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Gender and New Words in an Online World

Jenny Lewin-Jones

People's use of language interacts with social changes. Words fall out of use and new words are needed as customs, values, ideas, technologies, and ways of life evolve. As dictionary-writer Samuel Johnson said in his Preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): "as any custom is disused, the words that expressed it must perish with it; as any opinion grows popular, it will innovate speech in the same proportion as it alters practice" (Johnson, 1773, 9).

This chapter focuses on the rapidly evolving lexicon relating especially to gender in the English language. The language people use reflects social changes, so looking at words helps identify the changes occurring. Yet language is more than a mirror, since the use of neologisms can at the same time be a generator or accelerator of changing social attitudes, often spread through social media. Major online dictionaries such as Oxford, Collins, Merriam-Webster (USA), and Macquarie (Australia) annually identify and publicise on social media their 'Words of the Year' (WOTY), words and phrases that loomed large in public attention during a particular year.

The applied linguistics research presented in this chapter began with etymological and morphological analysis of the total of 337 shortlisted WOTYs in the lists published by those four dictionaries from 2003–2017. Analysing and coding the WOTYs by theme showed that gender-related words formed a prominent category. The research explores how new words, freshly popularised words, or expanded meanings of existing words, can reflect evolving attitudes, the naming and overturning of disempowering practices, and increasing critiques of particular gender-related categorisations. The study investigated words that were coined to name gender-related phenomena that were previously nameless and identified examples of how popularisation of words and concepts via social media can express change.

This chapter looks at the interrelationship between social change and language evolution, tracing the WOTY phenomenon. It considers word formation processes to explore how new words enter the language and demonstrates how analysis of a purposive selection of words can illuminate broader social issues and evolving attitudes to gender. This chapter also extends the original research by considering some of the WOTYs of 2018–2020, arguing for their importance in providing sociological insights into gender inequalities and discriminatory practices. It also draws on linguistic evidence from traditional grammar books, online

dictionaries, and examples of language usage on social media. It concludes that WOTYs are very far from a frivolous and media-hyped impression of language change.

Why Words Change: Social Change and Language Change

Professional linguists agree that living languages are in a state of flux and constant change. The etymology of a word is not a finished story, but is “an ongoing negotiation” (Chatfield 2013, 4). A word is not a thing but is a happening, since change is inherent in the nature of language, always in a state of becoming (McWhorter 2016, 3). Or to use Lane Green’s vivid metaphor, language is a wild animal like a wolf, adapting to its environment and needs (Green 2018, 6). How people are represented, categorized, and described has long been an arena of linguistic struggle. For example, occupational designations such as ‘businessman’ and ‘fireman’ are critiqued for their gender stereotyping. Similarly, the use of compound nouns such as ‘woman driver’ and ‘lady doctor’ is contentious for the assumption that the default is male (Talbot 2010, 225).

A functional view of language change says that the creation of new words in a language is due to need. Like old clothes which are no longer worn, old words are discarded if they lose their impact or are no longer used (Aitchison 2013, 154). Conversely, new words are needed as social needs alter. Since understandings of gender identities have expanded, new words are needed to fill lexical gaps: “Inclusiveness involves a lexical response” (Danesi 2018, 37). However, this change may extend beyond the use of new words to include other forms of communication. For example, in the early years of emoji, there was criticism of their gender bias and gender stereotyping, and particularly that many professions were only represented by male emoji (Evans 2017, 224). In a 2017 update, options to choose the gender of emoji characters were expanded, and new emoji were introduced that were not gender-specific (Seargeant 2019, 139). Earlier emoji had marked gender by the depiction of women wearing knee-length skirts, with below-shoulder hair length, and purple outfits, in contrast to short-haired male characters in blue clothing including trousers.

As well as fulfilling a lexical gap, creating new words arises from the playful or ludic uses of language, when language is manipulated for fun and enjoyment (Crystal 1998, 1). In her germinal work on playfulness online, Brenda Danet argues that the label ‘the Information Highway’ in the early days of the internet turned out to be a misnomer, as cyberspace was becoming as much about social activity and play as information (Danet 2001, 5). Arguably, functional social need and playful manipulation of words coalesce in many of the WOTY shortlists.

Social change also involves identifying and illuminating patterns of behaviour that do not yet have names or labels, so naming a newly recognized concept is an important step towards understanding the phenomenon under the spotlight (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013, 222). This chapter posits that WOTYs can provide insight into ongoing social changes in various overlapping areas. Change in one area of social life is often connected to change in a different area. For example, another key theme identified in the WOTYs was new technology-based social media practices, which overlaps with the theme of gender. This overlap is reflected in WOTYs such as ‘sharenting’ (Collins Dictionary 2016), and ‘sexting’, shortlisted by Oxford Dictionaries in 2009 (Paul 2009). ‘Sharenting’ refers to the practice of parents sharing (or over-sharing) their children’s achievements on social media, blending ‘sharing’ and ‘parenting’. ‘Sexting’ is the sending of sexually explicit or suggestive messages using a mobile phone, blending ‘sex’ and ‘texting’.

However, neologisms are not always greeted with enthusiasm. Analysis of media stories about computer-mediated communication in the early twenty first century found that they were largely pessimistic about perceived declining standards and the impact of new media on language usage (Thurlow 2006). New words can also provoke strong feelings, with some people bemoaning what they see as short-lived fads (Clayton 2018, 17). This is, however, not a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Language change often meets with anxieties, complaints, and even panic. Jean Aitchison (2013) cites examples from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of objections to new words.

How Words Evolve: Morphological Processes

New words can be created in a variety of ways, usually based on existing words or elements, with brand new coinages rare (Burridge and Bergs 2017, 29), and many traditional methods employed (Horobin 2016, 122). Word formation processes include compounding, affixation, backformation, conversion, abbreviation, acronyms, borrowing, and blending (Burridge and Bergs 2017, 31–41).

Many of the words in WOTY shortlists are blends or portmanteau words (two words merged together). This is, however, not a new type of word formation. Some blends are much older than might be thought, for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary OED* has its earliest attestation of ‘brunch’ as 1895, and ‘staycation’ as 1944. Blending has, however, become particularly popular since the 1970s (Burridge 2004, 21). Blends such as the noun ‘podcast’ (first used in 2004) have become productive and have spawned verbs (‘to podcast’) and other derived forms (‘podcasting’, ‘podcasted’) (Crystal 2011, 251). The trend towards

hybrid technologies is reflected in the merger of words used to name the new phenomena, such as ‘vlog’ (video + blog) and ‘phablet’ (phone + tablet), replacing single-purpose technologies (Roig-Marín 2016, 2). However, this is not confined to communication technologies. Hybridisation is also rife, for example, in the worlds of fashion (‘jeggings’) and food (‘cronut’). A sign of a new compound or blend can be a hyphen, however, over time, the hyphen is lost (Burridge 2002, 45). For example, the earliest three of the attested usages in the *OED* (1944, 1965, 1999) contain ‘stay-cation’ with a hyphen, whereas twenty first century usage is ‘staycation’ without a hyphen. The word ‘staycation’ has become commonplace and the blend no longer needs signalling through hyphenation. This shows how new words continue to evolve once introduced and how their evolution reflects widespread recognition, often via social media.

Social Media Encourages Linguistic Creativity and Innovation

Once regarded as a special talent of particularly gifted individuals, linguistic creativity is now recognized as ubiquitous in everyday language and communication (Carter 2004, 13). Creativity can be defined as combining and connecting existing elements in new ways, heightened by evolving technologies which encourage hybrid forms of communication (Goddard 2011, 141). Digital writing gives people the freedom to disrupt and transcend conventions of normalized literacies such as standard spellings (Deumert 2014, 144). Research on Facebook showed that language playfulness was much in evidence (Lewin-Jones 2015, 83), and the same applies to other social media platforms such as Twitter (McCulloch 2019, 25).

Many of the new words introduced in the late twentieth and thus far in the twenty first century were connected with the need to name and express new technological and online experiences, and coinages were happening at a rapid rate (Crystal 2006, 71). Whereas linguistic innovation was once driven primarily by the spoken language, in the early part of the twenty first century it was the typed words on screens that drove change (Chatfield 2013, 2). The internet and digital technology mean that language changes can be observed far more easily, with large-scale, spontaneous language use available for searching and analysing (Paradowski and Jonak 2012; Heafner et al. 2018). The role of social media is apparent in that Twitter is increasingly cited in the *OED* as the first written evidence of words, including ‘lumbersexual’ and ‘mansplainer’, as well as new senses for old words (Williams 2020). Social media encourages the creation and spread of new words, as well as helping lexicographers to identify and track them (Burridge and Bergs 2017, 28–29). Moreover,

social media are resistant to attempts to gatekeep and regulate online language usage by official bodies, such as the Académie Française's objection to the English 'email', 'blog' and 'hashtag' being used in French (Horobin 2016, 121).

Social Media Encourages Language Change

Technological advancement is undeniably one driver of changes in how people communicate and in the language we use (Seargeant 2019, 6). An example in the late twentieth and early twenty first century was the deliberate re-spelling inherent in textspeak, when mobile phone messages were limited by cost and technology, and brevity was crucial. Revolutions in global communication have led to an acceleration in the speed of language change, illustrated by the pace at which emoji became so prevalent that the Tears of Joy emoji was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries' WOTY winner in 2015, provoking much media debate as to whether it could be regarded as a 'word' (Wheaton 2015). Another example of controversy over a selected WOTY surrounded the neologism 'milkshake duck'. The term was coined to describe the phenomenon when an individual rises sharply in popularity in the media but then suffers a fall when it transpires that they have done or said something that garners disapproval. A Twitter user described a lovely duck that drank milkshakes, but was then condemned for being racist. There was debate over whether 'milkshake duck' was a 'word' or not and could therefore be deemed a WOTY, when it was named Macquarie Dictionary's WOTY winner 2017, and a runner-up in Oxford Dictionaries' WOTY 2017. However, two-word terms are not unusual in WOTY shortlists.

The rapidity of adoption of new words is illustrated by author Lindsay Ellis's novel, *Axiom's End*, published July 2020. The novel is set in 2008, and on her Twitter account Ellis described the difficulty caused by terms and words used in 2020 that did not exist or were not in wide use in 2008 and therefore could not be used in her novel. One example she gave is the verb 'misgender' (Ellis 2020), meaning to address or refer to someone in a way that does not reflect the gender with which they identify. This definition was added to the *OED* in its June 2018 update. The earliest attested evidence it cites is from 1989 and 1999, showing how a word may 'exist' decades before it is widely used and gains recognition.

In the age of social media, what might once have remained 'nonce words' are more easily circulated and likely to attract more attention. 'Nonce words' are created for a one-off temporary usage, usually by someone playing around with language. Such words might be coined and then melt away, but sometimes they plug a hole in the lexicon and take off (Burridge 2002, 17–18). The process of lexical spread is, however, complex. Corpus-based

research of Twitter posts shows that some words are introduced and then lie dormant for years with infrequent use before they emerge and are used more widely (Grieve, Nini, and Guo 2017, 123). Digital communication has been characterised by a breaking down of former distinctions in the binary of speech and writing. Soffer (2012) uses Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity to show how oral-written digital language can be viewed as a melting down of previous linguistic rigidities. However, he goes on to say that any perceived anarchy in language use on digital media is limited, as people still need to understand each other (Soffer 2012, 1106–7). Early forms of online communication such as Usenet were constructed around different groups whereas contemporary social networks are more fluid with each individual's network different (Tagg 2015, 236–37).

Digital media provide spaces for experimentation, playfulness, mixing, mashing up, and sharing different resources (Barton and Lee 2013, 150). Just as social media have enabled a shift away from professionals towards more widely distributed experimentation and sharing in fields such as photography (Barton and Lee 2013, 150), it could be argued that the same has happened with lexical innovation. Anyone can coin a word, share it on social media, and submit it to one of the crowd-sourced open dictionaries such as the Urban Dictionary, which enable quick recording of new words, but tend to be more opinion-based as they are suggested by individual members of the public rather than professional lexicographers (Nguyen, McGillivray, and Yasseri 2018, 2).

The WOTY Phenomenon

Growth in the WOTY phenomenon is evident in the increasing numbers of traditional English language dictionaries (now online as well as with print versions) publishing their WOTY. However, it is not often acknowledged that the Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache e.V. (GfdS), the Society for the German Language, first published their 'Wort des Jahres' (Word of the Year) in 1971, then regularly from 1977 (GfdS 2020), making WOTY an older phenomenon in the German language than in English. The history of choosing a WOTY in the English language dates back to a meeting in Chicago in 1990 of the American Dialect Society, who began an annual tradition, initially on a small scale. A decade later, Merriam-Webster announced its first WOTY in 2003, followed by Oxford University Press in 2004, and then rapidly spreading to other dictionaries to become a bigger annual ritual. The growth of online dictionaries has enabled dictionaries' WOTY choices to be informed by what words are looked up in the online dictionary during the year (Steinmetz 2014).

It should also be acknowledged that English is a world language, and indeed it is customary now to speak of ‘Englishes’ in the plural rather than one homogenous ‘English’ language (Jenkins 2015; Galloway and Rose 2015; Saraceni 2015; Melchers and Shaw 2011). WOTYs cannot possibly encapsulate all the nuances of English language change, its enrichment by contact with other languages, and differentiated social change all across the globe. Nor can WOTYs really capture the diversity of language use by different social or ethnic groups (within a country or other geographical area), nor possible subtle differences in language use and lexical choice between people of different genders. However, selecting WOTYs from a range of dictionaries does reveal some of the expansion of the English lexicon from a range of sources. An example of a WOTY borrowed into English from another language is the Collins Dictionary 2020 WOTY shortlisted word ‘mukbang’, itself a blend of the Korean words for ‘eating’ and ‘broadcast’, referring to a webcast in which the host eats large quantities of food for the entertainment of viewers (Collins Dictionary 2020).

WOTY announcements by dictionary makers attract much media excitement (Burridge and Bergs 2017, 28). It is important to point out that the selection of WOTYs is not just a personal, impressionistic choice by dictionary-compilers. On the contrary, it is evidence-based corpus linguistics research. Studying lexical emergence has been made possible by the analysis of very large bodies of linguistic data (corpora) from social media sites (Grieve, Nini, and Guo 2017, 99–102). Oxford Dictionaries, for example, draw on a monitor corpus gathering news content daily and containing over 11 billion words (Oxford Languages 2020, 5). Such evidence is used by lexicographers in compiling longlists for their WOTY. The dictionary producers are transparent about the rationale for their selection of their WOTY. For example, Oxford Dictionaries state that they are to “reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of that particular year and to have lasting potential as a word of cultural significance” (Oxford Dictionaries 2017). Merriam-Webster base their choice on the look-ups in their online dictionary during the year, stating that they “combine an analysis of words that have seen a rise over the previous year along with instances of intense spikes of interest because of news events” (Merriam-Webster 2017). WOTYs thus sometimes speak to particular time-bound socio-historical events such as the specific political terms in Merriam-Webster’s lists in US presidential election years (Heafner et al. 2018, 127).

Dating words is an important part of lexicography. However, dates in dictionaries are often misunderstood. The date represents the first written usage found for a particular word, not the date of its invention; a word may have long been in use in speech, and private writing, before it appears in a published work (Stamper 2017, 191). Words are often older than people

think, as they falsely assume that a word they have newly encountered must be new to the language (Stamper 2017, 196). Keeping dictionary entries up-to-date once published also presents a challenge in the online world, as new evidence can come to light to antedate entries (Simpson 2016, 294). It is important to remember that WOTYs are not necessarily new words, but ones that have garnered public interest and curiosity, reflecting contemporary topics and a sociocultural zeitgeist (Heafner et al. 2018, 130–33).

WOTYs Challenging Gender Inequalities: ‘Singular They’

The investigation of particular WOTY shows why analysing language is so salient. Language can be a tool for perpetuating inequalities in society, including gender-based ones, as conventionalised language can be used to position some people below others in a social hierarchy. Challenging gender inequalities therefore involves arguing for language change, for example by advocating the replacement of some words by others (Ives and Rana 2018, 2–3). This is illustrated by the WOTY ‘singular they’, shortlisted by Oxford Dictionaries in 2015, also chosen by the American Dialect Society as its WOTY winner in the same year, and crowned Merriam-Webster WOTY winner in 2019.

One use of ‘singular they’ relates to using the pronoun ‘they’ to refer to a single individual, to avoid the gendered singular pronoun ‘he’ or ‘she’. One noticeable change in English is the increasing re-acceptance of ‘they’ as a generic singular pronoun as well as a plural pronoun. It is important to point out that this is not a new usage, but that this use of singular ‘they’ actually predates the generic ‘he’, as the *OED* attests (Green 2018, 35). Writing style guides now advocate the use of ‘they’ rather than the supposedly generic but sexist ‘he/his’ once favoured by prescriptivists as a default generic pronoun (Mooney and Evans 2019, 130–31). Even if there has been resistance to reform, with some people defending their desire to continue to use the so-called generic pronoun ‘he’, such advocacy of gender-neutral language is a sign of the effectiveness of feminist campaigning on issues of language policy (Mills and Mullany 2011, 152–54).

The gradual growth in acceptance of this usage of ‘singular they’ is also reflected in changes in grammar books, often seen as bastions of what is ‘correct’. For example, Swan’s *Practical English Usage* in the 1980 edition pronounced: “In a more formal style, *he*, *him* and *his* (not necessarily referring to a male person) are generally used” (Swan 1980, 432). However, by the 2005 edition of the same book, readers are told that singular they “has existed for centuries and is perfectly correct” (Swan 2005, 529). Similarly, in Ballard’s *The Frameworks of English*, a table of pronouns lists third person singular pronouns as ‘he’,

‘she’, ‘it’ and ‘they’ (Ballard 2007, 35), normalising the use of ‘they’ as a singular pronoun. This is an interesting example of the time lag between language in use and what ‘authoritative’ sources prescribe.

Issues of gender-neutrality or gender-fair language are not restricted to the English language. Research in Swedish, for example, has shown how male bias associated with masculine generic pronouns and the binary associated with paired male/female pronouns can be overcome by newly invented gender-neutral pronouns (Lindqvist, Renström, and Sendén 2019, 115).

WOTYs Breaking Down Gender Binaries

One use of ‘singular they’ relates to gender identities, transcending a gender binary, and taken by non-binary, transgender, or genderqueer persons to refer to themselves. A revision to the *OED* in 2019 added this usage, citing Twitter threads from 2009 (Williams 2020). As Williams points out, Twitter is increasingly used as a source in the *OED*, to the extent that for revisions and additions made in 2019 it was second only to the Times newspaper as a source of evidence. Tweets are often used in the *OED* as sources of words reflecting “evolving norms around gender and sexuality” (Williams 2020), and several such words are listed in WOTY shortlists, including the WOTY ‘transgender’ (Collins Dictionaries WOTY shortlist 2015) and ‘gender fluid’ (Collins Dictionary WOTY shortlist 2017). ‘Enby’ was a finalist in Macquarie Dictionary’s WOTY shortlist in 2016. Etymologically, it is a phonetic pronunciation of the initialism NB (non-binary), referring to a person who does not identify as male or female. The emergence of ‘enby’ could be said to demonstrate Judith Butler’s point that gendered terms are “constantly in the process of being remade” (Butler 2004, 10). In other words, the complexities, disruption and avoidance of binaries inherent in queer theory (Marinucci 2016) are being reflected in a changing lexicon. Although language change may lag behind social change, social media may be triggering the creation and accelerating the spread of new words (Burridge and Bergs 2017, 28).

The breaking down of gender binaries is also visible in everyday social media posts and debates. A gendered set of pink or blue fridge magnets to help children with spelling led to online criticisms of sexism, whereas it might have gone unnoticed in previous decades (Cameron 2017). Similar evidence of changing attitudes is illustrated by an example from Twitter. A father posted an image of his son wearing pink and orange shoes, with the comment: “Our 3 year old son chose these shoes today. Our first reaction was to tell him they

were girl's shoes and then realised how ridiculous that was. I think he looks great!" (Youles 2020).

WOTYs Reinforcing Gender Difference

Increasing recognition of gender neutrality or gender fluidity is, however, not the only aspect of social attitudes related to gender reflected in neologisms. A contrasting theme apparent through the investigation of WOTYs is the naming of behaviours associated with one gender. Many neologisms are based on gendered lexemes such as 'man', 'mum' and 'bro' (Foubert and Lemmens 2018, 3–4). Some gender-related neologisms thus reinforce gender differences between men and women, such as 'man cave' and 'man-flu', often appealing to stereotypical characteristics (Foubert and Lemmens 2018, 11–12). Two examples in the WOTY lists are 'Mummy Porn' (Collins Dictionary 2012), a term coined to describe erotic romance fiction such as 'Fifty Shades of Grey', published in 2011; and 'Dadbod' (Collins Dictionary 2015), an untuned male physique, considered attractive as a sign of a man relaxed about their appearance. The morphology of 'dadbod' shows creativity in the blend of 'dad' and 'body', affectionately abbreviated to 'bod'. Another word in a similar vein is 'lumbersexual' (Macquarie Dictionary 2015) to refer to an urban male who dresses in rugged outdoor clothing such as checked shirts, jeans, boots and sporting a beard stereotypically associated with a lumberjack. Such terms relating to fashion trends are used in a humorous way, perhaps reflecting a lighter aspect of the WOTY lists.

WOTYs Critiquing Gender-Associated Behaviours

Naming undesirable behaviours can lead to them being discussed and thus made more visible online and offline, potentially instigating change by making the behaviours socially unacceptable. This includes some neologisms with man- as the first element (Foubert and Lemmens 2018, 21). Being able to give an experience a name is useful as "you do not have to explain the experience in phrases developed from scratch" (Mills 2008, 86). Three particular examples illustrate this. The first example is 'manspreading' (Collins Dictionary 2015), a practice which became viewed as a public order issue (Lutzky and Lawson 2019, 3). For example, a New York Transit Authority campaign in 2014 featured an image of a male figure sitting in a subway train with legs spread wide, taking up several seats, while other passengers stood. The slogan used was "Dude, stop the spread please. It's a space issue" (Jane 2017, 465). Mainstream awareness and institutional support could be seen as success for feminist social media activism directed against the practice (Jane 2017, 468). However,

the formation of neologisms, with the man- element in the blend assuming that only men behave this way, led to claims that the terms are sexist by essentialising men (Lutzky and Lawson 2019, 3), giving rise to counter-responses from men's rights activists and antagonistic debates (Jane 2017, 471).

'Mansplaining' (Macquarie Dictionary 2014) is a second example of the critiquing and naming of disempowering practices through the creation of a new blend, in this case of 'man' and 'explaining'. Rebecca Solnit has described how her 2008 essay "Men explain things to me" went viral: "I had written about my own experiences and perceptions, and they had turned out to have a lot in common with other women's experiences and perceptions" (Solnit 2020, 219). An anonymous comment on a website coined the word 'mansplaining', which quickly caught on, exists in many languages, and is often attributed to Solnit herself, although she did not coin the actual word. 'Mansplaining' is also an example of how one neologism can spawn others, as the element -splaining has taken on meaning of its own and become attached to other words. For example, Thorne includes 'coronasplaining' in his glossary of Covid-19 lexis, defining it as "purporting to explain aspects of the coronavirus-induced crisis, particularly to those who understand it better than the explainer" (Thorne 2020). Although Thorne's definition is gender-neutral, the question arises as to whether 'coronasplaining' has subtle gender undertones due to the origins of the -splaining element.

'Glass cliff' is a third example of the making visible of disempowering or discriminatory practices, revealing that they continue to exist. This WOTY, shortlisted by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016 (Oxford Languages, 2016) is a compound of two existing words. It was coined by Michelle Ryan and Alexander Haslam to describe the phenomenon whereby women are placed into leadership positions with greater risk of failure, extending the twin metaphors of the 'glass ceiling' (where women are prevented from gaining leadership positions) and the 'glass elevator' (where men accelerate into leadership) (Ryan and Haslam 2007, 550).

Online Social Activism Through Coinages and Hashtags

The use of new words combined with hashtags (e.g. #manspreading and #mansplaining) forms part of the socio-political activism given new opportunities by social media platforms such as Twitter (Murthy 2013; Hill 2013; Edwards 2014). Hashtags are vital to the easy organisation, circulation and finding of content (Lupton 2015, 11). The examples discussed thus far showed how neologisms may gain the reach needed for them to feature as WOTY by being used as hashtags. Moreover, a powerful hashtag can itself become a WOTY, with the

#MeToo hashtag becoming Macquarie Dictionary's WOTY winner in 2018 (as well as featuring in other dictionaries' shortlists), after its rapid spread through collective solidarity by those who had experienced sexual assault or harassment. Solnit likens the #MeToo movement to a dam breaking: "The rise of social media and the plethora of new online forums created space for many more voices, and these amplified individual stories brought their own testimony to the conversation, and fortified the diagnosis and the need for change" (Solnit 2020, 225).

The WOTYs relating to gender illuminate characteristics of contemporary online feminist activism. WOTYs such as 'manspreading', 'mansplaining', '#MeToo', and 'glass cliff' reveal the rallying around common goals, which could be said to reflect a shift from being to belonging, and a sense of identification with others (Ehlers 2016, 359). They illustrate the concept of "affective solidarity" (Hemmings 2012), with the collective emotional experience of being caught up in and feeling part of a movement that feels significant (Liljeström 2016, 27). Finally, the use of WOTYs as hashtags (or a hashtag becoming a WOTY) reflects how cyberspace is "a space to establish and support a physical community" (Pilcher and Whelehan 2017, 26).

Intersections of Gender, Class, and 'Race'

The Covid-19 pandemic was a catalyst of language change during 2020, as Oxford Dictionaries explained in their justification for not selecting a single WOTY for 2020. Instead they produced a report on the "phenomenal breadth of language change and development during 2020" (Oxford Languages 2020, 6). However, not all the language changes focussed on Covid-19. For example, Oxford Dictionaries included the term 'Karen' in their list of 'Words of an unprecedented year'. The global Black Lives Matter protests saw a surge in usage of words relating to racial inequality, racism, and activism. 'Karen' became used as a generic derogatory name for a white woman behaving in a stereotypically racist or discriminatory manner (Oxford Languages 2020, 30). 'Karen' was also listed in Macquarie Dictionary's 2020 WOTY shortlist, with the extra elements in its definition of 'middle-class' and 'often of generation X' (Macquarie Dictionary 2020, 13), thereby adding class and age to the Oxford Dictionaries' emphasis on gender and 'race'. The intersection between gender, age, class and 'race' had already been apparent in Oxford Dictionaries' WOTY shortlist 2018 selection of 'gammon': a derogatory term for an older middle-class white man, whose face becomes flushed in anger, usually when expressing right-wing political opinions (Oxford Languages 2018).

Conclusion

To conclude, studying WOTY reveals how language is constitutive of complex social change, something that is reflected in the evolving lexicon of the English language. New words are increasingly spread on social media, and this wide reach may also play a role in changing social attitudes. Analysis of the gender-related WOTY illuminates the tensions between disrupting gender binaries while at the same time naming and uncovering oppressive gender-associated behaviours. The annual publication of dictionaries' WOTYs may be greeted with media hype and occasional controversy about what counts as a 'word', yet it also provides a serious insight into changes in social attitudes, ways of life, and language in an online world.

Bullet Point Summary

- The 'Words of the Year' phenomenon both reflects and amplifies new words and the associated concepts, including those related to gender.
- 'Words of the Year' illustrate how changes in language use reflect social change and to some extent advance it.
- Digital technologies and social media have encouraged the spread of new words, contributing to changing social attitudes to gender.
- People are active agents in language change, describing and naming gender-related social phenomena.
- New words may fill linguistic gaps but are also characterised by creativity and linguistic playfulness.

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