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Why is it that some words are “acceptable” to some groups but not to everyone? I found my answer to this conundrum when I came across “The Meanings of a Word” by Gloria Naylor during my English class at Emory. In her anecdote that explores the different meanings associated with the use of the term “niggar”, Naylor states that “Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power (Naylor 2013).” This statement summarizes her argument about how the word “niggar” could be used to mean so many things depending on the context it is used. I think this idea applies to the word “crazy” as well because it also has multitude of meanings depending on the way it is used. Thus I consider the word itself to be neutral and similar to a tool like a knife in which its yielder determines its purpose.

If there are so many meanings associated with the word, what does it exactly mean? According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the origin of the word traces back to the root word “craze,” which means “to break in pieces” as a verb and “a crack” as a noun (Oxford University Press 2013). In 1576, the word was first used to describe a “defect” in a subject or in its health condition. In 1700, it was also used to describe a state of bankruptcy. From the late 1700s, the word was used to describe something of “unsound mind” or to exaggerate a situation in widely used phrases such as “to go crazy” or “to be crazy about or for a person.”

Today, the OED shows that the word “crazy” comes in two parts of speech: adjective and noun. As an adjective, it is used to describe an object as “full of cracks or flaws” or a person as “having the bodily health or constitution impaired.” The OED also provides an informal meaning of the word, in which it could be used to mean “extremely” or “mad” in a slang or “a mad or eccentric person” in colloquial language.

However, the meaning of the word is not only defined by the dictionary but also the way we use the word. This notion gave me a chance to reflect on my usage of the word “crazy” and I realized that I have never given much thought to the meaning of the word “crazy” even though I use it so often. Among my peers, this word is often used to express disbelief or amazement to any kind of situation that involves extremes. For example, I would tell my friend that she’s “crazy” because she’s overloading herself by taking numerous major tests on the same day. In this context, I’m merely expressing my disbelief on the actions of my friend because she’s taking herself to an extreme situation that not everyone would put themselves in. However, I could also say the same thing when she accomplishes some amazing things that not everyone can do. Using the word in this way shows how I’m amazed beyond my expectations. Therefore, the word “crazy” can be used in a positive way when it is used to depict the extremes of a situation.

In spite of using the word to describe the extremes of certain situations, I’m also aware that the word can be used as a derogative term. For instance, I saw some kids on the subway using the exact same term to mock a mentally-disabled person who was talking to the reflection of himself on the window. He didn’t cause any harm, but the kids were just making fun of his actions, which they saw as different from their own. Even though I wasn’t the one that was mocked by those children, I felt very uncomfortable about the way they used the word to humiliate someone. Because of this experience, I realized that the word “crazy” could potentially offend many people and that its meaning can change by the way we use the word.

Although all of these different meanings seem somewhat unrelated to one another, they all suggest a sense of incompleteness and apparent “flaw” in either physical or mental state of the subject. Thus the word “crazy” is essentially a word that describes the frail nature of the subject, unlike what many people may think. Then why did the meaning of the word change so much? This diversion in the meaning of the root word can be traced back in the history of the usage of word.

Throughout history, some fluctuations have been observed in the frequency of the usage of the word “crazy.” This is shown in the data from COHA, which documents the usage of the word from 1810s to 2000s. Not much changes are shown until 1840s, when the usage of the word drops from 10.09 to 7.85 frequency per million. Right after this drop, it experiences a slow and steady increase from the 1850s to 1880s until a sudden decrease occurs in the 1890s. However, the frequency starts to increase steadily until the 1970s, when it reaches the highest of 73.27 frequency per million, and this trend of slow and steady increase in the usage of the word continues until 2012s in COCA, which records the data about the usage of the word from 1990s to 2012s.

The other part of the data in COCA reveals that the word is mostly used in fiction writings while it is rarely used in academic papers. This disparity in usage of the word suggest that the word is mostly used in a casual expression that is commonly used in informal writings. It is also important to note that there was a rapid growth in the computer industry and the internet in the late 1990s. Drawing from this evidence about the rise of computers and internet, it can be speculated that the usage of the word has increased dramatically throughout the history because of the advances in the technology that diversified the access and approach to the different kinds of writing, especially encouraging the growth of informal writings that often used the word “crazy” to simply create a sense of exaggeration. This phenomena can be easily observed in personal blogs and websites such as Facebook and Twitter, where people freely engage in informal writings.

Many people who prefer to use this word as a unique way of expressing themselves or their ideas about certain subject are fiction writers and the media, mainly found in TV shows, music and the internet. One of these examples is “Crazy,” a song by an artist named Gnarls Barkley. As shown in Macmillan Dictionary, the word is largely used to depict “silly behaviors and actions.” Some of the popularly used phrases are “crazy about someone,” which means “very much in love with someone,” and “drive someone crazy,” which translates to “to make someone very upset or angry.” It is important to note that the media has shaped our perception about the word by presenting its meaning as casual and harmless (Macmillan Publishers Limited 2013).

Despite the frequent use of the word, there are people who find this word unacceptable for use because it can be personally offensive to the people with cognitive disabilities and their families. This controversy comes from the myriad of meanings and connotations that the word suggests in different cultures and society. For example, the Office of Multicultural Programs and Services at Emory University discourages people to use this word in the “Words Matter” campaign, indicating that it is used as a derogative word that is “intended to point out characteristics of madness and insanity (Emory University 2013).” However, this phrase only depicts a very limited view on the word that emphasizes the negative connotations of the word because it was intended to persuade people to stop using the word by making them think that the word is derogatory.

In conclusion, the meaning of the word “crazy” cannot be given a single true meaning or be defined as purely negative word because it has so many meanings that arise from the different ways it is used throughout history until today. The word itself is neutral and does not hold any specific meaning until it is given a meaning through its user. Depending on the way it is used, the word can be an expression of awe and excitement or of hate and mockery.

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