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A Study in Words

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An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Writing and Linguistics.

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Carol Jamison

ABSTRACT
The etymology of words can provide insight into the language we speak today, explaining why certain words possess derogatory meanings, or simply why they hold their current definitions. C.S. Lewis published *Studies in Words* in 1960, and it contained an examination of the etymologies of various English words, explaining changes in meaning and usage throughout time. This thesis is structured similarly, exploring the etymologies and usage history of different English words, providing context for their modern meanings and an explanation of the importance behind understanding their histories.

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I. Acknowledgements

Throughout my time working on this thesis, I have received support, feedback, and assistance from a variety of individuals.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mentor, Dr. Carol Jamison, for her constant aid with this thesis. Your enthusiasm for the topic, your flexibility about meeting times, and your thoughts on every draft were beyond helpful. Without your courses at Georgia Southern, this thesis would not exist in the same manner it does today.

Dr. Martha Hughes, my mentor for my other thesis, was also a constant source of help for this thesis. Her sister, Rita Hughes Quade, and her book club, Read Meet, brought to my attention the first and longest section of this thesis, the history of the word “pecker.” Thank you all for giving me an encouraging start for this thesis.

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I would like to thank my friends (you know who you are) for their emotional support and encouragement throughout this project. You all listened to me rant and rave about this thesis for far longer than you needed to.

II. Introduction

This thesis is structured as a detailed history of a selection of words, with examples of how their meanings have changed over time. The words detailed herein are a selection of words given to me by friends, family, professors, and colleagues. Upon receiving these words, I performed brief research into each word to determine the richness of their history, and kept the words which had the most complex or interesting backgrounds. My main inspiration was C.S. Lewis's *Studies in Words*, which follows a similar structure.

I first read *Studies in Words* in late high school. My interest in language began with J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and his detailed documents describing his Elvish languages. I found the works of C.S. Lewis after learning of his close relationship with J.R.R. Tolkien. *Studies in Words* was my first experience with historical linguistics. Reading the histories of those words showed me how little I knew about the history of English. I started studying linguistics in college and had my first academic introduction to historical linguistics through two classes: Semantics and History of the English Language, both of which I took from Dr. Carol Jamison, who mentored me on this project. These classes helped me develop a better understanding not only of the history of English in general, but also the nuances of the words we use on a daily basis.

I hope to share my fascination with the history of words, etymology, through this thesis. I've selected a handful of words with rich histories to detail here. I've separated them into two sections based on the emotional weight of the word. The first section consists of words whose histories are interesting and relatively unemotional, such as "stripe" and "pecker." I refer to these words as "uninflammatory words." The second section contains words with which some readers may be less comfortable; these include the slurs "queer" and "faggot," as well as the varied

acronyms for gender and sexual minority groups. I call these words "inflammatory words." Sensitivity readers participated in the editing of this thesis to prevent any accidental offense while writing about these inflammatory words. Within each section, the subsections are listed in the order in which I researched them[1].

Understanding the history of words helps in comprehending the history of a society. Developing knowledge of the context behind words like "queer" and "faggot" can help aid in understanding why those words can be considered offensive and are generally avoided by a large portion of the population. The history of English shaped the way that the language is today, and knowing where our language comes from helps us to understand where we are now and where we will be going.

III. Sources

I rely heavily on several historical sources for my research, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Corpus of Historical American English*, and the Google Books Ngram Viewer. A familiarity with what these sources are and how they function is essential background information since I rely upon them the most. Additionally, I reference the *Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé*, which means "computerized treasure of the French language." This source is a digitized version of the *Trésor de la Langue Française*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is a historical dictionary of English which lists every definition of every word since work on the dictionary began in 1857 ("The Oxford English Dictionary: Oxford Languages"). As such, it provides a living history of each word, providing examples of usage and brief information about the words's origins. The *Oxford English*

[1] The original *Studies in Words* by C.S. Lewis is formatted similarly. Presenting the words in the order in which I researched them shows the same progression and journey I took during my research with the reader.

Dictionary is the de-facto historical dictionary for the English language. It contains over 2.4 million quotations, all with dates, to "present in alphabetical series the words that have formed the English vocabulary from the time of the earliest records down to the present day, with all the relevant facts concerning their form, sense-history, and etymology." It has had two major editions, the first and second, and several expansive supplements published between both editions. The editors are currently working on the third edition of the dictionary, with all updates since the second edition live on their website at oed.com ("The Oxford English Dictionary")[2].

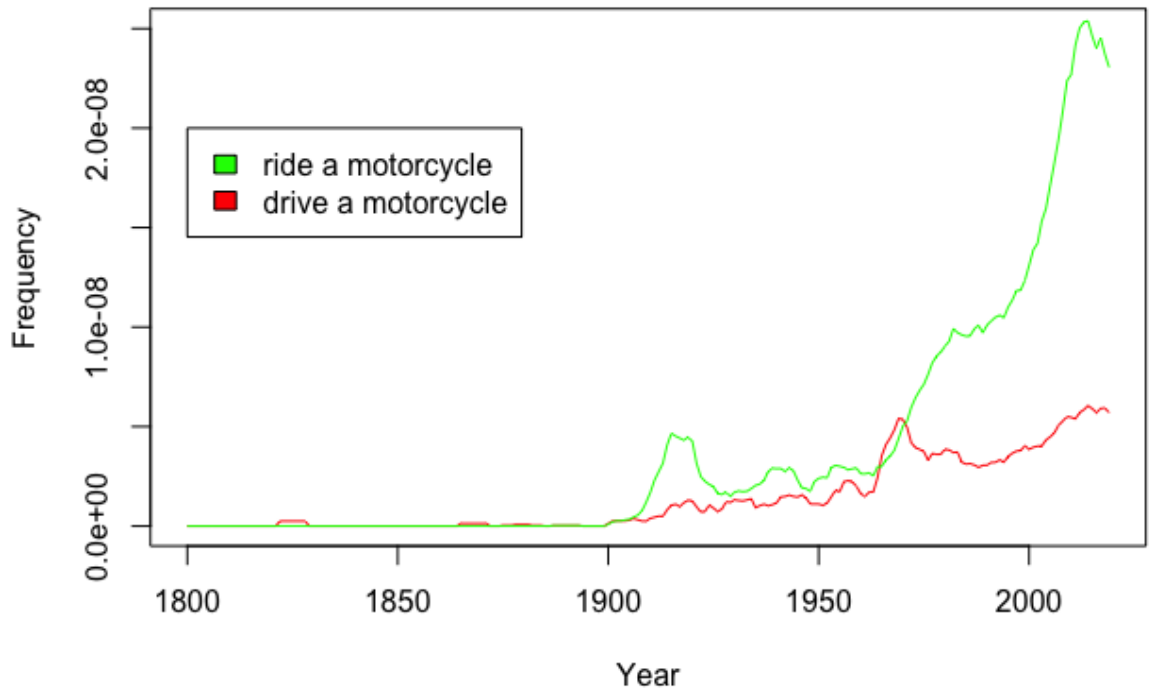
The *Corpus of Historical American English* is a searchable database of American English texts. This can provide sample quotations with more context than the *Oxford English Dictionary* may afford and can provide a greater variety of samples. Additionally, there may be instances where a word is used in the *Corpus of Historical American English* in a way not listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*; a definition must reach a certain level of popularity before admission into the *Oxford English Dictionary*, whereas the *Corpus of Historical American English* merely provides English-language texts with no rules about frequency. The corpus contains 475 million words and their contexts – 197 times greater than the number of quotations available in the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("Overview").

Finally, the Google Books Ngram Viewer is similar to the *Corpus of Historical American English* in that it provides searchable databases of texts in various languages. However, instead of providing context and usage examples, it provides graphs showing usage frequency over time, as a percentage of the total text in the database. The frequency is determined by the number of times the word(s) appear in all of the documents contained in Google Books. These charts can show when words come into and out of popularity, and help provide a greater understanding of

[2] J.R.R. Tolkien, whose works introduced me to linguistics, worked briefly on the staff of the Oxford English Dictionary before he began his work in creative writing (Hammond).

which meanings are more popular. For example, the Ngram viewer[3] shows that "ride a motorcycle" is significantly more common than "drive a motorcycle," though the latter was more popular from about 1964 to 1970 ("Drive a motorcycle, ride a motorcycle"). See Figure 1.

Figure 1



The *Trésor de la Langue Française* is a dictionary of the French language containing words from the 19th and 20th centuries, listing etymologies for about half of its entries. This dictionary was digitized and made available online at atilf.atilf.fr. It is the result of extensive linguistic research into the history and usage of the French languages beginning in the 1960s.

[3] I used the software RStudio to gather this data and display it in a consistent and legible manner.

The *Trésor de la Langue Française* was initially published between 1971 and 1994. The *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé* is a digitized version of that original publication ("Historique").

UrbanDictionary.com is an online, publicly edited slang dictionary. As such, it contains modern definitions of words not yet entered into non-slang dictionaries like the *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* or the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is used by linguists as a reference for modern language definitions and usage examples (Ro). Research has shown that care must be taken when using *UrbanDictionary.com*; since it is publicly editable, some definitions may not accurately reflect the evolution of modern slang (Ngueyn).

Several times throughout this thesis, I perform statistical analysis on word usage frequency. The two most common tests I perform are a two-sample t-test and a correlation test. A two-sample t-test takes two separate groups of data and determines if there is a statistically significant difference between the averages of the two groups. It does not inform about the nature of the difference; it is not possible from a t-test alone to determine which group has a higher or lower average. I follow these t-tests with a correlation test, which determines if there is a correlation between two values, such as time and usage. This information shows if there is a positive or negative correlation, or if there is no significant correlation at all. I use this to show there is an increase in usage before and after certain dates; if the t-test shows a difference in usage before and after a certain date, I can use a correlation test to show if the usage increases or decreases before/after that same date.

IV. Uninflammatory Words

A. Pecker, Peck, and Pecque

The word "pecker" in modern usage, predominantly in the United States, is a euphemistic term for male genitalia ("Pecker, n."). That meaning of the word did not arrive in the English language until the early 1900s. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s entry for the word "pecker" in this sense is dated to 1902. This timeline is corroborated by the *Corpus of Historical American English*, which has several occurrences of this usage beginning in the mid-1930s.

However, beginning in the middle of the 20th century, the *Corpus of Historical American English* shows the word "pecker" appearing in the phrase "keep your pecker up." This phrase, though, does not carry any sexual meaning; based on context, it means "keep your spirits up." In fact, this phrase is older than the euphemistic meaning of "pecker," with the *Oxford English Dictionary* dating the phrase to 1845. This phrase is chiefly British and not antiquated. It appears in *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* and *Collins Dictionary*, with neither marking the phrase as archaic. The phrase is used less frequently than the word in isolation[4]. The Google Books Ngram data provides information to create visual representation of their usage over time (see Figure 2).

The origins of the word trace back to the 1300s, and are tied to the history of the word "peck." Its earliest meaning was "to take, gather, or acquire," being used around the same time as the meaning "to strike with a beak" ("Peck, v.1"). This latter sense is still used today, and is the primary verb definition in *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* and *Collins Dictionary*. The word "pecker" entered English by derivation as a concrete noun, adding the -er suffix to become a

[4] Performing a Welch Two Sample t-test on the Google Ngram data for "pecker" and the phrase "keep * pecker up" shows a p-value of 3.174212e-72 which is less than the $\alpha = 0.05$; the average usages for the two words are significantly different. The average usage for the word "pecker" is 6.401518e-08, and the average usage for the phrase "keep * pecker up" is 1.304203e-09. Thus, the word is more common than the phrase. All calculations performed in RStudio.

"tool or instrument," specifically, "an implement for pecking" ("Pecker, n."). However, it is unclear how the word generalized into vulgar slang.

The verb "peck" has a myriad of other meanings, both as a noun and a verb, related to food. It can mean to eat sparingly, fussingly, or without interest. This meaning appeared in the 17th century as a verb ("Peck, v.1"). The *Corpus of Historical American English* does not extend to the 17th century, though it does show more context and supports this meaning of the phrasal verb "to peck at." This in turn spawned the noun "peck" meaning "food," but this usage is difficult to support using the *Corpus of Historical American English*, where most entries for "peck" are dominated by "a peck on the cheek" and yet another meaning: a unit of measure.

The phrase "a peck on the cheek" rose in popularity beginning in the early 1980s, with rapid adoption beginning in the mid-1990s ("A peck on the cheek"). Figure 3 shows the popularity of this phrase over time. This phrase derives from the verb meaning a light kiss ("Peck, v.1"). The verb is derived from the noun "peck" meaning "a light or perfunctory kiss," and finally can be traced to one of the earliest meanings, "to strike with a beak," or "an act of pecking" ("Peck, n.3").

All of these meanings and words are ultimately derived from the Middle French word "pic" meaning "pickaxe," which itself is of disputed origin, perhaps coming from the Latin "pīcus," meaning "woodpecker," or perhaps a Germanic borrowing of unknown origin ("Pike, n.1"). However, the final sense of the word "peck," meaning a unit of measure, is historically unrelated to the other meanings and derivations. It arrived in English in the late 13th century by way of Anglo-Norman "pec," which was a unit of measure for dry goods, which itself came from Latin "pecca," also denoting a measure of dry goods ("Peck, n.1").

A homophone of "peck" is the French word "pecque,"[5] meaning "a stupid or pretentious young girl or woman[6] ("Pecque"). This word is archaic; that is, not used commonly in modern French[7]. Despite the word having the same pronunciation as "peck," the two words are not related. The *Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé* shows the word attained this meaning in 1630, appearing in Jean Chapelain's translation of *Guzmán de Alfarache* by Mateo Alemán, a Spanish-language novel first published in 1599 ("Mateo Alemán"). "Pecque," in turn, comes from the older word "pec," meaning "silly, stupid"[8]. This word originated in the 13th century, and itself was derived from the Latin word "pecus, -udis," meaning "stupid or stupid man,"[9] but also meaning "head of cattle."[10] "Pecus, -udis" was a variation of "pecus, -oris," meaning "livestock"[11] ("Pecque").

Also derived from the Latin "pecus, -oris," by way of the Italian "pecora," meaning "ewe,"[12] and the earlier French "peccoire," is the French word "pécore," also meaning "stupid man or woman."[13] The definition of "peccoire" was "head of cattle," making it synonymous with "pec." This word comes from the 14th century. A masculine form of "peccoire," "pecque," first appeared in 1512. By 1808, "pécore" had the same definition as "pec": "a stupidly pretentious young girl or young woman."[14] The masculine "pecore" gained the acute accent in 1740 ("Pécore").

In short, the English word "pecker" traces back to the 1300s and the word "peck," which had a myriad of definitions. Despite its identical pronunciation to the French word "pecque," the

[5] Pronounced /pɛk/.
[6] Original definition: "jeune fille ou femme sotte ou prétentieuse." Translation by the author.
[7] There is often not a clear reason why a word falls out of use; language is constantly evolving.
[8] Original definition: "sot, stupide."
[9] Original definition: "stupide, stupide homme."
[10] Original definition: "tête de bétail."
[11] Original definition: "bétail."
[12] Original definition: "brebis."
[13] Original definition: "Homme ou femme stupide." Translation by the author.
[14] Original definition: "Jeune fille ou jeune femme sottement prétentieuse." Translation by the author.

two words are unrelated, even though both words were, at one point, spelled "pec." Both versions of "pec," however, were unrelated. The "pec" from which "peck" is derived is an Anglo-Norman[15] word coming from the Latin "pecca," while the "pec" related to "pecque" is a French word derived from Latin "pecus."

Figure 2

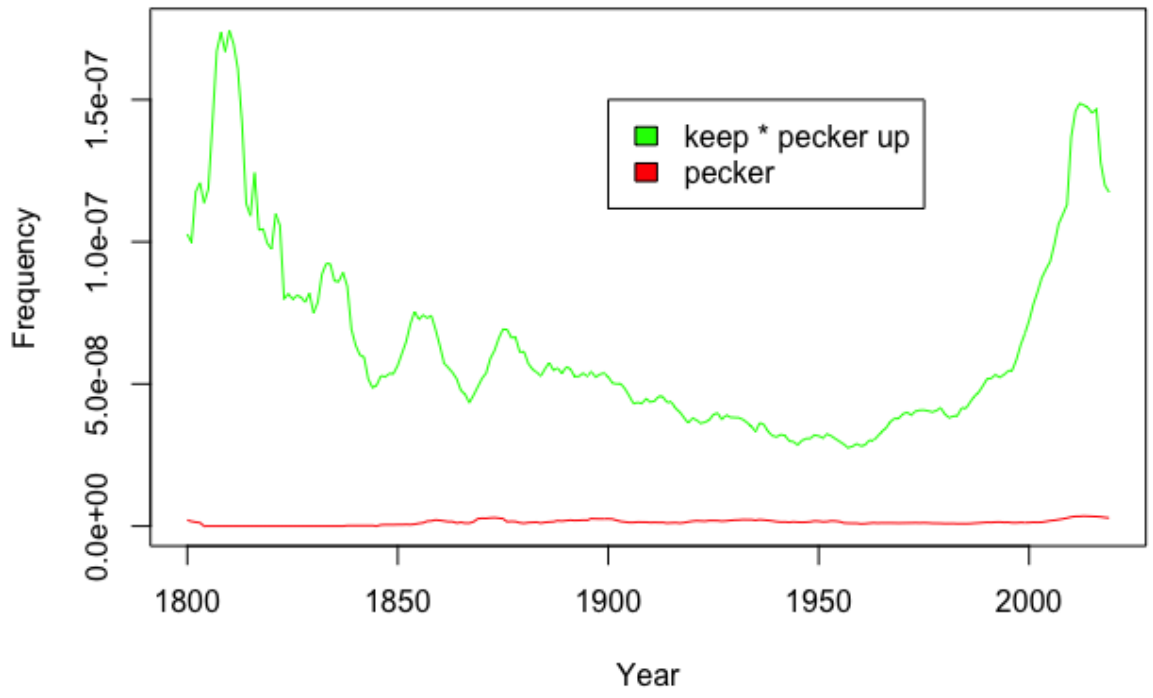
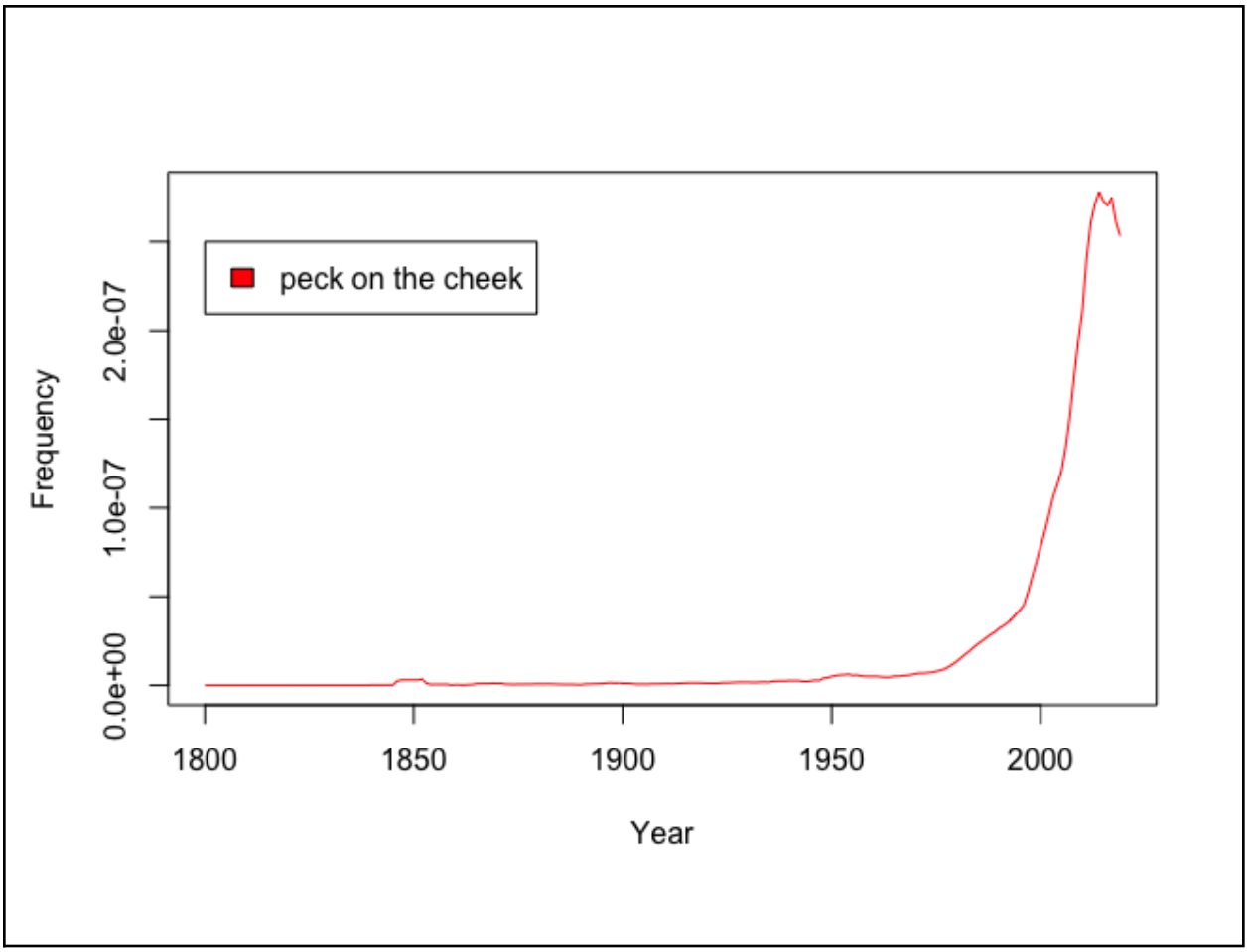


Figure 3

[15] The Anglo-Norman language is a dialect of Old French, closely related to the Francien dialect of Old French spoken near Paris, which itself eventually developed into Modern French. Since the *Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé* does not clarify which dialect "pec" originated from, it probably comes from Francien; other dialects are usually specified.



B. Smash

The word “smash” first appeared in English as a verb meaning “to kick down stairs,” recorded in 1699, in B.E. Gent’s *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern* (“SM” 162)[16]. B.E. Gent’s dictionary contained common slang and professional jargon (Coleman 400).

[16] The 1899 edition of this dictionary, which is available free online, contains a preface by the author, but no biographical information. Searching online for information about B.E. Gent returns an article from MentalFloss.com which lists Gent as “an anonymous lexicographer” (“30 Excellent Terms”). Searches on Ancestry.com returned no results for any Gent with a middle initial of “E.” who was born or died in England in the 1600s or 1700s. Despite Gent’s anonymity, the influence his *New Dictionary* had on the record of written English was immense: the Oxford English Dictionary cites it 1216 times in 1090 unique entries. This dictionary is among the earliest written records of modern English words such as “anybody,” when used as a synonym for “anyone”; “bunny” as in “bunny rabbit”; “cadet”; “carrot” as to describe individuals with red hair; the modern spelling for the word “cat”; “clodhopper”; “fun” when referring to a joke or prank; “maggot” in reference to a person; and many others. Gent provided the first written record of 122 words in the Oxford English Dictionary.

The common usage "to break into pieces," first appeared almost a century later, in 1778 ("Smash, v.1"). The verb entered usage as a noun around the same time, according to the Oxford English Dictionary ("Smash, n.1"). This word generalized over time, developing a myriad of definitions. One alternative meaning is "to defeat utterly," which first appeared early in the word's history, recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1816. The word also appears in the United States colloquial expression "to smash it," which is first recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1968. This phrase means "to do extremely well at" or "to do or perform...impressively" ("Smash, v.1")[17].

While the word "smash" first appeared in 1699, it remained in relatively low usage until the early 1900s. Data from the *Corpus of Historical American English* shows the number of occurrences of the word "smash" in all of the texts contained in the corpus, separated by decade. The data are available in Table 1.

Hypothesizing that usage of the word increased until the 1920s and then plateaued afterwards, the data were split into two groups, "Growth" and "Steady," with the former consisting of all the data before 1920 and the latter containing all the data from 1930 to 2010. Performing an independent sample t-test showed a statistically significant difference in the average usage in the two groups (see Table 2). Correlation calculations performed on both sets to confirmed the hypothesis. The "Growth" group showed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between usage and time (see Table 3); however, the steady group showed a weak and statistically insignificant positive correlation (see Table 4). In summary, usage of the word increased until 1920 and then plateaued[18].

[17] This entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a draft entry from June 2015, and is not yet an official entry.
[18] All calculations performed in RStudio.

In recent years, the word “smash” has developed a new, more vulgar, definition in slang, not yet recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “the action/process of fucking someone good,” according to the most popular definition on *UrbanDictionary.com*.

Table 1

Year	Count	Group
1820	0	Growth
1830	21	Growth
1840	16	Growth
1850	25	Growth
1860	52	Growth
1870	53	Growth
1880	51	Growth
1890	59	Growth
1900	125	Growth
1910	183	Growth
1920	192	Growth
1930	246	Steady
1940	201	Steady
1950	234	Steady
1960	187	Steady
1970	188	Steady
1980	227	Steady
1990	164	Steady
2000	253	Steady
2010	236	Steady

Table 2	
Two-Sample t-test	
H0	$\mu 1 = \mu 2$
H1	$\mu 1 \neq \mu 2$
t	-5.999368
p	0.00001128456
df	18
n	20
α	0.05
Mean of group Growth	70.63636
Mean of group Steady	215.11111
Results	**p < α; reject H0**

Table 3	
Pearson's product-moment correlation, group Growth	
H0	r = 0
H1	r ≠ 0
t	6.579944
p	0.0001015959
df	9
n	11
α	0.05
Results	**p < α; reject H0**

Table 4	
Pearson's product-moment correlation, group Steady	
H0	r = 0
H1	r ≠ 0
t	0.06245609
p	0.9519456
df	7
n	9
α	0.05
Results	**p > α; accept H0**

C. Flippant and Fluent

"Flippant" was first recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1605, with the definition "Of the tongue: 'Nimble', voluble. Hence of persons [sic]: Ready in the use of words, speaking freely, fluent, talkative, voluble" ("Flippant, adj."). This definition is synonymous to the modern usage of the word "fluent," as defined by the *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*: "capable of using a language easily and accurately" or "effortlessly smooth and flowing." The word fluent was originally restricted to descriptions of fluid motion, appearing in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1607: "That flows, flowing" ("Fluent, adj. and n."). The modern sense was entered in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1625.

The original definition of "flippant" continued in use, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, until the late 1800s. It also used to mean "sportive" or "playful," with recorded uses from 1711 to 1785 ("Flippant, adj."). The current meaning, according to the *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* is "lacking proper respect or seriousness," which shows that this word underwent degeneration. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a more precise

definition: “Displaying unbecoming levity in the consideration of serious subjects or in behaviour to persons entitled to respect.” Usage of the phrase declined from 1823 through 1990, when it saw a resurgence in popularity[19].

Usage of the word does not change in slang; the most popular definition on *UrbanDictionary.com* is “Marked by disrespectful levity or casualness; pert.” That definition was written in 2003, though definitions with the same meaning were entered in 2009 and 2010. A related definition for “flippant rap” on *UrbanDictionary.com* is “A rap that is casually embarrasing [sic], refers to flippant, rap lacking proper respect.” The meaning of flippant, as demonstrated by the persistent definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and definitions of the same meaning consistently in the slang *UrbanDictionary.com* demonstrate that the usage of the word flippant has retained its original meaning since its secondary definitions fell out of favor in the 1800s.

D. Stripe and Striped

The pattern referred to as “stripes,” composed of long segments of a given material differing in color from its adjacent parts, first entered the English language as an adjective, “striped,” which in turn came from the Dutch “strijpt” or Middle Low German “striped.” The first recorded use of the term as an adjective, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is in 1604, spelled “stript.” The noun appeared relatively soon after, recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1626 with the modern meaning. There are cognates for “stripe” in Dutch, German, West Flemish, Old Irish, Danish, Old Norse, and Swedish (“Stripe, n.3”).

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[19] Analyzing usage data from the Google Ngram viewer in RStudio shows a statistically significant negative correlation between year and usage frequency from 1800 to 1990, with a p-value of $2.2 * 10^{-16}$ and a correlation coefficient of -0.9612467. Between 1990 and the present, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between year and usage frequency, also with a p-value of $2.2 * 10^{-16}$, but a correlation coefficient of 0.9725872.

Both “stripe” and “striped” appear in several compound words, many in biology and design, including “striped bass,” “striped muscle,” “striped trouser,” and others. The noun form is also used in several different contexts, all narrowing to more specific contexts; for example, in geology, “stripe” refers not simply to a striped pattern, but specifically to a band of rock appearing in such a pattern (“Striped, n.3”).

Interestingly, “striped” has historically been used as an alternative spelling of the modern word “stripped.” This form is in the 1550 book *The Alcaron of the Barefote Friers*[20] [sic] by Erasmus Alber, where it is used twice, the first being “he striped him self [sic] naked” and the second, almost identical, usage being “striped him self [sic] stark naked.” Alber also uses an archaic form of “himself” split by a space between the two syllables.

The current meaning of the word “stripe” is not the first meaning of the word, though. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word came into use in the 1440s to refer to a small river (“Stripe, n.1”). At the same time, it meant “a blow or stroke with a staff, sword, or other weapon, with a missile, with the claws or hoofs [sic] of an animal, etc.” Several other meanings persisted roughly from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, including “a stroke of divine judgement [sic],” “a scourge,” and “a touch on the keys of an instrument” (“Stripe, n.2”).

The longest-lasting alternative definition of “striped” continued in usage to the late 1800s, and still appears today. Its usage is marked as “archaic”; however, not “obsolete.” This meaning is “a stroke or lash with a whip or scourge.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides several samples of the word being used in this fashion, with the earliest from 1485 and the last in

[20] Full title, *The alcaron of the barefote friers, that is to say, an heape or numbre of the blasphemous and trifling doctrines of the wounded idole Saint Frances taken out of the boke of his rules, called in latin, Liber conformitatum.*

1851 (“Stripe, n.2”). This is still the primary definition of the word in the *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, though (“Stripe”).

In his *A Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, Samuel Johnson defines “stripe” as “a lineary [sic] variation of colour [sic],” but incorrectly states that this is the original meaning of the word. His fourth definition of the word is “a blow; a lash,” which aligns with the previously mentioned entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Both Johnson and the *Oxford English Dictionary* provide verb forms of “stripe” meaning “to pattern with stripes,” but the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides more definitions relating to the violent meaning: “to beat, whip.” (“Stripe, v.1”). Additionally, the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides definitions of “stripe” as a verb that include narrowed versions analogous to the narrowed meanings of the noun; for example, “to divide (land) into strips or plots” (“Stripe, v.2”). All of these verbal definitions are first recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the mid-1400s. A final archaic alternate definition of “stripe” as a verb dates to the 1600s: “to thrust or draw (a thing, esp. a sword in order to cleanse or sharpen it) through, over” (“Stripe, v.3”).

E. Cinder, Cinder Block, and Associated Terms

Unlike most of the other words in this thesis, “cinder” has had a relatively stable definition over its lifespan in the English language. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has it first listed in the year 800, spelled “sinder” and meaning “the refuse or dross thrown off from iron or other metals in the furnace.” The word is still used in this manner today, though it is a technical term and not used in everyday language. The word has had several spellings, including “sinder,” “synder,” “sindor,” and “cyndyr.” Spellings beginning with an S were dominant and were the

original forms of the word, but false belief that the word comes from the French “cendre” or Latin “cinerem” caused C-initial spellings to become dominant (“Cinder, n”).

Soon after its introduction into the language, the word began to refer to ashes, with a variety of narrowed meanings all ultimately referring to ashes. Most of these definitions have resisted change and are still used today, even after roughly 1200 years of presence in the language.

“Cinder” is present in the word “cinder block,” a type of brick used frequently in construction. Cinder blocks differ from concrete blocks in that they include the ashes from coal fires, which is how they get their name (“Cinder block”). The *Oxford English Dictionary* contains no definition for “cinder block,” and combines the two into “cinderblock.” The *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* says the first known use of “cinder block” is 1922, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates it to 1868 and provides a quotation of the word being used in this manner. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also states that “cinder block” is a North American term. In dialects of English not from North America, cinder blocks are called “breeze blocks,” where “breeze” is synonymous with “cinder” (“Breeze, n.3”). Other regional terms include

- “Besser block” in Australia, named after the Besser Manufacturing Company, a producer of cinder blocks (“Besser block”),
- “Clinker block,” in parts of the United States (“Clinker block definition”), and
- “Concrete masonry” as a generic term (“Concrete”).

Whether “cinder block” or “cinderblock” is correct is unclear. The *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* does not have an entry for “cinderblock.” *Collins Dictionary* lists “cinderblock” as an alternative spelling (“Cinder block definition”). As stated before, the *Oxford English Dictionary*

only lists “cinderblock” and not “cinder block.” *Wiktionary.org*[21] says “cinderblock” is primarily an adjective meaning “made of cinder blocks” and that the objects themselves are “cinder blocks,” but does list “cinderblock” as an alternative spelling for the noun.

V. Inflammatory Words

A. LGBT(QIA+) and GSM

The initialism “GSM,” meaning “gender and sexual minority” belongs to a group of initialisms used to refer to, more or less, the same group. Other examples[22] include

- LGBT, which is perhaps the most recognizable, meaning “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender”
- GLBT, meaning “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender”
- LGBTQ, which adds a “Q” either meaning “queer” or “questioning”
- GLBTQ, using the same Q as LGBTQ, and
- LGBTQIA, adding an “I” for “intersex,” and an “A” for “asexual,” “agender,” or “aromantic.”[23]

Additionally, to any of these initialisms, one can add a “+,” as in LGBTQ+, used as an umbrella to include other gender and sexual minorities not included in the initialism, like pansexual, demisexual, et cetera, as in the *Collins Dictionary* definition for “LGBT.” Additionally, some add “2” or “2S,” as well, denoting two-spirit individuals (Loveless). The

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[21] *Wiktionary.org* is a publicly-editable, descriptivist dictionary maintained by Wikimedia. It is a sister project of Wikipedia, and its definitions must be scrutinized to ensure accuracy. As such, it is generally advisable to use an established dictionary like *Merriam-Webster* or *Collins.*

[22] These definitions come from the Merriam-Webster.com dictionary.

[23] Some sources state the A in this initialism can also stand for “ally,” denoting someone who does not belong to any of these other categories standing in support of them anyway (“What is LGBTQIA+?”). While this sentiment is not intentionally problematic, the purpose of having an abbreviation for these groups is to distinguish them from the people that “ally” includes.

goal of all of these initialisms is to refer to individuals who are not heterosexual and cisgender[24]. The most common is LGBT, according to the Google Ngram Viewer, with LGBTQ being used the second most often, and GSM the third most common. Other variants, notably those using a "+", are used infrequently enough that these top three initialisms render them invisible on the chart (see Figure 5).

When deciding which initialism to use, the author must consider several factors, including recognizability, popularity, and inclusivity. Some find the most inclusive acronym, LGBTQIA+, too cumbersome; the purpose of an initialism is to condense information to an easily digestible size. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was mocked on the internet after using "2SLGBTQQIA+," which individuals deemed too long (Patteson). However, using shorter initialisms and thus removing letters poses the risk of marginalizing individuals within an already marginalized community. There is no one correct answer or correct initialism, though usage popularity indicates that LGBT is the most popular initialism.

B. Queer

The word "queer" has had a complex history, but its usage is at an all-time high, according to the Google Ngram Viewer (See Figure 4). Since its introduction to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and its first noted use in 1513, it has had a variety of meanings. The word itself is of relatively unknown origin, though the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggest that it comes from the German word "quer," meaning "oblique." In its earliest usage, the word meant "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric," and it is not uncommon to see this usage in recent history; the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not mark this usage as dated or archaic ("Queer, adj.1"). In fact, there are entries in the *Corpus of Historical American English*

[24] Cisgender individuals identify with the same gender they were assigned at birth ("Cisgender").

as recent as 2005 using the word in this manner: “Bowdrie glanced up, a queer chill flowing through him.”[25] However, it would be amiss to say that this usage is standard, since using it to refer to homosexual indidivudals is prevalent, both offensively and unoffensively.

One of its older meanings is “out of sorts.” This meaning, while less common in recent years, is still used. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has a quotation from the *London Times*, date to 2003: “I also can’t eat eggs as they make me feel queer.” The word also could mean “drunk,” though this is now obsolete (“Queer, adj.1”). For about three centuries, from the late 16th century to the late 19th century, the word also meant “bad, contemptible, worthless.” At the same time, the word could refer to counterfeit money. While this meaning sounds connected to its later derogatory meaning, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that early written forms of these meanings differ enough from the “strange” or “homosexual” meanings, indicating that they probably have different origins (“Queer, adj.2 and n.1”).

Soon after, the slur entered into the language, both as an adjective and a noun. This usage began in the United States, first recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1914 (“Queer, adj.1”). For decades, the word was exclusively used in a derogatory manner to refer to homosexual people. The word is still used extensively as an insult; however, a positive connotation has come into use since the 1980s, corresponding to the usage increase in the Google Ngram Viewer. In its early stages being used in a positive manner, the word was synonymous with “gay” or “lesbian,” that is, homosexual (“Queer, n.1”)[26].

Both the negative and positive meanings of “queer” have undergone generalization in the last forty years. The *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* notes that the word can also mean “of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction that is not limited to people of a

[25] This is an excerpt from *Lone Star Law* by Robert J. Randisi, published in 2005.
[26] “Queer,” depending on context, can be offensive since it is still in use as a slur. One should take care when using it not to offend anyone.

particular gender identity or sexual orientation," both in a disparaging manner and a non-disparaging manner ("Queer"). Expanding from its use as a synonym for "homosexual," the word can now refer to anyone who identifies as a gender or sexual minority (GSM).

Despite its reclamation since the 1980s, usage by non-GSM individuals can be met with hostility, given the word's history and its continuing use as a derogatory term. Despite this, the word's usage in general language has increased, and context is important. It should be obvious based on the tone of the speaker or writer whether or not the word is being used offensively (Rocheleau).

Figure 4

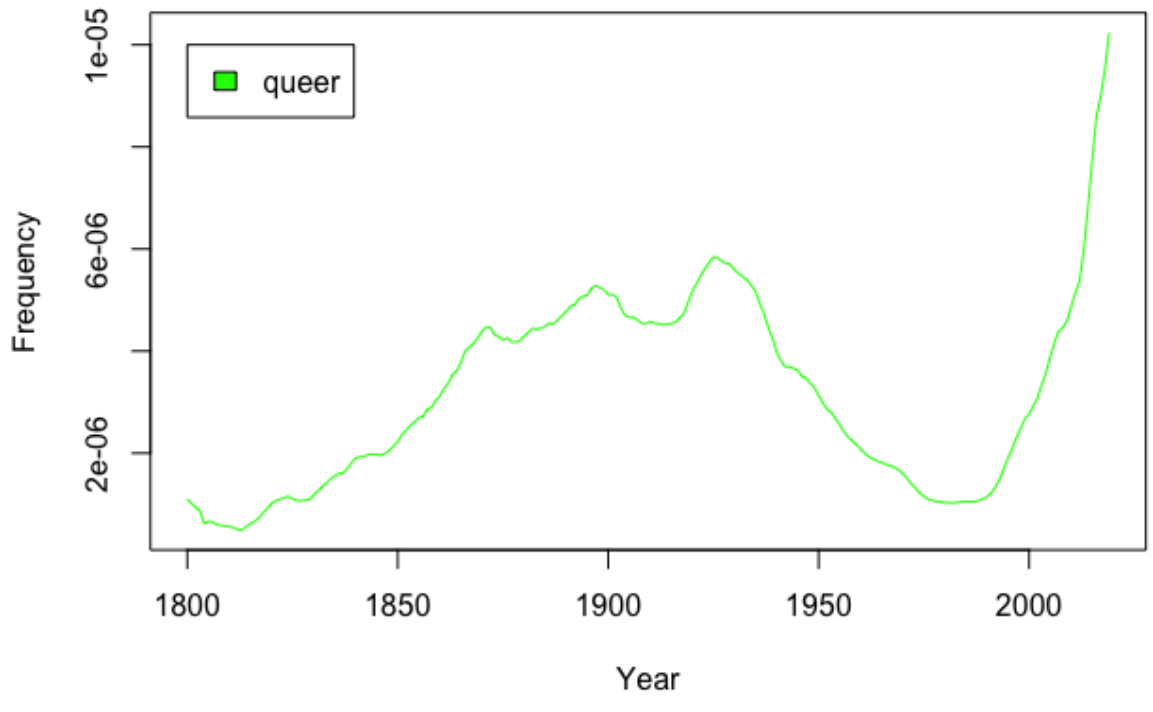
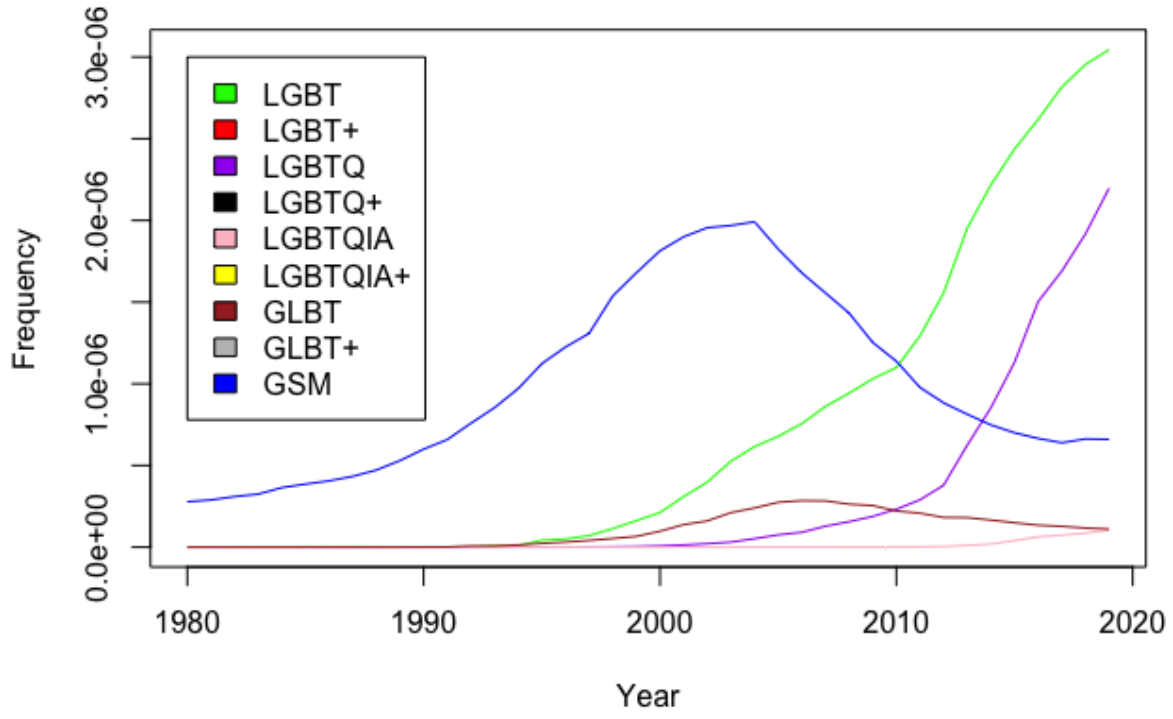


Figure 5



C. Faggot and Fag

"Faggot" is more instantly recognizable as pejorative than "queer," though both are slurs used to refer to non-GSM individuals, and both gained an offensive meaning at roughly the same time: 1914 and 1913, respectively ("Queer, adj. 1"; "Faggot, n. and adj"). Like "queer," though, "faggot" was not a pejorative word for most of its history. It entered into the language in the 1300s, referring to a bundle of sticks to be used as kindling for a fire. Similar uses continued for centuries, often referring to bundles of sticks either for burning or construction. By the 15th and

16th centuries, however, the word began to be associated with something more gruesome: burning people alive. These changes are indicative of degeneration and abstraction. However, the "bundle of sticks for kindling" meaning narrowed into a bundle of sticks used for execution by burning at the stake ("Faggot, n. and adj").

Unlike "queer," "faggot" has undergone little reclamation; that is, in many instances, the word "faggot" is still inappropriate and offensive, unlike "queer." This may be in part due to the nature of its history. Since "queer" initially meant simply "strange" or "odd," the word itself carries less weight historically. "Faggot," however, historially referred to a bundle of sticks used to burn people alive. However, the word appears in the phrase "to fry a faggot," which was used between the 1500s and 1800s, which meant "to be burnt alive for heresy." Thus, calling someone a faggot implies that they[27] should be burned alive. This differs from queer, whose negative connotations come strictly from its usage and not its meaning.

"Faggot" has also been a verb. Originally, in the 1500s, it meant to carry around a bundle of sticks, which was symbolic for having recanted one's heresy. Soon after, it referred to the action of bundling those sticks together ("Faggot, v"). From this adjective, the language gained the adjective "faggoted," which simply meant sticks bundled together ("Faggoted, adj"). While these meanings were most common from the 1500s through 1800s, they are not obsolete, simply rare and historical. From these senses, we get

- "faggoteer," or "a person who makes faggots" ("Faggoteer, n"),
- "faggoter," also meaning "a person who makes faggots" ("Faggoter, n"), and
- "faggotless," meaning "without faggots" ("Faggotless, adj").

[27] The usage of gender-neutral "they" has accrued significant controversy in recent years. For the same reason I use the abbreviation GSM, I have chosen to use singular "they": to be inclusive. Additionally, it has been in use in English as a singular pronoun since the 1300s; it is not a new word, despite the claims of some ("Singular 'They'").

However, it also was used as a transitive verb in place of "to burn [someone] alive," as in "The poet is staked and faggoted by his surrounding brethren"[28] ("Faggot, v"). This extends its association with execution and adds to its emotional weight. Derived from this word is "faggoting," or the act of burning someone alive ("Faggoting, n").

Evolving from the words relating to burning at the stake are all of the modern versions related to homosexuality. This word, which was originally meant to describe someone burned at the stake, is still being used today to refer to members of the GSM community, which can help explain its offensive nature and status as a slur. It also has several adjectival forms, including "faggy," "faggoty," and a noun "faggotry," meaning "the state of being homosexual." ("Faggy, adj"; "Faggoty, adj"; "Faggotry, n"). A few years after "faggot" began to be used in this sense, it was clipped to "fag," meaning the same ("Fag, n.5 and adj").

"Fag" in the pejorative sense is unrelated historically to the other meanings of "fag," since it was clipped from "faggot." It was first listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1463 and meant "a knot or blemish in a piece of cloth" ("Fag, n.1"). Several other meanings appeared throughout the 15th century, all generally related to cloth and rope ("Fag, n.2"). In the 1700s, people began to use it to refer to individuals her perform menial and boring tasks ("Fag, n.3"). In British slang, a "fag" can refer to a cigarette or a cigarette butt ("Fag, n.4"). This is unrelated all the earlier meanings and was clipped from "fag end," meaning "the last part or remnant of something" ("Fag end, n.").

There are a wide variety of verb definitions for "fag," including

- "To decline in vigour or strength" ("Fag, v.1"),
- "To beat, to thrash" ("Fag, v.2"),

[28] This quotation is cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and comes from *Imaginary Conversations* by Walter Savage Landor, published in 1846.

- "To cause (the end of a rope) to untwist or unravel" ("Fag, v.3"),
- "To cut (a cereal crop or stubble) down to the ground" ("Fag, v.4"), and
- "To supply (a person) with a cigarette" ("Fag, v.5").

The usage of "faggot" pejoratively actually predates its associations with homosexuality. In the 1500s, and continuing to today, the word can be a derogatory term for a woman. This is restricted to regional English in Ireland, Scotland, and England. The same reasons use it to refer to "a naughty or mischievous child," too ("Faggot, n. and adj").

VI. Conclusion

The study of etymology can prove fascinating. Language change is a constant, and language will continue to change. As people adapt to an increasingly modern era, so does our language. This change can manifest itself in numerous ways. The evolution of words is simply one facet. Some words have undergone extensive change since they first appeared, like the word "pecker," now meaning "penis," originating from a verb meaning "to gather," or relatively little, like "cinder."

While old words change, new ones constantly enter the language. Some fall into disuse relatively quickly, while others become mainstream. In the last fifty years, the most obvious example of new words are those pertaining to the internet and technology. New words can be formed in a variety of ways, either through borrowing from another language, as English has historically borrowed quite heavily from French[29], or through invention.

[29] The history of French to English word borrowing dates back to the Norman Conquest in 1066, when William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, captured England. For the next three centuries, the English aristocracy did not speak English, they spoke Anglo-Norman ("Norman Conquest"). Anglo-Norman was a dialect of French used in English legal proceedings until the 18th century. As a result of this extended period of use, Anglo-Norman had a significant part in the development of Middle English ("Norman French Language and Literature").

One modern example of word creation is the viral *Tumblr.com* post "23 Emotions People Feel, but Can't Explain." On June 14, 2015, *Tumblr.com* user tai-korczak shared a list of twenty-three words. Each of these words comes with a definition, explaining the emotion it represents (*"Run boy, Run"*). The original post received over 1.4 million notes[30] on *Tumblr.com*. A similar post with the same list and same title, but not reblogging tai-korczak, also received over 1.4 million notes, and was published on June 21, 2015 (*23 Emotions People Feel*). This list of words achieved widespread internet fame, which persists to this day; a *Medium.com* article from February 2019 provides the same list, though it does not cite tai-korczak (Ross).

The original post by tai-korczak cites a website as his source for the words: *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. This website is run by John Koenig, a video maker and graphic designer from Minnesota. His website culminated in the publication of a book by the same name, which was released on November 16, 2021. What was not communicated through the *Medium.com* article or either viral *Tumblr.com* post is that Koenig's book and website does not provide definitions for words that exist; his goal is to create new words for the feelings he describes. If any of these words gains widespread popularity, it will become part of the English language.

Unlike French and Spanish, there is no governing body for the English language. The governing bodies for French and Spanish are called the French Academy and the Spanish Academy, and they publish official dictionaries and grammar books that clearly define what is and is not a part of their language ("Academy"). There is no approval process for something to become an English word: if someone understands a word when you say it, then it must be a word.

[30] Like, comment, or reblog (share).

Words, however, carry a lot more significance than simply their meaning. “Faggot” and “homosexual” both mean roughly the same thing, but it would be ignorant to use them interchangeably. Understanding the history behind these words helps create a holistic understanding of the language we use every day and create a more inclusive society. Language is anything but clear-cut, but knowing the nuances behind it makes it more comprehensible.

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