Cartoon Connections: Identifying Connections Between Language Use and Evolution

Nikki Fingland
St. John Fisher College, nfingland_no@sjfc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol6/iss1/4 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Cartoon Connections: Identifying Connections Between Language Use and Evolution

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the article's first paragraph.

Holy Cowabunga, dude! You need to, like, stop having a cow, man! Does this sound familiar? In considering the extreme number of slang expressions that have infiltrated present-day English, it is no surprise that sayings such as these are so widely recognized. Cartoon shows and their characters have had an especially strong impact on the use and promotion of slang throughout the past century. With characters such as Bart Simpson and Beavis and Butthead leading the way, it has become nearly impossible to hold a conversation without using at least one word or saying that is a result of popular culture and its extensive influence. In the visibly increased usage of slang language, it has simultaneously become recognized that many elements of this construction have evolved and are still currently subject to changes in both meaning and connotation.
Holy Cowabunga, dude! You need to, like, stop having a cow, man! Does this sound familiar? In considering the extreme number of slang expressions that have infiltrated present-day English, it is no surprise that sayings such as these are so widely recognized. Cartoon shows and their characters have had an especially strong impact on the use and promotion of slang throughout the past century. With characters such as Bart Simpson and Beavis and Butthead leading the way, it has become nearly impossible to hold a conversation without using at least one word or saying that is a result of popular culture and its extensive influence. In the visibly increased usage of slang language, it has simultaneously become recognized that many elements of this construction have evolved and are still currently subject to changes in both meaning and connotation.

Slang is defined as "an informal, nonstandard, nontechnical vocabulary composed chiefly of novel-sounding synonyms for standard words and phrases" (Nunnally 76: 159). The word "slang" itself was originally used as a synonym for cant, or criminal slang. Linguist Maureen O'Connor points out that by the early nineteenth century it was, however, "being used for professional language—what we would now call jargon—and as a catch-all for lively, up-to-date and perhaps not quite respectable language and people" (2). Its users are fascinated with expressing the main emotional concepts of human behavior, as most slang deals in one way or another with money, crime, sex, or vulgarity in general. The intention of slang was or still is to obfuscate. It is "meant to confuse the pigs—a term for the police which can be traced back as far as 1811. Simple fashion now drives young people to keep one step ahead of their elders linguistically as well as in dress and lifestyle" (2). In a sense, it can be said to almost operate as some type of secret language.

The vital aspects of slang revolve around social dimension. Nunnally notes that slang is likely to turn up in the "derisive speech play of youthful, raffish, or undignified persons and groups" (76:159). Considering the association of youth with cartoons, it is no wonder how samples of language from the many animated shows have wound their way into everyday speech. "Television has done more to extend the bounds of acceptable language than any other medium—and to enrich it," (O'Connor 2). Whether here today, gone tomorrow, or around to stay, there is a definite slang vocabulary that promises to exist well into the twenty-first century.

Many might remember hearing "Cowabunga" for the first time on the early 1990s cartoon Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. This word’s history, however, began nearly forty years earlier in 1949 when head writer for The Howdy Doody Show, Eddie Kean, coined the term. Originally spelled "Kowabonga," it was created for the character Chief Thunderthud, who needed his own Indian greeting. Another character, Princess Summerfall Winterspring, used "Kowagoopa," so "Kowabonga" seemed logical for Chief Thunderthud. The full line as used by the Chief was "Kowabonga, Buffalo Bob!" (Mueller 2). In this connotation, the word means simply "hello," but it was also used as a mild curse in fights on the show where it would then mean "damn it" (2).

After its debut on The Howdy Doody Show, "Cowabunga" resurfaced years later in the early 1960s with California surfers. The word re-appeared with a brand new spelling and an exciting new enthusiasm (1). It was now being used as an exclamation of exhilaration and delight. Upon approaching a big wave, surfers would shout this word with a breath of energy. Charles Schulz featured "Cowabunga" in a Snoopy cartoon around this same time which depicted Snoopy running toward the ocean with a surfboard in hand. It has also been recorded that soldiers in Vietnam would shout, "Fire at the tree line...cowabunga!" (1). Finally, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles cartoon adopted this saying in their famous line, "Cowabunga, dude!" With the help of Michelangelo, this expression became the national motto of third-graders everywhere. Many people associate Bart Simpson with "Cowabunga," although Bart’s actual saying is "Aye Carumba" (3). The widespread promotion of "Cowabunga" by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles cartoon led both Busch Gardens and Disney World to use it in naming rides, and it has also been utilized in a commercial for Miller Beer. The increased usage gained enough attention to yield ultimate inclusion for the word in both the Oxford and Random House Dictionaries (4).

The second half of the famous saying from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles has an interesting past as well. As author Richard Hill points out, "The history of 'dude' is, in more ways than one, a rags-to-riches tale" (Hill et al. 321). A specialized cant of Northern England is believed to be responsible for this word’s wide range of usage. Before being used to reference a person, it was associated with "duddes," which was an eighth-century term for clothing. By the fifteenth century, "dudes" was being used as a term for old cloths and rags (321). "The earliest recorded use
of 'dude' as a synonym for person was the 'dudesman,' a scarecrow generally attired in rags too decrepit for even the 'common people'" (321). The variations of the word lasted through both the Middle and Early Modern English periods and entered the New World courtesy of the British settlers. The "pejorative connotation" was gradually dropped and "duds" simply referred to any and all garments (321).

According to a study led by Hill, the word "dude" has gone through four major shifts. "Dude" debuted in its first "shift" in the last quarter of the nineteenth century on the western frontier, meaning "a well-dressed man," and coming from a combination of "duds" and "attitude" (321). It was synonymous with the word "dandy," which held a similar meaning during this time. With the popularity of the "Wild West," "dude" reached the printing presses in the east and began to be utilized within popular literature. Mark Twain, Owen Wister, and western novelist Max Brand all promoted the word by including it in their works of the time period. This western meaning was still present in the second shift of "dude," although there was a significant broadening of connotation. Railroad conductors and new Army recruits were among the new groups of people to be labeled as "dudes" (323). The 1940s and 1950s saw "dude" being used as equally as "man" and "guy." The increased presence of television sets in homes in the 1950s "would have a profound effect on the spread of 'dude'" (324). The Howdy Doody Show was chiefly responsible. According to Hill, this show "may be seen in retrospect as a major catalyst for the modern 'dude' phenomenon, since it not only rode the last wave of romantic nostalgia for the Old West...but also influenced the patios of an ensuing popular culture endeavor concerned with real waves" (324). The waves are a reference to the surfing fad of the 1960s where terms like "dude" were a part of standard speech. By the end of the second shift in the early 1980s, "dude" had succeeded in reaching across the boundaries of culture and class to become a universally recognized synonym of "man." The third shift of "dude" saw increased usage of the word in high schools. Teenagers were using the word as an "exclamation of delight and/or affection" (325). By the mid-1980s, however, it could also be used to express disappointment and a positive or negative reaction to a surprise. A few years later, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles cartoon became responsible for making "dude" a "popular-culture sensation" (325). Hill writes that "Hundreds of millions of people worldwide have been exposed to [the cartoon], and those who know the Turtles know 'dude,' even if they speak no other English" (326). While the cartoon was receiving international exposure for "rarely uttering a sentence that did not contain the word 'dude','" the obsession with the word at home had become focused on younger children (326). By the end of the 1980s, dude was used by pre-school aged children to refer to an older, bigger boy. The 1990s saw the promotion of the word in such movies as Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey and Wayne's World. "Dude" has evolved to become a "vocal tic" and "verbal filler," similar to such phrases as "you know?" and "hmmmm" (326).

According to Hill, there is a possibility of development of a fourth "dude" shift. This would occur if, in the future, the word develops a verb form similar to the many uses of "-ed." Considering the many variations of this obscenity, the future could bring such sentences as, "Dude, dude, 'ja dude da dude?'" (327). The chance for an even greater saturation of "dude" is evident when considering the present and past tense forms of the verb "to do." With the present-day increased tendency to use "-ed" endings, people could very well be saying "If I did it" very soon (327). Is "dude destined to provoke a virtual syntactic revolution in the English language?" (327). Only time will tell, but if past success is any indication of future prosperity, it seems safe to say that it is well on its way, dude!

"Dude" has obviously undergone many changes in meaning throughout its history. A truly drastic change, however, is made visible to us by utilizing another cartoon program and its vocabulary. The popular series Scooby Doo features a crime solving dog and his friends who travel around solving various mysteries and fighting off ghosts and goblins, while of course being sure to save a generous amount of time for eating. Scooby Doo's favorite treats are known as "Scooby snacks," presumably some sort of dog biscuit or bone similar to those found today. The dictionary opens and there it is: "scooby snack: vagina, female genitalia," used in the sentence, "That girl gave me some of her scooby snack" (Glowka et al. 420). It gets better. Other definitions include "a drug used recreationally," and "a mixed alcoholic drink featuring Malibu Rum, Midori, pineapple juice, and whipped cream" (420). Only in the English language does a dog biscuit get turned into a vagina, a drug, and an alcoholic beverage. For this term, the perverse degradation of meaning can only be explained by the extensive influence of pop-culture in American society.

Other, although not so drastic, meanings have been tampered with over the years. The initial reaction upon hearing "Mickey" is to think of Mickey Mouse, the main star and focus of the Walt Disney characters. The other pervasive "mouse" in society is, of course, the mouse tool of a computer system. A "Mickey" is currently defined as "a unit of computer mouse distance, approximately 0.005 inch," and is used in the sentence, "The remaining bits... (indicate) the number of mickeys the mouse has moved in the 'x' and 'y' directions since the last report" (Glowka and
Lester 210). This is a perfect example of how words correlate. If a computer mouse were instead called a "Bugs," then the new term for mouse distance would be a "Bunny" or a "Carrot." Present-day English trends would rather use one recognizable word to associate with another instead of forming a new word that would be more difficult to remember. This follows the theory of least effort that is progressively becoming more invasive and recognizable in all aspects of modern day speech. A unique transformation has also occurred with the word "bunghole." "Bunghole" traditionally refers to an aperture through which a cask can be filled or emptied (Jewell 229). Popular 1990s cartoon characters Beavis and Butthead had something to say about this, however. The current connotation of "bunghole" is due to the language of these two figures. According to the cartoon, the correct usage is, "I saw her first, bunghole," meaning "asshole" or "jerk"; the only other previous recording of the word being used in this derogatory way is supplied by Stephen King's 1986 novel It (Lighter 316). It is doubtful that any of the thousands of junior high and high school students using this word everyday will ever know its traditional meaning.

Slang as a language would have an extremely limited vocabulary with the absence of vulgar words, sayings, and references. According to slang dictionary compiler, Jonathon Green, there are about three thousand words for being drunk and hundreds more for sexual parts and acts (O'Connor 2). Just take a look at some of Beavis and Butthead's suggestions for movie titles in their book Huh Huh for Hollywood.

At the top of the list are sayings such as "grooming the poodle," "wetting the weasel," "spanking the monkey," and "burning the candle at one end" (Doyle 25). The vulgarity does not stop there. Referring to a female, Beavis says, "Her thingies popped out," and Butthead says, "Let's, like, do it" (85). The American audience has a never-ending appetite for vulgarity whether it relates to sex, body parts, or bodily functions. "Vulgar sexual terms have become acceptable in the last two decades..." and for this reason, the cartoon Beavis and Butthead prospered and words like "thingies" became a part of the mainstream (Wachal 195).

Similarly, expressions that were previously considered to be taboo have made a significant comeback. Evidence of this lies in the fact that "The language used on network television has changed dramatically. The overall use of profane language has skyrocketed over five hundred percent since 1989" (Wachal 196). "Ass," which was used only twelve times in 1989, had become the second most frequently used word by 1999, when it was used two hundred sixty-five times. "Crap" went from five to forty-one, "sucks" from zero to forty, and "son of a bitch" from twelve to fifty-four (196). In a recent survey cited by Wachal, almost a quarter of children that researchers questioned reported using the expression "take a dump" for referring to going to the bathroom (198). Is it a mere coincidence that all of these words and phrases were featured heavily on Beavis and Butthead? This unmistakable correlation is ample evidence of just how impressionable the viewing public is.

The promotion of vulgar slang use in the cartoon Beavis and Butthead continues further. In research done by Wachal, the two characters are responsible for expressions listed in nearly every category of vulgarity, with each featuring a particular word. Under the use of "butt," they are cited for "kick butt," "butthole," and "stick a tambourine up his butt" (Wachal 203). Under "cock," the expression listed, again courtesy of these two figures, is "If I could turn into a bird, I'd turn into a cock; gonna show her my schlong" (Wachal 203). In yet another bathroom expression, "take a leak" is accredited to the show that aired on January 10, 1997 (Wachal 204). Although Beavis and Butthead is no longer airing new episodes, the future awaits the appearance of a new pair of swearing, vulgar teenagers who will bring with them the next wave of creative vocabulary and slang expressions.

Television and society have obviously come a long way since 1960, when the use of vulgarity was "excised from Jack Paar's Tonight Show" (Wachal 197). The influence of increased vulgar slang use has even shown its impact on Congress, with studies showing an "overall increase in usage from the 99th Congress (1985-87) to the 104th Congress (1995-97)," especially in the uses of "ass" and "crap" (Wachal 197). It would have been difficult to foresee that two characters like Beavis and Butthead would have such a profound effect on not only the speech of today's youth, but on that of our nation's Congress as well.

Dictionaries are having an increasingly difficult time keeping up with the fast pace of additions to the slang genre. O'Connor agrees as she says, "Essentially slang is spoken language. It moves quickly and is difficult to catch up with" (2). In Wachal's study, fifteen of the top forty vulgar slang expressions studied appear in fewer than seven of the twenty-three total dictionaries consulted. Despite being common, "butthead" is not found in any of the dictionaries, with "thing" and "weenie" only being located in two each (Wachal 197). In turning away from vulgarity, however, many of the popular "nicer" slang expressions can be readily found. "Yabbadabba Doo," used as a cry of exultation, appears as a result of the cartoon The Flintstones. The widely used and recognized expressions "Don't have a cow, man" and "Eat my shorts" are cited as moving into the mainstream as a result of the popularity of The
Simpsons cartoon (Green 388). These two phrases quickly became the answer to every question asked to elementary and junior-high students while simultaneously becoming the bane of teachers everywhere.

The Looney Tunes characters are also responsible for coining many popular phrases. Dictionaries recognize the influence of the fast moving Roadrunner in promoting the commonly used "beep-beep" sound of radio and television advertisements. Similarly, Speedy Gonzales is no longer just a cartoon character. In an extension of meaning, the name is now used as a phrase to mean "quickly" or "fast," as in "Let's be speedy gonzales this morning" (Glowka and Lester 200). Cartoon slang has had such an effect on American speech that there are currently web sites that are devoted to translating passages into the languages of Elmer Fudd, Scooby Doo, and the Smurfs. The key phrases of characters such as Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Sylvester, Tweety Bird, and Bugs Bunny are recognized at first glance by the majority of the public. Dictionaries would be remiss not to recognize and acknowledge the many elements of this widespread influence.

Will present day society ever be able to be adequately defined without the inclusion of such words as "Cowabunga," "dude," and the more vulgar "bunghole" and "ass'? It is very unlikely. Standard English has been influenced in a profound way, both in the sense that "previously unacceptable words and phrases (have) become repeatable in polite company" and also that a significant number of slang words have been "absorbed into the colloquial" and will eventually be absorbed into the standard written vocabulary (O'Connor 2). Ten years from now, this paper might be perfectly acceptable in saying "This dude proved this" or "His theory is not worth crap."

With the strong presence of television and impact of pop-culture, slang is destined to continue and grow. As researcher Thomas Cooper says, "The tolerance—in fact, the demand—of contemporary literature and journalism for a vigorous informal vocabulary...leads us to expect that, in coming decades, more slang will achieve standard status more quickly than ever before" (62). In the meantime, people would be well advised to use precise language, as asking for one of those "thingies" or trying to buy "scooby snacks" could have potentially hazardous results.

Works Cited


