

Gender in Dictionary Definitions: A Comparison of Five Learner's Dictionaries and Their Different Editions

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Issues of gender present an increasing challenge to lexicographers. The example sentences cited in some dictionaries have been criticized for enhancing stereotyped images of men and women. Definitions should similarly be free from any gender bias, a requirement that may at times clash with the actual use of the word in corpora. The present study focusses on the definitions of twenty-five words in the twentieth and twenty-first-century editions of five learner's dictionaries. The results show that there is a great deal of variation between the works examined when it comes to associating individual words with men or women. Furthermore, the different editions of a dictionary often manifest vacillation in gender descriptions.

Keywords: gender, vocabulary, lexicography, definition, learner's dictionary.

1. Introduction

The first dictionary aimed at foreign learners of English, West and Endicott's *The New Method English Dictionary*, was published in 1935. Seven years later, Hornby's *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* appeared, the precursor of what is today known as *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, now in its ninth edition. The authors of these books were British, and for almost the entire twentieth century, this area of lexicography was in the hands of publishers located in Britain. It is not until the late 1990s that learner's dictionaries edited by American lexicographers enter the market.¹

¹For the history of English learner's dictionaries, see Béjoint, 163–200; Cowie, *English Dictionaries*; Jackson, 129–32; Landau, *Dictionaries*, 74–77; and Yamada.

The design of a dictionary depends crucially on its target audience. If the circumstances in which the word can be used are restricted, it is essential that those with a limited knowledge of the language be informed about this. In works aimed at learners of English, formal style, for example, is more often marked with the label *formal* than in general-purpose dictionaries, and accurate information about currency, often conveyed by descriptions such as *dated* or *old-fashioned*, is essential.² It has also been discovered that dictionaries compiled for learners assign usage notes and labels to potentially insulting words with greater frequency than works aimed at a wider audience.³ Particular care is exercised in the drafting of definitions, which should be readily understandable and use words that advanced learners are expected to know already. In an attempt to ensure intelligibility, most learner's dictionaries employ what is called a *defining vocabulary* or *controlled defining vocabulary*, a selection of 2,000–3,000 high-frequency words used for writing the definitions.⁴ The so-called full-sentence definition is a style of defining developed in the context of learner's dictionaries, where it is now widely used. The meaning of the headword is explained with an entire sentence, as in the entry for *sombrero* in *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's Dictionary*: “A **sombrero** is a hat with a very wide brim which is worn especially in Mexico.”⁵

²Landau, *Dictionaries*, 218, 243.

³Norri, “Labelling,” 91.

⁴For a discussion of the pros and cons of controlled defining vocabularies, see Atkins and Rundell, 448–50; Béjoint, 171–3; Carter, 150–1; Cowie, *English Dictionaries*, 157–8; Svensén, 246–8; and Yamada, 201–2.

⁵Full-sentence definitions have been both applauded and criticized. See Atkins and Rundell, 441–3; Béjoint, 179–82; Cowie, *English Dictionaries*, 157–8; Svensén, 235–40; and Yamada, 202–4.

Dictionaries, like other literary products, have also been commented upon from the angle of gender. One such observation is that the compilers in general shy away from the label *sexist*, which appeared in the 1995 edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, attached for example to *chick* and *bird* in the sense 'young woman'.⁶ In subsequent editions, the label was abandoned. The example sentences in the same dictionary were studied by Cowie, who in his comparison of the first (1948) and fourth (1989) editions noted an increased prominence of women in the examples and their portrayal in a wider range of professional roles, the result of a conscious effort on the part of the editorial team.⁷ Those developments were a response to writers like Whitcut, according to whom invented examples offer lexicographers the "greatest freedom to be non-sexist",⁸ and Gershuny, who had criticized the stereotyped contexts and the dominance of masculine nouns and pronouns in the illustrative sentences of the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. When the first edition of *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* was published, it attracted criticism for the frequent appearance of women in example sentences relating to drug and alcohol abuse.⁹ The definitions of lexemes felt to be sensitive one way or another have also

⁶Norri, "Labelling," 77, 88.

⁷Cowie, "Learner's Dictionary," 286–8, 291–2. Herbst, 328, notes that the fifth edition of *OALD* has more female (59%) than male (41%) references in the example sentences from *need* to *nervy*. In his review of the *BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* (1986), Gold gives the authors credit for avoiding the use of stereotypes in their examples, which present women as "inventors, gardeners, jurists, military officers, etc."

⁸Whitcut, 143.

⁹Kaye. For a study of gender in the example sentences of a children's dictionary, see Landau, "Expression of Changing Social Values."

given rise to comments. The eighth edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* informed its users that the adjective *effeminate* meant “having feminine qualities (as weakness or softness) inappropriate to a man”, an infelicitous explanation later changed to “having feminine qualities untypical of a man”. Benson et al. cite the entry as an example of how “the treatment of sexist terms in dictionaries has shown improvement in recent years”.¹⁰

The present article is a survey of the treatment of gender in the definitions of five different British learner's dictionaries, known as “the Big Five”.¹¹ The drafting of definitions for a non-native speaker calls for particular care in avoiding any misinterpretable or biased statements, including ones on the rather sensitive issue of gender. Another reason for focussing on learner's dictionaries is the importance generally attached to conveying cultural associations or connotations of lexemes in these kinds of works.¹² The male or female aspect of a word in many cases seems to be part of the associative or connotative meaning rather than the core conceptual meaning.¹³ In future studies, it would be of interest to compare the results obtained in this survey with the treatment of the example words in general-purpose dictionaries.

All the editions of the Big Five published in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were included in the study. One of the main aims was to examine

¹⁰Benson et al., 223. According to Brewer, 21, the entry for *master* in the third edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* illustrates the eradication of earlier sexist definitions.

¹¹Béjoint, 164.

¹²Atkins and Rundell, 426–7; Ayto, 98; Jackson, 139–40.

¹³Commenting on the word *sombrero*, an anonymous reviewer observes that “[a] sombrero is just an object, and a sombrero will remain a sombrero if worn by a woman”.

possible changes in gender indications from the first edition of the dictionary to the present day. Editors and compilers have changed in the course of the decades, as has the society around them. Our awareness of gender issues has increased. To what extent is all this reflected in the entries for the words studied? Where gender descriptions have been modified, it is of interest to examine whether the new formulations proved to be temporary or of a more longlasting nature. In the course of the study, each of the example words was looked up in the different editions of the dictionaries, and the gender information provided, if any, was noted down. The data collected also enabled a comparison of the policies adopted by the five dictionaries, including the question of whether we can detect any parallel developments in their gender descriptions.

When it comes to writing definitions, the task of lexicographers is complicated by ongoing shifts in the meanings of words. Semantic changes may be engineered,¹⁴ based on a decision made by the discourse community, but more often they are cases of the language evolving, sometimes rather subtly, without any conscious intervention from speakers. The availability of vast corpora, with material drawn from a wide range of varieties of English, has made it easier to detect such changes in their initial stages. The origins of the new usages often lie in informal spoken language or the language of subcultures, increasingly better represented in corpora. For lexicographers drafting definitions, the work done by semanticists and other lexical scholars suggests the kinds of words that are liable to shifts in their gender association and which may therefore call for special attention. Semanticists have discovered that words from a particular semantic area often have a tendency to change their meanings in a similar fashion,¹⁵ a

¹⁴Term from Bauer, 145.

¹⁵Lehrer cites examples from the semantic fields of animals, gambling, and dimension.

finding that also applies to gender-related lexemes, as will be seen in Section 2, which provides an outline of earlier research into the changing gender boundaries of words.

2. Gender-Referential Shifts in English

Gender-related changes in the meanings of words first gained wider attention in the context of discussions about language and sexism in the 1970s. It was then observed that when a word used of both sexes comes to be applied only to women, it often takes on a more pejorative meaning. *Whore* seems to have meant ‘a male or female lover’ in its early history, and *bawd* signified ‘a go-between or panderer of either sex’ before it came to be applied to a woman in charge of a brothel.¹⁶ After the narrowing down of the meaning of *girl* from ‘a child of either sex’ to ‘a female child’, the word also started to denote a prostitute or mistress, and something similar happened to *wench*.¹⁷ When an originally masculine term extends its scope to cover females, the process may similarly involve pejoration. In its earliest written occurrences in Middle English, *harlot* carries the sense of ‘vagabond, beggar’, the modern application to an unchaste woman or prostitute becoming dominant in the sixteenth century.¹⁸

Burridge reminds us that the derogation of women evident in semantic shifts is not a thing of the distant past, but an ongoing phenomenon. She cites several twentieth-century examples, among them *tramp* ‘male vagrant’, which in the 1920s developed the further meaning of ‘promiscuous woman’, and *slag*, first ‘piece of refuse’, then ‘cheat,

¹⁶Schulz, 69–70.

¹⁷Ibid., 68, 70.

¹⁸Rawson, 187.

contemptible person', and, since the 1950s, 'promiscuous woman'.¹⁹ Another word mentioned by Burridge, *bimbo*, is assigned three senses in *The Oxford English Dictionary*: 'a fellow, chap; usually contemptuous' (dated 1919), 'a woman; esp. a whore' (1929), and 'a young woman considered to be sexually attractive but of limited intelligence' (1927). The last-mentioned is said to be "now the usual sense".²⁰

When the denotation of a lexeme is narrowed down to one of the sexes or extended to cover both, the process does not necessarily lead to semantic downgrading. The word may have been highly insulting to begin with. Burridge notes that the scope of the disapprobatory expressions *whore*, *bitch* and *slut*, traditionally applied to females and gay males, now includes males in general.²¹ Examples of such extended usages of derogatory epithets are found especially in the language of subcultures.²²

Sometimes both the old and the new usages have a positive ring to them. Singular *guy* usually refers to a man, as does the plural *guys* when used of particular persons, unlike in e.g. "good guys and bad guys". In direct address, however, *guys* or *you guys* can be said to all-male, all-female, and mixed groups. When used like that,

¹⁹Burridge, *Blooming English*, 60.

²⁰For further examples of gender-referential shifts associated with semantic pejoration, see Hughes, 220–3.

²¹Burridge, *Weeds in the Garden of Words*, 75.

²²The first sense listed for *whore* in *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* (ed. Green) is "a general derog. term of address, irrespective of sex". *Bitch*, labelled *UK/W[est].I[ndies].*, is described as "a general derog. term for a man" under sense 7. Coleman, 58–59, notes that in student slang the originally female *dog* 'unattractive person' and *whipped* 'dominated by a sexual partner' occasionally refer to men as well.

guys according to Lawson functions as “almost a suffix to *you* to suggest friendliness, camaraderie, informality”.²³

You guys illustrates one of the four types that Waksler distinguishes in the neutralization of gender in English vocabulary in the 1990s. Waksler’s categories comprise (a) [+male] words extended to women (e.g. *mensch*), (b) [+female] words extended to men (e.g. *bitch*), (c) lexemes filling a gap in a grammatical paradigm (a rare type exemplified by *you guys* filling the need for a specific second person plural pronoun), and (d) originally [+male] terms in pairs like *actor/actress* and *comedian/comedienne* becoming the general usage. Waksler observes that gender neutralization in vocabulary is paralleled by similar developments in other areas, such as perfumes, where quite a few of the fragrances are now unisex. As Waksler puts it, “[g]ender neutralization is the move of the times”.²⁴

The semantic extension of forms like *actor* or *comedian* is an example of the suppression of derivational suffixes now regarded as discriminatory by many. The specific marking of the female sex in pairs like *actor/actress* and *poet/poetess* is seen to imply that female is not the norm, but a deviation from the standard.²⁵ The effect of the suffix has also been characterized as trivializing, making the female term linguistically dependent on the male.²⁶ Bauer et al. observe that *-ette* may be the main gender-marking suffix in present-day English, many of the formations having clearly

²³Lawson, 158.

²⁴Waksler, 6.

²⁵Miller and Swift, *Words and Women*, 159.

²⁶Pauwels, 110.

disparaging connotations.²⁷ Miller and Swift criticize *-ette* in coinages like *usherette*, the form of the latter word implying that “an usherette is a frivolous little woman hired to replace a bona fide usher”.²⁸ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet also comment on *-ette*, noting that it merges gender and the basic diminutive meaning for example in *Raylettes*, the background singers for Ray Charles. The name of the group suggests that they are “not only female but small and cute”.²⁹

All of the examples cited thus far have been common nouns signifying human beings. The obliteration of gender boundaries can also be detected in proper names. In Britain, an orthographic distinction used to be made between male *Leslie* and female *Lesley*.³⁰ The former spelling has gradually been extended to girl’s names as well. The entry for *Leslie* in the 1990 edition of Hanks and Hodges’s *Dictionary of First Names* describes the name as “m[ale]., occasionally f[emale]., esp. in the U.S.”. In the 2006 second edition, the headword *Leslie* is followed by the male and female gender symbols, with no mention of the U.S. or frequency of the female usage.

²⁷Bauer et al., 396. Hellinger and Pauwels, 663, state that feminine suffixes in English “have not been productive for a while”. Bauer et al., 230, have, however, found examples of recent formations in *-ess* and *-ette* in corpora, and characterize the two suffixes as having “modest productivity”.

²⁸Miller and Swift, *Words and Women*, 159.

²⁹Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 86. Baron, 125, cites *Blondettes*, *Barberettes*, *Rockettes*, and *Roxyettes* as examples of names of all-female groups of singers or dancers.

³⁰In her dictionary of first names, Withycombe states that “*Leslie* is now a common man’s name, but is sometimes also given to girls, when it is usually spelt *Lesley*”. For a further discussion of the spelling *Leslie*, see Norri, “Gender-Referential Shifts,” 275–6.

In observations about gender-referential shifts in vocabulary, relatively little attention has been paid to inanimate objects. In 1970, Foster, citing the words *suit*, *blouse*, *stole*, *pants* ('underwear'), and *knickers* (a shortening of *knickerbockers*), commented that "[s]ome psychologist should really tell us what envies and unfulfilled longings cause women to steal the names of men's clothes". According to Foster, *briefs*, which started out as a female term and later became gender-neutral, manifests "a curious reversal of the usual tendency".³¹ Dovey was interested in studying the adoption of clothing terminology from French to English and vice versa. His long list of names of garments contains many instances of shifting gender boundaries. *Frock*, for example, first meant 'monk's long gown', the most common meaning now being 'woman or girl's dress'. *Petticoat* originally denoted 'a petty (small) coat' that men wore under their doublets.³² That Foster's views about women "stealing" the names of male clothes only present one side of the coin is shown by Norri's study of "lexical gender-benders in underwear". Many of the gender-neutral terms for underwear in fact originated in the female wardrobe.³³

Norri has presented a classification of gender-related changes that accommodates words for both human beings and inanimate objects. The main criterion in the categorization is the completeness of the semantic shift. Five different stages can be distinguished in the history of a word whose gender boundaries are being challenged

³¹Foster, 142–3.

³²Dovey, 171.

³³Norri, "Lexical Gender-Benders," 84, notes that "[o]f the gender-benders discovered in the present article, seven (nine if we include *combination(s)* and *French knickers*) had their origins in the female wardrobe, only four in the male".

or reassessed: (a) sporadic occurrences of the extended gender association (e.g. *bloomers, virago, vixen*), (b) the extended gender association begins to spread (e.g. *swimsuit, undies, long johns*), (c) parity (e.g. *blazer, jacket, balls* ‘courage’), (d) the more recent gender association prevails (e.g. *bimbo, blouse, Hilary*), and (e) the original gender association is totally forgotten (e.g. *harlot, shrew, petticoat*).³⁴ A particular word, as noted by Norri, may not fit easily into one or other of the five categories, as informants tend to disagree in their assessments about gender. The usage of special groups, furthermore, may never spread to the community as a whole.³⁵

The above-cited research has shown that shifts in the gender boundaries of words are a common type of semantic change. In studies looking into the presentation of gender in dictionary entries, the selection of example sentences has so far been in the focus of attention.³⁶ It is the definitions, however, which explicitly capture or fail to capture the semantic extension or narrowing of the word. The present article is a contribution to the study of definitions in particular, with special emphasis on learner’s dictionaries. Gender-related shifts in word meaning, as shown by the earlier studies mentioned above, have taken place in recent decades, often progressing in stages. It is therefore important to examine all the editions of a particular dictionary for forming an idea of how the different editors and compilers have reacted to instances of unstable

³⁴Norri, “Gender-Referential Shifts.” Some of the example words may no longer represent the same stage of development as in 1998.

³⁵Ibid., 286.

³⁶In their articles about gender issues in dictionaries, journalists have similarly focussed on the choice of example sentences. For such articles, see e.g. Astle; Caplan-Bricker; Crum; England; Flood; and Kestler-d’Amours.

gender reference. A comparison of the major titles in pedagogical lexicography is also essential, as the evidence available to each varies and there may be significant differences in editorial policies.

Earlier literature on gender issues in vocabulary has prompted the selection of the twenty-five words chosen for closer scrutiny in the present study. Some of the lexemes examined have been discussed in articles by Waksler (*actor/actress, comedian/comedienne, hero/heroine*) and Norri (*swimsuit, drawers*). More importantly, earlier work on gender has revealed entire areas of vocabulary where gender shifts have been particularly frequent, including terms for professions, personal characteristics, and clothing. Items from all three lexical fields are represented in the dictionary analysis that follows.

3. Dictionaries Studied

The selection of works analysed for the present article consists of five leading dictionaries meant for advanced learners of English. Now in its ninth edition, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (hereafter *OALD*) has the longest history, ranging from 1948 to the present day. *OALD*'s junior by thirty years, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (*LDOCE*) was first published in 1978 and has so far run to six editions. The *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (*Cobuild*) has, like *OALD*, seen nine editions, the first one coming out in 1987. Towards the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first, two more works aimed at learners of English entered the market. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (*CALD*) widened the selection in 1995 and the

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (MEDAL) in 2002. Of the former, four editions have been published, of the latter, two.

In addition to the printed books, all five dictionaries are available digitally. In fact, the publisher of *MEDAL* announced in 2012 that they would no longer publish print editions of the dictionary, focussing instead on the online medium.³⁷ The words examined were looked up in both the printed editions and the digital versions of each work.³⁸

Each of the five dictionaries make use of a defining vocabulary, the size of which ranges from 2,000 to 3,000 words.³⁹ Another similarity is the heavy reliance of all five on electronic corpora. In its blurb, *OALD* mentions that the dictionary is based on the authoritative Oxford English Corpus. The Oxford Dictionaries website describes the corpus as containing over 2.5 billion words and representing “all types of English, from literary novels and specialist journals to everyday newspapers and magazines, and even the language of blogs, emails, and Internet message boards”.⁴⁰ A pioneer in the use of corpora in dictionaries aimed at learners, *Cobuild* has its foundation in the Collins Corpus, over 4.5 billion words collected from books, newspapers, magazines, websites, radio, television, and everyday conversation.⁴¹ *LDOCE* takes thousands of its examples

³⁷Rundell, “Stop the Presses.”

³⁸See the References for bibliographical details.

³⁹For a comparison and critical assessment of the defining vocabularies in *OALD*, *Cobuild*, *LDOCE*, and the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, see Bogaards, 289–91, and Herbst, 324–5.

⁴⁰<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/what-is-a-corpus> (accessed September 6, 2018).

⁴¹*Cobuild*, 9th ed., v.

from the Longman Corpus Network and the Longman Web Corpus. The former comprises some 390 million words of written and spoken British and American English from a variety of sources, including books, newspapers, conversations, and advertisements.⁴² The main source of language data for *CALD* is the Cambridge International Corpus, a collection totalling more than 1.5 billion words of spoken and written language “from a huge variety of sources”.⁴³ The definitions in *MEDAL* are said to be based on the 200 million-word World English Corpus, which consists of the Bloomsbury Corpus of World English supplemented with additional material such as language teaching and learner texts.⁴⁴

4. References to Gender in the Dictionary Definitions

For the examination of gender descriptions in learner’s dictionaries, twenty-five words were chosen for closer scrutiny. The analysis focusses on items from three different semantic fields, which are professions and occupations (e.g. *actor*, *midwife*, *starlet*), personal characteristics and roles (e.g. *bastard*, *redhead*, *sissy*), and clothes (e.g. *fez*, *sombrero*, *swimsuit*).

4.1. Words for Professions and Occupations

⁴²*LDOCE*, 6th ed., xii.

⁴³*CALD*, 4th ed., ix.

⁴⁴*MEDAL*, 2d ed., ii.

The nine words in this group are *actor*, *boxer*, *comedian*, *midwife*, *nurse*, *priest*, *soldier*, *starlet*, and *stripper*. The level of agreement between the five dictionaries is higher for some of the items than for others. There is almost complete harmony in the descriptions of *boxer*, *comedian*, *nurse*, and *soldier*, generally unspecified as to the sex of the person designated. To cite some formulations of the gender-neutral type, we find “a person who boxes, especially as a job” for *boxer* in *OALD* (6th–9th eds. 2000–15), “someone whose job is to entertain people by telling jokes and stories to make them laugh” for *comedian* in *MEDAL*, “a person whose job is to care for people who are ill or injured, especially in a hospital” for *nurse* in *CALD*, and “[a] **soldier** is a person who works in an army, especially a person who is not an officer” for *soldier* in *Cobuild*.⁴⁵ The only hint at boxers being men occurs in the first (1987) edition of *Cobuild*, where the word is said to mean “a sportsman whose sport is boxing”, subsequently changed to “[a] **boxer** is someone who takes part in the sport of boxing”. In the same volume, *comedian* is defined as “a person, usually a man, whose job is to make people laugh, especially by telling them jokes or funny stories”. The phrasing used from the second (1995) edition onwards, “[a] **comedian** is an entertainer whose job is to make people laugh, by telling jokes or funny stories”, brought *Cobuild* into line with the other dictionaries examined. The placing of the notes “(*fem* **comediienne**)” in *OALD* (4th & 5th eds. 1989 & 1995) and “(**comediienne** *fem*)” in *LDOCE* (2d ed. 1987) right after the headword, before a gender-neutral definition, is a source of potential confusion. Are we supposed to deduce that when talking about a woman, *only* the form *comediienne* can be used? A comparison of the fourth and fifth editions of *OALD* shows that the lexicographers drafting the entries for *comedian* were faced with complexities of gender:

⁴⁵When no edition is specified, the definition is identical in all the editions of the dictionary.

- (1) (*fem* **comediienne**) (a) entertainer who tells jokes, performs sketches (SKETCH 3), etc to amuse an audience (b) actor or actress who plays comic parts (4th ed. 1989)
- (2) (*fem* **comediienne**) (a) an entertainer on stage, television, etc who makes people laugh by telling jokes, etc (b) an actor who plays comic parts (5th ed. 1995)

It was probably in the interests of clarity that both *OALD* and *LDOCE* soon returned to their earlier practice of assigning separate entries to *comedian* and *comediienne*. In its treatment of the two words, *CALD* has resorted to the adverb *also*, which makes it clear that the form *comedian* can be used of both sexes:

- (3) (female also **comediienne**) a person whose job is to make people laugh by telling jokes and funny stories or by copying the behaviour or speech of famous people (4th ed. 2013)

Observations about gender occur only rarely in the entries for *nurse*, but the first two (1978 & 1987) editions of *LDOCE* and the fourth (1989) edition of *OALD* are an exception. Both men and women may find reasons for disgruntlement in the *LDOCE* description of a nurse as “a person, typically a woman, who is trained to take care of sick, hurt, or old people, esp. as directed by a doctor in a hospital”. The mention of women in particular has since been deleted, and there is no longer any implication of a hierarchical relationship between doctors and nurses. Dealing with the same word,

OALD manifests a curious and, it would appear, inexplicable “U turn” in its gender statements, revealed through a comparison of the third, fourth, and fifth editions:

- (4) person, usu trained, who cares for people who are ill or injured (3d ed. 1974)
- (5) person, usu female, trained to help a doctor to look after the sick or injured (4th ed. 1989)
- (6) a person trained to help a doctor to look after sick or injured people (5th ed. 1995)

The part about helping a doctor is omitted in later editions.

As regards gender comments in the entries for *soldier*, two volumes differ from the rest. The first (1978) edition of *LDOCE* tells the reader that a soldier is “a member of an army, esp. a man and esp. one of low rank (not an officer)”, a description first changed to “someone who serves in the military forces of a country; a member of an army, esp. one who is not an officer” (2d ed. 1987), then shortened to “a member of the army of a country, especially someone who is not an officer” (3d–6th eds. 1995–2014). Again, *OALD* first adds a gender specification, then removes it:

- (7) member of an army, one who is not a commissioned or non-commissioned officer (3d ed. 1974)
- (8) member (usu male) of an army, esp one who is not an officer (4th ed. 1989)
- (9) a member of an army, esp one who is not an officer (5th–9th eds. 1995–2015)

One of the words studied, *starlet*, is systematically associated with women, the word *actress* appearing in many of the definitions. Why the fifth (1995) edition of *OALD* chose to include the adverb *especially* in its entry remains a mystery, but the modification was short-lived:

- (10) (*sometimes derog*) a young actor, esp a woman, who hopes to become a film star but is not yet very famous (5th ed. 1995)
- (11) a young woman actor who plays small parts and hopes to become famous (6th–9th eds. 2000–15)

The remaining four terms for professions and occupations exhibit greater variation in gender descriptions. The trend to call women acting in plays or films *actors* rather than *actresses* was observed in the early 1980s already.⁴⁶ In Nunberg's study, however, the majority of the 175-member Usage Panel of *The American Heritage Dictionary* found *actress* acceptable in 1988, but the results varied according to the sentence containing the word. Nunberg concluded that "the distinction between *actor* and *actress* is allowed, since that is one profession in which the jobs one can take obviously depend on one's sex".⁴⁷ Burchfield, in 1996, listed *actress* among central *-ess* words "remaining in use more or less unchallenged".⁴⁸

⁴⁶Beardsley, 159.

⁴⁷Nunberg, 478.

⁴⁸Burchfield, 263.

Of the five learner's dictionaries, *Cobuild* systematically associates *actor* with men, but not without qualification. In the first (1987) edition, it is stated that “[a]ctor’ in the singular usually refers to a man”, which was later expanded with the clause “but some women who act prefer to be called ‘actors’ rather than ‘actresses’” (2d–9th eds. 1995–2018). Three editions of *OALD* and *LDOCE* that were published before *Cobuild* entered the market illustrate the old, stricter division of labour between *actor* and *actress*, seen from the following entries for *actor*:

- (12) man who acts on the stage or for cinema films (*OALD*, 2d ed. 1963)
- (13) a man who acts on the stage, TV or in films (*OALD*, 3d ed. 1974)
- (14) a man who takes part in a play (*LDOCE*, 1st ed. 1978)

As with *nurse* and *soldier*, *OALD* shows a return to the older version in the course of its history: the first (1948) edition uses the gender-neutral *person* in its description of *actor*, as do all the editions from the fourth (1989) onwards. When it first came out in 1995, *CALD* apparently also had doubts about the applicability of the word *actor* to a woman. The sentential definition of *actor* states that “[a]n actor or actress is someone who pretends to be someone else while performing in a film, theatrical performance, or television or radio programme”. The formulation in subsequent editions (2005–13) is unambiguous, with the note “(female also **actress**)” prefixed to a definition beginning with “someone who pretends to be someone else...” (cf. (3) above). All in all, *MEDAL* and the later editions of *OALD*, *LDOCE*, and *CALD* do not assign the form *actor* to the male sex, either exclusively or especially.

The increased sensitivity in the application of terms relating to professions and occupations can also be detected in the entries for *midwife*. The most recent addition to

British learner's dictionaries, *MEDAL*, does not include any gender specification, while all the others do, at least at some point during their history. The earliest editions of *OALD* state that a midwife is a woman, but from the fourth (1989) edition onwards the phrasing is changed to "a person, especially a woman...", an assessment similar to *CALD*'s "a person, usually a woman...". *Cobuild* initially took a similar line, informing the reader that "[a] **midwife** is a nurse, usually a woman, who is trained to deliver babies and to advise pregnant women", but the gender-related comment was abandoned in the second (1995) edition and has not returned since. The dictionary with the most varied record is *LDOCE* with its three different types of information, progressing chronologically from most gender-specific to neutral:

- (15) A woman, usu. a nurse, who has received a special training to help other women when they are giving birth to children (1st ed. 1978)
- (16) a person, usu. a woman, who is not a doctor but helps women when they are giving birth to children (2d ed. 1987)
- (17) a specially trained nurse whose job is to help women when they are having a baby (3d ed. 1995)

The analysis of *priest* yields a profile that closely resembles that of *midwife* when it comes to mentioning gender in the various dictionaries or editions. *MEDAL*, again, mentions neither sex in its definition "someone whose job is to lead worship and perform other duties and ceremonies in some Christian churches". *CALD*, as in its entries for *midwife*, invariably resorts to the adverb *usually*: "a person, usually a man, who has been trained to perform religious duties in the Christian Church, especially the

Roman Catholic Church.” The first (1987) edition of *Cobuild* differs from the rest of the volumes in the series, a situation familiar from the above discussion of *midwife*:

- (18) A **priest** is a man who is a member of the Christian clergy, especially in the Catholic, Anglican, or Orthodox church. (1st ed. 1987)
- (19) A **priest** is a member of the Christian clergy in the Catholic, Anglican, or Orthodox church. (2d–9th eds. 1995–2018)

The earlier editions of *LDOCE* similarly differ from the later ones, stating that a priest is “esp. a man” (1st ed. 1978) or “usu. a man” (2d ed. 1987). After that, the gender indication disappears, reminiscent of the history of *midwife* in the same dictionary. As regards *OALD*, the use of the word *clergyman* as a central element in the first and second (1948 & 1963) editions points to a male referent. The later rewritten definitions mention neither sex, but there are additional notes in the third and fourth (1974 & 1989) editions stating that *clergyman* is the usual term in the Anglican Church. Except in the case of *CALD*, the general picture for *priest* is an obliteration of gender boundaries, a development reflecting reforms in the church over the last two decades or so.

The last word in the present semantic group, *stripper*, attracts mentions of gender in three dictionaries, the most straightforward description occurring in the first (1987) edition of *Cobuild*. Examples (20)–(21) show how the word *woman* was later changed to *person*, possibly to reflect actual changes in this branch of the entertainment industry, but more likely in an attempt to avoid a view of the occupation that could be regarded as sexist.

(20) A **stripper** is a woman who earns money doing striptease in clubs or at parties.

(1st ed. 1987)

(21) A **stripper** is a person who earns money by doing striptease. (2d ed. 1995)

In the third (1974) edition of *OALD* and first and second editions (1978 & 1987) of *LDOCE*, *stripper* is associated with women indirectly, through other words in the dictionary. *OALD* defines *stripper* by referring to *stripshow*, a “dance, cabaret or theatrical entertainment in which a person (usu a woman) takes off garments one by one”. *LDOCE* provides a cross-reference to *striptease*, said to be “(a) removal of clothes by a person, esp. a woman, performed as a show” (1st ed. 1978) or “a performance, esp. by a woman, in which the performer takes off her or his clothes in a sexually exciting way” (2d ed. 1987). In the latter definition, the phrase *her or his* catches the eye, being another indication of female prevalence. The same co-ordinated possessive also appears in the fifth (1995) edition of *OALD*, to be reversed in the sixth (2000), most likely in an attempt to avoid sexist overtones by using the more common order of the two parts:

(22) a performer who removes her or his clothes in front of an audience as a form of entertainment (5th ed. 1995)

(23) a performer who takes his or her clothes off in a sexually exciting way in front of an audience (6th–9th eds. 2000–15)

It is noteworthy that the observations about *stripper* being a female term occur in the earlier editions of the dictionaries.

4.2. Words for Personal Characteristics and Roles

In this semantic group, the focus lies on exploring the dictionary treatment of *adventurer*, *bastard*, *brute*, *divorcee*, *hero*, *looker*, *lover*, *redhead*, *sex object*, and *sissy*. With some of the words, there is near-uniformity as regards the gender descriptions provided. The entries for *adventurer*, for example, generally lack any reference to men or women, except for the first (1987) edition of *Cobuild*:

- (24) An **adventurer** is **1** a person, especially a man, who tries to become rich or powerful by using dishonest or immoral methods; used showing disapproval. **2** a person who enjoys adventure.

The order of the two senses was later reversed, with a concomitant revision of the phrasing:

- (25) **1.** An **adventurer** is a person who enjoys going to new, unusual, and exciting places. **2.** If you describe someone as an **adventurer**, you disapprove of them because they are using dishonest or immoral methods to gain money or power.
(2d & 3d eds. 1995 & 2001)

The fourth and subsequent editions (2003–18) list only the first sense in (25). *OALD* in its fourth and fifth editions (1989 & 1995) annexed the note “(*fem* **adventuress**)” to the headword, before the two gender-neutral definitions. As with *comedienne*, it is not entirely clear whether the form in brackets was supposed to be the only one applied to

women. The aim to clarify the issue is the likely reason for the dictionary's return in later editions to the practice of assigning separate entries to *adventurer* and *adventuress*.

Sex object is another lexeme hardly ever accompanied by information about gender. Only two such notes appear in the thirty printed volumes and five online versions examined. The following passages come from the fifth (1995) edition of *OALD* and the first (1987) of *Cobuild*, respectively:

(26) a person, usu a woman, considered only in terms of her or his sexual attraction

(27) If someone, especially a woman, is considered as a **sex object**, they are considered only in terms of their physical attractiveness and not their character or abilities.

The ordering of the elements in the two-part possessive in *OALD*, also found in the description of *stripper* in the same volume, further emphasizes the preponderance of women as sex objects. Both *OALD* and *Cobuild* soon rewrote their definitions so as to avoid any gender bias. The earlier versions were replaced with “a person considered only for their sexual attraction and not for their character or their intelligence” (*OALD*, 6th–9th eds. 2000–15) and “[i]f someone is described as a **sex object**, he or she is considered only in terms of their physical attractiveness and not their character or abilities” (*Cobuild*, 2nd–9th eds. 1995–2018).

Gender also receives scant attention in the entries for *lover*. *Cobuild*, *CALD*, and *MEDAL* say nothing about the matter. It is only the earliest editions of *OALD* and *LDOCE* that inform the reader that a lover is a man, a statement mostly qualified with the adverb *chiefly*, *especially*, or *usually*. The first edition (1978) of *LDOCE* states that a lover is “[a] man in love with or having a sexual relationship with a woman outside of

marriage”, but in the next version love has fallen by the wayside and the gender assignment is less strict: “a person (usu. a man) who has a sexual relationship with another person outside marriage, esp. over a long period”. The history of the *OALD* definitions of *lover* manifests a diminishing role of love and widening of the gender reference, similar to the development in *LDOCE*. The five different descriptions found in *OALD* are all worth citing, as they illuminate not just the complexities of defining caused by semantic shifts, but also the difficulty of deciding whether gender is an essential item of information that should be included in the description:

- (28) (chiefly a man) one who is in love; one who deeply admires a person of the opposite sex (1st ed. 1948)
- (29) person, esp. a man, who deeply admires a woman; woman’s sweetheart or suitor (2d ed. 1963)
- (30) person in love with another; regular sex partner (3d ed. 1974)
- (31) partner (usu a man) in a sexual relationship outside marriage (4th ed. 1989)
- (32) a partner in a sexual relationship outside marriage (5th–9th eds. 1995–2015)

Our lexicographers agree in their gender assessment of two more words, *brute* and *sissy*. *Brute* is described as a male term, some entries including the qualifier *usually* (*Cobuild*, 2d–9th eds. 1995–2018) or *especially* (*LDOCE*, 1st & 2d eds. 1978 & 1987), but there is one notable exception. In the second to fifth (1963–95) editions of *OALD*, the original *man* has given way to *person*, to reappear in the last four editions (2000–15), where we learn that a *brute* is “a man who treats people in an unkind, cruel way”. The reasons for the vacillation can only be conjectured. *OALD* has another unaccountable gap in the gender descriptions of *sissy*, the phrase “effeminate boy or

man” (2d ed. 1963) first changing to “effeminate or cowardly person” (3d ed. 1974), then to “effeminate or cowardly boy or man” (4th ed. 1989). The lexicographers working for the first (1987) edition of *Cobuild* distinguished between male and female applications of *sissy*, but the use for women or girls must have been thought uncommon or exceptional, as it was omitted in the second (1995) edition, not to return:

(33) **1.** A boy is described as a **sissy**, especially by other boys, if he does not like sport and is afraid to do things that are slightly dangerous. **2.** A girl or young woman is described as a **sissy**, especially by other girls, if she is weak and cowardly. (1st ed. 1987)

(34) Some people, especially men, describe a boy as a **sissy** when they disapprove of them because they think he is not manly enough, for example that he does not like sport or is afraid to do things that are slightly dangerous. (2d ed. 1995)

The sequence of pronouns in (34) is something of a muddle, especially for foreign learners, which led to a further reformulation and the present version explaining that “[s]ome people, especially men, describe a boy as a **sissy** when they disapprove of him because he does not like rough, physical activities or is afraid to do things which might be dangerous”. The earlier “sport” has been replaced with “rough, physical activities”, probably to avoid suggesting that liking sport is a typically male trait. *OALD* certainly saw a connection between boys and certain characteristics in its fifth (1995) edition, where *sissy* is defined as “a boy who lacks the qualities thought to be typical of boys, eg courage and a sense of adventure”. In view of the present-day emphasis on gender equality and avoidance of stereotyped descriptions, many readers probably wondered why courage and a sense of adventure should be considered typical of boys in

particular.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, the definition was rephrased for the sixth and subsequent (2000–15) editions: “a boy that other men or boys laugh at because they think he is weak or frightened, or only interested in the sort of things girls like”. The histories of the *CALD* and *LDOCE* entries for *sis*sy show that even a very general reference to qualities considered male, or, one would imagine, female, is now out of place:

(35) a boy who looks or behaves like a girl or who lacks qualities considered as male, or a person who is weak and cowardly (*CALD*, 1st ed. 1995)

(36) a boy who other boys dislike and laugh at because they think he is weak or interested in activities girls usually like, or a person who is weak and cowardly (*CALD*, 2d–4th eds. 2005–13)

(37) a boy who looks or acts like a girl in some way; one who lacks qualities believed to be typical of men or boys (*LDOCE*, 2d ed. 1987)

(38) a boy that other boys dislike because he prefers doing things that girls enjoy (*LDOCE*, 3d–6th eds. 1995–2014)

As appears from the above, *CALD* differs from the four other dictionaries examined in distinguishing two senses of *sis*sy, one restricted to boys, the other applied to people in general. *MEDAL* is the only recent work where men are included in the definition “a boy or man who does things that girls or women usually do”.

⁴⁹Lederer criticizes the entry for *manly* in *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* for citing boldness, resoluteness, openness in conduct, and courage as “qualities of a man”. In the same dictionary, Lederer notes, one of the example sentences for *womanly* suggests that volubility is typical of women in particular.

There is more variation in the treatment of the remaining five words in this semantic category. Regarding the mention of men and women in the entries for *divorcee*, *looker*, and *bastard*, in each case one of the dictionaries stands out from the rest. *Divorcee*, for example, is “especially a woman” for *Cobuild* and *OALD*, the current formulation in *OALD* succeeding the earlier “divorced person” (2d–4th eds. 1963–89). The first three (1995–2008) editions of *CALD* provide no gender information, but the fourth (2013) observes a difference between the uses of *divorcee* in Britain and America, a geographical distinction absent from the other dictionaries:

- (39) **1** UK a man or a woman who is divorced and who has not married again. **2** (also **divorcée**) US a woman who is divorced and who has not married again.

CALD is the only work to treat *divorcée* as a variant of *divorcee*. *OALD* and *Cobuild* assign separate entries to the two forms, and, like *CALD*, regard the accented version as American usage. *MEDAL* and *LDOCE*, perhaps a little surprisingly, do not list *divorcee* at all, only *divorcée*, for which *MEDAL* mentions no geographical restriction. Except for *LDOCE*, all the dictionaries state that *divorcée* refers to women. The entry for *divorcée* in *LDOCE* leads to confusion worse confounded as concerns both geography and semantics:

- (40) **1** *AmE old-fashioned* a woman who is divorced **2** *Br* a man or woman who is divorced

The analysis of *looker* yields more straightforward results. There is little chronological variation between the different editions of the five dictionaries. When the

word first appears in *OALD*, it is defined as “a good-looking person” (3d ed. 1974), followed by “attractive girl or woman” (4th ed. 1989), then “an attractive person, usually a woman” (5th–9th eds. 1995–2015). *MEDAL* manifests a similar development, from “a very attractive person” to “a very attractive person, usually a woman”. *LDOCE* and *CALD* have systematically associated the word with women, resorting, however, to the qualifying adverbs *usually* or *especially* in all the volumes. The one dictionary that stands out from the rest is *Cobuild*, whose definition suggests that neither sex is prominent as the referent of the word. The reader is informed that “[y]ou can refer to an attractive man or woman as a **looker** or a **good looker**” (2d–9th eds. 1995–2018).

For the present article, *bastard* was examined in the senses ‘an unpleasant person’ and ‘a person of the stated kind’. The latter usage appears for example in the phrases *lucky bastard* and *poor bastard*. In Table 1, the more negative sense is presented first, separated from the *lucky/poor bastard* type by a slant.

Table 1 Gender specifications for *bastard* ‘an unpleasant person’ / ‘a person of the stated kind’.

As can be seen from the table, the more recent editions treat the clearly disapprobatory *bastard* as a male appellation, a statement mostly qualified with “especially” or “usually”. *CALD*, however, is out of line, the expected gender indication in the earliest definition “an extremely unpleasant person, esp. a man” (1st ed. 1995) disappearing in the subsequent phrasing “an unpleasant person” (2d–4th eds. 2005–13). *Cobuild* manifests an inexplicable gap in the presentation of the milder usage from the fourth to the ninth (2003–18) editions, but the online version reproduces the exact words of the third (2001) printed edition: “Some people say things such as lucky

bastard or poor **bastard** to refer to a person, usually a man, who they think is very lucky, or very unlucky”.

The changing gender descriptions from one edition to the next are well illustrated by the entries for *bastard* in *LDOCE*, where we also note an increasing amount of pragmatic information:

- (41) **2** *sl* a man that one strongly dislikes **3** *sl* a man; fellow (1st ed. 1978)
- (42) **2** *sl* an unpleasant, disagreeable, or cruel person **3** *sl* any person, esp. a man, of the stated kind (2d ed. 1987)
- (43) **1** *taboo* a very offensive word for someone, especially a man, who you think is unpleasant. Do not use this word. **2** *spoken informal not polite* a man who you think is very lucky or very unlucky – often used humorously (3d ed. 1995)

For the remaining items in this semantic category, *redhead* and *hero*, three of the dictionaries provide similar gender descriptions, different from the other two. *Cobuild*, *CALD* and *MEDAL* associate *redhead* especially with women, except for the first (1987) edition of *Cobuild*, where readers learn that “[a] **redhead** is a person whose hair is a colour between red and brown”. The gender markings for *OALD* and *LDOCE* resemble one another. There is one edition in the middle of each series where *redhead* is said to denote especially women. In all the other volumes, the definitions are of the type “someone who has red hair” or “person who has red hair”.

The data for *hero* is presented in Table 2. *Hero*, like *bastard*, is a polysemous word, here examined in the senses ‘person famous for bravery’ and ‘main character in a story’. The bravery-related use is presented first, separated from heroes in books or plays by a slash. Generally speaking, the more recent editions of *OALD*, *Cobuild*, and

LDOCE are seen to form one group, as they state that a *hero* in the bravery sense is a man (*LDOCE*) or especially a man (*OALD, Cobuild*), while *heroes* in literary products are men (*OALD, Cobuild*), or men and boys (*LDOCE*). *CALD* and *MEDAL* paint a different picture, as gender information is provided only for a *hero* in a book or play, specified as male. The placing of the note “**heroine fem**” right after the headword, before the two definitions, in the second (1987) edition of *LDOCE* is reminiscent of the quandaries discussed earlier in connection with similar mentions of *comediienne* and *adventuress*. Again, the solution adopted in the later versions was to assign *hero* and *heroine* to separate entries. This has not happened in *CALD*, where the second to fourth editions (2005–13) have the following entry for *hero*:

- (44) [**PERSON**] > **1** (*FEMALE heroine*) a person who is admired for having done something very brave or having achieved something great **2** (*FEMALE heroine*) the main male character in a book or film who is usually good

As concerns the second sense, the prefixing of the phrase “(*FEMALE heroine*)” to a uniquely male definition is an infelicitous solution. It is, furthermore, not entirely clear whether the reader is supposed to deduce that only the form *heroine* can be applied to women in either sense. That was not the view expressed in the first (1995) edition of *CALD*, where there was a similar note, identically placed, but with the text “*female also heroine*”.

Table 2 Gender specifications for *hero* ‘person famous for bravery’ / ‘main character in a story’.

4.3. Words for Clothes

The six names of clothes studied for the present article are *bathing costume*, *drawers*, *fez*, *sombrero*, *swimsuit*, and *top*. It is again convenient to discuss cases of near harmony first. All five learner's dictionaries have provided gender-neutral descriptions of *top* for a couple of decades now. *MEDAL*, for example, writes that the word means "a piece of clothing that covers the upper part of your body". When *top* as a clothing term first appeared in *OALD*, *Cobuild*, and *CALD*, however, it was associated with female apparel:

(45) (esp. woman's) garment covering the upper part of the body (*OALD*, 4th ed. 1989)

(46) A **top** is a piece of clothing that a woman wears on the upper half of her body, for example a blouse. (*Cobuild*, 1st ed. 1987)

(47) A top is any piece of light clothing worn by women on the part of the body above the waist. (*CALD*, 1st ed. 1995)

Later entries for *top* contain no references to women in particular. The unisex nature of the word is further emphasized by the expanded selection of examples in *Cobuild*, where "for example a blouse" first becomes "for example a blouse or T-shirt" (2d ed. 1995), then the current "for example a blouse or shirt" (3d–9th eds. 2001–18). It is possible that *top* started off as a primarily female term, but has shifted its meaning to include both sexes. The need to have a word for the upper part of the male as well as female apparel is evident in fashion catalogues, where both "women's tops" and "men's tops" are standard phrases nowadays.

Three of the dictionaries (*OALD*, *CALD*, *MEDAL*) do not restrict the word *drawers* to either sex. *Drawers* last appears in the printed volumes of *Cobuild* in the

third (2001) edition, which states that “[**d**]rawers are underpants, especially ones worn by women”. The word, labelled *old-fashioned*, disappears after that, but emerges in the online version, briefly defined as “the same as underpants” and characterized as *mainly US, old-fashioned*. The reference to *underpants* causes uncertainty, as the definition for the latter word informs us that “[i]n British English, **underpants** refers only to men’s underwear, but in American English it refers to both men’s and women’s”. It is unclear whether the British and American gender distinction should also be taken to hold for *drawers*. As regards British English, that would misrepresent the actual situation. *LDOCE* is systematic in its description of *drawers* as underwear for women, or women and girls.

The two names for headgear, *sombrero* and *fez*, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, lack any gender comment in *Cobuild*, except for *sombrero* in the first (1987) edition: “A **sombrero** is a man’s hat with a very wide brim which is worn especially in Mexico”. “Man’s hat” later becomes just “hat”. The entries for *fez* in *LDOCE* show a similar eradication of male wearer, as the original “[a] kind of round red hat with a flat top and no BRIM, worn by some Muslim men” (1st ed. 1978) is cut down to “a round red hat with a flat top and no BRIM” (3d–6th eds. 1995–2014). The more recent editions of *OALD* agree that it is men who wear a *fez* or a *sombrero*, but the gender information has also been at times suppressed during the long history of the dictionary, for no obvious reason:

- (48) red felt hat with a flat top and a tassel but no brim, worn by men in certain Muslim countries (*fez*, 4th ed. 1989)
- (49) a red hat with a flat top and a TASSEL, but no BRIM (5th ed. 1995)

(50) broad-rimmed hat (as worn in Latin American countries) (*sombrero*, 2d & 3d eds. 1963 & 1974)

(51) man's felt or straw hat with a very wide brim (as worn in Latin American countries, esp. Mexico) (4th ed. 1989)

Some of the dictionaries have kept their gender assignments of *fez* and *sombrero* constant throughout their history. Both hats are said to be worn by men in the two editions and online version of *MEDAL*. *CALD* first explains what a *fez* looks like and then adds the comment “especially as worn in the past by men in some Muslim countries”. The qualifier *especially* is also a regular part of the definitions of *sombrero* in *CALD*, said to be “worn especially by men in Mexico”. One wonders whether the word order “worn by men especially in Mexico” would have resulted in a more accurate description. *LDOCE* systematically calls a *sombrero* “a man's hat” or “a hat for men”.

The analysis of the gender descriptions of *swimsuit* and *bathing costume* is complicated by the large number of cross-references used instead of definitions. The eighth (2010) edition of *OALD*, for example, refers a reader looking up *bathing costume* to the entry for *swimming costume*. Under the latter word, yet another cross-reference is supplied, this time to *swimsuit*. An unrelenting user of the dictionary following that signpost finally reaches a proper definition, “a piece of clothing worn for swimming, especially the type worn by women and girls”. The frequent use of cross-references in *OALD* has been characterized as “a space-saving device which will not always be welcomed by those who are trying to understand the text they are reading”.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Bogaards, 292.

The gender profiles for *swimsuit* and *bathing costume* are very similar in the dictionaries studied. In fact, *Cobuild* has, since the second (1995) edition, had an identical definition for both words, “a piece of clothing that is worn for swimming, especially by women and girls”. In the first (1987) edition, the description of *bathing costume* was different, “a tight-fitting garment covering a person’s trunk, which women wear when they go bathing”. In its treatment of both words, *OALD* at first omitted any mention of gender, the third (1974) edition, for example, defining both *bathing costume* and *swimsuit* as “garment worn for swimming”. In the more recent editions, the two terms are associated with especially women and girls, as in *Cobuild. MEDAL*, which lists only *swimsuit*, is a third dictionary that mentions female swimwear in particular: “a piece of clothing worn for swimming, especially by women”. The remaining two dictionaries, *LDOCE* and *CALD*, manifest an opposite development, as the originally female component of meaning disappears from the later versions. The last four (1995–2014) editions of *LDOCE* assign no gender specification to *bathing costume* or *swimsuit*, contrary to the first two editions (1978 & 1987), where both words are said to denote a garment “worn by women”. Similarly, *CALD*’s current “a piece of clothing that you wear for swimming” (2d–4th eds. 2005–13) for both *bathing costume* and *swimsuit* was preceded by “a piece of clothing, or sometimes two pieces of clothing, which is worn by women for swimming”.

Fashion terminology provides plenty of examples of gender-referential shifts. Based on the occurrences of the word in newspaper corpora, Norri placed *swimsuit* among the cases where “the extended gender association begins to spread”,⁵¹ which suggests that the history of the definitions in *LDOCE* and *CALD* may reflect changes in

⁵¹Norri, “Gender-Referential Shifts,” 276–7.

the actual use of the word. *Swimsuit*, like *top*, is indeed a likely candidate for extension of gender boundary, because the basic meaning, ‘a garment for swimming’, applies to men as well as women. In some other instances, changes in fashion such as unisex underwear may have been a major factor behind the semantic development. Unisex underwear has been on the market since the 1980s:⁵²

(52) Les Girls Les Boys Is The Unisex Underwear Brand You Need On Your Radar⁵³

(53) The trend in unisex underwear was further crystallised in the spring, when Calvin Klein reissued its original pants from the early 90s [...] Famously unisex-friendly Swedish brand Acne recently launched a line of “gender-neutral” underwear.⁵⁴

5. Concluding Remarks

The analysis of the five learner’s dictionaries has shown that certain areas of vocabulary manifest clearer tendencies than others when it comes to indications of gender. Generally speaking, the dictionaries studied follow a similar trend in their entries for professions and occupations, where, except for *starlet*, the lexemes have been losing their gender attributions. The overall picture for the words denoting personal characteristics and roles is different, as no clear tendency

⁵²Snodgrass, 341.

⁵³Sciarretto.

⁵⁴Ferrier.

towards gender-neutral descriptions is discernible. While *adventurer*, *lover*, and *sex object*, for example, have lost what male or female specifications there were at one time, *divorcee* and *looker* are now more often associated with women than they used to be. The six names for clothes studied have been losing rather than gaining gender assignments.

A closer analysis of the definitions of the twenty-five words shows that issues of gender have been something of a challenge for lexicographers. In the chronologically arranged tables for *bastard* and *hero*, the five learner's dictionaries often differ from each other in the gender descriptions recorded for particular years. Examination of the various editions of each dictionary has revealed "U turns" where an earlier gender attribution was deleted only to make its return later on. Sometimes an edition stands out from the preceding and following ones by its unique reference to one of the sexes. The "U turn" type of changes, coupled with more straightforward additions or deletions of information relating to the sex of the referent, illustrate the truly chequered history of gender indications in learner's dictionaries. There has been further vacillation in the use of notes like "*fem comedienne*", "*fem adventuress*", and "*fem heroine*", placed immediately after the respective headwords *comedian*, *adventurer*, and *hero*. The interpretation of such phrases is not evident. They have usually been deleted from the more recent editions and forms like *comedian* and *comedienne* are listed as separate headwords.

There are several possible reasons for the variation in the gender descriptions of the five dictionaries and their different editions. Changes in the real world have caused some of the gender assignments to become outdated. The breaking down of gender boundaries in working life and sports has no doubt had an influence on the drafting of the entries for words such as *priest*, *boxer*, *soldier*,

and *stripper*. One is hardly likely to see *priest* defined as a *clergyman*, or *boxer* as a *sportsman*, in modern dictionaries. As regards the presentation of the terminology for clothes, unisex fashion may have contributed to the loss of gender comments in areas such as underwear terminology.

Variation in the size and content of the corpora used by lexicographers is another factor likely to underlie some of the differences between the gender descriptions found in the five works studied. The omission of gender information may at first seem puzzling in cases such as *bastard* in *CALD*, described as “an extremely unpleasant person, esp. a man” in the first (1995) edition, later on as “an unpleasant person”. The male association of the word was apparently still strong in the 1980s, when Frank and Anshen stated that “[i]f someone is called a *bastard*, either as a general term of abuse, or as a statement of the lack of legal marital ties between that person’s parents, we assume that person is a male”.⁵⁵ A decade later, Hughes characterized the word as being “invariably applied only to males”.⁵⁶ Such categorical statements are, however, contradicted by evidence from the Lancaster Corpus of Abuse (LCA), where the targets of the slur may be of either sex. The compilers of the corpus observe that gender exclusive terms of abuse are “the exception rather than the norm” in their data.⁵⁷ The number of female referents of *bastard* in corpora of informal English is, nevertheless, still a far cry from the male occurrences,⁵⁸ which questions the policy of omitting any

⁵⁵Frank and Anshen, 66.

⁵⁶Hughes, 208.

⁵⁷McEnery et al., 52.

⁵⁸The search strings “she is a bastard”, “she’s a bastard”, “she is a * bastard”, and “she’s a * bastard” yield only one hit in the Corpus of Global Web-Based English created by Davies. The

mention of gender in the dictionary entry.

As concerns the role of corpora, it should be noted that the *OALD* and *LDOCE* editions that were published before the late 1980s did not rely on electronic corpora. The variation in the gender comments of earlier times, seen for example in the treatment of *bastard* and *hero*, has more to do with the compilers' personal opinions about the usage of the word.

Discussions about gender-biased language and stereotyped images of men and women have probably also had an effect on the wording of some of the definitions studied for the present article. There are words and phrases that in corpora occur primarily in contexts associated with one of the sexes. Such uses can sometimes be considered pejorative or sexist. The lexicographer's dilemma then is to decide whether the gender association should be mentioned in the dictionary entry or omitted because of the danger of reinforcing stereotypes. Whitcut argues that "what we are describing as lexicographers is language itself, and it is our business to describe the language as it is", which is why "[i]f all the citational evidence suggests that the verb *nag* is generally used with a female subject, [she] ought to say so".⁵⁹ Rundell agrees that the basic task of a lexicographer is to explain the meanings of words by observing their actual use. Any gender bias should, however, be avoided, wherefore the importance of portraying women in positive roles in definitions and example sentences. Rundell also mentions

corresponding search strings with *he* reveal 90 occurrences. None of the 41 hits for "what a bastard" refers to women.

⁵⁹Whitcut, 142.

the particular importance in learner's dictionaries of supplying offensive words with warnings about the effects that they may produce in the listener or reader.⁶⁰

Of the twenty-five words studied, *hero* has been extensively commented upon in debates about gender-biased language. Since the 1970s,⁶¹ there have been calls to treat *hero* as a gender-neutral word, the separate terms *hero* and *heroine* being seen as perpetuating gender stereotypes and making women seem non-standard. The male emphasis in the concept of what it means to be a hero has also been criticized.⁶² The entries for *hero* in the five learner's dictionaries vary as regards mentions of gender. *CALD* and *MEDAL* consider *hero* in the bravery sense a gender-neutral word, in contrast to the three other works, which state that the referent is "a man" or "especially a man". It is possible that the main reason for the differences in the descriptions is not the corpus evidence available to each dictionary, but the lexicographers' varied responses to calls for extending the scope of the word to cover women as well. That the compilers of the learner's dictionaries examined are aware of the debates surrounding sexist language is certainly shown by the omission of earlier references to "qualities considered as male", "qualities believed to be typical of men or boys", and "qualities thought to be typical of boys, eg courage and a sense of adventure" in the entries for *sissy* in *CALD*, *LDOCE*, and *OALD*, respectively.

⁶⁰Rundell, "A Nice Girl like you."

⁶¹Cameron notes that it was the early 1970s that saw the emergence of "serious feminist criticism of mainstream/malestream dictionaries".

⁶²Doyle, 38; Fayer, 27; Golden, 43; Kramarae et al., 189; Miller and Swift, *Handbook*, 139–41.

Some of the changes from one edition of the dictionary to the next do not seem explicable by changes in the real world, corpus evidence, *or* discussions about non-biassed vocabulary. It is difficult to see any of those factors behind the decision to remove the mention of men from the entries for *fez* and *sombrero* in some of the dictionaries. Rather, it would appear that here the lexicographers have assessed the importance of the gender component of meaning differently. For some of them, the description of the physical appearance of the object is enough, with no need to add information about the sex of the wearer. The language learner's view of the matter may well be different. If a word is predominantly applied to one of the sexes, most learners would probably appreciate knowing that, because the information might help them to avoid producing a sentence that sounds unidiomatic or somehow "not right". In some instances, the omission of any comment on gender may in fact affect the mental image of the referent. Some learner's dictionaries define *swimsuit* as "a piece of clothing for swimming", others adding that the garment so called is worn especially by women or girls. The genderless definition would equally cover monokinis, bikinis, and swimming trunks, the focus in the gendered version being on the two first-mentioned types of swimwear.

In a dictionary intended for learners, definitions should be drafted in such a way as to enable the learner to use the words in a natural manner in a foreign-language environment. The learner's own culture may be very different from that environment, and it is therefore important to include cultural information, and information about the associations of a word, where such explanations are relevant for the idiomatic use of the word. Comments about gender need to be non-biassed, yet informative about the contexts where the word is typically found. Uses generally perceived as offensive should be labelled as such or furnished with a usage note. The analysis of the definitions

of the example words in the five learner's dictionaries shows that gender is not an easy matter to handle in lexicography. Rundell's description of issues of language and gender as a "minefield"⁶³ is appropriate indeed.

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⁶³Rundell, "A Nice Girl like you."

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Table 1 Gender specifications for *bastard* ‘an unpleasant person’ / ‘a person of the stated kind’.

date	<i>OALD</i>	<i>Cobuild</i>	<i>LDOCE</i>	<i>CALD</i>	<i>MEDAL</i>
1948	neither meaning given				
1963	neither meaning given				
1974	unspecified / man				
1978			man / man		
1987–9	man (usu.) / man (usu.)	unspecified / unspecified	unspecified / man (esp.)		
1995	man (usu.) / man (esp.)	man (usu.) / man (usu.)	man (esp.) / man	man (esp.) / man (esp.)	
2000–1	man (esp.) / man (esp.)	man (esp.) / man (usu.)			
2002–3		man (esp.) / meaning not given	man (esp.) / man		man / unspecified
2005–7	man (esp.) / man (esp.)	man (esp.) / meaning not given		unspecified / unspecified	man / unspecified

2008–10	man (esp.) / man (esp.)	man (esp.) / meaning not given	man (esp.) / man	unspecified / unspecified	
2012		man (esp.) / meaning not given			
2013–5	man (esp.) / man (esp.)	man (esp.) / meaning not given	man (esp.) / man	unspecified / unspecified	
2018		man (esp.) / meaning not given			
online	man (esp.) / man (esp.)	man (esp.) / man (usu.)	man (esp.) / man	unspecified / unspecified	man / unspecified

Table 2 Gender specifications for *hero* ‘person famous for bravery’ / ‘main character in a story’.

date	<i>OALD</i>	<i>Cobuild</i>	<i>LDOCE</i>	<i>CALD</i>	<i>MEDAL</i>
1948	boy or man / man				
1963	boy or man / man				

1974	unspecified / unspecified				
1978			unspecified / man		
1987–9	unspecified / man	unspecified / man	unspecified / unspecified		
1995	unspecified / man	man (esp.) / man	man / man or boy	unspecified / unspecified	
2000–1	man (esp.) / man	man (esp.) / man			
2002–3		man (esp.) / man	man / man or boy		unspecified / man
2005–7	man (esp.) / man	man (esp.) / man		unspecified / man	unspecified / man
2008–10	man (esp.) / man	man (esp.) / man	man / man or boy	unspecified / man	
2012		man (esp.) / man			
2013–5	man (esp.) / man	man (esp.) / man	man / man or boy	unspecified / man	
2018		man (esp.) / man			

online	man (esp.) / man	man (esp.) / man	man / man or boy	unspecified / man	unspecified / man
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