No offence, but...

A study on offensiveness and usage of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*

Suvi Varttinen
Tampere University
School of Language, Translation
and Literary Studies
Degree Programme in English Language,
Literature and Translation
Pro Gradu Thesis
December 2013

Tiivistelmä
Tampereen yliopisto
Englannin kieli, kirjallisuus ja kääntäminen, Kieli-, käännös- ja kirjallisuustieteiden yksikkö
VARTTINEN, SUVI: No offence, but... A study on offensiveness and usage of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*
Pro gradu -tutkielma, 87 sivua + 1 liite
Joulukuu 2013

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman aiheena on loukkaavien termien käsittely sanakirjoissa. Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, kuinka eri kohdeyleisöille suunnatut brittiläiset ja amerikkalaiset sanakirjat merkitsevät termien *bitch* ja *son of a bitch* loukkaavuutta ja verrata näitä tuloksia korpusesimerkkeihin. Loukkaavuuden ohella huomiota kiinnitetään myös kyseisten termien mahdollisiin neutraalimpiin merkityksiin ja siihen, vaikuttaako kohteen sukupuoli termin loukkaavuuteen. Lisäksi tutkitaan, onko termien käsittelyn ja käytön välillä maantieteellisiä eroja.

Tutkielman teoriaosio keskittyy aluksi käsittelemään sanojen merkitystä ja loukkaavuutta merkitysten osa-alueena. Tässä osiossa todetaan muun muassa se, kuinka merkittävä tekijä konteksti on niin sanojen merkityksen kuin loukkaavuuden tulkitsemisenkin kannalta. Teoriaosion toisessa kappaleessa puolestaan tutustutaan tarkemmin sanakirjojen käytänteisiin merkitä loukkaavuutta ja osoitetaan mahdollisia loukkaavuuden merkitsemiseen liittyviä ongelmia.

Tutkimuksen materiaaleina käytettiin 16 sanakirjaa, joihin kuului niin brittiläisiä kuin amerikkalaisia yleissanakirjoja sekä joko englantia äidinkielenään puhuville tai vieraskielisille opiskelijoille suunnattuja sanakirjoja. Lisäksi tutkittiin kahta englanninkielistä korpusta, joista toinen oli brittiläinen ja toinen amerikkalainen.

Tutkimus osoitti, että sanakirjat merkitsevät termien *bitch* ja *son of a bitch* loukkaavuutta hyvin eri tavoin. Säännöllisimmin loukkaavuutta merkittiin brittiläisissä, englantia vieraana kielenä opiskeleville tarkoitetuissa sanakirjoissa, kun taas useat muut sanakirjat eivät olleet yhtä systemaattisia loukkaavuuden merkitsemisessä. Sanakirjat käyttivät myös monia eri termejä loukkaavuuden merkitsemiseen, mikä nähtiin melko epäselvänä menettelynä sanakirjan käyttäjän kannalta.

Sanakirjojen ja korpusesimerkkien vertailu osoitti, että termien *bitch* ja *son of a bitch* käsittely sanakirjoissa ei täysin vastaa sitä, kuinka termejä oikeasti käytetään. Useat sanakirjat eivät pitäneet termiä *bitch* erityisen loukkaavana, vaikka korpusesimerkkien perusteella sitä käytetään pääsääntöisesti loukkauksena. Suurin osa sanakirjoista sivuutti myös sen, että *son of a bitch* esiintyy usein neutraalissa tai jopa positiivisessa merkityksessä. Koko termin selkeästi suurempi esiintyvyys USA:ssa jäi niin ikään huomiotta lähes kaikissa sanakirjoissa. Lisäksi vastoin sanakirjojen käsitystä *son of a bitch* vaikuttaisi viittaavan lähes yksinomaan miehiin, kun taas *bitch* voi viitata kumpaan tahansa sukupuoleen.

Tutkimuksen mahdollisesti merkittävin löydös koski aiemmin vähälle huomiolle jäänyttä oletamusta, jonka mukaan miehiin viittaavat loukkaavat termit kehittävät ajan mittaan vähemmän halventavia tai jopa positiivisia merkityksiä, kun taas naisiin viittaavat halventavat termit pysyvät loukkaavina. Tämä tutkimus osoitti, että termien *bitch* ja *son of a bitch* perusteella kyseinen oletamus pitää paikkansa, joten on siis mahdollista olettaa, että teoria on yleistettävissä muihinkin vastaaviin tapauksiin. Laajempi yleistäminen vaatii kuitenkin lisätutkimusta aiheesta.

Avainsanat: loukkaavuus, sanakirja, korpus, sukupuoli, alueelliset erot, *bitch*, *son of a bitch*

Contents

Bart: Hey, boy, you want to play fetch?
(Santa's Little Helper, the Simpsons' dog, looks up, tired, then puts his head back down.)
Bart: Aw. Me and Santa's Little Helper used to be a team, but he never wants to play anymore since his bitch moved in.
Marge Simpson: Bart, don't ever say that word again!
Bart: Well, that's what she is. I looked it up.
Marge Simpson: Well, I'm going to write the dictionary people and have that checked. Feels like a mistake to me...

1. Introduction

The task of deciding which words are offensive may at first seem quite straightforward. We are all familiar with various insults, whether or not we actively use them ourselves, and are more than capable of being hurt when somebody offends us. However, there can be instances where even language professionals, such as dictionary compilers, find it difficult to decide how exactly a word should be treated. In terms of offensive words, lexicographers have to consider several different factors before a dictionary entry can be formulated successfully. Firstly, they have to decide whether the term in question actually *is* offensive, and secondly, choose in what way the negative attitude conveyed could be best expressed so that it would be clear to the dictionary user. In addition, the possible neutral or positive meanings and their presentations have to be considered in order to create a dictionary entry that entails the relevant information needed to create a definition that truly communicates.

The whole concept of a dictionary is presently under great pressure as many types of online dictionaries have become common (van Sterkenburg 2003, 5–7). Online dictionaries have many advantages compared to traditional printed dictionaries. For example, it is possible to include significantly more material, such as video and audio links, in online dictionaries, whereas space is always an issue in printed dictionaries. In addition, information can be searched and found quickly, and through multiple search routes one can for example find synonyms and antonyms without flipping through the pages of a traditional dictionary. For dictionary compilers, the advantage of an online dictionary is that they enable the update of information to be both easy and quick (ibid.).

Sinclair (2003, 167) says that in the process of dictionary-making, corpora are nowadays very important tools. Lexicographers have to decide how the corpus is used and what is included in the actual dictionary. According to Sinclair, since dictionary users are normally not interested in every idiosyncrasy of usage, only those language uses that recur should be regarded as belonging to the

common language and thus gain foothold in a dictionary. Sinclair however notes that not even all the recurring cases find their way in dictionaries, which in their nature are "very condensed summaries of information about language" and thus cannot include everything. However, as the lack of space is not a problem in online dictionaries, it could be assumed that they will more readily include various meanings as well as provide thorough usage information.

The labelling of negative attitude in dictionaries has been previously studied by Norri (2000) and Nyrke (2010), but the starting points and goals of their studies were fairly different from the present study. The aim of this study is to examine offensiveness by focusing on two insulting terms, namely *bitch* and *son of a bitch*, and study how they are actually used as well as comment on whether dictionaries provide enough information on their usage. The underlying assumption is that there are both gender-related (male vs. female referents) and regional differences concerning the use of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* that present a real challenge to lexicographers. If such differences are indeed detected, they can possibly help explain and exemplify other similar differences that occur in the English language.

The present study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What do dictionaries say about the usage and offensiveness of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*? Do corpus findings support these views?

2. Are there differences in offensiveness according to whether the referent is a male or a female?

3. Are there any regional differences in the usage of these terms between the UK and the US?

In order to answer the above research questions, a set of 16 dictionaries, two language corpora and the terms *bitch* and *son of a bitch* will be examined carefully. The study includes both quantitative and qualitative aspects, because although the overall emphasis is on a qualitative approach, the presentation of the occurrences of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* in tabular form can also be considered quantitative.

The main reason for choosing the words *bitch* and *son of a bitch* as the starting point of this

study is the fact that they are both well-known and commonly used terms of abuse that most people are, perhaps unfortunately, familiar with. They can also be treated as a word pair, one of them typically referring to women and the other to men, which makes it possible to compare insulting words referring to different sexes and thus include another interesting aspect to the study. Indeed, there seems to be a lack of research in one particular area of gender-related offensiveness. Although many researchers (see for example Schulz 1975, Norri 1998, and Burridge 2005) have successfully demonstrated the existence of the tendency where words denoting females deteriorate over time whereas terms referring to men remain neutral, the opposite possibility, that is, whether insulting words referring to men are more prone to become less offensive over time than terms of abuse used for women has not received much attention. The present study will for its part seek an answer to this interesting question by examining whether this assumption can be applied to *bitch* and *son of a bitch*.

Despite the fact that online dictionaries are very practical, the reason for choosing traditional, printed dictionaries as the basis of this study is quite simple: their accessibility. Even though there are several excellent dictionaries on the Internet, most of the best online dictionaries are not free of charge. Moreover, respected online dictionaries tend to be based on printed dictionaries, which is why the use of the latter in the study should not be a hindrance. Any possible ideas for improvement that may arise in the present study are targeted at both printed and online dictionaries. However, it should be noted here that the present study does not aim to evaluate dictionaries, although a few words of criticism may be expressed when seen necessary, but to concentrate on the problems of marking negative attitude as well as answering the research questions above.

The thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 present the theoretical background of the study. The different aspects of word meaning and offensiveness are discussed in chapter 2, whereas the focus of chapter 3 is on indicating usage, especially negative attitude, in dictionaries. The remaining chapters present the actual study. Chapter 4 explains the material and methods

used in the study, and chapter 5 examines the etymology and present-day meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*. In chapters 6 and 7, dictionary and corpus findings are presented and analysed, whereas chapter 8 compares the corpus findings to the dictionaries studied. The final chapter of the thesis, chapter 9, concludes the study by summarizing the most central findings.

2. Aspects of word meaning and offensiveness

> Dictionaries are filled with words and their meanings. So is the head of every human being who speaks a language. You are a walking dictionary. You know the meaning of thousands of words. Your knowledge of their meaning permits you to use them to express your thoughts and to understand them when heard, even though you probably seldom stop and ask yourself: "What does *boy* mean?" or "What does *walk* mean?"

The above quotation from Fromkin and Rodman (1993, 124) illustrates how simple yet complex the concept of word meaning can be. We all have an idea about it, but to understand the matter on a deeper level, it is useful to resort to theoretical sources. This chapter begins by introducing word meaning in general and by studying how word meanings are formulated in dictionary definitions. After this, a particular dimension of word meaning, that is, offensiveness, is studied in more detail. A discussion on offensiveness in terms of gender concludes the chapter.

2.1 Introduction to word meaning

> To the layman, words are *par excellence* the bearers of meaning in language. While it is in danger of understating the importance of other linguistic structures and phenomena in the elaboration of meaning, this view is not entirely unjustified: words do have a central role to play in the coding of meaning, and are responsible for much of the richness and subtlety of messages conveyed linguistically. (Cruse 2000, 83)

The scientific approach to the meaning of a word is far more complex than it appears to be in the eyes of the ones not dedicated to the field of linguistics. Although words themselves naturally have a central role in intermediating messages, they cannot function in isolation. This is why a significant part of this section is dedicated to context and its importance in word meaning. However, before focusing on context in more detail, we shall start by examining the concept of meaning in general.

2.1.1 The concept of meaning

There are different ways in which to treat the aspects related to word meaning, and even the basic terminology varies in different works. For example, for Allan and Burridge (2006, 1), *denotatum* is what the word is normally used to refer to, whereas Leech (1981, 23) prefers the term *conceptual meaning*. According to Geeraerts (2003, 87), the descriptive type of meaning is typically referred to as *denotational meaning*. For the sake of consistency, the term *denotation* is used in this thesis.

In addition to denotation, there are other aspects of meaning that need to be considered. For example, Geeraerts (2003, 87) presents three non-denotational types of meaning: *grammatical meaning*, *pragmatic meaning* and *emotive meaning*. Grammatical meaning is reserved for words with a grammatical function (e.g. the conjunction *that*), whereas in pragmatic meaning what matters is what is being achieved by using the word rather than what the denotational meaning of the word is (e.g. the greeting *hello*). According to Geeraerts, emotive meaning entails "the emotional response of the speaker with regard to the thing being talked about". However, it could be argued that it is not only the speaker who is entitled to "the emotional response" but also the hearer can have their own emotional reaction, which is something that Geeraerts does not seem to acknowledge here. Geeraert's comments on emotive meaning are related to the concepts of connotation and offensiveness, both of which will be discussed at length later on in this chapter.

The broadness and complexity of the concept of meaning becomes evident in the multiple ways different aspects of meaning can be categorised. For example, Leech (1981, 23) identifies and discusses no fewer than seven types of meaning:

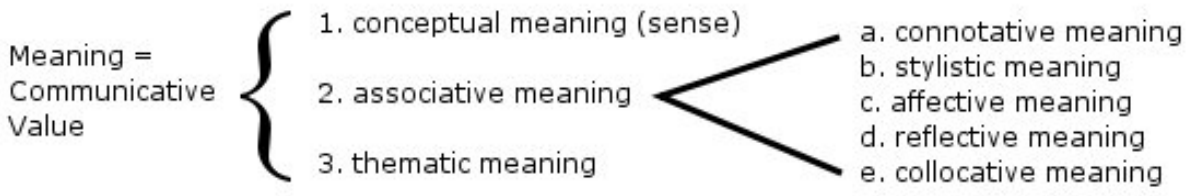

Figure 1. Seven types of meaning (adapted from Leech 1981, 23)

As the figure shows, Leech's approach to meaning is very thorough. The first category, *conceptual meaning*, can be understood as the denotation of a word, whereas the third category, *thematic meaning*, represents constituents larger than words, focusing on how the message is organised in terms of emphasis and order. Leech's thoroughness in categorising meaning becomes especially evident in the way the second category, *associative meaning*, is divided into five different subcategories, which include for example the important components *affective meaning* and *connotative meaning*. However, Leech's idea of connotative meaning is quite narrow compared to what the term *connotation* most often stands for. As pointed out by Lipka (1990, 64), connotations are "additional properties of a lexeme", which means that all the subcategories listed by Leech under the category *associative meaning* could also be replaced by the umbrella term *connotation*. The difference between denotation and connotation will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

2.1.2 Denotation, connotation, and the importance of context

Jackson (2002, 16) says that there is a commonly made distinction between the *denotation* and *connotation* of a word. Denotation is what the word actually refers to, or represents, the relationship being neutral and straightforward. However, many words carry certain associations, which are often emotive and can be shared by a whole community. These associations can be referred to as the connotation of a word. Jackson exemplifies the distinction between denotation and con-

notation with the word *champagne*, which denotes a sparkling wine from a region in France, but has the connotation of luxurious life and celebrations. It could be argued, though, that almost all the words carry connotations of some kind to individual speakers. These connotations cannot be generalized, and they may even vary according to the speaker's mood and recent experiences. For example, the word *computer* is a fairly neutral word that does not carry universally accepted positive or negative connotations, but for some people the word itself may cause feelings of frustration and being left behind in the development of modern technology. The whole idea of connotation is thus far from unambiguous and acknowledging all the possible connotations that a word may have is simply impossible.

Lipka (1990, 63) notes that the concept of connotation is closely related to that of synonymy. As Lipka says, synonyms have the same denotation, but they differ in terms of connotations. Allan and Burridge (2006, 48) point out that the choice between different alternatives normally depends on the context, which is one of the most important factors in word meaning and thus deserves a more detailed discussion here.

According to Cruse (2000, 105), "[o]nce we try to grapple with the notion 'the meaning of a word', we come up against a serious problem, namely, that the interpretation we give to a particular word form can vary so greatly from context to context". As Hartmann (1983b, 109) accurately states, all language exists in some context, and any successful communication requires a shared context of interlocutors. This means that the meaning of a word depends very much on the context in which it is used. Hartmann (1983a, 7) emphasizes the fact that language and its vocabulary always reflect the world in which they occur, which is why it is often impossible to explain the meaning of a word without referring to the context in which it appears. Contextual approach is also favoured by Cruse (1986, 1), who seeks "to derive information about a word's meaning from its relations with actual and potential linguistic contexts". According to Cruse (1986, 16), the meaning of a word reflects and actually comprises its contextual relations. Indeed,

we cannot communicate with sporadic words since words themselves do not bear messages nor carry properties such as true or false, appropriate or paradoxical. Instead, "[a] linguistic item must in general have at least the complexity of a simple sentence to show such properties" (Cruse 1986, 9).

Similarly, Lipka (1990, 24) points out that "discussing words in isolation, without linguistic or extralinguistic context" is always problematic. However, it is not enough to merely note the problems that may arise from contextual variation: instead, a coherent system accounting for all the relevant factors is needed (Hartmann 1983b, 109). Hartmann (1983b, 118) notes that "[t]o study a language in context requires the collection, classification and description of written as well as spoken text samples". Both written and spoken text samples are fortunately nowadays easily accessible in different online corpora.

2.1.3 Changes in word meaning

According to Kleparski (1986, 33), true semantic change "is a change whereby a new lexical item remains constant while the semantic content attached to it varies". Hughes (1988, 9) says that semantic changes are rarely rapid; instead, the changes between established and arising senses are generally relatively slow. Bauer (1994, 21) notes that dealing with on-going changes in language is always quite risky. It can be tempting to assume that if a beginning of a change is detected, the change will automatically continue. However, this is not always true, which means that predictions based on a current trend must be taken with some reservation.

Semantic change also involves register, which refers to "the special word-choice appropriate to a given social situation or literary context" (Hughes 1988, 9). Hughes (1988, 17–18) says that formality is typically seen as the most important aspect of register, but it should be remembered that register can also be well demonstrated by word-choice: whether the words a speaker uses are

old or new, concrete or abstract, or slang or demotic, affect register.

Additional important factors related to the change of meaning are *amelioration* and *pejoration*, also known as *deterioration*. The term *amelioration* (also *elevation*, *improvement* or *betterment*) is used to describe a situation where a previously negative meaning becomes less negative or starts to acquire positive associations. A typical example of amelioration is the word *knight*, which used to refer to a boy or lad only, but has since then elevated in meaning (Hughes 1988, 12, Kleparski 1986, 26). Changes in the opposite direction, where a word takes on negative connotations, is known as *pejoration*. Several examples of pejoration can be found in the semantic field of words denoting females. Kleparski notes that "[i]t has often been suggested that words denoting women are particularly prone to descend the semantic ladder". For example, the previously neutral words *harlot*, *courtesan* and *wench* have been exposed to significant deterioration over time. Whether amelioration or pejoration is more common in the English language is debatable, some linguists saying that human nature being what it is, the tendency towards negative developments is more common. However, more thorough research on the matter seems to be needed to corroborate such statements (Hughes ibid., Kleparski ibid.).

2.2 Word meaning in dictionary definitions

The above-presented aspects of word meaning are important in terms of understanding how complex the concept of word meaning can be. In addition to the general ideas presented, it is useful to consider what has to be taken into account when the meaning of a word is formulated in a dictionary definition. It is, after all, often through those definitions that language users are able to attach a meaning to a word previously unfamiliar to them.

According to Cruse (1986, 23), dictionaries traditionally characterize lexical items in three different, yet interconnected, ways. These include the form (both graphic and phonological), the

grammatical function and the meaning of a lexical item. However, Kiefer and van Sterkenburg (2003, 350) emphasize the fact that there is no common framework for designing dictionaries: no agreement on structure has been reached – nor in fact demanded.

Jackson (2002, 15) states that an "important and difficult task for lexicographers is to capture the meaning of a word in a dictionary definition". Lexicographers need to decide what should be included in the meaning and how the possible different meanings a word may have should be organised. Jackson notes that even if a word has only one meaning, several different factors have to be considered, including the associations a word may carry as well as its relation with other words. Indeed, Ayto (1983, 94) accurately notes that a dictionary which only focuses on linguistic and denotative differentiation is not sufficient as a communicative tool. There are also extralinguistic features that need to be considered, as was noted in subsection 2.1.2.

According to Svensén (2004, 258–259), the first step any lexicographer has to consider before starting to formulate a dictionary entry is to decide whether the lexical item in question has more than one meaning. Svensén notes that the criteria for deciding whether a word is monosemic or polysemic are different for lexicographers and linguists. The purpose of a dictionary entry is not to describe what a word "really" means; instead, it should describe its meaning in the way that is convenient for the dictionary user. For instance, a word can be seen as monosemic in the semantic perspective but is still presented in sub-entries because this can be more advantageous to the dictionary user (ibid.). Indeed, as Ayto (1983, 98) says, the usefulness and usability of definitions should be the main starting point for any lexicographer, who then has to do whatever it takes "to compose definitions that communicate, and are not merely dumb monuments to arcane speculations". Similarly, Landau (1989, 131) notes that the entry word must truly be defined: it is not enough that it is talked about, or that there are comments on its usage.

Svensén (2004, 267) states that one common type of explaining the meaning of a word in a dictionary entry is to resort to near synonyms of the word defined. In a definition that is composed

with the help of synonyms, the synonyms chosen to describe the entity in question should be more familiar to the dictionary user than the term being defined. Neither should the definition differ from the term in question in terms of connotations and usage, for example (Svensén 2004, 271).

Landau (1989, 120–121) notes that the traditional rules of definition, based on Aristotle, require that a word must be defined in terms of *genus* and *differentia*. This means that a word must first be identified according to the class of things that it belongs to, and secondly it needs to be distinguished from the other things belonging to the same class. Landau gives the definition of the word *bachelor* as an example where "a man" is the genus and "who is unmarried" serves as a differentia. Svensén (2004, 271–272) explains basically same idea with the help of componential analysis, in which words that share certain characteristics are differentiated from one another by their semantic components. For instance, *chair*, *sofa*, *bench* and *stool* are all something that typically function as a seat of some kind, but by employing componential analysis, the differences in meaning become evident, as shown by the table below (modified after Svensén):

	chair	sofa	bench	stool
For one	x			x
For many		x	x	
Upholstered		x		
Upholstered or not	x			x
Not upholstered			x	
With backrest	x	x		
Without backrest				x
With or without backrest			x	

Table 1. Componential analysis for distinguishing between meanings of related words.

According to Landau (1989, 121), another common rule for defining words is that a definition should be able to capture the essence of the thing that is defined, without repeating the word itself anywhere in the definition. As Landau notes, lexicographers have to have their readers in mind when they construct definitions and try to explain everything in the way that it is understood by the dictionary users.

Landau (1989, 124–125) points out that in addition to the above-mentioned requirements, there are a few other important factors worth considering. For example, every lexicographer should avoid circularity in their definitions, meaning that dictionaries should not define a term by using a derivative of the same term in the definition unless the related word is defined independently of the original term (e.g. the definition for *fear* should not be "the state of being fearful" if *fearful* is explained in the dictionary with the term *fear* in its definition). Neither should there be dictionary definitions where word A is defined in terms of word B, and vice versa (e.g. the definition provided for *lynx* is *bobcat*, and the definition of *bobcat* is *lynx*). However, Landau points out that circularity is so established a problem that its possible occurrence in a professional dictionary is an innocent mistake and not a sign of ignorance.

Another important factor concerning dictionary definitions is that every word used in a definition should also be defined somewhere in the dictionary (Landau 1989, 129). This means that if a dictionary user is not familiar with a word encountered in the definition, he or she can also look this word up and find it defined in the same dictionary. This rule is according to Landau broken more often than the above-mentioned rule of circularity, because it is difficult to check whether all the words used in definitions are also defined themselves.

All of the principles described should be put into practice by every lexicographer. However, as Landau (1989, 131–138) notes, following these basic rules does not assure the production of good definitions. Instead, a set of other factors still need to be considered. In successful definitions, the most important elements of meaning are presented first followed by the less essential elements. Definitions of relatively simple words should not be overly complicated, and definitions in general should be brief (ibid.). Kiefer and van Sterkenburg (2003, 357) add that to avoid confusion, the words used in a definition should have the same meaning in both British and American English.

Landau (1989, 123) notes that dictionaries "deal only with certain kinds of meaning and ignore other kinds no less important, and we must not suppose that associated meanings cease to exist

because dictionaries fail to note them". As Hartmann (1983, 3–4) states, dictionaries deal with "the ever-changing meanings of words", which means that lexicographers compiling a dictionary have to understand how words are actually used in discourse between people. In order to be able to do this, language corpora can prove quite useful for dictionary compilers. In the present study, the actual correspondence between the views presented in dictionaries and the results of corpus search will be compared, with a special emphasis on the level of offensiveness detected. This brings us to different aspects of offensiveness, which will be presented in the following section.

2.3 Aspects of offensiveness

2.3.1 Offensiveness and insults

According to Battistella (2005, 72), offensive language can be divided into four different categories: epithets, profanity, vulgarity and obscenity. Epithets include various slurs, such as *fag* or *bitch*. These slurs usually refer to race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality, but may also be targeted at other characteristics, such as appearance and disabilities (e.g. *midget* and *retard*). Allan and Burridge (2006, 79) add that insults are typically directed at a person's looks, mental ability, behaviour, beliefs, character and social relationships.

Battistella's (2005, 72) second category, profanity, refers to religious cursing entailing the rude references to subjects typically considered sacred (e.g. *goddamn*). The last two categories, vulgarity and obscenity, include coarse expressions that are related to sexual and bodily functions, for example *fuck* and *shit*, the difference between the two categories being mainly in the level of offensiveness (ibid.).

Allan and Burridge (2006, 79) say that verbal insults occur in all language styles, and that the purpose of insults is to hurt the addressee or a third party. Hughes (1998, 6–7) adds that insults targeted at individuals can have serious consequences. Sexual slurs used to be the most common

insults with serious results, but in modern times the worst insults seem to arise from ethnic slurs (ibid.). According to McEnery (2006, 1), using certain words may "lead the hearer to make a number of inferences about you" concerning, for example, the speaker's social status, religious beliefs or emotional state at the time.

Quite often there has been confusion between the concepts of offensive language, swearing and slang. McEnery (2006, 2) talks about "bad language" in general, saying it can mean any word or phrase that does not belong to polite conversation, and if used in one, is likely to be offensive. He quite accurately notes that swearing is only one example of bad language, because racist, sexist, blasphemous and homophobic language also cause offence. Slang, on the other hand, does not *necessarily* entail swearing, although it often still does, perhaps because both slang and swearing are colloquial and found in informal contexts (Allan and Burridge 2006, 74). According to Burridge (2005, 34), "[t]he whole point of slang is to startle, amuse, shock", but perhaps the most significant characteristic of slang is that it serves as "a marker of in-group solidarity" (Allan and Burridge 2006, 70), meaning that it connects human groups sharing the same experiences. Thus, slang is often tied to a specific time. What is slang for one generation is often either outdated for the next or becomes part of mainstream language. Consequently, when slang survives, it mostly stops being slang (ibid., 71).

Like meanings in general, the offensiveness of an utterance is dependent on the context in which it appears. Allan and Burridge (2006, 30) accurately note that politeness is tied to context, place and time. They say that style on the whole depends on:

> who we are and whom we are communicating with;
> whether we are speaking or writing;
> where we are and when the utterance takes place;
> what we are talking about; and
> how we feel about the whole situation.
> (ibid., 75)

Thus, if the speaker wants to avoid causing offence, style must be chosen accordingly. Rawson

(1989, 3) says that the way in which a word is spoken has a significant role in determining its meaning, which is why there can in fact be instances where normally insulting words are not offensive. Similarly, Allan and Burridge (2006, 89) note that sometimes insults can even be a sign of solidarity within a certain group. This shows that context is not only important when it comes to the general meaning of words, but also in terms of the level of offensiveness.

Hughes (1988, 15) notes that there can be different taboos within a broad cultural group. For example, he discusses the term *mother-fucker*, which is basically unheard of in the UK, but which in the US can be used in the everyday language of black people with a familiar and even friendly tone. On the other hand, Americans have had the tendency to start avoiding certain words, for example words including the term *cock*, as in *cockroach*, of which the most commonly used form today is plain *roach*. However, as Hughes points out, nowadays when taboos on swearing have become more liberated, new words including the word *cock*, such as *cock-teaser* and *cock-sucker*, have emerged in common use. Still, as Allan and Burridge (2006, 45) note, homonyms of taboo words tend to disappear from language use. A possible reason for this is that a speaker does not want to risk offending someone when no offence is intended. Rawson (1989, 5) mentions that this tendency could already be detected in the mid-eighteenth century when people started to become hesitant about using the words *cock* and *ass*, replacing them with *rooster* and *donkey*. Although Allan and Burridge (ibid.) say that in the cases where there is less room for misunderstanding, homonyms may remain in the language, based on the examples of *donkey* and *rooster*, it seems that people quite systematically avoid homonyms of insulting expressions.

When people try to avoid causing offence, different techniques can be deployed. For example, a common phenomenon that aims at polite language use is the introduction of *euphemisms*. Euphemisms, that is, mild or vague expressions used to substitute for words that are thought to be offensive or harsh, try to soften the original expression, as in *to pass away* for *to die*, and can be described as “sweet talking”. Euphemisms arise in socially sensitive fields such as sex, race,

illness, death and swearing, where a variety of taboos typically occur (Hughes 1988, 14–16, Allan and Burridge 2006, 29). Hughes points out that sometimes an opposite process, known as *dysphemism*, can also occur in taboo areas. As opposed to euphemisms, dysphemisms convey the meaning directly and often even crudely, as in *to push up daisies* instead of *to die*. Allan and Burridge define dysphemism simply as "speaking offensively", and in addition to euphemisms and dysphemisms, they present the term *orthophemism*, which stands for "straight talking", meaning that the real, often neutral, word is used. Allan and Burridge use the umbrella term *X-phemisms* for all the three terms presented, and in their discussion on X-phemisms, they also introduce the concept of cross-varietal synonymy. An example of cross-varietal synonymy can be illustrated by the words *poo*, *shit* and *faeces*, which all denote the same thing but have different connotations (ibid.). The choice between different alternatives normally depends on the context (Allan and Burridge 2006, 48). The following figure illustrates the differences between X-phemisms:

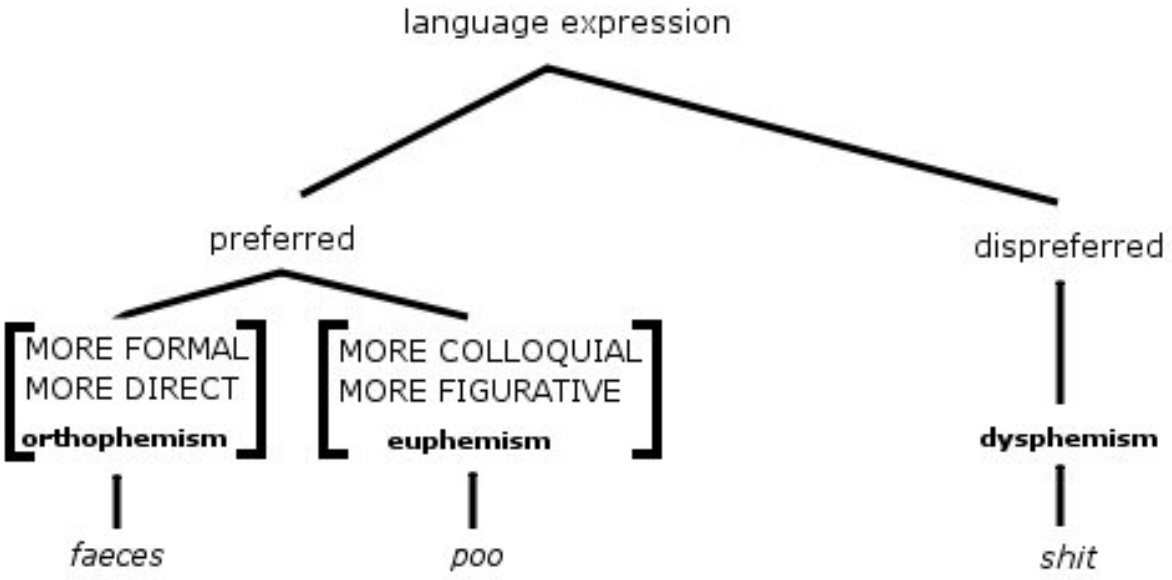

Figure 2. Differences between X-phemisms (adapted from Allan and Burridge 2006, 34).

The coinage of different X-phemisms may require creative thinking. Especially dysphemisms, or insults, can be quite creative. Allan and Burridge (2006, 79) say that one way of insulting another

person is by comparing them to animals that are associated with certain behaviours (e.g. *bat*, *swine* and *mouse*). According to Allan and Burridge, the names of female animals can typically be used only for women and homosexual men, as is the case with *bitch*, which is said to refer to a '(usually nasty) woman held in contempt'. As another type of offensive language, Allan and Burridge (2006, 85) mention terms of insult or disrespect that focus on the target's character, as *son of a bitch*, which typically refers to men. There seem to be differences in the way offensive terms are used for women and men, a notion which will be discussed in the following section.

2.3.2 Gender-specific offensiveness and gender-related derogation of meaning

Among offensive terms, there are words that typically refer to either women or men, meaning that a term may be used quite exclusively to offend the referents of a certain gender. However, there are constant gender-referential shifts (see Norri 1998), which challenge the previously prevailed views on the gender of the referent. For example, Burridge (2005, 75) notes that a set of offensive expressions, including *whore*, *bitch* and *slut*, traditionally associated with women or gay men, are now used by some speakers to refer to males as well.[1]

Norri (1998, 286–287) says that there are indeed changes occurring all the time, which means that there can be a multitude of words that have been subjected to gender-referential shifts in between the publications of the previous and the latest edition of a dictionary. According to Norri, these shifts present a real challenge to lexicographers, who are expected to take into careful consideration the recent studies on gender-related issues in order to keep up with the constant changes. As a result, a reference to a particular gender may have to be left out altogether, as has happened in certain dictionaries with the word *balls*, for example. Another way to keep up with the changes is to insert qualifiers such as *especially* and *chiefly* in the relevant entries (ibid.).

[1] Intrestingly, this somewhat contradicts what Allan and Burridge (2006, 79) say for example about the word *bitch* elsewhere (see section 2.3.1).

Baker (1981, 167–168) has studied the way women are identified and which words can be used instead of the word *woman*. He notes that there is a clear difference between the terms women identify themselves with and the terms men use to denote women. Women do not typically identify themselves in sexual (*cunt*) or gender terms (*skirt*), nor as playthings (*doll*) or animals (*bird*). Baker includes the term *bitch* in the animal term category, although he notes that many users do not know its original meaning, but instead relate the term to the adjective *bitchy*, meaning 'snappy and nasty'. Baker says that some men and most women see the use of *bitch* as pejorative, but still a large group of men seem to think that it is a standard term of identification not conveying a negative attitude. This may according to Baker suggest that some men have started to see women in general as shrews.

To continue the discussion on the term *bitch*, Waksler (1995, 4) says that *bitch* used to appear in two contexts only: it was used either to refer to an obnoxious or difficult female or in gay male dialect where it was used to refer to another, obnoxious, member of that same speech community. Waksler adds that in both of these cases, *bitch* could also be used jokingly or sarcastically. Lately, Waksler (1995, 3) has noticed something that she calls *gender neutralization*, which means that words that were typically seen as carrying a [+female] denotation are now used in the same form for males, and vice versa. One of the types of gender neutralization described by Waksler (1995, 4) concerns the word *bitch* referring to males. According to her, there have been numerous occasions where she has heard the word *bitch* being used among San Francisco male teenagers as a general vocative for someone of the same age as the speaker. Here, in this speech community, *bitch* does not seem to convey a negative attitude. According to Waksler, this shows that a previously negative [+female] word has undergone gender neutralization, where in this case the word has lost its negative connotations. However, the idea of a term losing its negative connotations is always somewhat problematic, even if we are considering only one situation or speech community. It is possible to argue that a number of different aspects and variables should be taken into account

before such an idea can be proposed as factual. Should we consider the speaker's intention, the hearer's response, or an outsider listener's reaction to the term, or all of them, before we can say that a term is definitely used without negative connotations?

Indeed, Waksler (1995, 4) seems to simplify the matter when she says that "[i]t is not surprising that the negative feature is lost when a word is generalized to include males", and she resorts to generalization when saying that a "negative female term, then, that undergoes gender neutralization would be expected to lose its negative character". Waksler makes generalizations based on one speech community only, which does not seem satisfactory, especially if we consider the fact that calling a man a bitch can still be extremely insulting. Even though Waksler may have a point in that offensive words typically denoting women can lose their negative attitude when they start to be used of men, she might have wanted to consider her choice of words more carefully. In the latter part of the study, Waksler's ideas will still be revisited in order to see whether the findings of this study support her views.

Gender-related offensiveness and derogation of meaning has also invoked more accurate statements. For example, Schulz (1975, 65) claims that there is a pattern in English which shows that "virtually every originally neutral word for women has at some point in its existence acquired debased connotations or obscene reference, or both". The same has, however, not happened with terms referring to boys and young men (ibid., 69). The vast number of examples in Schulz's study where previously neutral terms designating women have undergone major pejoration shows that there indeed seems to be a tendency for female words to deteriorate in meaning over time.

As Schulz (1975, 64) notes, language always reflects the prevailing society: the thoughts and attitudes of people living according to society's standards. Men have been, and perhaps still are, the creators of language, so it is mostly the male perspective that a language reflects. Schulz (1975, 71) states that men think of women in sexual terms no matter what the context, which leads to the point where all the words referring to women carry sexual suggestions in the mind of the

male speaker. Even the word *woman* was avoided in the 19th century, and the certainly innocent term *person*, when used instead of *woman*, could carry sexual references at that time.

As further examples, Schulz (1975, 70) discusses the words *dog* and *bitch*. She says that *dog* is only sometimes offending when referring to males and often even jocular. When referring to females, on the other hand, *dog* is said to denote a woman inferior in some aspects of life or even a prostitute. *Bitch*, on the other hand, is said to be an offensive term when referring to women, but when denoting men it is "less opprobrious and somewhat whimsical – like the modern use of dog". The *OED* definition for the male bitch quoted by Schulz could be challenged, though, because it seems to create too positive a picture of the word *bitch* when used to denote a man. Indeed, in the current *OED* definition, the note "Not now in decent use" is added, which seems reasonable, since it is possible to claim that the majority of men would most likely feel insulted if they were referred to as *bitches*. In the latter part of the study, this assumption will be revisited.

Schulz's theory about the semantic derogation of women shows how words associated with women are more likely to receive negative connotations than those associated with men. This is seen especially in cases where a word previously referring to both sexes starts to be used for women only and eventually turns into a term of abuse. Norri (1998, 270) adds that the same tendency can be seen in male-female word pairs where the word for a woman "often undergoes semantic devaluation or gains additional, pejorative, senses". As examples, Norri gives the word pairs *bachelor*/*spinster*, *King*/*Queen*, *Sir*/*Madam* and *courtier*/*courtesan*, in all of which the word referring to a woman has gained negative connotations whereas the term used for a man remains neutral. Similarly, Burridge (2005, 76) exemplifies this by the terms *witchery* and *wizardry*, of which only the former has gained negative connotations, showing once more that one reason why there are so many derogatory terms for women is that words denoting women often deteriorate in meaning over time.

Norri (1998, 271) notes that there seems to be a lack of research in one field of the study of

gender and offensiveness. As Norri says, scholars have mostly focused on studying only either female or male words and their meanings. The focus of studying historical developments has mostly been "on the phenomenon where a word which has originally been used for both sexes narrows its meaning in terms of gender reference, and if it starts to denote women only, it often undergoes semantic pejoration". However, according to Norri, the opposite development whereby a word used for only one of the sexes starts to be associated with both has received far less attention. Norri finds the lack of research in this are quite surprising, because, after all, changes such as these have been, and still are, common in the English language.

In one of his later studies, Norri came across some examples of the above-mentioned phenomenon concerning the differences between terms of abuse for men and women. In his study, Norri (2000, 89) noticed that according to the dictionaries he studied, words such as *bastard*, *bugger*, *sod* and *son of a bitch* could be used in both negative and neutral contexts, whereas *bitch*, *whore* and *tart* seemed to be almost without exception negative terms. Norri says that whether "derogatory and insulting terms for men are more prone to develop unprejudiced secondary meanings than similar terms for women is a moot point" and adds a comment from one of his referees saying that this may be an example of a case where "the distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed is relevant: men have not been an oppressed group historically, and therefore it is felt to be less unacceptable to insult them". This issue was naturally not further discussed in Norri's 2000 study, although wider research into this lexical inconsistency was seen to be in order. The present study aims to rise to the challenge and at least partly fill this research gap in the empirical part of the study.

3. Indicating usage in dictionaries

According to Hughes (1988, 26), there is an "assumption that dictionaries should be descriptive, recording all usage, and not simply the polite, literate forms". In this chapter, different ways of indicating usage in dictionaries are discussed. Usage is first introduced in a more general way, after which the focus will turn to the different ways of indicating negative attitude in particular. In addition, the possible effects that the target audience may have on indicating usage, especially negative attitude, will be commented on. The discussion of the problems involved in the marking of negative attitude concludes the chapter.

3.1 General observations on usage in dictionaries

Hartmann (1983a, 5) notes that the standards of appropriate language usage change all the time and vary in different styles or dialects. Thus lexicographers often face the difficult situation where they have to decide whether certain expressions are neutral or somehow marked. When it comes to questions of usage, dictionary compilers are often treated as authorities, a task which comes with responsibility. Hartmann (1983a, 6) argues that although it is important to codify usage, it is not the main objective of dictionaries. Still, usage information is a noteworthy part of dictionaries and deserves further investigation.

Usage information on words or phrases typically concerns currency, temporality, region, style or social factors (Landau 1989, 175). By including information on usage, dictionaries aim to protect their readers from using "the wrong words in the wrong contexts" (Verkuyl et al. 2003, 302). Indeed, it is essential to include information on usage because if no indications of important aspects of use such as the above-mentioned are given, incorrect use of the word and misunderstandings are likely to follow (Burkhanov 2003, 108). In addition, if there are no details concerning

usage, readers may come to the conclusion that the dictionary is not providing them with sufficient information, making them feel that the whole dictionary is quite a disappointment (Norri 2000, 71).

Developments in modern technology have made it easier for lexicographers to collect information on usage. Today, primary sources for lexicographers compiling a dictionary are language corpora and archives, whereas secondary sources include the more traditional fieldwork and encyclopaedias, which are now being pushed aside by the more modern alternative, the Internet (Cermák 2003, 20–21). The greatest advantage in using corpora is that they provide access to an almost unlimited context and thus illuminate collocational aspects of use quite satisfactorily. In search of even more specific information on usage, lexicographers may turn to technical and specialized fields, such as medicine, for help (ibid.).

Even though lexicographers nowadays have better access to different sources, the task of deciding how much information on usage is sufficient seems to be far from straightforward. The problems of indicating usage, especially negative attitude, will be further discussed in section 3.4 below.

3.2 Usage labels and other ways of indicating attitude

3.2.1 Types and functions of usage labels

Usage labels are something that are found in all noteworthy dictionaries of English. Burkhanov (2003, 105) says that usage labels can be either full words or abbreviated forms that "are intended to specify the limitations on the use of lexical items according to time, place, and/or circumstances of communicative interaction" (see also Verkuyl et al. 2003, 298). Usage labels are usually typographically modified: they are often italicized, bolded, written in capital letters or placed in brackets so that they are easily detected and will not get buried under the rest of the informa-

tion provided in the entry. In the extract below, the usage labels are italicized and placed within brackets:

> **2** [C] (*slang*, *disapproving*) an offensive way of referring to a woman, especially an unpleasant one: *You stupid little bitch! <> She can be a real bitch.*
>
> (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2005, s.v. *bitch*)

The usage labels in the example above illustrate that this dictionary has decided to treat the word as a slang word and has also assigned the usage label *disapproving* to it. However, the labels used in different dictionaries can vary significantly, and labelling policies are often far from unanimous (for further discussion, see section 3.2.2).

The following list of the most common types of usage information presented in dictionaries is a slightly modified version of Landau's (1989, 175) list. An example of a typical label from each area is given in brackets:

1. currency or temporality (*archaic*)
2. frequency of use (*rare*)
3. geographical variation (*BrE*)
4. technical or specialized terminology (*physics*)
5. restricted or taboo usage (*vulgar*)
6. insult (*offensive*)
7. slang (*slang*)
8. style, functional variety, or register (*informal*, *literary*)
9. status or cultural level (*nonstandard*)

Verkuyl et al. (2003, 299) have decided to follow a less detailed categorization by distinguishing between what they call *group labels* and *register labels*. Group labels include geographical, temporal, frequency and field labels, which are in fact the first four types in Landau's list. Register labels, on the other hand, cover the last five categories introduced by Landau. According to Verkuyl et al. (2003, 300), register labels are provided in dictionaries in order to guide the readers in their use of language so that they would not use words that are inappropriate in certain contexts.

3.2.2 Labels indicating negative attitude

Hartmann (1983a, 9) says that dictionary-makers have still not developed "a secure and generally agreed inventory of labels with which to mark special-register uses". Indeed, this seems to be true with marking offensiveness, as there are several different labels that can be used to indicate negative attitude. When one studies the different labels more carefully, it becomes evident that sometimes the differences between the labels are very subtle. Furthermore, dictionaries tend to define the labels that they use somewhat differently, as some dictionaries include information on the meaning of the label that is lacking in others. For example, if we study the definitions of the label *offensive* in five different dictionaries, it is possible that we find five fairly different definitions.

The following table and the description of the different labels used to indicate negative attitude in dictionaries give a general idea about what labels are used and how the labels are defined as well as point out the most obvious differences between these labels. The dictionaries used here to illustrate the labels indicating negative attitude represent both British and American monolingual dictionaries targeted at different audiences. Only the labels that are listed, defined and differentiated in the introductory section of the dictionaries are covered in the table. The dictionaries themselves are discussed in more detail in section 4.1. (For further comments, see also section 6.1.)

	offensive	*derogatory*	*disapproving*	*disparaging*	*taboo*	*vulgar*	*rude*	*impolite*
AHD	•					•		
AHC	•					•		
CALD	•		•					
CED	•	•			•			
COBUILD	•						•	
COED	•	•						
EWE	•		•		•			
Macmillan	•							•
OALD	•		•		•			
Penguin	•	•			•			
RHD	•			•				
RHWC	•			•		•		
WNC						•		

Table 2. Labels indicating negative attitude in different dictionaries. (For full names of dictionaries, see section 4.1)

Offensive

AHD: "This label is reserved for words and expressions such as racial, ethnic, or gender slurs that are derogatory and insulting to the members of the group to whom they are directed. This label may occur alone or in combination as *Offensive Slang*."

AHC: "This label is reserved for words and expressions such racial, ethnic, or gender slurs that are not only derogatory and insulting to the person to whom they are directed but also discredit to the one using them. This label may occur alone or in combination as *Offensive Slang*."

CALD: "very rude and likely to offend people"

CED: "indicates that a word might be regarded as offensive by the person described or referred to, even if the speaker uses the word without any malicious intention."

COBUILD: "likely to offend people, or to insult them; words labeled offensive should therefore usually be avoided, e.g. *cripple*"

COED: "likely to cause offence, especially racial offence, whether the speaker intends it or not."

	EWE:	"likely to be offensive to many people, for example, because it is racist or sexual"
	Macmillan:	"extremely rude and likely to cause offence"
	OALD:	"expressions are used by some people to address or refer to people in a way that is very insulting, especially in connection with their race, religion, sex or disabilities, for example *half-caste*, *slut*. You should not use these words."
	Penguin:	"shows that the word normally causes offence"
	RHD:	"If a word arouses resentment in some hearers or readers, even if that is not the intention of the user, it is identified as ***Offensive***."
	RHWC:	"Likely to be perceived as offensive whether or not any offense was intended."
Derogatory	*CED*:	"implies that the connotations of a word are unpleasant with intent on the part of the speaker or writer."
	COED:	"intended to convey a low opinion or cause personal offence."
	Penguin:	"shows that the word is normally used in a depreciatory or disapproving way."
Disapproving	*CALD*:	"used to express dislike or disagreement with somebody or something"
	EWE:	"marks a derogatory attitude on the part of the speaker"
	OALD:	"expressions show that you feel disapproval or contempt"
Disparaging	*RHD*:	"associated with contempt or hostility on the part of the speaker or the writer."
	RHWC:	"Used with disparaging intent, as to belittle a particular racial, religious, or social group."
Taboo	*CED*:	"indicates words that are not acceptable in polite use."
	EWE:	"for classic taboo words referring to sex and bodily functions"
	OALD:	"expressions are likely to be thought by many people to be obscene or shocking. You should not use them Examples are *bloody*, *shit*"
	Penguin:	"shows that the word is normally regarded as socially unacceptable"

Vulgar	*AHD*:	"This label warns of social taboos attached to a word; it may appear alone or in combination as *Vulgar Slang*, which is used for words that violate accepted standards of decency."
	AHC:	"This label warns of social taboos attached to a word; it may appear alone or in combination as *Vulgar Slang*."
	RHWC:	"Considered inappropriate in many circumstances because of association with a taboo subject."
	WNC:	"The word or meaning is regarded by many people as being too crude, coarse, or unrefined to be suitable for use in many social situations."
Rude	*COBUILD*:	"used mainly to describe words which could be considered taboo by some people; words labeled rude should therefore usually be avoided, e.g. *bloody*"
Impolite	*Macmillan*:	"likely to offend some people"

One of the most common labels indicating negative attitude is *offensive*, which is used in the majority of the dictionaries. When they describe the use of the label, dictionaries state that offensive expressions are likely to cause offence and insult the people who are described or referred to. Some dictionaries, such as *COED*, *CED* and *RHWC* point out that the words labelled *offensive* may cause offence whether or not the speakers intends to do so. In addition, some dictionaries, such as *OALD* and *AHD*, mention that terms labelled *offensive* are often connected with gender and ethnic background.

Two other labels whose meanings somewhat differ from the label *offensive* but which are quite similar to one another are *derogatory* and *disapproving*. The similarity of these labels can be easily detected since the term *derogatory* appears in some of the definitions of *disapproving*, and vice versa. For example, *Penguin* says that the label *derogatory* "shows that the word is normally used in a depreciatory or disapproving way", whereas *EWE* states that the label *disapproving* "marks a derogatory attitude on the part of the speaker". Few, if any, dictionaries use both of these labels, which is very understandable considering how closely related their meanings are.

Relatively close to the definitions of *derogatory* and *disapproving* is the label *disparaging*, which according to *RHWC* is "used with disparaging intent, as to belittle a particular racial, religious, or social group". Again, because of the similarity of meanings, *disparaging* is not likely to be found together with the labels *derogatory* and *disapproving* in one and the same dictionary.

Another common label indicating negative attitude is *taboo*, which according to several dictionaries is unacceptable in polite use. *EWE* uses a more specified and narrower definition by stating that this label is used "for classic taboo words referring to sex and bodily functions".

The term *taboo* appears in the definition of another label, *vulgar*, in *AHD* and *RHWC*. According to the former, the label *vulgar* "warns of social taboos attached to a word", whereas the latter says that vulgar words are "considered inappropriate in many circumstances because of association with a taboo subject". This overlapping of different labels in the definitions illustrates how similar in meaning many of the labels indicating negative attitude actually are.

In addition to the above-mentioned definitions, the term *taboo* is also used in the definition of the label *rude* in *COBUILD*, which states that the label *rude* is "used mainly to describe words which could be considered taboo by some people; words labelled rude should therefore usually be avoided, e.g. bloody". This example not only illustrates the overlapping of labels but also exemplifies how learner's dictionaries tend to advise their users more carefully as regards how to use, or in this case *not* to use, words that are labelled as conveying negative attitude.

One last label that can for example be found in *Macmillan* is the label *impolite*, which according to the dictionary accompanies words that are "likely to offend some people". The wording in this definition brings us back to the first label presented in this section, namely *offensive*, which was also generally defined as occurring together with words that are likely to cause offence.

While all the labels presented above indicate that a word has negative connotations, it is possible to argue that there is a difference in how the labels denote negative attitude. For example, words which are labelled *taboo*, *vulgar* or *rude* by no means always have to do with relationships

between humans, unlike the other labels. This means that words like *shit* and *bloody*, which are negative in a slightly different manner from terms such as *bitch* and *son of a bitch*, would be more likely to carry for example the label *vulgar* than *disapproving* or *disparaging*.

Another matter worth emphasizing here is the overlap of the labels *derogatory*, *disapproving* and *disparaging*, as well as *taboo*, *vulgar* and *rude*. From a dictionary user's perspective, it would seem more practical if dictionaries agreed on deploying more or less the same labels, using for example in this case only the labels *derogatory* and *vulgar* instead of choosing their labels, quite randomly, as it seems, from a set of labels that basically share the same meaning and function.

The labels presented above are common labels that are used to indicate negative attitude. This list of labels is by no means exhaustive in the sense that if one was to study all the English dictionaries ever written, a few more labels indicating negative attitude could most likely be found. However, for the present study it suffices to present the most common labels in order to get a general idea of the labels and their meanings.

3.2.3 Other ways of indicating negative attitude in dictionaries

Labels are not the only way to indicate usage in dictionaries, and indeed, not always the best one. Burkhanov (2003, 106) notes that due to the changing nature of language and the increasing awareness of diversity, it has become ever more difficult to say what is 'correct' and neutral as opposed to incorrect and somehow restricted. Furnishing a word with a certain usage label may thus provide a simplified picture of its use. Burkhanov (ibid.) says that in order to include more information on how the word is actually used, one may resort to usage notes. Usage notes are longer, written descriptions that can include more explicit information on usage than a plain label (ibid.). However, their use is far from common, probably due to the lack of space in printed dictionaries.

Besides labels and notes, information on usage may be included in the definition itself. Geeraerts (2003, 87) notes that the negative or positive aspects that a word carries can be recognized in the denotational definition. In other words, the denotational definition may be constructed in such a way that these aspects become implicit. As an example, Geeraerts gives the word *curse* that can be defined as 'an annoying, wretched, or despicable person', where the negative adjectives in the definition may be enough to indicate the pejorative nature of the word. However, in many cases using negative adjectives in the definition alone does not suffice to indicate such important aspects as offensiveness. This is something that will be further discussed in chapter 6 on dictionary findings.

In addition to the ways mentioned above, Burkhanov (2003, 107) states that example sentences given in the dictionary entry may contain information on usage. If the lexicographer has for some reason decided not to present usage information by means of usage labels or notes, the dictionary user may find the same information expressed somehow in the example sentences (ibid.). Although examples are always useful, it seems somewhat risky to leave the dictionary user in charge of making interpretations concerning usage by solely relying on example sentences.

3.3 Labelling policies according to target audience

Bogaards (2003, 26) notes that since the middle of the 20th century, lexicographers have started to pay more and more attention to target audiences, which has resulted in the realization that "dictionaries have to be designed for special user groups in response to specific needs".

Geeraerts (2003, 85) notes that as many words have different senses, it is the lexicographer's task to decide which meanings to include in a dictionary, and this choice of words and senses to be included depends on the target audience and the purpose of the volume that the lexicographer has in mind. He or she may want either to focus solely on common words and general vocabulary

or also include elements that are restricted in terms of geographical distribution or register, for example (ibid.).

It is not only the choice of words but also the labelling policies that vary according to the target audience (Norri 2000, 75). Lipka (1990, 67) says that dictionaries may legitimately use different labelling systems, depending on whether they have the foreign learner or an educated native speaker in mind. For example, learner's dictionaries are often expected to provide more explicit information on restricted usage than general purpose dictionaries, because of the simple reason that they are targeted at non-native *learners* of English, who might be unfamiliar with the term itself (Norri 2000, 75). Indeed, Landau (1989, 185) says that it is especially important to include and indicate taboo words in learner's dictionaries so that foreign learners could "avoid the embarrassment of using them inadvertently."

Sometimes the nationality of the target audience affects the labelling policy adopted. Ilson (1986, 61) notes that, as expected, British dictionaries label Americanisms and American dictionaries label Briticisms. However, only British dictionaries also tend to furnish Briticisms with a label, whereas American dictionaries do not label words such as *elevator* as being American. Indeed, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* states that in the dictionary in question "[n]o collective label (as U.S.) is used to indicate currency in all regions of the U.S.". According to Ilson, this tendency seems to suggest that British lexicographers are more aware of the fact that British English is nowadays only one variety of world Englishes and not the only "true" English in the world. American lexicographers, on the other hand, do not yet appreciate the idea of American English as one variety of English that is equal to for example British, Australian and Indian English. For American lexicographers, it seems, American English is the neutral standard English, and everything else is marked, whereas British lexicographers see both British and American English as marked. This policy also seems to suggest that American dictionaries are targeted at American readers only, whereas British dictionaries may be aimed at an international audience

(ibid.).

3.4 Problems related to indicating negative attitude in dictionaries

Although dictionary users may not often realize it, the labelling of negative attitude can be quite a challenge to a dictionary compiler (Norri 2000, 71). As Landau (1989, 187) notes, certain words may seem neutral to some people, whereas others may consider them offensive. The decision to label a word offensive is, accordingly, only based on the "editor's judgement of society's norm for the limits of reputable public behaviour" (ibid.). Also, the number of offensive English words is so vast that it would be rather a hopeless task to label systematically all the words that can be used as an insult (Landau 1989, 188). This means that labelling of offensive words must remain selective, because there is no possible way to be sensitive to everybody's feelings. The lexicographer should know more than it is humanly possible about different contexts where each word can appear and take into consideration a number of different groups that have not attracted a label in the past, such as determined women, timid men and old people, to name but a few (ibid.).

A significant difficulty in determining how to label a word arises from the complexity of interpretation, since a number of different factors, such as context and the level of intimacy between speakers, influence the way a word can be used and interpreted. When talking about insults, it is essential to remember that an offensive word may not always be insulting. As Landau (1989, 187) points out, context has a significant influence on the meaning of a word. Members of the same group might call each other by names that would be considered extremely offensive in any other context. Insulting terms may lose their offensive nature when used among friends and accompanied by a laugh and friendly facial expressions or gestures. The tone and loudness of one's voice are also different when a term is used to insult and when it is merely jocular or sympathetic. In consequence, Landau (ibid.) argues that there is "no basis for asserting that terms of insult are

vulgarly offensive or contemptuous". What makes the lexicographers' task difficult here is that they have to decide whether to include a mention of the positive use of the word in their dictionary entry. Norri (2000, 72) says that the positive meaning should be included at least in those cases where the "neutral or positive application gains a firm foothold among the targets of the abuse". Yet, as Landau (1989, 186) says, in these cases, it is still extremely important to include a label indicating the negative attitude in the other meaning, so that those unfamiliar with the word itself are warned about its possible offensiveness.

Another point that makes the lexicographer's task even more challenging is that sometimes it is difficult to know whether the different meanings that a word carries at a certain moment will last. The development of opposite, positive meanings of words normally considered offensive is particularly common in slang (Norri 2000, 73). For example, in Thorne's (1990) *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*, one definition of *bitch* is "something impressive, admirable", which is quite the opposite from its typical meaning. Waksler (1995, 4) even says that among youngsters in San Francisco, *bitch* is a typical word used to refer to someone of the same age as the speaker (see section 2.3.2). However, it would be quite impossible to predict whether these meanings will last and whether they ought to be included in a dictionary.

The above discussion on slang leads us to another problem that concerns the sometimes misused and misunderstood label *slang*. Lipka (1990, 64) says that "there are no clear-cut boundaries between the labels *colloquial*, *casual*, and *slang*", whereas Landau (1989, 189) accurately notes that not all taboo words are slang and most slang words are definitely not taboo. Neither is it totally satisfying to say that slang is very informal usage (Landau 1989, 191). It is then sometimes difficult to understand why some words are described as slang. As noted in Thorne's *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* (1997, iii), we all think we know what slang is, but it still remains difficult to decide which words should be placed under that label. Probably the best-known characteristics of slang are that it is felt to be extremely informal and typical of spoken language. It is also often

short-lived: some words previously regarded as slang may become neutral or totally disappear. In addition, Thorne (ibid.) says that slang is often used to 'enforce intimacy', meaning that a certain group of people using the same form of language feel a stronger sense of togetherness. Many slang terms also replace the already existing standard words with more interesting alternatives (ibid.). Still, slang seems to be often mistaken for swearing or seen as comprising taboo and vulgar words only, which is why it apparently confuses the lexicographers trying to come up with a suitable label for indicating offensiveness.

The difficulty in labelling words is by no means a recent phenomenon. Landau (1989, 174) says that debates over the so-called good usage of language have long formed part of English, and as the problems listed above imply, the difficulties concerning labelling are not disappearing anytime soon.

4. Material and methods

In this chapter, the material and methods used in the study will be presented and discussed. The primary material of the study includes a set of dictionaries and two language corpora. In this material, the occurrences of two words generally considered insulting, namely *bitch* and *son of a bitch*, will be examined. Section 4.1 introduces the 16 dictionaries chosen, whereas section 4.2 focuses on the two language corpora. Finally, the methods employed in the study are explained in section 4.3.

4.1 Dictionaries

One of the main issues of the present study is to examine how dictionaries treat the words *bitch* and *son of a bitch*, which is why a wide selection of dictionaries were chosen as the primary material. Altogether 16 dictionaries will be consulted in order to get a clear and extensive picture of how the words are, or should be, used according to dictionaries. As the study deals with only two insulting words, it is possible to include a great variety of dictionaries without extending the study too much. The selection of dictionaries includes the most recent editions that I was able to access. Still, the publishing years vary considerably, ranging from 1993 to 2008. The obvious reason for such differences is that some dictionaries have not published a new edition since 1993, whereas others have done so regularly.

Since one research topic of the study is regionality, that is, whether there is a difference in the use of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* between Britain and the United States, the set of dictionaries should comprise both British and American works. In addition, different types of dictionaries should be included because labelling policies often depend on the target audience. Choosing an even number of general purpose and learner's dictionaries from both sides of the Atlantic creates

an even balance and offers sufficient variation.

Eight of the 16 dictionaries chosen are general purpose dictionaries, four of which are British: *The Chambers Dictionary* (*ChD*), *Collins English Dictionary* (*CED*), the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (*COED*), and *The Penguin English Dictionary* (*Penguin*). The four American general purpose dictionaries are *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (*AHD*), the American edition of *The Encarta World English Dictionary* (*EWE*), *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (*RHD*), and *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (*W3*).

The number of learner's dictionaries is equally balanced so that four of the eight volumes come from Britain and four from the United States. However, the concept *learner's dictionary* does not exist in the United States in the same sense as in Britain, the main difference being that British learner's dictionaries are mainly targeted at non-native speakers of English, whereas the American ones are normally designed for native speakers only. To maintain the balance of different types of dictionaries, I decided to use the closest American equivalents for learner's dictionaries. These are normally called *collegiate dictionaries*, which is the term that I will be using if I discuss them separately from the British learner's dictionaries. When they are discussed together with the British learner's dictionaries as opposed to general purpose dictionaries, I will place them under the heading *learner's dictionaries*. The four British learner's dictionaries are *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (*CALD*), *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (*COBUILD), Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (*Macmillan*), and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (*OALD*). The American collegiate dictionaries are *The American Heritage College Dictionary* (*AHC*), *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (*MWC*), *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (*RHWC*), and *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (*WNC*).

4.2 Corpora

The two corpora used in the present study are the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The reason for choosing one British and one American corpus was the fact that the dictionaries chosen for this study include both British and American works, which is why the corpora should also represent both varieties of English. In addition, if there are differences in how *bitch* and *son of a bitch* are treated in British and American dictionaries, the corpus examples may prove that this is due to actual differences between British and American English.

The BNC is a monolingual corpus of 100 million words dealing with modern British English. The latest edition, the BNC XML Edition, was released in 2007 and will be used in this study. The corpus consists of both written and spoken language and includes different styles and varieties. For example, in the written part, which covers 90% of the corpus, there are extracts from newspapers, academic books and popular fiction, to name but a few. Similarly, the spoken part (10%) contains examples from various sources, ranging from informal conversations and radio shows to more formal business and government meetings.

As its British counterpart, COCA also consists of both written and spoken material. However, there is one major difference between these two corpora, which is the size. COCA is four times larger than the BNC, containing more than 410 million words, 85 million of which are spoken language. The different categories of written language (fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic journals) each include more than 80 million words. COCA was first released in 2008 and is now being updated once or twice every year, which, according to the COCA website, makes it "the only corpus of English that is suitable for looking at current, ongoing changes in the language". Indeed, the size of the corpus alone suggests that COCA will probably be a more productive source of information and examples than the BNC. Still, both corpora will be used in

the study because no matter what their size, they are likely to shed some light on the regional differences between the lexemes examined.

4.3 Methods employed

The first step when carrying out the present study will be to go through the dictionary examples carefully and pay special attention to how they warn the reader about the offensive nature of the two lexemes in question. Both the use of labels and the definitions given are the main focus at this point. After examining the dictionaries, the findings will be presented and discussed. The purpose is to see how often and how consistently the dictionary user is warned about the possible offence caused by the two lexemes studied. The differences, if any, in the labelling policies between the British and American volumes will also be noted here, as well as the differences or similarities between different types of dictionaries. The aim, however, is not to evaluate dictionaries but to concentrate on the problems of marking the negative attitude.

Dictionaries may include several different labels concerning, for example, temporality or style, but this study is mostly interested in usage labels denoting offensiveness. However, some other labels, such as regional labels and the, in my opinion, commonly misused label *slang*, may be commented on if seen relevant. In addition to labels, the definitions given in each dictionary are also of importance, as they may contain relevant information in terms of offensiveness even in the absence of a specific label. For example, there may be cases where a dictionary has not labelled *bitch* as offensive, but still gives a definition of the following kind: “an offensive term referring to a woman, especially an unpleasant one”. In these cases, even though the actual label is missing, the warning of offensiveness is clearly spelled out, which is why the definitions are also taken into account when examining the dictionaries. In addition, the definitions are interesting because they may contain information on the gender of the referent. As noted in the introductory part of

the study, *bitch* typically refers to a woman, whereas *son of a bitch* is generally used to denote a man, but the dictionary definitions may offer a different view on this point. In addition, example sentences, which are used in some dictionaries, may express something about the gender of the referent and will therefore also be taken into account.

The next step after examining the dictionaries is to take a closer look at the corpus data derived from the BNC and COCA. A random search on *bitch* and *son of a bitch* will be carried out in both corpora. Although *son of a bitch* has alternative spellings (see chapter 5 for further discussion), it was decided that the corpora would be searched only for the spelling *son of a bitch*, because a preliminary search indicated that the number of occurrences for *son-of-a-bitch* was relatively low in both corpora. Similarly, no particular search on the plural forms of either *bitch* or *son of a bitch* is carried out, because there seems to be enough material for the present study even without including the plural forms. In fact, the only case where additional corpus examples could be seen as useful is *son of a bitch* in the BNC. However, a preliminary search gave only two examples of *sons of bitches* in the BNC, a result which was naturally considered rather insignificant in terms of the whole study, and thus the idea of including plural forms was disregarded.

Since the BNC contains a significantly smaller number of words than COCA, I have decided to include all the examples found in the BNC in this study. When using COCA, I will carry out a search that gives all the hits found in the corpora but then by choosing a random selection of examples narrow the number of examples down to one thousand for *bitch* and 500 for *son of a bitch* so that there would be more correspondence between the number of examples derived from both corpora.

As in almost any corpus search, irrelevant examples are bound to come up at this stage of the study. For example, it is very likely that there will be examples where *bitch* refers to a female dog and cases where it is not used to refer to a person but to a thing or a situation. Neither are all the examples of *son of a bitch* probably useful in this study because *son of a bitch* can often appear

as an interjection. There is no other way to discard these irrelevant tokens but to go through the examples manually and disregard all the examples that do not refer to human beings.

As the focus of the study is on two lexemes only, it is possible to examine a great number of corpus examples, which will hopefully challenge some of the views presented in dictionaries and offer new information on the meanings and uses of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* as well as offensiveness in general.

5. The history and present-day meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*

The reasons for choosing the words *bitch* and *son of a bitch* as the starting point of this study were commented on in the introductory part of the thesis. It was noted that they both are generally known terms of abuse, the former being stereotypically seen to refer to women and the latter to men. In this chapter, the etymology of the terms is briefly presented, after which the meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* are studied starting from Old English and extending from Middle English to all the way to their present-day meanings.

At this point, the alternative spellings of *son of a bitch* should be pointed out. I have decided to spell *son of a bitch* without hyphens even though the spelling *son-of-a-bitch* is also commonly used. The reason for choosing the former spelling is that most of the dictionaries examined use the spelling *son of a bitch* in their main entry for the word even though they might also give the spelling *son-of-a-bitch*.

Yet another issue concerning *son of a bitch* is the acronym *SOB*, which is not included in the study for three reasons. The first reason is that there is no similar acronym for *bitch*, and including *SOB* in the study would break the balance created by choosing this particular pair of words. Secondly, whereas *son of a bitch* and *son-of-a-bitch* are typically treated together in dictionaries, some dictionaries give a separate entry for *SOB*. Including the definitions given in these entries would complicate the study unnecessarily. Thirdly, it might be quite difficult to find relevant corpus examples of *SOB*: the vast majority of hits found in a simple query would probably be either the verb or noun *sob*.

In order to study the development of the meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*, a number of different dictionaries were used. To present the meanings in Old English, the *Dictionary of Old English* (hereafter *DOE*) was examined. As for the Middle English definitions, the *Middle English Dictionary* (hereafter *MED*) was resorted to. To illustrate the meanings that *bitch* and *son*

of a bitch have nowadays, four randomly chosen dictionaries of the set of dictionaries presented in section 4.1 were studied. In addition, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED2*, the number '2' showing that the entries quoted here have not yet been updated in the online *OED*), typically regarded as the pre-eminent dictionary of the English language, and an extensive work by Hugh Rawson specializing in offensive terms, were consulted for additional information where seen relevant, especially in the following section about etymology.

5.1 Etymology of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*

According to *OED2*, the etymology of *bitch* is not at all clear. In the other Germanic languages it is only found in Old Norse as *bikkja*, but the relation of these two words remains unclear. It is uncertain whether these words are cognate, or whether one of them is adopted from the other. It is equally uncertain whether the German word *betze* and the French word *biche* have any relation to the English word (*OED2* s.v. *bitch*). Rawson (1989, 43) agrees that the origin of *bitch* is obscure, saying that it may have evolved from the Latin word *bestia*, meaning 'beast'.

The etymology of *bitch* is veiled in such mystery that the etymology of *son of a bitch* is no less complicated. In any case, we can naturally briefly study the etymology of *son*. *OED2* states that *son* is of common Germanic origin. Its different forms have existed in for example Old Norse and Low German, and variants of *son* still appear in many Germanic languages.

5.2 *Bitch* and *son of a bitch* in Old English

In Old English, the word *bitch* (spelled *bicce, bich* or *bicge*) already existed, although its meaning was hardly complex at the time. Even though the dictionary entries themselves are quite complex in *DOE*, the entry still shows that *bitch* was a feminine word that was used to refer to canines.

Son of a bitch, on the other hand, is not found at all in Old English. It is thus not useful

to study the Old English meanings of *son* alone either, firstly, because there was no recognised compound *son of a bitch* existing, and secondly, the above-mentioned meaning of *bitch* already shows that in Old English *bitch* was not used to refer to a human being. Thus it seems that the Old English meanings are not very relevant to the present study although they do serve to exemplify the development of the terms in different eras of the English language.

5.3 *Bitch* and *son of a bitch* in Middle English

By the Middle English period, the meaning of the word *bitch* (spelled *bicche*, *biche*, *becche*, *buche* or *bikk*) had developed further. The word was still found in the sense of a female dog, but an additional meaning had also formed. In this newly developed meaning, *bitch* could be "used contemptuously or profanely" of both women and men (*MED* s.v. *bicche*).

The first recordings of *son of a bitch* are also from the Middle English period. In *MED*, the lexeme appears under the term *bitch* in the compound *bicche sone*, meaning 'son of a bitch'. When one studies the entry for *sone* in *MED*, a number of different senses are found. *Sone* was used to refer to the male child of a human being, pagan deity or personified abstraction as well as the male offspring of an animal. It could also be used for male and, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, female descendants who are more remote than a son. In addition, the figurative senses of "one who inherits the spirit or displays the character of someone or something" as well as "one characterized by the presence or influence of a quality, vice, virtue, etc." (*MED* s.v. *sone*) are found.

5.4 *Bitch* and *son of a bitch* in Present-Day English

To get a better idea of the present-day meanings of the lexemes, the definitions for *bitch* and *son of a bitch* given in four of the 16 dictionaries used in the study are presented in the following table. These dictionaries were randomly chosen, the only criterion being that each type of

dictionary should be consulted. The British general purpose dictionary chosen is *Collins English Dictionary* (*CED*) and the American one is *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (*AHD*). The British learner's dictionary used for defining the two words is *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (*OALD*) and the American collegiate dictionary is *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (*MWC*). Only the definitions that refer to human beings are relevant for this study and are thus the only ones presented in the table. If a dictionary has two different definitions that refer to human beings, both are given in the table. No labels are included at this point, because they will be discussed in more detail later on in chapter 6.

Here are the definitions given for *bitch* and *son of a bitch* in four randomly chosen dictionaries:

	bitch	***son of a bitch***
CED	1. a malicious, spiteful, or coarse woman	1. a worthless or contemptible person
	2. a person who acts as a subordinate or slave to another person.	2. a humorous or affectionate term for a person, esp a man
AHD	1. a woman considered to be spiteful or overbearing	1. a person regarded as thoroughly mean or disagreeable
	2. a lewd woman	
	3. a man considered to be weak or contemptible	
OALD	1. an offensive way of referring to a woman, especially an unpleasant one	1. an offensive word for a person that you think is bad or very unpleasant
MWC	1. a lewd or immoral woman	1. an offensive or disagreeable person
	2. a malicious, spiteful, or domineering woman	2. man, fellow

Table 3. Definitions of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* in randomly chosen dictionaries.

Although the wordings of the definitions vary especially in terms of the adjectives used, the dictionary definitions unanimously show that the most common meaning of *bitch* is that of a spiteful and malicious woman, whereas the most common meaning of *son of a bitch* is a disagreeable person.

However, there is a good deal of variation between the dictionary entries in terms of presenting different meanings. As the table shows, *OALD* has given each of the terms only one definition,

whereas in *CED* and *MWC* the lexemes have two definitions each. *AHD* has decided to go even further by giving *bitch* three different definitions, yet *son of a bitch*, on the other hand, has only been assigned one meaning.

According to the dictionary definitions, in addition to the meaning of a spiteful and malicious woman, *bitch* can also be used to refer to a lewd woman, to a person who "acts as a subordinate or slave to another person" and to a man who is regarded as weak or contemptible. In Present-Day English, besides the meaning of a disagreeable person, *son of a bitch* can simply be used to denote a man or a fellow, sometimes in an affectionate way.

What is noteworthy in the above dictionary entries is the use of the words *woman*, *man* and *person*. All of the dictionary entries in the table show that *bitch* in its most common meaning is used to refer to a woman. In the additional meanings, *bitch* is said to refer to a man or a person in general. The use of the word *person* in the first definitions of *son of a bitch*, on the other hand, shows that according to the dictionaries, *son of a bitch* can be applied to both women and men. In neutral or humorous senses, its use seems to be more limited to men only.

In addition to the meanings presented in the table, the *OED2* definitions referring to human beings are worth considering. The most common meaning of *bitch* with a human referent is explained as follows:

> Applied opprobriously to a woman; strictly, a lewd or sensual woman. Not now in decent use; but formerly common in literature. In mod. use, *esp.* a malicious or treacherous woman (*OED2* s.v. *bitch*, sense 2a)

Rawson (1989, 44) notes that the "taboo against the term stemmed from its associations with a dog in heat". Overtime, the offensiveness of the word grew so great that people started to avoid using it even in the sense of a female dog. However, Rawson (1989, 43) further notes that *bitch* is not necessarily an offensive term but can also be used in an affectionate and admiring way.

According to *OED2*, when *bitch* is applied to a man, its meaning becomes "less opprobrious, and somewhat whimsical, having the modern sense of 'dog'" (*OED2* s.v. *bitch*, sense 2b). It

is added, though, that this meaning is "not now in decent use" (cf. the discussion in section 2.3.2). Rawson (1989, 44), however, says that "*bitch* once referred to males as well as females", a quotation which shows that according to Rawson, *bitch* cannot be used to refer to a man in present-day English.

In the case of *son of a bitch*, Rawson (1989, 366), on the other hand, says that although *son of a bitch* usually refers to a man, it can sometimes be used of a woman as well. Similarly, *OED2* also states that *son of a bitch* can be used as a term of abuse applied to a woman, but this is seen as rare. For Rawson, *son of a bitch* is "[p]robably the most common American vulgarity from about the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth" but has nowadays lost a large part of its shock power. *OED2* seems to agree with Rawson again because one meaning of *son of a bitch* in the dictionary is "with weakened force and neutral or friendly overtones: a fellow, a man" (*OED2* s.v. *son of a bitch*, sense 1b). In accordance with Rawson, *OED2* also states that *son of a bitch* is mainly an American expression.

5.5 Comments on the changes in the meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*

The study of the dictionaries in this chapter shows that the meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* have indeed evolved and broadened over time. Although the etymology of the two lexemes remains somewhat unclear, their present-day meanings can be traced all the way back to Middle English. In fact, the *MED* definition which states that *son* can be used to denote a female descendant may indicate why *son of a bitch* is even in its present-day meaning said to refer to women as well, despite the fact that *son* nowadays refers to men only. According to *OED2*, *son of a bitch* referring to a woman is rare, and the reason for the hesitance to use it nowadays with female referents can well be based on the narrowing of the meaning of *son* in Present-day English. The following chapters will shed more light on the present-day usage of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*.

6. Dictionary findings

In this chapter, a selection of dictionary entries are examined and commented on. As explained in chapter 4, when examining the dictionary entries, only the meanings referring to human beings are taken into account. The main focus lies on the use of attitudinal labels and other ways of indicating negative attitude. In section 6.1, the attitudinal labels and other ways of indicating negative attitude provided for *bitch* and *son of a bitch* in the dictionaries studied are presented in tabular form and commented on briefly, after which the most important findings will be commented on in section 6.2. In the sections that follow, the dictionaries' views on non-derogatory senses and gender of the referent as well as possible comments on regional variation are examined. A discussion on how different types of dictionaries present information about usage will conclude this chapter.

6.1 Labels and other indications of negative attitude for *bitch* and *son of a bitch*

The dictionaries studied use one or more of the following labels to indicate negative attitude: *offensive* (*AHD, AHC, CALD, CED, COBUILD, COED, EWE, Macmillan, MWC, OALD, Penguin, RHD, RHWC*), *derogatory* (*CED, COED, Penguin*), *disapproving* (*CALD, EWE, OALD*), *disparaging* (*MWC, RHWC*), *taboo* (*CED, EWE, OALD, Penguin*), *vulgar* (*AHD, AHC, MWC, RHWC, WNC, W3*), *rude* (*COBUILD*), *impolite* (*Macmillan*) and *abusive* (*ChD*) (see also section 3.2.2 for discussion on the frequency and meanings of different labels). Furthermore, *COBUILD* also uses the labels *very offensive* and *very rude*, which are apparently assigned to words which are seen as more impolite than the labels *offensive* and *rude* would indicate without the intensifier.[2]

What was found interesting when studying the different definitions that are given to labels in different dictionaries was that there were cases where a dictionary had not defined the labels it

[2]In addition, *COBUILD* has a set of pragmatic labels which indicate, for example, approval and disapproval.

uses at all. For instance, *ChD* and *W3* do not list or define the usage labels they use anywhere: the labels *abusive* in *ChD* and *vulgar* in *W3* were only found by chance when studying the terms *bitch* and *son of a bitch*. *MWC*, on the other hand, lists the labels *disparaging, offensive, obscene*, and *vulgar* in its introductory section, but does not make any distinction between these labels, merely stating that they "are used for those words or senses that in common use are intended to hurt or shock or that are likely to give offense even when they are used without such an intent". Using so many different labels without distinguishing their purpose seems somewhat odd, but perhaps the reason for such a policy will become clearer when studying the dictionary in more detail.

The different labels and other indications of negative attitude found in the sixteen dictionaries studied are presented below in tabular form. In the table, all the labels indicating negative attitude assigned to *bitch* and *son of a bitch* are presented in italics. If no specific label is found, but the offensiveness of the word in question is otherwise clearly stated, for example by using words such as *offensive* or *insulting* in the definition, the word which indicates negative attitude is presented in the table without italics to separate it from labels proper. In those cases where a label occurs together with a frequency modifier, such as *mainly* or *often*, or some other restriction (e.g. *with an adjective*), the label is placed in brackets. The use of the label *slang* is also indicated in the table, because even though it is not an actual attitudinal label, *slang* often seems to be mistaken for an equivalent to offensive language and swearing, or seen as containing taboo and vulgar words only (see discussion in section 3.4). Keeping this common misunderstanding in mind, it can be expected that there will be something to comment on as concerns the use of the label *slang* in the definitions for *bitch* and *son of a bitch*.

In the cases where no clear sign of negative attitude is given, the symbol '-' will be used to indicate the lack of labelling. In addition, if two or more separate meanings referring to human beings are given in the dictionary entry, this is indicated in the table by giving the order in which these definitions occur in the dictionary. The labels used are listed individually for each definition.

The first four dictionaries in the table are British general purpose dictionaries followed by the four American general purpose dictionaries. The next four volumes are British learner's dictionaries, whereas the last four are American collegiate dictionaries. (For a full list of relevant dictionary definitions, see Appendix.)

Dictionary	***bitch***	***son of a bitch***
ChD	1. *abusive* 2. *sl* 3. *sl*	1. *sl*, abusive
CED	1. *offensive slang* 2. -	1. *slang*, insult 2. *slang*
COED	1. - 2. -	1. term of abuse
Penguin	1. *slang* 2. -	1. (term of abuse)
AHD	1. *offensive* 2. *offensive* 3. *offensive*	1. *vulgar*
EWE	1. *offensive*, *taboo insult*	1. *offensive*, *slang*, *insult* 2. *slang*, (vulgar)
RHD	1. *slang* 2. *slang*	1. *slang*, *vulgar*
W3	1. term of abuse 2. -	1. (*vulgar*), term of abuse 2. (*vulgar*) 3. (*vulgar*)
CALD	1. *offensive* 2. *offensive slang*	1. *offensive*
COBUILD	1. *very rude*	1. *very rude*
Macmillan	1. *offensive*, insulting	1. *offensive*, insulting
OALD	1. *slang*, *disapproving*, offensive	1. *taboo*, *slang*, offensive
AHC	1. *offensive* 2. *offensive*	1. *vulgar*
MWC	1. - 2. (term of abuse)	1. (*vulgar*), term of abuse 2. (*vulgar*)
RHWC	1. *slang* 2. *slang*	1. *slang*, (*vulgar*)
WNC	1. - 2. *slang*, term of contempt	1. *slang*, (vulgar)

Table 4. Labelling and other indications of negative attitude in the dictionaries studied.

The following sections will comment on the indications of negative attitude presented in the table

in more detail.

6.1.1 *Bitch* in the general purpose dictionaries

There is a good deal of variation in how *bitch* is treated in the general purpose dictionaries studied. In the British general purpose dictionaries, the labels *abusive* (*ChD*), *informal* (*CED*, *COED*), *offensive* (*CED*) and *slang* (*ChD*, *CED*, *Penguin*) are used. Seven definitions did not receive a label or any other indication of negative attitude; instead, the label *slang* appeared alone in some of these cases.

The American general purpose dictionaries use the labels *insult* (*EWE*), *offensive* (*AHD*, *EWE*), *slang* (*RHD*) and *taboo* (*EWE*). In addition, *W3* sees *bitch* as 'a generalized term of abuse'. The only labels that appear in both the British and American general purpose dictionaries are *offensive* and *slang*, which shows that labelling policies vary notably on the two sides of the Atlantic. However, based on the labels found here, it is not very plausible to state that the differences in labelling policies in this case would depend on the country of publication. Instead, it is evident that the choice of labels varies from one volume to another, regardless of region.

6.1.2 *Bitch* in the learner's dictionaries

Most consistency in labelling the negative attitude within one group of dictionaries was found in the British learner's dictionaries. All of them warned the user about the insulting nature of *bitch* using the labels *disapproving* (*OALD*), *informal* (*COBUILD*), *offensive* (*CALD*, *Macmillan*), *slang* (*CALD* , *OALD*) and *very rude* (*COBUILD*). This shows that the British learner's dictionaries live up to the expectations, the initial presumption with learner's dictionaries being that they should provide plenty of information about usage and especially warn the readers who may be fairly unfamiliar with the language itself.

The American collegiate dictionaries were not as consistent a group as the British learner's dictionaries, and not all of them gave any indication of the negative attitude conveyed by *bitch*. *Offensive* (*AHC*) and *slang* (*RHWC*, *WNC*) are the only labels proper found for *bitch*. In addition, *MWC* states that *bitch* is 'sometimes used as generalized term of abuse', whereas *WNC* says that it is 'a term of contempt'. The approach in *WNC* is different from the others in the way it seems to place more importance on the speaker's attitude rather than on the referent's response.

As was the case with the general purpose dictionaries above, *offensive* and *slang* are again the only labels that are used in both British and American volumes.

6.1.3 *Son of a bitch* in the general purpose dictionaries

Several labels for *son of a bitch* were found in the general purpose dictionaries studied: *abusive* (in *ChD*), *informal* (in *COED*), *insult* (in *CED* and *EWE*), *offensive* (*EWE*), *slang* (in *CED*, *EWE* and *RHD*), and *vulgar* (in *AHD* and *RHD*). In addition, *Penguin* says that *son of a bitch* is 'often used as a term of abuse', whereas according to *W3* it is 'sometimes considered vulgar' and can be used as 'a generalized term of abuse', which is very close to *COED's* view according to which *son of a bitch* is 'a general term of abuse'. The most common labels attached to *son of a bitch* in the general purpose dictionaries seem to be *insult*, *vulgar* and *slang*. The frequent appearance of the label *vulgar*, which in fact recurs in the American volumes only, is interesting here. In previous discussions on labels (see sections 3.2.2 and 4.3), it was noted that *vulgar* indicates that a word is not acceptable in polite use. The use of this label thus seems to suggest that *son of a bitch* is not expected to cause offence in exactly the same way as *bitch*, which often receives the label *offensive*.

6.1.4 *Son of a bitch* in the learner's dictionaries

Again, the British learner's dictionaries quite consistently use labels that indicate negative attitude for *son of a bitch*. We can find *offensive* (*CALD* , *Macmillan*), *slang* (*OALD*), *taboo* (*OALD*) and *very rude* (*COBUILD*).

The American collegiate dictionaries employ the following labels: *often vulgar* (*RHWC*), *sometimes vulgar* (*MWC*), *vulgar* (*AHC*) and *slang* (*RHWC*, *WNC*). In addition, *MWC* says that *son of a bitch* is 'used as a generalized term of abuse', and *WNC* calls it a 'somewhat vulgar term'. The American collegiate dictionaries seem to favour the label *vulgar*, whereas among the British learner's dictionaries there is more variation in terms of labelling.

6.2 Central findings concerning indications of negative attitude

This section focuses on the most central findings concerning indications of negative attitude in the set of dictionaries chosen for the present study. Especially those cases that leave room for interpretation will be commented on. This section concentrates on the most basic negative senses of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*, meaning that the possible positive or neutral meanings will be discussed in separate sections.

Shown by the table in section 6.1, the negative attitude conveyed by these two words is indicated in most dictionaries. However, there are some striking exceptions. For example, *COED* says that *bitch* is "a disliked or spiteful woman" and only furnishes it with the stylistic label *informal*. Similarly, the second meaning presented in *ChD*, "a malicious or arrogant woman", only receives the label *slang*. These examples seem to suggest that it is perfectly fine to call a woman a *bitch* if she indeed is somehow unpleasant and mean. The same approach can be seen in *RHD* and *W3*: if the woman in question is "malicious, unpleasant, selfish" and "spiteful, and domineering", one can call her *bitch* without fear of causing offence. At least for me, a non-native speaker of En-

glish, these definitions, although full of 'negative' adjectives, do not seem sufficient to illustrate the possible offence these words might cause. What makes the labelling choices in *W3* even more questionable in this case is that it gives two meanings that are related but only labels one of them as *a generalized term of abuse*. As pointed out earlier in chapter 3, meanings are often contiguous, which is why it is odd if only one of the negative senses receives a label.

Interestingly, the dictionaries that have included the sense 'a lewd or immoral woman' tend to leave this meaning unmarked, the only exceptions being *AHD* and *AHC* (see Appendix 1 for full dictionary entries). For example, *WNC* labels it as archaic, whereas *RHD* and *RHWC* see it as slang. *MWC*, on the other hand, has decided to leave this meaning completely unlabelled. *W3* has followed a strikingly different policy here: it labels only this sense as a *generalized term of abuse*, but leaves the other meaning, 'a malicious, spiteful, and domineering woman' completely unmarked, as already noted above. One can only wonder what the reasons, if any, behind *W3*'s labelling system are.

As the table in 6.1 indicates, the label *slang* comes up more often than expected, or, indeed, hoped for. More than half of the dictionaries assign the label *slang* to one or both of the words, so it would seem that they cannot be totally wrong. Still, it is quite impossible to forget Thorne's views on slang (see section 3.4) and accept that *bitch* and *son of a bitch* should be labelled as slang. If we take a look at how the label *slang* is defined in *RHWC*, for example, the reasons for hesitating to place *bitch* and *son of a bitch* so readily under that label may become clearer. It is said in *RHWC* that slang is "[o]ften metaphorical. Much slang is ephemeral, becoming dated in a relatively short time, but some slang terms find their way into the standard language. Slang terms are used in formal speech and writing only for special effect". *Bitch* and *son of a bitch* do not fit in this definition all that well, because they have certainly existed for a long time without becoming dated. Perhaps they could be considered slang terms that have found their way into standard language, but if so, why should they be called *slang* anymore. If they are now part of the

everyday language, as at least the negative meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* most definitely seem to be, there should be no need to label them as slang.

Among the dictionary definitions studied, there are perhaps four definitions where the label *slang* might be considered accurate. *Penguin* leaves the sense 'a woman, girlfriend, or prostitute' completely unlabelled although this might be a case where *slang* would not be an utterly inappropriate label if we assume that this meaning is used and approved of by certain groups only. In addition, the meanings 'a man considered to be weak or contemptible' in *AHD*, 'someone who will do everything you tell them to do because you have complete control over them' in *CALD*, 'a person who acts as a subordinate or slave to another person' in *CED*, and 'a person who undertakes demeaning tasks for another' in *ChD* could perhaps be seen as examples of meanings to which the label *slang* could be applied because these meanings might not yet have established their position in standard language. In reality, as concerns these definitions, *slang* is only used in *ChD* and in *CALD* where it appears in the phrase *offensive slang*, whereas *AHD* prefers *offensive* and *CED* has decided to label the above meaning as *informal*.

The complexity of the label *slang* becomes even more evident in *MWC*'s interesting discussion about slang:

> There is no satisfactory objective test for slang, especially with reference to a word out of context. No word, in fact, is invariably slang, and many standard words can be given slang applications.

Based on this notion, it is no wonder, then, that lexicographers' views on slang may differ from those of individual laymen. What the quotation also quite accurately shows is that deciding which words should receive the label *slang* can be a very context-dependent issue (cf. the discussion on the importance of context in terms of word meaning and offensiveness in chapter 2).

6.3 Non-derogatory meanings of *bitch*

Only two of the dictionaries mention a positive or neutral meaning for the word *bitch*. In *Penguin*, the definition "a woman, girlfriend, or prostitute" is given without any label or other indication of how, where and when this sense is acceptable and would not cause offence. One may wonder whether a woman, girlfriend or prostitute would not feel offended if somebody from out of the blue decided to address her as *bitch*. I myself, a woman and a girlfriend, would definitely feel insulted if I was suddenly called a *bitch*. It does seem insufficient, then, to merely list some persons to whom *bitch* may refer without giving any additional information on the possible context.

The other positive meaning found in the dictionaries studied is from *COED*, and it is hardly less perplexing than the definition in *Penguin*. *COED*'s entire definition for *bitch* with a human referent reads as follows: "*informal* a disliked or spiteful woman. > *black English* a woman (used in non-derogatory sense)". The information given within brackets makes one wonder whether the reader is supposed to conclude that in *other* uses than the one in black English *bitch* is indeed an offensive and derogatory term. Still, if it has been the dictionary compilers' purpose to provide the readers with important usage information on this term, it would have been far more practical to assign the definition 'a disliked or spiteful woman' a clear label stating the possible offence caused by the term. In this case, only the label *informal* is used, which does not seem to suffice. There are plenty of words in the English language that are informal but not offensive. It would not have taken too much space to include, for example, the label *often offensive* and spare the reader the confusion caused by this inconsistent labelling.

6.4 Non-derogatory meanings of *son of a bitch*

Compared to *bitch*, *son of a bitch* is given a positive or neutral meaning twice as often, namely in four dictionaries. The definition in *CED* states that, in addition to the offensive meaning, *son*

of a bitch can be "a humorous or affectionate term for a person, esp a man: a lucky son of a bitch". *MWC* simply states that *son of a bitch* can be used in the sense of "man, fellow". *EWE* agrees with these works, stating that *son of a bitch* can be a "person in general". Even though one may once again wonder about the appropriateness of the label *slang*, the definition in *EWE* is quite informative and thorough, stating that, in this sense, *son of a bitch* is "used, together with an adjective, as a familiar, humorous, and slightly vulgar term for a person, usually a man, who has the named characteristic". An example sentence exemplifies the meaning even further: "He's a lucky son of a bitch". What is especially interesting in the *EWE* definition is the underlining of the need for an adjective to make *son of a bitch* something other than offensive. The same importance of an additional adjective, although not in any way specifically emphasized, can be seen in *W3*, which gives not only one but two neutral meanings, both of which, at least according to the example sentences given, seem to be most often used together with an adjective. The first non-derogatory meaning in *W3* is "an unfortunate victim", followed by the example sentence "once the sequence of events was set going the poor ∼ never had a chance". It seems that the adjective *poor* pays a rather important role here. In my bachelor's thesis, I studied the adjective *poor* and noticed that it often occurred together with words such as *bastard*, *bugger* and, indeed, *son of a bitch*. In all the examples where *poor* and one of the above-mentioned nouns occurred together, the overall tone of the utterance was certainly sympathetic. It is a little odd, then, that this use that seems to be fairly common is mentioned in so few dictionaries.

Another neutral, or even positive, definition of *son of a bitch* found in *W3* is "fellow – used as a generalized term of approval", followed by the example sentence: "the nicest thing an Aussie can call you is a bloody fine ∼". Again, *son of a bitch* is preceded by an adjective which clearly modifies its meaning in a more positive direction.

One interesting aspect concerning the non-derogatory meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* is that none of the dictionaries give neutral or positive meanings to both of these words, but only

to one or the other. If the lexicographer has come to the conclusion that *bitch* can be something other than an insulting term, would it not be fair to anticipate that in the same work *son of a bitch*, the "offspring word", would also be given a neutral meaning, and vice versa? This type of inconsistency exemplifies well the problems that lexicographers face when trying to handle the multitude of different words and senses (see section 3.4).

6.5 Gender of the referent

The dictionaries' views on the gender of the referent, that is, whether the word can be applied to women, men or both, are quite similar, but some differences occur in this respect as well. For example, *RHD* defines *bitch* as 'a malicious, unpleasant, selfish person, esp. a woman', which entails that a male referent is possible though not the most probable. Similarly, *Macmillan* states that *bitch* is 'an insulting word for someone, especially a woman, who is rude or cruel', which implies that *bitch* could also refer to a man.

In addition, *AHD* gives *bitch* a totally separate meaning of 'a man considered to be weak or contemptible'. This meaning is similar to the ones in *CALD*, *ChD*, and *CED* already quoted at the end of section 6.2, where the label *slang* was discussed. What is interesting in terms of the offensiveness of these male or gender-neutral meanings is that although two of the dictionaries, namely *AHD* and *CALD*, treat them as offensive, in *CED* the relevant sense does not receive any other label than *informal*, whereas *ChD* resorts to the label *slang* only. It is quite difficult to understand, though, why this meaning would not be as insulting as any other sense that *bitch* has.

As regards *son of a bitch*, the dictionaries studied tend to use the word *person* in their definitions. This policy implies that *son of a bitch* can be used for both women and men and that it is equally common with both male and female referents. Only one dictionary, namely *EWE*, points out that male referent might be more common: 'an offensive term for sb, usually a man'. The fact

that only one of the 16 dictionaries studied states that *son of a bitch* more commonly refers to men than women is somewhat surprising since the initial hypothesis was that *son of a bitch* would be more common with men.

6.6 Regionality

Five dictionaries comment on regional variation and all the remarks concern *son of a bitch*. *ChD* provides the term with the label *esp N Am*, *CED* says that *son of a bitch* is "chiefly US and Canadian", *EWE* gives the labels *US* and *Can* without any qualifier such as *mainly* or *chiefly*, according to *Macmillan* it is "mainly AmE", and *CALD* states that *son of a bitch* is "mainly US". One more reference to regionality is presented in *OALD*. The reference concerns the abbreviated form *SOB*, which is, according to *OALD*, "used especially in NAmE". However, this last note on regionality is not directly relevant here, because the abbreviation *SOB* is not discussed in more detail in the present study (see chapter 5).

What is noteworthy here is that labels concerning regionality mainly appear in British dictionaries, *EWE* being the only American dictionary furnishing *son of a bitch* with a regional label. The reason behind *EWE*'s labelling can be that it derives from the British edition, which labels *son of a bitch* as *N Am*. The lack of regional labelling confirms what was said in section 3.3 about the way American dictionaries tend to leave Americanisms unlabelled.

Another reference to a specific region is made in the *W3* example sentence quoted above in section 6.4, where the word *Aussie* is mentioned. This example sentence is taken from a magazine, which could suggest that the mention of the region may be purely coincidental although admittedly it still tells us something about the region. However, this kind of reference hidden in the example sentence alone does not seem to provide sufficient evidence based on which it would be possible to conclude that, according to *W3*, *son of a bitch* is typically used in Australian English.

Based on the scarce information provided in the dictionaries on regionality, it is only possible to state that according to the dictionaries studied, *son of a bitch* may be somewhat more common in North America, whereas there seems to be no difference in the use of *bitch* depending on the area.

6.7 Comments on indications of negative attitude in different types of dictionaries

As was to be expected, the British learner's dictionaries were the most careful in pointing out the offensive nature of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*. All of them used at least one label to express the negative attitude conveyed, and many of them even underlined it further by giving various labels or making it clear in the definition itself that these words should be used with caution. This shows that labelling policies indeed depend on target audience (see discussion in section 3.3). The fact that these dictionaries want to ensure that *bitch* and *son of a bitch* are not used carelessly also becomes evident in the policy adopted by all the British learner's dictionaries: no positive or neutral meanings are given. Although this is definitely the safest and most straightforward policy, one may wonder whether it would be useful for a non-native learner to be able to find information about all the possible senses, or at least the most established ones, that different words have.

The American collegiate dictionaries, on the other hand, are not as careful when it comes to indicating negative attitude. One reason may well be that their purpose and target audience are different from the British learner's dictionaries (see discussion in section 4.1). It is still somewhat strange that so many of them decide not to label *bitch* as offensive. A possible explanation may arise from the relationship between some of the collegiate and general purpose dictionaries chosen for this study. For example, *RHWC* is likely to base its information on *RHD*, so if *RHD* decides to label *bitch* as *slang* only, *RHWC* most likely follows this policy. One may still wonder why *RHD* has in the first place decided not to give any information on the negative attitude that *bitch*

conveys.

The label *slang* appeared in all of the four groups of dictionaries, which seems to entail that, at least according to the dictionary compilers, *bitch* and *son of a bitch* are slang words in both the UK and the US. However, this does not seem very plausible if we consider the most common characteristics of slang. Slang is said to be short-lived and often something that is used within a certain group to enforce intimacy (see section 3.4), which is why it seems very strange that a certain group would have managed to spread these words on both sides of the Atlantic in a relatively short period of time in a way that they are now used and recognised all over the world. Moreover, worldwide recognition is hardly a common characteristic of slang. In fact, the only cases where the label *slang* may be somehow justified in the dictionaries studied are found in *AHD*, *ChD*, *CALD* and *Penguin*, as discussed at the end of section 6.2. One more possible candidate for the label *slang* is found in *EWE*, where *son of a bitch* is given the meaning of a 'person in general'. The reason for accepting the label *slang* in these cases is that *bitch* and *son of a bitch* may not yet have established their meanings in these senses, which is why there is at least a some theoretical background to label them as *slang*.

In addition to the label *slang*, a vast number of different labels indicating negative attitude are used in the set of dictionaries chosen (see section 6.1). One can wonder whether a great variety of terms such as these are actually needed. The most common attitudinal label indicating a negative attitude found in the dictionaries studied was *offensive*, which in fact would surely be sufficient for most dictionary users. Even though lexicographers may be able to distinguish the subtle differences between different labels, the public, the common people at whom dictionaries most often are targeted, are less likely to find a significant difference between *offensive* and *insulting* or *vulgar* and *rude*. Furthermore, it is interesting how two words like *bitch* and *son of a bitch* that in many ways are quite similar receive such different labels within one and the same work. It would be intriguing to know why exactly *OALD* has decided to label *bitch* as *disapproving* and *son of a*

bitch as *taboo*, and what the logic behind *CED*'s *offensive* for *bitch* and *used as an insult* for *son of a bitch* is (for definitions of each label indicating negative attitude, see section 4.3).

All in all, there is significant variation in how dictionaries treat *bitch* and *son of a bitch*. What is more, there is often inconsistency in the labelling of the negative attitude within one volume. Furthermore, the label *slang* seems to be commonly misused in both British and American general purpose dictionaries as well as learner's dictionaries.

7. Corpus findings

In this chapter, *bitch* and *son of a bitch* are examined with the help of corpus data derived from the BNC and COCA. As well as focusing on different senses that are found in the corpora, attention is drawn to possible differences between the data from the two corpora, which may reflect actual regional differences in the use of these two lexemes.

As mentioned in section 3.2 above, due to the different sizes of the two corpora, the corpus data consists of all the examples containing *bitch* and *son of a bitch* in the BNC (876 hits for *bitch* and 30 for *son of a bitch*) and of a random sample of 1,000 hits for *bitch* and 500 for *son of a bitch* in COCA. The corpus examples collected were typically relatively short, only one or two sentences, but if the nature of the word could not be decided based on such a short extract, it was possible to take a closer look at the larger context provided by the online corpora.

The first section of this chapter presents the findings for *bitch* in the two corpora, after which the examples for *son of a bitch* are examined. As explained earlier in section 4.3, only the examples referring to human beings are taken into account in this study. Examples of each case discussed will be presented, with information on the source given in brackets after the example sentence in question.

7.1 *Bitch* in the two corpora

A simple corpus search on *bitch* resulted in 876 hits in the BNC. All of these examples as well as the sample of 1,000 examples out of a total of 4,541 hits derived from COCA were dealt with manually and categorized as either irrelevant, insulting or non-derogatory. In addition, examples where *bitch* was clearly used to refer to a man received special attention. All of the different aspects will be exemplified and commented on consecutively below.

There were some cases where the corpus examples, being limited in length, were not as clear as could have been hoped for, which made the task of deciding the relevance and purpose of certain cases quite difficult. In these cases, the larger context of the example in question was studied, which proved very useful in determining the nature of the word in the less straightforward instances.

The table below presents the different uses of *bitch* in the two corpora:

	bitch in BNC	*bitch* in COCA	TOTAL
offensive	515	584	1,099
non-derogatory	4	6	10
disregarded			
- dog	265	40	305
- non-human referent (other than a dog)	27	59	86
- verb	15	36	51
- proper noun	7	22	29
- interjection	13	2	15
- *son of a bitch*	30	251	281
TOTAL	876	1,000	1,876

Table 5. Breakdown of the uses of *bitch* in the two corpora studied.

7.1.1 Disregarded examples of *bitch*

In both corpora, a significant number of the examples collected had to be disregarded. In many of these examples, *bitch* was used to denote an animal. In most of these cases, *bitch*, as could be expected, referred to a female dog:

> However, four years later I bought Bamba, a Border Collie **bitch**. (BNC ACM 1035)

As noted in section 2.3.1, homonyms of taboo words tend to disappear from language use. This appears to be happening with *bitch* in the sense of 'a female dog', as it seems that because of the offensiveness of the word when denoting human beings, *bitch* is now often avoided by many speakers even when they are referring to a female dog. The corpus results show that *bitch* meaning

a female dog was found significantly more often in the British corpus than in the American one. This may imply that there is a regional difference in how readily people are willing to use this term, although neutral in this context. Another explanation for the difference in the frequency of this meaning in the corpora can be quite simply that whereas the sample used in this study includes all the examples found in BNC, only less than one quarter of the examples in COCA are examined, and it may be that most of the examples where *bitch* refers to a female dog simply did not come up in this random selection. However, this latter explanation seems somewhat unlikely because the whole idea of a random sample is that it illustrates as many points as possible and gives a clear overall picture of the matter in question.

In several examples, *bitch* was used as a noun referring to something non-human other than a dog, mostly life, as in the first example:

> Ain't life a **bitch**? (BNC C9M 1140)

> Payback is a **bitch**. (COCA 2003 FIC Analog)

In addition, there were a few examples where *bitch* formed a part of a proper noun:

> During the New Music Seminar, NYC noise harbingers Unsane lost their drummer Charlie Ondras to an overdose, then the following week Stefanie Sargent from Seattle band Seven Year **Bitch** died in similar circumstances. (BNC CHB 840)

Neither were a number of other examples where *bitch* was used as a verb or an interjection expressing annoyance or surprise taken into account:

> It was not in Daisy's nature to **bitch**, but faced with Ricky's almost clinical detachment, everything came pouring out. (BNC CA0 1287)

> '*Bitch*', said Camille, commiseratingly. (BNC G1D 34)

In the remaining examples that were disregarded, *bitch* formed a part of the lexeme *son of a bitch*, which will be discussed in section 7.2 below.

7.1.2 *Bitch* as an offensive term

In the vast majority of examples, *bitch* was used offensively as a term of abuse:

> '**Bitch**,' I screamed down the phone at her, then, remembering how much they like dogs here, I shouted in English, 'Whore!' (BNC A0U 1473)
>
> 'I'll find ya and kill you, you **bitch** wherever you are. (COCA 1995 FIC Mov:Heat)
>
> Vicki's trying to protect Jane cos Jane's such a little **bitch** of a shit hole she can't defend herself. (BNC KP9 314)
>
> Get tha fuck out then, **bitch**! Walk your ass home! (COCA 1993 FIC Mov:PoeticJustice)

Although *bitch* is generally considered an offensive term referring to women, there were seven examples in BNC and nine in COCA where the referent was clearly a male:

> He's the organisation's prime male **bitch**, for all he thinks his feathers are so bonny. (BNC HD7 1988)
>
> 'He's an asshole. A **bitch**.' 'I thought you really like him. What happened?'(COCA 2002 FIC Ploughshares)
>
> Rich The **Bitch** Gets Hitched! (BNC APU 377)
>
> His considerable appeal lies in the head-on collision between his apparent sweetness and his equally obvious gifts as a grade-one **bitch**. (BNC CAT 977)
>
> Joe's a fat **bitch**! (BNC KCW 2913)
>
> Look, he's such a **bitch**. You know that? You're a **bitch**. (COCA 1994 SPOK CBS_Sixty)
>
> Speaking of J. Edgar Hoover, that **bitch**... trying to control the rest of the world. (COCA 2001 ACAD AfricanArts)

Based on the examples above, it seems that *bitch* can indeed be used to refer to men as well. However, the use of the word *male* in the first example might suggest that for some speakers *bitch* is still normally a female, while others are more comfortable about using the word for a male as well, as in the latter examples. Even though the numbers for male referents were not high in either of the corpora, it does not necessarily mean that this use is not becoming more common. Only the examples where the referent was definitely and without doubt a male were selected, and it is quite likely that the overall number for male referents is significantly higher in both corpora.

In the corpus examples, there were a few cases where *bitch* was used to refer to a man in the sense of a subordinate or slave to another person. Most of the relevant examples seem to take

place in prison:

> ...the next day he and four other inmates took turns pissing into the **bitch's** ocular cavity. (COCA 1993 FIC Mov: SoIMarried)
>
> He was not going to be that new **bitch**. (COCA 2007 FIC Bk:IsBitchDead)
>
> Nelson, so unless you're into squealing like Porky Pig's love **bitch**, none of your short cuts! (COCA 2004 FIC Mov: 2001Maniacs)
>
> Yeah. Yeah. It's a good thing to be somebody's **bitch** now. Didn't you know that? (COCA 2003 SPOK Ind_Oprah)

In the last example, it is also possible that the referent is a female, but the context is still prison. The only examples of using *bitch* in the meaning of subordinate or slave were found in COCA, which suggests that this meaning is mostly used in the United States.

In addition to the meanings above, *bitch* was sometimes used in one more context, that is, to refer to gay men:

> Jay looks at him. # Well what are you waiting for, **bitch**? Start sucking. Bunnggg! (COCA 2001 FIC JaySilentBob)
>
> The gay male **bitch** desublimates and desexualizes a type of femininity glamorized by movie stars, whom he thus lovingly assassinates with his style. (BNC A6D 1328)

7.1.3 *Bitch* as a non-derogatory term

At first, it was quite difficult to place any examples of *bitch* under the title 'non-derogatory'. In the preliminary study of the corpora, especially COCA, none of the examples seemed anything but offensive, which shows how deeply rooted the idea of *bitch* as exclusively an offensive term can be in the mind of a researcher. When returning to the examples a while later, altogether 10 examples were seen to be suitable to be placed under the category 'non-derogatory'. Among the 1,000 examples from COCA, there were six examples where *bitch* could be seen as non-derogatory, and in the entire BNC, there were only four cases where *bitch* was considered something other than insulting:

> 'They'll get an au pair, some poor foreign **bitch** they can exploit.' (BNC A0L 916)
>
> I think you really ought to let your hair down and become one horny **bitch**! (BNC C87 1379)
>
> 'Don't be such a goddam **bitch**,' but she said it affectionately. (BNC BP8 1087)
>
> Karen was a magnificent **bitch**, but when she tried to be human she turned into a Disney puppy: trashy, vulgar and sentimental. (BNC BMR 1266)

However, even though all the four examples above can be regarded as non-derogatory, it is only in the first two examples that the word *bitch* itself seems to have lost its negative connotations and is apparently used in a more positive sense. In fact, the interpretation of the first example depends on the way the adjective *poor* is understood here: it can either refer to 'somebody that you feel sorry for', which would confirm that the utterance is non-derogatory, but if the intended meaning of *poor* is that of 'having very little money', the example may well be offensive. Even though the third example is clearly not insulting, the lack of offensiveness does not arise from the term itself becoming neutral, but from the way it is said. Without clarification of the way "goddam bitch" was said, it would be quite impossible to treat this example as anything other than insulting. This is certainly problematic when analyzing any corpus data: when the speakers' expression cannot be seen or their tone of voice heard, the speakers' intention is more covered, and deciding whether or not certain words are used with the purpose to offend becomes at times almost impossible (see discussion in sections 2.3.1 and 3.4 about the importance of context and extralinguistic factors). The same problem can be seen in the fourth example as well. Even though the context of this utterance was carefully studied, it did not become entirely clear what the speaker was after. There is the apparent dog word play in the sentence, but the speaker's attitude is more difficult to grasp hold of. In the end, it might have been the adjective *magnificent* alone that made me hesitant to consider this example entirely offensive. This represents well the problematic nature of analyzing corpus data: there is often room for interpretation, as the example below shows:

> The **bitch** just came to the man with the most. # DANCER # **Bitch**? # JAY # No offense, baby. (COCA 1999 FIC Mov:Dogma)

The example above could be an example of African American vernacular, where *bitch* is sometimes indeed used in a non-derogatory sense. In this sense, *bitch* simply refers to a woman or a girlfriend:

> Fuck it! I can just go and get me another **bitch**. I'm a good-looking nigga. I got a job. Income. Car. (COCA 1993 FIC Mov: PoeticJustice)

> - - or, as 2pac put it: "I f - - ed your **bitch**, you fat muthaf - - er." (COCA 1996 MAG AmSpect)

The fact that there still were so few examples that could be considered non-derogatory shows that *bitch* in actual language use is mostly an offensive term used to insult the referent.

7.2 *Son of a bitch* in the two corpora

In this section, a sample of 500 examples out of a total of 1,135 hits for *son of a bitch* in COCA and all the examples found in the BNC are examined. The overall number of examples for *son of a bitch* in the BNC was perhaps slightly disappointing: no more than 30 hits came up. The fact that the number of examples was this low in the BNC seems to suggest that the expression itself is not used very much in Britain. Even though the number of examples in the BNC was not high, these data are analyzed and categorized the same way as the examples in COCA, using the same principles as with *bitch* above. Firstly, the irrelevant cases will be discussed, and secondly, some clearly insulting examples followed by notions on the gender of the referent are presented. After this, the non-derogatory examples will be commented on.

Again, there were some examples that were quite impossible to categorize without looking at the context in more detail. In most cases, examining the context proved helpful in deciding how the lexeme was used.

The numbers for each case can be seen in the following table:

	son of a bitch in BNC	*son of a bitch* in COCA	TOTAL
offensive	24	398	422
non-derogatory	4	36	40
disregarded			
- interjection	-	52	52
- non-human noun	2	14	16
TOTAL	30	500	530

Table 6. Breakdown of the uses of *son of a bitch* in the two corpora studied.

The following sections discuss the occurrences of *son of a bitch* in the corpora.

7.2.1 Disregarded examples of *son of a bitch*

In the case of *son of a bitch*, a number of examples were disregarded because they were either nouns referring to something other than a human being or interjections:

> Because, to begin with, at least - it made our back ache like a **son of a bitch**. (BNC FYV 264)

> Catfoot is drunk, the train hit them. **Son of a bitch**, life, just like that. (COCA 2000 FIC Bk: LongSon)

Especially when studying the COCA examples, it was sometimes difficult to decide whether *son of a bitch* was used for a person or as an interjection. Fortunately, these cases became clearer when the larger context was examined. In the BNC, on the other hand, no examples of the interjection came up, which seems to suggest that *son of a bitch* is even rarer as an interjection than as an offensive term.

7.2.2 *Son of a bitch* as an offensive term

The majority of the examples collected were quite clearly insulting:

> 'You – you **son of a bitch**,' she hissed, her breasts rising and falling rapidly beneath the gown, ' you – you bastard.' (BNC JY7 776)

> I'm gonna kill your dog you **son of a bitch**! (BNC KPG 4034)

Based on the number of insulting examples found in the corpora, it seems that *son of a bitch* is, if not always, at least often used as an insult. When examining the gender of the referent in the corpus examples, it was noted that in the vast majority of the cases the referent of *son of a bitch* was without doubt male:

> He's got to be the meanest **son of a bitch** I've ever had the misfortune to work for... (BNC HGT 4256)

> ...smoke and talk to Luther, telling him what a lazy **son of a bitch** he was for lying there while they were touring... (COCA 2004 MAG RollingStone)

Among the corpus hits, there was only one example where it was absolutely certain that the referent was a female although considering the meaning of the verb *take* here, one can perhaps argue that the women in the example may not be traditionally speaking feminine:

> 'You **son of a bitch**, you can take me.' She was never rude to her before... (COCA 2000 FIC SouthernRev)

The almost nonexistent number of examples with a female referent implies that *son of a bitch* indeed mainly refers to men. However, it does not mean that *son of a bitch* would necessarily be restricted to men only. A possible reason for so few examples with a female referent is that in the short corpus examples, the context and thus the gender of the referent may often remain unclear. Still, based on the corpus examples it is very plausible that *son of a bitch* is almost exclusively used to refer to men.

7.2.3 *Son of a bitch* as a non-derogatory term

As was the case with *bitch*, it is often impossible to know whether some examples are insulting or neutral. Still, there were quite a few examples where *son of a bitch* seems to have been used in a non-derogatory, even affectionate, way:

> 'You poor old **son of a bitch**, Harry.' (BNC CLD 33)

> 'You old **son of a bitch**,' he said in a relaxed idle way, and he leaned forward and grabbed my arm to be sure I wasn't an hallucination. (BNC HR7 2313)

> For Godsake, Stan, Walter is leading the poor little **son of a bitch** around by the nose. (COCA 1999 FIC Bk: PersonalInjuries)

The number of non-derogatory examples of *son of a bitch* (40 examples) was significantly greater than the same number for *bitch* (10 examples). This implies that *son of a bitch* can be more readily used in contexts that are not offensive but even friendly.

What is especially interesting in the three non-derogatory examples above is the use of the adjectives *poor* and *old*. In all three examples, there is either one or both of these adjectives in front of *son of a bitch*, which undoubtedly softens the basic meaning of the term.

There was yet another example that could perhaps be seen as non-derogatory:

> . . . about eight times out of ten you did it to another troop, but then again they did it back to you, but this time he was a right cocky **son of a bitch**, I mean we all liked him, but he was a right cocky bastard. . . (BNC KDA 7800)

The corpus example above is by no means as clearly neutral or affectionate as the three previous examples, but it is certainly not as insulting as most of the other examples found in the corpora. It should be noted here that in this case, as with the three previous ones, there is an adjective in front of *son of a bitch*, but here, the adjective being *cocky*, it does not create the same feeling of familiarity as *poor* and *old* above. In addition, consider the following example:

> Get out of my fucking cab, you dirty **son of a bitch**! (BNC KPG 2947)

Although *dirty* is definitely an adjective, the sentence is still offensive. What these example sentences show is that it is not enough for *son of a bitch* to become non-derogatory if there is an adjective in front of it but the selection of adjectives that soften and neutralize the meaning of *son of a bitch* is limited, the most common ones being *poor* and *old*.

Even with these guidelines, it is sometimes quite impossible to decide for certain whether *son of a bitch* is insulting, quite friendly, or perhaps something in between. The difficulty in deciding whether or not words are used to insult in some cases only proves how difficult a task it is to tackle something as multifaceted as language.

8. Comparison of the corpus findings and dictionaries studied

Even though the analyzing and categorizing of the corpus data was sometimes far from straightforward, both corpora provided useful information on the way *bitch* and *son of a bitch* are used in actual spoken and written language. This section compares the corpus findings to the information in the dictionaries studied. First, indications of a negative attitude in the dictionaries are commented on in the light of the corpus examples, after which the non-derogatory meanings are discussed, followed by comments on gender-related and regional issues. A discussion of the correspondence of the use of the label *slang* in the dictionaries studied with the actual corpus examples concludes the section.

8.1 Indications of negative attitude in the dictionaries and corpora

When considering the fact that most of the examples of *bitch* found in the corpora are insulting, it seems quite strange that a number of the dictionaries studied in the previous chapter did not label *bitch* as offensive. For example, dictionaries such as *COED*, *RHD*, *RHWC* and *Penguin* do not give clear labels or other indication of the offensiveness of this word. The lack of marking the negative attitude here seems to be equally common in both British and American dictionaries since two of the dictionaries that do not point out the offence *bitch* can cause are British and two American. The two American dictionaries are in fact of the same series and apparently follow the same labelling policies. Still, in the light of the numerous insulting corpus examples, it seems quite reasonable to suggest that informing the dictionary user of the negative attitude that *bitch* conveys should rather be obligatory than optional.

Son of a bitch, on the other hand, received a label indicating negative attitude in all of the 16 dictionaries studied. The dictionaries seem to be on the right track here, because most of the

corpus examples were indeed offensive. However, one may with good reason wonder why some dictionaries have decided to leave out a label for *bitch* when they still have included one for *son of a bitch.* This policy does not seem very coherent, to say the least.

What is more, as pointed out in section 3.2.1, the use of register labels, such as the ones indicating negative attitude, should help the readers to become aware of the usage of the word so that they will not use unsuitable words inadvertently in inappropriate contexts. Unfortunately, many of the dictionaries studied do not follow this principle as far as labelling *bitch* as an offensive term is concerned.

More dictionary compilers might also want to consider whether they should add the meaning 'person who is under somebody else's control' to their entries for *bitch*, because this use seems to be getting more and more common at least in the US according to the corpus examples.

8.2 Non-derogatory meanings in the dictionaries and corpora

Both terms are mostly found in insulting contexts, but especially *son of a bitch* seems to appear in more neutral and friendly contexts as well. Although the dictionaries studied in the previous chapter quite unanimously state that *son of a bitch* can be offensive, surprisingly only a few of them, namely five out of 16, give any attention to the non-derogatory meaning, which, according to the corpus data, is fairly common at least in the United States. It might then be justified to expect dictionaries to include this meaning in their definition of *son of a bitch* (see section 3.4 for discussion about including neutral or positive meanings of offensive terms in a dictionary).

Some of the dictionaries that mention a neutral or non-derogatory meaning for *son of a bitch* should still reconsider their wording. As noted in section 6.4 above, *EWE* points out that *son of a bitch* can be a familiar or humorous term when used together with an adjective. The first three corpus examples in section 7.2.3 above definitely support this statement: without the adjectives,

the utterances could be misunderstood as insulting. However, the corpus examples showed that the choice of adjectives is not random in this case, meaning that only certain adjectives neutralize the otherwise offensive term. It seems, then, that *EWE* might want to modify its otherwise aptly formed statement on the use of an adjective together with *son of a bitch*. It is not enough to state that *son of a bitch* can be used affectionately as long as there is an adjective in front of it, but there should be a specification concerning the adjectives that create this sense of friendliness. The most common adjectives that make *son of a bitch* something else than an insulting term seem to be, according to the corpus findings, *poor*, *old* and *lucky*.

Bitch, on the other hand, was found significantly less in non-derogatory contexts, and only a few dictionaries listed any non-derogatory meanings. *Penguin* says that *bitch* can be used to refer to 'a woman, girlfriend, or prostitute', whereas *COED* gave the following definition: "*black English* a woman (used in a non-derogatory sense)". Among the corpus examples, there were in fact a few cases where these dictionary definitions were indeed supported. Examples such as these were only found in COCA, which suggests that this sense is much more common in the US than in the UK. That is why it is quite interesting, as well as controversial, that these meanings are only given in some British dictionaries; meanwhile all the American dictionaries completely ignore them.

Overall, the presentation of the different meanings of *bitch* varied a good deal in the dictionaries studied. At least two of the dictionaries, *ChD* and *CED*, introduced the meaning of 'a person under somebody's control' without labelling it as offensive. Most of the related corpus examples, on the other hand, were offensive, which shows that if more dictionaries decided to add this meaning to their definitions of *bitch*, as they probably should, they should also ensure that it would receive a label indicating negative attitude.

In section 2.3.2, it was noted that little research has been done in the area of offensive terms concerning whether derogatory and insulting terms for men are more likely to develop unmarked

secondary meanings than similar terms for women The fact that *bitch* is found in non-derogatory contexts far less than *son of a bitch* clearly illustrates that there indeed is an existing tendency for offensive terms denoting women to maintain their offensive nature, whereas offensive terms for men might lose their initial negativity over time and even become terms of endearment.

8.3 Gender in the dictionaries and corpora

In terms of gender, the dictionaries studied almost unanimously stated that *bitch* refers to a woman, but in their definitions for *son of a bitch*, the genderless referent 'person' was mostly used. In the light of the corpus findings, however, the case is quite the opposite: it is in fact *bitch* that can refer to both women and men. *Son of a bitch*, on the other hand, referred almost exclusively to men in the corpus examples. A proposal for improvement in dictionary entries is clearly in order here: when defining *bitch* in dictionaries, stating that the referent is 'a person, mostly a female' would be the most accurate option. In the case of *son of a bitch*, the referent could be said to be 'a man, very rarely a woman'. These minor alterations would induce the dictionary definitions to correspond with the corpus findings (cf. the discussion in section 2.3.2 about gender-referential shifts).

Another point worth considering here is the offensiveness of the term *bitch* with a male referent. In section 2.3.2 Waksler's argument about how a negative female term which undergoes gender neutralization is expected to lose its negative attitude was seen as too much of a simplification. Indeed, in the present study and in the light of the offensive corpus examples where *bitch* was used to refer to a man, it became evident that *bitch* has not lost its negative attitude even when gender neutralization has taken place. However, if *bitch* continues to become more common with a male referent, it could be possible that in the future the meaning of *bitch* would turn more neutral or even positive, at least when referring to a man.

8.4 Regionality in the dictionaries and corpora

The corpora provided some information on regional differences related to the use of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*. First of all, the limited number of corpus examples for *son of a bitch* in BNC shows that the term itself is not widely used in the UK. Still, only four out of the twelve dictionaries stated that *son of a bitch* is mostly used in North America. One reason for scarce labelling could be the fact that American dictionaries rarely give regional labels to American words (see sections 3.3 and 6.6). In fact, only one American dictionary studied, namely *EWE*, uses the labels *US* and *Can* in its entry, which is probably because it bases its labelling policy on the British version of the same dictionary. Based on the low number of corpus examples in BNC, one could expect that British dictionaries would, and they indeed should, more readily attach the label *US* to *son of a bitch*.

The corpora also show that *bitch* in the sense of 'being a subordinate or slave' is exclusively used in the US. It is thus somewhat surprising that only British dictionaries introduce this definition: *ChD* presents the meaning 'a person who undertakes demeaning tasks for another', *CALD* states that *bitch* can be used to refer to 'someone who will do everything you tell them to do because you have complete control over them', whereas *CED* says that *bitch* can be 'a person who acts as a subordinate or slave to another person'. Another similar, yet not identical, definition was found in the American dictionary *AHD*, which states that *bitch* can refer to 'a man considered to be weak or contemptible'. Exact examples of the latter sense were not found among the corpus examples, although some of the examples of 'being under somebody's control' could be considered to represent this meaning as well.

Another point worth considering here is that at least in the US, the offensive meaning of *bitch* with a human referent seems to be becoming, or perhaps already is, more common than that of 'a female dog'. If dictionaries are to follow the principle presented in section 2.2, stating that

the most important meanings should be presented first in the entry, dictionary compilers should reconsider the order in which they present the meanings of *bitch*. Currently the policy adopted in all the dictionaries studied is that the meaning of 'a female dog' is presented first (although, as noted in 2.3.2, many Americans are not even familiar with this meaning), but in the light of the corpus findings, this meaning as the most common meaning for *bitch* is definitely challenged.

8.5 Label *slang* in the dictionaries and the corpora

The corpus findings showed something that was anticipated quite early on in this study, that is, that the label *slang* is used unnecessarily and is in fact very much out of place when we are talking about *bitch* and *son of a bitch*. Nothing in the corpus data implies that the general offensive meanings of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* should be considered slang, because the great number of examples found in both corpora show that the terms have existed for a long time without becoming dated or neutral and their use is in no way restricted to members of a certain group only. (For a discussion on the possible correct usage of the label *slang*, see the end of section 6.2.) The majority of the dictionaries used in this study, namely nine out of 16, used the label at some point when defining *bitch* and *son of a bitch*. Among the set of dictionaries that used the label *slang*, there were both British and American works as well as both general purpose and learner's dictionaries, so the misuse of the label is not restricted to one region or type of dictionary.

The fact that dictionaries favoured the label *slang* with the word *bitch* and sometimes gave no other label in their entries is quite strange, because the incorrectly used label *slang* is by no means enough to express negative attitude, which is conveyed by *bitch* even more than by *son of a bitch*. What is perhaps even more puzzling is the way some dictionaries have decided to use the label *slang* to describe only one of the terms and not both. The corpus examples gave no indication that this inconsistent labelling would have any basis in the way the most common meanings of *bitch*

and *son of a bitch* are used in the actual English language.

General and learner's dictionaries should thus consider their use of the label *slang* very carefully. Dictionary compilers should not mistake all informal language for slang, but keep in mind the characteristics of slang, and only then decide whether the label is accurate. In addition, corpora can help in deciding the possible validity of the label. At least in the present study, corpus examples were able to illustrate the fact that although they are definitely informal terms, *bitch* and *son of a bitch* should not be labelled *slang*.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to study the use of labels and other ways of indicating negative attitude in dictionaries for the words *bitch* and *son of a bitch* and compare these findings with examples derived from corpora. The material consisted of a set of 16 dictionaries, including both British and American general purpose and learner's dictionaries. In addition, two language corpora were searched in order to exemplify how the words are used in actual language. The dictionary entries were first examined in order to receive information on indications of negative attitude as well as the gender of the referent and regional aspects. After this, the data derived from the two language corpora, the BNC and COCA, were analysed and compared to the information provided by the dictionaries.

The study showed that there are significant differences in how dictionaries treat these two terms. Some of them, especially the British learner's dictionaries, are very careful to warn the reader about the offence that *bitch* and *son of a bitch* may cause, whereas others resort to a less strict labelling policy. It is of course natural and even useful to have dictionaries that include different information, but what was found somewhat disconcerting was the fact that some dictionaries had only decided to label one of the words, whereas the other received no label or other indication of negative attitude. This showed that there can be a real inconsistency within one and the same volume, which is indeed not desirable.

Something that was also noted in the present study is that although different dictionaries resort to different labels when labelling negative attitude, the differences between the meanings covered by the labels are often very subtle. From a dictionary user's point of view, it can be rather confusing to find labels such as *disparaging* and *vulgar* in some dictionaries, whereas others have decided to use the labels *derogatory* and *rude* instead. If one were to find the most straightforward and user-friendly labelling policy, it could perhaps be suggested that the label *offensive* should be

used for words that can denote a person in an insulting way, whereas the label *vulgar* could be assigned to words that are seen too crude in basic conversation.

When the dictionaries were compared with the corpus examples, it was observed that there are rather significant differences in the way the dictionaries describe the use of *bitch* and *son of a bitch* and how they are actually used. The corpus data showed that *bitch* is mostly used as an offensive term and should thus be labelled offensive, something that was neglected in quite a few of the dictionaries studied. In the light of the corpus findings and the highly insulting examples examined, it is safe to say that *bitch* should most definitely receive a label informing the dictionary user of the offence this word is likely to cause. Furthermore, *bitch* did not seem to lose its negative connotations when it was used to refer to men. Contrary to the dictionary definitions, it also became evident in the study that *bitch* can indeed be used for both men and women, whereas *son of a bitch* was found with male referents only.

Another matter worth underlining is that the corpus data clearly showed that *son of a bitch* can be found in non-derogatory contexts, a fact that was totally disregarded in the majority of the dictionaries studied. In addition, according to the corpus data, its occurrence is far greater in the US than in the UK, something that was also left unnoticed in most dictionaries. When considering the use of *bitch* in terms of different regions, the study showed that at least in the US the meaning 'slave or subordinate' is becoming increasingly common and should thus perhaps be included in dictionary entries for *bitch*. On the other hand, at least in the US, the use of *bitch* in the sense of 'female dog' seems to be becoming less frequent and could perhaps then be placed last in the dictionary entries.

Something quite alarming that the present study was able to illustrate is the fact that the label *slang* is widely misused in dictionaries, at least if we follow the dictionaries' own definition of that label. Based on the findings of this study, it became evident that the label *slang* is quite problematic indeed and should not be used excessively without careful consideration.

The final and perhaps one of the most important findings of the whole study concerns the previously hardly researched idea of whether offensive terms for men develop non-derogatory meanings more readily than similar terms for women. According to this study, this assumption seems to be accurate. Even though the present study has proven that this indeed seems to be the case with *bitch* and *son of a bitch*, and is consequently quite probable with other similar cases as well, more research is still called for in this particular area.

Something that also became evident in the course of the present study is that there is always room for interpretation. Dictionary compilers have to interpret different terms in order to decide whether they should receive a label, the researcher examining corpus examples has to decipher the meaning behind an utterance, and the target of a possibly offensive term has to decide how to interpret the meaning conveyed and whether to get offended as a result.

No offence, but that sounds far from straightforward.

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Appendix: Dictionary definitions of *bitch* and *son of a bitch*

Dictionary	*bitch*	*son of a bitch*
ChD	a woman, very rarely a man (abusive); a malicious or arrogant woman (sl); a person who undertakes demeaning tasks for another (sl).	see sonofabitch Sonofabitch: (sl; es N Am) son of a bitch, an abusive term of address or of description, or vulgar exclamation.
CED	2 *offensive slang* a malicious, spiteful, or coarse woman 5 a person who acts as a subordinate or slave to another person -> vb informal	*slang*, chiefly US and Canadian 1 a worthless or contemptible person: used as an insult 2 a humorous or affectionate term for a person, esp a man: a lucky son of a bitch
COED	2 *informal* a disliked or spiteful woman. > *black English* a woman (used in a non-derogatory sense).	sub verbum son: *informal* used as a general term of abuse.
Penguin	2a *slang* a malicious, spiteful, and domineering woman. b a woman, girlfriend, or prostitute	*informal* an offensive or disagreeable person, often used as a term of abuse.
AHD	2. *Offensive* a. A woman considered to be spiteful or overbearing. b. A lewd woman. c. A man considered to be weak or contemptible.	*Vulgar* A person regarded as thoroughly mean or disagreeable.
EWE	2. OFFENSIVE TERM an offensive term that deliberately insults a woman's temperament (*taboo insult*)	US, Can 1. OFFENSIVE TERM an offensive term for sb, usually a man, whom the speaker considers hateful, despicable, or intensely annoying (*slang insult*) 2. PERSON IN GENERAL used, together with an adjective, as a familiar, humorous, and slightly vulgar term for a person, usually a man, who has the named characteristic (*slang*) *He's a lucky son of a bitch*.
RHD	3. Slang a. a malicious, unpleasant, selfish person, esp. a woman. b. A lewd woman.	Slang (vulgar). 1. A contemptible or thoroughly disagreeable person; scoundrel.
W3	2 a : a lewd or immoral woman: TROLLOP, SLUT - a generalized term of abuse b : a malicious, spiteful, and domineering woman.	BASTARD 7 - sometimes considered vulgar. Bastard 7 a : an obnoxious or mean overbearing person - used as a generalized term of abuse <they made him an officer and right away he became the biggest ∼ you ever saw - T.O. Heggen> b : an unfortunate victim <once the sequence of events was set going the poor ∼ never had a chance - Samuel Yellen> c : FELLOW - used as a generalized term of approval <the nicest thing an Aussie can call you is a bloody fine ∼ -Life>

Dictionary	***bitch***	***son of a bitch***
CALD	UNPLEASANT PERSON -> 2 OFFENSIVE an unkind or unpleasant woman: She can be a real bitch. CONTROLLED PERSON -> 5 OFFENSIVE SLANG someone who will do everything you tell them to do because you have complete control over them.	(ALSO sonofabitch, ABBREVIATION S.O.B.) MAINLY US OFFENSIVE an unpleasant man: *What a low-down son of a bitch took my clothes? o I'm going to beat that son of a bitch if it kills me!*
COBUILD	If someone calls a woman a bitch, they are saying in a very rude way that they think she behaves in a very unpleasant way /INFORMAL, VERY RUDE/ (usage note: disapproval)	also son-of-a-bitch. If someone is very angry with another person, or if they want to insult them, they sometimes call them a son of a bitch. /INFORMAL, VERY RUDE/ (usage note: disapproval)
Macmillan	1 *offensive* an insulting word for a woman 1a. offensive an insulting word for someone, especially a woman, who is rude or cruel	*mainly Am E offensive* an insulting word for someone you are angry with
OALD	2 (*slang, disapproving*) an offensive way of referring to a woman, especially an unpleasant one: *You stupid little bitch! * She can be a real bitch*.	(also SOB especially in NAmE) (*taboo, slang*) an offensive word for a person that you think is bad or very unpleasant: *I'll kill that son of a bitch when I get my hands on him!*
AHC	2. *Offensive* a. A woman considered to be spiteful or overbearing. B. A woman considered to be lewd.	*Vulgar* A person regarded as thoroughly mean or disagreeable.
MWC	2 a: a lewd or immoral woman b: a malicious, spiteful, or domineering woman - sometimes used as a generalized term of abuse	sometimes vulgar : BASTARD 3 -> bastard 3 a : an offensive or disagreeable person - used as a generalized term of abuse b : MAN, FELLOW
RHWC	3. Slang a. a malicious, unpleasant, selfish woman. B. a lewd woman.	Slang: Often vulgar 1. a contemptible or thoroughly disagreeable person or thing.
WNC	2 Archaic a lewd or promiscuous woman 3 Slang a woman regarded as malicious, bad-tempered, or aggressive: a term of contempt	Slang 1 a person or thing regarded with anger, contempt, etc. A somewhat vulgar term. Also written sonofabitch.