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SEMANTIC MEANDERINGS OF QUEEN IN LEXICOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: A lexeme typically conveys a variety of senses. This depends on its actual semantic structure, involves presupposed meanings as well as embraces conversational and situational implicatures. The meaning of a lexeme is also determinated by the context, the situation of its use and the knowledge of the user of a particular language. Hence, the information provided by a particular work of reference is twofold in its nature - semantic and pragmatic. Accordingly, the main objective of the paper is to investigate the semantics and usage value of the lexical item QUEEN throughout the development of the English language.

Key words: lexicography, dictionary, label, usage, diasystematic information

Introduction

In order to reach the goal of the paper, we shall employ a system of notational conventions. To be more specific, in the account proposed in the following – in order to show the thematic area where a given noun is located – we shall habitually employ <FIELD LABEL> which will be primarily aimed to formalise such ideographic details as <ANIMALS>, <MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS>, <WEAPONS>, etc. At the same time, we shall distinguish such labelling categories as <CURRENCY LABEL> that is meant to encode such peculiarities of lexical items and their meanings as, for example, being <OBSOLETE>, <OLD-FASHIONED> and <RARE>. Apart from this, we shall distinguish the type of label termed <USAGE LABEL> intended to represent such features of usage of individual lexical items as <OFFENSIVE>, <HUMOROUS> or <DISAPPROVING>. Dialect peculiarities acquire the form of <REGIONAL>

labels, as for example, <BRITISH ENGLISH>, <AMERICAN ENGLISH>. Finally, what shall be referred to as <STYLE LABEL> is aimed to accommodate such peculiarities of style as, for example, <INFORMAL>, <FORMAL> or <COLLOQUIAL>.

One of the topical issues investigated in current linguistic research is the problem of axiological value of lexical meaning. Apart from the labels listed above, we shall also employ yet another convention that serves to render and formalize the axiological characteristics of female-specific words analysed here. As shown in, among others, Kleparski (1990), Kochman-Haładyj and Kleparski (2011), in the history of English female specific words have been particularly prone to undergo the process of meaning degeneration which is realized in different ways, and – therefore – different types of negative axiological content may be distinguished, such as, for example, socially laden elements, behaviorally and morally pregnant values. To the best of our knowledge, no attempt to account for this side of lexical meaning has been ventured in lexicography. Hence, to mark and formalize this aspect of content information we propose to put to use <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL>, which – in the case of language material analysed here - is most frequently realized as <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: SOCIALLY (NEG.)> or <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: MORALLY (NEG.)> with yet another possibility that – during the history of one and the same word – both socially negative and morally negative elements appear, if not at the same period than at two different points of time in the history of the word.

What follows should be treated as a contribution to the ongoing lexicographic discussion. Although the labelling system proposed here should in no way be looked upon as a finished product, but rather a proposal open to further scholarly amendment and refinement, it is our strong belief that that the system proposed here may successfully be employed both in lexicographic theory and practice. In proposing our account we have chiefly relied on the information provided by the following sources: Online Etymological Dictionary (OED), Word Origins (WO), Dictionary of the English Language (DEL), An American Dictionary of the English Language (ADEL), Word Histories and Mysteries (WHM), The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms (AHDI), A Dictionary of Rhyming Slang (DRS), Slang Down the Ages (SDA), An Encyclopedia of the Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-Speaking World (ESHOPFES), Womanwords: A Dictionary of Words about Women (WDWW), A Dictionary of Euphemisms and other Doubletalk (DED), Slang and Euphemism (SE), Dictionary of Contemporary Slang (DCS), Sex Slang (SS1). We strongly believe that in order to provide an in-depth description one needs to resort to as many lexicographic works as it is only possible, both ancient and modern, synchronic and diachronic, covering a variety stylistic angles and regional language variants.

Etymology and semantics of queen

Some early lexicographic works, such as, for example, ADEL (1828), take no stand as to the roots of the noun in question. Interestingly enough, when we turn to Johnson's DEL (1785) we realize that the exact sense of the noun is defined there as 'the wife of a king; a woman who is sovereign of a kingdom' and, therefore, we gain very early evidence to mark the noun with <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: SOCIALLY POSITIVE>. At the same time, queen is also documented as a verb, meaning 'to play the queen', and in this particular case the verb should be marked as <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: SOCIALLY NEGATIVE>. According to the OED, the word discussed here has its ultimate roots in Proto-Germanic. More specifically, when we consider other lexicographic sources, such as WHM (2004) we find that queen is the descendant of Old English noun cwene, while the Germanic shape of the noun is reconstructed to have been *kwen-o, 'woman, wife'. The lexical item is a cognate with, among others, Old Saxon quān 'wife', Old Icelandic kván 'wife' (in poetry) 'queen'. Along similar lines, although earlier traces of the word are found already in Anglo-Saxon texts, WO (2005) informs us that present-day English queen goes back to prehistoric Indo-European *gwen-'woman' (cf. Greek guné 'woman'), Persian zan 'woman' (from which English gets zenana 'harem'), Swedish kvinna 'woman' and the now obsolete English quean 'woman'. Similarly, Mill's WDWW (1989) speaks in favour of the Indo-European origin root reconstructed to have been *gwen 'woman'. From this root the Greek word used in the sense 'woman' is gune, gunaikos, and this yielded English words gynaecology, androgyene, misogyny, etc.

On the whole, one may say that over 1000 years of its presence in English the various senses of *quean* shifted from 'woman', woman of high position' to 'wanton woman', before being transferred to a the male-specific context. In its very earliest use in Old English *queen* (or *cwēn*, as it then was) denoted the wife of a man of particular distinction, and usually the wife of a king. It was not long before it became institutionalized in the socially positively loaded 'king's wife', and hence 'woman ruling in her own right'. According to the *OED*, the noun was used originally in the sense 'a woman, especially a noblewoman; a wife, esp. of an important man'. Even at the Anglo-Saxon stage, the noun was not the usual term to express the sense 'woman' or 'wife'; but rather it was used in this sense only in poetry. Our discussion prompts us that one is justified to postulate here <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: SOCIALLY POSITIVE>, but also, stylistic marking formalized as <STYLISTIC LABEL: POETICAL/LITERARY> is clearly justified.

So, when we view the problem from a purely diachronic perspective, we come to realize that in the history of English one may speak about the existence

¹ Especially, as shown by the 19th century dictionaries (see *DRS* 1975), at that time *queen* denoted chiefly 'a slurt, or worthless woman, a strumpet'.

of several lexical manifestations of *QUEEN*. First, there is the nominal form *QUEEN I* the various applications of which have been sketched in the foregoing and all these senses bear the <FIELD LABEL: HUMAN>, the central sense of which refers to adult female human species, and this realization of *QUEEN* forms the main target of our enquiry. Secondly, there is the *QUEEN 2* of an extended usage 'of things' that is used in the sense of 'something regarded as supreme, especially as 'the finest, most outstanding, or most beautiful, of its kind'. In terms of the evaluative markings adopted here the noun comes to be marked with the <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: SOCIALLY POSITIVE>.

At the same time, there is evidence that allows us to speak of the existence of *QUEEN 3*, which is used with reference to one of the major figures in the game of chess, in fact the most powerful chess piece belonging to each player, placed next to the king at the start of the game, and able to move in any direction along a rank, file, or diagonal on which it stands,² as well as cards.³

Further, the noun targeted here started to be employed as *QUEEN 4*, at the beginning of the 17th century in the insect-specific sense 'the reproductive female caste in social bees, wasps, ants, and termites, larger than the ordinary workers; an individual of this caste, one (or more) of which are normally present in each colony', which may be qualified as an extension of the Old English socially high-ranking human-specific sense 'wife of the monarch'. In later use there developed the generalized animal-specific sense that may be defined as 'the sole fertile female in certain other social animal colonies', the use that must be obligatorily marked with the label <FIELD LABEL: ANIMALS>.

Let us now go back to the nominal *QUEEN 1*, with various female-specific senses that shall be the subject to our scrutiny. As shown by the *OED*, its earliest records go back to Anglo-Saxon times,⁴ with the well-pronounced sense 'a woman, especially a noblewoman; a wife, especially of an important man', and the extension that may be defined as 'the wife or consort of a king'.⁵ Also, since the early OE times, the noun was frequently employed in the sense 'a female ruler of an independent state, people, etc., especially one who inherits the position by right of birth; a female sovereign'.⁶

 $^{^{2}}$ c1450 The *quene* or the fers. > 1992 Materially speaking Black is doing quite well with rook, bishop and knight for *queen* and pawn (the *OED*).

 $^{^3}$ 1408 The card in each suit bearing the representation of a *queen*, normally ranking next below the king and above the jack > 1575 There is 5 trumps beside the *Queene*. > 2006 He put all of his high cards on the left, so if he threw the third card from the left and it has a *queen* then you knew what the rest of them were.

⁴ OE *Cwen* mec hwilum hwitloccedu hond on legeð, eorles dohtor, þeah hio æþelu sy.

⁵ OE Adstitit regina a dextris tuis, in uestitu deaurato circumamicta uarietate: ætstod cwoen to swiðran ðire in gegerelan bigyldum ymbswapen misenlicnisse. > 2000 A garage to accommodate the two cars that had recently been provided for the King and *Queen*.

⁶ OE Hi mon hæt on Crecisc Amazasanas [read Amazanas], þæt is on Englisc fortende. Heora twa wæron heora cwena, Marsepia & Lampida wæron hatene. > 2005 Rabuka staged the first of

As evidenced in the historical lexicographic works, through the 16th century, the noun in question developed a novel meaning extension, especially visible in such contexts as *queen and country*, the semantics of which is to be interpreted as 'a female sovereign and her people, considered together as objects of patriotic allegiance'. At the same time, the noun is documented as being used 'with specification of the people, country, etc, ruled over by a queen or by the king to whom she is consort', as, for example, *Queen of Scots*, *Queen of France*, etc.'. 8

Apart from this, in historical lexicographic works, we come across a somewhat less positively loaded generalized sense that is defined as 'a female whose authority or pre-eminence is comparable to that of a queen' which most frequently forms a constitutive element of various of-phrases, such as Queen of glory, Queen of grace, Queen of heaven, etc.'.

Much earlier, because in the late 14th century, the noun in question is attested in the extended sense 'any of the goddesses of ancient religions or mythologies, frequent in such collocations as *queen of heaven*, *queen of love*, *queen of marriage*, etc.'. At the same time, in the late 14th century, the word appeared in the sense 'a fine and honourable woman; a woman surpassing all others in rank or excellence, most frequently employed as a term of endearment and respect'. 11

The two Old English words, that is *cwen* (c825), meaning both 'a female ruler' and' the wife of king consort', and *cwene* (c1000), meaning 'woman', provide one of the earliest examples of what in linguistic semantics has come to be known as radiation, defined as the development of more than one distinct sense from a common historical source. *WHM* (2004) stresses that the original sense of the word was by all means evaluatively neutal. Let us make a direct quote from the dictionary, which reads: "Once established, the pejorative sense of quean drove out its neutral senses, and especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was used almost solely to refer to prostitutes. Around the same time, in many English dialects the pronunciation of queen and quean became identical, leading to the

his two coups, resulting in the *Queen*'s removal as head of state and Fiji being expelled from the Commonwealth.

⁷ 1572 These now being the profites and frutes that your *Queene* and Countrey haue reaped and gathered of this Tree of mutation. > 2001 Any man or woman who has had to face the real possibility of dying for *Queen and Country*..should be entitled to due recognition from those he is employed to defend.

⁸ OE *Regina austri surget in iudicio cum generatione ista*: *cuen* suðdæles arises *uel* aras in dom mið cneorisso ðas *uel* ðys. > 1994 The *Queen* of Sheba went to pay homage to King Solomon accompanied by a dazzling entourage and piles of pressies.

⁹ OE Eala þu mæra [perh. read mære] middangeardes seo clæneste cwen ofer eorþan þara þe gewurde to widan feore. > 1990 The empress Theodora, who stands in state on the wall of San Vitale wearing a jeweled crown that was to be the model for the crown of Mary, Queen of Heaven.

 $^{^{10}}$ a1382 Pei make swete cakis to be *qween* of heuene & sacrifien to alien godis. > 1990 Ancient *queen* of wisdom, Hecate, Hecate, Old one come to us.

¹¹ 1385 Allas, myn hertes *queene*, alas my wyf! > 1991 And now if I dissolve my tears in dissipation, know, my *queen*, only you are to blame. My fragile heart will never be the same.

obsolescence of the latter term except in some regions" (*WHM* 2004). Hence, we are apparently justified to postulate the negatively coloured marking <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: MORALLY NEGATIVE> for what may be classed as morally pregnant use of the noun.

It is stressed in other lexicographic works, such as the WDWW (1989), that originally queen denoted high status, preeminence and a sphere of power, with connotations of regal and majestic status and behaviour. Hence, postulating the label <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: SOCIALLY POSITIVE> appears to be justified. A substantial modification occurred at the beginning of the 17th century when – particularly in such morphological derivatives as queen like or queenly – the noun acquired evidently negative connotations of haughtiness, and hence the label that is to be postulated for this secondary historical sense is <AXIOLOGICAL LABEL: SOCIALLY NEGATIVE>, What is in semantic literature referred to as sexual pejoration (see Kleparski 1900), affected the semantics of queen during the course of the 19th century, when the noun started to be used with evident sexist and/or sexual connotations in the sense 'girlfriend' of a female partner. Interestingly enough, in the third decade of the 20th century (1924) queen was first used in the male-specific derogatory sense 'an effeminate person', which in all likelihood was designed as a euphemism for a male homosexual, or more precisely 'the effeminate partner in a homosexual relationship'. Likewise, the editors of SE (1991) confirm that queen from the beginning of the 20th century in American English slang – has been used in the sense 'an effeminate male', or alternatively disparagingly in the sense 'an effeminate male homosexual, especially one who prefers virile men', as well as 'a type of male homosexual with specific preferences as to the types of lovers'. All of those recently developed male-specific senses must be marked with <USAGE LABEL: OFFENSIVE/DEROGATORY>.

Among others, Rawson's *DED* (1981) stresses that there is yet another use of the lexical item *queen* that has little in common with the noun *QUEEN 1*, the central sense of which is 'a male homosexual who plays the female part', but before that, *quean* developed the sense 'a bold or ill-behaved woman, specifically, a whore'. At that point of its history in English – although the noun is clearly associated with the field label <FIELD LABEL: HUMAN BEING>, it must be marked for its currency rate as <CURRENCY LABEL: OBSOLETE>. At the same time, the diminutive formation based on *queen*, that is *queenie* is used in the evaluatively loaded sense 'a prostitute'. ¹³

Dictionaries of current English air different views on the historical meanderings of *queen*. And so, for example, according to the editors of *ESHOPFES* (2006) both *quean* and *queen* have a complex and interwoven

¹² 1777 Here's to the flaunting extravagant *quean*. And here's to the housewife that's thrifty.

¹³ Rest a us *queenies* from them eight places up and down the street, we was left high and dry, cause they wasn't gonna open them places up no more.

history encapsulating the binary image of woman as contemptible whore and admired regent. The dictionary stresses that *quean* always denoted a woman of low class and has become a now obsolete synonym of *prostitute*, while *queen* has an ambivalent status, having maintained its royal meaning from Anglo-Saxon up to modern times, but also acquiring certain associations of prostitution and homosexuality. It is maintained by the editors of the dictionary that the confusion between the two words no doubt started with the evident similarity of origin, and was aggravated by the basic instability of spelling in Middle English. From this period *quean*, which originally meant simply 'a woman', became in the words of the *OED*, 'a term of disparagement and abuse'.¹⁴

	MED	CCAD	LDCE	CALD
QUEEN 1	1)'a woman who	1) 'a woman who	1) 'the female	1) 'a woman who
	rules a country	rules a country as	ruler of a	rules a country
	because she	its monarch'.	country', 'the	because she has
	belongs to a royal		wife of a king'	been born into a
	family'	2) <stylistic< th=""><th></th><th>royal family, or a</th></stylistic<>		royal family, or a
		LABEL: VERY		woman who is
	2) 'a woman who	INFORMAL> 'a	2) <usage< th=""><th>married to a king'</th></usage<>	married to a king'
	is married to a	woman who is for	LABEL:	
	king'	being very good	INSULTING>	2) <stylistic< th=""></stylistic<>
		at it.	<stylistic< th=""><th>LABEL: VERY</th></stylistic<>	LABEL: VERY
	3) 'a woman who		LABEL:	INFORMAL>
	does something		INFORMAL>	<usage label:<="" th=""></usage>
	very well'		'male	DISAPPROVING>
	4) HIGA CE		homosexual'	'any woman who is
	4) <usage LABEL:</usage 			considered to be the best at what she
	INSULTING>			does'
	STYLISTIC			does
	LABEL:			3) <usage< th=""></usage<>
	INFORMAL>			LABEL:
	INTORWAL/			DISAPPROVING>
	'an offensive			<stylistic< th=""></stylistic<>
	word for a gay			LABEL:
	man who the			INFORMAL>
	speaker thinks is			'a homosexual
	like a woman in a			man, especially an
	way he looks,			older man, whose
	talks or behaves'			way of behaving is
				noticeable and
				artificial'

Table 1. The present-day sense range of queen.

¹⁴ ca.1290: An olde *quene* ther was biside, strong hore and baudestrote [bawd].

Morphological and idiomatic potential of queen

In terms of its word formation potential, we observe that the human-specific noun analysed here has been relatively productive in the formation of a number of historically evidenced compounds, such as, for example, *drag queen* meaning 'a male transvestite; also a female impersonator', *queen it*, the verbal expression the sense of which may be defined as 'to act like a queen, domineer'. ¹⁵ This female counterpart of the male-specific *lord it over* was used by Shakespeare in *The Winter's Tale* (*AHDI*, 1997), (*SDA*, 2005). The former also documented in Modern English (see *DCS*, 2007), where we find that someone for whom the label *drag queen* is employed is a male homosexual who wears women's clothing. ¹⁶

Other formations with the noun *queen* as the compounding formant that are documented in DCS (2007) are closet queen the sense of which is defined as 'a homosexual who conceals his or her homosexuality'. 17 Let us stress that originally the term was first widely used in American English although its precise time and place of its etymology lie in obscurity. In terms of our system of label markings the noun requires to be marked as <USAGE LABEL: CONTEMPTOUS/DISSAPPROVING>. Apart from the compounds discussed earlier, there is the *curry-queen* compound, that is used somewhat disparagingly in the sense 'a gaymale who is attracted to South Asian partners', and hence postulating the label <USAGE LABEL: DEROGATORY> is certainly justified. One the basis of the language material given in DCS (2007) one must acknowledge other compound formations in English, namely drama queen, used in the sense 'a self-dramatising or hysterical person', which originally in the 1960s was applied by male homosexuals to their fellows while in the following decade the compound was adopted by heterosexuals and applied to women and, sometimes, to straight, as well as gay men. The spelling variant quean is the earlier spelling of queen meaning 'an effeminate homosexual', and the spelling coexisted with the variant spelling queen until the early 1960s when it virtually disappeared from the lexicon of English. As we have seen, the semantics of most of the existing queen/quean formations concentrates of queer sexuality in all its forms and manifestations. Apart from the various gay-specific senses, in presentday English, as evidenced by Dalzell and Victor's SS1, the word forms the constitutive part of the metaphorical compound queen bee used in the 'the manager of a homosexual brothel'. 18

¹⁵ She *queened* it over the family, treating her siblings like servants.

¹⁶ 1967 Kenneth Williams then gave a long portrait of a dismal *drag queen* writing a witty letter requesting employment.

¹⁷ Originally *closet queen* was part of underground gay terminology, and it became well known in the early 1970s when many previously secretive homosexuals decided to come out.

¹⁸ Customers call the *queen bee* and specify the male they want by physical characteristics and the length of time he is wanted.

Understandably, as recently emphasized by Ptaszyński (2010: 413), "the purpose of lexicography is to help people satisfy their information needs rather than describe language, the latter being the domain of linguistics." As far as the usage labels are concerned, the very idea of incorporating thus understood labels in the structure of lexicographic description is by no means a novelty, and it has been signalled in the literature of the subject, but – equally for a long period of time – lexicographers have faced the multitude of difficulties connected with the intricacies of the very shape and extent of the labelling system (see Ptaszyński, 2010: 411-412). One of the main reasons, as indicated in Atkins & Rundell (2008: 496), is that "many labels are umbrella terms that conceal a good deal of variation." What is more, the discussion concerning diasystematic information in dictionaries cannot be detached from the parameter formed by users' needs. It goes without saying that lexicographers, while making their decisions on usage restrictions should focus both on the profile of the intended dictionary user, as well as the type/purpose of the reference work they are compiling.

As mentioned by Jackson (1988:176), "[...] language learners, like all users of language, employ language in two functions: decoding [...] and encoding." Compilers of *EFL* dictionaries declare that special emphasis is placed on aiding the user in encoding correct and natural sentences in the target language (see Jackson, 1988:176). Although the field of lexicography has been developing at an unprecedented pace, there still remains the problem of the indispensable requirements that any lexicographical description will have to address if it is to be somehow satisfactory. The present study aims to shed some light on the way the lexical item QUEEN is used and, in particular, to determine its sociolinguistic value throughout the development of the English language.

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