, but it would come at the cost of a lot of space. It should be decided on a case by case basis whether such information is needed. Personally, I think that *nigger* deserves such an explanation because of the extreme sensitivity of such words, while it might be skipped in cases like *amazon*.

It should at any rate be clear that many of the above labels (e.g. *informal*, *literary*, *old-fashioned* etc.) may be used in both “word for” definitions and in other types of definitions, depending on the availability of a replacing (default) lexical item. Thus, *afters* may be “an informal WORD FOR *dessert*”, but *airy-fairy* is to be defined as “an adjective USED TO INFORMALLY DESCRIBE something as not practical or based on reality” (based on CALD).

6. Conclusion

In the above I hope to have made a convincing case for dropping labels carrying semantic information, especially in learner’s dictionaries.¹¹ Labels provide information that is strictly speaking an integrated part of the semantics of lexemes, which should therefore not be relegated to the sidelines, with as the undesirable consequence that they are easily overlooked. It was also pointed out that labels are frequently unsupported by the evidence in the sense definitions proper, as in the case of *offensive*. Labels are furthermore something dictionaries do not seem to agree on: no two dictionaries use the same set of labels nor do they define them in the same way, let alone always use them consistently or correctly. Finally, there are many more semantic elements that would with equal justice qualify for label status but have never been accorded it. All this is a good reason for reappraising the use and effectiveness of labels. My suggestion is: abolish them and put their information where it belongs—in the sense definitions themselves.

¹⁰ Interestingly, OALD7 calls this “literary”.

¹¹ Therefore labels with grammatical information like “noun”, “verb” etc. are best kept as such.

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