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**“THEY’RE DUMB, NOT STUPID.”**  
A Corpus Study on the Language on Stupidity in American  
English

# ABSTRACT

Arttu Luhtala: "They're dumb, not stupid.": A Corpus Study on the Language on Stupidity in American English  
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This master's thesis studied the use of four evaluative adjectives with senses denoting a lack of intelligence, *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded* in informal American English. The first of three research questions concerned prominent features of the words in the data. The second research question concerned the near-synonymy and variance of these words, and the third research question concerned the presence of evaluation and attitude in language containing one or more of these words.

Theoretical notions on insults, semantics, and evaluative language were used to form a basis for the analysis. Basic notions on corpus linguistics were provided, as the language data formed from television and film subtitles was retrieved from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Three dictionary entries were used as supplementary material for comparison in the discussion of the second research question. The main methods were the analysis and comparison of the 30 most frequent collocates of the adjectives and concordance lines of those collocations.

The collocational data showed both similarities and differences between the adjectives. Among the collocates of the adjectives, only the words *thing* and *girl* were shared by all four. All adjectives had varying numbers of collocates specific to them, and of those collocates shared by two or more adjectives, different collocates were found to prefer one of the adjectives to varying degrees. Regarding the second question, the four adjectives were found to behave as either near-synonyms or variants situationally. Similarly, the evaluations and attitudes the words were found to express also varied situationally, though the presence of repetition or synonymy appears to aid in specifying this. Furthermore, it was suggested that such expressions are found more offensive in interrogative form.

Keywords: corpus study, insults, informal language, evaluational adjectives, American English, near-synonymy

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

Arttu Luhtala: "They're dumb, not stupid.": Korpustutkimus typeryyttä koskevassa kielenkäytössä  
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Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tutkittiin älykkyyden puutetta merkitsevien, subjektiivisesti arvottavien adjektiivien *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish* ja *retarded* käyttöä epävirallisessa amerikanenglannissa. Ensimmäinen kolmesta tutkimuskysymyksestä käsitteli näiden huomattavia ominaisuuksia aineistossa. Toinen kysymyksestä koski sanojen lähisyntymyyttä ja varianssia ja kolmas tutkimuskysymys käsitteli arvioinnin ja asenteen läsnäoloa näitä sanoja sisältävässä kielenkäytössä.

Teoreettisen pohjan rakentamiseen hyödynnettiin loukkauksien, semantiikan ja arvottavan kielenkäytön käsitteitä. Perustavanlaatuisia käsitteitä korpuslingvistiikasta sisällytettiin, sillä televisio- ja elokuvatekstityksiin perustuva kieliaineisto kerättiin nykyajan amerikanenglannin korpuksesta Corpus of Contemporary American English. Kolmea sanakirjamääritelmää hyödynnettiin vertailuun toista tutkimuskysymystä käsiteltäessä. Pääasialliset tutkimusmenetelmät olivat adjektiivien kolmenkymmenen toistuvimman kollokaatin sekä näiden kollokaatioiden konkordanssirivien analyysi ja vertailu.

Kollokaatiodata osoitti sekä samankaltaisuuksia että eroavaisuuksia adjektiivien välillä. Adjektiivien kollokaateista vain *thing* ja *girl* kollokoivat kaikkien neljän kanssa. Kaikille adjektiiveille löytyi vaihteleva määrä niille spesifisiä kollokaatteja ja niistä, jotka olivat kahdelle tai useammalle adjektiiville yhteisiä, tietyt kollokaatit suosivat jotakin adjektiiveista eriasteisesti. Koskien toista tutkimuskysymystä, tutkitut adjektiivit havaittiin toimivan joko lähisyntymeinä tai varianteina tilanteellisesti. Samoin arvoinnit ja asenteet, joita adjektiivit havaittiin ilmaisemaan, vaihtelivat tilanteen mukaan, joskin toiston tai synonyymien läsnäolo vaikuttaa tukemaan näiden täsmentämistä. Lisäksi tällaisten ilmaisujen esitettiin vaikuttavan loukkaavammilta kysymysmuodossa.

Avainsanat: korpustutkimus, loukkaukset, epävirallinen kieli, subjektiivisesti arvottavat adjektiivit, amerikanenglanti, lähisyntymia

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin Originality Check -ohjelmalla.

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## 1 Introduction

A person who has never insulted or been insulted, whether by intention or not, is likely to be a fictional one. In fact, as will be shown in this thesis, not even fictional characters are safe from their person coming under attack. Yet, insulting language has seemingly received relatively little scholarly attention.

When a writer or speaker uses the word *stupid*, some thing or person is likely to come to the mind of the reader or hearer. A stupid neighbour may be one who does not realise they are making noise in the middle of the night. A stupid cat might be one that has not been witnessed catching a single rodent in its eight years of life. A stupid idea could be one that, in one moment, seemed a stroke of genius, but only brought trouble when acted upon. Et cetera, ad infinitum; could someone consider these stupid words?

In Hughes' lengthy volume on swear words, he notes that words on 'stupidity' form "perhaps the richest source of terms of personal insult and abuse" (2006, 452). He continues by stating that this group of words is broad enough to be considered "unmanageable", and considering that most thesaurus entries on words like *stupid* are populated by dozens of synonym candidates seems to agree with this claim. Despite this, most literature engaged in the study of language seem to exclude this word category.

This thesis aims to do the opposite by specifically investigating four potentially intelligence-insulting words: *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded*, henceforth referred to as SDFR where all four are concerned. In preliminary searches, these words were found to be some of the more frequent ones representing words denoting, among other things, low intelligence. The reason the word class chosen to be studied is adjectives stems from their evaluational and attitude-expressing characteristics. Although the intention of this thesis is not to give a full account of any one of the four words or the full interplay between them—

see comment on unmanageability above—it does seek to reveal some prominent patterns and features of them individually and in interplay between each other.

The thesis proceeds by introducing and reviewing relevant literature in section 2. The first notion to be discussed in section 2.1 is that of an insult; what counts as an insult, what kinds of insults have been recognised, and the social relevance of the topic are of particular interest. Section 2.2 offers an overview of corpus linguistics, which will assist in some discussions of the data analysis. Section 2.3 introduces the semantic basis the thesis is built upon, as well as important concepts of lexical semantics. Finally, section 2.4 presents insights into adjectives, evaluational language, and the intersection of these, evaluational adjectives.

Section 3 focusses on the data and the analysis methods used in the thesis and introduces the research questions. Section 3.1 discusses some dictionary entries for SDFR, while section 3.2 explains what data was used, how it was sourced, and the way of analysing it. Based on the discussion up till then, the research questions are given in section 3.3.

Section 4 combines the data analysis and the discussion of it. The data analysis commences with general frequency data in section 4.1, while section 4.2 begins the language data analysis and discussion via collocation and concordance data and concerns the first research question. Section 4.3 discusses research question two and section 4.4 research question three. Finally, section 5 concludes the thesis.

## 2 Background Material

In this section, both the theoretical and otherwise contextual material that this thesis is built upon will be introduced and reviewed. The notion of an insult, especially one on another person's intellect, will be defined, and some current discussion on the topic introduced. Aspects of corpus linguistics relevant to this thesis will be explained, followed by similarly

motivated concepts of meaning. A short section on adjectives and evaluative language will be followed by an overview of previous studies partially similar in nature to this thesis.

## 2.1 Insults

Insults are a diverse and complex category of linguistic items. At its simplest, insulting language is meant to express disdainful opinion of some thing, person, or group (e.g., Conley 2010, 2). The targeted characteristics of an insult may refer to appearance, nationality or ethnicity, sexual orientation, or, as is focused on in this thesis, perceived intellect. The characteristics listed above are simply some of those which seem to garner more attention than others, as studies on racist or sexist slurs, for instance, are numerous (e.g., O’Dea et al. 2015; O’Dea and Saucier 2020; Felmlee et al. 2020; Fasoli et al. 2015). However, it seems, and is indeed claimed by Conley (2010, 2), that the larger group of insults has been left largely overlooked and underexamined.

Returning to the short list of possible target characteristics of an insult, it may be close to impossible to create one that would be all-encompassing (Conley 2010, 9). This stems from the view that an effective insult targets some “otherness”, i.e., dissimilarity, between the source and recipient of an insult (Wee 2015, 2). This dissimilarity may be related to commonly upheld ideals and values, and according to Van Oudenhoven et al., these measures also affect the effectiveness of an insult (2008, 176). Wee (2015, 7) takes a similar stance, stating that an insult is effective if it refers to a “socially devalued attribute”, such as low intellect, and there exists asymmetry between speaker and hearer in possessing said attribute. The difficulty of creating a list of insult targets is in part due to differences in the valuing of these characteristics between social groups, from societies to microcommunities, as well as specific situations. For instance, high intelligence is assumed to be respected in general, but there may be scenarios where it may be the negatively associated attribute. In communicative

situations whose themes are decidedly everyday and casual, such as locker-room talk, bringing up topics which are often associated with higher intelligence, like science, might earn the speaker a retort along the lines of *nerd*, *smarty-pants*, etc.

The terminology surrounding insults is not totally clear-cut. An insult is commonly described as offensive, abusive (e.g., Van Oudenhoven 2008), or aggressive language (e.g., Cruz 2019). Other common terms in the domain of insults include *derogatory*, *pejorative*, and *slur*. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, especially in arenas of discussion where specificity is less demanded, but there are marked differences between them. Cousens (2019, 1) offers a hypothesis, according to which both insults and slurs are pejorative, but slurs are considered harsher, even oppressive. This is likely to, at least partly, stem from the general perception that slurs specifically refer to some group (e.g., Rix 2022, 3; Hom 2010, 165), often based on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Another factor separating slurs from insults is whether there is reference to some taboo, i.e., something forbidden and to be avoided.

A word commonly used for insulting may not always indicate ill intentions. In fact, the act of insulting itself may not elicit negative reactions, but mixed or positive ones instead. This is common in games, such as “The Dozens” (Conley 2010, 3); comedy, both modern stand-up comedy and classical comedies (ibid.; Smith 2021; Kamen 2020); and in close relationships (Korobov 2017). Sometimes, words which are apparently abusive can even be used endearingly (Conley 2010, 18) or to intentionally seek a humoristic reaction (Dynel 2021, 32). These insults lacking offensive intent may be categorised as “ritual” or “jocular” insults and are often signs of solidarity and good rapport (ibid., 27). In contrast, insults of a “personal”, or as Dynel calls them, “genuine” nature are intended to offend at least the recipient, perhaps other hearers or non-interactants as well.



Insults may be explicit or implicit. The below examples (1a-b) are taken from Dynel (2021) and illustrate an explicit and implicit insult respectively (emphasis added).

- (1) a. James Blunt just has an annoying face and a highly irritating voice  
 b. I can't escape James blunt... first it's on in the car and now on repeat in the shop

In (1a), the explicitness of the insult comes from the underlined words, while in (1b) the insult is directed towards James Blunt's music, judging it as somehow disagreeable enough to wish to not hear it anywhere. The kind of insults focused on in this thesis are explicit, marked by the use of a term of abuse. More specifically, the focus is on "words denoting negative qualities" (Cruz 2019, 2). Other ways to create insults include euphemism, nonverbal language, and irony. Some measures of how insulting a term of abuse can be include the intent of the speaker (Cruz 2019, 3), as well as extralinguistic and paralinguistic features (Conley 2010, 7). Intent is rarely if ever explicitly clear but is rather subject to interpretation. This interpretation is, of course, not built from nothing, but is rather a result of perceiving and analysing various cues in an interaction (Cruz 2019). Dynel (2021, 34) states that these include the form of the utterance (e.g., word choices), particularly in the form of creativity; if applicable and present, nonverbal cues; the reactions of those participating in an interaction; and other contextual cues, on both small and large scale. She reminds the reader that even with these cues, any interpretation of intention and what type the insult belongs to is subject to doubt. Cruz (2019, 11) takes a similar stance, arguing that the hearer of an insult may inaccurately hypothesise the intentions of a speaker if they interpret contextual clues in ways that "do not match the speaker's informative intention." There is room for argument, then, that some utterance of a speaker that is not meant to insult may result in a hearer interpreting it as one, and vice versa.

As touched upon above, insults are not built from language alone. While he states that verbal insults are the most common, Conley also introduces nonverbal insults, such as

dressing improperly, breaches of etiquette during meals, or a specific tone of voice (2010, 7). Furthermore, he argues that even verbal insults use resources other than words to create insulting force. These resources include choices in how a speaker utters an insult, their body language surrounding the utterance, and he argues that the most important one is timing. Conley takes this view even further and claims that only few, if any, words are “inherently abusive, that is, insulting” (8). Finally, he argues for the contextual nature of potentially insulting words, i.e., terms of abuse. Specifically, what constitutes a term of abuse is dependent on language, culture, and even situation.

As insults are dependent on more than just verbal resources, a hypothesis arises where it may be possible to distinguish legitimate insults from jocular ones more precisely in spoken language. This is likely connected to the common perception that ironic language is riskier in writing. Nevertheless, insults are present in written language, too, where making one explicit may involve, for instance, the use of an expletive. Written insults tend to be common on the inter, and as an example, Dynel (2021) studied insults originating on Twitter (now X; references to the platform will remain as *Twitter*, as the studies cited and the data gathered were conducted under the old name). Based on two case studies, she expanded this genuine-jocular dichotomy with the “humorous genuine insult” (34). This type of insult combines the genuine intent to offend with an intent to amuse in social interactions between multiple participants, usually through creative means.

An utterance or passage carrying insulting force may be produced in varying circumstances. As a result, similar productions may fulfil different functions depending on the situation (Van Oudenhoven et al. 2008, 175). This circumstantial variation includes variables such as the source(s) and recipient(s) of the insult (Conley 2010, 3), the presence of the recipient (Wee 2015, 4) or other hearers and the latter’s expectations (Conley 2010, 5), and the time and place of insulting. Examples (2a-b) elaborate hearer presence.

- (2) a. You're such an asshole. [speaker insults another directly, face-to-face]  
 b. He's such an asshole. [speaker insults another indirectly, having the insulted in vicinity or otherwise available, or completely absent, at least in the speaker's mind.]

The relationship of source and recipient consists of the individual and the group, where a representative of one may insult a representative of the same or other side (Conley 2010, 3). Conley gives examples of three scenarios—individual-group, group-individual, and group-group—and suggests that individual-individual insults may be “the most common scenario that comes to mind” (ibid.). While an individual may also direct an insult at themselves, the abusive nature of an insulting expression is less contested when some representative insults another (Wee 2015, 1-2). The former case is better described as self-berating or self-deprecation (ibid., 5). Wee also found that two separate sets of respondents were much more capable of complimenting themselves, contrary to genuinely insulting. Furthermore, these respondents agreed that insults directed at themselves weren't very effective, as they deemed offending oneself impossible. What seems to be missing, however, is the consideration of a self-insult of a group. While an insult towards someone the speaker is close to may also indicate and even strengthen feelings of solidarity, by including oneself, this could be even further emphasised. Instead of “I am different from you”, “We are different from them” could further strengthen the in-group bonds of the speaker(s) and listener(s).

While this section so far has reported on insults in general, attention is now shifted toward the kind of insults this thesis is centred around: insults constructed using words which refer to low intellect. In an informal survey conducted by Conley, in which he requested ten insulting terms from students, terms referring to (low) intelligence—*jerk*, *idiot*, and *asshole* were reported—were the only category to which both male and female students contributed (2010, 9). The significance of this result is slightly dampened by the overall “semantic poverty” of the combined list of terms, as it potentially could have amounted to 280 terms, but only “pretty much the same dozen or so” were reported. This leads to a hypothesis that, in

general, some particular insulting terms dominate a certain “domain”, such as physical appearance, sexual orientation, and (the lack of) intelligence, found in the aforementioned survey.

Items in this category sometimes overlap with ableist insults, which Cousens (2019, 1) states refer to real or perceived disabilities, often of the cognitive type. He questions the description of ableist terms as “mere” insults and argues that these are similar to slurs. His examples of such terms are *retard*, *idiot*, and *moron*, each of which have historically denoted a specific learning or intellectual disability in varying official capacity (*OED*). This view contrasts with that of Rix (2022), who first suggests that an insult targeting intellect does not extend to every possible recipient of such an insult (3), and finds that the words he studied—*idiot*, *imbecile*, and *moron*—“definitely seem” to be pejorative but not taboo, in contrast to *retard* (8). One conclusion that can be drawn here is that an insult on intelligence is likely to be relative. To call another person an idiot, a moron, an imbecile, or a retard is to suggest their intelligence to be inferior to that of the speaker to varying degrees. This is one likely motivation for the multiplicity of low-intelligence insults, and a more likely dimension of meaning to be referred to than their historical one in common use.

There has been some discussion on the impact insults have in public spaces. Closely related to the above discussion on ableist insults is, for example, a tweet from user @ShannonDingle, in which the sentence “Insults involving ‘low IQ’ are ableist.” is repeated seven times ([twitter.com/ShannonDingle/status/1277266172866674689](https://twitter.com/ShannonDingle/status/1277266172866674689)). Similarly, Andrew Pulrang writes on the relationship between ableist insults and American politics, and how these insults are apparent enough in the field to petition a shift away from them ([forbes.com/sites/andrewpulrang/2021/02/24/how-giving-up-ableist-insults-can-help-heal-our-politics/](https://forbes.com/sites/andrewpulrang/2021/02/24/how-giving-up-ableist-insults-can-help-heal-our-politics/)). On 14 February 2023, EU commissioner Olivér Várhelyi was caught mumbling “How many other idiots are still there?” into a microphone in the Parliament,

which raised voices calling for his resignation ([politico.eu/article/hungary-oliver-varhelyi-ursula-von-der-leyen-commissioner-called-meps-idiots-now-they-want-him-out/](https://politico.eu/article/hungary-oliver-varhelyi-ursula-von-der-leyen-commissioner-called-meps-idiots-now-they-want-him-out/)). These contributions to the discussion on insults are merely droplets in the sea, but they further the claim that insults (on intellect) are undesirable in public spaces. The almost extreme reaction to a single utterance, containing no apparent slur or taboo, either, further illustrates how sensitive certain arenas are to insults on one hand, and how closely language and power are tied to each other. This likely stems from the lack of room for humour in these arenas to a large degree for one, as the possibility to interpret an insult humorously often dulls its offensiveness. For two, it may be due to people wanting to avoid receiving genuine insults, thus leading to them being regarded as language to avoid (Rix 2022, 7).

## 2.2 Corpus Linguistics

Corpus linguistics can be considered either a theory or a methodological approach to language analysis (e.g., Gries 2009, 1225). The stance one takes will depend on what they are studying, but perhaps more common is the methodological stance. As a methodology, corpus linguistics offers tools for researchers that few others can, at the core of which are corpora. A corpus is a language database, usually one the language data of which has been gathered, and sometimes analysed, according to some principles, such as domain, time, or location (e.g. Vaughan and O’Keeffe 2015, 1). One of the basic forms of analysis of this language data is tagging, in which words are tagged based on a set of rules, such as grammatical category. For example, based on overly simple word class tagging, the noun *car* could appear as “car\_N” in a corpus. Tagging is one concrete approach to the more general process of annotation, in which texts are enriched with additional data, such as linguistic properties, paralinguistic characteristics, or demographic data on the producers (speakers/writers) of the language data (Stefanowitsch 2020, 23).

Some of the guiding principles of linguistic corpora are authenticity, representativeness, and large size (Stefanowitsch 2020, 22-23). Stefanowitsch defines authenticity to refer to language being produced for the purposes of communication and not linguistic analysis, i.e., unprompted. Representativeness, he states, pertains to a corpus containing language in a balanced fashion, correlated with what is “actually there”, i.e., how people use language in real life. Accomplishing this is usually attempted by including diverse manifestations of language, not ignoring their prevalence in the target speech community. Conceptually, a large size is simple enough to forego a detailed explanation. What makes size significant, then, is its contribution to representativeness—to a certain point, a larger corpus correlates to a more representative corpus (*ibid.*, 37). With the advance of (computer) technology, corpora have continued to grow in scale, where the largest corpora contain billions of words. An unfortunate reality is, however, that most language data in corpora is written, as written corpora are far easier, cheaper, and faster to produce (Vaughan and O’Keeffe 2015, 3). This one-sidedness is unfortunate because there are differences between written and spoken language, where spoken language is generally thought to be more up to date with linguistic innovation while written language changes more slowly.

Corpora are categorised based on their characteristics, such as size, use case, and time focus. A large corpus that contains 100 million words or more may be referred to as a mega corpus (Weisser 2016, ch. 2.3.2.2). Corpora that represent language as holistically as possible are termed general or sample corpora, while corpora which are specific to a particular domain, such as a particular type of speaker or a collection of an author’s literary works, are called specific or specialised corpora (e.g., Weisser 2016, ch. 2.4; Vaughan and O’Keeffe 2015, 4). Two distinctions can be made based on time: the time period in focus and the changing of the corpus over time. Regarding the prior, historical (or diachronic) corpora focus on language from some limited period of time, whereas a synchronic corpus focuses on

contemporary language (e.g., Weisser 2016, ch. 2.3; Vaughan and O’Keeffe 2015, 4).

Finally, a static (or snapshot) corpus is designed to not be modified after it has been finalised, while a dynamic (or monitor) corpus is updated with new language data, thus reflecting language change in action (e.g., Weisser 2016, ch. 2.5; Vaughan and O’Keeffe 2015, 4).

Corpus-based language analysis heavily relies on the notions of frequency, concordance, and collocation. Most frequencies are normalised to allow comparison between corpora of different sizes (e.g., Vaughan and O’Keeffe 2015, 7), and likely the most common “base of normalisation” is one million words. Concordance refers to a particular view of a word in its “immediate linguistic context”, often five to eight words to each side (*ibid.*, 8). Single items of concordance are typically called “concordance lines”. Finally, collocation refers to habitual co-occurrence of two words (e.g. Xiao and McEnery 2006, 105), where the combination is more frequent than can be “expected by chance” (Stefanowitsch 2020, 217). Frequencies and collocation form the basis for quantitative language analysis using corpora, while concordance lines contribute to qualitative analysis.

Expanding on the notion of collocation, some concepts dealing more closely with meaning ought to be presented. The co-occurring of words as collocates is not only a statistical observation, as meaningful relations are always found between a node word, i.e., the word used to make the corpus search (query), and its collocates, as well as collocates themselves (Stubbs 2002, 225). This “collocational meaning arising from the interaction of a given node and its typical collocates” is referred to as “semantic prosody” (Xiao and McEnery 2006, 105). Primarily, this feature expresses “speaker/writer attitude or evaluation” (Louw 2000, 58, *qtd. in* Xiao and McEnery 2006, 106). Xiao and McEnery state that, in general, this form of evaluation is negative, but violating this expectation may affect the hearer in some way, and they give irony, insincerity, and humour as examples of this. Furthermore, they argue that semantic prosodies are a result of the interplay between an “item

and its typical collocates” (Xiao and McEnery 2006, 106-107), and that two possibilities emerge from this notion. Firstly, it seems that an item only gets affective meaning in the presence of its typical collocates, and secondly, that especially the negative semantic prosodies “stain” these items. This results in their use outside of the context of their typical collocates leading to the extension of their affective meaning to that new context.

### 2.3 Meaning

At its most basic, semantics refers to the study of meaning (e.g., Partee 1999; Kroeger 2019). Semantics is not limited to one scientific discipline, such as linguistics or philosophy, though the prior two are likely the most common interfaces for studying meaning. The linguistic side, which this thesis leans towards, focuses on “the relationship between linguistic form and meaning (Kroeger 2019, 4).

Meaning is, of course, an exceptionally vague concept, and it must be related to some other concept, such as “the world” or the mind, for it to even come into existence. Language, on the other hand, transmits that meaning. For instance, without reference to the physical conditions on Earth (“the world”), a tree being defined as a living organism, capable of photosynthesis, and requiring water and nutrients for it to grow and sustain itself would hold no meaning; the definition would simply amount to contentless scribbles about another contentless scribble. When it is agreed that “the world” is the common playfield of the tree and the concepts present in its definition, the tree receives world-referential, descriptive meaning. This kind of meaning includes the notion of truth, which in simple terms refers to the in-world situation and the claims an utterance makes. To illustrate, saying “This is a tree” while holding one’s hand on a tree would most likely hold true, but not when the hand is on a streetlamp, for example. This description of the relationship between a world, language, and the mind is based on the Semiotic Triangle (Kroeger 2019, 16). The stance taken here,



though, is that this relationship is more linear, with the world and the mind on opposite ends of a line and language in between them, functioning as a filter and conveyor of meaning.

Between a word and its world-referent is a person, and more specifically, the cognition of a person (e.g., Geeraerts 2010, 9-12). While it is true that trees exist both as objects in the world and items in the vocabularies of most of the world's languages—the tree is a rather commonly encountered thing, after all—the specific English word *tree* is more a product of human intervention than a product of biological evolution (though it can be argued that the fact itself that there is a word for the tree is (Pinker & Bloom 1990)). As a result, the word *tree* is almost expected to conjure different understandings or examples of real-world trees, i.e., the word is interpreted differently by people, based on their experiences to a great extent. To one, *tree* (hypernym) may primarily refer to a lush oak tree (hyponym), under which they would relax on a fair-weathered day; and to another, a withered pine tree (hyponym) on the side of a busy motorway; and so on. But crucially, in most situations, many if not all would agree that any such examples of trees can be referred to with *tree*, owing to the hypernym-hyponym, or broad-specific relationship (e.g., Murphy 2010, 113-114; Kroeger 2019, 113-114). This context-dependent kind of referring is known in linguistic semantics as denoting (Kroeger 2019, 21). Here, the sense of *tree* is shared between utterances and informs as to the possible denotations it can have in the frame of reference (“universe of discourse”), but the specific (kind of) tree varies between contexts.

The discussion so far has focused on a far too arboreal topic in relation to the main theme of this thesis. The tree was used to showcase interplay between a word (noun) and a real, tangible object, existing both in- and outside human cognitions. SDFR are vastly different in this word-thing interplay, or word-quality interplay here, as they are all adjectives (though the last two are derivations of nouns), and, in the sense this thesis primarily addresses, they all refer to an abstract, invisible quality of a person. Furthermore, this quality

is not only invoked through cognition, but it also pertains to cognition. This raises questions about the source of the meanings of the four adjectives, since intelligence as a human trait cannot be directly sensed through the five senses. Rather, the intelligence of a person is estimated, perhaps intuitively, through perceiving and evaluating their words, actions, behaviours, and so forth. This inherently introduces subjectivity and perspective-dependence to the words and, more generally, the act of evaluating and commenting on a person's intellect. As an example, more people would likely give the label of low intelligence to an adult who habitually miscalculates simple arithmetic equations than one who occasionally slips up on calculus. But, as the saying "there is always someone better than you" implies, the mostly successful calculus-doer may be evaluated as stupid in comparison to someone who effortlessly performs real analysis, for example. This is made possible via the scalar nature of these words—and the general property of intelligence—calling a hearer to assess the degree of the ascribed quality for each utterance (Cruz 2019, 16). Granted, this example is quite simplistic in comparison to real-world situations, assuming that not excelling mathematically is a sign of low intelligence, that mathematical calculations can be linearly ranked in terms of difficulty, and that intelligence is measurable through one area alone. However, it should suffice in showcasing the comparative and evaluative nature of intelligence-measuring.

Linguistic semantic analysis can be separated into three parts: word meaning, sentence meaning, and utterance meaning. Words and sentences should require no further introduction, and utterances are, at their simplest, actual realisations of sentences by language users, including their context (Kroeger 2019, 5). This distinction is useful in this thesis, as the main objects of study are words, and the primary data used for the analysis consists of pseudo-utterances. Utterances and pseudo-utterances are separated here, as the data, as introduced in section 3, is in fact made up of transcriptions of utterances in the form of subtitles. As such, while it is true that the language within these transcriptions was at some point uttered by a

person, the actual items in the data are sentences written based on utterances. This means that some of the information within utterances, namely most contextual information, is lost in transcription. Furthermore, some of these utterances have been directed by scripts written to be performed for a commercial product and may thus be not wholly representative of what a “wild” utterance would be. Nevertheless, these pseudo-utterances should function well as data for this thesis, in part because they were likely written while considering what would be said with a situation in mind, and they are still much more authentic than imagined examples.

In linguistic semantics, vagueness and ambiguity are clearly separated concepts, though still adjacent to each other. While ambiguity requires a word to have more than one sense, vagueness is generated due to missing limits of the denotations available to them, particularly evident in scalar adjectives (Kroeger 2019, 81-84). Technically, SDFR are members of both classes, as they possess more than one sense and, in at least one of them, are analysed as scalar adjectives without definite limits. Consider the following imagined examples.

- (3) a. He’s so stupid, he makes me laugh all the time.  
 b. He’s so stupid, he always keeps his hat on inside.  
 c. He’s so stupid, he didn’t even catch on when I hinted that I like him.  
 d. He’s so stupid, he can’t even calculate the area of a triangle.  
 e. He’s so stupid, he should just jump off a cliff.

Each of these examples may be rephrased in different ways. The *stupid* in (3a) could be replaced by *silly*, but not so much by *unintelligent*, whereas the one in (3b) could be replaced by *inconsiderate*, and to a slightly greater degree, *unintelligent*. Likewise, *unintelligent* is a possible replacement in each of (3c–e), though the likely primary one only in (3d), while (3c) would likely prefer *slow*. (3e) is particularly unspecific, as the actual reason for uttering such a sentence could be virtually anything, though usually borne out of negative rapport with or emotions toward the target. It is clear, then, that *stupid* is both vague and ambiguous, further evinced by the “x but not-x” test. For the sentences in (3a–c), especially, a retort along the lines of “I mean, he’s stupid but not stupid” would make sense, amounting to “silly but not

unintelligent” in (3a), given appropriate differentiation strategies, such as increased stress (indicated with an underscore). This test is known as the test of contradiction, and Kroeger claims it to be a strong indicator of ambiguity (2019, 87–88). In short, the shared clause in (3a-e) “He’s so stupid” differs in meaning between contexts.

However, in his claim lies an issue in relation to SDFR. This issue is that “an essential property of ambiguity is that the two senses must have different truth conditions” (88), namely the inclusion of truth conditions. As discussed above, an expression on the intelligence of a person—perhaps even the self—is based on perceptions and attitudes, rather than factual knowledge. In that case, how can truth conditions be established for words such as SDFR? One possible avenue is the inclusion of the presence of an attitude, i.e., a phrase such as “I believe/think that X”, a practice introduced in Saka (2007). This way, the truth condition would no longer hinge on whether someone actually is of low intelligence, but rather the belief of the utterer that someone is. Of course, this way of establishing truth conditions remains non-measurable in the way observations about the physical world are, but it still allows for establishing much more specific and retrievable ones than relying on fuzzy and undefined limits of the words themselves. Whenever necessary, this is the truth-conditional manner of analysis in this thesis.

Furthermore, a second problem lies in the requirement that the truth values of the senses be different. The issue regarding SDFR is that one may think that a person is stupid both in the silly sense and the unintelligent sense simultaneously, clearly in violation of the aforementioned requirement. Does this mean that such an utterance would not be ambiguous? Not necessarily. Returning to Saka (2007), he tackles the topic of ambiguity by arguing that, with his basis of attitudinal semantics, ambiguity can be explained through possibilities. More specifically, he argues that if a thought of the form “x is y” may refer to two or more separate thoughts, it is ambiguous. Returning to the examples in (3), if one were to utter only the first

clause (“He’s so stupid”), the hearer may conjure any number of thoughts similar to the second clauses, choosing the one or a set they believe to be the most contextually appropriate.

To summarise the discussion on ambiguity, then, it is less likely that SDFR will exhibit lexical ambiguity (the prior kind), as their primary senses are closely related to each other. However, it would not be surprising to see ambiguity on the level of thought or attitude (the latter kind), as the gamut of reasons for calling someone stupid, whether in the sense of low intelligence, thoughtlessness, general discontent, or others, is wide. While the rest of SDFR may exhibit different ranges, it seems likely that they would be similar in essence.

Homing in on words, Murphy (2010) states that they are thought to have three dimensions of meaning. These are the denotative, connotative, and social dimensions. Denotative meaning refers to the relationship between a word and its object of reference, i.e., some thing, property, action, concept, etc. In simple terms, the denotative meaning of a word is its literal meaning, the one dictionaries focus on. Connotative meaning refers to “semantic relations that a word has” (33). Different words may share a denotative meaning but have different “flavours”. As for SDFR, they may all refer to someone lacking in intelligence, as can *unintelligent*. Here, the latter represents a more neutral, remark-like word, whereas the prior are tinted by attitude towards the denoted.

Social meaning is related to communicative situations, as it refers to what an expression can suggest about the speaker and the surrounding social situation. With this dimension of meaning, in particular, it is important to note that language data can only be used to make assumptions of varying veracity, especially if the amount of data available is limited. There are, for example, differences between calling someone stupid or foolish. Based on intuition, *stupid* is a common choice for most people, used primarily in more casual and private situations, whereas *foolish* may be heard in speeches and other public-facing situations, or used more commonly by highbrow individuals.

The final concept of importance to this thesis is synonymy. First and foremost, synonymy can be divided into subclasses. Murphy (2010) first distinguishes between absolute and sense synonyms: absolute synonyms are words that are interchangeable in every imaginable situation, leading to no changes in any aspect of meaning, whereas sense synonyms share at least one sense. In the case of SDFR, it is clear that they are not absolute synonyms—absolute synonyms largely exist in technical realms of language—and conversely are sense synonyms, as the words share the sense of low intelligence or lack of judgement but have specific meanings other than those. As an example, one may state that their friend became stupid after using narcotics, in the sense that they became senseless or dazed, but none of the other words function in a similar way. Likewise, *dumb* has its now-offensive sense of ‘unable to speak’, while *retarded* can refer to something that is delayed or to a developmental disorder, which are not shared between SDFR. *Foolish* is arguably the closest to an absolute synonym status based on its senses alone, but even it differs from the others, specifically by emphasising a lack of judgement in many situations. It feels natural to utter that “my little brother is really stupid, he’s nine but can’t even read properly”, but substituting *stupid* for *foolish* here makes the sentence feel awkward. However, the substitution functions in cases where the style of the whole sentence is more stereotypically high-class, as in “my younger brother is so very foolish, he is already nine but has yet to fully attain the ability to read”, suggesting a difference in preferred registers between *stupid* and *foolish*.

The second distinction Murphy makes is between near-synonyms and variants. Near-synonyms are words whose senses show overlap, being substitutable in some but not all contexts, depending on the sense employed, which leads to their denotations not being identical. Variants, on the other hand, are words which are denotationally identical, differing in other ways, such as dialect, register, or connotation, as listed in Murphy (2010). Relating

these two concepts to SDFR, there seems to be room for both. Near-synonymity, in the sense of “somewhat similar yet somewhat different”, is apparent between *stupid* and *retarded*, for instance, as they both denote an attribute of low intelligence, but the prior tends to imply a moderate low intelligence, whereas the latter is closer to extreme low intelligence. Similarly, *dumb* and *foolish* may both indicate, for example, a lack of care in making a decision. Where they differ, too, is the felt degree: a dumb decision is usually one which may have been made hastily or without much consideration, whereas a foolish decision may be a more deliberate one that proved unwise. On the other hand, when singling out the sense of ‘low intelligence’ of SDFR, they seem to become variants of each other. *Stupid* and *dumb* are quite common and casual, easily finding a place in various communication situation, while *foolish* is generally more formal or literary. *Retarded* is seen as the most offensive of these and tends to find accepted use only in the most private correspondence or while under the protection of anonymity, especially on the internet.

#### 2.4 Adjectives and Evaluative Language

Adjectives are traditionally divided into two semantic categories: descriptors and classifiers (Biber et al. 1999, 508). Descriptor adjectives are typically gradable and are used to denote various features, such as colour, size, and especially pertinent to this thesis, emotion. This final semantic domain includes adjectives which denote, among others, judgements, affect, or emphasis. Biber et al. list some adjectives in this domain, most of which refer to a general quality, e.g., *bad* and *good*, and the only other negatively loaded adjective they give is *poor*. In addition, they note that an adjective’s meaning may change whether it is used predicatively (“X is poor”) or attributively (“a poor X”), as well as that an adjective is often not used uniformly across registers. They also found that evaluative adjectives are present in all four

of the registers they covered, namely conversation, fiction, news, as well as academic prose, although the individual adjectives used are likely different between registers.

The words chosen to be analysed in this thesis, *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded*, primarily belong to the descriptor category of adjectives. An argument to view *retarded* as a classifier is not far-fetched but does rest on classifying people based on their mental development, which is not the use of the word this thesis focuses on. Instead, *retarded* will be handled similarly to the rest of the words, viewed as descriptor adjectives. More specifically, the four share the function of judging people based on perceived differences in intellect, placing them in the category of evaluative adjectives.

Pounds (2015) offers a broad definition of evaluative language. At its core, evaluative language typically expresses “attitude or stance...to entities in the real world...or to propositions” (1). Functionally, an individual may share bits of their worldview and simultaneously interact with other people on the matter, probing or influencing their thoughts, for instance. Pounds lists several parameters that may be subject to evaluation, the most relevant of which for this thesis, “appreciation and judgment”, should be mentioned here. Centrally, Pounds claims that these parameters tend to follow a “basic high/low or positive/negative continuum” and gives important variables that affect the effectiveness of the evaluation: source, target, subjectivity vs factuality, and level of explicitness. To elucidate the above, two imagined example sentences follow.

- (4) He was definitely dropped on his head multiple times as a child. [uttered by an upper manager about one of their subordinates to a colleague of the subordinate, wanting to imply stupidity]
- (5) I think she’s an idiot. [uttered by an avid follower of celebrity A about celebrity B to a fan of celebrity B]

An obvious difference between (4) and (5) is their level of explicitness. (4) suggests that having been dropped on their head as a child makes one less intelligent, while (5) states its message directly. As for source and target, in (4), the source-target relationship includes



dimensions of authority, presence, and rapport. The utterer holds power over both the non-present recipient and the hearer of the insult, and while the natures of their relationships are not clear, the insulter-insulted one may be assumed to be less than amicable. In (5), the target of the insult is, again, not present, but depending on the relationship of the interlocutors, the insult may be thought to extend to the hearer as well, implying that simply being a fan of celebrity B makes one an idiot. Turning to the subjectivity-factuality parameter, it works on two levels in (4), as the utterance first makes an assumption about the past of the insulted (low factuality) and unravelling the utterance for its subtext reveals a similar message to that in (5). This evaluation should be considered subjective, as will be argued shortly.

Additionally, the configurations present in these examples are not exhaustive, merely representing two plausible situations out of the uncountable similar instances of real-world origin.

Silk extends the attitude-expressing function of evaluative adjectives, which form a part of what he calls “evaluational predicates”, by specifying them to express “various types of normative and epistemic attitudes” (2021, 128). Of the two kinds of attitude, particularly of interest for this thesis is the normative kind, having to deal with norms and widespread expectations. As has been discussed in section 2.1, the four words under analysis targeting a person’s intellect reflect social values. This is another feature of evaluational language, though it may be referred to in different terms. In Silk’s terms, an evaluation is based on a “body of tastes, values, norms, etc.” (129), while Pounds takes a more specific approach, arguing that evaluation relies on “unstable and varying sociocultural assumptions and expectations” (1). These two views can be combined, amounting to evaluation being embedded in interaction with socially constructed, maintained, and contested values, preferences, and expectations. In practice, when an act of evaluation takes place, the evaluation-maker refers to their understanding of these “bodies” and aligns themselves via

said understanding relative to the discursive context at hand, for example by praising, criticising, or critiquing some relevant matter. Through this stance-taking, the evaluation-maker positions themselves onto a continuum, where the other positions are taken by other evaluation-makers (Pounds, 4). The values, preferences, and expectations regarding intellect, for example, may be expected to hold higher intelligence as positive and lower intelligence as negative, or in other terms, desirable and undesirable respectively.

However, difficulties arise when valuing intelligence. Firstly, intelligence can be separated in different ways, such as Gardner's multiple intelligences (2011), Sternberg's triarchic theory of intelligence (1985), or even popular, intuition-based distinctions<sup>1</sup>. If one were to be called stupid, which type(s) would be subject to it in any given circumstance, based on what evidence, and how could that be retrieved through linguistic analysis? Are there lexical items which more explicitly refer to a specific kind of intelligence? Such arising questions are outside the scope of this thesis, but they could further the understanding of the interplay of intelligence and language.

Secondly, evaluating a person's intellect must refer to some point of comparison. This raises two concerns: 1) where does this comparison point lie and how is it determined, and 2) whether different potentially insulting words targeting intellect differ in their potency, i.e., whether, say, *stupid* and *retarded* require different levels of perceived lower intelligence for them to "count. To utter one of SDFR, then, is prototypically to situate the recipient of the word against some accepted level in some speech community, usually below it. Wherever this comparison point is set, it is utilised in making a judgement and expressing an attitude. To point out a perceived lower intelligence of a person implies devaluing them if the desirable value is high intelligence. However, as discussed earlier, potentially insulting

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the manner of separating intelligence makes little difference; rather, the fact that it is possible is of importance.

language is used in a multitude of situations and for various functions. Therefore, it is an oversimplification to argue that every utterance of *stupid*, for example, expresses an attitude of contempt, but such an utterance may also signal solidarity or affection, for instance.

Another layer of complexity regarding the position of a comparison point is the subjectivity (Silk 2021, 128) and context-dependency of many, if not all, evaluative adjectives (Silk 2021, 130; Pounds 2015, 1). In the context of insulting intellect, this subjectivity is inherent to the act, as remarks of a person's smarts embed comparison to a non-factual standard. In calling someone stupid, for instance, a complex combination of circumstantial factors, including the recipient's appearance or behaviour, or social pressure, conjures a point of comparison, most prominently in the mind of the insulter. That is, while the surface utterance of "that person's stupid" simply attributes the person with stupidity, underneath it lies a comparison akin to "that person's stupider than that other person" or "that person's stupider than that group of people". Furthermore, this point of comparison is not rooted in any factual standard, but a conjured one, one which is likely subject to change from one uttering to another. Evaluational adjectives, like SDFR, are sensitive to such standards, requiring a certain degree of a denoted quality of an adjective (e.g., "dumb for a mathematician"), which in turn is subject to (dis)agreement between interactants (Silk 2021, 130). This subjectivity is further enriched by the speaker's attitude towards the recipient of the utterance; saying "you're so stupid" to a friend in a playful manner holds far less insulting force than coldly asserting the same to a junior colleague, and agreement may be easier to achieve in the former than the latter. Lastly, the different occasions likely relate to different points of comparison.

## 2.5 Previous Studies

O’Driscoll (2020, 32-33) offers an overview of different words used in academic study article titles on the topic of offensive language. The list is divided into three parts by lexeme, namely those titles that include *swear* (4 lexemes, 47 cases), those with *taboo* (4 kinds of compounds, 30 cases), and other lexemes (9 lexemes or types of compounds, 48 cases). It must be noted that a number of words were omitted from this survey, including *insult* and *slur*, but the point is made nonetheless: the terminology used in the titles varies greatly, and as O’Driscoll later points out, many are used synonymously (34). This variance and, frankly, inconsistency in wording may lead to a situation where different sources discuss either different concepts using the same words, or the same concepts using different words, which in turn may lead to confusion. Furthermore, this is the situation before considering the use of the omitted words, which can make the topic yet more difficult to navigate.

Several studies have been conducted on the topic of insults. The focus here will be on linguistic studies, though the subject has been studied in fields such as psychology and social studies as well. For example, Pavesi & Formentelli (2019) studied the translation of insults in films by comparing English source texts, Italian dubs of those, and comparable original Italian texts. They analysed the texts for instances of genuine and mock impoliteness (i.e., genuine vs jocular insults) and structural differences of insults using the Pavia Corpus of Film Dialogue. The corpus is a parallel corpus, which hold different-language versions of a text and allow comparison between them (Vaughan & O’Keeffe 2015, 4), and it consists of 24 transcriptions each of the kinds mentioned above, amounting to about 700,000 words. The analysis method combined “automatic and manual identification of insults...[by] perusing the scripts of the films and running queries of word combinations” (569), followed by classifying the discovered insults into genuine and jocular ones based on both linguistic and extralinguistic factors. They found that the original English transcriptions contained the

fewest genuine insults but the most jocular ones, while the case of the original Italian transcripts is the opposite. They also found that the insults in English texts were more structurally complex and diverse in type, which they argue “points to a distinctive authorial playfulness” (576).

Keeping with the theme of genuine vs jocular insults, Dynel (2021) used Twitter data in two case studies to attempt distinguishing between the two. An important revelation here is that doing so requires careful consideration of various factors against purported insults, such as reactions toward them from individual interactants—either a bystander or the recipient of an insult—or collectives of them; the possible presence of jocular rituals; and, more obviously, the form of them, including the use of emoji or textual clues. Crucially, it is made clear that considerations of intention are far from enough to provide basis for judging whether an insult is jocular or genuine.

Moving onto a topic closely related to this thesis, Taylor (1974) lists “more than four hundred” (206) words used to denote low intelligence in American English, both nominals and adjectivals. The list is divided by source into categories such as authoritative terms, consisting of terminology of institutional origin; defining terms, found in dictionaries but many of which are “too formal to be heard in formal conversation” (201); and slang terms, colloquial in use and nature, representing a more playful and creative side to low-intelligence terms. Each of SDFR is found in the lists, except for *foolish*, although *fool* was found in sentimental and literary terms. Based on the variety and abundance of these terms, and as Taylor herself claims, the issue of low intelligence is clearly present in American society and minds. And while the article was published half a century ago at the time of writing, it is hard to imagine its prevalence to have decreased—a subject to be revisited in section 4.1. This is supported by a finding in De Raad et al. (2005), according to which at least one term of abuse denoting low intelligence was found among the ten most frequent ones in word lists which

were assembled from questionnaires filled by a total of 192 male subjects from Spain, the Netherlands, and Germany.

More recently, Rix (2022) investigated how the words *idiot*, *imbecile*, and *moron* are used in 134 articles from four newspapers and 29 academic papers. In the newspaper sources, 166 cases of *idiot*, four cases of *imbecile* (+5 adjacent uses), and 35 cases of *moron* were found, while in the academic sources these figures were 69 (+62 adjacent uses), one (+3), and one again. The counts of newspaper cases were contextualised against *retard(s/ed)*, which was found to be used only once out of 31 occasions in insulting fashion, which Rix states could reflect to a general view that the word is considered taboo. He found that, in both newspaper and academic sources, the terms were used by a variety of different people. In the academic sources, school personnel and pupils or students were found to use the term the most and equally as often at ten cases each, while in newspapers, journalists and reviewers were found to use any of the terms the most at 61 cases, with celebrities and professionals trailing behind at 22 and 24 cases respectively. As for the contexts the terms were used in, both sources utilised the terms in quotes (76.7% for academic, 49.6% for newspaper), in the author's voice (10% and 32.2%), and referred to as text (13.3% and 18.2%). Rix points out that not all uses of these terms were linked to intellect, though in newspapers over 75% of them referred to other people, viewing some part of them as lesser to that of the user, while in academic texts most use was reported speech.

While this is not an exhaustive account by any means, it should serve to show that the subject is of interest in many different fields. However, what seems to be lacking are corpus-based studies on closely related words targeting the same or very similar attributes, especially adjectives. As in Rix (2022), the labelling *retard* and similar nouns have been studied previously, but their adjective counterparts seem to have garnered less attention in research.

Furthermore, the more general *stupid*, *dumb*, and *foolish* seem to not have been targets of concentrated research. This is the gap this thesis aims to slot into.

### 3 Data, Methods, and Research Questions

In this section, three dictionary entries for SDFR will be discussed in section 3.1, after which the source and the methods of gathering and analysing the data will be introduced in section 3.2. Finally, the three research questions will be presented in section 3.3.

#### 3.1 Dictionary Definitions

The most pertinent adjective definitions of SDFR, focussing on notions of intelligence while including adjacent senses, are given in Appendix. These definitions were taken as-is from three dictionaries, representing different dictionary types. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE)*, accessed via the *LDOCE Online* website, is a learner's dictionary, while the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, also accessed online via *OED Online*, is a historical dictionary. Both dictionaries are of British origin, but since this thesis analyses data of American English origin, a dictionary of American origin should be included. The dictionary chosen for this purpose was the *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary (M-W)*, a general dictionary accessible online.<sup>2</sup> These online dictionaries were used for the sake of convenience on one hand, and the assumption that many if not most modern learners and users of language prefer to use digital dictionaries available through devices, such as computers or smartphones, rather than physical volumes. Dictionaries of the prior kind are also not limited by length-of-entry restrictions like printed ones, and may include additional information, such as usage notes, use frequencies, or example sentences. One limitation to

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<sup>2</sup> All dictionary entries were retrieved on April 29 2024.

online dictionaries is that their entries are updated, frequently overwriting the previous entry and without mention. The exception in the dictionaries used here is the *OED*, as it mentions both when the latest revision and the latest modification were made to an entry, as well as listing earlier editions of the dictionary which the entry was published in. The *M-W* seems to be following this trend, although less consistently, as it mentions when the latest modifications were made and what concerned in the entries for *stupid* and *foolish*.

Some noteworthy similarities and differences are present in the definitions. Firstly, each entry for *stupid* includes a sense denoting ‘mental slowness’ (*M-W*, 1.a) or difficulties in learning or understanding (*LDOCE*, 2; *OED*, 1.a). However, the definitions differ in whether they explicitly mention a low or a lack of intelligence in the same senses as the above. Both *LDOCE* and *OED* mention this in connection with the prior trait, while *M-W* separates the two. On the other hand, while both the *M-W* and the *OED* include similar senses denoting products of cognitive function or concrete human activity described as unintelligent (*M-W*, 1.b) or lacking intelligence (*OED*, 1.c), the prior dictionary does not mention a lack of ‘good judgement’ or ‘common sense’ in any sense in the entry, a characteristic that is shared between the prior *OED* sense and the *LDOCE* (1). The three entries do, however, include senses for expressing annoyance, impatience, etc., though they vary in the specifics (*LDOCE*, 3; *OED*, 1.d; *M-W*, 4). Notably, the *M-W* definition does not suggest the word to be colloquial in any sense. Considering that the *OED* mentions the use in sense 1.d being originally American English and both British dictionaries agreeing on its colloquiality, the judgement in the American dictionary may be more representative of contemporary American English.

The entries for *dumb* are quite different from those of *stupid*. For one, these entries are all partially or fully defined using synonyms. According to the *LDOCE* entry, the two words essentially do not require differentiation and can be used interchangeably (1). The *OED* entry



is slightly more informative, mentioning that *dumb* can be used as a “general term of abuse” (II.10.a). Sense II.10.b, on the other hand, repeats the definition found in sense 1.c of *stupid* exactly, though adds that the word is used to express annoyance etc. and used as an intensifier, which the other entries do not mention. Finally, senses 1.a-1.c in the *M-W* entry for *dumb* home in on the lack of intelligence, repeating the pattern found in the discussion on *stupid* that the entries in the American dictionary tend to focus on intelligence rather than other plausible reasons for similar behaviour or disposition. Furthermore, the *M-W* entry does not mention the word being colloquial or informal, as the British dictionaries do.

The *LDOCE* and *OED* entries for *foolish* both include the word *silly* in defining the word in one or more senses (1-2; 1.a). Curiously, the *LDOCE* definitions of both present senses employ the word, the first sense as a synonym and the second in the definition itself. Furthermore, *stupid* is used similarly, used in the definition of the first sense and given as a synonym of the second. On the other hand, the *OED* entry for *foolish* is the only one to mention the use of the word as denoting a person with an intellectual disability (2.b), labelling the sense as North American. That the American dictionary does not include this sense may indicate that it is used infrequently in the region generally, which would agree with the *OED* on the sense being “chiefly north-eastern”. However, the entries across the dictionaries agree that *foolish* denotes a lack of sense or judgement (*LDOCE*, 1; *OED*, 1.a-1.b; *M-W*, 1) on the one hand, and silliness or absurdity on the other (2; 1.a; 2.a), though the use of *stupid* in the *LDOCE* definitions could be understood as referring to low intelligence, as it is not specified which sense the synonymity is based on. On the surface, then, no entry mentions a connection to a low or a lack of intelligence.

Finally, *retarded* is defined mostly in similar terms between the dictionaries, though some differences remain. The most noticeable one is that the *LDOCE* does not mention a sense denoting (severe) stupidity or foolishness, only referring to the now outdated—as

mentioned in all three dictionaries in different ways (*OED*, 2.a-2.b; *M-W*, 1)—sense of *retarded* referring to a developmental delay. While each dictionary adds that the word is considered offensive to some degree, the *M-W* makes the strongest claim overall, labelling both senses as entirely offensive. The claims the British dictionaries make are weakened, as the *LDOCE* states the word is thought to be offensive by many people, but not all or most, while the *OED* makes a similarly powerful claim only regarding the sense referring to intellectual disability, 2.b. The entry does advise sense 2.a to be “potentially offensive, esp. outside North America”, and likewise sense 2.c to be “sometimes considered offensive”. In contrast to the latter definition, the *M-W* labels its second sense as *informal* and *offensive*. This is a clear difference between representations of North American and British judgement of the word.

### 3.2 Corpus Data

All data used in this thesis was retrieved from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which was accessed through the online interface [English-corpora.org](http://English-corpora.org).<sup>3</sup> COCA is a representatively ‘balanced’ corpus of American English, containing slightly over one billion words spread across eight genres and years 1990-2019.<sup>4</sup> Each of the eight genres contains approximately one eighth of the whole corpus data, amounting to 125 million words per genre on average.

The relevant data, most importantly overall and section-specific frequencies, collocations, and concordance lines were then copied to Google sheets files, where most of the data analysis was performed. All queries, unless specifically mentioned, were conducted using the base form of the words alone (e.g., *stupid*, *dumb*). This form was chosen, because

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<sup>3</sup> [www.english-corpora.org/](http://www.english-corpora.org/)

<sup>4</sup> [www.english-corpora.org/coca/help/texts.asp](http://www.english-corpora.org/coca/help/texts.asp)

the words chosen for analysis in this thesis, *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded*, do not have significant representation in word classes other than adjectives.<sup>5</sup>

The language data retrieval was further limited to the TV/Movies (TV/M) section of the corpus, based on user-submitted subtitle files from OpenSubtitles. This allows the amount of data to be kept manageable at 128 million words instead of one billion. Secondly, the restriction allows for the analysis of the language data to focus on one domain of language, that being informal spoken language here. This, in turn, should enable the study of insults in their preferred arena of communication, as they are likely to be avoided in formal settings. As for arguments supporting the choice of TV/M as representative of informal spoken language, Davies (2021) convincingly argues through comparisons to the British National Corpus (BNC), which holds the second-largest English spoken language corpus, that subtitles can be as or more representative of actual conversational language than the corpus specifically made from such language. He does caution that some discursive elements may not be as well-represented in TV/M, as the data is not sourced from transcriptions, but this thesis does not require their veracious presentation.

The English-Corpora interface offers many tools for its users. The basic ones are the List tool, which by using one may acquire, for example, a simple list of combinations of a node word/phrase query and variables surrounding it (e.g., querying “stupid NOUN” will list the 100 most frequent combinations of a token tagged as a noun modified by *stupid* in order of frequency); the Chart tool, which allows the user to investigate query results per section (e.g., how common the phrase “dumb dog” is in the TV/M section); and the Word function, which leads to a page with various information on a word, such as a definition of the word, some of its collocates and related words, and a selection of concordance lines it is found in.

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<sup>5</sup> Additionally, some tokens are mistakenly tagged as non-adjectives, even though they are used as adjectives.

The interface offers a tour of its functions and other helpful hints and is far too extensive to be described in full here.

The frequency data was retrieved with the Chart tool, focusing on the data in the different genres,<sup>6</sup> while the collocation and concordance data was retrieved using the Collocates tool,<sup>7</sup> available by clicking the + sign on the tool row. In the upper field of the tool, one node word (SDFR) was inserted at a time, and in the below field a star (\*), signifying a placeholder for any kind of word. The range of collocates was set to 0 on the left and 1 on the right, instructing the tool to only search for collocates immediately to the right of the node word (+1 collocates). The section of the query was restricted to the TV/M section by selecting it in the left (1) pane of the Sections setting, the Minimum option under the Sort/Limit setting was set to MUT INFO = 0,<sup>8</sup> while the other settings were kept at default. The resulting collocate data was then copied to a Google Sheets file and pruned to the 30 most frequent collocates limited to adjectives and nouns. Subsequently, the concordance line data for each of these collocations was retrieved using the List tool to search for the collocation. In addition, samples of concordance lines were retrieved through queries of the node words by themselves, depending on the overall frequency of the word in TV/M: a total of 1,500 concordance lines were randomly sampled for *stupid*, 1,000 for *dumb* and 500 for both *foolish* and *retarded*. These were not directly analysed but were saved for reference purposes. Furthermore, collocation-specific concordance lines used for linguistic analysis were limited to 100 for each collocation, but before this limitation was performed, the list of concordance lines was randomised using the ‘Randomise range’ functionality in Google Sheets.

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<sup>6</sup> The tool seems to sometimes report a different size of the sections than is described on the information page on the texts of the corpus. Clearing your browser’s (site-specific) cookies may rectify the situation.

<sup>7</sup> It is now recommended to search for collocates through the Word tool

<sup>8</sup> Mutual Information is an approximation of how general or specific a collocate is, higher = more specific  
[www.english-corpora.org/MutualInformation.asp](http://www.english-corpora.org/MutualInformation.asp)

The collocation data was analysed by comparing Mutual Information (MI) scores, the collocates, and with the help of context provided by concordance lines. Most concordance lines were annotated based on prominent properties present where such were discovered to create a pattern, such as what the collocation refers to in a specific instance or what type of expression the instance is. Much of the concordance line analysis relied on instance and context-specific features, and rigidly systematic analysis methods across all language data were not employed.

### 3.3 Research Questions

Three research questions were composed for this thesis, based on the loose theoretical notions discussed in section 2.

1. What are some prominent features of the potentially intelligence-insulting words *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded* in informal American English as depicted in American television and film?
2. What relationships of near-synonymity and variance do *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded* have based on the corpus and dictionary data?
3. How are evaluation and attitude present in informal American English in potentially intelligence-insulting contexts where *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, or *retarded* is used?

## 4 Results, Analysis, and Discussion

In the following sections, pertinent results from the corpus data will be provided and analysed. To reiterate, the node words focused on will be *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded* (SDFR). First, analysis on the overall frequencies of the four words will be given. This will be followed by analysis on the +1 collocation and concordance lines of each node word in section 4.2 and its subsections, where the first research will be examined. Section 4.3 will

focus on the second research question, and section 4.4 will conclude section 4 by discussing the third research question.

#### 4.1 General Frequency Data of SDFR

The frequencies of *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded* all differ from each other, some more distinctively than others. Figure 1 below shows the normalised frequencies per one million words of each word in each corpus section. The four words are most present in less formal genres, especially BLOG (data from blogs) TV/M, and FIC (various forms of fiction, including short stories, first chapters of books, and movie scripts). As spoken language data in corpora often consists of less formal conversations, the relatively low normalised frequencies found in SPOK seemingly contradict this trend. The SPOK section in COCA, on the other hand, consists of transcribed radio and TV programs, mostly talk shows, and while they are primarily unscripted, they are expected to be much more formal than casual conversation or dialogue in many TV shows or movies.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the SPOK section contributes more towards the formal genres than informal ones. The SPOK section is quite comparable to MAG (magazines from various domains), for instance, in terms of how frequent these words are, as aside from *stupid*, the normalised frequencies of the two sections are within two words per million from each other. The last two predominantly formal genres, NEWS (ten different newspapers from around the US) and ACAD (peer-reviewed journals from varying fields), exhibit yet lower frequencies for each word, except for *retarded*. This change of direction will be discussed at the end of this subsection, where some of the caveats of the present data will be introduced. Finally, based on the various levels of presence of these words in the COCA sections, it can be argued that using such potentially intellect-

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<sup>9</sup> [www.english-corpora.org/coca/help/spoken.asp](http://www.english-corpora.org/coca/help/spoken.asp)

insulting words, such as these four, is an informal act. The manifestation of this aspect will be investigated in the following sections.

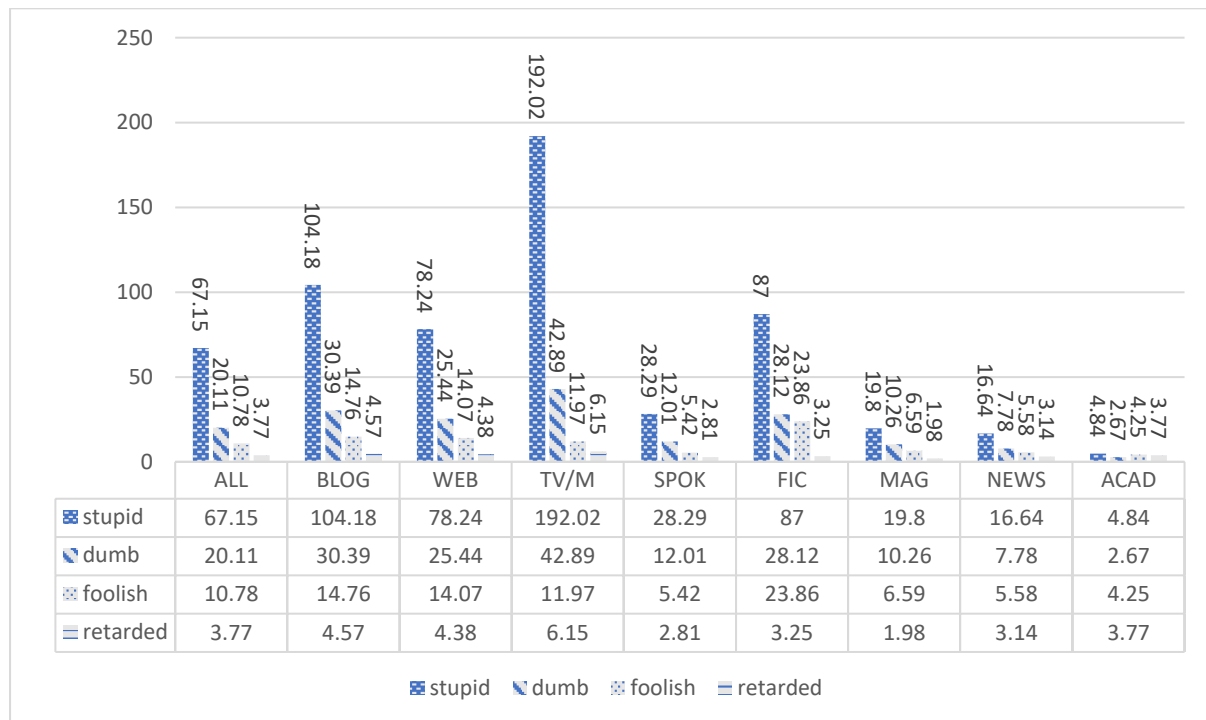


Figure 1. Normalised frequencies of stupid, dumb, foolish, and retarded in COCA.

Among the four words, *stupid* is clearly the most frequent of the four, exhibiting a 3.3 times higher normalised frequency across the entire corpus than the runner-up, *dumb*. This trend is most pronounced in the TV/M section, where the normalised frequency of *stupid* is 4.5 times that of *dumb*'s. In the other less formal genres, *stupid* is between 3 and 3.5 times more frequent than *dumb*, whereas in the more formal sections, this ratio is closer to 2, still in favour of *stupid*. This overwhelming difference between the two most frequent potentially intelligence-insulting words suggests that *stupid* is the typical choice to ridicule a lack of intelligence, thoughtfulness, or knowledgeability, and the other three words under analysis somehow differ from it. This is another matter to be investigated more closely through collocation analysis in the next section.

One of the trend breakers in Figure 1 is *foolish*. While *stupid*, *dumb*, and *retarded* are more frequent in the TV/M data than in other sections, *foolish* is most frequently found in the FIC data, followed by BLOG and WEB. The word is still more frequent in the TV/M data

than the overall data, but as the genre is the most accurate measure of informal spoken language in COCA, its data exhibiting the lowest normalised frequency of the four aforementioned sections suggests that *foolish* is more typical in written language than in spoken language. Furthermore, another data set of spoken language, such as more organically occurred conversations, could exhibit yet lower frequency of *foolish*, as the language data in TV/M combines both written and spoken language production, since most TV shows and movies are based on scripts that are then used for their performance. Thus, the possibility of *foolish* “leaking” into these scripts cannot be fully rejected without further analysis, which is outside the scope of this thesis.

Compared to the other three words, *retarded* is somewhat more even in frequency across the different sections relative to ALL. For instance, *stupid* is most frequent relative to ALL in TV/M at 2.9 times the frequency of ALL, and least frequent in ACAD at 0.1 times. On the other hand, the respective figures for *retarded* are 1.6 times in TV/M and 0.5 times in MAG. Here, the relatively low raw frequency of *retarded* in the data must be considered, as this does temper the judgements that can be made based on the ratios. The low raw frequency of *retarded*, especially in the more informal genres, suggests that the word might be “worse”, i.e., more socially unacceptable than the other three. This view is further reinforced by many dictionary entries, which include notes on the extreme offensiveness, tabooeness, or slur-status of *retarded*. On the other hand, though, the relatively high presence of the word in ACAD and NEWS is likely to originate from its historical use as a technical term, referring to people “diagnosed with or characterized by learning difficulties or an intellectual disability” (*OED*, 2.a). Furthermore, the use of *retarded* in the two genres has decreased in COCA between 1990-1994 and 2015-2019, from 1.41 words per million to 0.46 in ACAD and 1.26 words per million to 0.09 in NEWS. This indicates that the technical use of *retarded* has notably diminished, though not completely disappeared.



To further understand how common the use of these potentially intelligence-insulting words is, a short comparison between the overall frequencies of *stupid* and *smart* follows. As *stupid* was suggested to represent the aforementioned category of words, it was chosen for this comparison. As for *smart*, it was found to be the most common antonym for *stupid*, based on online searches<sup>10</sup> and a Chart query in COCA. While *smart* is slightly less frequent across the whole corpus at 60.97 words per million, it is much more frequent in the more formal sections, ranging from 2.10 times the normalised frequency in SPOK to 3.70 times in MAG compared to *stupid*. To counterbalance this, *smart* was significantly less frequent in the more informal sections, ranging from 0.83 times as frequent as *stupid* in WEB to, most importantly, 0.47 times as frequent in TV/M. Based on this, there seems to be some inclination to insult more than to compliment, especially in informal spoken settings<sup>11</sup> and (scripted) television and film fiction. Once more, a small reservation remains regarding the data being analysed, as more “realistic” spoken data, i.e., language not necessarily meant to be a part of a commercial product, might result in different conclusions.

Finally, one significant caveat in this data must be noted. As this limitation primarily concerns judgements based on frequencies, it is specifically brought up here. The limitation in question is polysemy, the concept of a word possessing multiple meanings. This was touched on in the discussion on *retarded*, where its historically used technical sense was introduced. The aspect these words share and is of primary interest for this thesis relates to perceived low intelligence of people. However, each word possesses their own, different meanings apart from it, as was discussed in section 2.3, which will inevitably distort these

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<sup>10</sup> A Google search for “stupid antonyms” produced results for many different online dictionaries (e.g., Merriam-Webster, Cambridge) and other thesaurus-like websites. Exact results may vary based on where and when the search is made, for instance, but this should not greatly affect the contents of the entries.

<sup>11</sup> This seems to be corroborated by data from the Spoken BNC2014: normalised frequency of *stupid* = 119.5 wpm, and that of *smart* = 22.061 wpm.

conclusions based purely on frequency data. The collocation data may be more informative in this respect, which is the topic the thesis will tackle next.

## 4.2 Collocation and Concordance

This section, through its subsections, aims to answer the first research question. This section will be divided based on node word. To reiterate, all data has been taken from the TV/M section of COCA unless specifically mentioned otherwise. As previously mentioned, only the +1 collocation will be analysed here. Concordance line data will accompany the analysis of the collocations and will be analysed itself.

### 4.2.1 *Stupid*

	COLLOCATE	FREQ	PER MIL	ALL	MI		COLLOCATE	FREQ	PER MIL	ALL	MI
1	THING	407	3.18	140413	3.92	16	STUFF	85	0.66	40599	3.45
2	LITTLE	268	2.09	178159	2.97	17	KID	81	0.63	41308	3.35
3	THINGS	262	2.05	87060	3.97	18	OLD	80	0.62	67469	2.63
4	BITCH	257	2.01	22527	5.89	19	MISTAKE	79	0.62	11943	5.11
5	IDEA	225	1.76	48342	4.6	20	FUCK	75	0.59	69880	2.48
6	QUESTION	164	1.28	26194	5.03	21	MAN	74	0.58	223726	0.78
7	SHIT	156	1.22	73880	3.46	22	MOTHERFUCKER	65	0.51	6989	5.6
8	DOG	111	0.87	24223	4.58	23	NAME	58	0.45	74849	2.01
9	ASS	110	0.86	28572	4.33	24	BASTARD	57	0.45	6518	5.51
10	GAME	110	0.86	32956	4.12	25	PARTY	53	0.41	31671	3.12
11	IDIOT	103	0.8	8062	6.06	26	FACE	52	0.41	36560	2.89
12	SON	101	0.79	50384	3.38	27	BOOK	47	0.37	21623	3.5
13	QUESTIONS	97	0.76	15050	5.07	28	JOB	47	0.37	54339	2.17
14	GIRL	94	0.73	65655	2.9	29	PIECE	45	0.35	16671	3.81
15	PEOPLE	91	0.71	158114	1.58	30	COW	41	0.32	2680	6.32

Table 1. Top 30 content word collocates of *stupid* ordered by raw frequency.

As Table 1 illustrates, the most common collocater for *stupid* is *thing*, with its plural form trailing behind *little* in third place. The non-count counterpart of *thing(s)*, *stuff*, is found around the halfway point of the list. The MI-scores the interface has calculated are quite close to each other, despite the difference in raw frequency, as *stuff* appears less frequently overall in the TV/M section. These ambiguous nouns are often used to refer to something previously

<i>COLLOCATE</i>	<i>MI</i>	<i>COLLOCATE</i>	<i>MI</i>	<i>COLLOCATE</i>	<i>MI</i>
<b>COW</b>	6.32	ASS	4.33	PARTY	3.12
IDIOT	6.06	GAME	4.12	LITTLE	2.97
BITCH	5.89	THINGS	3.97	GIRL	2.9
MOTHERFUCKER	5.6	THING	3.92	FACE	2.89
BASTARD	5.51	PIECE	3.81	OLD	2.63
MISTAKE	5.11	BOOK	3.5	FUCK	2.48
QUESTIONS	5.07	SHIT	3.46	JOB	2.17
QUESTION	5.03	STUFF	3.45	NAME	2.01
IDEA	4.6	SON	3.38	PEOPLE	1.58
DOG	4.58	KID	3.35	MAN	0.78

Table 2. Top 30 content word collocates of stupid ordered by MI-score.

mentioned or otherwise recoverable in context, as in (6). Like in the following examples, the node word and its collocate will be bolded for clarity, while the exemplifying language will be underlined, if necessary.

(6) That was a **stupid thing** to tell her. (TV:Animal Kingdom)  
They can also be used to refer to something yet to be determined, as in (7).

(7) Guys, uh, count me in for whatever stupid thing you're doing tomorrow night.  
(TV:Grandfathered)

*Thing(s)* and *stuff* share three major trends: telling or saying (6), direct reference to doing (7), and substitution for one or more referents in the world or context (6-8).

(8) Except she laughs at **stupid stuff** and that makes me laugh. It's stupid because it's so stupid. (TV:Scrubs)

While the examples include references to people, there is no direct reference to a person's intelligence. Whether accusing someone of saying something inappropriate, assuming some individual or group is going to engage in inadvisable acts, or arguing that what someone interacts with lacks thoughtfulness constitutes an attack on their intelligence is a more complex problem, one to which an answer may not be found through corpus data alone. One clue on the nature of the evaluation might be the inclusion of the self, as in (7-8). In these examples, while the speaker evaluates what they refer to as silly, for example, they do not show a clear disinclination to be involved with those things, suggesting that at least some level of rapport is present between the speaker and those they refer to. It should be noted,

however, that the speaker's laughing at another person laughing at things the former deems stupid, as in (8), could be interpreted as both endearing or mocking depending on extralinguistic and paralinguistic features.

*Little* is one of the two adjectives found in the *stupid* +1 collocation data. The adjective pair of *stupid little* modifies a wide range of nouns, and one of the meanings they constitute is “silly and insignificant”, as in (9).

- (9) Let' em have their **stupid little** party and then don't put enough muscle on.  
(TV:Orange Is the New Black)

The pair can also refer to small-sized or immature things, such as children (10) or animals (11).

- (10) I was a **stupid little** kid. (TV:From Dusk Till Dawn: The Series)

- (11) I hate that **stupid little** lizard. (TV:Charlie Gets Romantic)

Here, *stupid* is likely to not refer to intelligence, at least that of humans. The use of past tense in (10) suggests that the situation has since changed, and as intelligence is a much more static trait than wisdom, for example, it is unlikely that *stupid* here refers to intelligence.

Furthermore, the utterer of *stupid* in (10) refers to themselves, which makes it further less likely to refer to intelligence, based on the discussion on self-deprecation in section 2.1. On the other hand, the instance of *stupid* in (11) could refer to intelligence, but it could also refer to appearance or behaviour, for example. Looking at the extended context, though, reveals that the speaker was referring to their mother, who they were arguing with, which suggests that the expression has been uttered due to annoyance. This, then, can with high confidence be called an insult, but as with (6-8), it is difficult to determine whether it targets intelligence specifically.

Additionally, there are some nouns *stupid little* frequently modifies. The five most frequent of these are, in descending order of the number of instances, *bitch*, *shit*, *kid*, *girl*, and *boy* (11, 10, 9, 9, and 8 instances respectively) across the TV/M section. *Bitch* and *shit*, which

will be examined further below, are offensive nouns referring to people, while the other three are used when referring to children (12) or possibly diminutively (13), if the recipient of such an utterance is believed to be an adult woman.

- (12) Bart! Forgive him. He's just a **stupid little kid** who says the first thing in his head. (TV:The Simpsons)  
 (13) Neither are you, **stupid little girl**. (MOV:The Other Side of the Mirror)

While (13) is likely an insult against the hearer—though whether it specifically targets intelligence is dubious—(12) is less likely to be one. In the latter, *stupid little kid* is not directed at the referent of the expression, but at a third party, assumedly uttered by Bart's mother who apologises for his behaviour on his behalf. Furthermore, the example includes a reason for describing him as a “stupid little kid” and the adverb *just*, signalling a sense of insignificance. Considering the topic here is a child, the use of *stupid* in (12) is likely to refer to rowdiness or a lack of life experience rather than a lack of intellect.

The other adjective in the *stupid* collocation data is *old*. Like *stupid little*, *stupid old* modifies an array of words, but the latter has clearer trends. The adjective pair modifies either *man* or *men* in 21 concordance lines of 79 (20 and 1 times respectively) and *fool* in 14. These uses are exemplified in (14-15).

- (14) You **stupid old man**. You stupid, stupid selfish old man. You wrecked everything. (TV:Law & Order: Criminal Intent)  
 (15) I'm not okay. I'm just a **stupid old fool** who's overstayed his welcome on this earth. (TV:The King of Queens)

In (14), the three instances of *stupid* and the use of another descriptive adjective, *selfish*, suggest that the evaluation is likely to target intelligence, if not solely, at least among other qualities. In addition, the final sentence of the example posits a grave outcome due to the man's actions and implies taking deliberate action. On other hand, the self-deprecating utterance in (15) is potent, owing to the relative clause. It is one thing to call oneself stupid, old, a fool, or a combination of these, but connecting these self-evaluations to the judgement of having lived too long is akin to arguing that these kinds of people do not have a place in

the world. While such remarks may be made in jest or exaggeratingly, they may also signal a person in some amount of distress, often mental such.

There are multiple collocates referring to people in Table 1, either directly or indirectly. In total, there are ten collocates which refer to people, eight of which refer to humans rather unambiguously. The two which are more ambiguous are *bitch* and *cow*, judged by the meanings of the words in isolation according to their dictionary entries. However, many instances of *stupid bitch*, for instance, either make the recipient clear as in (16) or include the second person pronoun as in (16-17).

(16) Liza, you fucking **stupid bitch**. (TV:Haunting on Fraternity Row)

(17) You **stupid bitch!** (TV:The Farm)

In (16), the sex of the recipient of the insult can be assumed to be female based on the name *Liza*, while this is not the case in (17), even through the extended context. It seems that the target of such an insult is often made clear through other means, such as body language or speaker identity. As information on these are not available in COCA, determining the sex of the insulted becomes difficult. Instances where the insulted is overtly specified as male are rare, and seem to often include the comparing *like*, as in (18).

(18) In all seriousness, he's behaving like a **stupid bitch**. (TV:Survivor)

Based on the etymology of *bitch*, it is not too surprising that most instances of the word refer to females, but it is striking that this gender-specific word is this frequent in the current data, primarily because a male-leaning counterpart of a similar frequency is missing. This hints at the possibility that women may be insulted using more derogatory words than men more frequently.

The next most frequent gender-specific collocate of *stupid* is *son*, which denotes the opposite sex of *bitch*. However, a deeper look into the concordance lines of *stupid son* reveals that most of these uses (93/100) begin the phrase *son of a bitch*, in six of which the word *bitch* has been ellipted. This does not fully remove the reference to the male sex originating

from *son*, but the phrase has accumulated more generic senses and is used as a general expletive as well. The phrase also includes, or is expected to include, the word *bitch*, which is one likely source of the negative connotation of the phrase.

The remaining at least primarily gender-specific collocates are *girl*, *man*, *bastard*, and *cow*. *Girl* and *man* are more obvious in referring to female and male humans respectively. *Bastard* is similar to *son of a bitch*, as it is strongly associated with the male sex and offensive, but not exclusive to it, as the word may be used to refer to women (19), although it seems to be rare.

(19) You know, she always was a real bastard. (TV:Jake 2.0)

*Cow*, on the other hand, seems to at first refer to not human but bovine females (20), but examples such as (21) demonstrate that this is not always the case.

(20) I didn't do anything to Welke's **stupid cow**, sheriff! (TV:Eureka)

(21) She didn't take it to court. She didn't do anything. **Stupid cow**. (TV:Time Out of Mind)

The referent of *stupid cow* in the latter is clearly female, evinced by the use of the feminine singular third person pronoun and the properties of semantic *cow* itself. This alone does not prove that the referent is human, however, as it is not uncommon for people to refer to animals they feel attached to with the personal pronouns *he* or *she*. What does specify the referent as human is the act of taking someone or something to court, as doing so requires abilities only humans possess, primarily proficiency in a natural language. That the speaker claims their referent has not utilised these facilities alludes to an evaluation of either thoughtlessness or low intelligence. Furthermore, the *OED* definition for *cow* includes a sense of the word as a term of abuse for women (4.b). In addition, the expression can elicit a strong response of surprise or disbelief (22). As in the below one, examples which evidently include utterances from two or more speakers will henceforth include markings attributing

speakers to utterances, though as this information is not provided in the corpus, they have been made based on inference.

- (22) A: Is everything alright? B: Go home, you **stupid cow**. A: I'm sorry. What did you say? (MOV:The Proposition)

On account of these elements, *stupid cow* can be said to typically constitute an insult towards women, though it is still unclear whether these insults target intellect specifically.

While the six collocates discussed above exhibiting strong associations to the sex of a person are evenly divided between the sexes in number of collocates, the frequencies of the collocations indicate a difference between the two. *Bitch*, being the most frequent out of all six and, while not exclusive to it, it being strongly associated with the female sex is perhaps the most revealing one. While *bastard* does show a similar, albeit slightly lower MI-score, suggesting that this strongly male-associated word is also significant, *cow* shows an even higher score than *bitch*. In contrast, the less offensive *girl* and *man* are further apart in MI-score, with *girl* scoring higher by more than two points. These findings suggest that *stupid* as a word, and thus the meanings it carries, are more often attributed towards women than men. A larger data set could further elucidate this, for example by investigating a wider range of noun collocates, a more significant difference in the division between sex-specific collocates may surface.

Despite the representation of sex in the top 30 collocates of *stupid* being skewed towards women, neither *woman* nor *women* are included in the list. It seems, then, that besides women being subjected to being called *stupid* more frequently, the words that accompany it may be further from neutral than they are for men.

In the above examples on sex-specific collocates, *stupid* is clearly often used to insult, but once more, whether the insult targets the intelligence of the insulted is unclear. It seems likely, then, that extracting the exact meaning behind *stupid* is problematic, at least when the word is attributed to an ambiguous or person-referring noun. A different set of collocates,



especially those regarding cognition, may help to remedy this. Table 1 includes four such collocates closely related to thought, specifically *idea*, *question*, *questions*, and *mistake*.

*Idea* is mentioned to have originated in the past in 52 concordance lines out of a sample of 100 in the *stupid idea* collocation data, using verbs like BE and HAVE<sup>12</sup> in the past tense. This use is similar to (10), but without necessarily suggesting that the situation has changed for the better. As in (23), the assessment is often done in hindsight, after the events caused by the “stupid idea” have occurred.

- (23) A: If the brass finds out... B: Hey, it was your **stupid idea** to start spying on him in the first place. (TV:Jake 2.0)

In (23), the idea that is referred to was made in a singular point in time and could be attributed to a lapse in judgement instead of habitual expression of low intelligence through ideas deemed to be unwise. This type of assessment made afterwards is realised by admonishing another person of having a bad idea (23) or by admitting that one’s own idea was substandard, as in (24).

- (24) The slide show was my **stupid idea**. (MOV:If Dad Only Knew)

There are also instances where an idea is thought to have been stupid before it was acted on (25-26).

- (25) I tried to tell him it was a **stupid idea**, but he wouldn't listen. (MOV:First Kill)  
 (26) I just think it's a damn **stupid idea** to go back Out there, especially alone.  
 (MOV:Fertilize the Blaspheming Bombshell)

It seems unlikely that most instances of *stupid idea* directly insult a person’s intelligence. However, while ideas that should not be fulfilled are likely to be commonly encountered in people, acting on such an idea may be regarded as a clue of low intelligence, especially if the executor was warned of one being unwise. What may be crucial here is the severity of the

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<sup>12</sup> These and similar instances hereon refer to the lemma form of the word as would be found in dictionaries to include their inflected forms.

idea itself or its consequences. An idea judged to be stupid that leads to death or injury is likely to result in a more extreme reaction than one that leads to an embarrassing situation or small financial loss, for instance.

*Question* and *questions* behave somewhat differently in the data. One of the features they have in common is polarity switching, as in when a good question becomes a stupid question (27) or vice versa (28).

- (27) A: What kind of question is that? B: That's a good question. A: It's a **stupid question** and I ain't answering it. (MOV:Jungle Fever)  
 (28) A: Yeah, **stupid questions**. B: They're not stupid questions. They're good questions. They're insightful. (MOV:American Zombie)

This connects to the idea of agreement of evaluation, as what counts as a “stupid question” differs from speaker to speaker. In such cases, the connection to insulting appears to be weak, as does the link to intellect, because the evaluating *stupid* is directly attached to *question(s)* and there is no mention of making or asking questions. A reluctance to answer a question may also be due to features other than their lack of insightfulness, such as the probing of one being detrimental to its recipient. This is likely the case in (27) and its extended context, as it pertains to whether the addressee has had sex with the asker’s sister, which, if true, is shown to be unfavourable to the questioned through a threat of violence.

Both collocates are also intensified in different ways, though *stupid question* more frequently (29).

- (29) What kind of a fucking stupid question is that? (MOV:Lewis Black: Stark Raving Black)  
 (30) Because I knew you'd get all weird and ask a million stupid questions. (TV:Modern Family)

In (29), the *stupid question* is doubly intensified by both *what kind of* and *fucking*, while in (30) the intensifying element is *a million* in the sense of ‘very many’. Crucially, in (29), *fucking* can be analysed to intensify either the adjective *stupid* ([fucking stupid][question]) or the adjective phrase ([fucking][stupid question]). The former, modifying *stupid* directly,

evaluates the question to be of extreme low intellectual value, while the latter displays general contempt toward it. Neither reading is difficult to read as an insult and the prior one may, through its strong intensification, be understood to question the hearer's intellectual capacity.

One of their differences is that *stupid question* is sometimes hedged using various strategies, such as prefacing warnings of possibly sensitive content (33), softening expressions (34), or modal parts of speech like modal adverbs (35) or verbs (36).

- (33) Let me ask a **stupid question**. (TV:The Dead Zone)
- (34) Yeah, that was kind of a **stupid question**, huh? (MOV:Lake Placid 2)
- (35) Excuse me. This is probably a **stupid question**, but, uh, where are we? (TV:The Forgotten)
- (36) Okay. This might be a **stupid question**, but what exactly killed her? (TV:Eureka)

On the other hand, *stupid questions* is used with a negated imperative DO, i.e., *don't*, in conjunction with *ask* in slightly more than 10% of the concordance data (37).

- (37) A: Look, there are only three rules at this zoo. Don't feed the animals, don't touch the animals, and don't ask me **stupid questions**. B: Um, why not? A: Oh, now we're breaking rules two and three, huh?

These two phenomena suggest that what are often called stupid questions are in some way undesirable. On the one hand, those in the asking role may feel obligated to mark an upcoming question as potentially mundane or such to which the answer may be assumed to be already known, for instance. On the other, those on the receiving end may make explicit their unwillingness to hear such questions.

The final thought-related collocate, *mistake*, is in line with *idea* in that it is commonly in a past-tense construction at a similar frequency (40/80 concordance lines). What separate *mistake* from *idea*, however, are two features: the presence of longstanding effects (38) and the specific reference to a single mistake using the determiner *one* (39).

- (38) You make a **stupid mistake** and you pay for it for the rest of your life. (MOV:The Four Feathers)
- (39) It was just a **stupid mistake**. One stupid mistake. (TV:Survivor)

The contrast between the nature of the mistake—be it careless, committed under substandard consciousness, or unproportionally insignificant compared to its effect(s)—and what it brings about is the crux of these expressions. They do not necessarily, or even likely, comment on intelligence, but rather unfairness. This does not mean that *stupid mistake* cannot allude to a person's intelligence, though that seems to be most salient in wh- questions used together with the referential second person pronoun *you* (40), and difficult to retrieve via the non-referential one like in (38)

(40) What kind of **stupid mistake** did you make? (MOV:Mother Krampus 2:Slay Ride)

The possible reference to intelligence here is likely to stem from othering, i.e., communicative interactions where a speaker makes a clear distinction between themselves and another individual or group and excludes the latter from their group, or in simple terms, discourses of “us vs them” or “me vs you”.

While the collocates of *stupid* related to cognition did show a somewhat greater tendency of pertaining to intellect than the general and sex-sensitive ones, no generalisation could be made about either kind being used to insult a person's intelligence. There remains one group of collocates relevant to the ongoing investigation. Three of these, *bitch*, *cow* and *bastard* were discussed earlier, while the other impolite, derogatory, or otherwise offensive collocates of *idiot*, *fuck*, *motherfucker*, and *shit* will be considered below.

*Stupid idiot* could be intuited to typically insult a person's intelligence. For one, the collocation is found in an addressing *you* form in almost half of the concordance data (41).

(41) A: Oh, God. Don't. L-look... I'm sorry. B: I'm not crying about you, you stupid idiot. I couldn't care less about you. (TV:Party of Five)

In this context, the first speaker apologises for, as they believe they did, making the second speaker cry, while the second speaker rejects the notion and questions the judgement of the prior. In this instance, *stupid idiot* could refer to intellect, but it may also refer to a lack of

social skills or tact, for example. Additionally, this use of *you* does not seem to bring about othering, but a more direct connection between the speaker and hearer, intensifying the insult. Curiously, the reason for the second speaker to call the first one well not so much from contextual clues in their interaction, but a seemingly unrelated matter only immediately available to the prior. This kind of situation may have been artificially articulated for dramatic effect, and it is not necessarily representative of real-life use.

In other contexts, *stupid idiot* is more likely to refer more candidly to low intelligence, like in (42).

- (42) A: These stupid jerks nearly started a fire here. B: What are you talking about? A: You **stupid idiot!** You nearly burned the fucking place down. (TV:MOV:Go Go Tales)

Here the likely reference to intelligence originates from the accusation toward the addressee having almost caused a destructive fire, them not recognising that, or a combination of the two. The first speaker seems to insinuate that either one or both of starting a fire in a building and not recognising having been at the verge of doing that in the course of their interaction are signs of low intelligence.

*Fuck* is a problematic word to analyse.<sup>13</sup> It is often used an exclamation (“Fuck!”), an intensifier (“Get the fuck off my ship”, TV:Carnival Row), in various phrases (“fuck it”, “for fuck’s sake”...), or as a verb, in a similar sense as *screw* or *to hell with* (“Fuck tradition”, TV:Game of Thrones), to name a few. Its use as a noun, referring to a person or thing, seems to be somewhat infrequent compared to the aforementioned ones, and the automatic tagging process in COCA has mistakenly tagged most non-noun uses as such. To offer some idea of how frequent the person or thing-referring noun use of the word is, a query was made which searched for instances of *fuck* modified by an adjective, resulting in 1,388 total (any instance

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<sup>13</sup> It is also significant enough to warrant its own Wikipedia page. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuck)

of adjective + *fuck*) and 325 unique hits (different adjectives modifying *fuck*). Based on this result, a new MI-score of 8.14 was calculated for *stupid fuck* using the formula provided in the COCA documentation (see section 3.2, fn. 8). This score is the result of an exceedingly simple operation, but should serve as the ceiling, i.e., the highest possible value the score may be for *stupid fuck*. For a more comparable value, though still an oversimplified one, the original MI-score and the one calculated here were averaged together for a score of 5.31.

The addressing *you* form found in the *stupid idiot* data is present here as well, but more frequently (42/75). Notably, though perhaps not surprisingly, *stupid fuck* is accompanied by some form of swearing (43) or otherwise offensive language (44) in 31 out of 76 concordance lines.

- (43) I'm the smartest asshole in three districts and she looks at me like I'm some **stupid fuck** playing some stupid game for stupid penny-ante stakes. She fuckin' looks through me, Kima. (TV:The Wire)  
 (44) Suck my dick, bitch. Seriously. Suck it! **Stupid fuck.** (MOV:Going the Distance)

There is a disagreement about a person's level of intelligence in (43). In this instance, the speaker insists that they are "the smartest asshole" in a considerable area and laments that someone else is of the opposite opinion. Considering the extended context, the same speaker mentions that when they were with the woman, they felt like a doormat, i.e., below her in some way, here probably in intellect. This connects to the idea that intelligence is seen as a relative trait, and that one may feel like the most intelligent person in one context, but below another in other circumstances. The use of *stupid fuck* in (43) is therefore unlikely to be an insult, but a self-deprecating comment on intelligence.

*Suck my dick* is a strong and vulgar insult, almost certain to be used by men more than women, similar in meaning to *screw you*. This alone makes the utterances in (44) highly insulting. What is interesting about the example is that, with the assistance of the extended context, these lines are attributable to a female character. Using the conventional beliefs regarding the users and targets of the words sensitive to biological sex increases the weight of

the insult (using *bitch* of a man, a woman choosing *suck my dick* for an insult), as they are not expected to be used in this way. However, while the use of *stupid fuck* in (44) is evidently an insult and though it may be one on intelligence, it may also be a strong expression of annoyance or dislike, among others.

*Stupid motherfucker* is similar in how *stupid fuck* appears in the data, as it often follows an addressing *you* and is frequently accompanied by swearing and other offensive language. This likely stems from the words' shared etymology through the verb *fuck*, which was used in forming both the noun *fuck* through conversion and *fucker* through derivation. The person-referring *fuck* and *motherfucker* have also been recorded to first appear in the early 20th century about ten years apart from each other, with the prior being first attested in 1927 or 1928 and the latter in 1918 (*OED*).

Finally, *stupid shit* refers to a person in approximately 20% of the data (45) and functions similarly to *stuff* in the rest (46). References to faeces, human or otherwise, was not discovered.

(45) Robert Brenton, that dumb fuck! That **stupid shit** was so dumb, he deserved to die! That asshole! (MOV:Wild at Heart)

(46) Really makes you stop and think about all the **stupid shit** you waste your time on and what we could be doing instead. (TV:Tales of the City)

Any utterance of *stupid shit* in reference to a person is highly likely to be a genuine insult, and while not quite as severe as *stupid fuck*, it tends to be highly offensive. There is some interplay between the word pairs *dumb* and *stupid* on one hand, and *fuck* and *shit* on the other in (45). The prior pair being present in the same set of utterances is a strong indication of the insult targeting the recipient's intelligence, and simultaneously, is a clue towards the two potentially intelligence-insulting words' near-synonymity. The latter pair being present in consecutive utterances and both instances referring to the same character suggest that they are variants in person-referring use. Their co-occurrence may stem from a number of reasons, but two likely ones are phonological preference and avoiding repetition. In General American

English, the vowel ‘u’ in both *dumb* and *fuck* is pronounced as /ʌ/, while the vowel ‘i’ in both *stupid* and *shit* is pronounced as /ɪ/.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the collocations of *dumb fuck* and *stupid shit* rhyme in American English. In addition, *dumb* and *fuck*, as well as *shit*, are monosyllabic words, and while *stupid* is a disyllabic one, its initial consonant sound (/s/) is similar to that of *shit* (/ʃ/).

However, the use in (45) is similar to an interesting dynamic between *dumb*, *stupid*, and other similar adjectives. This dynamic is related to adjective order in English, which is widely thought to follow a systematic progression, and though such classifications vary, semantic accounts seem to be favoured (Westbury 2021, 122). Wulff, who studied adjective ordering with data from BNC using multivariate analysis, states that evaluative adjectives “occur significantly more often at the first position of an adjective pair rather than the second” (263). However, adjectives like *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, etc. are all used to evaluate.. To see how these adjectives may be ordered, both attributively and predicatively, queries were made in TV/M with the Collocate tool, searching for the node word pairs within three spaces of each other. The results were surprising; the judgement between *dumb* and *stupid* was split almost evenly in the middle, as out of 56 concordance lines, in 28 of them *stupid* was uttered before *dumb*, and the other way around in 26 concordance lines, while *stupid* preceded *foolish* in three of eight instances and *retarded* in four of five. The other pairs resulted in no hits. Some examples of the results are given below (47-55).

- (47) They're dumb, not stupid. (TV:Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.)
- (48) Dumb, stupid, and idiotic. (TV:Law & Order)
- (49) In fact, the only thing they weren't found guilty of was the one thing they were most guilty of, being dumb stupid fucks. (MOV:Pain & Gain)
- (50) I got to tell you, of all the stupid, dumb, ignorant, dangerous ideas you've had, this is definitely the dumbest. (TV:Hawaii Five-0)
- (51) Not only stupid, but retarded. (MOV:The Express)
- (52) It's stupid, dumb, idiotic. (TV:Freakazoid!)

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<sup>14</sup> Pronunciations taken from the online version of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* and adapted to the International Phonetic Alphabet.



- (53) An ignorant, stupid, foolish child. (MOV:Heaven & Earth)  
 (54) He said, "If you want to improve, be content to be thought foolish and stupid."  
 (MOV:Serendipity)

This ordering seems to be speaker, or at least context-specific (44).

- (55) A: Stupid. Dumb. [two turns of the other speaker and three sentences from the first one] A: But in this parade of stupid and dumb. . . (TV:Gilmore Girls)

This ordering may result from a wide array of factors, and one such factor mentioned by Wulff will be explored here. On one hand, she found positively loaded adjectives to precede negatively loaded ones “marginally significantly more often...than vice versa” (266). Though the adjectives present in the above examples are not positively loaded, judgements of one adjective being less negatively loaded may be present. For example, in examples (48) and (52) both *dumb* and *stupid* precede *idiotic*, but the ordering of the prior two differs between the examples. This suggests that *idiotic* may be more negatively loaded than either *stupid* or *dumb*, but the same judgement regarding the latter two seems to be situational. On the other hand, she found positively loaded adjectives to precede neutrally loaded ones significantly than vice versa. This may be the case in (50) and (53), though, following this, the speakers would need to assess *ignorant* differently. What seems to offer most support for a less-negative to more-negative ordering is the distribution of *stupid* followed by *retarded* and vice versa. While the sample size is small, *stupid* preceding *retarded* in all but one instance indicates a pattern, which is supported by the consensus of *retarded* being an offensive word. While the minutiae are unclear and strictly speaking outside the scope of this thesis, these examples suggest that that SDFR are commonly considered to be very close in meaning to each other, but minutely different. This will be explored further in section 4.3 when discussing SDFR regarding near-synonymy and variants.

4.2.2 *Dumb*

The collocation data in Table 1 and Table 3 show many similarities.

	COLLOCATE	FREQ	PER MIL	ALL	MI		COLLOCATE	FREQ	PER MIL	ALL	MI
1	ASS <sup>S</sup>	231	1.8	28572	7.56	16	OLD <sup>S</sup>	33	0.26	67469	3.51
2	SHIT <sup>S</sup>	125	0.98	73880	5.3	17	MOTHERFUCKER <sup>S</sup>	29	0.23	6989	6.6
3	FUCK <sup>S</sup>	81	0.63	69880	4.76	18	KIDS	27	0.21	41648	3.92
4	IDEA <sup>S</sup>	74	0.58	48342	5.16	19	LITTLE <sup>S</sup>	27	0.21	178159	1.82
5	BITCH <sup>S</sup>	66	0.52	22527	6.09	20	ONE	26	0.2	387638	0.65
6	LUCK	65	0.51	16456	6.53	21	STUFF <sup>S</sup>	24	0.19	40599	3.78
7	QUESTION <sup>S</sup>	52	0.41	26194	5.53	22	GIRL <sup>S</sup>	24	0.19	65655	3.09
8	SON <sup>S</sup>	49	0.38	50384	4.5	23	NAME <sup>S</sup>	22	0.17	74849	2.78
9	DOG <sup>S</sup>	44	0.34	24223	5.4	24	BLONDE	21	0.16	1549	8.3
10	THING <sup>S</sup>	44	0.34	140413	2.87	25	ANIMALS	19	0.15	6152	6.17
11	KID <sup>S</sup>	42	0.33	41308	4.57	26	QUESTIONS <sup>S</sup>	19	0.15	15050	4.88
12	GUY	37	0.29	100876	3.1	27	PEOPLE <sup>S</sup>	19	0.15	158114	1.49
13	THINGS <sup>S</sup>	36	0.28	87060	3.27	28	COP	17	0.13	10919	5.18
14	ANIMAL	35	0.27	6668	6.94	29	MOVE	17	0.13	51964	2.93
15	BASTARD <sup>S</sup>	34	0.27	6518	6.93	30	FUCKS	15	0.12	676	9.02

Table 3. Top 30 content word collocates of *dumb* ordered by raw frequency.

COLLOCATE	MI	COLLOCATE	MI	COLLOCATE	MI
FUCKS	9.02	DOG	5.4	OLD	3.51
BLONDE	8.3	SHIT	5.3	THINGS	3.27
ASS	7.56	COP	5.18	GUY	3.1
ANIMAL	6.94	IDEA	5.16	GIRL	3.09
BASTARD	6.93	QUESTIONS	4.88	MOVE	2.93
MOTHERFUCKER	6.6	FUCK	4.76	THING	2.87
LUCK	6.53	KID	4.57	NAME	2.78
ANIMALS	6.17	SON	4.5	LITTLE	1.82
BITCH	6.09	KIDS	3.92	PEOPLE	1.49
QUESTION	5.53	STUFF	3.78	ONE	0.65

Table 4. Top 30 content word collocates of *dumb* ordered by MI-score.

*Dumb* shares 20 of its collocates with *stupid*, marked in Table 3 with a superscript ‘s’ after such collocates. Of these collocates, only five are *stupid*-favoured in MI-score: *questions* (*stupid*: 5.07 vs *dumb*: 4.88), *things* (3.97 vs 3.27), *thing* (3.92 vs 2.87), *little* (2.97 vs 1.82) and *people* (1.58 vs 1.49). These five are very general words, and with the exception of *thing* and *little*, the MI-score difference is under one point, pointing towards a fair level of interchangeability between *stupid* and *dumb* with these collocates. On the side of *dumb*-favoured collocates, seven collocates have an MI-score one or more points higher than they

are with *stupid*: *ass* (*dumb*: 7.56 vs *stupid*: 4.33), *bastard* (6.93 vs 5.51), *motherfucker* (6.6 vs 5.6), *shit* (5.3 vs 3.46), *fuck* (4.76 vs 2.48), *kid* (4.57 vs 3.35), and *son* (4.5 vs 3.38). These collocates, with *son* beginning the phrase *son of a bitch* (47/49 concordance lines) similarly as with *stupid son*, are of a more informal and offensive nature than the prior five, suggesting that *dumb* is favoured in informal communicational situations or that it is considered more suitable to use with unsavoury language.

Out of the ten collocates exclusive to *dumb* in Table 3, *fucks*, *blonde*, *animal*, *luck*, *animals*, and *cop* have high MI-scores of over 5. *Fucks* continues the trend of *dumb* attracting vulgar language, while *blonde* and *cop* specify certain kinds of people. While *animal(s)* is a general term and seemingly neutral, the *LDOCE* defines *dumb animals* to refer to defenceless animals treated poorly by humans. Additionally, *luck* is used in the common phrase, *dumb luck*, defined as a positive outcome, especially one considered to be unearned, happening somehow surprisingly.

The MI-score of 9.02 for *dumb fucks* is reminiscent of the value that was calculated for the person or thing-referring *fuck* that collocated with *stupid*. One reason for this high MI-score is the low overall frequency of *fucks*, as the TV/M section of COCA contains only 676 instances of *fucks*. On the other hand, *dumb* is the second most common adjective modifier of *fucks*, being beaten only by *sick*. Furthermore, the 15 instances of *dumb fucks* are spread over 13 texts and the years 1990-2019, which means that the high MI-score does signal highly habitual use. This use is primarily split into two kinds: grouping (56) and likening (57).

- (56) Marathons are bullshit. They're all hype. Some official picks a random day... and rain or cold, you're out pounding the pavement... alongside 50,000 other dumb fucks. (TV:Oz)
- (57) The fuck you thinking you greedy piece of shit? They put the bait in there for **dumb fucks** like you! (MOV:Triple 9)

The grouping use is unlikely to count as an insult on the personal level, though it can register as a contemptuous remark against a certain clearly delineated group, such as marathon

runners in this case. Furthermore, the extension of disrespect that is held toward one object to the people engaging with it is displayed here, as suggested in (5) in section 2.4. In this case, at least, the insult may count as an insult on intelligence, though in this case, it is more likely that the speaker is attempting to elevate themselves over a large group of people labelled in connection to something, and concurrently, above that something.

The likening function is similar to the grouping one in that they both assume there to be more than one person of their denoted quality in existence. In (57), then, the speaker claims there to be a group of “dumb fucks” in the world, i.e., unintelligent and contemptuous people. The first sentence offers additional information as to what the speaker believes to count as such a person in the situation they are in through the word *greedy*, and further in the second sentence by stating the hearer either fell or was going to fall for the bait, and that these qualities are enough for them to belong to the group of “dumb fucks”. It is, however, not completely clear whether the insult targets intellect specifically, as being deceived by a lure could occur due to a lapse in judgement, for example.

While *fuck* is situated around the middle of Table 4, it is the third-most frequent collocate of *dumb* in Table 3. In that position, the collocate is surrounded by such which exhibit considerably higher MI-scores. Repeating the process here as was performed with *stupid fuck* results in an MI-score of 10.41, but like in the case of *stupid fuck*, this MI-score calculation is only a rough estimate, essentially of how high the score can get, based on an “ADJ fuck” query for the frequency of this use of *fuck*. As a compromise, the average of the two values will be used as a comparison point, bringing the estimate MI-score to 7.59.

Like in examples (58-59), *dumb fuck* was found to be used similarly to *stupid fuck*, further reinforcing the idea that *stupid* and *dumb* as near-synonyms or variants in many cases.

- (58) Probably crossed your mind, a world-class piece of ass like that don't usually fall for a **dumb fuck** like you. (TV:True Blood)
- (59) Why don't you mind your own fuckin' business? Get in the fuckin' room! **Dumb fuck**. (MOV:American Dresser)

In fact, most collocates *dumb* and *stupid* share are used similarly, though some collocate-specific differences are apparent. *Ass* and *bitch* will be addressed in more depth later in this section, while the rest of the those shared collocates which were analysed in section 4.2.1 will be briefly commented on next.

*Motherfucker*, *bastard*, *shit*, *thing(s)*, and *stuff* were found to be used in comparable ways between *dumb* and *stupid*, mostly differing in how frequent each kind of use was discovered to be. The determiner for *dumb bastard* was more often *the* than for *stupid bastard*, while *that* was more frequent with the latter. The number of instances without a modifier and those with a modifying addressing *you* were similar between the two node words. In the case of *shit*, while both *stupid shit* and *dumb shit* may refer to a person, doing so is considerably more frequent with *dumb shit* (53/100 such instances of *dumb shit* vs 23/100 of *stupid shit*). *Dumb thing* referred slightly more often to doing or saying something than *stupid thing* and, consequently, slightly less frequently to a general, context-specific thing. However, *dumb things* was used in the latter manner twice as often than *stupid things*, while less often in the sense of doing or saying. Finally, *dumb stuff* refers to things in two thirds of all cases, to doing in one fourth, and to saying twice among all 24 instances of *dumb stuff*, whereas *stupid stuff* refers to these in 30, 36, and 19 out of its 85 cases, respectively.

Both the uses and frequencies of these were found to lack in significant differences between *stupid questions* and *dumb questions*. *Dumb question*, on the other hand, was found to be used without a verb or in otherwise incomplete sentences more frequently than *stupid question* was. The only significant difference found between *stupid idea* and *dumb idea* was that *stupid idea* was referred to in the past tense more often than *dumb idea*. Finally, while *little* and *old* were found to have some patterns of use as collocates of *stupid*, similar trends of theirs are considerably weaker as collocates of *dumb*. *Little* modified no word more than once, whereas *old* modified *fairy tale* and its plural counterpart once each. While person-

denoting words is one category of such words, they are not dominant in the data. In effect, *dumb little* and *dumb old* may be used to modify a diverse, possibly limitless set of words as dictated by context, including names (60), noun phrases (61), and people nouns (62); or they may be followed by more modifying adjectives (63).

- (60) Can you picture **dumb old** Mick sitting there alone next to two empty seats? (MOV:Downtown)
- (61) So, what's left for a girl like me? A **dumb old** chain of Costmart stores, that's what. (TV:Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman)
- (62) Why do you want to waste our time playing hide-and-seek and kill the aliens... with your stupid brother and your **dumb little** cousins? (MOV:Aliens in the Attic)
- (63) **Dumb old** merry grade-A sucker. Bought it, hook, line, and sinker. (MOV:Her Smell)

The collocation of *dumb ass* is not without problems, though it is not as problematic as investigating *fuck*. The primary issue lies in the compound word *dumbass*, as it is sometimes orthographically represented as *dumb ass*. While *dumbass* and *dumb ass* share the meaning of ‘a stupid person’, there are minute differences between the two. For one, *ass* can refer to a person, either similar in meaning to *asshole* or, in genitive constructions or with a possessive adjective, to *neck* or *skin* (e.g., “it was his ass on the line”); a person’s buttocks; or a donkey. *Ass* can also compound with an adjective to an intensifying effect (e.g., “yesterday was a cold-ass day”). *Dumbass* appears 293 times in the TV/M section of COCA, and *dumb ass* 231 times. As such, *dumbass* seems to be the preferred orthographical form for their shared meaning. Therefore, the instances of *dumb ass* which are likely to share the meaning of *dumbass* have been marked as such, resulting in 52 of the analysed 100 concordance lines to not be considered in this thesis.

Out of the remaining 48 concordance lines, *ass* was used as an intensifier in nine of them. This is a slightly lower figure as that of intensifying use of *stupid ass*, which was found in 25 of 100 concordance lines. While the resulting sample sizes are not unequal, they can be compared in relative terms; while the intensifier *dumb ass* is slightly under one fifth of the

whole, *stupid ass* in the same use is one fourth. Contrary to this difference in frequency, the orthographic form of *dumb-ass* (322 instances across TV/M) is over three times as frequent as *stupid-ass* (89 instances), and while the former is another variant spelling of *dumbass*, a perfunctory query suggests that the intensifying use is common there.

Moving on to the language of *dumb ass*, its intensifying use modifies a range of different nouns or noun phrases (64), while the possessive adjectives found modifying the expression were *my*, singular *your*, *his*, and *her*, of which *your* was found to be the most common, modifying 18 out of 27 instances (65).

(64) I don't wanna be the **dumb ass** drug guy in a horror movie, know what I mean? (MOV:Amigo Undead)

(65) And lo and behold, your dumb ass actually finds the right apartment! (TV:NYPD Blue)

(64) is interesting thanks to the definite determiner *the* modifying the rest of the clause, as it implies there to be a typical character role in horror movies. Consequently, the evaluating modifying expression *dumb ass* may be analysed as having two meanings: a specific “drug guy in a horror movie” being dumb or the role itself being dumb. Whichever the case, it is made clear that the speaker wishes to avoid being recognised as such a character. While this is unlikely to count as an insult, as it is a person talking about themselves related to what they claim to be a widespread idea. (65) is also remarkable, owing to the presence of the expressions *lo and behold* and *actually*, which express a reaction to a situation other than what was expected. Furthermore, finding the correct apartment may be considered not to be an intellectually demanding task, and as such, this instance, is likely to count as an insult on intelligence. As it is also humorous, this example may count as a genuine humorous insult.

*Dumb blonde* is used in ways both reinforcing (66) and extending (67) the stereotype of attractive light-haired women lacking intelligence or acting in such a way.

(66) A: Guess how we're slowing down cognition. B: I don't know. A: The hair dye. **Dumb blonde**. B: Very artistic. A: Works its way into the blood through the scalp... Very gradual. (MOV:The Cabin in the Woods)

- (67) Actually, you know, I'm really thrilled Hulk hogan is here, because, you know, Every roast needs a **dumb blonde** with huge tits. (MOV:Comedy Central Roast of David Hasselhoff)

Both examples are humorous and wield the stereotype playfully. In (66), the claim is made that a hair dye capable of hindering a person's intellectual capabilities has been developed, an idea that is likely to seem peculiar to most who encounter it. While the utterances do reinforce the stereotype, they are difficult to understand as an insult, as there is no mention of people, singular or multiple.

Understanding (67) requires knowledge of both what a roast is and who Hulk Hogan is. A roast, in the entertainment world, is an event, often broadcasted on television or via livestreaming platforms, in which one person is usually chosen as the main target of the roast and a group of other people are picked to compose jocular insults toward the roasted, as well as the other roasters, as is the case in (67). Hogan, on the other hand, is best known for his professional wrestling career and is known to have light hair and a large build. Thus, while (67) is doubtlessly an insult, the situation it is uttered in alone makes it a jocular one, and unlikely to be genuine.

*Dumb luck* is a widespread phrase in English, used to describe a situation which is thought to be brought forth by utter chance. While the phrase is used without malice in most cases, it can be used to undermine someone's achievements (68).

- (68) A: As you may know, for the past two years, Captain Holt and I have engaged in an epic battle of wits, to determine who must call the other an amazing detective/genius. B: The first year, by sheer, **dumb luck**, Jake eked out a feeble victory. A: And last year, I let the captain win, because he's old an sad. B: Sad because the competition was so dismal.

In (68), A refers to the competition they have engaged in with the other speaker as a "battle of wits", with the title of "genius" on the line. B then claims that A only won due to luck, implying that no (lack of) wits or genius were the cause of their loss. This is a strategy to appear superior to the opposition by challenging the legitimacy of the latter's victory.



However, A counters, claiming themselves that they allowed B to win the following competition due to sympathy for their feebleness. Finally, B strikes back by reclaiming their superiority by insisting on the inferiority of their rival. As these speakers are engaged in symmetrical undermining of the other's victory, these utterances are likely to have been made jokingly, resulting in banter between competitors, which is common in sports, for example. While there are hints of insulting and a connection to intelligence present, it is unlikely that these count as genuine insults on intelligence, but jocular ones at best.

*Dumb animal(s)* is, as expected, mostly used in reference to some animal(s), though in fiction, they can sometimes be shown to be or have been intelligent (69).

- (69) Get treated like a **dumb animal** long enough, that's what you become.  
(MOV:The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian)

The utterance refers to Aslan, a lion that formerly displayed intelligence and the capability of speech that the speaker knows. Although *dumb animal* referring to animals in the data showed a tendency to show contempt toward them, either the speaker's own or those belonging to some other individual or group, (69) seems to do the opposite. Here, the speaker seems to refer to the attitudes of others when commenting on the animal through the use of the passive voice. While the attitude expressed may be negatively loaded, the expression may also be a simple juxtaposition to intelligent animals, highlighting the two different states the speaker has witnessed the lion in.

There are some instances of *dumb animal(s)* being used to refer to people, and in these cases, they can be understood as endearing (70) or highly offensive (58).

- (70) A: There's a big **dumb animal**... I love more than that horse. B: What is it, a hippopotamus? A: I mean you, you dummy. (TV:The Simpsons)  
(71) A: How do big **dumb animals** like you even get into college? B: Just' cause I look like this... doesn't mean I don't have feelings. (MOV:21 & Over)

In (70), animals are a part of the immediate context, while in (71), the reference to an animal seems to be taken from the second speaker's appearance. Furthermore, while both instances

of *dumb animal(s)* are pre-modified by *big*, their connotations are all but opposite of each other, bearing from the rest of the utterances. It may also be assumed that the paralinguistic and extralinguistic features present in the different scenes are unlike each other (e.g., the tone of voice in (70) may be soft, while it may be exasperated in (71)). A further argument against (70) being a genuine insult is found at the end of the example, in the diminutive *dummy*, as it can be received as a more accepting alternative to *idiot*, used primarily by children and child-minded people. On the other hand, (71) can be argued to be a genuine insult on intelligence, as it is generally recognised that being accepted into higher education is a feat requiring some intelligence. By questioning how the hearer managed the feat while likening them to an animal is an affront to their intellectual capabilities and human identity.

*Dumb cop* is an oddity in the collocates list for two reasons. For one, it is the only occupational word in either of Table 1 or Table 3. Secondly, across the entirety of COCA, *dumb cop* is found 22 times, of which 17 are from TV/M. With further investigation, it was found that, of these 17 instances, 12 were found in TV shows or films related to law enforcement or crime. As the collocation is idiosyncratic to the genre, and its concordance lines seem to not indicate use similar to more general collocates, it will not be analysed further.

Finally, *dumb bitch* appears to have a more specialised use with *dumb* than with *stupid*, as the collocation was not found in likening configurations, suggesting that the expression may be used more specifically as a targeted insult towards women. It may elicit a strong enough reaction to put it into words (72), including a counter-remark.

(72) A: I ain't saying nothin'. Especially to no **dumb bitch**. B: Hey! Show some respect, piece of crap!

In the context of (72), there is no evidence of justification for the first speaker's attitude. As such, the insult may be thought to stem from prejudice against women instead of any

supposed intelligence of recipient. While the insult is likely genuine, it is less likely to home in on intelligence.

### 4.2.3 Foolish

The collocate list in Table 5 is quite different than those for *stupid* and *dumb*.

	COLLOCATE	FREQ	PER MIL	ALL	MI		COLLOCATE	FREQ	PER MIL	ALL	MI
1	PLEASURE	32	0.25	8758	8.25	16	WAYS	7	0.05	7543	6.28
2	THING <sup>sd</sup>	29	0.23	140413	4.11	17	DREAM	7	0.05	15602	5.23
3	THINGS <sup>sd</sup>	24	0.19	87060	4.53	18	TALK	7	0.05	102913	2.51
4	MAN <sup>s</sup>	23	0.18	223726	3.1	19	MORTALS	6	0.05	398	10.3
5	SAMURAI	17	0.13	659	11.07	20	HUMANS	6	0.05	4176	6.91
6	PRIDE	17	0.13	3007	8.88	21	MISSION	6	0.05	8563	5.87
7	CHILD	17	0.13	20000	6.15	22	QUESTION <sup>sd</sup>	6	0.05	26194	4.26
8	GIRL <sup>sd</sup>	15	0.12	65655	4.25	23	WOMAN	6	0.05	50259	3.32
9	OLD <sup>sd</sup>	15	0.12	67469	4.22	24	LITTLE	6	0.05	178159	1.49
10	ONE <sup>d</sup>	13	0.1	387638	1.49	25	GAME	5	0.04	32956	3.66
11	BOY	11	0.09	57864	3.99	26	PRATING	4	0.03	8	15.35
12	HEART	10	0.08	31565	4.73	27	ATTEMPT	4	0.03	2627	6.99
13	GAMES	9	0.07	6472	6.86	28	IDEAS	4	0.03	5215	6
14	MISTAKE <sup>s</sup>	9	0.07	11943	5.98	29	DREAMS	4	0.03	8039	5.38
15	CHOICES	7	0.05	2358	7.95	30	HUMAN	4	0.03	17453	4.26

Table 5. Top 30 content word collocates of foolish ordered by raw frequency.

COLLOCATE	MI	COLLOCATE	MI	COLLOCATE	MI
PRATING	15.35	CHILD	6.15	GIRL	4.25
SAMURAI	11.07	IDEAS	6	OLD	4.22
MORTALS	10.3	MISTAKE	5.98	THING	4.11
PRIDE	8.88	MISSION	5.87	BOY	3.99
PLEASURE	8.25	DREAMS	5.38	GAME	3.66
CHOICES	7.95	DREAM	5.23	WOMAN	3.32
ATTEMPT	6.99	HEART	4.73	MAN	3.1
HUMANS	6.91	THINGS	4.53	TALK	2.51
GAMES	6.86	QUESTION	4.26	ONE	1.49
WAYS	6.28	HUMAN	4.26	LITTLE	1.49

Table 6. Top 30 content word collocates of foolish ordered by MI-score.

Out of its 30 most frequent collocates, *foolish* shares five both *stupid* and *dumb*—*thing*, *things*, *girl*, *old*, *question*—two with just *stupid*, *man* and *mistake*; and *one* with only *dumb*.

In terms of MI-scores, the *foolish* collocations all display higher ones to their *stupid* or *dumb* counterparts, except for *mistake*, which remains *stupid*-favoured. On the other hand, of the

*foolish*-specific collocates here, *prating*, *samurai*, and *mortals* exhibit MI-scores of over 10. Moreover, the MI-score for the collocation of *foolish pleasure* seems odd. After investigating the concordance lines of these collocations, the reasons for these anomalies became clear. *Foolish prating* originates in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and is found in three different movie renditions of it,<sup>15</sup> while *foolish samurai* in source texts of different episodes of *Samurai Jack* found in identical sentences. *Foolish Pleasure*, the most frequent collocation of *foolish*, was discovered to be the name of a racehorse in the movie *Ruffian*. Only *mortals* was found to be spread across different texts, used by fictional "higher beings", like celestials or dragons, accompanied by a refined manner of speech (73)

- (73) A: So it appears you **foolish mortals** do need my help. B: Score one for the **Prince of the Obvious!** A: And I shall assist you. On one condition. When this is over, Odin will grant you a request. You will insist he pardon me for all crimes against Asgard. B: Yeah, yeah, whatever. (MOV:Guardians of the Galaxy)

The different language styles of the two speakers in (73) is a sign of their different dispositions, one being supernaturally powerful and the other a regular human, and of the ramifications thought to originate from that. The condescending attitude shown by the human speaker implies that they do not respect the non-human one, possibly due to, in part, the latter's speech style, which may be felt to show a condescending attitude itself. While the use of *foolish mortals* here is likely to stem from a conviction of superiority over the recipients, it might not be intended as an insult specifically, though it may be received as one.

While the use of *foolish thing(s)* is similar to the use of *dumb thing(s)* or *stupid thing(s)* when it comes to the function of the expression, the language surrounding it is often less crude (74).

- (74) Some historians have raised the question that Don Chafin, who was certainly no fool, might have done what seemed like a **foolish thing** to in fact provoke confrontation. (TV:American Experience)

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<sup>15</sup> One of the source texts was deemed a duplicate by the corpus interface, while one concordance line would only appear if the section filter was disabled.

One of the reasons as to why this is the case may be the type of program the utterance is found in. Most of the examples used prior to this section were found in television series or movies made for entertainment purposes, while the above example originates from a documentary series, a genre used more for informative purposes. The collocation is, however, found in entertainment products as well (75).

(75) That may well be. But my point is, some time ago... in a moment of weakness, I did a very **foolish thing**. And that **foolish thing** was photographed. I believe that photo is in the possession of a Mr. Vic Cavanaugh... an associate of yours, who refuses to surrender it... despite several generous offers for its purchase... the last of which, delivered not 10 minutes ago. (MOV: The Ice Harvest)

In this example, the choice of *foolish thing* instead of *stupid thing* or *dumb thing* is almost certainly to stem from the speaker's habitual manner of speech, which, based on the underlined sections, is believed to be stereotypical of high-class individuals in fiction, if not literary. These elements of language, such as deliberately using Latinate vocabulary (e.g., *associate*, *generous*, *possession*), using complex grammatical expressions (e.g., *in the possession of* instead of *has it*), and attaching titles (*Mr.*) to a name, are less typical of "real speech" than literary fiction. The extended context provides the information that the speaker in (75) is a politician (high-class person), while the environment of the interaction is a bar. The language in (75) may be an attempt to highlight the juxtaposition of character and place with the intention of inciting a humorous reaction in the viewer.

Two final notes should be made regarding *foolish thing*. Firstly, three instances of the collocation originate from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and are used identically ("a foolish thing was but a toy"). Two of these instances are from adaptations of the play, while one was found in the film *Brand Upon the Brain!*

Secondly, of the 29 concordance lines, 14 were found in sources released before the year 2000. This can suggest at least two things: that this kind of language is considered old-fashioned, or that the nature of television shows and movies has changed after the turn of the

millennium. In contrast, out of the 100 concordance lines used for the analysis of *stupid thing*, 32 were found to be from the 1990s, while the figure for *dumb thing* was 16 out of its concordance lines. Furthermore, comparing the overall frequencies of *stupid*, *dumb*, and *foolish* in the TV/M section by year range, it was discovered that *stupid* was at its most frequent in the years 1995-1999 (34.97 words per million), and while its frequency has since dropped in each successive year range, *stupid* was still more frequent in 2015-2019 (29.65 wpm) than in 1990-1994 (28.86). Meanwhile, *dumb* fluctuated in frequency minutely between the ranges 1990-1994 and 2000-2004—with the highest frequency being 6.84 wpm and lowest 6.72 wpm—and after a small decline to 6.53 wpm in 2005-2009, its frequency surged to 7.44 wpm in 2010-2014 and further increased to 8.6 wpm in 2015-2019. Finally, *foolish*, like *stupid*, was at its most frequent at 2.82 wpm in 1995-1999, after which it steadily declined to 1.17 wpm in 2010-2014, and while it rose back to 1.59 wpm in the final year range, it remained below its 1990-1994 frequency of 2.44 wpm. Based on these variations in frequency, it is clear that potentially intelligence-insulting words are in continued use in television and film production, and that *foolish*, while less frequent than its two competitors here throughout the period which the COCA data concerns, is used less frequently as time progresses. Regarding the two suggestions above, it is likely that both hold to some extent. For another point of comparison, *foolish* has become less frequent in its preferred genre of fiction in the COCA data, reinforcing the argument of it being considered old-fashioned more widely. On the other hand, and partly deriving from the previous point, it may be that characters who are considered old-fashioned have fallen out of favour of consumers. However, these suggestions require further research focussed on the possibility of *foolish* being considered old-fashioned.

*Foolish pride* is often seen to be an obstacle between one situation and a better one (76) or the cause of something undesirable (77). In addition, the collocation is found as part of the lyrics for the song “Layla” by Derek and the Dominos twice among the concordance lines.

- (76) This is no time for **foolish pride**. We've never been so close to victory.  
(MOV:Mortal Kombat)
- (77) And so they lied and deceived. Killed each other because of **foolish pride** then told themselves it was justified. But it wasn't. (MOV:Applesseed Alpha)

In these cases, it is the trait of pride that is evaluated as undesirable, and while the attitude of an utterer of such an expression toward those they deem possessing this trait may be scornful, such an expression is likely to be a lamentation rather than an insult.

The *foolish*-preferred *man* and *old* are connected to the discussion on *stupid old* in section 4.2.1, as it was discovered that the expression frequently modified *man* or *fool* and *foolish* is derived from *fool*. The trend of *man* being modified by the collocation of either *stupid* and *foolish* and *old* is repeated here, as the expression appears in 12 of the 15 concordance lines of *foolish old*.

Further reinforcing the idea that *foolish* is an old-fashioned word are references to a passage in the Bible (78) which include *foolish man*.

- (78) Building a subway under land that's seismically active. It was a **foolish man** that built his house upon the sand. Matthew 7:26. (MOV:Beverly Hills Blondes)

The word may also signal a level of politeness in translation, for example (79).

- (79) A: What do they say? B: They say "What make **foolish man** think I speak Chinese?" (TV:Bones)

While the translation in (79) is not genuine, i.e., it is a humorous retort in the form of one, the choice of *foolish* instead of *stupid* or *dumb* is likely deliberate. The expression could be rephrased using *inconsiderate* or *thoughtless*, and as there is a considerable presence of banter in the extended context, it is unlikely to count as an insult on intelligence or a genuine insult.

On the other hand, *foolish* is the sole node word that *woman* is found to collocate with within the data, and this collocation is relatively frequent. In fact, as regards the collocates of SDFR, *woman* is only discovered being modified by *stupid* and *foolish* in TV/M,<sup>16</sup> and comparing instances of the collocations reveals that *stupid woman* is found in more offensive utterances (80-81). This supports the argument that *foolish* may be considered the polite option of SDFR.

- (80) Josephine, you think you can just walk out on me? You **stupid woman!**  
Worthless cow! You're nothing without me. (MOV:Chocolat)
- (81) That foolish, **foolish woman**. She swallowed four razor blades? (TV:Grey's Anatomy)

(80) is evidently highly insulting, as the speaker employs the woman-referring *cow*, further modified by *worthless*, and finally claims that the recipient's value is dependent on the speaker. Meanwhile, the act of swallowing razor blades in (81) seems abnormal enough for it to justify being evaluated by harsher words, but the speaker chooses to use the specific expression "foolish, foolish woman". The attitude this expresses here is less likely to be contempt and more likely to be sympathy or pity, though it could target intelligence. However, as the recipient is not present and no reference is made between a present interactant and them, the utterance counting as an insult is questionable.

*Foolish* also seems to be a word favoured in the realm of literature, used by authors and in adaptations of books, as was suggested in section 4.2.1. This seems to be especially salient with collocations like *foolish child* (82), *foolish girl* (83), and *foolish boy* (84).

- (82) A: I am not the sort of female to torment a respectable man. Please understand me, I can not accept you. B: Headstrong, **foolish child**. (MOV:Pride & Prejudice)
- (83) It's about a young girl, a young and **foolish girl**, who sees something from her bedroom window which she doesn't understand, but she thinks she does. I probably won't ever finish it. (MOV:Atonement)

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<sup>16</sup> *Stupid woman* appears 23 times across the TV/M section, displaying an MI-score of 1.25. *Women* is also found only with *stupid* and *foolish*, yet more infrequently.



Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813, providing additional evidence for the argument of *foolish* perhaps becoming antiquated, while also supporting the findings that the word is typical to literary fiction. On the other hand, the use of the expression in (83) is not based on the text of a piece of literature, but is related to a proposed story of one, uttered by its writer.

Interestingly, these three collocations were found to be used by two other groups of speakers: those of advanced age, in a position of guidance, or a combination of these, like elders, older relatives, or teachers (84); and those not belonging to mainstream groups (85).

- (84) A: Ah, Mr Wu...B: Apologies for intruding, but my wife's nephew... you recall he got into some trouble. A: Armed robbery and got six years, hmm? B: Yes, yes, **foolish boy** who deserved his sentence. (TV:Underbelly)
- (85) Why talk to a **foolish girl** who lies like her father? Who promises my people things they will only get after they die. (TV:The Magnificent Seven)

Example (84) is similar to (79) in that there is a relationship to foreign culture in both, as B in the example is implied to be of a different ethnicity than the mainstream one through their name, "Wu". It seems, then, that *foolish* is thought to be preferred by some speakers of English for whom it is not their first language or who belong to different ethnicities, as is also implied in (85). As the latter example is from a television series featuring native Americans and the episode synopsis reveals that the girl mentioned in the utterance was "apparently abducted" by one, along with the use of *my people*, attributing these lines to a native American speaker (in fiction) seems appropriate. The example also includes othering, but from the perspective of the typically othered, i.e., the minority group, emphasising the division between their group and the majority. However, while these two examples do show an unapproving attitude, they are less likely to evaluate their referents as unintelligent than unwise, as both refer to a specific reason for the evaluation.

One difference between *foolish* and the other node words that these findings on collocations on adolescents highlight is the preferred term for children. While the rest of

SDFR prefer *kid* to refer to singular children, *foolish* alone favours *child*. While there may be multiple reasons for this, register is likely to play a large part here. By comparing the general frequencies of *child* and *kid* in COCA, the differences in genre preference were discovered to be in line with that of *foolish*. Firstly, *kid* is overwhelmingly most frequent in TV/M, followed by FIC at half of the prior's normalised frequency of 322.48 wpm. The word is third-most frequent in SPOK, with its frequency falling to 6.59 wpm in ACAD. Meanwhile, *child* is most frequent in ACAD at a slightly higher frequency than *kid* in TV/M, 329.99 wpm, followed by the other written genres and the least frequent in TV/M at 156.05 wpm. As TV/M is the most informal genre in COCA and ACAD is the most formal one, it is clear that *child* is the neutral to formal choice for referring to a single child, while *kid* is the informal, colloquial one. On the other hand, the string *foolish kid* was found only six times across COCA, once in TV/M and twice in FIC, and the rest in SPOK. It can finally be claimed, then, that *foolish*, in the senses it shares with *stupid* and *dumb*, is their variant used in neutral to formal situations, with a connotation for politeness or propriety.

#### 4.2.4 Retarded

The first noticeable detail in Table 8 are the high MI-scores for the ten collocates in the first column. Of these ten, *just-out-of-rehab* and *fish-frog(s)* appear only one time in TV/M, while *homuncular*, *revenger*, and *huxtable* only once when modified by *retarded*. Additionally, while the words *sibling*, *tyrannosaurus*, *gorillas*, and *offspring* are found in more than one source, each of them is only found to be modified by *retarded* in single texts. Furthermore, *fish-frog(s)*, *offspring*, and *idea* all originate in episodes of *South Park*, with the former two in a single episode and the latter across two different episodes from 2002 and 2003. These results indicate idiosyncratic, context-specific use and are therefore less reliable in assessing general use.

	COLLOCATE	FREQ	PER MIL	ALL	MI		COLLOCATE	FREQ	PER MIL	ALL	MI
1	KID <sup>sd</sup>	14	0.11	41308	5.78	16	SIBLING	2	0.02	223	10.51
2	PEOPLE <sup>sd</sup>	12	0.09	158114	3.62	17	GORILLAS	2	0.02	238	10.42
3	KIDS <sup>d</sup>	8	0.06	41648	4.96	18	OFFSPRING	2	0.02	388	9.71
4	COUSIN	6	0.05	5798	7.39	19	SISTER	2	0.02	22105	3.88
5	SON <sup>sd</sup>	6	0.05	50384	4.27	20	DAUGHTER	2	0.02	22916	3.83
6	GIRL <sup>sdf</sup>	6	0.05	65655	3.89	21	ASS <sup>sd</sup>	2	0.02	28572	3.51
7	GUY <sup>d</sup>	6	0.05	100876	3.27	22	IDEA <sup>sd</sup>	2	0.02	48342	2.75
8	CHILDREN	5	0.04	22025	5.21	23	FRIEND	2	0.02	53136	2.61
9	BROTHER	5	0.04	35340	4.52	24	GUYS	2	0.02	107609	1.59
10	PERSON	4	0.03	31785	4.35	25	JUST-OUT-OF-REHAB	1	0.01	1	17.31
11	BOY <sup>f</sup>	4	0.03	57864	3.49	26	FISH-FROGS	1	0.01	1	17.31
12	MAN <sup>sf</sup>	4	0.03	223726	1.54	27	FISH-FROG	1	0.01	1	17.31
13	TYRANNOSAURUS	3	0.02	236	11.01	28	HOMUNCULAR	1	0.01	2	16.31
14	THING <sup>sdf</sup>	3	0.02	140413	1.8	29	REVENGER	1	0.01	7	14.5
15	PAPERBOY	2	0.02	112	11.5	30	HUXTABLE	1	0.01	21	12.92

Table 7. Top 30 content word collocates of retarded ordered by raw frequency.

COLLOCATE	MI	COLLOCATE	MI	COLLOCATE	MI
JUST-OUT-OF-REHAB	17.31	OFFSPRING	9.71	DAUGHTER	3.83
FISH-FROGS	17.31	COUSIN	7.39	PEOPLE	3.62
FISH-FROG	17.31	KID	5.78	ASS	3.51
HOMUNCULAR	16.31	CHILDREN	5.21	BOY	3.49
REVENGER	14.5	KIDS	4.96	GUY	3.27
HUXTABLE	12.92	BROTHER	4.52	IDEA	2.75
PAPERBOY	11.5	PERSON	4.35	FRIEND	2.61
TYRANNOSAURUS	11.01	SON	4.27	THING	1.8
SIBLING	10.51	GIRL	3.89	GUYS	1.59
GORILLAS	10.42	SISTER	3.88	MAN	1.54

Table 8. Top 30 content word collocates of retarded ordered by MI-score.

While *retarded* is found modifying 19 words no other node word modifies, it shares certain words with different node words. Crucially, it is made evident that SDFR share two collocates: *thing* and *girl*. While *retarded thing* appears only three times in TV/M, the appearances are spread over three sources and points in time, suggesting that the collocation is not coincidental. To see how this argument holds in a larger dataset, the collocation was searched on the iWeb corpus,<sup>17</sup> which resulted in 94 hits and an MI-score of 3.30.

<sup>17</sup> The iWeb corpus is available through the English-Corpora.org interface. It is comprised of over 14 billion words from more than 22 million web pages. [www.english-corpora.org/iweb/help/texts.asp](http://www.english-corpora.org/iweb/help/texts.asp)

The collocation is used similarly to *dumb thing* or *stupid thing* to refer to an item in the conversational context, but in two of three instances here, in the superlative form (86).

- (86) A: Whenever someone lies, they normally have a tell. Like my new friend, Graham, over here. B: That's the most retarded thing I've ever heard. (MOV:Cry Wolf)

It is clear that *thing* refers to A's utterances, but the reason for B's utterance is not as clear-cut. On one hand, it could be a response to A's first claim, though the retort would likely have been produced directly after the first utterance. What is more likely, then, is that B's utterance is a reaction to them being accused of lying, and an attempt to dispel this doubt by discrediting A's argument as absurd. However, by making this utterance, B is seen to take a defensive stance, and by attempting to deny having lied, they effectively admit to it. B's utterance, then, may be argued to have been intended as an insult through the strong evaluation, but it appears to not have been received as one.

There is one instance of possibly misleading data among the concordance lines if *retarded thing* (87).

- (87) A: Let's talk about the specific incident that brought you to us. B: Oh, yeah, the **retarded thing**. A: Yes. Exactly. Now, when you said that word, Congressman, is there, I don't know, another word that you could have used, had the same meaning? (TV:Veep)

This instance of *retarded thing* seems to, at first glance, refer to something B evaluates as "retarded" in the context. However, considering the underlined expression and the episode synopsis, it becomes evident that B is referring to an instance of them uttering the word *retarded* in a public address. In short, the subtitle author has, mistakenly or erroneously, not added quotation marks around *retarded*. The example is valuable, however, as it illustrates the node word being considered unacceptable, especially in public spaces. While the example comes from a fictional production, as the series is characterised as political satire,<sup>18</sup> it should

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<sup>18</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veep](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veep)

be assumed to be conscious of political trends, like the use of words such as *retarded* seems to be. That the use of the word is discouraged here reflects the social standard in America labelling it as a word to be avoided unless a speaker deliberately aims to offend.

Among the 18 explicitly person-referring nouns in Table 7, *girl* is the only one shared by SDFR. Most instances of *retarded girl* employ the outdated technical sense of the node word. In some of these cases, the speaker may not be aware of the word's connotations, resulting in probably-unintended insults, which are recognised as such by the hearer(s) (88).

- (88) A: You got that **big retarded girl**... down there with you? B: Uh-huh, yeah, Grandma. . . She doesn't mean that. She kind of lost the old filter with the last stroke. (MOV: Sugar & Spice)

While B's claim about A not meaning what they said is impossible to validate, as it is a matter of speaker intent, the prior is cognisant of the insensitivity brought forth by *retarded* on one hand, and *big* on the other. There is no discrepancy between A and B as to who they understand *retarded girl* to denote, but, while it is not clear how B would refer to the girl, there seems to be a difference in how the speakers prefer to do that. This example illustrates that, even in more intimate circles—B calls the present group “squad” in the extended context—*retarded* may often be considered inappropriate.

However, using *retarded* might not have such repercussions in all intimate communicative contexts. In conversations where the word is first attributed to a non-present third party, it may be reused for a present interactant as well, for example (89).

- (89) A: Even that **fat retarded kid**, Robbie Friedman, got one. . . But the Pentagon's got to give little trophies to all the Robbie Friedmans of the world. B: So, basically, you're a **fat retarded kid**. A: Bro, I'm the fattest and most retarded. (MOV: War Dogs)

Here, the character Robbie Friedman is first described as “that fat retarded kid” and later speaker A uses their name to refer to a group of such referents, a phenomenon known as *antonomasia* (Holmqvist and Płuciennik 2010). While this character is likely not as famous or of paragon status as those often used to exemplify the process, such as Don Quixote, they are

chosen to be the representative of the group they are ascribed to, which Holmqvist and Płuciennik argue suffices to establish understanding of said group (375). As such, this use of antonomasia functions and its denoted quality is understood because the interactants share similar knowledge. Holmqvist and Płuciennik argue that this kind of metaphorical antonomasia is based on culture (375) and, citing Stephen Turner, that culture is “acquired through experience” (376). Furthermore, they suggest that the phenomenon “can perhaps best be regarded as a cryptographic tool”, which may be used in differentiating between “those who know” and “those who do not know” (379). Considering, then, that the two speakers in (89) share similar knowledge (i.e., culture) regarding the circumstances surrounding Robby Friedman and themselves and use it to make jokes, the two are likely close friends. While the use of *retarded kid* here seems to show a negative attitude toward the group it is used to denote, the use of the expression by B appears to amount to banter, as A recognises and responds in kind, resulting in both speakers laughing.

Interestingly, (88-89) both describe an adolescent referent as large-sized and “retarded”, suggesting a pattern connecting being overweight and one or more traits denoted by *retarded*. In fact, there are two more instances in the *retarded kid* concordance line data in which both an expression denoting obesity and *retarded* are present (MOV:Little Monsters, MOV:Orgazmo), and similar cases are found in the concordance line data of *retarded son* (TV:Drawn Together) and *retarded brother* (TV:American Experience). While the amount of data is low, it seems that, at least in television and movie productions, these two assessments have some tendency to co-occur. However, as these examples are based on references to characters created for these productions, no strong generalisation can be made regarding real-world use.

Related to the discussion on *kid* and *child* in section 4.2.3, *retarded* collocates with both *kids* and *children*. While *kid* was found to be most frequent in TV/M, *kids* is similarly

frequent in the section, though it is somewhat more frequent in SPOK. *Kids* is similar to *kid* in its frequency in ACAD, though the prior is slightly more frequent. In contrast, though *children* is almost twice as frequent as *child* across COCA, the prior's use in the written genres remains similarly high, and extraordinarily so in ACAD, at 849.91 wpm. Based on these findings, the argument for *kid* versus *child* may be repeated here, i.e., *kids* being typically casual and colloquial and *children* neutral to formal.

In practice, the use of *retarded children* may be an attempt to appear correct (90).

(90) A: So, what do you guys do? B: For fun or for work? A: For **retarded children**.  
 B: Oh come on, that's evil. C: Don't. A: No, what do you two do for fun?  
 (MOV:Order of Chaos)

While the use of *retarded children* in the above example seems to be an attempt at humour or teasing, it appears to be ill-received. It is possible that the reluctance to engage with the topic is not caused by the word *retarded* alone, as it could also stem from the topic of intellectually disabled children itself. Whichever the case, A promptly changes course after being reprimanded. This kind of grouping use is, once again, unlikely to count as a direct or genuine insult, especially since no representatives of the group are acknowledged to be present, but it does seem to convey a ridiculing attitude.

One clue regarding the reason why *retarded* is pronouncedly frequent in the TV/M section of COCA is in its distribution across the different types of movies and TV shows it is found in. Taking a sample of 50 source texts and assigning them genre tags based on the spreadsheet containing information on all texts in COCA (see section 3.2, fn. 4), it was discovered that 27 of these 50 source texts were classified at least partially as comedy. *Retarded* being defined as and shown to be an offensive word, it may be assumed that the comedy in these cases is of the offensive kind. For example, one text based on an episode of *South Park* appears among this sample of 50 texts. The show is highly contentious and employs offensive language, though it is also considered a leading example of television

series critical of sensitive topics (e.g., Arp and Decker; Schulzke). In addition, multiple stand-up sources populate the list, and examples (87-89) also belong in the category of comedy.

In their article, Graefer and Das recognise two approaches to offensive humour: one based on avoidance “at all costs”, and another on defending “the right to offend” (2020, 149). Among the data for their interview-based analysis were *South Park* and *Family Guy*, both being present in the overall data on *retarded* in TV/M (18 of 785 concordance lines attributed to the prior, 19 to the latter). They highlight the difficulty of defining offensive humour, though they mention features such as contributing to stereotypes and explicit style and content (152). Of key, however, is the direction of this humour, or “humour regimes” (e.g., Kuipers 2011), i.e., implicit rules governing who may joke about a particular topic. Graefer and Das found that, most often, a joke that offends is one made by a member of a majority to an individual or a group of minority status (154). The least contested cases were those in which a group member portrayed themselves or their group humorously (153).

From this follows a re-examination of the examples used in this section, namely whether any of them can evidently be attributed to an intellectually disabled individual. The result is a clearly negative one. Even the self-deprecating remark in (89) is unlikely to count as such an instance, as the joke seems to stem from contextual cues. Investigating the *retarded* concordance lines further, it seems that no instance of the word being used is plausibly attributable to a speaker representative of the group. This suggests that at least this form of referring to intellectually disabled people has not been re-appropriated by the group, i.e., claimed by the target group of the word to refer to other in-group members, a process researched in relation to slurs (e.g., Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018; O’Dea and Saucier 2020)



### 4.3 Near-synonymity and Variance

This section examines the second research question (What relationships of near-synonymity and variance do *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded* have based on the corpus and dictionary data?). To briefly reiterate, near-synonyms show overlap of senses and are substitutable in nearly all situations, while variants denote the same thing, showing differences in other ways. A hypothesis here is that, as SDFR are evaluational adjectives, they can be substituted in numerous instances while retaining the quality they denote. The differences here are likely to be of expressive nature, such as the intensity of annoyance.

To commence the discussion, consider the following imagined examples using the collocates SDFR share among their 30 most frequent ones (91). Where one choice seems anomalous, a question mark will be placed before it.

- (91) a. It was such a stupid/dumb/foolish/retarded thing to say.  
 b. She's so not real for going out with the stupid/dumb/?foolish/retarded girl.

The expression most likely to raise questions here is the one which uses *foolish girl*, and it likely would raise eyebrows in such a strongly colloquial context. However, the word is found in examples of slightly less strong spoken language quality (92).

- (92) This ain't killing for profit. He's not that foolish. (MOV:From Hell)

However, that it can be said, or even that it has been said, does not necessarily mean it is widely found agreeable. As this inappropriateness seems to stem from style, another kind of context might fare better (93).

- (93) The stupid/dumb/foolish/retarded girl believed she could learn to play the piano in a month.

Here, each configuration seems to be acceptable on their own. However, the four cases appear to mean something slightly different. With *stupid*, (93) could mean, for example, that the girl was naïve to believe that she could learn to play the piano in one month —although it is not clear what level one must be at with the instrument for them to have gained the label of

“able to play the piano”. If the girl’s goal was to learn the basics and a simple song, say, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”, but she failed to reach that goal, the meaning may shift to something closer to ‘talentless’ or ‘unintelligent’. In contrast, if she aspired to become the next Beethoven, no amount of practice would be realistic to take her from zero to genius on one month, plausibly bringing the meaning of the expression closer to ‘immature’ or ‘lacking common sense’. The difference between using *stupid* and *dumb* in this case does not seem to change the denoted quality, but perhaps *dumb* would be preferred by speakers more intimate with the girl, such as close friends or family members, while *stupid* may be used between piano teachers discussing their students in private. Alternatively, the choice may stem from a speaker’s experience with the words, such as which word they have encountered more often in their life. Nonetheless, in this kind of use, *stupid* and *dumb* seem to be variants rather than near-synonyms.

*Foolish*, in such an instance, seems more likely to refer to a lack of judgement. Continuing with the more modest context, what *foolish* seems to refer to is the girl’s ignorance of or lack of consideration for her circumstances. Without specifying this, which would probably be done in some way in real contexts, the use of *foolish* may refer to any imaginable obstacle(s) between an aspiring learner and them attaining the skill. If the circumstance is known, for example that the learner can only use two hours every Sunday to train or that they have never received any musical instruction, a more expert person of the craft may assess the learner as ‘ignorant’ or ‘inexperienced’. However, in such a context, *stupid* and *dumb* seem to select a similar meaning as the primary one. The difference in word selection here, then, may—among others—lie in the mode of communication or, again, the speaker themselves or the relationship between the speaker and the target of the evaluation, or a combination of these. Considering that *foolish* seems to more easily select this meaning, it may be argued that in such scenarios, *stupid* and *dumb* are variants of *foolish*.

Finally, returning to the original “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” context, *retarded* seems to work in two ways. When it is understood to mean ‘exceedingly stupid’, the denotation can be deemed to be the same or very similar, while the primary difference seems to arise from affect, i.e., the feelings the speaker has toward the target of the expression. In this meaning, the speaker assesses the learner as both ‘very stupid’, in whichever meaning of *stupid* is more applicable in that context, and ‘contemptible’. In this use, *retarded* can be classified as a variant of *stupid* and *dumb*, though it is difficult to retrieve *retarded* as a variant of *stupid* or *dumb*.

The other manner *retarded* seems to function in draws from its historical senses, while likely retaining the meaning of ‘contemptible’. In such a case, a speaker attributes *retarded* to a learner who they suspect, believe, or know to have an intellectual disability or a learning disability. In such a case, *stupid*, *dumb*, nor *foolish* can be used as a substitute word to denote the same quality *retarded* does. This, for one, implies there to be near-synonymity between the words, establishing *retarded* as a near-synonym of *stupid* and *dumb*.

To explore this relationship in other contexts, (91a) is repeated here for convenience.

(91) a. It was such a stupid/dumb/foolish/retarded thing to say.

As suggested above, these instances are not expected to raise strong objections on their own. However, when compared to each other, some differences seem to surface. For instance, referring to having replied with “Thanks, you too” to a waiter’s “Enjoy your meal” in a restaurant may elicit any of the four adjectives. However, it seems that while all four are available to one person commenting on another having accidentally reciprocated the salutation of the waiter, *foolish* appears to not be as easily used in the first person. The data on *foolish thing(s)* supports this, as only 15 of 52 concordance lines are plausibly analysable as an expression of something considered foolish by the self. While this alone does not assign

*foolish* as a near-synonym or variant of the other three, it seems to be a choice language users make in spoken contexts.

As for the possible meanings the different words can produce, shame appears to be a central one in such situations, connecting the four adjectives. It seems, then, that one controlling variable in the selection of the adjective used here is the level of shame, assumedly so that *retarded* would indicate the highest level, *foolish* likely situated below it, with *dumb* and *stupid* somewhat subjectively contentious. In this sense of ‘shameful’, SDFR seem to be variants of each other, though extracting such a single sense in real use may be much more difficult.

Furthermore, it seems that intentionality is another factor informing the selection among SDFR in similar situations, as *foolish* seems to be more appropriately used of things one says not accidentally, but deliberately (94).

(94) A: I remember when we started out, you said I was a fool for running a media company. B: Well, it was a foolish thing to say. (TV:Revenger)

This feature may be examined by substituting the verb SAY in (91a) for BLURT OUT (95).

(95) It was such a stupid/dumb/?foolish/retarded thing to blurt out.

Despite *foolish* being defined as showing a lack of judgement, sense, or discretion in the entries gathered in Appendix, the use of *foolish* and *blurt out* do not seem to fit well together. This may be partially due to the third sense in the *M-W* of ‘insignificant’ or ‘trifling’. In general, something that is blurted out is supposed to not be said, for one or more of a number of reasons, such as maintaining secrecy, upholding social decorum, or avoiding hurtful comments under strong emotional duress. This suggests that *foolish* is a near-synonym of the other three.

In addition, the collocation data analysed in section 4.2 is a clue in itself, namely the collocation preferences and node word-specific collocates. As was demonstrated in section 4.2.2, *dumb* and *stupid* share 20 of their 30 most frequent collocates, exhibiting similar use in

many. Most words preferring *dumb* were found to be negatively loaded, derogatory, or words which otherwise tend to prefer informal communication situations. However, claiming *dumb* to be the informal variant of *stupid* in a similar vein to the *LDOCE* entry defining the first sense of *dumb* as ‘stupid’ is overly simplistic. As it was found that, for example, despite *dumb thing* and *stupid thing* sharing how they were used in the senses of ‘doing’, ‘saying’ and ‘thing in context’, the frequencies of these functions varying suggest that there is some selectional variation that is not immediately apparent in dictionary entries, for example. As these variations themselves varied between collocations, it becomes difficult to generalise situations in which *dumb* and *stupid* are near-synonyms or variants, and the argument can be extended to the remaining two words of SDFR. A more complete investigation into this phenomenon is outside the scope of this work, and as such, the answer to the second research question remains vague, i.e., that there seem to be tendencies, but ultimately, “it depends”.

#### 4.4 Evaluation and Attitude

This section considers the third and final research question (How are evaluation and attitude present in informal American English in potentially intelligence-insulting contexts where *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, or *retarded* is used?). The question will be approached in terms of collocation, context, and utterance type in order.

As was shown in section 4.2, each node word among SDFR has more and less typical collocations, estimated by the MI-score. In general, a higher MI-score suggests of a high likelihood of two words co-occurring, though some reservations must be remembered when considering low-frequency items in unaltered corpus data, as illustrated in section 4.2.3 and 4.2.4. On the other hand, some items may exhibit lower MI-scores in a specific use due to their multitude of uses, as was indicated in the case of *fuck*. If considering the MI-score for the collocation of *stupid fuck* as-is, *fuck* is situated as the 20th most frequent collocates of

*stupid* and fifth to last as ordered by MI-score. However, the suggested MI-score in section 4.2.1 of 5.31 would shift its position in the ordering to sixth position.

The situation is similar with *dumb*, although *fuck* is ordered as the third most frequent collocate of *dumb* and the 16th most significant according to the original MI-score, this collocation moves in the significance ordering to the third-highest position. As these collocations were found to refer to people in numerous instances, they can therefore be classified as negatively loaded language toward human referents, instead of simply general expletive use.

These, together with collocations with words such as *shit*, *bitch*, *cow*, *motherfucker*, *idiot*, *bastard*, etc., display semantic prosody, repeated here as the collocational meaning resulting from interplay between a node word and its collocates, especially its typical ones. This meaning is thought to express the evaluation or attitude of a speaker or writer, as well as to stain other items the node word frequently collocates with. In this case, the meaning arising from collocations of *stupid* or *dumb* and the words above tends to display contempt, dislike, or arrogant superiority, and some of this was found in collocations of the node words and their other collocates.

On the other hand, more generally frequent collocates, such as *thing*, displayed capacity for both the above evaluational meanings and those ascribed to them in dictionaries, such as the sense ‘silly’ in some instances some *stupid thing*. However, some instances were found to employ meanings more strongly attributed to the other words among SDFR, such as ‘insignificance’, which is more apparent as a sense of *foolish*. The relatively high MI-score of *foolish thing* and *foolish* displaying near-synonymity or variance with *stupid* and *dumb* in some instances might serve as clues as to the “staining” of collocational meanings between collocations.

As the above paragraphs argue, the most frequent or typical evaluations made using collocations with high MI-scores may be more specific, at least to a narrower domain if not to a single characteristic, than the evaluations made with less typical collocations. As was shown in the discussion throughout sections 4.2.1-4.2.4, though, even in instances of the more typical collocations the specific target of a (potential) insult is often unclear. Therefore, while collocations may point to the general arena of negative attitude or evaluation, it appears that both linguistic and substantial context is required to make more specific assessments of the nature of these judgements.

One kind of linguistic contextual clue is the repetition of certain potentially intelligence-insulting words (96) or the use of a variety of adjacent terms (97).

(96) Oh, are you stupid. Stupid Brad. Stupid, dumb, dumb Brad. (MOV:Extract)

(97) Stupid fucking dumb idea. Just really retarded as all fuck. . . (MOV:Kevin Smith: Sold Out - A Threeevening with Kevin Smith)

As can be seen in (96), these strategies may also be used in conjunction, while the utterances in (97) also include three instances of intensification. What these examples have in common, however, is that they seem to employ a specific meaning across the present utterances in each. While extralinguistic and paralinguistic features unavailable through limited context may be used to further specify these, (96) seems to convey the attitude and evaluation of ‘unintelligent’, while that retrievable in (97) appears to be ‘completely nonsensical’. Through such examples, though, it becomes apparent that complete attitudes and evaluations are often not conveyed through single words, or even words alone. As such, the contextual factor can be argued to be vital to both conveying and understanding evaluations and attitudes.

As a final consideration, and perhaps the most generalisable one, is the difference between an evaluation or attitude conveyed through an exclamatory declarative (98), an interrogative (99), and a negative interrogative (100).

(98) You guys are fucking retarded! (TV:Californication)

- (99) A: Are you retarded? B: What? A: Are you? Are you mentally fucking retarded?  
(TV:Viny1)
- (100) Look what he's doing. Isn't he stupid? (MOV:A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries)

These examples can be divided into two general categories: the exclamatory declarative in (98) is a speaker making an evaluation without linguistically signalling an expectation of reciprocation, while the interrogatives in (99) and (100) both do, though they differ slightly in what kind of reciprocation they seek. The simple interrogative in (99) invites the hearer to answer the question—which, in this example, they don't—while the negative interrogative in (100) calls for agreement, implying that the speaker expects the hearer to share their evaluation. This dichotomy results in different likely reactions to such expressions, as explored below.

For both declaratives and interrogatives, some frequent strategies seem to be ignoring, or “letting it go”; retaliation, with either an expression showing a similar attitude as the inciting one (101) or an expletive retort (102); pleading for the abusive attitude showing to cease (103); or an affirmation, usually implied to be humorous (104).

- (101) A: Take it easy - he's just a kid. B: Yeah, a retarded kid. C: You're the retard, retard! (MOV:Raven's Hollow)
- (102) A: Are you saying he was retarded? B: Why don't you go fuck yourself? (TV:The Sopranos)
- (103) A: You kids are retarded. B: Leave us alone! Why are you bothering us?!  
(MOV:ThanksKilling)
- (104) A: Why are you talking so slow? B: I just figured, looking at your sheet, that since you sold grass to a uniformed police officer that you must be retarded.  
A: Yeah, I get that a lot. (MOV:Our Idiot Brother)

For interrogatives, another common strategy seems to be to deny the allegation (105).

- (105) A: What are you, retarded? B: No. I took that test when I was seven - a little slow in some stuff, mostly math and spatial relations, but certainly not challenged.

As speaker C in (101) and speaker B in (103) are children, it seems that the strategies of answering a negative evaluation or asking such to not be used may be more common among juveniles, while the strategies of expletive retorts (102), self-deprecating humour (104), and



reasoned denial (105) seem to be more mature responses to negative evaluations. Among the latter group, the responses that evaluating expressions in interrogative form elicit seem to be more intense, suggesting that negative evaluation and expressing negative attitude in question form may be considered more offensive than simple declaratives.

## 5 Conclusion

This thesis has considered the use of the four evaluational adjectives *stupid*, *dumb*, *foolish*, and *retarded* (SDFR), which can potentially be used to insult the intelligence of a person, referred to in the thesis as potentially intelligence-insulting words. The data that was used in the analysis was taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), further restricted to the TV/Movies section of the corpus (TV/M). The aim of this choice was to study informal language originating in spoken contexts, and while some features of written language are at times present, most data used in this thesis was found to be quite informal.

Three research questions were investigated in the thesis. The first one, pertaining to how the four words appear to be used in informal American English, was undertaken in section 4.2 by analysing collocation and concordance line data of the four. While no clear all-encompassing answer could be drawn out, as the words were shown to be used in a number of different ways and contexts, some features could be discovered more clearly. Firstly, as the *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* states in its entry for *retarded*, the word was found to be offensive in most if not all instances of it being used. However, as different contexts tolerate offensive language differently, the reactions to the use of the word elicited varied. For example, a politician using *retarded* in a public address was found to be problematic, while the joke of one speaker was not deemed as an issue by another in a private, intimate interaction. One possible source for this difference was suggested to be comedy.

Secondly, it was found that all four can be used to refer to general or contextual items, primarily through the use of words such as *thing* and *stuff*. However, the details of how each word was used in such contexts varied, such as how frequently a combination of a node word and such a general collocate referred to either doing or saying something, or to an object, utterance, idea, etc. available to the interactants in context.

Thirdly, as was predicted in section 4.1, *foolish* was found to differ from the rest in some ways. One such difference was the development of its frequency in the data over time, as it was the only node word to exhibit a lower normalised frequency in the final time period, following the division in COCA, of 2015-2019, than the initial one of 1990-1994. This was suggested to indicate that the adjective is old-fashioned, especially in spoken American English.

The second research question, involving near-synonymy and variance between SDFR, was similarly difficult to answer in a generalised way. While the four adjectives were shown to display patterns of near-synonymy and variance, these depended on context and the most plausible meaning an expression including a potentially intelligence-insulting word has. One exception was, again, *foolish*, which seemed to prefer certain contexts. One such context was suggested to be one in which the evaluation is made of something done intentionally. This contextual factor seems to be related to another one, namely whether an expression is intended to be self-referential or other-referring in contexts of ‘saying’, in which *foolish thing* is attributed to something that has been said. It was suggested that *foolish* is less likely to be uttered by a speaker referring to their own utterance than the other three potentially intelligence-insulting words, using an example of an accidental reply in a customer service situation. Finally, *foolish* was suggested to not situate well in highly colloquial linguistic contexts. In conclusion, the answer to this question was argued to be “it depends”, and while

a more granular categorisation of near-synonymous and variant relationships eluded this thesis, the question could be repurposed for another study focussed on the issue.

The third research question continues the trend of vaguely-answered inquiries, though some more concrete suggestions could be made in relation to this question. The third question examined the topic of evaluation and attitude as shown in utterances containing SDFR. It was argued that utterances in which only a single such potentially intelligence-insulting word is used are more vague than those employing multiple instances of the same word or an assortment of adjacent words, or a combination of the two strategies. Furthermore, it was argued that evaluations and attitudes are expressed across multiple utterances more specifically than through single words. Finally, it was found that interrogative expressions of evaluation and attitude seem more offensive than declarative ones. This last notion, in particular, is one which could benefit from further research.

Some limitations of the thesis should be mentioned. The first, and perhaps most obvious one, is the use of language data that does not originate in completely natural communication. While analysing a dataset of wholly naturally occurring language might not affect the patterns and features of language much, there may be a larger discrepancy between the two types of data in how frequently potentially insulting language is used, as well as frequencies of specific language items. Unfortunately, such natural language data is much more difficult to collect, especially on a similar scale as in COCA. This is one aspect of corpus studies which could be mitigated with specifically trained artificial intelligence in the future, though said program would also likely need to be created with ethical research principles in mind.

The second limitation concerns the data and the methods of its analysis. As the final data was large, at 120 collocate pairs and thousands of concordance lines, the analysis of some collocations had to be omitted due to time constraints. In addition, the concordance

lines being variably tagged based on the most prominent situational features lead to the patterns which were recognised among the data to be more local than general. While this does enable the discovery of features present between SDFR and clues toward expressing attitude and making evaluations, it is difficult to generalise these from possibilities to patterns of language use. Finally, the absence of rigorous statistical analysis results in a lack of a strong measure of significance.

Nevertheless, the aim of the thesis to offer a broad picture of the use of adjective-based potentially insulting informal language is far from unfulfilled. The various uses of SDFR have been displayed and discussed in varying depth, and it has been shown that intelligence, or the lack of it, is a common topic in American culture, particularly in US-based television and film productions.

## Appendix

### Defining SDFR

<i>stupid</i>	
<b>LDOCE</b>	<p>1: showing a lack of good sense or good judgment (SYN: <i>silly</i>)</p> <p>2: having a low level of intelligence, so that you have difficulty learning or understanding things</p> <p>3: <i>spoken</i> used when you are talking about something or someone that makes you annoyed or impatient</p>
<b>OED</b>	<p>1.a: Of a person: slow to learn or understand; lacking intelligence or perceptiveness; acting without common sense or good judgement. In later use also as a more general term of abuse.</p> <p>1.c: Of words, actions, ideas, etc.: characterized by or associated with lack of intelligence, perceptiveness, common sense, or good judgement; foolish; ill-considered.</p> <p>1.d.: <i>colloquial</i> (orig. U.S.) Of a thing: annoying; objectionable; useless; silly. Frequently used as an intensifier expressing exasperation or displeasure: damned, bloody.</p>
<b>M-W</b>	<p>1.a: slow of mind; obtuse</p> <p>1.b.: given to unintelligent decisions or acts; acting in an unintelligent or careless manner</p> <p>1.c: lacking intelligence or reason; brutish</p> <p>3: marked by or resulting from unreasoned thinking or acting; senseless</p> <p>4.a: lacking interest or point</p> <p>4.b: vexatious, exasperating</p>
<i>dumb</i>	
<b>LDOCE</b>	<p>1: <i>informal</i> stupid</p>
<b>OED</b>	<p>II.10: <i>colloquial</i> (orig. U.S.)</p> <p>II.10.a: Of a person: foolish, stupid, ignorant. In later use also as a more general term of abuse.</p> <p>II.10.b: Of words, actions, ideas, etc.: characterized by or associated with lack of intelligence, perceptiveness, common sense, or good judgement; foolish; ill-considered. More generally: annoying; objectionable; useless; silly. Frequently used as an intensifier expressing exasperation or displeasure.</p>
<b>M-W</b>	<p>1.a: lacking intelligence; stupid</p> <p>1.b: showing a lack of intelligence</p> <p>1.c: requiring no intelligence</p>
<i>foolish</i>	
<b>LDOCE</b>	<p>1: a foolish action, remark etc is stupid and shows that someone is not thinking sensibly (SYN: <i>silly</i>)</p> <p>2: a foolish person behaves in a silly way or looks silly (SYN: <i>stupid</i>)</p>

<b>OED</b>	1.a: Of a person, person's heart, etc.: lacking good sense or judgement; unwise. Later also in weakened sense: silly, ridiculous. 1.b: Resulting from or indicative of poor judgement. 2.b: Of a person: having limited or impaired mental faculties; that has a limited capacity to learn, understand, reason, etc.; that has an intellectual disability (now potentially offensive). Now North American regional (chiefly north-eastern).
<b>M-W</b>	1: having or showing a lack of good sense, judgment, or discretion 2.a: absurd, ridiculous 2.b: marked by a loss of composure; nonplussed 3: insignificant, trifling
<b><i>retarded</i></b>	
<b>LDOCE</b>	<i>old-fashioned</i> less mentally developed than other people of the same age. Many people think that this word is offensive.
<b>OED</b>	2.a: Of a person or person's development: less advanced than usual or expected; spec. (a) North American Education (of a pupil) behind his or her age cohort in educational progress or attainment; that has been held back one or more school grades (now rare); (b) (of an adult or child) less advanced than others in a particular (frequently specified) respect; underdeveloped, unsophisticated (originally Psychology, now also colloquial (somewhat derogatory)). 2.b: Originally (Psychology): having an intellectual disability; spec. having an IQ below 70 (now disused). Later also (colloquial): designating a person regarded as unintelligent or mentally (or occasionally physically) slow. Now offensive. 2.c: <i>North American slang</i> . Stupid, silly; foolish; pathetic (sometimes considered offensive).
<b>M-W</b>	1: <i>dated, now offensive</i> affected by intellectual disability; intellectually disabled 2: <i>informal + offensive</i> very stupid or foolish

*Appendix. Dictionary Definitions of stupid, dumb, foolish, and retarded (SDFR) from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), Oxford English Dictionary (OED), and Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary (M-W)*

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