Social Status, Attitudes, and Word Connotations

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People acquire diverse attitudes in occupying social positions and enacting different roles. To take a single example, attitude differences exist between social strata with respect to politics, business, the legal order, family life, and sex. It follows that word connotations cannot be uniform throughout a complex society and also be in agreement with everyone’s personal attitudes. If the language is similarly employed by all speakers then some persons must use words whose connotations conflict with their feelings. Conversely, if all persons maintain consistency between their feelings and the implied attitudes in their speech, then word connotations or word usage cannot be the same in all subgroups.

A word is a cognitive category which is linked through denotative meaning to a referent category (representing a class of perceptions), and each category typically is bound with affective associations or attitudes. Referent attitudes are associations derived from experience. When a particular affective state is always or frequently contiguous with a class of perceptions it becomes associated as a conditioned response, and this referent attitude continues as long as the pattern of experiences producing it is unaltered. Since the experiencing of a great many referents varies with social positions and since experiences that

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are socially determined are not easily modified by the individual, positionally determined referent attitudes tend to be reinforced consistently and are resistant to change. The connotation of a word (i.e., its affective association) is rooted in its interpersonal use as one of a set of symbols, each of which has an agreed upon meaning. Adopting an idiosyncratic connotation for a word causes one to encounter conflicts as the word gets associated with others which still retain modal connotations. For example, if the word “mother” comes to have a negative connotation for a given person and “baby” retains the modal connotation “good,” conflict occurs in the process of thinking, hearing, or observing the culturally given formula, “mothers like babies.” To reduce the conflict this person might begin feeling negative toward “baby” or attempt to change the formula so that “mothers do not like babies” or revert to positive feelings toward “mother.” Considering the ubiquity of culture, reform is the path of least resistance. A word’s connotation is anchored to the connotations of other words through the linkages of cultural beliefs and norms, and maintaining an idiosyncratic connotation for one word constitutes an assault on the whole system. Further, if a person were to maintain uncommon connotations, he would be led to use words in phrases which produce conflict for listeners, e.g., “she’s nothing but a mother.” When such deviant expressions are emitted, others initiate social control and attempt to reform the speaker through influence attempts or through various kinds of punishments.4

Sometimes the forces maintaining referent attitudes and word connotations converge. A simple society with relatively little social differentiation, with an invariant culture, and with diffuse internal interactions is supportive of homogeneity in word connotations. Lack of social differentiation implies that experiences and referent attitudes are similar for everyone. Lack of cultural variants means that an individual cannot support idiosyncratic word connotations without creating a unique cognitive system (and even then he would be exposed to others acting according to discordant norms). Existence of diffuse interactions means that an individual is under constant pressure to maintain modal connotations, to avoid conflicts from what others say, and to avoid social control in response to what he says. In a complex society with extensive social differentiation, with subcultures corresponding to different social positions, and with interaction among persons in the same position but segregation between persons in different positions, variation in word connotations can be expected. Since persons with similar conflicts interact, subcultures can provide beliefs and norms

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which are supportive of positionally determined word connotations. With interactions between positions minimal, the sorts of pressures for uniformity which derive from intergroup interaction and social control will not occur.

The unstable situation in which the forces which stabilize referent attitudes and word connotations are in opposition occurs in complex societies characterized by high rates of interpositional interaction. Socially determined variations in experience anchor different referent attitudes, but the network of communications creates pressures for socially shared word connotations. Assuming that the forces of experience and interaction are equally intense, neither the referent attitudes nor the word connotations are subject to change.

It is helpful to turn to attitude balance theory in order to define a theoretical solution to this dilemma. One statement of attitude balance theory is as follows: (1) linking categories which are associated with different attitudes results in tension or dissonance; (2) people seek escape from dissonance; (3) a limited number of techniques exist for reducing dissonance, namely, avoidance and rejection, communication or instrumental action, restructuring, attitude change, or psychological defense mechanisms (repression, projection, regression, etc.). In dealing with the word-referent attitude conflicts of the complex, integrated society, some means of dissonance reduction may be eliminated from consideration. Avoidance and rejection cannot be used to reduce all conflicts save at the price of pathological withdrawal, so these means can be treated as relatively constant factors used to reduce some conflicts but not all. Psychological defenses seem to be used mainly as desperation measures for dealing with extreme, irresolvable dissonance; and the defenses, too, can be assumed to account for only a small portion of the total number of dissonance reductions which are accomplished. Instrumental action to change experiences or communication to change norms and beliefs cannot be used with equal effectiveness by everyone, since diversity is implicit in the social structure being considered. Attitude change can eliminate or reduce conflicts in some particular instances. That is, if experiences reinforcing a particular referent attitude are rare, the referent attitude can be temporarily modified to correspond with a word connotation. Also, word connotations can be adjusted to a minor degree to correspond more

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closely with referent attitudes; and this may serve to reduce dissonance, even if it does not eliminate it. The amount of adjustment possible in word connotations is limited, however, because at some point an adjusted connotation will become too deviant, and internal tensions and social control will ensue. Thus, attitude change can lead to a few changes in referent attitudes and to small, though pervasive, variations in connotation; but it cannot produce a stable state of conflict resolution. This leaves restructuring.

Consider the case of a slum boy coping with the problem of policemen. In his own experience police are bullying and persecuting; but the words “policeman” or “officer” connote respect and even admiration; and these connotations are reinforced in conversations with middle class teachers, storeowners, officials, as well as by listening to radio and television. If he uses these words to designate lawmen he arouses two opposing attitudes, neither of which can easily be changed. In the general case being considered here, restructuring is the only solution to his dilemma. The referent category for lawmen is linked not to “policeman” or “officer” but to synonyms such as “cop,” “the Man,” or “fuzz,” whose connotations are more in line with the boy’s personal feelings. By using synonyms persons in subgroups can maintain modal word connotations, and at the same time avoid dissonance, by using only those words which are congruent with their personal experience. In everyday circumstances and in interaction within the subgroup a positionally-relevant sublanguage is used; in cross-position interactions another sublanguage is used, one that affords expressions which produce minimum dissonance and punishment during interaction.6

In a complex integrated society there may be some avoidance and rejection of disturbing referents and of persons in other positions, some dissonance reduction using psychological defenses, some dissonance reduction by means of instrumental action and influence, and some alteration of the connotations of words associated with positionally determined referent attitudes. It is anticipated, however, that the major and general means for reducing conflicts between language and personal attitudes is restructuring—the differential use of synonyms or sublanguages.

American society is a complex system of social positions with a high rate of interpositional communication (mediated in part by channels 6 The sublanguage used in cross-position interactions, of course, may produce some temporary dissonance. For example, a delinquent being questioned in middle class language by a middle class official frequently is confused and ashamed of his crimes, though in returning to his customary group and language habits he plans and enacts old offenses without guilt. In an extended version of this analysis, use of sublanguages undoubtedly would be linked to “role taking” and “definition of the situation” as these concepts are used in the Symbolic Interactionist school of social psychology: Arnold M. Rose, editor, Human Behavior and Social Processes, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.
of mass interaction, e.g., mobility, mass markets, mass media, etc.). Hence there should be differential use of synonyms in subgroups with only minor variation from group to group in the connotations of words. Some structuring of communications does exist in American society, and to the extent that a subgroup is segregated from others it should have a tendency to maintain idiosyncratic word connotations. However, the assumption here is that mass interaction is more characteristic of the society than is segregation, and it is accordingly expected that in no case will positional variations in word connotations be so large as to reflect the actual attitudinal differences existing between positions. These considerations lead to the hypotheses that in American society (1) differential use will be made of synonyms or sublanguages by persons in different social positions, and (2) no major variations in word connotations will be found to occur among persons in different social positions. The studies which follow are relevant to the second of these hypotheses.

STUDY I

Data were collected at the Hospital Corps School of the Great Lakes Naval Training Center using as subjects all male enlistees who were enrolled in the school at the time. The mean age of these Hospital Corps School students was 18.9, mean education was 11.9 years, and the vast majority were native born whites. Additional descriptive statistics on the sample of subjects are presented in another publication.*

The sample of words considered was the set of 1,000 most frequently used content words in English as indicated by West's semantic frequency count. Each word was presented to subjects together with a short defining sentence so that a single denotation might be specified in the case of homonyms.

Measures of word connotations were obtained by having subjects rate the words on a semantic differential instrument consisting of the following bipolar scales: good-bad; pleasant-unpleasant; active-passive; lively-still; strong-weak; tough-tender; rational-emotional; tamed-untamed. Each subject rated 50 words, each word was rated by 16 subjects and a total of 320 subjects contributed ratings.

Ratings were converted to factor scores representing the three major dimensions of affect or connotative meaning: Evaluation (good-bad),

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* Mobility is used here in its broadest sense to encompass intergenerational movements, changes in position during a single lifetime, and the relatively rapid changes in position which are involved in enacting multiple roles.


* Michael West, A General Service List of English Words, New York: Longmans, Green, 1953; this is based on the Thorndike-Lorge counts.

Activity (active-passive), and Potency (strong-weak).\textsuperscript{11} Factor scores were calculated as weighted sums of ratings, using the factor loadings as weights. Separate factor analyses carried out for high status and low status subjects indicated that scales contributed to the three factors in the same ways in both groups, so a single set of weights was used to derive scores for all subjects.

Subjects were divided into high and low status groups using father’s education and occupation as criteria. The procedure involved translating both variables into Duncan’s Occupational Prestige Index\textsuperscript{12} and summing to get a final score for each subject. Within any given group of 16 subjects who rated a single word, the four highest and four lowest scoring individuals were selected for the high and low status groups, respectively. Comparison of the 160 subjects in the high and low status samples on family income revealed a highly significant difference, suggesting that the index had adequately differentiated subjects with high and low stratum backgrounds.

The data at this point were divided into 20 independent sets, each set consisting of factor scores for a different list of 50 words based on ratings by four lower and four higher stratum subjects. Each of the 20 sets was treated as a separate problem with three analyses carried out—one for each factor score. A two-way analysis of variance was used in which one variable, SES, represented the status differences between subjects, the other variable Words, represented the differences in connotation between words, and the error term was based on repetitions of measurements over the four subjects within each SES group. Since all 50 words in a set were rated by the same subjects, the Type I mixed design outlined by Lindquist was used.\textsuperscript{13} In this design two separate error variances are calculated: a between groups error for testing the Words main effect and a within groups error for testing the Words main effect and the SES-by-Words interaction.

In the case of both Evaluation and Potency measurements, none of the SES main effects or SES-by Word interactions were significant in the 20 independent analyses. In two of the analyses dealing with Activity measurements there were significant SES main effects, and in two different analyses there were significant SES-by-Word interaction effects, one with a probability less than .01. Since all 20 of the analyses for a given measurement are independent, the analyses themselves may be treated as “observations.” Then over the 20 analyses the number of


interaction effects significant at the .05 level which may be expected by chance is one. Clearly the results for Evaluation and Potency do not exceed chance. In the case of the Activity dimension, the binomial probability under the null hypothesis of getting two or more interaction effects significant at the .05 level is .26; the probability of getting one or more significant at the .01 level is .18. Including the two significant SES main effects as positive results, the binomial probability of getting four significant results (p<.05) out of 40 independent tests is .15. At most, the differences in activity connotations are of marginal statistical significance.

In every analysis the Word main effect was highly significant and represented a much greater proportion of the total variance than either the SES main effect, or the SES-by Word interaction effect, or the two combined. This suggests that the interaction of SES and word connotation is of slight magnitude compared to the differences in connotation between words.

An approximate t-test\textsuperscript{14} was used to identify words which had different connotations in the two social strata. According to the analyses of variance, of course, the differences are interpretable mainly as random variation. However, the differences were examined to see if any major variations had occurred at all. It was found that none of the differences constituted a major portion of the possible range in factor scores. That is, even the largest differences did not represent substantial reversals in connotation. This reinforced the conclusion that any existing differences in word connotation between strata are minor compared to differences in connotation between words.

\textit{Comment}. The statistical tests lacked power because of the small number of subjects used for each comparison. This does not affect the conclusion that differences in connotations between strata are small when compared to the variance among words, but it does mean that any differences between strata which do exist might be defined at higher levels of significance.

It was assumed that the socioeconomic index was an adequate indicator of the subjects' social stratum position. However, the index was based on characteristics of fathers rather than of the subjects themselves, and it can be argued that the subjects' presence in the Navy is a more immediate indicator which suggests that all subjects are in the same stratum. In addition to this problem, the two strata considered were not at the extremes of the social hierarchy, and subjects may have attenuated any differences among themselves through interactions prior to testing.

The analysis of variance model is appropriate where differences in

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
connotation are assumed to exist between strata for most words. If, however, differences in connotation exist only for a small number of words which are most directly related to differences in experience, then results using this model might be misleading: meaningful differences could be misinterpreted as random variations. The secondary analysis using t-tests bypassed this problem by focusing attention on instances where differences were found, and it is notable that the conclusions were essentially the same.

In summary, the results of Study I suggested that word connotations are essentially the same for persons in different social strata. The differences found were few and quantitatively small compared to the differences in connotation which exist between words. However, it is possible that the subjects employed did not differ sufficiently in social position for variations in word connotations to be evident.

STUDY II

This investigation compared word connotations among Navy enlistees with those of male and female college students. The group of Navy enlistees is described in Study I; for this analysis all Navy subjects who provided ratings were used. The college students were upper-classmen in a social psychology course at the University of Wisconsin. Sixteen males and 16 females were chosen from a total of 57 student respondents, matching their ages as nearly as possible with the age range of the enlistees and maximizing parental socioeconomic status for the students. Considering both family background and present position, the modal Navy respondent can be described as upper-lower or lower-middle class and the modal college student as upper-middle or lower-upper class.

The college students provided semantic differential ratings (see Study I) for 23 of the 1,000 words previously rated by the enlistees. Procedures for selecting words were designed to maximize possible variation in connotations. First, all words for which t-tests revealed status differences in Study I were categorized by means of Roget's Thesaurus, and frequencies were computed within each major category. Categories with frequencies above chance were taken to define status relevant meaning domains; and twelve words were chosen to represent these domains, using size of differences found in Study I and spread of differences over the three attitudinal dimensions as the criteria for selecting particular words. Since class differences in attitudes toward business and labor are noted frequently, two additional words were chosen to represent that realm. The occupational difference of

sailor versus student is a positional difference, and four words were chosen for their relevance to this difference. Five words denoting sex roles and sex role activity were chosen for their relevance to the different experiences of males and females.

Factor scores\(^1\) were computed and means calculated for each word-dimension-position combination. The results are presented along with the list of words in Table 1.

A series of analyses was carried out to determine if there are any differences at all in word connotations between groups. If either minor or major variations exist, then it must be possible to reject the null hypothesis that factor scores along a given dimension are the same for each word in all groups except for chance fluctuations.

Comparing word connotations by means of analyses of variance (see Study I) indicates that some significant differences did exist between college males and females in the Evaluation and Activity connotations of words but not in potency connotations (for Evaluation, \(p < .01\); for Activity, \(p < .05\)). Using an exact t-test to make individual comparisons,\(^2\) the following words were found to have significantly different evaluation connotations for the college males and females (\(p < .05\), one-tailed test): court, able, job, man, attack. Compared to the males, the females rated the first four words as more "good and pleasant" and the last as less so. On the Activity dimension there were differences for the following words: court, government, university. Compared to males, females rated these words, and most other words, too, as more "lively and active."

Analyses of variance in which college males and Navy enlistees were compared indicated differences on the Evaluation and Potency dimensions (\(p < .05\) and \(p < .01\), respectively) but none on the Activity dimension. On the Evaluation dimension, words with differing connotations were: able, newspaper, play, marry, sea. Compared to college males, enlistees rated these words as more "good and pleasant," though there was no significant tendency for enlistees to rate all words higher on the Evaluation dimension. On the Potency dimension, significant differences were found for the words: able, point, remember, think, business, job, father, mother, book, university, quit. Compared to college males, enlistees rated all these words but the last as less potent. The overall tendency was for the enlistees to rate all words as less potent except Instability words which they rated higher in potency.

The analyses of variance comparing college females with enlistees indicated significant differences on the Evaluation and Potency dimen-

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1\(^\text{st}\) Scores were computed using regression equations based on factor analysis of Navy ratings for the 1,000 most frequently used words; the equations are presented in Heise, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 8.

2\(^\text{nd}\) Standard t-tests are the preferred means for making the individual comparisons with this design: see Lindquist, \textit{loc. cit.} Each test was one-tail and involved 30 degrees of freedom.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Category and Word</th>
<th>Evaluation Scores*</th>
<th>Activity Scores*</th>
<th>Potency Scores*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Navy Males</td>
<td>College Males</td>
<td>Naval Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized Authority*</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instability</td>
<td>-2.3</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>-3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea Expression</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Processes</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Roles</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naval-College</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Positive scores indicate the following connotations: Evaluation—good, pleasant; Activity—lively, active; Potency—tough, strong. Negative scores indicate the opposites.**

**Status-relevant meaning domains were derived from the Thesaurus analysis. Names for the domains were assigned for their descriptive value and are not the same as those in Roger's Thesaurus.**
sions (p<.01 in both cases) but none for the Activity dimension. Words differing in evaluation connotation for the two groups were: court, business, newspaper, play. Compared to the enlistees, college females rated the first two as more "good and pleasant" and the last two as less so. Differences in potency connotation were found for: court, government, able, think, business, job, father, man, marry, mother, university, attack, quit. Compared to the college females, the enlistees rated all these words but the last two as less potent; again there was an overall tendency for the enlistees to rate words as less potent except for Instability words which they rated as stronger.

It was assumed that differences between words amounting to one third or more of the total possible range in factor scores could properly be called "major" variations in connotation. In terms of original scales this criterion is equivalent to differences of the following magnitudes: (where A and B represent groups of subjects, W stands for a word, and "plus" and "minus" refer to directions on a semantic differential dimension) A rated W "extremely minus" and B rated W "slightly minus;" A rated W "quite minus" and B rated W "neutral;" A rated W "slightly minus" and B rated W "slightly plus;" A rated W "neutral" and B rated W "quite plus;" A rated W "slightly plus" and B rated W "extremely plus." A "major" variation in Evaluation connotation is indicated by a difference in factor scores of 2.3 or more units, on the Activity dimension by a difference of 2.6 or more units, and on the Potency dimension by a difference of 3.0 or more units.19

Using these criterion differences to compare group means in Table 1 it was found that no major variations exist between groups in the evaluation, activity, or potency connotations of the words considered. In fact, the criterion differences could be reduced substantially for the Evaluation and Activity dimensions (say, to 60 per cent of the above values), and still no more than a chance number of "major" differences would be found. On the Potency dimension, a number of differences tend towards being major and would be so classified if the criterion difference were reduced to 2.5 or less (critical words are "quit," "think," and "father" in the comparison of college females with enlistees and "think" in the comparison of college males with enlistees). These "nearly major" differences may represent chance fluctuations or they may be evidence that potency connotations are unusually subject to variation, even if differences do not constitute major differences as defined here. Most likely though they are a reflection of certain meth-

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19 The Potency regression equation included corrections for Evaluation and Activity contamination, but these correction factors were treated as constants in calculating the maximum range of Potency scores. This is equivalent to defining the possible range of Potency scores for words with neutral Evaluation and Activity scores. The procedure has the overall effect of reducing the criterion value for a "major" difference and thus works against the hypothesis.
Comment. The samples of subjects were not systematically drawn from general populations, and therefore generalizations concerning differences between strata or between sexes are tentative at most. This particular limitation in sampling does not affect the test of the hypothesis, however, since the hypothesis is concerned only with positional differences in general, and the three samples do represent three different positions. The major sampling limitation is that only three social positions were considered out of the many which exist.

No major variations in connotations were found between groups on any of the dimensions, and this finding is interpreted as providing support for the hypothesis and theory. An assumption involved in this interpretation is that major differences in referent attitudes exist between the groups for the words considered. Words were selected, on the basis of Study I and the published literature, so as to maximize differences in referent attitudes, but data are unavailable to prove that the condition really was achieved.

In summary, Study II showed that minor variations in word connotations do exist between persons in different social positions but no major variations were found for the positions and words considered.

DISCUSSION

These results parallel findings in some studies which were not directly focused on language. For example, in a comparison of middle-class, lower-class, and delinquent-gang boys' evaluation ratings of 17 images, no major differences were found between groups despite an effort to select images relevant to differing attitudes. In studies of occupational prestige it has been found that evaluative ratings of occupations are basically similar between strata, between sexes, between age groups, and in different geographic regions. The evidence presented here and in these other studies supports the hypothesis that in this society the attitudinal association or connotation of a word, and perhaps of other cultural units as well, is generally uniform across groups. The results give credence to the theoretical analysis relat-

20 The Potency dimension accounted for the least amount of common variance in the factor analysis of Navy ratings, scales loading on this factor were relatively impure so that factor scores had to be corrected for Evaluation and Activity contamination, and Navy enlistees' ratings of words had considerably more error variance on Potency than on either the Evaluation or Activity dimensions. Examination of the student ratings indicates that the Potency dimension was defined much better for them than for enlistees. The fact that student ratings were better defined and consequently more extreme than enlistee ratings may account for most of the differences reported. 
22 However, nearly any semantic differential study uncovers a few individuals who give extremely deviant ratings. From the standpoint of the theory it would be interesting to know if these persons maintain deviant word connotations over time and if so how it affects their interpersonal relations.
ing positionally determined attitudes to variations in word connotations and word usage; though the other hypothesis, predicting differential word usage in different groups, also must be supported to validate the theory.

Certain elaborations can make the theory more precise. For example, segregation is a parameter with different values for different groups within society; and the segregation variable, as it is used here, is not a simple function of interaction: two groups may interact frequently yet be entirely segregated with respect to some particular content domain, because in cross-position interactions they “do not talk about those things.” Adding a concept of interaction-dominance would appear to be useful in accounting for some aspects of language change and fashions.\textsuperscript{24} (Group X has interaction-dominance over group Z if Xs communicate mostly with Xs and rarely with Zs, but Zs communicate often with both Xs and Zs.) To provide an example of the expected dynamics, assume that in the United States the middle class has interaction-dominance over the criminal elements of society. Middle class words for lawmen create dissonance for criminals and so criminals seek synonyms whose connotations are congruent with their own experiences. Their experiences, however, are so deviant that none of the proper words fit, and synonyms must be created (e.g., “bull,” “screws”). The new words diffuse into the middle class slowly since most members of the middle class do not interact with criminals. Once they have become generally known, however, their connotations are changed to fit middle class experiences: the criminals are neither widely available nor in an appropriate position to reinforce the original connotations. Finally, because criminals interact frequently with the middle class, they come to accept the middle class connotations of words which they themselves created. The old words then produce dissonance, and new words must be coined, thus beginning another round of fashion. These elaborations lead to qualifications in predictions under certain circumstances. When a society is generally integrated but highly segregated with respect to some particular content domain, major variations in the connotations of words in this domain can be expected (two likely possibilities of such domains in the United States are Sex and Politics). Also, if the analysis of word fashions is accurate, group differences in connotation can be expected during certain phases in the life cycle of slang and jargonistic terms.

\textsuperscript{24} Interaction-dominance could occur, for example, if a group x were larger than a group z and interactions between all persons occurred randomly or if group x controlled the mass media and other forms of mass interaction. I am indebted to Stanley Lieberson for the notion of dis-symmetry in interactions between groups and to Hans Gerth for a stimulating discussion of word fashions.