

The productivity of word-formation among selected Modern English synonyms of *prostitute* in an onomasiological method of research

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This paper aims at applying the onomasiological method of research proposed by Štekauer (1998, 2005) to the analysis of the synonyms of prostitute which date from the Late Modern English and Present-day English periods, with particular attention drawn to the level of productivity of word-formation in the formation of the synonyms of prostitute. Additionally, to make the picture as complete as possible, a sociolinguistic factor will be taken into consideration as a triggering force in the formation of euphemisms and dysphemisms in the field of PROSTITUTION.

Keywords: *word-formation, euphemism, productivity, prostitution, onomasiological theory*

1. Introduction

The part and parcel of sociolinguistic reality we live in is a multitude of language restrictions which have been imposed on human kind since time immemorial. The reason for this is that – regardless of the time period or the geographical location – people have always been warned against a certain taboo. As Allan and Burridge (2006: 8) put it,

humans are social beings and every human is a member of at least a gender, a family, a generation and – normally – also friendship, recreational and occupational groups. An individual's behavior is subject to sanction within these groups and by the larger community. [...] sanctions on behavior arise from beliefs supposedly held in common by a consensus of members of the community or from an authoritative body within the group.

The forbidden spheres in the lives of social communities, such as religion, death, illnesses, sex, body parts and bodily functions – to mention but a few – have obviously left their mark on the linguistic system of a given community. As Chamizo Dominguez and Sánchez Benedito (2005: 12) argue, “in our society, the last remaining taboo seems to be sex.” Hence, we may risk forwarding the assumption that the linguistic restrictions imposed on people communicating within the sphere of sex should have triggered the formation of a large number of lexical items to veil the shamefulness, embarrassment or, even, contamination associated with the more direct appellations.

2. The analytical framework

An ample starting point for our discussion on the productivity within the conceptual category PROSTITUTE is the so-called *triad of relations* (to use Štekauer's 2005 terms) between extra-linguistic reality (object to be named), speech community (coiners) and the word-formation component. As Štekauer (2005: 212) clarifies, “[...] each act of naming responds to a very real and specific *naming demand* on the part of a member (members) of *speech community*.” In the case of the synonyms of *prostitute* the underlying justification behind the formation of

an extensive number of lexical items in the history of English (between 80 as in Schulz 1975 and 530 as in Spears 1991) may be sought in the inherent society-grounded characteristic of human kind either to avoid unpleasant and/or offensive talk, or to use abusive and/or vulgar terms, depending on the circumstances of a specific conversational exchange. This taboo-euphemism relation is an overwhelming triggering force individuals use in order to name elements of their reality. Additionally, we must not forget that, as noticed by Halliday (1976: 571), anti-languages tend to be overlexicalised as members of an anti-society constantly seek for new ways to maintain their counter-reality and, more often than not, secrecy of their anti-language. In this way, it hardly comes as a surprise that there have been hundreds of synonyms of *prostitute* formed in the history of the English language. The *demi-monde* of fallen women is a form of anti-society being on the verge or completely outside the society, and as such their language and, also, the language describing the oldest profession is, at least partially, a type of anti-language.

More importantly, the afore-mentioned triad of relations mirrors the three principles which Štekauer (2005: 212-213) outlines along the following lines:

- 1) It lays emphasis on the *active role* of language users in the process of giving names to objects instead of presenting word-formation as an impersonal system of rules detached from the objects named and from language users.
- 2) The naming act is not a purely linguistic act. Naming units do not come into existence in isolation from factors, such as human knowledge, human cognitive abilities, experiences, discoveries of new things, processes, and qualities, human imagination, etc. [...] By implication, any naming act is necessarily preceded (or dominated) by a network of ‘objectively’ existing relationships. By implication, the naming act is a *cognitive phenomenon* relying on the intellectual capacities of a coiner.
- 3) It stresses a close interconnection between *linguistic* and *extra-linguistic* phenomena.

The triad in question is indubitably an indispensable facilitator in the description of elements or classes of our conceptual system and/or lexical resources. It goes without saying that the innate need of humans to name the reality around them leads to the formation of a whole array of actual words¹ frequently representing the same, sometimes highly specific and small, conceptual category. As Allan and Burridge (2006: 131) stress, “[...] names somehow encapsulate the essence of the name-bearer; the very fact which motivates taboos on naming.” Such is the case with the synonyms of *prostitute*, which seem to have been formed as a result of language users’ need to name members of the class of ‘women and/or men whose job is to engage in sexual activity in return for payment’. However, once a name is formed it gets tainted with the ‘dirty’ connotations, becomes taboo, and there emerges a need to form a new name, and the domino effect begins.

2.1 *The body of analytical data*

The aim of this paper is to analyse the productivity level of word-formation as a formative mechanism employed in the formation of the selected synonyms of *prostitute* dating from Late Modern English (L.Mod.E.) and Present-day English (Pres.E.).² The body of the analytical data includes such naming units³ as L.Mod.E. *night-walker*, *town-woman*, *town-miss*, *market dame*, *kennel-nymph*, *tomrig*, *molly*, *truly* and *high-flyer* and Pres.E. *loose fish*, *receiver-general*, *horse-breaker*, *soiled dove*, *white slave*, *yum-yum girl*, *working girl*,

pavement princess, street girl, bad girl, call girl, sex worker, sex care provider and fly girl, which were extracted from the *Historical Thesaurus of English (HTE)*. The analysis conducted also takes into account the word-formation heritage among the synonyms of *prostitute* which had entered the English lexico-semantic system before the advent of the Late Modern English period.

2.2 Word-formation heritage

As for the earlier stages of the history of English, one is also to observe how language users named the profession, which stereotypically earned the title of the oldest one. According to the *HTE*, such naming units as *forligerwif, myltestre, portcwene, beþæcestre, horcwene, firenhiçgend* and *synnecge* were formed in Old English (O.E.⁴). As for the naming units generated in the course of Middle English (M.E.⁵), they comprise *common woman* and *tickle-tail*. In sharp quantitative contrast, in Early Modern English (E.Mod.E.⁶) the act of giving a name to ‘women and/or men whose job is to engage in sexual activity in return for payment’ was both extensive and impressive. Such naming units were formed for women as *strange woman, public woman, street-walker, polecat, walk-street, night-shade, hackney-woman, fling-dust, night-trader, hackney-wench, hell-moth, public commoner, night-worm, Winchester goose, stewed strumpet, laced mutton, wagtail, huckster, twigger, waistcoateer, martail, occupant, community, doxy, harlotry* and, for men, *love-boy* and *ganymedean*. Since “a naming unit which falls within the scope of word-formation *must* be a structurally analysable *linguistic sign*, and the sign nature *must* also be an inherent feature of its constituents (Štekauer 2005: 214)”, all monemes and clippings (e.g. O.E. *hóre, cwéne*, M.E. *wench, slut*, E.Mod.E. *hack, drab, cat*) were left out of the scope of our discussion.

2.3 The conceptual and onomasiological levels

Let us now move to the conceptual level and draw the prototypical features of the class of ‘women and/or men whose job is to engage in sexual activity in return for payment’ by describing the logical spectrum, which in the case in question may be formulated along the following lines:

The motivating Object 1 is SUBSTANCE₁.
A SUBSTANCE₁ is Human.
The Human performs an ACTION.
The ACTION is the Human’s Profession (=Agent).
The Human is an Agent.
The ACTION concerns SUBSTANCE₂ (=Patient of Action).
The ACTION is based on a Service provided to SUBSTANCE₂.
SUBSTANCE₂ is a class of Clients.
SUBSTANCE₂ is a Patient of Action performed by SUBSTANCE₁.
The Clients are expected to pay for the Service provided.

(based on Štekauer 2005: 215)

As for the onomasiological level, it seems that out of the whole multitude of semes a different one – either more central or more peripheral – is selected to function as an onomasiological base denoting the class which is represented by the object, and together with a mark, which

specifies the base, they constitute an onomasiological structure (Štekauer 2005: 215-216). The onomasiological structure is then linguistically expressed at the onomatological level by means of the *Morpheme-to-Seme-Assignment Principle* (MSAP).

2.4 The application of the onomasiological theory

Taking into account five Onomasiological Types, as proposed by Štekauer (2005: 217-221), we may feel adequately equipped for the analysis of the plentitude of historical synonyms of *prostitute*. Let us start with the Onomasiological Type 1 (all three onomasiological structure constituents are present at the onomatological level), which is illustrated by the following example synonyms:

- | | | |
|-----|----------|-----------------------------------|
| (1) | | Location – Action – Agent |
| | E.Mod.E. | <i>street walk -er</i> |
| (2) | | Temporal Stative – Action – Agent |
| | E.Mod.E. | <i>night trade -er</i> |
| | L.Mod.E. | <i>night walk -er</i> |
| (3) | | Quality – Action – Agent |
| | L.Mod.E. | <i>high fly -er</i> |
| (4) | | Action – Agent – Quality |
| | Pres.E. | <i>receiv -er general</i> |
| (5) | | Patient – Action – Agent |
| | Pres.E. | <i>horse break -er</i> |
| (6) | | Result – Action – Agent |
| | Pres.E. | <i>sex work -er</i> |
| | Pres.E. | <i>sex care provid -er</i> |

Out of the first three synonyms of *prostitute* (examples in (1) and (2)) based on a metonymic contiguity pattern (LOCATION FOR PROFESSION and TIME OF ACTIVITY FOR PROFESSION) only *streetwalker* earned a permanent place in the English language and is still recorded in the lexicographic sources of the 21st century with the sense ‘prostitute’. Interestingly, out of the three items it was the naming unit *streetwalker* that was recorded as the earliest acquisition (1592 *HTE*)⁷ and both *night-trader* and *night-walker* were recorded later, 1629 (*HTE*) and 1670-1 (*HTE*) respectively. It is hard to escape the impression that there is a kind of analogy in the formation of *night-trader* and *night-walker* and their earlier synonym *streetwalker*.

As for the naming unit *high-flyer*, according to *ODO*, it means ‘someone who is successful academically or in business’, and semantically the word corresponds to the phrase *fly high*, which means ‘be successful’. Adding to that, as noted in Duda (2014b: 3), the conceptual metaphorical extension SEX IS TRADE which is mirrored in such linguistic expressions as *sell one’s body*, *buy love* or *get down to business*, we end up using the word *high-flyer* in the slang register in the sense ‘fashionable prostitute’ (late-17th c. → 19th c. and 20th c. Am. E; see, the *OED*, Partridge 1984 and Green 2003) or – to be more precise – a prostitute who is prosperous and is a successful “businesswoman” in the sex trade. Another metaphorically conditioned synonym, namely *receiver-general*, has been, according to the

OED and Partridge (1984), used in the sense ‘chief receiver of public revenues’ since the 15th century, and this literal meaning is still in use in some of the United States of America. The metaphorical extension SEX IS TRADE seems to have taken place at the outset of the 19th century when the actual word began to be employed in the sense ‘prostitute’ in slang register. As elucidated further by Green (2003), the rise of the female-specific pejoratively loaded sense ‘prostitute’ owes much to the pun according to which “she ‘receives’ such lovers as pay their money.” Unfortunately, the synonym *receiver-general* is now obsolete, which is confirmed by the lexicographic sources of the 21st century.

In turn, *horse-breaker* entered the English lexico-semantic system in the mid-16th century and it started to be used in its literal sense ‘one who breaks in horses and trains them to the bridle or collar’. In the second half of the 19th century, as noted by Partridge (1984), *horse-breaker* was the name for a woman who was hired to ride a horse, especially in the park, and almost at the same time the word was also used in the sense ‘courtesan given to riding, especially in the park’. The *OED*, in turn, provides a more general 19th-century sense ‘courtesan, demi-mondaine, prostitute’, and marks the meaning as obsolete, which is also confirmed by Partridge (1984). It is hard to escape the impression, though, that the sense ‘prostitute’ of *horse-breaker* is, at least to some extent, of metaphorical nature, whereby we perceive sex as horse riding. As for the remaining two examples *sex worker* and *sex care provider*, they may be treated as the 20th-century lexical by-products of political correctness, and as such are definitely euphemistic in nature. As the *OED* informs us, *sex worker* is “usually used with the intention of reducing negative connotations and of aligning the sex industry with conventional sex industries.” Along similar lines, Ayto (2000: 98) stresses the influence of some “politically correct lobby” in the formation of this “new non-judgemental terminology.”

As for Onomasiological Type 2, in which the determining constituent of the mark is absent, it is represented by the following body of Pres.E. examples:

- (7) 0 – Action – Agent
- | | |
|----------------|-------------|
| <i>yum-yum</i> | <i>girl</i> |
| <i>working</i> | <i>girl</i> |
| <i>call</i> | <i>girl</i> |

Interestingly, all the illustrations of Onomasiological Type 2 are relatively new lexico-semantic inventions, and they are attested as such in the *OED* and Ayto (2000). As for *yum-yum girl*, one may have some doubts whether the naming unit should not be treated as a representative of Onomasiological Type 3, whereby the determined constituent of a state is left unexpressed (e.g., *yum-yum* (looking) *girl*). However, we may risk forwarding the assumption that *yum-yum* is the name of an action itself, as defined by the *OED* (‘action providing a pleasurable or delicious sensation; love-making’). From the angle of conceptualization patterns, we may observe that *yum-yum girl* is a lexical realization of a metaphorical extension SEX IS CONSUMPTION, and as such is a deliciously-formed euphemism. As to *working girl* and *call girl*, we may – with a fair amount of certainty – postulate that the naming units are euphemistic rather than dysphemistic in their illocutionary force. This is mainly due to their superficially innocent semantic structures, which suggest either the action of working associated with, as Ayto (2000: 92) puts it, “paid employment” and the action of calling, neither of which has immediate connotations with sexual activities.

In turn, Onomasiological Type 3, in which the determined constituent of the mark is left unexpressed at the onomatological level, is observable in the following historical synonyms of *prostitute*:

(8)	Location – Action – Agent		
O.E.			
	<i>port</i>	0	<i>cwene</i>
	<i>bepæc</i>	0	<i>-estre</i>
E.Mod.E.			
	<i>hell</i>	0	<i>moth</i>
	<i>Winchester</i>	0	<i>goose</i>
L.Mod.E.			
	<i>town</i>	0	<i>woman</i>
	<i>town</i>	0	<i>miss</i>
	<i>market</i>	0	<i>dame</i>
	<i>kennel</i>	0	<i>nymph</i>
Pres.E.			
	<i>pavement</i>	0	<i>princess</i>
	<i>street</i>	0	<i>girl</i>

Here, as evidenced by the *HTE*, none of the four L.Mod.E. synonyms managed to survive longer than a century in the English language (*town-woman* 1675-1710; *town miss* 1749 † 1921; *market dame* 1705-7; *kennel nymph* 1771) whereas the 20th-century lexico-semantic innovations *pavement princess* and *street girl* are still recorded in the lexicographic sources (see, Ayto 2000 and *SS*). Conceptually, they are all lexical realisations of the metonymic contiguity pattern LOCATION FOR PROFESSION, and they may be treated as onomasiological competitors of E.Mod.E. *streetwalker*. The cognitive mechanism of naming the profession using the name of the place where it is performed was already exploited in Old English (*portcwene*, *bepæcestre*) and was also at work in the formation of E.Mod.E. *hell-moth* and *Winchester goose*. Interestingly, though, it is Type 1 illustrated by the naming unit *streetwalker*, which is complex linguistic representation of complex structure, which has survived in the language and has won the battle against the economized expressions of complex structure, here Type 3, out of which only Am.E. *pavement princess* and *street girl* are still in use.

Another L.Mod.E. synonym, namely *tomrig*, seems to be somewhat more problematic in analyzing its onomasiological type. Again, the determined constituent of the mark (ACTION) is left unexpressed. Hence, *tomrig* represents Onomasiological Type 3 as follows:

(9)	Patient – Action – Agent (???)		
	<i>tom</i>	0	<i>rig</i>

It is the etymology of the constituents that makes us opt for this onomasiological type. The naming unit *tomrig* was coined in the late 17th century to be used in the sense ‘strumpet, romping girl, tomboy’. We may risk speculating that the formation of *tomrig* was inspired by its earlier analogous form *tomboy* (1579 – a1700 *HTE*) which was used in the sense ‘bold, immodest woman’. Looking at the etymology of the constituents, *tom* – a shortening of the Christian name *Thomas* – was also used, according to the *OED*, as ‘a generic name for any male representative of the common people’ from the late 16th century (1588 – 1974)⁸ while

rig emerged in the English language in the late 16th century with the sense ‘wanton girl, woman’. We may assume that language users put the two constituents together to express the sense ‘wanton girl for any man’, hence ‘strumpet’. However innovative the naming unit, it failed to survive long in the language as the last *OED* contextual evidence dates from 1728.

Additionally, the two L.Mod.E. naming units *molly* and *trully* seem to illustrate Onomasiological Type 3 as well:

(10) Agent – State – Evaluation (Diminutive)

<i>moll</i>	0	-y
<i>trull</i>	0	-y

It is worth mentioning at this point that both *moll* and *trull* were used in the sense ‘prostitute’ at the beginning of the 17th and 16th century respectively and later in the Late Modern English period the monemes became the onomasiological bases for the naming units *molly* and *trully*, also used in the sense ‘prostitute’. Although diminutive and, hence, definitely euphemistic in nature both *molly* and *trully* were relatively short-term innovations and went out of use shortly after they were coined.

Last but not least, the following Pres.E. naming units may be construed as representatives of yet another subtype of Onomasiological Type 3:

(11) Quality – Action/State – Agent

<i>fly</i>	0	<i>girl</i>
<i>loose</i>	0	<i>fish</i>
<i>white</i>	0	<i>slave</i>
<i>bad</i>	0	<i>girl</i>

The first of the four examples, namely Am.E. *fly girl*, may seem to be wrongly categorised as the determining constituent, here the adjectival form *fly*, is primarily associated with the action of flying, and hence could be mistakenly treated as the determined constituent of action. As the authors of the *OED* conjecture, the determining constituent modifying *girl* in this naming unit is the adjective used in American English in its late-19th-century sense ‘unrestrained or rebellious in one’s behaviour’ or ‘(of a woman) wanton, sexually promiscuous’. Similarly, *loose* in *loose fish* is also used in the sense ‘free from moral restraint, wanton’. Interestingly, as noted by Green (2003) and confirmed by the *OED*, this naming unit was a mere one-time occurrence and quickly went out of use. As for *white slave*, it entered the English lexico-semantic system at the beginning of the 20th century and, according to the *OED*, has been used in the sense ‘prostitute, especially one trapped into prostitution by others’. It seems that the conceptualisation pattern behind the formation of *white slave* is that of metaphorical extension. The aspect of forcing and selling is mapped from one domain (SLAVERY) into another (PROSTITUTION), and the quality expressed by *white* refers to ‘ethnic type (chiefly European or of European extraction)’. In turn, the naming unit *bad girl* (Am.E.) represents the formative mechanism of understatement, whereby *bad* is euphemistically applied in the sense ‘immoral’, and as such is treated as a synonym of *prostitute* (see Ayto 2000: 94).

3. Conclusions

All in all, out of all 22 onomasiological structures analysed here, and which were formed in the course of the Late Modern English and Present-day English periods, only a half managed to survive the test of time, which is presented in *Table 1* below.

Onomasiological Types	Naming Units	L.Mod.E. 1650-1800	Pres.E. 1800-now
OT 1	<i>night-walker</i>	1670-1 ●	
	<i>high-flyer</i>	a1700	→20 th c. Am.E.
	<i>receiver-general</i>		1811 → 1903
	<i>horse-breaker</i>		1861 → 1865 + 1966
	<i>sex worker</i>		1971 →
	<i>sex care provider</i>		late-20 th c. →
OT 2	<i>yum-yum girl</i>		1885 → 1962
	<i>working girl</i>		(Am.E.) 1968 →
	<i>call girl</i>		(Am.E.) 1940 →
OT 3	<i>town woman</i>	1675 → 1710	
	<i>town miss</i>		● 1749 + ● 1921
	<i>market dame</i>	1705-7 ●	
	<i>kennel nymph</i>	1771 ●	
	<i>pavement princess</i>		1976 →
	<i>street girl</i>		1979 →
	<i>tomrig</i>	1668 → 1728	
	<i>molly</i>	1719 → 1890	
	<i>trully</i>	1711 ●	
	<i>fly girl</i>		1893 → 1994
	<i>loose fish</i>		1809 ●
	<i>white slave</i>		1913 →
<i>bad girl</i>		1855 →	

Table 1 *Onomasiological Types and life span of the naming units analysed*

What we may observe, though, is that language users of Late Modern and Present-day English have exploited Onomasiological Type 3 the most frequently, with Onomasiological Type 1 being the second most popular, and the least often exploited is Onomasiological Type 2. Far-fetched as it may seem, in an attempt to veil the shamefulness or to create counter reality language users seem to prefer either complex linguistic representation or, if economised representation is chosen, there seems to be preference towards expressing the determining constituent of location, quality or patient, while leaving the determined constituent unexpressed. After all, stating the obvious, in this case action, would no longer be

a covert appellation, but rather overt and, more often than not, the sociolinguistic reality would fail to match the illocutionary force of the naming unit employed.

However, the most general conclusion drawn from the analysis conducted is that both taboo and anti-language are those sociolinguistic factors which definitely stimulate language users to exploit their own linguistic resources in order to veil what is forbidden or maintain the secrecy and counter reality of anti-society. Productivity level is, hence, relatively high but the frequency of use, the register of the naming units coined as well as predicting their life span in a language are much more complex issues still awaiting a fully fledged analysis.

Notes

¹ *Actual word* is understood here, after Štekauer (2005: 223), as ‘a naming unit which was coined to satisfy a linguistic demand, be it the demand of a single member of a speech community, be it a single-act one-off demand. [...] Whether its use will be spread over the whole speech community (implying frequent use), or whether it will be confined to a single use on the part of a single speaker, is insignificant.

² Late Modern English and Present-day English cover the periods between 1650 and 1800, and 1800 and present, respectively, and this chronological division of historical periods in the English language is taken from Fisiak (2000).

³ As elucidated by Štekauer (2005: 212), *naming unit* is a term which in Štekauer’s cognitive onomasiological theory “substitutes for the terms like *word*, *lexeme*, *lexical item*, etc., because of their inconsistent use and various connotations in linguistic literature. ‘Naming unit’ refers here to a complex unit generated by the Word-Formation Component.”

⁴ Old English, according to the chronological division of historical periods in the English language by Fisiak (2000), covers the period between 450 and 1150.

⁵ Middle English, according to Fisiak (2000), covers the historical period between 1150 and 1450.

⁶ In accordance with Fisiak’s (2000) chronological division of historical periods, Early Modern English covers the time between 1450 and 1650.

⁷ For detailed analysis of *streetwalker* and other E.Mod.E. synonyms of *prostitute*, see Duda (2014a).

⁸ Note that *tom* began to be used in the sense ‘girl, woman’ in Aus.E. slang 1882-1951 and also in the slang register in the sense ‘prostitute’ 1914-1977.

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