Prudes versus sluts
An analysis of how attitudes are expressed through colloquial terminology

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Abstract

This paper performs a corpus-based critical discourse analysis on the terms “vamp”, “slut”, “prude” and “spinster” and how they are used in context from the 1920s to the 2000s. They were categorized according to what attitudes were connected to them, positive, neutral and negative. An interest was also taken in what attributive adjectives were used in context with each term. The results showed consistent negative attitudes towards “prude” and “spinster”, while the attitudes towards “Vamp” and “slut” were mixed with negative and positive.

Keywords

Critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, historical sociolinguistics, attributive features
1 Introduction

The 20th century was a century full of social change and development. A recent collaborative study by linguist Tony McEnery and historian Helen Baker combined corpus studies and historical sociolinguistics to examine language used to talk about prostitution in the 17th century (McEnery and Baker, 2017), and Minna Nevala and Marianna Hintikka did a similar study (2009). However, it is hard to find studies on this topic in more recent times. The 20th century started out a sexist society, where women did not have the right to vote, and ended with men and women with equal legal rights (Encyclopedia.com 2017). One of the many things that changed during this century was society's relationship with sexuality (Czuzka 2000). Laws were altered, and or disposed of, and birth control became more commonplace and accepted by the public.

Given these drastic societal changes, it is interesting to examine if it is possible to see these legal changes reflected in everyday language from the time they occurred. H. Baker, McEnery, and Nevala and Hintikka could analyze the attitudes people had towards prostitutes, and this study will look at attitudes in the 20th century against women's sexuality in general.

This lead me to look into colloquial words from the early 20th century. This choice was made due to the informality of colloquialism, which more accurately represents contemporary attitudes. In order to examine authentic language use from the 20th century, I used the Corpus of Historical American English, COHA, to see each chosen term in context as well as the frequency of usage throughout the century. However, given the informal and non standard status of most terms, there were not collections of all of them in the corpus. Two words which are more historically connected and represented in
the corpus are “vamp” and “spinster”. Outside of these, I elected to include two more terms who are commonplace to hear today, but are not inherently modern words either, “slut” and “prude”.

These four are interesting due to their contrasting definitions. “Vamp” is a noun defined as a “woman who intentionally attracts and exploits men”, and a “slut” is “a woman of a low or loose character” (Oed.com, 2017). The other two are from the opposite end of the spectrum, a “spinster” is a “woman still unmarried beyond the usual age for marriage”, and a “prude” is “a person who has or affects an attitude of extreme propriety or modesty, esp. in sexual matters” (Oed.com, 2017).

This study will cover the years 1920 to 2009, and will include excerpts of each term from each decade for analysis. Methodology will closely follow Nevala and Hintikka's study “Cider-Wenches and High Prized Pin-Boxes: Bawdy Terminology in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century England” (discussed in more detail in section.2.2). This is due to the similarity in topic, with the exception of time period. Their study looked into terminology used for prostitutes, whereas this is not, but the results their study produced were interesting and I aim to investigate if similar features can be found in more recent language as well.

This study will focus on frequency change in the usage of the terminology, as well as how they are used in context and what attitudes towards female sexuality can be drawn from them. The aim is to discuss not the attitudes themselves in great detail, but to shed light on how they are expressed through one word with only few attributive features attached.
2 Background

Here I will present previous relevant research on the topic of both history and CDA as a tool of language analysis. Section 2.1 offers an overlook on the sexual history of the U.S to contextualize this paper, and section 2.2 will focus on critical discourse analysis as presented by Teun A. van Dijk in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (2005), and look at corpus based studies. A particular paper of interest is Minna Nevala and Marianna Hintikka's study on the lexical field of prostitution in 17th and 18th century England (2009). Despite different terminology, time period and country, their study sheds light on issues I can use in my own.

Andrew Hardie and Tony McEnery presents in their article “On two traditions in corpus linguistics, and what they have in common”, the two camps of corpus-based linguistics (2010). Some consider it a methodology to be applied on various fields of research, while other deems it a sub-field on its own (2010:386). This paper will simply use corpora as a method and not theoretical framework, and it will therefore not be discussed in this section.

2.1 A century of social change

The 20th century was a century of rapid changing society. In the beginning of the century a person could be arrested for simply publishing a text about contraception (Czuzka 2000:15), and ninety years later anyone looking for information had an ocean of options on information from schools, the internet, and organizations (2000:18). The 1920s has been called “a revolution of manners and morals”, and sex became prominent in advertisement of mundane things such as Listerine (2000:15-16). The Great
Depression did bring about a more conservative view on life again, but anti-contraception policies were still turned over and condoms were available almost everywhere (2000:16).

With World War II came also a change in the sexual landscape of America, resulting in icons such as Rosie the Riveter, pinup girls and Betty Grable. Towards the end of the decade *The Kinser reports* were published, which “brought sex out of the bedroom and into the public discourse” (2000:16). In the 50s, Hugh Hefner rejected sexual limitations and published the first issue of *Playboy*. With more and more publications concerning sexuality, laws were changed and the Supreme Court resolved that “sex and obscenity are not synonymous” (2000:17). In the 60s, with the invention of the birth control pill and the scientific research stating that women's desires were equal to men's, came a sexual revolution. The U.S government showed its support in the social changes, and the Office of Education promoted family-life and sexual education (2000:17).

In the 70s, abortion was legalized and homosexuality was removed from the list of mental illnesses by the American Psychiatrist Association. Due to the AIDS epidemic in the 80s, interest in sexual education grew. However, there were still religious extremists forwarding anti-gay and abstinence-only policies in schools (2000:18). With the internet in the 90s came almost unlimited opportunities of communicating sexuality information all around the world. Early in the decade President Clinton passed a law funding schools to promote abstinence to students, which limited the effectiveness sex education throughout the nation (2000:18).

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis
This paper looks at the selected four terms from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis as presented here by Teun A. van Dijk. He writes that “critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately resist social inequality” (2005:352). CDA is looking at texts and talk, and analyzing how social power, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted in them. The purpose is to understand and expose social inequality and finally to resist it (2005:352). Scholars Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos and Tony McEnery did in this their study of how the word “Muslim” is used in the British press (2012).

CDA is much more of a different perspective in discourse studies, as opposed to a direction or specialization of it. This critical perspective can be found areas such as pragmatics, narrative analysis, sociolinguistics, to name a few (2005:352). van Dijk continues to say that CDA rejects the idea of a “value-free” science, and insists that scholarly discourse cannot be free of social influence. Rather than trying to remove scholarship from society they choose to study these relations and include them in scholarly practices (2005:352-353). This was also touched upon by P. Baker, et.al, saying “all social research is biased” (2012:274), and saying their own status as non-Muslims affected their evaluation of the usage of “Muslim” (2012:275).

van Dijk writes that CDA doesn't simply describe discourse structures, but explains them as well in relation to social structure and interaction. The focus is not on current paradigms, but rather on issues of social and political nature, and the critical analysis is usually multidisciplinary. Finally, critical discourse focuses on how discourse structures enforce, confirm or challenge relations of social dominance and power (2005:353).
Nevala and Hintikka (2009) collected data consisting of 13 pamphlets and two additional texts discussing prostitution, and they performed a critical discourse analysis on these samples to see what words were used to talk about prostitutes and what attitudes those words signaled.

They found in the 17th and 18th century, there was no such thing as “political correctness”, and words that, through a modern perspective, seem offensive and derogatory, were used as standard names for prostitutes. These were words such as harlots, whores, and strumpets, and in these old texts the words themselves did not carry any evaluative meaning. The tone of the writers were not reflected by the nouns they used, like they would be today, but rather by the adjectives preceding the nouns (2009:139).

They classified the adjectives immediately preceding the noun as attributive adjectives, and chose three different expressions of attitude categories; sympathetic, negative and neutral. The categorization was based mostly on the adjectives. Examples of these adjectives are terms such as cheap and filthy falling in the negative category, poor and try in the sympathetic one, and private and strange in the neutral one (2009:143-144).

Where there were no attributive adjectives they looked at the context in order to deduct tone, and if none was clear, single standing nouns were sorted as neutral (2009:143). This constant manual work of looking at context and not simply lexical definitions is important when trying to determine tone and attitude.

3 Aim and research questions

Given the drastic social changes throughout the century, it is interesting to see if this can be seen reflected in the language of the time, especially regarding
female sexuality. The aim of this paper is to perform a critical discourse analysis of the terms “vamp”, “spinster”, “slut” and “prude”, which are non-standard words used either for “overtly” sexual women or the opposite, women who remain single. This has resulted in two research questions:

- How are the words used in context at the time and how do they relate to each other?
- What conclusions about attitudes towards female sexuality can be drawn from these differences and similarities?

4 Method and data

The data for this study is collected from the online Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), which consists of more than 400 million words and covers the period from the 1810s up until the first decade of the 2000s. As this study focuses on more recent history, each term was searched and data was collected from the year 1920 to 2009. The data shows the frequency of the word per decade, what kind of content they are collected from, fiction, magazines, newspapers and non-fiction, as well as the frequency of content per decade (Corpus.byu.edu, 2017).

Given the uneven number of texts per word per decade the raw frequencies (the exact number of instances of hits), can provide an inaccurate representation of the times. Therefore, you look at the standardized frequencies (hits per million words), so that the numbers can be accurately compared and evaluated (Lindquist, 2009:41-42). In the case of “vamp”, there are synonyms found in the results, and so it was necessary to prune the
corpus. I had to look at each instance and rule out any false hits, and then recalculate the standardized frequency (Weisser, 2016:76).

The second part of the study is an in-depth analysis of how each individual term was used in context and what attributive features can be found in coalition with each individual term. The COHA corpus provides extended context on each hit. There, you are given access to the paragraph the term is from in the original text, which gives you the opportunity to find attributive features and the impression of tone in the text.

5 Results

5.1 Frequency results

In this section results are shown for how frequent the terms have been used since 1920s. Each term is looked over in its own subsection which covers the three things covered above in section 4.
5.1.1 Vamp

In total there are 129 instances of the term “vamp” in the corpus, with 118 of them occurring in 1920s and forward. It was the most in use in the 1920s, and then sank drastically and stagnated with only minor changes between the 1940s and 1970s, and embarked on a drastic rise of usage again.
This figure shows how vamp appears mostly in Fiction in the corpus. 67\% of the data is collected from Fictional texts and 26\% from Magazines. This was expected, given the informal status of the term it would not likely be used in texts not aiming to capture everyday speak. When it appears in magazines, it is often in short stories published in magazines.
Similar to how “vamp” was used more frequently in the beginning of the 20th century, and later 20th and early 21st century, Fiction is the main source of instances. However, during the stagnating period of the 40s to the 70s, Magazines were the ones printing content featuring “vamp” more frequently. As you can see above in figure 3, it is the fictional genre that has the most impact on the frequency results of “vamp”. Magazines do not experience major changes in frequency and remains somewhat level in amount of texts featuring “vamp”. It is Fiction that fluctuates on a larger scale and has a much larger impact on the corpus in regards to this term.
5.1.2 Spinster

“Spinster” appears a total of 924 times in the corpus, whereof 499 are from the relevant decades for this research. As you can see in figure 4, “spinster” appears more frequently than “vamp” and is used less and less decade by decade, but still on a higher frequency than “vamp”. In the 1960s, it went up again a bit more in usage, only to go down again next decade and it continued to sink until hitting a low point in 1980. From there on it has turned a slight upward trend.
When it comes to source content, “spinster” is most frequently found in the Fiction category. 69% is Fiction, with Magazine being the second largest category at 25%. Non-fiction here is more prevalent than in “vamp”, taking up 6%, and News is only 1% of the source content.

Figure 6
Fiction has consistently been the main producer of texts using the term “spinster” throughout the decades, only losing majority in 1980. Then Magazines held 44 % of the source content and Fiction were close behind with 41 %. Magazines in the 1920s were only at 3 %, and Fiction at 93 %, but expanded drastically by the following decade, occupying 34 % in the 1930s.

5.1.3 Prude

The usage of “prude” has fluctuated since the 1920s, with a total of 102 instances. With 0.62 % in the 20s it dropped to a third of that the following decade. It had a slight raise in the 40s, and raced its high point in the 1950s with 0.65 %. It proceeded to repeat the fall that happened in between 1920
and 1930 again. Since the 1960s it had grown again, except for a small dip in the 1980s. In the 2000s it sank with 3% from the previous decade.

**Figure 8**

Fiction is again the majority source content at 70%. Magazine occupies 24.5% and News and Non-fiction have 2.9% each.

As shown in figure 9 below, Fiction is the majority of source content in each and every decade. In 1930 it was the only content containing “prude” in the COHA corpus. Magazines had 38% in the 20s, and 15% in the 50s. From the 70s to the 90s it went from 23% to 36% in the 80s to 33% in the 90s. In the 2000s it only occupied circa 7%, smaller than Non-fiction with its 13%.
5.1.4 Slut

Figure 9

![Figure 9](image)

Figure 10

![Figure 10](image)
Unlike the previous three terms, the frequency chart for “slut” does not start with a high point. The lowest point is the first point in the 1920s and from thereon it grows, with smaller ups and downs, steadily upwards. From 1920 to 1930 it increased to a 1.38% frequency from 0.55. The second lowest point is in the 1960s and from the 60s and 70s it increases drastically to 2.77% in the 2000s.

Out of the 381 instances of “slut” in the corpus, 295, 77% are from Fiction. Magazines contain 18% of the instances, and News and Non-fiction have 1.5% and 2.9% respectively.
Text type frequency over time is dominated by Fiction, they have over 50% on each staple. Given the both informal and offensive nature of the term, this was not unexpected.

5.2 Context

This section looks closer at the context the words are used in. The subset analyzed here are taken from the first four listed contexts of each decade, unless two or more of them are from the same source, then those were skipped over in favor of text from a different author. This is to avoid over
representation of one author's viewpoint, and give a more nuanced depiction of the usage.

Similar to how Nevala and Hintikka did in their study, I looked at the sentences and the context each word appears in and placed them in one of three categories, Positive, Negative and Neutral. These categories reflect the judgment/attitudes toward the term in question, not whether the sentences and/or context is objectively positive or negative.

Attributive adjectives were not as crucial in this study, since the words themselves carry attributive meaning unlike back in during Middle English. However, the words can rarely be analyzed in a vacuum, even if they're informal, they're not always derogatory or complimentary. Context and attributive adjectives are still necessary in this analysis and will be looked at in depth in this section.

Section 5.2.5 discusses the attributive features of all four terms in order to get a more comprehensive look and enable possibilities of discussion of parallels.

5.2.1 “Vamp” in context

Given the lower number of words in each decade compared to the other words, there are not as many instances taken into consideration during the this sub-analysis. Out of the 25 texts I looked at, 9 fell in the Negative category. 7 were placed in Positive and 9 in Neutral.
In the 1940s, the raw frequencies included four instances of the word vamp, but only one was within the definition of “seductive woman”. In the 50s none of the six instances could be applied in this essay. As you can see on the first staple, vamp was used more in negative ways in the 1920s: “she was a detestable little vamp” (*The City of Fire*, fiction 1922), and then a more neutral attitude took place, and it proceeds to take on a more positive turn in the 1980s, 90s and 2000s, “a brilliant vamp is aching to be set free” (“Full-Witted”, magazine 2001).
5.2.2 “Spinster” in context

As previously observed,”spinster” can be found with far more frequency than “vamp”, and therefore there is enough data on every decade for analysis. Out of 36 different texts, 20 showed negative attitude, 10 neutral and 5 positive.

**Figure 14**

![Bar chart showing attitude distribution over decades](chart.png)

A negative way of talking about or to a woman staying single past normal age seems to have been consistent throughout the decades. As time and society progressed the few positive instances disappeared in favor of neutral and negative.

The positive example from the 1920s was how a woman was referred to as the “indomitable spinster”. Here, spinster itself is only used to tell the reader that the woman in question is an older unmarried woman, and the
attitude is interpreted from the attributive adjective “indomitable”. The author chose to connect this single woman with strength of character, which placed it in the Positive category.

The texts placed in the Negative category tend to focus on the unattractiveness of the spinster, “a plainfaced spinster” (*42nd Parallel*, fiction 1930), or her pitiful existence: “one eccentric spinster used to talk incessantly to her aged dachshund while wheeling it about in a baby carriage” (“Do Cities Really Need Dogs”, magazine 1970).

5.2.3 “Prude” in context

Unsurprisingly, the results on “prude”, show a vast majority of negative attitudes associated with the term. There are only two instances ruled as other than negative, two neutral ones.

The neutral ones were “My mom is a prude like that”, from “Hush in the heat” in 2000 (magazine), and “his affectionate if promiscuous wife harshly berates the prude” from the 1960s (*New Play on Broadway*, fiction). The first sentence is said by a teenage child about her mother's discomfort with others possibly thinking about going to the toilet. The way it is written, a short explanation without any further commentary or focus put on it, puts in the neutral category as there is no judgment from either text or characters. The second one contains negative attention given to someone deemed a prude, however it is presented in text as a poor reflection on the “promiscuous wife” rather than the prude, and there it was deemed neutral.

5.2.4 “Slut” in context
The term “slut” is defined as derogatory noun in the dictionary, and it was to be expected to find few, and possibly even zero, instances of slut being used in any manner than negative. Those expectations turned out to be true, resulting in all 36 analyzed terms being placed in the Negative category.

Certain attributive adjectives appear more than once and seems to a common way of enhancing the negative associations of the term, such as “little slut” and “filthy slut”. This is discussed more in depth in the following section.

5.2.5 Attribution features

When looking at the attributive features, mainly adjectives, a pattern seemed to emerge for each term. “Spinster” was often preceded by comments on old age, and non-flattering descriptions of physical appearance. A third type of attributive quality commonly seen is one shared with “prude”, and that is a comment on their character.

**Figure 15**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spinster</th>
<th>Prude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>aged, elderly (2), old</td>
<td>old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
<td>fat, plainfaced, plain, tanned, brittle, bleached, angular</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character</strong></td>
<td>austere, indomitable, perfect, eccentric, repressed</td>
<td>Miserable, ignominious, terrible, dreadful, damned, economic, humorless</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, “prude” is the one out of the four terms, with the least connected adjectives. It is also the term most characters within the stories use to defend themselves and their views, while simultaneously distancing
themselves from the prospect of being a prude. “I'm not a prude, but...” and variations thereof appear 12 times in the subset of 36 texts.

**Figure 16**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vamp</th>
<th>Slut</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Old young male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
<td>bleached voluptuous voluptuous</td>
<td>Black nigger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character</strong></td>
<td>Brunette, detestable little, you sly little, twice-divorced Valentino-age, seductive, man-consuming, impenetrable, Trotskyite lady, stage, the ultimate, victimized, Russian, Poor motherless, brilliant, drama</td>
<td>Dirty (2), ornery, sordid enough,little (4), American movie, hateful little, whorish, The Bank [Slut]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both “vamp” and “slut” tends to be connected to, and proceeded by judgments on their character and person far more often than physical appearance or age. “Vamp” has a mix of both negative and positive connotations with their adjectives, whereas “slut” has exclusively negative. As mentioned in the previous section, “slut” is often likened to something dirty, for example “dirty slut” or “sordid enough slut”. Depending on exactly what definition the author had in mind, “sordid” could both be a comment on the perceived immoral and dishonorable actions of the woman in question, or her dirtiness (Oed.com, 2017).
6. Discussion

In the beginning of this paper two research questions were presented. This section will discuss the results with the objective to answer those questions. The first RQ is mostly answered in the results section, consequently the focus here will be mostly on the second one: “what conclusions about attitudes towards female sexuality can be drawn from these differences and similarities?”

“Slut” and “prude” were used extensively in negative contexts. Despite being on opposite ends of a spectrum, they are both undesirable labels to be connected to. There are also little to no change in these attitudes over time.

“Prude” did reduce in usage in the 1930s, a decade where conservative values again were in fashion after the Roaring Twenties (Czuzka 2000:16), however it also sank in the 60s, which did not have this conservative wave (2000:17). There appears to be no clear correlation between the frequency of “prude” and the conservative or liberal waves gaining momentum over the course of the century.

Interestingly, the usage of “slut” took a rapid turn upwards in the 70s to the 2000s. It is possible this is related to the increase of abstinence-only policies in schools during the 80s and 90s (2000:18). Given the polarity of the sex positive movement versus the conservative resistance, if it should be called that, could lead to both an increase in sexual activity as well as that activity being shamed. However, the data does not show the age demographic of the users of these terms, and so it cannot be said for certain that it is related to school and education.

“Spinster” has both differences and similarities to “prude”, as they both are connected to being boring and stiff. However, the perception of what
a spinster is seems to be more varied than a prude. Being an unmarried woman does not necessarily translate to a direct view of personality as it does with “prude”, as there could be multiple reasons for never marrying. Attributive adjectives connected to “spinster” tends to project an image of someone outside the norm in various ways. They are unattractive, or eccentric or even indomitable.

The only term showing real difference in both usage frequency and attitudes is “vamp”. When it was most frequently used it was predominately negative, and when it occurred in more neutral contexts it decreased rapidly in usage. The fact that it increased again, and this time with more positive connotations is interesting.

As society became more and more open in its attitude towards sexuality, a woman being in control of her sexuality, and being able to use it to get her way, was viewed as a thing to almost admire. This line is collected from a text from 1977: “now, if she had been beautiful, they might have thought she could vamp him into telling” (Spell for Chameleon, fiction). Here vamp is used a verb, and it is presented as a skill beautiful girls can use and it is not a negative thing.

Then how come “slut” is still hurled at women in texts from the second half of the century? Why has one of these terms of similar meaning changed while the other has not? Looking at the consistent negative attitudes towards “prude” and “spinster” you can conclude being too restrictive sexually is deemed a bad thing by society, no matter the decade. However, in the case of overtly sexual women, it is more blurred and further research on the topic is needed.
7. Conclusion

To conclude, in regards these four terms, there are difficulties to see extensive change in attitudes over the 20th century. Based on the results of this study, being a too sexually repressed person is seen as a negative thing throughout the century. An apparent connection can be observed, between remaining unmarried and a lack of physical appeal, as well as an outsider status following spinsterhood.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, by the change seen in “vamp”, there appears to be progress in the way people view women in control of their sexuality and are connected to more positive attributive features. However, this is not observed in the case of “slut”, which is consistently used as a derogatory term from the 1920s to the 200s, and is growing rapidly in usage frequency despite the increasingly more liberal landscape of society.

However, this is a study on a small scale, and the results do not necessarily represent the issue of language and attitudes towards sexuality in general. Further studies on either simply one of these terms, or larger studies with more overarching terms are encouraged, and this is a topic I, myself, aim to look further into in the future.
References


