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**Metaphor and ideology in slang:  
the case of WOMAN and MAN**

*Notre étude cherche à savoir si dans l'argot anglo-américain la conceptualisation de la FEMME est différente de celle de l'HOMME. La principale question qui se pose est la suivante : étant donné que l'argot est typiquement un langage d'hommes, la conceptualisation de la femme dans l'argot anglo-américain témoigne-t-elle de certains préjugés partagés par les hommes ? Nous avons effectué l'analyse métaphorique de plusieurs centaines d'éléments argotiques anglais relatifs aux deux notions, et nous avons découvert que la femme y est plus souvent que l'homme conceptualisée en tant que MARCHANDISE, NOURRITURE APPÉTISSANTE ou ANIMAL, ce qui s'explique par l'intérêt que portent les hommes aux femmes en tant qu'objets sexuels.*

We can think of ideology as dominant discourse about a socially-culturally important subject matter that provides us with a particular perspective on that subject matter and also on other related subject matters. I will use the concepts of WOMAN and MAN in (American) English slang to demonstrate one way of dealing with the study of the ideology connected with the subject matter of woman and man. Speakers of English slang talk a lot about the related concepts of WOMAN and MAN, and, as we will see, the way they talk about them reflects a particular ideology about them. This topic is particularly interesting in light of the commonly heard claim that males (and most speakers of English slang are males) have an ideologically biased view of women. Slang seems to be an especially suitable domain of language for this purpose, since speakers of slang are mostly men (moreover, macho men) who are commonly regarded as having extreme views and negative biases against women, as well as ethnic groups, homosexuals, fat people and short people, to name just a few cases. I wish to see whether this is true by examining the ideologies about women and men. Specifically, I want to explore the issue of what these ideologies about women and men consist of in detail, and whether and to what extent the ideologies we find for women and men, respectively, are different or the same.

Hopefully, a detailed comparison will allow us to throw some light on these issues.

The methodology I will employ for this purpose consists of some of the analytic tools of cognitive linguistics, in particular, conceptual metaphor and metonymy. (On these, see LAKOFF & JOHNSON 1980; KÖVECSES 2002, 2005, 2006.) Altogether, 245 words for women and 95 (American) English slang words for men have been examined. I collected these data from several American English slang dictionaries (CHAPMAN 1989; BERREY & VAN DEN BARK 1947). In addition, I used Jonathon Green's book, *Slang Down the Ages* (GREEN 2005), which is very similar in spirit to the present study, although it does not use the tools of cognitive linguistics. A large part of what both he does and I do is to unravel the images (in my terms, the conceptual metaphors) that speakers of slang have used to talk and think about women and men. I suggest that such images, or metaphors, are crucial in understanding the ideologies, the kinds of discourses we employ when we deal with the subject matter of women and men.

I readily admit at the outset that there are several problems with such a methodology in the study of ideology. The first problem is that my study is based on individual words and not on coherent discourses used by real people in a real historical-cultural setting. That is, my study is ahistorical and acultural in the sense that it works with isolated slang words that have been produced in (American) English culture in roughly the past fifty to one hundred years (i.e., no specific period and no specific cultural setting is provided). The second problem is that even in this vague general period and cultural setting many more than 300 or 400 words have been coined, but, in this study, I only work with the 300 or 400 words that lend themselves to the type of analysis (metaphor and metonymy analysis) that I am reasonably competent at. I leave out of consideration all other terms.

Despite these shortcomings, my hope is that I can bring to the surface ideas that form a significant part of the ideologies about women and men and that could not be unearthed with more traditional ways of studying ideology. More specifically, I will suggest that there are four groups of images, or metaphorical source domains, that seem to dominate the conceptualization of women and men in (American) English slang. They are THING, FOOD, ANIMAL, and KINSHIP (RELATIVES). A fifth group of terms is based on the social stereotypes speakers have of women and men. The analysis below is structured by these five sets of concepts.

### ***Women and men as THING***

Women and men are both conceptualized as thing. Things can be either objects or substances. Both women and men are seen as things, while only women are substances. The particular examples are as follows:

#### WOMEN ARE OBJECTS/SUBSTANCES

she-thing; sweet stuff; sweet thing

#### MEN ARE OBJECTS

he-thing

Objects include a variety of kinds. The kinds that appear in the conceptualization of women in slang are commodities and playthings. It is only women who are conceptualized as such commodities as article, goods, and merchandise:

#### WOMEN ARE COMMODITIES

article; dress goods; package; piece of dry goods; piece of goods; piece of merchandise

It is also only women who are viewed as playthings:

#### WOMEN ARE PLAYTHINGS

doll/dollie/dolly; gadget; job; toy; plaything

It is debatable whether a slang term such as *gadget* should be classified as a commodity or a plaything; it fits both.

The metaphorical conceptualization of women as commodities assumes the existence of some other more general conceptual metaphors that have to do with life and/or human relationships. If women are commodities, then men must be the people who buy such commodities:

#### HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ARE BUSINESS TRANSACTIONS

#### WOMEN ARE COMMODITIES/PRODUCTS

#### MEN ARE CUSTOMERS

customer

In the situation created by the metaphor, men as customers buy women as commodities, or products. The commodification metaphor may have started out as a literal understanding of women as commodities, but for a long time now it

has been functioning as a major metaphor that, in slang, led to the conceptualization of women in general as prostitutes.

Speakers of slang seem to make an all-important distinction in their social relationship to women and men: it is that of respect versus disrespect. The disrespect socially felt (or imposed) for any inferior social position in which women are found is used to express one's disrespect for women:

WOMEN ARE PROSTITUTES

floozy; sailor bait; tart; whore; zosh

WOMEN ARE FEMALE SERVANTS

wench

WOMEN ARE WITCHES

witch

Prostitutes, servants, and witches are, and have probably always been, stigmatized social positions. As a result, these inferior social positions are good source domains for the expression of disrespect toward women.

The male equivalent for the expression of the same idea occurs via the equally stigmatized notion of being an illegitimate son:

MEN ARE ILLEGITIMATE SONS

mother's son; son of a bee; son of a bitch; son of a gun; son of a so-and-so; sumbitch

By contrast, respectful relationships to women and men are expressed by means of further conceptual metaphors:

WOMEN ARE GENTLEWOMEN (SOCIALY PRESTIGIOUS WOMEN)

dame; damn-sel; gentledame; lady (any woman); ma'am; marm; milady; miss; missie; missis; missiz

MEN ARE SUPERIORS (SOCIALY IMPORTANT MEN)

boss; chief; codger; gent; gentman; mister; wallah

Respectful relationships to women are expressed through a subcategory of women, gentlewomen, who must have been historically respected even by speakers of slang. Respect toward men derives from metaphorically conceiving all men with the respect one (must have historically) had for one's superior.

We find some metaphors (or metonymies) in which men are understood in terms of a group or subcategory of men. Two such subcategories can be readily identified:

MEN ARE MALE CITY DWELLERS (MALE CITY DWELLERS FOR MEN)

dude

MEN ARE MALE ATHLETES (MALE ATHLETES FOR ALL MEN)

jock

For speakers who do not have a respectful attitude to these groups, these designations for men indicate disrespect. In this sense, the basis of the metaphors (metonymies) is what the intention of the speaker is. If it is the expression of disrespect, he will choose a subcategory (male city dwellers or athletes) to which speakers have a conventionally negative attitude.

Overall, it seems that while both women and men are viewed metaphorically as things, the metaphorical view of women as commodities have been taken further in (American) English slang. The commodification metaphor is based on the “ancient institution” of prostitution. In all likelihood, it is the disrespect felt in society toward prostitutes that prompts the use of the metaphor **WOMEN ARE PROSTITUTES**. The same applies to **MEN ARE ILLEGITIMATE SONS**. In general, many slang words for women and men may have emerged as a result of transferring to women and men the disrespect felt for specific groups of women and men.

### ***Women and men as FOOD***

One of the most productive ways of conceptualizing people in slang in English (but probably also universally) is to consider them as food. In general, both women and men are viewed as food:

WOMEN ARE FOOD

dish

MEN ARE FOOD

dish; hunk of man; meat

As can be seen, the food is typically meat.

However, it is mostly women whose conceptualization as food receives considerable elaboration; thus, women can be white meat, dark meat, and appetizing food:

WOMEN ARE WHITE MEAT TO EAT

chunk of (white) meat; piece of (white) meat; tuna; white meat

WOMEN ARE DARK MEAT TO EAT

cunt meat; hunk of woman

When the food is appetizing food, its appetizing character derives from its being sweet:

WOMEN ARE APPETIZING (SWEET) FOOD

buttercup; cookie; cream puff; honey; honey-bun; honey-bunny; puff; sugar cookie; sugar; sweet; sweet mama; sweet meat; sweet momma; sweet patootie; sweet stuff; sweet thing; sweetheart; sweets; sweetums

In nonslang usage, some of these terms, such as *sugar* and *sweetheart*, are used of men also.

This conceptualization of women and men chiefly occurs when they both are considered for sexual purposes. The relationship of sexuality that exists between women and men is perhaps the main and most productive perspective from which men think and talk about women. The conceptual metaphor that underlies many of the examples above is SEX IS EATING, where the object of sex is FOOD. The SEX IS EATING and THE OBJECT OF SEX IS FOOD metaphors combine with the metaphor of SEXUAL DESIRE/LUST IS HUNGER, where the object of hunger is again APPETIZING FOOD (LAKOFF 1987). These metaphors led to the conceptualization of women as appetizing food. The perspective of sexuality will be discussed further in several sections below.

### ***Women and men as ANIMAL***

In slang, both women and men are conceived as animals at a very general level. According to my sources, the word *animal* can be used of both women and men:

WOMEN ARE ANIMALS

animal

MEN ARE ANIMALS

animal

As can be expected, women are viewed as female animals, while men are male ones:

WOMEN ARE FEMALE ANIMALS

cow; mare

MEN ARE MALE ANIMALS

dog; fish (esp. strange or foolish); horse; stag; stud

In addition to the obvious literal similarity between female animals and women, on the one hand, and male animals and men, on the other, the motivation for the use of these terms is provided by the sexual perspective that characterizes the relationship between women and men. It is especially the assumed hypersexuality of the male animals that in all probability contributes to their selection as terms for men.

It is again women as animals who receive considerable further elaboration. Thus, women are young animals, furry animals, and they are birds:

WOMEN ARE YOUNG FEMALE MAMMALS

filly; heifer

WOMEN ARE SMALL FURRY ANIMALS

bunny; kitten; mouse; pet; pussycat

WOMEN ARE BIRDS

biddy; bird GB; canary; chick; chickabiddy; chickadee; chicken; chicky; duckling; fuss and feathers; grouse; hen; pigeon; quail; wren

The conceptualization of women as birds is probably universal. The metaphor, together with the other two cases above, may be based on the perceived similarity between these animals and the female sexual organ (hair, softness, featheriness, etc.).

In another group of animal metaphors that involve women and men, it is not the sexual act itself or the sexual desire that underlies metaphorical conceptualization but the finding of available sexual partners. The finding of such partners is conceptualized as hunting, resulting in the SEX IS HUNTING

metaphor. In this metaphor, men are the hunters and women are the hunted. The word *cat* fits this particular metaphor, in that a cat hunts for its prey (like a mouse).

In general, the WOMEN ARE YOUNG SMALL ANIMALS metaphor appears to be motivated by the feelings of caring and affection felt for such animals. In most cases, it is the caring, protectiveness, and affection felt for women by men that calls forth this metaphor and thus explains the terms used by men.

### ***Women and men as KINSHIP (RELATIVES)***

As we would expect, women and men are metaphorically viewed as female and male relatives, respectively. More specifically, women are conceptualized as mothers and sisters, while men as fathers and brothers.

#### WOMEN ARE MOTHERS

mama/mamma; momma; mommer

#### WOMEN ARE SISTERS

sis/siss; sister

#### MEN ARE FATHERS

daddy; daddy-o

#### MEN ARE BROTHERS

brother

The SISTER and BROTHER metaphors are predominantly used for the expression of solidarity in Black slang, but can also be used by whites.

The MOTHER and FATHER metaphors can express a variety of feelings or attitudes to women and men, depending on context. They can be used to convey either respect (or disrespect), or affection, or a combination of these. This situational variation is possible because speakers can foreground several distinct feelings or attitudes in connection with the categories of MOTHER and FATHER. The WOMEN ARE MOTHERS and the MEN ARE FATHERS metaphors can indicate respect for women and men, since respect for other women and men may derive from the respect one feels for one's parents. But these source domains for women and men can also highlight the age of one's parents, and old age, as we'll see shortly below, is typically used to express disrespect. At the same time, the feeling of affection one typically feels for

one's parents can be utilized by speakers of slang to indicate affection for other women and men. In the examples any combination of respect, disrespect, and affection is imaginable.

How can old age indicate disrespect, or at least a lack of respect? It appears that speakers of slang divide up the world into "too old", "too young", and a category in between, where the speaker typically situates himself (rarely, herself). Being too old or too young are categories that are undeserving of respect in slang (unless mothers and fathers are involved) because people who are too old or too young cannot fully participate in many of the activities that members of the in-between category can participate in. In other words, it is not only the "too old" who may be used to express disrespect for women and men but also the "too young". All of the conceptual metaphors below can indicate the speaker's disrespect for the other in one way or another:

WOMEN ARE CHILDREN/INFANTS

babe; baby doll; baby; daughter; girl; girlie/girly; sweet baby

MEN ARE CHILDREN/INFANTS

boy; kid

WOMEN ARE OLD WOMEN

old girl

WOMEN ARE YOUNG WOMEN

baby; doll; girl

MEN ARE OLD MEN

geezer (odd or eccentric person, esp. old); old bean; old boy; old chap; old cock; old fella; old guy; old horse; old sock; old top

MEN ARE YOUNG MEN

big boy; boy; lad

However, being too old or too young (as in the case of children) may also evoke the feeling of affection. Either the old or the very young may be seen as being in need of care and protection and thus deserving affection and love. This might explain the mixture of feelings in some of the examples, where disrespect and affection can be combined.

Affection can also be indicated by the social relationship of friendship. This happens especially in the case of terms for MEN:

MEN ARE MALE FRIENDS

chum; buddy; fella; feller; pal; sport

Men who are not friends of the speaker can be referred to metaphorically as friends if the speaker wishes to indicate some sort of affection, solidarity, or empathy with the other man. It seems that female friends are not used to refer to women, and hence to express affection between women.

In sum, KINSHIP metaphors are primarily used to express respect, disrespect, solidarity, and affection in (American) English slang.

***Words based on social stereotypes***

In a large set of further cases, there is no underlying metaphorical conceptualization that underlies the naming of women and men. What is involved instead is that there is a social stereotype for women and men, and various aspects of this stereotype metonymically give rise to a variety of further names for women and men. Let us now take a look at this stereotype and see those aspects of it that create names for women and men.

A large portion of the stereotype is made up female and male sexual organs and activities. These serve as convenient ways of referring to women and men. Such terms display an interest on the part of women and men in the other as objects of sex or sexual desire. The terms are not metaphor-based as the previous ones were, but are based on metonymy, where a body part or sexual action is used to indicate women and men:

BODY PART FOR WOMAN

VAGINA FOR WOMAN

cooz; crack; cunt; fish; gash; oyster; piece of tail; pussy; pussycat; snatch; splittail; tail; tuna

FEMALE PUBIC HAIR FOR WOMAN

bit a fluff; fluff; bush; frill; muff; wool

BREASTS FOR WOMAN

tits; titty

BUTTOCKS FOR WOMAN

butt; patootie

ANKLE FOR WOMAN

ankle

LEG FOR WOMAN

leg

BODY PART FOR MEN

MALE SEXUAL ORGAN FOR MEN

cock; gun; schmo

As can be noticed, the body parts used metonymically for women greatly outnumber the body parts used for men for referential, or naming, purposes. Men select body parts for referring to women that participate in some way in the sexual act. However, which body part is actually selected (outside the “core parts”) for such a purpose seems to be historically (and probably also culturally) contingent. For example, it is unlikely that the ankle or leg would be used today by men to refer to women.

As far as women referring to men within the sexual perspective are concerned, it is unlikely that they identify men through the major male sexual body part. It is men who use such terms to refer to other men. Women, however, might use words based on the MEN ARE FOOD metaphor (*dish*, *hunk*, etc.), designations outside the social stereotype perspective but within the general sexual perspective.

Another metonymy that seems to be used by men to refer to other men is the following:

ACTION FOR AGENT

ASSUMED MALE SEXUAL ACTION FOR MEN

beggar; bugger; cat; fucker; jigger

Such terms for men refer to men through the (initiating, more active) agent of the sexual act, who is typically taken to be men. The terms may be euphemistic (beggar, jigger), they may denote a particular kind of sexual act (bugger), and they may indirectly indicate a type of sexual act (cat), where we have the AGENT FOR HUNTING (prowling) metonymy and THE ACQUISITION OF A SEXUAL PARTNER IS ANIMAL HUNTING metaphor.

In sum, all these ways of referring to women and men make use of metonymy based on sexual organs and activities. The metonymy is used to highlight the primarily sexual interest in the other sex by speakers of slang.

But there are many other metonymies that are not based on human sexual behavior. Assumed qualities that women and men have and that are part of the stereotype can be used to create further names for women and men.

One of the qualities that women are assumed to possess is that they are frail (see also Shakespeare's "Frailty, thy name is woman"), while a comparable quality for men is that they are tough. Such qualities for women and men metonymically give rise to additional ways of referring to them:

ASSUMED TYPICAL QUALITY FOR WOMEN

fluff; frail; frail femme; frail sister; frail Susie

ASSUMED TYPICAL QUALITY FOR MEN FOR MEN

tough customer; tough cookie

A quality that seems to uniquely characterize women is beauty:

BEAUTY FOR WOMEN

angel; bimbo; cutems; cuteness; cutie; fair

While the previous examples clearly reflect appreciation on the part of the speaker, certain qualities are used to express depreciation. One of these is stupidity:

STUPIDITY FOR WOMEN

bimbo; dumb blonde

STUPIDITY FOR MEN

bozo; clown; geek/geke; geezer (odd or eccentric person, esp. old); goof; goofer; goofie; goofus; joker; monkey; sucker

As can be seen, it applies to both women and men, and it seems to be more productive for men.

Certain assumed typical activities by women and men may also produce words for women and men:

ASSUMED TYPICAL VERBAL ACTIVITY BY WOMEN FOR WOMEN

shouter (US, a criminal's girlfriend)

ASSUMED TYPICAL VERBAL ACTIVITY BY MEN FOR MEN

cuss

While women are assumed to quarrel and shout, men are assumed to swear.

Men are also seen as engaging in a variety of different activities, such as fighting, shaving, and others. These yield a number of metonymy-based designations for men:

ASSUMED TYPICAL MALE ACTIVITY FOR MEN

bruiser; buster (either crime buster or broncobuster); fart (esp. old men); shaver; squirt

There seem to be no corresponding activity for women that results in designations for women.

Typical proper names for women and men can also create slang words for women and men:

TYPICAL FIRST NAME FOR ALL WOMEN

eve/evie; jane; jenny/Jenny; Jill; Kate; Maud; Nell; Nelly; Sheila; susie/Susie

TYPICAL FIRST NAME FOR MEN FOR ALL MEN

Jack; Jake; Jasper; Joe; John; Johnny GB; Tom

In these cases, it may be that the commonness and ordinariness of the names reflects the uninteresting character of the women and men, and hence a basic depreciation on the part of the speaker.

An interesting special case of name-based metonymies for women and men involve words for women and men in another language or ethnic group:

WORD FOR WOMAN IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE/ETHNIC GROUP FOR ALL WOMEN

fem; femme; femmie; frau; muchacha; squaw

WORD FOR MEN IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE/ETHNIC GROUP FOR ALL MEN

hombre; mac/mack

Clothing is another source of creating words for women and men:

ASSUMED TYPICAL CLOTHING FOR WOMEN

skirt

ASSUMED TYPICAL CLOTHING FOR MEN

pants

As with many of the other examples, these terms may be historical relics.

Some slang terms for women and men originate in the Bible:

ASSUMED ANCESTRY OF WOMEN FOR WOMEN

piece of Eve's flesh

ASSUMED ANCESTRY OF MEN FOR MEN

piece of Adam's flesh

Most of the designations discussed so far were parallel ones; the same kind of metonymy produced words for both women and men. There are, however, a number of metonymies that appear to apply to men only:

FACE FOR MEN

chap (chap(s) is the forepart of the face); chappie (chap(s) is the forepart of the face); chappy (chap(s) is the forepart of the face); gill; mug; mush

BALD HEAD FOR MEN

skin

PERSONALITY FOR MEN

character

In general, it can be suggested in connection with the set of words for women and men discussed above that some of them are neutral, but many of them express either appreciation or depreciation on the part of the speaker. Moreover, some of the cases (e.g., PERSONALITY FOR MEN) are such that the basic evaluation can be either appreciative or depreciative, depending on the context of use. In other words, the words for women and men based on social stereotypes reflect the speaker's appreciation or depreciation of another person. It is this basic evaluative function that motivates the use of these words for women and men.

### **Conclusions**

It appears that both women and men are conceptualized as THINGS, FOOD, ANIMAL, and RELATIVES in (American) English slang. As far as the more specific metaphors within these are concerned, women are more commonly conceptualized as COMMODITIES, APPETIZING FOOD, and YOUNG ANIMAL than men are. As regards the metaphors centered on KINSHIP, there

seem to be no specific-level metaphors to distinguish the conceptualization of women from that of men.

Why are such metaphors used to talk and think about women and men? The most likely answer that emerges from this study is that there are certain elementary social feelings and attitudes characteristic of speakers of slang that prompt the use of the metaphors. Such feelings and attitudes include respect or disrespect for the other, the appreciation or depreciation of the other, affection, solidarity, and caring. To express these feelings and attitudes in relation to other women and men, the metaphors we have seen above are especially appropriate.

In addition to the metaphors and the elementary feelings and attitudes prompting them, speakers of (American) English slang operate with a stereotype for both women and men. The stereotypes become clear from the many metonymically-used words for women and men. The stereotypes have women and men as having a certain body, having certain typical qualities, performing certain actions, wearing certain clothes, having typical names, etc. Many of these aspects of the respective stereotypes are used for evaluating people in certain basic ways: appreciating or depreciating them.

Perhaps at the deepest layer of the emerging ideology about women and men, we find the unsurprising fact that women and men are sexual beings. It is this basic sexual perspective from which men consider women. The language we have studied above indicates that sex is almost always “on the mind” of speakers of slang when they create words for women. The COMMODITY, APPETIZING FOOD, and ANIMAL metaphors, as well as the social stereotype for women are informed and produced by this deep interest and urge on the part of men in relation to women.

As this study indicates, this asymmetry constitutes the single most important difference in the conceptualization of women and men, and hence in the ideologies about them. In other words, the motivation for such metaphors does not only come from the social feelings and attitudes they can suitably express but also from predominantly viewing women as sexual objects. When these two types of motivation successfully meet, as in the present case, speakers have created an especially powerful ideology that drives the ways in which men relate to women and, to the extent that women adopt this perspective, women relate to men.

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