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Lexicographic lumpers and splitters: issues with innovative slang

This paper will relate to you some findings from my lexicography class at the University of Georgia. Our class project is a dictionary of slang terms used on the UGA campus and is titled *Dawgspeak* which now has over 1650 entries in it. I think that I have uncovered an old issue, lumping of senses in an entry, in some of the students' work. This inability to separate all of the senses in a slang term can happen since many of the terms are from subcultures in the US that the students are not very familiar with. The meanings are not overtly discussed informally in dorm rooms and fraternity houses, so this class is one of the only venues in which they can flesh out the senses.

The question of how to carve up meaning is made concrete by the dictionary editor's decisions on how to treat the meanings of lexical items. Whether to lump senses in an entry together, often with run-ons, or split them into numbered senses or separate entries depends on the salience of the components of the various senses. Lumpers like to group the senses together while splitters enumerate the differences in meaning in more detail. When the treatment involves slang terms, their non-standardized and ephemeral nature may lead users to perceive the probable meanings differently depending on their own usage patterns. This individual variation in usage of slang makes these lexical items ideal for revisiting the lumping vs. splitting problem in dictionaries. This paper will examine the practice of lexicographic decision making regarding lumping and splitting by these student editors. The course has been offered times, in spring 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, and 2008, and thus has five editions of 750 words, 1120 words, 1450 words, 1580 words, and over 1650 words.

Bitch: An example of splitting:

Splitting and enumerating senses by indicating a genus or superordinate with specific differentia is a typical modern day lexicographic practice. According to Geeraerts (2003:89): "an analytical definition is a definition that analyzes the definiens into constituent features" by specifying a superordinate category or genus proximum with "distinguishing features with regard to that generic term (differentias specificas)." With most of the slang items that refer to concrete things or very specific actions, the lexicography class does this effortlessly. However, certain terms sometimes well known, sometimes obscure, are problematic. The most salient example that took several years to flesh out and fully enumerate is the slang term bitch. This term was expanded from four to five to six to seven senses between 2001 and 2004. The original verb sense was **bitch** "When someone bitches, they are complaining." No other sense for the verb has been reported by my students. The original four noun senses were 1 If someone calls a girl a bitch, they do not like her or her actions. 2 If a guy calls a girl his bitch, he means that she is his girlfriend. 3 If a thing or situation is a bitch, you mean that it is extremely unpleasant or disagreeable. 4 A person can address their friend as bitch." In 2001 sense 5 was added by female students in the class. 5 If a girl calls her boyfriend her bitch, then he does what she tells him to do. When several of the fraternity boys in class objected saying that the girls could not use the word that way, they were met with a resounding, "Oh yes we can!"

In 2003 sense 6 was added: 6 A person might call anyone displaying servant characteristics as a bitch. Dr. Reiter's research assistant seems more like a research bitch, the way he has to photocopy all of Dr. Reiter's class handouts. We see and attempt to create servant or servile as an overarching sense for the term that might stand for several specific senses. This tendency lies behind the perceived need to lump senses rather than splitting them, although with bitch, the enumeration was maintained.

Bitch was separated into one verb sense and seven numbered noun senses in 2004. The seventh sense is "7 Calling a friend a bitch can be a term of endearment. Bitch, I already told you, you could borrow my lipstick. You don't even have to ask." This usage of bitch in a friendly manner is especially popular in the drag queen community. This is similar to sense 4 'A person can address their friend as bitch. John said, "Yo, bitch, whassup?!" When asked about this similarity, students felt that the use in the gay-lesbian community was a different sense of the term.

Several phrases with bitch follow the entry for bitch. **Bitch out** "If you bitch someone out, you curse and yell at them. All I did was eat some of Mandy's chips and she bitched me out!" This sense was split, but could have been lumped with the verb sense of bitch. Likewise, the term bitchin' follows from the positive sense of bitch as friend. **Bitchin'** If you say something is bitchin' you mean it is really cool or that you like it a lot. That Porsche is bitchin'! This sense could have been lumped with bitch meaning friend.

In these entries, the meanings were split, although student editors in the next edition in spring 2006 may very well discover additional nuances of meaning of bitch that warrant additional senses.

Blowing up: an example of lumping:

Blowing up is treated as two senses, the first a verb meaning crowded and the second meaning the ringing of a cell phone. The entries are as follows:

blowin' up (verb) 1 If a place is blowin' up, it is becoming crowded or popular. The party we went to last night was blowin' up. 2 If someone is blowin' up, their cell phone is ringing, usually repeatedly. When someone was blowin' up in the movie theater, an angry man yelled: "Turn your damn phone off!"

This may be an example of lumping mainly because the first blowin' up, meaning popular and crowded probably is an adjective, not a verb, an adjective that can only be in the predicate. Determining this is easy to do by simply asking the students about specific contexts, such as the possibility of a "blowin'up party" and examining student usage with "blew up," "blows up" and other verb forms. If it is an adjective, the two senses should be split since both the part of speech and the meaning are very different. We saw this with bitching, clearly an predicative adjective that follows a to be verb, which is correctly labeled adjective.

Splitting and expansion:

A second issue involves splitting for the sake of expanding the entries. We can see two verb senses below that are split by the student editor, although they could have been put in one entry.

chillax (verb) If someone is **chillaxin'**, then he or she is acting in a very laid back and calm manner, either alone or with friends. *Nah, I'm not gonna do anything today. I just wanna **chillax** at my house and watch some TV.* **chillax** (verb) When you say someone is **chillaxing**, you mean they are casually spending time with friends. *"Mark went over to Peter's, but instead of working on the project they just ended up **chillaxing** with a bag of chips."*

In the next entry we see two senses in one entry, both nouns and both numbered, with sharply different meanings. The next edition will regularize this treatment so that the two separate noun or verb senses in the two entries above will be corrected. Placing both senses of chillax, both verbs, into one entry is preferable. We see this in the following entry for 'cock.'

cock (noun) 1 If a guy greets another guy and calls him a **cock**, then that guy is his friend. *"What have you been up to, **cock**?" Todd asked John on the phone.* 2 If a girl calls a guy a **cock**, she means she does not like him or something he did. *Mary called John a **cock** when he made fun of her hair.* This can be either a friendly term of abuse or a true term of abuse depending on the context.

Lumping caused by inability to distinguish meaning:

The students use "**cool**" as a frequent everyday term, meaning acceptable and favorable, as in sense 3 When you say something's **cool**, you mean it's okay and acceptable. *If you want to take my car for the weekend, that's **cool** with me.*

The question is, could there be another sense, the word alone said in reply to an idea or suggestion. The Macmillan English Dictionary has an example, *"We could go to a movie." "Cool."* If the students miss a usage such as this, it may count as lumping since it is slightly different from "okay and acceptable" given in sense 3 above.

Lumping a new sense for 'Dog':

In the entry for 'dog,' we see that sense 2 for dog means an unattractive girl. We may note that Randy Jackson, a judge on the TV show "*American Idol*" consistently calls both male and female contestants "dog" when he praises them. This seems to be a new usage, and is then lumped into sense 1 "dog" as a synonym for friend.

dog (noun) 1 When you call someone **dog**, they are your friend. *T-Roy is my **dog**; we have been friends since elementary school.* 2 If you call a girl a **dog**, you mean she is not attractive. *Claire has a really nice personality; it's a pity that she is such a **dog**.* This term, which you should avoid, is considered to be very offensive. 3 If you call a guy a **dog**, you mean he sleeps around with different girls. *Robert is such a **dog**; he spends all his time in the bed.* This term is used when you disapprove of the guy's action.

Similarly, a lack of delineation in the senses of **stank**, **stank you**, **stankily**, and **stanky** occurs in the entries.

stank (noun) If something has **stank** on it, it is dirty or unclean, usually referring to sexually transmitted infections. *You should probably go get tested. That girl you went home with last night looked like she had all kinds of **stank** on her.*
stank you (idiom) If you say **stank you**, you mean thank you. *"Nice tie, Andre!" "**Stank you**!"* Often used in a humorous way, though listeners may perceive it as lightly mocking. Popularized by Outkast's Andre 3000. **stankily** (adverb) If someone, usually a girl, is described as behaving or dressing **stankily**, she is behaving or dressed in a very sexually provocative or promiscuous manner. *Did you see how **stankily** Erin was dressed when she left for the frat party?* See also **stanky**.

stanky (adjective) 1 If someone, usually a girl, is called **stanky**, they are dirty or unclean, usually in a manner that relates to the number or type of people she slept with. *That girl is so **stanky**. I've heard she has slept with guys into the triple digits.* Being **stanky** is worse than being skanky. 2 If something is **stanky** it is unclean or smelly. *There were some **stanky**-ass bathrooms in that Gator Haters bar.*

The sense of being dirty and sexually unclean in stank, the past tense of the verb "stink," is mixed with provocative and promiscuous in stankily. We see this in the noun stank and sense 2 of the adjective stanky. The adverb stankily is related to sense 1 of the adjective stanky. With the idiom stank you, meaning thank you, the connection with the flirting or provocative sense is only hinted at in the usage note: "Often used in a humorous way…."

Metrosexual and differentia

Minor disagreements about how to distinguish the sense of a word came to a head with metrosexual and metro. Students could not agree on which of the following factors could distinguish whether a man might be a metrosexual: a man's feminine side, his fashion tastes, his perceived needs for hair products, skin products, and body products, and the amount of attention he pays to his looks. The result was four entries, three for

metrosexual and one for metro. In each the superordinate term is nearly the same, a guy, a straight man, a man, and a guy, respectively; however, the differentia are slightly different.

metro (noun) If you say that a guy is a **metro**, you mean that he is heterosexual, but is eager to embrace his feminine side. Men like this tend to buy expensive suits, haircuts, body products, etc. *Brandon is a **metro**; he just bought a $150 moisturizer for himself.* This term may be considered mildly offensive to some. It can also be used in a disapproving manner. Metro is short for metrosexual.
metrosexual (noun) A **metrosexual** is a straight man but participates in some feminine practices such as carefully grooming skin and hair, and dressing in fashionable or expensive clothing. *Ever since Jack started watching "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" he's turned into a total **metrosexual**.*
metrosexual (adjective) If you say that a man is **metrosexual**, you mean that he is straight but participates in some feminine practices such as carefully grooming skin and hair, and dressing in fashionable or expensive clothing. *Look how sophisticated Tom is with his new hairstyle and Gucci loafers. He is totally **metrosexual**.*
metrosexual (adjective or noun) If a guy is **metrosexual** or a **metrosexual** , it means he is a heterosexual who pays too much attention to his looks. *He bleaches his hair and gets his eyebrows waxed, he is so **metrosexual***! (This entry was cut from the printed book, *Dawgspeak*, but remains in the website.)

Part of speech and differentia

It appears that the lumping vs. splitting question is dependent on the differentia in the entries and how perceptive the student editors are. However, in many cases, the need to split senses may be reducible to the determination of the part of speech for the term. In *Dawgspeak* lumping tends to be related to the inability to distinguish a verb phrase from a predicative adjective. The different perceptions by the students for many slang terms are focused on whether the item or phrase is an adjective or a verb. In fact, many slang terms appear to be verbs in their form, but apparently can only act as predicate adjectives, e.g. "That Porsche is bitchin'. At any rate, lumping may be triggered by multiple senses that co-occur with each part of speech.

Three Cases for differentiating meaning:

It seems that three cases exist regarding lumping or splitting in this slang dictionary.

1. The senses are lumped and not enumerated in one entry. This may be the case with "cool" as an agreeable answer, a synonym for OK.

2. The entry has two or three numbered senses in one entry; one of the senses is a separate part of speech with a very different meaning. The entry for blowin' up is in this category.

3. Two or more entries have been included with very slightly different senses, as in the entries for metrosexual and chillax.

Problematic Lumping Issues in published dictionaries in the US

Lest the audience think that lumping meanings or incorrectly splitting meanings is only a problem in this course project at the University of Georgia, I can add that it is possible to find examples of lumping in published American ESL dictionaries.

The following examples from the *Newbury House Dictionary of American English* are not exactly the same as lumping that occurs in Dawgspeak because the students are in the process of discriminating meaning in terms that are often not that familiar to all of them. In contrast, lumping in published dictionaries is dependent on the editorial policy that governs run-ons. Certain run-ons, hopefully, arguably, allegedly, and others, which are mainly adverbial forms that are disjuncts that act as sentence modifiers, may be listed at the end of an entry. They then lack a note or an entry of their own to distinguish their meaning.

In the *Newbury House Dictionary of American English* we see the following:

Hopeful 1 having faith that s.t. good will happen. 2 optimistic, positive: adv. hopefully; n. hopefulness.

Hopefully is listed as a run-on along with hopefulness. Since this word has received considerable attention in the press from language mavens and other writers, the reader, even an ESL student, might expect better treatment in the dictionary of this modifier.

Likewise, we might expect that "bitch," as a frequently used word in English, might get fuller treatment, beginning with the most frequent sense first, but this is not the case in the Newbury House dictionary.

Bitch 1 a female dog 2 vulg. Pej. a difficult woman: She is always angry and mean; she's a real bitch. 3 vulg. a difficult job to do: The computer lost a lot of information; what a bitch to redo it all! V. vulg. To complain: Some employees bitch all the time; there's no way to stop their complaining.

Here we see 'a female dog' as the first sense. This does not serve the needs of the ESL student. We can claim that this entry has some lumping or at least elisions, since another ESL dictionary, the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, has five noun senses, the three above plus "rude or cruel person" and "a complaint about someone," the fifth sense reserved for the female dog, plus one for the verb, and one more for "bitch out," a phrasal verb.

The next example, arguably, seems to be a better example of lumping without meaning discrimination because this adverb, a disjunct that acts as a sentence modifier, just as 'hopefully' does, is listed under the wrong part of speech. In addition, 'arguably' is wrongly labeled an adjective.

Argue v. 1 to disagree, contest what s.o. says in a formal, logical way. 2 to fight with words, (syn.) to wrangle. adj. arguably.

This adverb “arguably” should be listed under ‘arguable,’ the adjective, not the verb. There are additional examples but in the interest of time, I will merely state that in abridged paperback dictionaries, such as the *Random House Webster’s Dictionary*, we can see the editorial policy for run-ons leading to similar lumping problems when the run-on has frequent usage as a sentence modifier (allege, allegedly; argue, arguable, arguably; hope, hopeful, hopefully).

Conclusion: Three Cases for differentiating meaning

It seems that three cases exist regarding lumping or splitting in this slang dictionary.

1. The senses are lumped and not enumerated in one entry. This may be the case with “cool” as an agreeable answer, a synonym for OK. The future treatment of Randy Jackson’s use of “dog” is another example

2. The entry has two or three numbered senses in one entry; one of the senses is a separate part of speech with a very different meaning. The entry for blowin’ up is in this category. “Crushin’” for guys and “have a crush on” for girls may also be.

3. Two or more entries have been included with very slightly different senses, as in the entries for metrosexual and chillax.

To conclude, we might ask a rhetorical question: which policy is preferred for a slang dictionary such as Dawgspeak? Should the same spelled form with different parts of speech and different meanings occur multiple times under the same entry?

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