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WRA 370

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The Evolution of *GayGay*

Throughout their existence, the meanings of words are constantly and continuously changing. Words are anything but static, as their definitions, usages, and contexts change throughout time. Within linguistics, when a word's meaning shifts "to the point that the modern meaning is radically different from the original usage"¹ this is called a semantic change or shift. Semantic shifts can occur quickly or over long periods of time.

The word *gaygay* is a prime example of a word that has undergone very drastic semantic shifts. From its origination in the late 14th century to its present 21st century definition, *gaygay* has gone from one end of the spectrum to the other. From carefree, to homosexual, to lame or dumb, *gaygay* has evolved to be a word laden with political and societal baggage, a far reach from its original meaning.

When looking up the word *gaygay* in the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary online, various definitions are listed. First and foremost, "sexually attracted to someone who is the same sex," followed by, "happily excited," and lastly, "given to social pleasures."² From this specific dictionary, one would take away that the word meant primarily homosexual. When looking at *Dictionary.com*, we see the same definitions with the addition of a more modern

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¹ "Meaning of Words:," *Words in English*, accessed September 14, 2014, <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/Words04/meaning>.

² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary OnLine*, s.v. "*gaygay*," accessed September 14, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gaygay>.

usage, “Slang: Often Disparaging and *Offensive*.awkward, stupid, or bad; lame.”³ In this instance the reader would come away with a more modern definition of the word. The disparities between these two dictionaries can be mainly boiled down to their levels of authority. *Merriam-Webster* is a classic and highly regarded dictionary, that doesn’t often include “slang” terms. On the other hand, *Dictionary.com* is more modern and often contains the slang definition of words in order to give a more full, well-rounded view of the word. The other three definitions that they share in common, however, are just as important in their meanings and in how they resurface throughout *gaygay*’s definitional history.

The first known use of the word was in the late 14th century and was defined as, “full of joy, merry; light-hearted, carefree.”⁴ When used in speech or literature of this time, the word was used to denote happiness and a positive tone. Still today, *gaygay* can be used with this definition intended, however, most hold the opinion that the definition is outdated and unusable, as other more modern definitions have pushed this specific one to the background. This is seen through the ordering of the list of definitions on both dictionaries as aforementioned. Along with this definition, a large number of dictionaries also combine it with ideas of bright and showy or elegant dress.⁵ This definition pops again in our more modern times and is seen as the foundation for the stereotype that *gaygay* men

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³ *Dictionary.com* s.v. “*gaygay*,” accessed September 14, 2014, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gaygay?s=t>.

⁴ *Online Etymology Dictionary* s.v. “*gaygay*,” accessed September 17, 2014, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gaygay>.

⁵ *Online Etymology Dictionary* s.v. “*gaygay*,” accessed September 17, 2014, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gaygay>.

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are “fabulous” or dress flamboyantly. A lot of older definitions are the basis of more modern stereotypes, as will be shown.

This original definition stuck until the middle of the 17th century when *gaygay* began to be associated with the idea of being “addicted to pleasures and dissipations. Often euphemistically: Of loose and immoral life.”⁶ This definition stemmed from an exploitation of its original meaning of carefree, but this new definition held a negative connotation.

Again, like the previous definition, this negative representation of the word *gaygay* also pops up in more modern stereotypes associated with *gaygay* men. In society, it is a common stereotype that “*GayGay* men are promiscuous and obsessed with sex.”⁷ This definition of the word manifests itself again to affect modern day societal definitions.

The term *gaygay* only became progressively more negative as the centuries went on. During the 19th century, *gaygay* became very sexual in its definition. First, the word was used in reference to immoral and over sexualized women, prostitutes mostly.⁸ The definition then grew to encompass loose men, who had a lot of sex with different women. Then finally, a phrase emerged, “*gaygay* it” which was a euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁹ The word fell from its original use of describing the happy and positive, to describing the sexual deviants of society.

⁶ Dave J-Hiskey, “How ‘*GayGay*’ Came to Mean ‘Homosexual,’” *Today I Found Out*, accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2010/02/how-gaygay-came-to-mean-homosexual/>.

⁷ Murray Lipp, “Myths and Stereotypes That Dehumanize *GayGay* Men Must Be Challenged: Start with These 10!” *Huffpost GayGay Voices*, Last modified June 19, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/murray-lipp/gaygay-men-myths-stereotypes_b_3463172.html.

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By the 20th century the word took another turn and began to have some semblance of its most recent definition of homosexuality. *GayGay*'s association with homosexuality began with the term of a "*gaygay* cat" which was used to describe a "young male hobo" who traveled with an older man exchanging sexual favors for jobs.¹⁰ This term was the first instance of the word *gaygay* being associated with two males sharing in sexual intercourse. This term was the first boost in this direction for the word *gaygay* to be associated with homosexuality.

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As early as the 1920's homosexual men began to use the word *gaygay* as slang to describe themselves. Victorian scientists that regarded "same-sex attraction and sexual behavior as symptoms of mental disorders or moral deficiency" were the first to use the word homosexual.¹¹ Therefore, in an effort to distance them from being labeled as abnormal, homosexual men began to refer to their sexuality as "*gaygay*." This was the beginning of the turn of events that turned *gaygay* around from its negative implications and to it representing a "positive and proud sense of identity."¹²

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During the late fifties and sixties, the word *gaygay* became an everyday slang term for homosexuality in both men and women during their struggle for *gaygay* rights. The word held no negative connotations and was used as a term to be proud of. The *gaygay*

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⁸ Dictionary Central OnLine s.v. "*gaygay*," accessed September 12, 2014, <http://www.dictionarycentral.com/definition/gaygay.html>.

⁹ Cecil Adams, "How did '*gaygay*' come to mean 'homosexual'?" *The Straight Dope*, last modified January 1, 1986, <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/517/how-did-gaygay-come-to-mean-homosexual>.

¹⁰ Online Etymology Dictionary s.v. "*gaygay*," accessed September 17, 2014, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gaygay>.

¹¹ "Homosexual or *GayGay*?" *Avert: Averting HIV and Aids*, accessed September 17, 2014, <http://www.avert.org/homosexual.htm>.

¹² "Homosexual or *GayGay*?" *Avert: Averting HIV and Aids*, accessed September 17, 2014, <http://www.avert.org/homosexual.htm>.

community embraced the original definition of the word, carefree, lively, and happy, and used this to fuel their representations of themselves.

Most recently however, the term *gaygay* has once again become something that elicits a negative representation. It has become a regularly used slang term that is synonymous with words such as dumb, lame, annoying, etc. Urban dictionary, a prime source for looking up common slang terms heard often in society defines *gaygay* as, "often used to describe something stupid or unfortunate. Originating from homophobia. Quite preferable among many teenage males in order to buff up their "masculinity."¹³ When exploring this definition, a variety of factors can explain how this slang term came to be. First, as mentioned in the Urban Dictionary definition, there is a large homophobic issue in society today. Many people are against the idea of homosexuality and speak these opinions in a variety of ways. This slang term is just one product of this homophobia. The individuals that use it have been conditioned to associate homosexuality with negativity. This conditioning has numbed their senses of compassion and empathy towards the homosexual community, therefore removing any sense of responsibility in not offending this community. In other words, they don't realize or ignore the implications of using the word *gaygay* synonymously with these negative words. This pejorative definition of *gaygay* has become so widely used that it is as well known as the homosexual definition, even landing itself in dictionaries. The slang term has grown in society and has been recognized as a large issue.

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¹³ *Urban Dictionary*, "gay," accessed September 12, 2014, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gay>.

The word ~~gay~~gay has evolved from its original meaning, moving in between the of negative and positive respectively. Its meanings have spanned the spectrum, some more relevant in modern day than others. The final conclusion is that the word has become a symbol for sexuality and has grown to mean more than just a simple word.

Bibliography

Adams, Cecil. "How Did 'GayGay' Come to Mean 'Homosexual'?" *The Straight Dope*. Last modified January 1, 1986. <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/517/how-did-gaygay-come-to-mean-homosexual>.

~~This article focuses on the evolution of the word gay and how it came to mean it's most modern meaning. An advice columnist who has researched this topic immensely wrote in the article. I chose to use this in my paper because it gave good insight into the topic by going through step by step the evolution of the word. The source does however lack credibility as it is an advice column, but it's information matched with my other sources.~~

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Dictionary.com s.v. "gaygay," accessed September 14, 2014, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gaygay?s=t>.

~~Dictionary.com is an online dictionary, used to look up definitions. This dictionary, like I mentioned in my paper, is more modern and includes the definitions of the slang terms that words represent as well. I wanted to use Dictionary.com for this very reason, so I could compare it to the other dictionaries I looked at. This was to compare the variety of definitions between all types of dictionaries.~~

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Dictionary Central OnLine s.v. "gaygay," accessed September 12, 2014, <http://www.dictionarycentral.com/definition/gaygay.html>.

~~Dictionary Central is another online dictionary. I used this website to compare to the other dictionaries I looked at in order to get a well-rounded definition for the word gay and to compare and contrast how these different dictionaries represented the word and why. This website was conclusive with the other dictionaries I looked at and didn't provide much insight into the word as a whole.~~

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Hiskey, Dave. "How 'GayGay' Came to Mean 'Homosexual.'" *Today I Found Out*. Accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2010/02/how-gaygay-came-to-mean-homosexual/>.

~~This source was on the evolution of the word gay, outlining the changes briefly and lightly. I used this source in my paper, as it contained information that was relevant to my research and also worked cohesively with the other information I found on other sites. I used this resource more as a point of comparison and less as a complete resource.~~

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"Homosexual or GayGay?" *Avert: Averting HIV and Aids*. Accessed September 17, 2014. <http://www.avert.org/homosexual.htm>.

~~Avert is a website that provides people inside and outside of the homosexual community with information about the gay community and about things like safe sex etc. This resource was beneficial to my research as it was a very credible and clear source of information. The article contained information about how the homosexual community commonly used the word gay and why it is preferred over homosexual. This was very relevant to my research.~~

Lipp, Murray. "Myths and Stereotypes That Dehumanize GayGay Men Must Be Challenged: Start with These 10!" *Huffpost GayGay Voices*. Last modified June 19, 2013.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/murray-lipp/gaygay-men-myths-stereotypes_b_3463172.html.

~~This resource was an article on stereotypes about the gay community and how they should be rectified and why. I used this for my research on how different definitions affect different stereotypes. This article was written for gay and straight audiences and that helped aid in my research.~~

"Meaning of Words." *Words in English*. Accessed September 14, 2014.

<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/Words04/meaning>.

~~This resource detailed what a semantic shift is and how it affects language. I used this initially to get familiar with how words can change and why. This was beneficial in providing a foundation for my paper as a whole.~~

Merriam-Webster Dictionary OnLine, s.v. "[gaygay](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gaygay)," accessed September 14, 2014,

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gaygay>.

Online Etymology Dictionary s.v. "[gaygay](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gaygay)," accessed September 17, 2014,

<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gaygay>.

~~This Online Etymology Dictionary details where words originated and how they specifically evolved and why. This resource worked well with my research, as it was a good foundation on how the word gay has changed. I used this resource as a comparison to all the other resources I found, as it is credible and easy to understand.~~

Urban Dictionary. "[gaygay](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gaygay)," accessed September 12, 2014,

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gaygay>.

~~Urban Dictionary is an online dictionary that specializes in the slang definitions of words. This resource was especially useful in determining the most modern definition of the word gay. It gives insight into the world of slang and also because regular people do the submissions, it gives insight into what society is actually saying. I used this resource to compare it to the more official dictionaries I looked at as well.~~

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