

Trabajo de Fin de Grado (Code 31099)
Degree in English Studies
Session 2019-20



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Title of your TFG	A diachronic, corpus-based examination of politics, race- and origin-related slurs in American English
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Abstract (150 words)

This paper analyzes four different slurs in the American variety of the English language extracted from three slang dictionaries. The analyzed slurs are related to politics, race, and origin. The use of these slurs will be examined diachronically, that is, from the first time they are registered in a corpus till the present day. In doing so, the frequency of usage of these terms in the different periods will be considered in the analysis, as well as the historical context. Thus, aiming to defend that slurs are terms that at early stages are not strictly related to negative or disparaging connotation, and that their evolution and use throughout the years and their association to certain negative ideas make them acquire a negative connotation, thus becoming what is known under the name of 'slurs'.

Key words (up to five)	slur, politics, race, origin, semantics
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Number of words	6751
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1. Introduction

This paper analyzes four different slurs in the American variety of English. A corpus of words built upon three slang dictionaries will be used to carry out this study. The analyzed slurs are related to politics, race, and origin. The use of these slurs will be examined diachronically, that is, from the first time they are registered in a corpus till the present day. In doing so, the frequency of usage of these terms in different periods will be considered in the analysis.

Once slurs have been compiled, the *Corpus of Historical American English* (henceforth [COHA](#)) will be used to analyze these examples in context. The slurs will be categorized according to their semantics. They will be classified depending on whether they have undergone a process of amelioration, pejoration, neutralization, or whether they have become obsolete. Furthermore, the frequency with which these slurs appear is related to the historical context in which they are employed and, if so, it is hypothesized that there is a historical event that affects the use of these slurs and their meaning.

Some examples of politics-related slurs are *commie*, referring to “a communist person” (Ayto, 117) or *snollygoster*, which is defined as “a shrewd unprincipled politician” (Ayto, 117). Examples of race and origin-related slurs are *gook*, which alludes to an Asian person (Ayto, 42), and *red*, which refers to a person “of a mixed (black and white) racial heritage US” (Dalzell, 808).¹

The first section of this paper will introduce some important sources and previous research studies related to the topic, as well as some concepts that are necessary to have a clear idea about the purpose of the research and the analysis. The next section presents the tools and procedures used in the analysis and the way this will be performed. After establishing the theoretical framework and explaining the

¹ Readers must keep in mind that the use of slurs in this paper has the only purpose of research and analysis and there is no intention of defamation.

methodology, the analysis of the terms compiled will be developed. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn considering the general results obtained in the analysis.

In this paper, I attempt to defend the view that slurs are terms that at early stages are not strictly related to negative or disparaging connotations, and that their evolution and use throughout the years and their association to certain negative ideas make them acquire negative connotation, thus becoming what is known under the name of 'slurs'.

2. Bibliographic review

It is important to clarify certain concepts that are central ideas and that contribute to the basis of this study. The first key concept is 'slang'. It is defined as "an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large" (Eble, 11). This is the definition applied in this paper, since slurs being explored here are uttered by a certain community of language users and their meaning is in constant change, or at least there is a connotational shift. Also, their frequency of use is presupposed to change throughout the years, as examined in the analysis.

'Slur' is a concept of high importance in this research, being defined as "a remark that criticizes someone and is likely to have a harmful effect on their reputation" (*Cambridge Dictionary Online*). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, the definition of 'slur' that is used is that by Croom, in which he states that a 'slur' is "a disparaging remark or a slight that is usually used to 'deprecate' certain targeted members" (*Slurs*, 1). In addition, in another of his publications, Croom adds that slurs are "often considered to be among the most offensive of all linguistic expressions" (*The semantics of slurs*, 2).

To have a better understanding of this definition, it is necessary to consider the concept of communicative situation (see Fig. 1). There is a sender, who is the person

or group of people that create or produce the message. Besides, there is a message, in which a slur is embedded. There is a medium, which in this paper corresponds to written, as the corpus used in this paper consists of written data, specifically fiction books, popular magazines, newspapers, and non-fiction books. Likewise, there is a receiver, who would be the person or people towards whom the slur is targeted. Furthermore, context is essential in the analysis to explain how and why the lemmas under study have undergone such semantic changes.

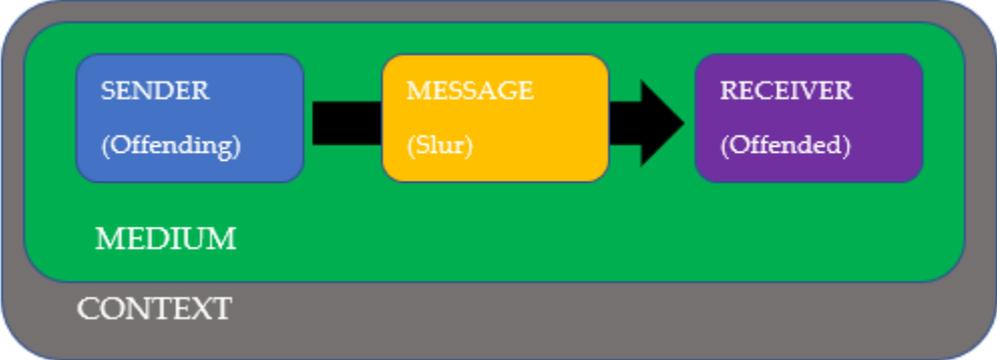


Fig. 2: Communicative situation in terms of slurs

Moreover, Croom specifies that “utterances of slurs are usually explosively derogatory acts, and different slurs derogate members of different classes” (*Slurs*, 1). Therefore, the intention is also important considering that the intention of provoking a negative impact on the receiver or receivers of the slur tends to be explicit. What is clear about these definitions is that ‘slur’ is a term carrying negative connotations employed to address people disrespectfully to harm their feelings or their reputation. Slurs are thought to carry negative connotations to a relatively measurable extent, even Croom qualifies them as “often considered to be among the most offensive of all linguistic expressions” (*The semantics of slurs*, 2).

For further definition of the concept, a distinction between slurs and descriptors must be made. According to Croom, “slurs and descriptors are in fact not coreferential expressions with precisely the same extension” (*The semantics of slurs*, 2). In other words, descriptors are terms that are used to give objective information

about the target person or group, whereas slurs are considered expressive elements that carry emotional meaning. This emotional meaning was previously stated to be negative. Accordingly, “slurs and descriptors differ in their extension they thereby differ in their meaning or content also” (Croom, *The semantics of slurs*, 2).

To dig deeper into the concept, slurs are claimed to be a very complex group of words because they “vary in offense both across groups [...] and even for co-referring slurs” (Anderson, Lepore, 1). Consequently, a slur does not always have regular semantics. Instead, its meaning oscillates depending on the context, slurs are in constant evolution. A slur does not carry the same meaning when it is uttered towards a discriminated collective (e.g. Afro-American people, LGBTIQ+ community), and when a person who is part of a community uses the same word to address another person that belongs to it as well. The intention of the speaker as well as social context are important factors for the clarification of slur usage.

For the analysis, the concepts of ‘amelioration’ and ‘pejoration’ are important because they will be used to classify and clarify the meaning, use, and diachronic evolution of slurs. These polar concepts are important for the study because ‘slurs’ are considered one of the paradigmatic examples of pejorative words (Hom, 1). The two concepts of ‘pejoration’ and ‘amelioration’ can be defined as “common linguistic processes through which the meaning of a word changes to have a more positive or negative orientation” (Cook, Stevenson, 1). If we take a closer look at the term ‘pejoration’, it is relevant to highlight that “pejoratives demonstrate a wide array of complex phenomena, but their primary function is to conventionally convey negative, emotional content beyond the truth-conditional content that they are normally taken to encode (if any)” (Hom, 1).

Thus, these key concepts will be contemplated as linguistic processes that words undergo, having to do with the change in the semantics of each word. When the meaning of a word changes towards a more negative sense, it is a case of ‘pejoration’. When the semantics of a word is originally pejorative or neutral and it evolves

towards a more positive connotation, it is an instance of 'amelioration'. Hence, our classification of race-, politics- and origin-based slurs will be built around these concepts of 'pejoration' and 'amelioration'.

Alongside these two semantic change processes, two more concepts will be added to the classification. These are the concepts of 'neutrality' and 'obsolescence'. In relation to semantics, 'neutral' terms are those whose connotation is neither pejorative nor ameliorative. Besides, the concept of 'obsolescence' refers to the words that are no longer in use. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary Online* (henceforth CDO), something becomes 'obsolete' when it is "not in use any more, having been replaced by something newer and better or more fashionable" (CDO). Consequently, any of the slurs that are to be analyzed can also fall into one of these two categories, i.e. obsolescence and neutrality, provided they have not undergone the semantic processes of pejoration or amelioration.

Moreover, the slurs retrieved will be related to race, origin, and politics. Race slurs are defined by Croom as "derogatory or disrespectful nickname[s] for a racial group" (*Slurs* 2). Regarding origin slurs, they can be defined as derogatory or disrespectful labels that are used to discriminate against people according to their place of origin as well as their race. The main difference between origin-related slurs and race-related slurs is that the latter are more connected to cultural groups, whereas the former are associated with race, especially to immigrants or people that live in a place different from their place of birth. It can also be the case that origin-related slurs are uttered towards someone that has foreign ancestors but the person in question could have been born in the country where he or she resides. As a consequence, physical traits also play an important role in the use of these slurs. However, drawing a line between origin- and race-related slurs is a challenging task, as both discriminate against people because of their race but the emphasis is put on different aspects. Parallel to Croom's definition of race slurs, politics-related slurs can be defined as derogatory or disrespectful labels given to a political group or a group

of people that share similar ideas concerning politics or a political entity, e.g. a president or the head of a political party.

The field of semantics is also present in this paper, specifically the process of 'semantic change' or 'semantic shift', which is defined as "any variation of meaning of a given word, be it synchronic or diachronic" (Zaliniak, 217). To better understand semantic shift, the concept of 'frequency' is also important. Frequency is a crucial factor in this process, as "[s]emantic change is known to be associated with an increase in frequency of use of the form whose meaning expands" (Feltgen, Fagard, Nadal, 2). Frequency is described as "the number of times something happens within a particular period, or the fact of something happening often or a large number of times" (CDO). Accordingly, the less specific the meaning of a word is, the higher its frequency is.

However, the expansion in meaning of a word is different from 'polysemy'. 'Polysemy' refers to "[w]ords [that] gain senses over time as they semantically drift" (Hamilton, Leskovec, Jurafsky, 1). While 'semantic expansion' refers to the generalization of the meaning of a term, 'polysemy' refers to the multiple meanings a word can have or acquire. Hence, 'semantic expansion' and 'polysemy' are both processes related to semantic change, but in this paper the former process will be the one considered in the analysis. Nevertheless, 'polysemy' and 'diachronic semantic change' are related aspects, as "semantic change from meaning A to meaning B normally involves a transitional phase of polysemy where a form has both meanings" (Zalizniak, 218).

A distinction needs to be made between 'frequent words' and 'polysemic words'. Diachronically, the former group of terms undergoes semantic change more slowly, i.e. the 'law of conformity', whereas the latter do it more quickly, i.e. the 'law of innovation' (Hamilton, Leskovec, Jurafsky, 9). Semantic change is examined in this paper considering 'frequency' and the processes related to connotation, i.e. 'amelioration', 'pejoration', 'neutrality', and 'obsolescence'. Therefore, through the

diachronic analysis of terms, the 'law of conformity' is given consideration. The relationship between 'frequency' and 'semantic change' is important as well, as "any instance of semantic change should have its empirical counterpart in the frequency rise of the use of the form" (Feltgen, Fagard, Nadal, 2). In other words, the semantic change of a word implies an increase in its frequency of use.

Regarding the historical approach, the *U.S. History Timeline* is the primarily used source. This webpage provides its visitors timelines that include major events in the history of the US chronologically ordered from before 1600 to the present day. These timelines divided by periods (e.g. Mid-Century and Cold War) include important events of every period as well as a brief explanation of each event. This source will be consulted to briefly analyze what historical events took place during the peaks and the drops in the frequency of use of these slurs so that it can be looked upon if there is a direct effect of the historical context on the use of these lemmas.

3. Methodology

The *Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)* is, according to their self-presentation, "the largest structured corpus of historical English" (COHA). It is a free corpus that contains over four hundred million words from texts between the 1810s and 2009. The texts from this corpus come from different sources, such as fiction books, popular magazines, newspapers, non-fiction books, and film scripts.

This corpus has been utilized as a tool to examine the different slurs that are examined in this paper. The selected slurs were previously crawled and checked in different slang dictionaries, which are: *The Oxford Dictionary of Slang*, *NTC's dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions*, and *The Routledge Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English*. After having searched for as many politics- and race-related slurs as possible, these terms have been filtered through the COHA in order to check if this corpus provides enough information to analyze each of them diachronically and semantically. However, some of these slurs are not

precisely defined in these dictionaries, so other sources have been necessary to narrow down their meanings, i.e. online dictionaries such as *Cambridge Dictionary Online*, and *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* (henceforth MWOD).

The first group of slurs extracted from these dictionaries was made up of fifty lemmas, without counting the different spelling variants of a single slur (e.g. *schwartz(e)(r)*, *schwartz(e)(r)*). After all these slurs and their meanings had been collected, they were processed in *COHA* manually in order to check which ones could be useful for the analysis and which ones had to be discarded. Slurs were discarded for two reasons. Firstly, if there were no hits or instances of a given slur in the corpus, the slur was not used (e.g. *g-man*). The other reason is that either the results of a search were ambiguous, or there were not enough instances of the word used as a slur in the results, as in the case of *blackie*, which was mainly used as a proper name.

Even though *COHA* lets researchers use certain filters in order to narrow their search, e.g. suppressing proper names, the output generated is not always as precise as expected. These filtering options may not be accurate, as one may stick to adjectives and still find nouns in the search stage.

There is another difficulty, which is the limitation of the corpus' scope. Slurs, being overtly disparaging terms, are not commonly found in written texts. Consequently, their search and discrimination are not easily carried out. This fact restricts the analysis to fewer slurs than the ones gathered at the starting point of this paper. Apart from this, the extension of this paper impedes the analysis of a bigger group of lemmas.

The analysis and classification are intended to be objective, but it is necessary to consider that the semantics of each slur can only be examined through the meaning of the word in various dictionaries and the context generated by word searches. That is, the connotation of each of the slurs in every example will be extracted from its meaning in the dictionary and the way they have been used within a sentence.

Furthermore, the etymology and morphology of the analyzed terms will be also considered. The slurs will be morphologically decomposed in order to find out the original word from which they evolved. Thus, the different morphological processes these words have undergone will also be included in the analysis if possible, so that a whole picture of the slur can be traced.

4. Analysis

The first two slurs that will be analyzed are politics-related ones. The first one is *commie*, followed by *sorehead*. After that, the race-related slur *darkie* and the origin-related slur *dago* will be examined.

The word *commie* is defined as “communist” (MWOD). In the second edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Slang* by John Ayto, the term is described as “Often derogatory; from Comm(unist) + -ie; used as a noun and an adjective” (Ayto, 117). Therefore, the slur comes from the word *communist* and it has undergone the processes of clipping (*communist* > *comm-*) and suffixation (*comm-* > *commie*). This slur can be used as a noun as well as an adjective, just like the original word. Nevertheless, *communist* is originally an adjective that can be nominalized (e.g. “He is a communist” vs. “The communists are here”). According to Ayto, the first instance of this slur that is registered dates back to 1939. However, in COHA there have been instances registered since 1923.

Commie is found in COHA a total of 125 times, from which 95 match with the definition of *communist*. The earlier attestations do not seem to convey a negative connotation as seen in example (1) from *The New York Times*.

- (1) “During the period from the Armistice to the Autumn of 1922. while Austria was struggling to establish its new democratic form of government on a working basis and to adjust its? commie life to the conditions arising from the disruption of an economic unit which had been in existence for centuries” (*The New York Times*, 1923).

This example (1) is the first one found in the corpus in which the word *commie* is used in the sense of communist, but as it has already been suggested above, it does not seem to have a derogatory meaning.

The next example (2) found is interesting, as a negative connotation is detected in the context.

- (2) ""There was rage in his eyes. " Me?! " he said. He almost shouted it. " Me a Commie? " His face was red with anger. " Watch out who you call a Commie, lady. Just watch out." (Lockridge, Lockridge, 1946).

This example from the novel *Death of a Tall Man* (2) dates to 1946. The use of the lemma is derogatory as suggested by the contextual information and the communicative frames of the other characters that intervene in the dialogue. From the next decade on, the instances of the word *commie* increase considerably, as shown in Fig. 2.

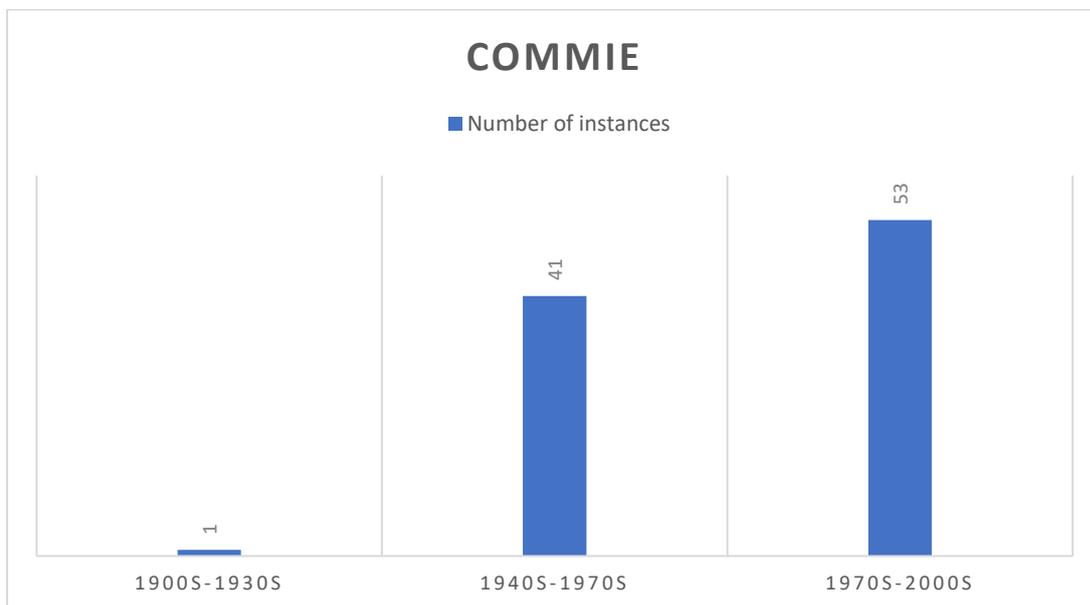


Fig. 3: Graph showing the frequency of appearance of *commie* in COHA

The first example of *commie* in the sense of communist is registered in COHA in 1923, and the last example is registered in 1989. As can be seen in Fig. 2, the frequency increases exponentially from the first third of the century to the second.

From the second to the last third of the century there is also an increment, but a less relevant one.

Some examples illustrate the negative connotation of *commie* during the third part of the 20th century. The first instance (3) dates to 1979, from the novel *Silver Ghost*. Also, there is a subsequent example (4), from the movie script of the movie *Salvador*. Examples (3) and (4) show that the use of *commie* is explicitly derogatory. In both instances the lemma coexists with other words that are also disparaging.

(3) "That commie cocksucker. Does your Cuban lady have any beautiful sister -- imbo said" (Kinder, 1979).

(4) "You can kill me but you can never destroy El Salvador -- you commie puta, swine, traitor..." (Stone, Boyle 1986).

The high frequency of *commie* cannot be conceived without historical contextualization. In the second and third parts of the century (from the 1940s to 2000s), several events took place that could be related to the word *commie*, particularly the wars. For example, World War II (1939-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), and the Vietnam War (1950-1975) ("*US History Timeline*"). After these conflicts, the use of *commie* is especially common in movies and novels concerning the previously stated conflicts, and with the end of these wars, the use of *commie* declines considerably.

In short, the use of this slur is mainly negative, some examples show that the word was used with the same descriptive connotation as communist in a starting point, and later on, it became negative, i.e. it underwent the process of pejoration. However, after 1989 no more entries of this word have been gathered, and it coincides with the end of the Cold War, whose end is set in this same year, as well as the fear of communism ("*US History Timeline*").

The next politics-related slur is *sorehead*, which in the *American Slang Dictionary* is defined as "a disgruntled politician" (Maitland, 256). In this definition, the adjective

'disgruntled' is already hinting that the word might have a negative connotation. Even though this source is really dated (1891), there are some interesting examples in *COHA* that show that the word and its meaning have been in some way preserved until the present day.

Sorehead is found 27 times in *COHA*. From these instances, only the first 6 entrances coincide with the definition previously compiled from the *American Slang Dictionary*. However, according to *Ayto*, the term is used to define "a bad-tempered or discontented person" (*Ayto*, 256). Therefore, the word that was mainly applied to politicians got also a more general sense. The evolution of the term from its first specific sense to a more general one can be seen in the entries of *COHA*, as it is shown in examples (5), and (6). The first instance of the lemma (5) registered in *COHA* matches the definition given by Maitland.

- (5) It is but right to say that much of the time of the campaign was consumed in the effort of Democrats to saddle all the work upon the "sorehead" Republicans (*New York Times*, 1872).

In the example (5), the word is used in the context of politics. It is used as an adjective accompanying the word Republicans. According to the context of this excerpt, the addresser used the word with a clear negative intention. However, if we have a look at the definition of the word in other dictionaries, the word has experienced a standardization of its meaning. Another instance of the slur with a politics-related sense is this from a magazine (6).

- (6) The predictions were many that Mr. Lawson's move was merely a bluff, that in due time he would call himself off or be called off for a consideration, and that his campaign was that, vulgarly speaking, of a "sorehead" who, successful financially, found himself as it were a social outcast among the men whom he had helped or who had helped him to riches (*Givens*, 1905).

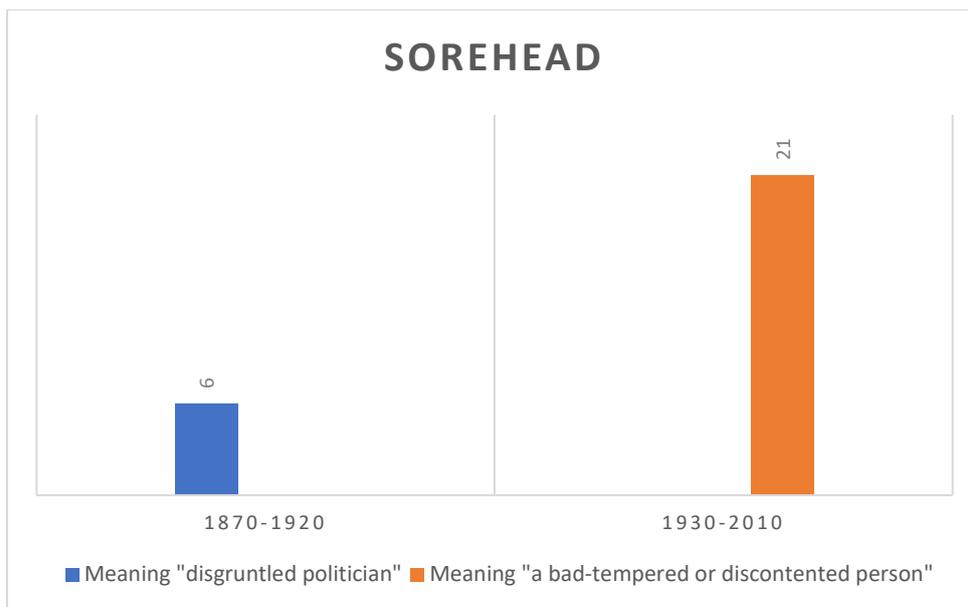


Fig. 4: Graph showing the frequency of appearance of *sorehead* in *COHA* and its semantic change

Fig. 3 shows the frequency of the lemma as well as its semantic expansion.

According to the entries of *COHA*, from the 1870s to the 1920s, the word's meaning is matching the one attested by Maitland, whereas the entries from 1930s to the 2010s are matching the definition from Ayto's, which is related to the previous one but with instances of less specialized denotation. Probably, this change was more of a gradual process, but in the entries registered in *COHA*, the change indicates a drastic semantic shift. However, even though the word stops referring merely to politics and its meaning becomes wider, it continues to show a negative connotation as it can be seen in examples (7) and (8).

- (7) "This editorial, I remember, it said they made for an un-American snobbishness among the students, sort of, like Greece and Rome. " " Hah! " Walt said. " What the hell. Some independent probably wrote it, some sorehead, son of a bitch, couldn't make a fraternity himself, so he's got a grudge against them" (Cantwell, 1934).
- (8) " I've got to work with that sorehead all day, and that's no cinch. " " All right then, I talk to Edna, " (Thomas, 1935).

A parallelism can be established in the analysis of this slur. On the one hand, an earlier definition in Maitland shows that the term applies to politicians, and Spears defines it as applying to any person, thus generalizing its use. On the other hand,

COHA shows that the earlier entries match with the earlier definition provided by Maitland, e.g. examples (7) and (8). Then, the word is not registered with that meaning anymore and it only appears with the meaning of “a grumpy person” (Spears, 389). This is not concluding, but it can be an indicator of semantic change.

On the morphological level, the word *sorehead* is a compound (*sore* meaning “pain”, and the noun *head*). It is probably built in analogy to “sore throat” or “sore muscles”.

Relating this slur to the political context is difficult because there are not many examples of it in COHA and the word *per se* is not strictly attached to any of the political events that were taking place at the time when the slur was used with a political sense. However, the period between 1870 and 1920 was a time of political turmoil in the US. For example, the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution that gave black people the right to vote in 1870 was ratified, the American Federation of Labor was organized in 1886, the National American Woman Suffrage Association was founded in 1890, and the Spanish-American War took place in 1898. (“US History Timeline”).

‘Semantic expansion’ is the phenomenon that best describes *sorehead*, as it can be seen in dictionaries as well as in the examples found in COHA. As a result, this slur happens to have a negative connotation, which is preserved, but at the same time, it underwent a process of semantics broadening.

This section revolves around two politics-related slurs. The next part of this paper will focus on two race-related slurs following the line of analysis already used. The first slur is strictly race-related, i.e. *darkie*, and the second one is more of an origin-related one, i.e. *dago*.

According to the second edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary of Slang*, *darkie* is classified as “Orig. a neutral colloquial use, but now derogatory or offensive from *dark* + *-y/-ie*” (Ayto, 41). This lemma is a slur used to denote black people. *Darkie* is

defined as “an insulting and contemptuous term for a black person” (MWOD). Both definitions highlight the negative intentions of the word, thus it can be considered a slur. As mentioned before, this term is formed by the adjective *dark* and the suffix *-ie*. The allomorph *darky* is not under study here, for only *darkie* is attested by slang dictionaries.

Darkie is found in 51 hits in COHA between 1846 and 2009. These examples are analyzed and classified to check the word’s connotation. According to Ayto, the term is registered for the first time in 1775, and the first instance registered in COHA dates back to 1846 (9).

- (9) “There is a good path along the creek shore!’ answered a man in the true Yankee negro intonation, but speaking with manifest reluctance. If you deceive me, darkie, you are a dead man!” (Ingraham, 1846)

In this first example (9) the term conveys a negative connotation. However, the word is also put in the mouth of black people, and these instances show no negative connotation, as these people address themselves with no harmful intentions, as in example (10).

- (10) “Go’ long wid you, and you’ ll find her a seamsterin’ up stairs, and never mind de’ stress of an old darkie like me.” (Cary, 1859)

There are many hits of this lemma in which, as in the previous example (10), the word is used by black characters to address themselves, therefore in this context, it does not carry a negative connotation. It conveys a communicative function of community speech slang, as the word is used to embed speech with traits pertaining to all members of such community.

However, there are others in which the lemma is used with a negative connotation, as shown in example (11).

(11) "Blackie, black dog, " they shouted at her. Sookie, hands still over her ears, would recite the alphabet. " Your father must be a U.S. darkie! " the boys spat at us" (Keller, 2003).

This very recent example from the novel *Fox Girl* (11) shows negative connotation that the word carries in some contexts, specifically in the context of racism. The following chart shows the token frequency, either with a derogatory sense or with a non-derogatory one:

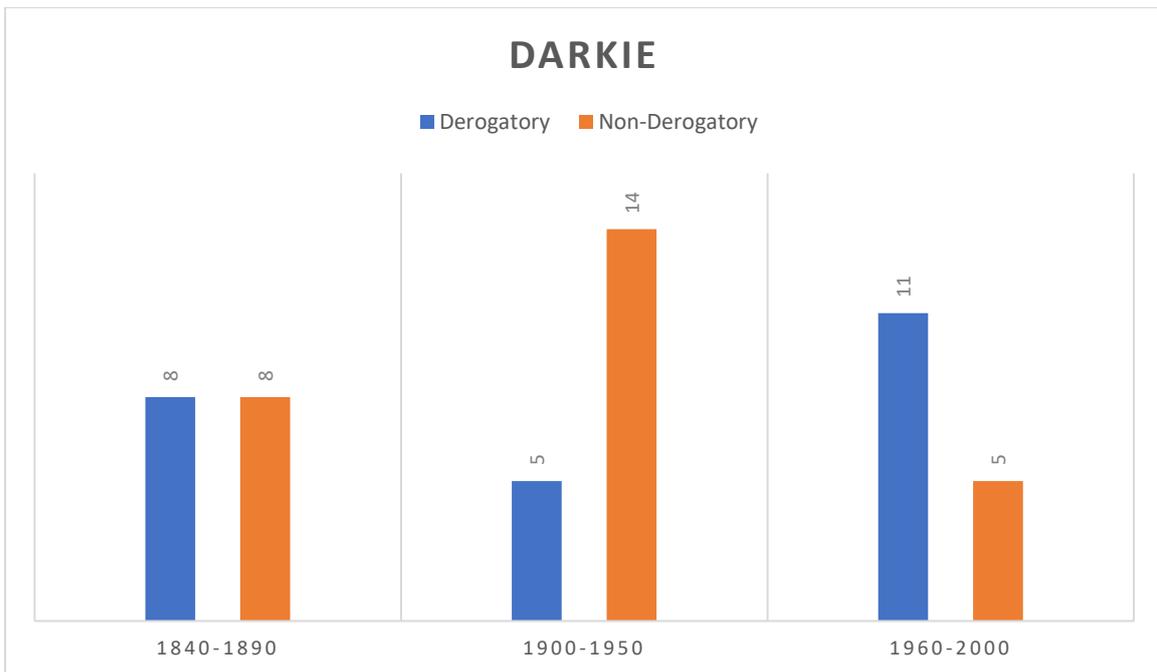


Fig. 5: Graph showing the frequency of use of *darkie* and its contrasts in connotations

According to Fig. 4, examples in *COHA* show that the connotations of this word have changed throughout the years. It appears very equally distributed in the first six decades. Then, in the next group of decades, there is a rise in the use of *darkie* with a non-derogatory meaning and a reduction of occurrences with a derogatory connotation. In the next six decades, there is a change of tendency. The instances of *darkie* as a derogatory term outnumber those as a non-derogatory term.

All the hits of *darkie* found in *COHA* correspond to examples located in novels or films. The word is used in fiction to reflect racism, showing that there is a clear use of the word as a slur in society. This slur is related to racism, specifically against black

people. Historically, this could be related to events such as slavery in the US between 1619 and 1865 (*History.com*).

From this slur, two differences in connotation can be established. The negative connotation when the slur is used to address black people in a derogatory way (11) and the neutral or even positive one when used by black people to refer to themselves (10). These two senses are well established, and they seem not to undergo any semantic changes throughout different years, but they rather coexist.

The last slur to be analyzed is *dago*. According to the classification established in this paper, it is an origin-related slur. It is defined as “[a]ppplied derogatorily to a Spaniard, Portuguese, or Italian, and also to the Spanish or Italian language; from the Spanish male personal name *Diego*, equivalent to English *James*” (Ayto, 35). Therefore, this slur is used in US English to refer to people who came originally from one of these Mediterranean countries in Europe.

This definition also provides information about the etymology of the word. The term *dago* is a deformation of the name *Diego*, which is typically found in the countries mentioned above.

A number of 158 instances have been registered in *COHA*. The first registered entry dates back to 1884, and the example (12) shows that the lemma was already used in this derogatory sense:

(12) “And, if I did, it wuddent be for the likes of no I-talian Dago, if id's him ye're a-dthrivin' at” (Cable, 1884)

From these 158 hits in *COHA*, the slur appears with the sense given in the above definition in 141 of them. In the entries in which it is not used with that sense, the word is used as a proper name. Other examples can show that all the instances, from the earliest to the most recent ones, have the lemma with this meaning, as illustrated in the examples (13) and (14).

(13) “ Nick, you little dago, give me that blue deck. ” (Gautreux, 1995)

(14) "" Get your backs into it, you dago bastards, " the Australian foreman barked"
(McKinty, 2007)

After analyzing all the instances of *dago* in *COHA* and finding out that in all of them (except when used as a proper name) it is used with the sense of the definition provided by *Ayto*, it is concluded that the connotation of this word is originally negative, and this connotation has been kept throughout the years, as shown in examples (12) and (14). These examples show that the slur keeps the same meaning and derogatory sense in a period of a hundred years.

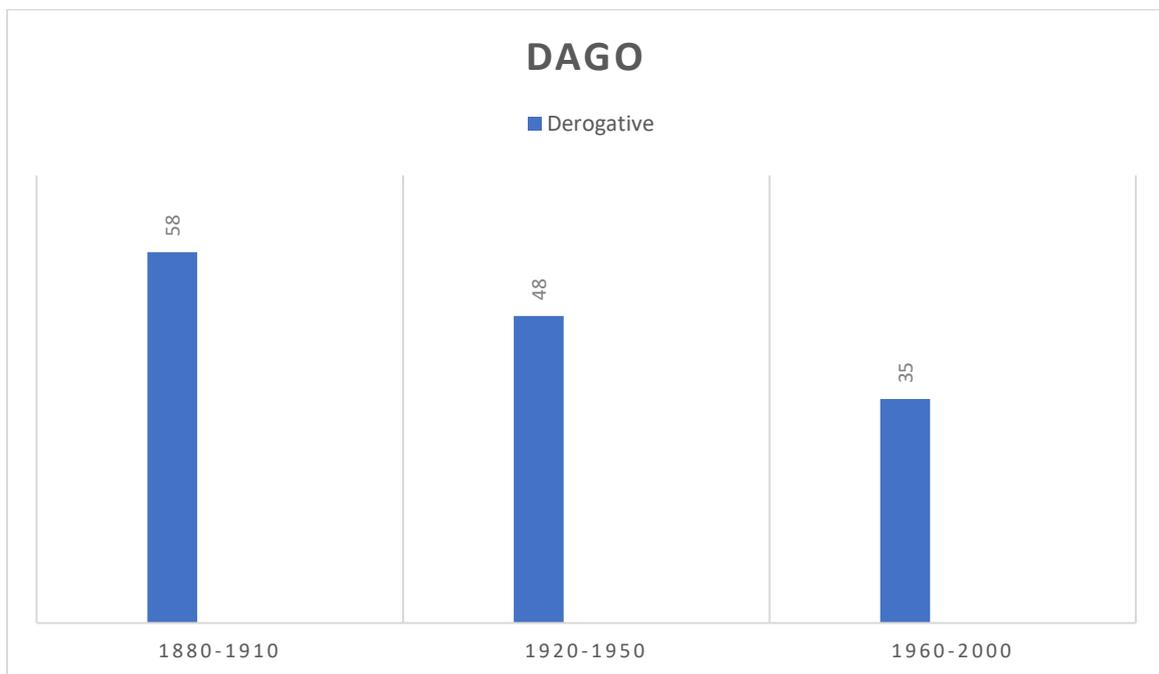


Fig. 6: Graph showing the frequency of appearance of *dago* as a slur in *COHA*

According to *Ayto*, the first instance of *dago* is registered in 1834. Before that moment, the countries to which the slur is addressed had contact with the US on different occasions. For example, when Spain ceded Florida to the US in 1819. There are also some remains of the colonization that had ceased the previous century. However, there was abundant contact of US citizens with Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese people. Another event to consider is the migration flow that took place at the beginning of the 20th century from Europe to America ("*US History Timeline*").

Considering all these facts and the analysis, it can be stated that the use of *dago* is entirely derogatory, it has undergone no semantic change, and it has a negative connotation. As previously stated in the definition, the term comes from the personal name *Diego*, and it has probably been phonetically deformed, even affecting its written form, thus leading to the form *dago*. Accordingly, it is a loanword that has been adapted to English phonetics and orthography. Concerning its use, it has decreased progressively, considering the data provided by *COHA*.

5. Conclusion

This study set out the idea that slurs are words that in principle had no negative connotation, but different factors such as the use of the lemma throughout the years and its association with negative ideas might have triggered a semantic acquisition of negative traits.

However, this study is limited by extension and, therefore, data must be interpreted with caution because the analyzed content may not be extensive enough to reach decisive conclusions. Another important limitation is that the words that have been examined are considered to be rude and/or pejorative. Thus, there was difficulty in finding instances of these terms in *COHA*.

Taking all these factors into account, the results of the analysis are diverse. The study aimed to show that slurs are terms that acquire this connotation progressively; nonetheless, three out of four lemmas showed no change of meaning of this sort. Only *commie*, one of the politics-related slurs analyzed, appears to be compliant with our hypothesis, as it is the only lemma that was not initially embedded with a negative connotation, which was acquired later, thus undergoing the process of pejoration.

Concerning the other three slurs, the results seem to be divergent. *Sorehead* is a politics-related slur that shows a counter-specialization of meaning, but no indication of neutral or positive meanings was found, not even in the first examples gathered in

the corpus. The lemma solely shows negative connotation throughout the historical periods provided by *COHA*. Consequently, the word does not show the process of pejoration, as it is pejorative throughout all the examples, with no change in connotation.

Darkie is a race-related slur showing two different perspectives. On the one hand, it appears with a derogatory connotation when addressed to black people. On the other hand, when the word is uttered by a black person or a black character, its connotation does not seem to be negative. Therefore, this term does not show progressivity as far as derogation is concerned; instead, it shows that a derogatory and a non-derogatory meaning coexist, which obviously depends on the context. Hence, *darkie* is a pejorative term that has undergone the process of pejoration as well as the process of amelioration, when used among black people. For this reason, this distinction of pejorative and ameliorative connotations is dependent on the communicative functions of speakers.

Dago is an origin-related slur that shows a negative connotation in all the examined instances. Therefore, since its earliest attestation, the word has been pejorative and has remained semantically intact. Thus, no process of pejoration or amelioration has taken place. Regarding semantic change, only *commie* has shown to agree with the hypothesis, which shows that words take various semantic paths in their evolution. Historical facts and semantic typology have clearly demonstrated to correlate semantic change and lemma.

Regarding the relation of these terms with the historical context, none of the findings is determining. The only slur whose development seems to be related to the historical context is *commie*. Its relationship with politics is really evident and clear, therefore it is easier to identify in which context it could be used or not, and in which periods of history it could be more or less related to. The rest of the slurs can also be related to the historical context. However, none of the intended connections

show a clear relation with the development of negative connotations of the slur, since they all manifested to have undergone various diachronic processes.

The use of slurs to examine the semantic evolution of words shows that this is not a homogenous process, and words appear to take different morphosemantic paths. These paths, besides being restricted by intra-morphosemantic limitations, are influenced by historical contexts, communicative functions, and more importantly, the inner nature of slang as an ever-changing lexicon.

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