

The Semantic Asymmetry of Gender: Tracing the Pejoration of Mistress, Spinster, and Dame in English History

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Abstract

This paper investigates the sociolinguistic phenomenon of semantic pejoration in English, specifically examining why terms denoting female authority and occupation consistently undergo semantic derogation while the male equivalents do not. Focusing on three case studies mistress, spinster, and dame, this study utilizes diachronic data from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to trace their semantic evolution from the Middle English period to the present. The analysis reveals a systematic pattern where words originally signifying power (mistress as head of household), economic independence (spinster as spinner of wool), or high rank (dame as female knight) were redefined through sexualization, trivialization, or social stigmatization. In contrast, male counterparts such as master and lord retained or elevated their prestige. This paper argues that these semantic shifts are not random linguistic accidents but driven by patriarchal social structures that linguistically unstable female power, reinterpreting it as either sexually illicit or socially deviant. The findings contribute to historical sociolinguistics by demonstrating how language change serves as an archive of gendered social hierarchies.

Keywords

Semantic Change; Diachronic Study; Gender Asymmetry

1. Introduction

Language is often perceived as a neutral carrier for communication, a transparent medium where reality is described. However, sociolinguists have long argued that language is less a mirror of reality than a reflection of social attitudes, preserving the hierarchies and biases of the cultures that speak it (Holmes, 2013; Kitayama, 2017; Garg et al., 2018). Nowhere is this more evident than in the semantic history of gendered terminology in English. While the English language has undergone significant phonological and morphological shifts over the last millennium, its semantic evolution reveals a striking consistency in one specific area: the

vocabulary used to describe women (Dai & Xu, 2014). This observation is consistent with the broader socio-linguistic claim that lexical change is shaped by power relations and ideology rather than purely linguistic mechanisms (Lazar, 2007; Koller & Davidson, 2008; Dai & Xu, 2014). Critical discourse scholars argue that vocabulary functions as a site where social dominance is naturalized and reproduced, making gendered semantic change a particularly revealing diagnostic of social hierarchy (Van Dijk, 1993). Therefore, this paper investigates the phenomenon of semantic pejoration, specifically examining the systematic downward trajectory of terms denoting female authority, occupation, and rank.

The concept of “semantic derogation of women”, first famously articulated by Muriel Schulz (1975), describes the tendency for terms referring to women to acquire negative, trivial, or sexualized connotations over time, while their male equivalents remain neutral or elevate in status. Schulz (1975) argued that this asymmetry is not merely a linguistic curiosity but a reflection of the social distribution of power, a view supported by Dale Spender’s (2001) assertion that language is “man-made” and structured to reinforce patriarchal dominance. When a word’s meaning shifts, it often does so under the pressure of social usage; as Robin Lakoff (1973) noted in her seminal work *Language and Woman’s Place*, the linguistic treatment of women reflects their marginalization in society. If a culture views women primarily through the lens of their sexual availability or their subordination to men, the vocabulary used to describe them will inevitably drift toward those meanings.

This study focuses on three specific lexical case studies that illustrate this phenomenon with remarkable clarity: mistress, spinster, and dame. Each of these words began its life in the English lexicon with high or neutral status. Mistress, derived from the Old French *maistresse*, originally denoted a woman who had control or authority over a household (OED). Spinster began as a purely occupational term for a woman who spun wool, a vital economic role in medieval England (OED). Dame, from the French *dame*, was a title of high rank and respect (OED). The earliest known use of the noun *dame* is in the Middle English period (1150-1500). Yet, over the centuries, all three have suffered severe semantic degradation. Mistress narrowed to primarily denote a woman in an illicit sexual relationship; spinster shifted from an economic descriptor to a derogatory label for an unmarried, “undesirable” older woman; and dame devolved into a slang term for a woman, often with dismissive overtones.

In stark contrast, the male equivalents of these terms, master, bachelor, and lord, have followed radically different semantic paths. Master retains its sense of authority and expertise; bachelor has evolved to suggest a desirable, available single male; and lord remains a title of high dignity. This semantic asymmetry raises critical questions about the mechanisms of change. As Traugott and Dasher (2002) observe, semantic change often involves “subjectification”, where meanings become increasingly based on the speaker’s attitude. In the case of female terms, this

attitude has historically been one of dismissal or sexualization. Recent quantitative studies have confirmed the persistence of this asymmetry; for instance, Garg et al. (2018), employing word embedding models on a corpus of 20th-century English texts, quantified how gender stereotypes have been systematically encoded in language over a hundred-year period. Their research revealed that female names were consistently and more strongly associated with attributes related to art and the family, whereas male names were linked to careers and science (Garg et al., 2018). Similarly, Fernandez Fontecha and Jimenez Catalan (2003) argue that this derogation is often driven by cognitive metaphors that link women to “lower” domains (such as animals), a mechanism that parallels the historical devaluation of female titles. Their contrastive analysis of English and Spanish reveals that animal metaphors applied to women (e.g., vixen, cow, bitch) almost exclusively map onto negative sexual or intellectual traits, whereas male equivalents (bull, wolf) often retain connotations of strength or virility. This suggests that semantic derogation is facilitated by deep-seated cognitive metaphors that equate “female” with “animalistic” or “subordinate” (Fontecha, 2003).

This paper argues that the semantic pejoration of *mistress*, *spinster*, and *dame* is driven by patriarchal social structures that linguistically unstable female power. By analyzing diachronic data from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the Corpus of Historical American English (COCA), this study will trace the timeline of these shifts. The analysis will demonstrate that as women’s roles were increasingly confined to the domestic and sexual spheres, the language adapted to reflect this confinement, stripping female titles of their professional and authoritative dimensions. Based on the theoretical framework of semantic derogation (Schulz, 1975), feminist sociolinguistics, and diachronic semantic change, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How have the meanings of *mistress*, *spinster*, and *dame* evolved diachronically from their original senses to their now negative uses?

RQ2. To what extent do these semantic development exhibit systematic asymmetry when compared with their male counterparts (*master*, *bachelor*, *lord*) across historical periods?

RQ3. How can the observed semantic asymmetry be interpreted as a linguistic manifestation of patriarchal social structures and ideological control?

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of semantic change has long been a central concern of historical linguistics, yet the specific intersection of semantic shift and gender ideology remains a contested and fertile ground for sociolinguistic inquiry. Pejoration, as a type of meaning change, is essentially the process where a word gradually takes on a negative meaning. As Rayevska (1979) explains, it’s what happens when a word loses its respectability. Sometimes a term can become so negative that it’s

eventually considered unfit for polite use. While early structuralist linguists like Bloomfield and Hockett (1999) largely viewed perogation as an internal or stochastic process governed by linguistic system-inherent principles, the sociolinguistic turn pioneered by scholars such as Labov fundamentally reshaped this paradigm (Hazen, 2011). Labov's empirical work demonstrated that language variation and change are inextricably linked to social stratification and group identity, thereby introducing social power and prestige as key directional forces (Hazen, 2011). This perspective was powerfully applied to gendered semantics by Lakoff (1973), who argued that linguistic patterns systematically reflect and reinforce patriarchal social structures. Ullmann (1981) and Traugott (2002) both emphasize that semantic change is frequently motivated by social evaluation, especially in areas related to morality, sexuality, and social status.

Gender, as a core dimension of social organization, therefore becomes one of the most productive domains for meaning shift, particularly in evaluative directions. Research on words related to women shows that their meanings tend to go downhill over time. For example, *wench* started out simply meaning "child," then narrowed to "girl," later referred to "a serving woman," and eventually took on the negative sense of a "low-status woman." *Bitch*, originally just "a female dog," was being used to insult women as "immoral" as early as the 14th century. In contrast, many words for men have shifted in a positive or neutral direction. This suggests a clear pattern: terms referring to women are historically more likely to lose status and gain negative meanings, while those referring to men are more likely to maintain or even gain respect (Borkowska & Kleparski, 2007).

This review synthesizes key research on the "semantic derogation of women", tracing the theoretical development from early feminist critiques to recent corpus-based and cognitive analyses. Recently, using large-scale corpus methods, Hamilton, Leskovec, and Jurafsky (2018) demonstrate that gendered words undergo systematically different semantic shifts over time, with female-associated terms significantly more likely to acquire negative or evaluative connotations. Similarly, Caliskan, Bryson, and Narayanan (2017) show that word embeddings trained on massive corpora reproduce human-like gender bias, indicating that historical asymmetries remain deeply encoded in present-day language systems.

The foundational framework for this study is Muriel Schulz's seminal article, *The Semantic Derogation of Woman* (1975), which first systematized the observation that terms designating women routinely undergo a process of pejoration. Schulz argued that this is not an accidental feature of language drift but a systematic reflection of patriarchal anxiety; as women move into spheres of power or visibility, the language used to describe them is "polluted" by negative associations (Thorne & Henley, 1978). This hypothesis was further developed by Stanley in *Paradigmatic Woman: The Prostitute*, where she demonstrated that the English lexicon contains a disproportionate number of terms for "promiscuous woman" (over 200) compared

to men, suggesting that the semantic field of female sexuality is a primary site of linguistic derogation. More recent empirical studies have provided quantitative support for Schulz's claims. Using diachronic corpora, Garg et al. (2018) demonstrate that gender bias is not static but evolves historically in line with changing social conditions, with female-referential terms showing particularly volatile semantic behavior.

The specific trajectory of terms denoting female rank has been rigorously documented by Kochman-Haľadyj (2007) in *Low Wenches and Slatternly Queans*. Their diachronic analysis of Middle English terms reveals a consistent pattern they term "zoosemic extension", where words for female servants or lower-class women inevitably drift toward meanings of sexual looseness. This historical inevitability is echoed in Curzan's (2003) work on gender shifts, which notes that the markedness of female terms makes them linguistically unstable. Unlike the unmarked male term, which stands for the universal human, the female term is always specific and thus more vulnerable to specialization and eventual pejoration. Burnett (2020) examines the semantic distinction between slurs and their neutral counterpart terms. Focusing on the contrast between the slur *dyke* and the more neutral referent *lesbian*, she argues that slurs conventionally activate derogatory social personae, whereas neutral terms lack this evaluative loading (Burnett, 2020). This framework extends beyond the specific case she analyzes, offering a model for understanding how many female-referential terms undergo semantic derogation: what begins as a merely descriptive or neutral label can acquire a term that invokes a stigmatized social identity, thereby enacting linguistic discrimination against women more broadly.

The semantic derogation of women is not a phenomenon unique to English, but a cross-linguistic pattern rooted in patriarchal social structures. A powerful contemporary example is found in Mandarin Chinese with the state-mediated creation and popularization of the term *leftover women*. As analyzed in corpus studies of Chinese media, this label semantically frames unmarried, educated women over a certain age as undesirable social surplus, linking their personal status to national demographic anxieties and reinforcing traditional gender roles (Yu & Lam, 2023). This demonstrates how new, pejorative categories can be actively constructed within a language through institutional and media discourse.

While the historical pejoration of female terms is relatively well-documented in English, existing scholarship exhibits two critical limitations that this study seeks to address. First, prior work has often described these semantic shifts as isolated linguistic curiosities in language, without systematically explaining their trajectories through the lens of specific, evolving social institutions. For instance, the decline of *spinster* cannot be fully understood apart from changes in property law and the economic precarity imposed on unmarried women (Schulz, 1975). Much of the literature acknowledges this social context in passing but lacks a focused analysis of

how institutional power directly engineered and accelerated these lexical devaluations. Secondly, although these three terms are frequently cited as canonical examples of gendered semantic derogation, they are rarely analyzed in a sustained, comparative framework. This isolation obscures the nuanced mechanisms and varying chronologies of their pejoration. A dedicated comparative study is needed to move beyond listing examples to constructing a typology of gendered semantic change. This study bridges these gaps by undertaking a systematic, historically-grounded comparison of *mistress*, *spinster*, and *dame*. It argues that their pejoration was not an inevitable linguistic fate but the direct result of their intersection with pivotal social institutions.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative diachronic semantics with quantitative corpus linguistics to trace the semantic evolution of the selected terms. The research design is grounded in the principle that semantic change is best understood not in isolation, but through the analysis of usage patterns (collocations) and authoritative lexicographical records over time.

To ensure a comprehensive historical analysis, data is drawn from two primary lexicographical and corpus resources:

1. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED Online): As the historical authority on the English language, the OED serves as the primary source for establishing the etymological baseline and the chronological sequence of sense development. For each target word, the OED's "sense timeline" is mapped to identify the precise century in which pejorative definitions first appeared.

2. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): To analyze usage in Contemporary American English, COCA is utilized to examine semantic prosody: the "aura" of meaning created by the words that habitually co-occur with the target terms. While the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) provides definitions, COCA provides evidence of current, real-world usage, revealing how these terms are actually employed in contemporary discourse.

The three case studies—*mistress*, *spinster*, and *dame*—were selected based on stratified sampling to represent three distinct domains of female social power:

Mistress: Represents Domestic Authority (Head of household).

Spinster: Represents Economic Autonomy (Occupational status).

Dame: Represents Social Rank (Aristocratic title).

This selection allows for a comparative analysis to determine if semantic derogation is limited to one domain or is a systemic feature of female-referring terms across the lexicon. For each term, the original etymological meaning is established using the OED. A semantic profile is constructed for the term's point of entry into English (e.g., *Spinster* = [+female] [+occupation] [+neutral]). This is compared against the male equivalent (*Bachelor*) to establish the initial symmetry.

Using the OED's citation dates, the timeline of negative sense emergence is plotted. For the modern period, COCA is queried to identify the top 20 collocates (adjectives and verbs appearing within 4 words of the target term). A collocate index is applied:

Figure 1. The COCA corpus query tool, configured to identify collocates of “dame” within a span of four words to the left and right.

Neutral/Positive Collocates: (e.g., noble, virtuous, skilled).

Negative/Sexualized Collocates: (e.g., kept, old, lonely, loose). A shift in the ratio of these collocates over time serves as empirical evidence of semantic derogation. The linguistic data is then cross-referenced with socio-historical developments. For example, the semantic shift of spinster is analyzed alongside the changing economic status of unmarried women in the 17th century. This phase interprets the why behind the what, linking the linguistic data to the theoretical framework of patriarchal control established in the Literature Review.

This study is limited to written English, which historically overrepresents the perspectives of literate, upper-class males. Consequently, the “usage” analyzed is primarily that of the dominant social group. However, as Spender (2001) argues, it is precisely this dominant group that codifies the “standard” meanings of words. Therefore, analyzing their usage is appropriate for understanding how hegemonic definitions are constructed.

4. Case Study

4.1. Case Study I: *Mistress*

The semantic history of *mistress* offers perhaps a striking example of the *sexualization of authority* in the English lexicon. While its male equivalent, *master*, has retained and even expanded its connotations of expertise, control, and dominance (e.g., *mastermind*, *masterpiece*, *mastery*), *mistress* has undergone a radical semantic narrowing, shifting from a title of social power to a euphemism for an illicit sexual partner. This shift reflects broader patterns of gendered semantic change documented in historical linguistics and feminist language studies (Erickson, 2014). This pattern exemplifies what Cameron (2003) terms “symbolic domination through discourse”, whereby linguistic structures subtly encode and legitimize unequal power relations. The semantic fate of *mistress* thus cannot be separated from the historical regulation of female sexuality and authority.

The Era of Authority (c. 1300-1600): Derived from the Old French *maistresse* and ultimately the Latin *magistra*, the term entered Middle English around the 14th century with a clear and unambiguous definition: a woman who has control, rule, or authority over a place, institution, or household. In the OED's earliest citations, the term is used symmetrically with master. A man was the master of his servants; a woman was the mistress of hers. Crucially, in this period, the term possessed a strong sense of professional competence. A woman could be a *mistress of her art* a *mistress of rhetoric*, mirroring the usage of *master of his craft*. In the religious domain, it was applied to the Virgin Mary (*Mistress of the World*), a usage that would be blasphemous if the modern sexualized meaning were present. In this phase, the semantic features of mistress can be mapped as: [+female] [+authority] [+control] [+respect].

II.9. A woman who is proficient in an art, craft, or other branch of study. **to be mistress of:** c1440-
to be versed in or perfectly acquainted with (a subject).

(c1440)	Meede..be þe enchaumentis..of þe which she was a souereyne maistres , made charmes. S. Scrope, translation of C. de Pisan, <i>Epistle of Othea</i> (MS St. John's Cambr.) (1970) 66 [Composed c1440]
ø1456 (ø1449)	Prynse, þereuers to expresse Of yche thing by contynauce: Entendement Double is cheef maystresse . J. Lydgate, <i>Minor Poems</i> (1934) II. 467 [Composed ø1449]
1484	I am a maystresse in medecyn. W. Caxton, translation of <i>Subtyl Histories & Fables of Esope</i> v. 221
1535	The fayre and beutifull harlot: which is a maistresse of wychcraft. Bible (Coverdale) Nahum III. 4
1590	Great maistresse of her art was that false Dame. E. Spenser, <i>Faerie Queene</i> I.vii. sig. F6
ø1616	I cannot say, 'tis pittie She lacks Instructions, for she seemes a Mistresse To most that teach. W. Shakespeare, <i>Winter's Tale</i> (1623) IV. iv. 582
1712	I would advise all young Wives to make themselves Mistresses of Wingate's Arithmetick. J. Addison, <i>Spectator</i> No. 92. ¶5
1719	Hail! mighty Mistress of <i>Hæmonian</i> Arts. N. Rowe, translation of Lucan, <i>Pharsalia</i> VI. 248

Figure 2. Historical lexicographic evidence for mistress denoting female authority and governance

Euphemism and the Kept Woman (c. 1600–1700): The semantic turning point occurs in the Early Modern period, specifically during the 17th century. As social norms regarding marriage and extramarital affairs evolved, men required a polite euphemism for a woman with whom they were having an illicit relationship. Terms like whore or concubine were too blunt for polite society. Mistress, with its connotations of a woman who holds sway over a man's heart, became the preferred euphemism. This transition is visible in the corpus data. In the 15th century, collocations with mistress are overwhelmingly possessive or honorific (my good mistress, mistress of the house). By the late 17th century, a new cluster of collocations emerges: kept mistress, king's mistress, and little mistress. The OED records the specific sense of "A woman other than his wife with whom a man has a long-lasting sexual relationship." gaining traction during the Restoration, a period famous for the public visibility of royal mistresses like Nell Gwyn. Historical

discourse analysis of Early Modern English further indicates that the emergence of the sexualized sense of mistress coincided with intensifying regulation of female sexuality and marriage norms (Erickson, 2014). Linguistic choices surrounding women's social roles during this period reveal a growing tendency to collapse female authority into sexual reputation, a pattern also documented in Early Modern legal and conduct literature (Erickson, 2014).

By the 19th century, the sexualized meaning began to displace the authoritative meaning. While mistress was still used as a title of courtesy (the precursor to Mrs.) and for a female teacher (schoolmistress), the bare noun mistress increasingly implied a sexual relationship. The asymmetry with master becomes stark in this period.

Master: A man who has control over others or a subject.

Mistress: A woman who is financially supported by a man in return for sex.

This shift represents a subjectification where the objective definition (authority) is replaced by a definition based on the male subject's relationship to the woman. The woman is no longer defined by her power over a household, but by her sexual utility to a man.

Today, the professional sense of mistress is all but obsolete. We do not speak of a Mistress of Science or a Mistress of Arts (despite the degree being an MA). The term schoolmistress sounds archaic, having been replaced by teacher. The only surviving context where mistress implies authority is in the BDSM subculture (Dominatrix), which ironically reinforces the link between female authority and sexuality. Of Johnson's original definitions for mistress, the primary contemporary use of the full form aligns with his final, most derogatory sense, what he termed "whore or concubine," though it is now more commonly and euphemistically used to refer to a married man's extramarital partner. Meanwhile, the original sense of "a woman who governs" survives only in compounds such as schoolmistress or housemistress, largely confined to the context of traditional private education. The trajectory of mistress demonstrates a clear sociolinguistic rule: when a term for female authority exists, it is unstable. It will either be devalued to a general term of address (Mrs.) or sexualized, leaving English with a lexical gap for female authority that has only recently been filled by gender-neutral terms like boss or manager.

4.2. Case Study II: *Spinster*

If *mistress* illustrates the sexualization of female authority, *spinster* exemplifies the devaluation of female autonomy. Unlike *mistress*, which began as a relational term (authority over others), *spinster* originated as an occupational term, defining a woman by her labor rather than her relationship to a man. Its semantic trajectory, from skilled artisan to legal status to derogatory slur, mirrors the historical erosion of women's economic independence and the increasing stigmatization of the single life.

The term *spinster* enters Middle English in the mid-14th century as a straightforward occupational noun: a woman who spins. Derived from the verb spin with the feminine agentive suffix *-ster* (as in *brewster* or *webster*), it denoted a specific economic role. In the medieval wool economy, spinning was one of the few trades where women could earn an independent income. In this phase, the term carried no connotation of marital status. A married woman could be a spinster, just as she could be a weaver. The semantic features were purely functional: [+female] [+occupation] [+textile production]. Corpus citations from this period frequently list *spinster* alongside other trades in guild records, indicating a status of skilled labor.

From Occupation to Marriage Status (c. 1600-1700): The first semantic shift occurred in the 17th century, driven by legal necessity. As the wool trade became more industrialized and male-dominated, the specific occupational sense of *spinster* began to fade. However, the legal system required a way to identify unmarried women in documents. Since a married woman was legally covered by her husband, she had no independent legal identity. An unmarried woman, however, needed a title. By the late 17th century, *spinster* had become the standard legal addition to the names of unmarried women in court records, regardless of whether they actually spun wool. This shift from activity to status is crucial: the woman was no longer defined by what she did, but by what she was not (a wife).

The use of *spinster* to denote a woman's marital status appears to have originated from the prevalence of unmarried women in the spinning trade. This occupation, not being circumscribed by the child-rearing and domestic duties traditionally associated with married life, was actively promoted by Poor Law authorities in the 17th and 18th centuries as a viable means of income for single women. Consequently, in historical records, it is often ambiguous whether the term refers specifically to an occupation, a marital status, or both. Until the legal reforms of 2005, *spinster* was the official term for an unmarried woman on marriage certificates in England and Wales, paired with *bachelor* for men. Both were then replaced by the neutral term *single*. While *spinster* may still appear in certain legal documents, the historically neutral term *feme sole* is increasingly preferred in modern legal contexts, largely due to the pronounced negative connotations now associated with *spinster* (OED, 2023).

Once the term became synonymous with "unmarried woman", it became vulnerable to the social stigma attached to that state. In the 18th and 19th centuries, as the "marriage market" became the primary determinant of a woman's social value, the "unpicked" woman was increasingly viewed with pity or contempt. Corpus data from the 19th century reveals a dramatic shift in semantic prosody. In COCA, the most frequent collocates for *spinster* shift from neutral legal descriptors to negative adjectives: old, lonely, elderly and adverbs: alone, firmly. The term became inextricably linked with the caricature of the Old Maid—a woman who had failed in her primary social function (marriage).

+ ADJ		NEW WORD	?
60	4.42	old	
17	7.53	lonely	
10	6.60	elderly	

Figure 3. Top three collocates of *spinster* in the COCA corpus: old, lonely, and elderly.

The semantic derogation of *spinster* is stark when compared to its male equivalent, *bachelor*. Originally a “novice knight”, *bachelor* evolved to mean an unmarried man. Crucially, it acquired positive connotations of freedom, eligibility, and choice (eligible bachelor, bachelor pad). This asymmetry reflects a double standard: a single man is holding out (agency), while a single woman is left on the shelf (passivity). The derogation became so severe that by the 20th century, the term was largely abandoned in favor of single woman, and in 2005, the UK government officially replaced *spinster* with single in marriage registration documents, citing the term’s offensive connotations.

The history of *spinster* records the transition from a society where a woman could be defined by her work to one where she was defined solely by her marital status. The pejoration of the term serves as a linguistic enforcement of the marriage mandate, punishing non-compliance with semantic ridicule. Historical demographers have noted that the rise of the negative stereotype of the unmarried woman coincided with economic restructuring in early modern Europe, where women’s access to independent labor sharply declined (Lakoff, 1973; Cameron, 2003; Fontecha, 2003). The linguistic degradation of *spinster* therefore mirrors the material conditions that constrained women’s economic autonomy.

4.3. Case Study III: *Dame*

The final case study examines *dame*, a term that originated as a title of high aristocratic rank but has, in many contexts, devolved into a dismissive slang term or a figure of ridicule. Unlike *mistress* (sexualized) or *spinster* (stigmatized), the trajectory of *dame* is characterized by trivialization and generalization. It illustrates how terms for “noble woman” are prone to a specific type of semantic drift where “high status” is reinterpreted as haughty, matronly, or simply female.

The Aristocratic Phase (c. 1200–1800): Derived from the Latin *domina* via Old French, *dame* entered Middle English as a title of great dignity. It was the female equivalent of *sire* or *lord*, used to address women of rank, particularly the wives of knights or baronets. In the hierarchy of address, *Dame* was a marker of deference. In this phase, the term possessed the features: [+female] [+noble] [+respect]. It was used in religious contexts (*Notre Dame* / *Our Lady*) and legal contexts. There was no ambiguity; to call a woman *Dame* was to acknowledge her social superiority.

The semantic history of dame bifurcates in the 19th and 20th centuries, revealing a sharp divide between British and American English usage. In the UK, Dame retained its official status as the female equivalent of Knight in the honors system (e.g., Dame Judi Dench). However, even here, a subtle derogation occurred in the cultural sphere with the rise of the Pantomime Dame, a comic, grotesque female figure traditionally played by a man in drag. This cultural association introduced a connotation of “frumpy” or “ridiculous” femininity that Knight never acquired. In the US, the term underwent a rapid downward shift in the early 20th century. By the 1920s and 30s, particularly in hardboiled detective fiction, dame became a slang synonym for woman, often with a tone of cynical detachment or objectification. In this context, a dame was not a noblewoman; she was simply a female, often one who was trouble. The shift in American English represents a classic case of generalization followed by pejoration. The term spreads from a specific class (noblewomen) to a general class (older women/matrons) to any woman. Once applied generally, it acquires negative prosody. In COCA data from the 1930s-50s, dame frequently collocates with adjectives like old, classy (ironic), sexy, or dizzy. The asymmetry with Lord is profound. Retains connotations of divinity (The Lord) and high nobility (House of Lords), it has not become a slang term for man. In common parlance, Dame evokes either a “grand old lady” (at best) or a “broad” (at worst). The semantic feature [+noble] has been stripped away, replaced by [+female] with a nuance of [+attitude]. Similar patterns of trivialization of female honorifics have been documented in other European languages. Bussmann and Hellinger (2001) show that feminine titles cross-linguistically exhibit greater semantic instability than their masculine counterparts, frequently undergoing generalization and evaluative weakening. The English development of dame thus aligns with broader typological tendencies in gendered semantic change.

46	2.10	old	
27	6.49	colonial	
11	2.20	beautiful	
10	7.27	classy	
7	4.22	sexy	
5	5.82	dizzy	

Figure 4. Frequent collocates of dame in the COCA corpus

The trajectory of dame confirms the hypothesis that female honorifics are linguistically unstable. While male honorifics tend to remain restricted to their high-status domain (or expand into general polite address like Sir), female honorifics tend to slide down the scale of dignity. Dame demonstrates that even a title protected by royal decree is not immune to the “semantic drag” of patriarchal

culture, which seemingly resists the permanent linguistic encoding of female superiority. The erosion of the noble sense of dame demonstrates how even institutional titles are vulnerable to ideological pressure when they conflict with entrenched gender hierarchies.

5. Conclusion

The diachronic analysis of mistress, spinster, and dame reveals a striking and systematic asymmetry in the semantic evolution of English gender terms. While male equivalents such as master, bachelor, and lord have largely retained their original connotations of authority, eligibility, and high rank, their female counterparts have undergone a consistent process of semantic pejoration. This study confirms Schulz's (1975) hypothesis that terms designating women are linguistically unstable, prone to a downward trajectory that reinterprets female power as either sexual availability or social deviance.

The case of mistress demonstrates how female authority is sexualized; as Lakoff (1973) argues, a woman's power in a patriarchal society is often conflated with her sexual utility to men. The trajectory of spinster illustrates the stigmatization of female economic autonomy; once the occupational definition faded, the term was filled with the negative meaning of the "unwanted" woman. Finally, dame exemplifies the trivialization of female rank, sliding from a title of nobility to a slang term for a "broad", a shift that Curzan (2003) attributes to the inherent "markedness" of female categories.

These findings suggest that semantic change is not a neutral cognitive process but a sociolinguistic mechanism of control. As Spender (2001) famously asserted, language is "man-made" in the sense that the dominant group encodes its worldview into the lexicon. The systematic derogation of these terms serves to linguistically police the boundaries of female power, ensuring that women who step outside the roles of wife or mother are semantically redefined as illicit (mistress), failed (spinster), or ridiculous (dame). Future research might fruitfully examine whether recent attempts at feminist language planning have succeeded in arresting this drift, or if new terms like Ms. are undergoing similar processes of derogation. Once female authority becomes linguistically associated with deviance or ridicule, that association reinforces social expectations about women's roles and limits the imaginable forms of female power.

This study also has several limitations that need future research. First, its scope is confined to three representative lexical items: mistress, spinster, and dame. While these can illuminate core mechanisms of gendered semantic derogation in English, the generalizability of the findings requires careful consideration. Gendered semantic change constitutes a vast and complex system. Future work should incorporate a broader set of terms (e.g., hussy, madam, governess) and engage in cross-linguistic comparison to test and refine the patterns identified here.

Second, while the historical and contemporary corpora employed (e.g., COCA) are representative, they inevitably possess blind spots in terms of text types and discursive fields. For instance, informal speech, private correspondence, and the internal discourses of specific communities are not fully captured. This may limit a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced meanings and dynamic shifts of these words in actual use.

Finally, the analysis is primarily conducted from socio-linguistic and historical-semantic perspectives. It offers less exploration of the deeper cognitive mechanisms (e.g., conceptual metaphors, frame shifting) and the specific processes of discursive interaction underpinning semantic change. Incorporating methodologies from cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and conversation analysis would help elucidate more precisely how semantic derogation is enacted and reinforced in micro-level speech acts.

These limitations simultaneously highlight fruitful directions for future inquiry. Expanding the lexical sample, integrating multimodal and new-media corpora, and pursuing interdisciplinary analytical approaches will contribute to a more complete picture of the complex interplay between language and societal gender ideologies.

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