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The Results of the Evolution of Language:

An Analysis of the Word *Bad*

Throughout history, change has proven to be inevitable. As time passes, changes in geography, technology, personal relations and even society occur. The changes occur at different rates but some are significantly evident and experienced by individuals as they age. Due to multiple generations coexisting at any given time, one of these changed, the evolution of communication can cause confusion and conflict to individuals within a society. This occurs with some words in the English language that have been molded and shaped by cultural influences causing, in some cases, individual words to attain new meanings. In cases such as the word *bad*, original definitions are still relevant today, however new contradictory definitions have been produced and adopted by segments in modern society. This has lead to confusion and miscommunication among many generations and cultures and has perplexed individuals when engaged in cross-culture and generational communications.

The word *bad* originated from the old-English word bæddel, meaning hermaphrodite or womanish man[[1]](#footnote-1). Used as a derogatory word, *bad* throughout history has maintained a negative connotation, until recently as some modern urban cultures have adopted and molded the term in their own way.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *bad* as “of poor quality or little worth”. In today’s society, most individuals use *bad* as a derivative of its original meaning, as a word with negative associations. In modern society, this is the most prevalent definition of the word and is also the definition, which most individuals are introduced at a young age. Children are introduced at an early age to the theory of “good versus bad” as they develop their senses and formulate their own opinions. At an early age, children are bombarded by media influences that feature superheroes and villains. They grow up with terms such as “bad guy” and using basic vocabulary to describe their opinions, such as “this tastes bad.” It is irrefutable that children use *bad* in accordance with either its Oxford English Dictionary definition or the Dictionary.com definition, which states that *bad* means “not good in any manner or degree”[[2]](#footnote-2).

Another field in society today that uses *bad* in the same context is the professional sector. Many professionals use *bad* to evaluate others. Sometimes this is not evident in direct communication as *bad* may be replaced with more formal or objective words such as poor, inferior or subpar. However one can evaluate the use of *bad* in either professional’s casual conversations or on casual media platforms. For example, the twitter account for the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) recently tweeted an article, written by their senior member Max Boot, entitled “How Obama Foreign Policy Went Bad After the Bin Laden Raid”[[3]](#footnote-3) which explores the flaws in recent foreign policy. The author uses the word *bad* as a synonym for poor or faulty.

The word *bad* has transmuted in modern social society to become an antonym of the original definition. The word is given a positive meaning in informal modern communications. Urban Dictionary states the definition of *bad* as “dope, good, tight[[4]](#footnote-4)”. It also states that as an adjective *bad* “describes a male/female appearance in a good way.”

Often the word is used as an adjective in the phrase *bad bitch*, which may appear to be an extremely derogative term. However to many young adults today, the phrase can be viewed as an accomplishment or positive status symbol. The positive version of *bad* is becoming especially popular in the music industry, specifically in the Rap and Hip-Hop culture. Rapper Webbie dedicated an entire song to the term in the 2005 song “Bad Bitch” in which he immortalizes the term through lyrics such as “can never tell a bad bitch a freak she too classy.[[5]](#footnote-5)” Similarly, and more recently, the rapper Tyga’s chorus of Gudda Gudda’s song entitled “Bad Bitches” states, “got a sign...bad bitches only[[6]](#footnote-6).” Thus conveying the message that being a woman whom is qualified to be a *bad bitch* is desirable and therefore a good thing. Artist Kanye West uses the term similarly in a surprisingly less vulgar way as he mentions the desire for this type of woman through lyrics such as “Can I have a bad bitch without no flaws[[7]](#footnote-7)” and “where the bad bitches, huh? Where they hiding” thus indicating that *bad bitches* are superior and more alluring than the average woman and alluring. In a 2012 twitter rant, West asked, “Is it okay to use the word bitch as long as we put BAD in front of it? Like you a BAD BITCH. Perhaps the word BITCH is now neither positive or negative. It is just potent and it depends on how it’s used and by whom?[[8]](#footnote-8)” West’s theory about the word bitch also applies to the word *bad*. As a modifying and descriptive adjective, bad is a potent word and has the power to convey internal feelings and opinions in word form. With such vast definitions, the meaning of *bad* is certainly dependent on who uses it and in what context.

Similarly confusing in itscontradictory is the term badass. Commonly used by a significantly larger audience than *bad bitch*, a badass is described as being “A person who defines supreme confidence, nearly divine ability and a frequent disregard for authority.[[9]](#footnote-9)” As an individual who exudes supreme self-confidence, this term refers to someone whom others aspire to be or are fond of. In this instance, once again the context of *bad* is positive.

Some modern industries that appeal to a large audience still refer to *bad* with its original definition. In the film community, the term is used in a more literal sense, as there is little confusion of what companies mean when they utilize the term *bad* in movie titles. The 2011 film *Bad Teacher*[[10]](#footnote-10) leaves little room for audience interpretation for the context of *bad* in this sense. Cameron Diaz’s character spends her time at work sleeping, drinking and getting high which most of the public would deem *bad*, as in unacceptable or of poor judgment for an elementary school setting.

In the television community one of the most successful shows of this generation, *Breaking Bad*, also utilizes a more literal definition of *bad* in its title. The creator of the show, Vince Gilligan, stated that the title means to “raise hell”[[11]](#footnote-11) or in other words, “to do bad”. The show also explores the line that separates, as used in noun form, the good versus the bad of modern society in humanity.

As the most confusing and yet simultaneously accurate definition of the word describes, *bad* is “The opposite of good. The opposite of bad.” The word bad is an evolving piece of the English language and has ever-changing definitions that will form and adapt throughout time. For now the conflicting and contradicting definitions have the potential to coexist in all realms of society and it is left up to the audience to focus on societal queues that use the proper meaning of *bad.*

Annotated Bibliography

*Dictionary.com,* s.v. “bad,” accessed September 21, 2014, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bad?s=t.

The dictionary.com definition provides an example of how the word is most commonly used in today’s society. This is important to know so one can understand the norm for comprehension of the word. This is also important because, if this is the most well-known definition of the word, it is most likely how individuals who may not be familiar with the English language will first understand the word or how a non-Anglophones will first experience this word. This source was crucial to my essay to prove that derivations of the original definition are still relevant today.

Kanye West, *Twitter*, September 2, 2012, accessed via Complex.com on September 21, 2014,

http://www.complex.com/music/2012/09/kanye-west-goes-on- twitter-rant.

Kanye West’s twitter rant introduced an interesting theory I had not explored earlier in my essay. In summary, he states that some words have evolved to a point where their definition and meaning is completely up to the rhetoric in which it is presented. Words, such as bad, have evolved and can be either positive or negative. He is explaining, essentially, that both the positive and negative definitions of a word can both be correct, and that is the way society is currently influencing language.

Kanye West, vocal performance of “Cold.1,” by Chauncey Hollis, James Todd Smith, Kanye West, Marlon Lu Ree Williams, recorded 2012, on *G.O.O.D. Music: Cruel Summer*, with DJ Khaled, Getting Out Our Dreams / IDJ Records.

I chose to include this lyrical excerpt because it states the desire for a certain type of person. It endorses the idea of a “bad bitch” being a positive title and a in significant relation to my thesis it proves that being *bad* has developing into something one strives for—It is a positive notion in the urban music culture. This is important in my essay because it supports my claim that the music industry has taken the word bad and has completely changed its definition, as we had previously known it.

Kanye West, vocal performance of “Power,” by A. Gardner, B. Bergman, F. Bernheim, J.P. Lang, Jeff Bhasker, K. Lewis, Kanye West, M. Giles, Peter Sinfield, Robert Fripp, recorded 2010, on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy,* Roc-A-Fella Records LLC.

This lyric was crucial to my essay because once again it idolizes women becoming *bad.*  It confirms as stated before that in today’s society, at least in this culture, men are looking for “bad bitches” and they are not the norm. Through inference, one can note that Kanye West is saying that *bad* women are rare and therefore should be adorned and cherished. This supports my claims that the urban music industry has decided to use the word *bad* to commonly mean good or desirable.

Lee Eisenberg and Gene Stupnits*. Bad Teacher.* DVD*.* Directed by Jake Kasdan*.* Culver City, CA*:* Columbia Pictures*,* 2011*.*

Including Bad Teacher was necessary to support the idea that both positive and negative definitions of the word *bad* co-exist in modern media society. The producers and writers mean bad in its literal sense, as the opposite of good—An idea that contradicts the way in which the music industry is choosing to utilize *bad.* Through the inclusion of this piece, I have offered a small rebuttal, stating that *bad* has only gained more meanings and not lost any.

Lily Rothman. “Breaking Bad: What Does That Phrase Actually Mean?” *Time Magazine*, September 23, 2013. Accessed September 21, 2014. http://entertainment.time.com/2013/09/23/breaking-bad-what-does-that- phrase-actually-mean/.

By providing the example of *Breaking Bad* I once again showed my audience that the original definition of *bad* does still exist and thrive in modern media. With even a small amount of background knowledge, one knows the main idea of the show is a teacher who gets cancer and decides to become a meth manufacturer to ensure he has provided for his family after his death. It is a noble idea from a well-respected man, however it blurs the line between “good and bad”. It explores and questions what makes someone good, or contrastingly bad, and our stereotypes about good and bad people. The show’s title, in theory, explores the multiple dynamics a word can have.

Max Boot, “How Obama Foreign Policy Went Bad After the Bin Laden Raid,” *Twitter,* September 26, 2014 (10:27 a.m.), https://twitter.com/MaxBoot/status/515508038170861568.

This tweet shows an example of how a verified twitter source uses the word *bad* in a casual, yet informative way. It proves the casual nature of social media, and also supports the theory that the word has maintained its original meaning. It proves that the more well-respected and well-known definition is the one political and business professionals use and recognize, which is important as it contrasts the way in which the music industry uses the word.

*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “bad,” accessed September 21, 2014, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/bad.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition was crucial to include in my research as it provided a basis for the origin of the word and how it is used in the English Language, not necessarily in the United States. It shows how the word is universally recognized and why. It was important to note how it is formally used and recognized so I could use this as a basis to contrast the evolution of *bad* to how it can be used today.

Tyga, vocal performance of “Bad Bitches,” by Gudda Gudda, recorded 2012, on *Gudda Grindin*, with Gudda Gudda, 2 Chainz, Big Kanaka – SoSouth.

I thought this was an interesting quote to cite from because it shows how *bad* can be used in the most vulgarly casual way. In a demented sense it shows the desire for someone *bad* and how it is an exclusive title. This quote is extreme but it shows individuals who may not be familiar with the way *bad* is used in the urban, hip-hop culture a raw introduction and I think the vulgar nature of the quote adds to its effectiveness as it explains the evolution of the word *bad*  to mean something desirable and good.

*Urban Dictionary*, s.v. “bad,” by ~Xo\_Sex-c\_Xo~, accessed September 23, 2014, http://www.urbandictionary.com/author.php?author=%7EXo\_Sex- c\_Xo%7E.

This specific definition of *bad* was important to the validity of my thesis as it shows that *bad* is an unrestricted phrase. It has the potential to be used to describe both genders and still works as intended. I thought this was also important to show the slight respect this quote conveys towards someone who is *bad* in this sense, as they say it is describing someone attractive.

*Urban Dictionary,* s.v. “bad,” by VAKI5, accessed September 23, 2014, http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bad&defid=216211.

I chose this definition of bad because it shows an individual who may be unfamiliar with modern culture and slang some informal synonyms for how *bad* is used in this sense and interchangeable words. I think this was important to include so the audience can get a sense of the vocabulary one who may use this word in the sense described has and other words that are culturally similar in present day.

Webbie, vocal performance of “Bad Bitch,” by Mouse, recorded 2003, on *Gangsta Musik*, with Lil Boosie, Thrill Entertainment LLC.

This lyric was important to prove the definition of *bad* being a “good” thing in the music industry as they compare being bad to being a freak, stating that a *bad bitch* is better, classier and more desirable than a freak. It states how the hip-hop industry and culture views the word *bad* in a positive way as it directly compares the word to something such as a freak, which holds a negative connotation. It is a clear example of the evolution of *bad* and how it can be paired with other words to prove influence or importance.

1. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “bad,” 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Dictionary.com,* s.v. “bad,” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Max Boot, *Twitter,* September 26, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Urban Dictionary, s.v. “bad,” 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Webbie, vocal performance of “Bad Bitch” 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tyga, vocal performance of “Bad Bitches,” 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kanye West, vocal performance on “Cold.1” 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kanye West, *Twitter*, September 2, 2012 via Complex.com on September 21, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Urban Dictionary*, s.v. “bad,” 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lee Eisenberg and Gene Stupnits*. Bad Teacher*. 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lily Rothman. “Breaking Bad” *Time Magazine*, September 23, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)