Socio-cognitive factors in the pejoration of German words for women

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From 'virgin' to 'spinster', from 'handmaid' to 'prostitute': words for women in many languages have been subject to pervasive pejoration, more so than words for men. In German, a large number of female words have acquired negative connotations (e.g. *Magd* 'handmaid', *Jungfer* 'spinster', *Dirne* 'prostitute'), and lexical asymmetries have arisen between male and female terms (e.g. *Mann/Frau* 'man/woman' – *Herr/Frau X* 'Mr/Mrs X' – *männlich/weiblich* 'male/female', cf. Nübling 2011). Although the phenomenon is frequently described in general treatments of semantic change (from Bechstein 1863 to Nübling et al. 2017) and feminist linguistic commentary (e.g. Lakoff 1973, Schulz 1975, Mills 1989), no satisfactory account has emerged so far. Previous socio-pragmatic (Keller 1994) or cognitive approaches (e.g. Kochman-Haładyj & Kleparski 2011) remain unconvincing in both their insufficient regard for empirical evidence and their failure to account for the interaction of social and cognitive factors.

To reveal recurrent patterns of change in German words for women, the diachronic trajectories of selected female lexemes and their male counterparts are examined through collocational and contextual analysis of historical corpus data, as pioneered in case studies on English by Rabofksi (1985) and Schulze (1992). Following Nübling (2011), female pejoration is argued to be a reflection rather than a distortion of misogynistic culture, contrary to Keller's invisible-hand theory (1994) of unintentional devaluation through inflationary use of gallantry. According to Nübling (2011), pejoration may result from social degradation *(Frau* 'lady' > 'woman'), functionalisation *(Magd* 'young woman' > 'handmaid'), sexualisation (*Jungfrau* 'young lady' > 'virgin'), or a combination *(Dirne* 'girl' > 'handmaid' > 'prostitute'). It should thus be considered a consequence of interacting socio-cultural preconditions and cognitive mechanisms of semantic change.

Whilst the social degradation of *Frau* may indeed stem from inflationary euphemism or the levelling of social distinctions and is perhaps better classified as generalisation, the other pathways seem to involve different processes. Within a framework of diachronic prototype semantics (Geeraerts 1997), lexical categories are regarded as radial sets with blurred edges and overlapping, clustered senses of varying structural weight, organised around a central prototype. Over time, new senses emerge via metaphorical, metonymic, or taxonomic links to established senses. Crucially, categorial extension need not originate from the entire set of senses, but may proceed inductively from a salient subset, or from typical contiguity or habitual similarity between members of two categories (Geeraerts 1994). It is argued here that female lexical categories are often extended from stereotypical subsets or associations which reduce women to their physio-biological attributes, social functionality or sexual availability, and which have attained cultural salience due to deeply entrenched societal sexism. The new, more evaluatively charged senses carry more structural weight within the category, thus replacing the older, more neutral senses at the prototypical centre. For example, 'young unmarried woman of high status' gives rise to 'virgin' *(Jungfrau)* whereas 'young unmarried woman of low status' is extended to 'handmaid' performing menial service *(Magd),* which may obtain a sexual interpretation as 'prostitute' *(Dirne)*; in all cases, the originally neutral senses are lost.

Ultimately, the different pathways of categorial extension result in pejoration by objectifying and evaluating women according to sexist norms, thus highlighting the prevalence of misogynistic conceptualisations in speakers' minds. A comprehensive picture emerges only once socio-cultural and cognitive factors are integrated, and once the historical data is examined for the syntagmatic and semantic contexts of female terms.

Keywords: semantic change, pejoration, gender, prototypicality, cognitive categorization

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