Table of contents

Grønvik, Ottar (1987), "Die Runeninschrift auf der Nordendorfer Bügelfibel I", in: *Runor och runinskrifter. Föredrag vid Riksantikvarieämbetets och Vitterhetsakademiens symposium 8-11 september 1985*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 111-129.

Gundel, Wilhelm (1938), "Zur Herkunft unserer Wochentagsnamen", *Giessener Beiträge zur deutschen Philologie* 60, 63-74.

Gundermann, G. (1901), "Die Namen der Wochentage bei den Römern", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung* 1, 175-186.

Hessels, John Henry (1906), *A late eighth-century Latin-Anglo-Saxon glossary preserved in the library of the Leiden University*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jensen, P. (1901), "Die siebentägige Woche in Babylon und Nineveh", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung* 1, 150-160.

Johnson, David F. (1995), "Euphemerisation versus demonisation. The pagan gods and Ælfric's *De falsis diis*", in: T. Hofstra, L. A. J. R. Houwen & A. A. MacDonald, eds., *Pagans and Christians* (Germania Latina II), Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 35-69.

Jordan, Richard (1968), *Handbuch der mittelenglischen Grammatik*, 3. Aufl., Nachdruck der von H. Ch. Matthes bearbeiteten zweiten Auflage, mit einem bibliographischen Nachtrag von Klaus Dietz, Heidelberg: Winter.

Kluge, Friedrich (1895), "Die deutschen Namen der Wochentage", *Wissenschaftliche Beihefte zur Zeitschrift des allgemeinen deutschen Sprachvereins* 7, 89-98.

Kruijsen, Joep & Ellen Mooijman (1986), "The week and some days of the week", in: Nils Århammar et al., eds., *Aspects of language. Studies in honour of Mario Alinei*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 380-404.

Lindsay, W. M. (1921), *The corpus glossary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Madden, Sir Frederic (1847), *Layamons Brut or chronicle of Britain; a poetical Semi-Saxon paraphrase of the Brut of Wace*, vol. II (reprint, Osnabrück: Zeller, 1967).

Meid, Wolfgang (1957), "Götternamen mit *-no*-Suffix", *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* 7, 72-108; 113-126.

- (1969), *Germanische Sprachwissenschaft. III: Wortbildungslehre*, Berlin: de Gruyter.

Meyer-Lübke, Wilhelm (1901), "Die Namen der Wochentage im Romanischen", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung* 1, 192-193.

Nöldeke, Th. (1901), "Die Namen der Wochentage bei den Semiten", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung* 1, 161-163.

Ó Cróinín, Dáibhí (1981), "The oldest Irish names for the days of the week", *Ériu* 32, 95-114.

Pheifer, J. D. (1974), *Old English glosses in the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary*, Oxford: Clarendon.

Simpson, J. A. & E. S. C. Weiner, eds. (1989), *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press. [= OED].

Skeat, Walter W. (1871), *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (reprint, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970).

Strutynski, Udo (1975), "Germanic divinities in weekday names", *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 3, 363-384.

Sweet, Henry (1885), *The oldest English texts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Early English Text Society, No. 83, reprinted 1957].

Thumb, Albert (1901), "Die Namen der Wochentage im Griechischen", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung* 1, 163-173.

Thurneysen, Rudolf (1901), "Die Namen der Wochentage in den keltischen Dialekten", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung* 1, 186-191.

Vilkuna, K. (1957-1958), "Zur ältesten Geschichte der Woche", *Folk-liv* 21-22, 197-215.

Gerles, girls, grrrlz – Girl Power!
Cultural phenomena and the semantic changes of *girl*

Ursula Lenker

1.   Introduction[1]

It is generally held that human language is both a systematic and a cultural phenomenon, and that both these characteristics need to be borne in mind when addressing the question of linguistic change (Smith 1996: 1). It may come as a surprise, however, to see to what extent these characteristics of language (and language change) have influenced and are still influencing the meaning of an everyday word such as Modern English *girl*. This paper will focus on the influence of cultural phenomena[2] on the semantic development of the lexeme *girl*. Firstly, the emergence of childhood and, in particular, adolescence as a specific period in human life (cf. Ariès 1973) will be shown to have played an important part in the restriction of the conceptual meaning of *girl* from 'young person of either sex' to 'female child, young female human being' in the Early Modern English period. Secondly, current cultural phenomena such as feminist criticism and trends in pop-culture will be shown to be responsible for ongoing changes in the connotations of *girl* (cf. *girl power*), and also for a more obvious change in the language system, the neologism *grrrl*.

2.   The semantic history of *girl*

Although the lexeme *girl* is part of the core vocabulary of Modern English and has a supposedly indisputable meaning 'female child; young female person', it is nonetheless one of the most investigated words in the linguistic literature on English (see "References"). This is primarily due to the "uncertain etymology"[3] of *girl*, which is first recorded at the end of the thirteenth century in the sense of 'a child or young person of either sex, often a boy' (1290). Though numerous etymologies have been proposed (cf. Luick 1898, Robinson 1967, 1993, Diensberg 1984, 1985, Moerdijk 1994),

---

[2]   For the relevance of the systematic property of language see the structuralist analysis and its problems on p. 12f. below.

[3]   For similar etymological problems in French (*garçon, gamin*), Italian (*ragazzo*) and Spanish/Portuguese (*rapaz*) cf. Diensberg (1984: 473) and Pauli (1919).

none of them is firmly established. The etymological theory most widely accepted today is Fred Robinson's (1967: 233-39, 1993), which assumes a metonymical use of OE *gierela, gyrela* (Gmc. **garw-ilan-*) 'garment, apparel' for 'someone who wears this garment, apparel'.[4]

In the period attested by written sources (i.e. from 1290 onwards), *girl* acquires the additional semantic feature [+ FEMALE], so that its meaning is specialised from 'young person of either sex' to 'young female human being'. The date of this semantic restriction, however, is disputed: While the *OED* (s.v. *girl*; 2a) cites Palsgrave's rendering of French *garçe* in 1530 as the first instance of the specialised sense, the *MED* (s.v. *girl*; b) now finds altogether four Middle English examples in which *gerle/girle* refers specifically to females. All of the examples cited for the specialised sense in the *MED* could, however, reflect generic use; the meaning of *girl* only seems to be specialised because of the co- and context, i.e. the female extralinguistic referent denoted by *girl*.[5] Since the combination *knave-gerlys* 'boys' is recorded as late as 1475 in the *Ludus Coventriae* (*MED* s.v. *girl*; a), the semantic restriction of *girl* should be dated from the beginning of the Early Modern English period: only from about the beginning of the sixteenth century does *girl* refer to young females exclusively.

3.   The semantic field "young human beings"

The examination of the lexemes of the semantic field "young (male and female) human beings" furthermore shows that *girl* is not the only item which has entered the field

---

[4]   Some linguists reject this etymology for phonological (cf. Diensberg 1984: 474; Moerdijk 1994: 61) and also semantic reasons, since the "two senses ME 'youth or maiden' and OE 'dress, apparel' have never been attested side by side in the same period" (Moerdijk 1994: 50). There is furthermore no indication that OE *gyrela* denoted garments typical for young persons or children. By contrast, it frequently refers to "showy or luxurious apparel, which seems to be associated with worldly rank" (Terasawa 1993: 342f.). – The second major theory, which asserts that *girl* is a loan from Low German *Göre(n)* (Gmc. **gur(w)ila-*; cf. Luick 1898 and Diensberg 1984) - apart from phonological issues - raises problems because *Göre* is only attested from the sixteenth or seventeenth century onwards (Terasawa 1993: 339f.). The etymology of *girl* therefore remains a puzzle.

[5]   In "Þe gaye gerles were in-to þe gardin come" (a1375 *Will. Palerne* 816), *gerles* refers to princess Melior and her favourite maiden Alexandrine. Since the reference is only clear from the context, this instance is cited under 'young person of either sex' in the *OED*. Another example in the *MED* is taken from Chaucer's "Miller's Tale": "What eyleth yow? som *gay gerl*, God it woot, Hath broght yow thus vpon the viritoot" (A. 3769), for which the glosses and translations unanimously give 'Mädchen' or 'girl'. Yet the phrase *gay gerl* here is used to address Absolon, who is depicted in the tale as a, to say the least, somewhat effeminate character: *gerl* therefore could be used deliberately as an allusion to Absolon's indeterminate sexual identity. Terasawa notes that, in the earliest attestations, *girl* is primarily used in the alliterative phrase *gay girl* (1994: 337f.). Such alliterative uses are often problematic for strict semantic analysis, as the widely used phrase *Bertis Buben* for the German football team during the World Championship 1998 shows.

---

comparatively late: not a single one of the Old English terms for 'boy' has remained in the field (see OE *cnæpling, cnafa, cnapa, cniht* etc.; cf. Roberts & Kay 1995: 38);[6] of the Old English terms for 'girl' – *mægden, fǣmne, mæg(e)þ* (Bäck 1934; Roberts & Kay 1995: 38) – only *mægden* has survived (in *maiden*[7] and its apocopated form *maid(e)*). We hence encounter a considerable enrichment[7] of the field "young males and females" in the (late) Middle and Early Modern English period. Apart from *girl*, the new lexemes for young females (cf. OED) are

damsel	French loan (OF *dam(e)isele*); XIII 'unmarried young woman (originally one of noble or gentle birth'; XIV 'young unmarried women (without implication of rank or respect), a maid, girl', 'female attendant',
lass	of uncertain etymology (?Scandinavian loan); XIV 'a female child, a young woman' (restricted to Northern dialects, Scotland), and
wench	OE *wencel* 'child' (last occurrence 'children' c1300 (*Ancenre Riwle*)); XIV 'young women, girl'; XIV 'wanton woman', XIV 'maidservant' (according to Diensberg 1984: 332 *wench* takes the central role in the semantic field from the end of the thirteenth century).

The field for 'male young persons' is enriched by

boy	of uncertain etymology (Diensberg 1981: cf. OF *boi-esse (-asse)* 'female servant; servant girl'); XIV 'young male child', XIV 'man servant', 'youth or man of low estate', 'knave' (according to Diensberg 1985: 330 dominant lexeme in the field after 1400), and
lad	of uncertain etymology (?Scandinavian loan; cf. Norwegian *ladda* 'walk heavily'); XIV 'serving man, valet', 'a male young servant', 'servant of low rank, such as a stable boy', XVI 'youth, young fellow' (ME *ladde* is not recorded with the meaning 'boy, male child').

The diachronic analysis thus testifies to the radical restructuring of the semantic field "young persons" from the end of the Middle English period (Diensberg 1984, 1985): virtually all of the words used in current standard and dialectal varieties of English[8] entered the field only then (cf. *girl, lass, wench*; *boy, lad*). Diensberg (1985) explains this restructuring, a change in the language system, primarily in terms of the semantic development of the native words having become polysemous. Thus "an empty slot [words for "young human beings"] arises which demands to be filled" (1985: 330). Many native words indeed show pejorative development; they are, for instance, trans-

---

[6]   The OE terms for the archilexeme 'child' are *bearn, gebyrd, cild, lytling, wencel* (Roberts & Kay 1995: 38).

[7]   The pure fact of enrichment in Middle English is not remarkable since the influx of Romance loan words from the end of the twelfth century onwards is known to have caused fundamental changes in the vocabulary of English. However, apart from ME *dam(e)isele*, the new words in this field are not of Romance origin. See Diensberg (1985) for related Romance loans in the field of "servant" (*bacheler, page, garsoun, servant, squire*).

[8]   For the terms employed in different dialects see Glauser (1985).

ferred into the neighbouring domain SERVANT (OE *mægden* > *maid (maidservant, handmaid)*; OE *cnafa* > *knave*) and are consequently removed from the domain YOUNG PERSON (+ HUMAN, - ADULT > + HUMAN, ± ADULT, + SERVING; 1985: 331). There are also cases of social upgrading (OE *cniht* > *knight*) or narrowing of meaning such as OE *mægden* > *maiden* 'virgin'.[9] Yet, Diensberg's assertion that *wench* replaces OE *mægden* as early as the end of the thirteenth century, and that *boy* and *girl* are the central items of their respective fields at the close of the Middle English period (1985: 332) seems a bit too simplistic when not only the quotations in the *OED* and the *MED*, but also the texts themselves are examined. The semantic changes mentioned by Diensberg also cannot sufficiently explain the increasing use of *girl* during the Early Modern English period.[10]

In the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the situation should be described as a period of broad variation. This can be exemplified by an analysis of the lexemes used in the works of Shakespeare and Marlowe, and two translations of the Bible, the *Rheims New Testament* (1582) and the *Authorised Version* (1611):[11]

Authorized Version		Rheims		Shakespeare		Marlowe	
damsel	53	damsel	11	maid	257 (271)	wench	54
maid	18 (46)	maid	5 (7)	wench	97	maid	36 (41)
maiden	13 (26)	girl	3	girl	69	girl	13
girl	2	maiden	1 (1)	maiden	26 (26)[12]	damsel	7
wench	1	[wench	0]	lass	11	maiden	7 (7)
[lass	0]	[lass	0]	damsel	9	[lass	0]

This comparison first of all corroborates the assumption that the words *girl* and *wench* originated in colloquial language (perhaps even in "jocular usage", as suggested by the *OED*, s.v. *girl*), the "domestic sphere" (Robinson 1967: 236), or "in the lower strata of medieval society" (Diensberg 1985: 328). The *Authorised Version* and the *Rheims New Testament*, highly literary texts, prefer *damsel* and *maid(en)*; *girl* is used twice in the *AV* (three times in *Rheims*), *wench* only once in the *AV*. The plays by Shakespeare and

---

[9]   In the case of *maiden*, the common reference to the holy Virgin Mary and female saints may have been decisive (Terasawa 1993: 343).

[10] *Wench* did by no means only denote 'prostitute' at that time (cf. Diensberg's argument 1985: 332). In the cases of *boy* and *lad* the process of amelioration needs further explanation, namely the shift of the words from the domain SERVANT to the domain YOUNG HUMAN BEING.

[11] These tables are compiled with the help of concordances (Spevack 1973; Fehrenbach et al., eds. 1982) and the computer-readable texts of the Holy Writ provided by the *Oxford Text Archive*. In the case of *maid* and *maiden*, the numbers in brackets give the whole number of instances of *maid* and *maiden* (including those meaning '(maid)servant'), though in some cases the two meanings are hard to distinguish.

[12] In three of the 26 instances, *maiden* more specifically denotes a 'virgin'. Terasawa counts 61 instances (1993: 337), but does not differentiate between noun and adjective uses.

Marlowe,[13] which may serve as examples for interactive and more colloquial language, employ *wench* and *girl*[14] much more frequently.

This conclusion is supported by an investigation of the distribution of *girl* in various other texts. In the *Helsinki Corpus*, for example, *girl* is almost exclusively recorded in texts labelled "(interactive), informal", such as Nicholas Udall's *Roister Doister* (c1522), Thomas Deloney's *Iack of Newsbury* (1619) and Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1630).[15] The only instances of *girl* in a text labelled "high" are from the only comparatively "formal" travelogue *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes* (d. 1698). *Girl* in these texts primarily denotes 'young females', and not 'female children', which is best illustrated by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's play the *The Roaring Girl or Moll-Cut-Purse* (1612; first occurrence of *girl* in a title).[16] In most of the early EModE instances, the connotations of *girl* are those which are also implicit in the ME phrase *gay gerles*, namely 'youth' (but not 'immaturity'!), 'vitality', 'vivacity', 'frivolity' or even 'sexual availability' and 'unchastity'.[17]

In essence, these analyses show that *girl* was by no means the central item of the semantic field 'young person' at the beginning of the sixteenth century, but was used increasingly only in certain registers and styles. Thus in my opinion another cause, namely a cultural phenomenon, should be made responsible for the increased use of *girl* in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. I would like to suggest that *girl* (and also *boy*) develop the new basic and increasingly fixed meanings 'female/male child' during the Early Modern English period because Western societies from then on develop a new concept of childhood and, in particular, adolescence. The restructuring of these concepts might thus have played a part in the restructuring of the semantic field.

When considered in a historical (and also global) perspective, childhood and adolescence are not natural states in the development of humans, but social conventions. In his seminal study on childhood in Western culture, Philippe Ariès (1973) finds that medieval society did not recognise childhood and adolescence as such. Whereas ancient society presupposed a difference and a transition between the world of children and that of adults, childhood and adolescence did not exist in the Middle Ages: as soon as children could do without the care of their mothers, at about the age of seven, they entered the adult world. Only during the seventeenth century, Ariès claims, did people gradu-

---

[13] Marlowe's use of *damsel* is restricted to his translation of Ovid's *Elegies*.

[14] This corresponds to the fact that most of the Middle English instances of *girl* are already found in alliterative poetry and medieval drama, genres known to record colloquial language (see Terasawa 1993: 336f.).

[15] Further instances are from George Gifford's *A Handbook on Witches and Witchcraft. A Dialogue concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* (1593), from Samuel Pepys' *Diary* (1666-67) and his *Penny Merriments*, and from *The Trial of Lady Alice Lisle* (printed 1730), a collection of state-trials and proceedings for high treason and other crimes.

[16] Mary Frith, alias Moll Cutpurse, was a striking and colourful person in Jacobean London and was known for her pranks and misdemeanours.

[17] For a more detailed analysis of the distribution and meanings of *girl* and related terms in texts from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century see Lenker (forthc.).

ally realise that children were not just smaller versions of themselves ("miniature adults"), but were different from adults. They were now seen as weak and innocent. It was only as late as the mid-eighteenth century that the child took the central place in the (nuclear) family and the modern view of childhood emerged (Ariès 1973: 273).

Although Ariès' analysis is not undisputed (see, e.g., Pollock 1983: esp. 33-67), his general ideas and dates seem to be correct and can hence offer additional explanations[18] for the linguistic findings, i.e. the manifold changes in the semantic field "young persons of either sex". After a period of rather broad variation,[19] *girl* takes the central role in the semantic field at exactly the time when a new concept of childhood and adolescence develops,[20] especially when we consider the emergence of the meaning 'female child' (in opposition to woman and *boy*) predominant today, and its connotations 'weakness', 'dependence'. The meaning of *girl* has changed in both its denotations (young human person > young female > female child) and connotations ('youth', 'vivacity', 'frivolity' > 'immaturity', 'weakness', 'dependence') so that *girl* is finally employed to express the new concept, the 'female child' now becoming increasingly central to the family.[21] In this meaning, *girl* is used in all registers and styles and becomes part of the core vocabulary of Standard English. This analysis is corroborated by the fact that the derivatives *boyhood* and *girlhood*, which denote the specific period in human life, are only recorded from the middle of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century (see the first instances in the *OED*: s.v. *boyhood*: 1745, 1802; s.v. *girlhood*: 1785, 1831, 1862, 1866, 1880).

4. *Girl* and *boy* in the twentieth century: the structuralist approach

The predominant concept of *boy* and *girl* today is that which arose from the "emergence of childhood and adolescence", namely 'children (young adolescents) dependent on their parents', 'young humans in the state of girlhood or boyhood', with connotations of 'weakness' and 'dependence'. While *girl* and *boy* in the Early Modern English period can still denote young persons who are marriageable or at least available for sex ([±

---

[18]   Diensberg's arguments, especially those concerning the earlier changes in the semantic field, can certainly not be completely ignored (see above, p. 9f.).

[19]   Such broad variation is considered a precondition of language change in variationist theories of language change. Most innovative features are not radically novel, but rather inconspicuous features which are selected in a language at a specific time and place and begin to spread. Ariès analysis thus provides an explanation for the 'actuation' of the change, the question what triggers the selection of a certain item in a given language at a particular time. With regard to its 'transition' or spread, *girl* shows the characteristic frequency pattern known as the "S-curve pattern" (slow-quick-slow).

[20]   The archilexeme *child* fulfills part of the function of *girl* and *boy* in the OE/ME period when, according to Ariès, the concept of childhood was not important.

[21]   A similar case is found in the coinage of the term *teenager*, which is first mentioned in "Among the New Words" (*American Speech*) for 1947.

ADULT]!), our concept of *boy* and *girl* contrasts them to the world of the adults[22] and stresses their immaturity, weakness and innocence. This becomes particularly apparent in the structuralist analyses of the words: The contrasts between *boy*, *girl*, *woman* and *man* are given in almost all textbooks on English semantics (Lyons 1977: 334, Leech 1981: 89ff., Lipka 1992: 100) where they serve as prototypical examples for the introduction and exemplification of componential analysis. The features chosen for componential analysis are [± HUMAN], [± MALE] and, most interestingly for our concern, [± ADULT] (Leech 1981: 90f.):

man:	+ HUMAN, + ADULT, + MALE	as	'man' is to 'boy'
woman:	+ HUMAN, + ADULT, – MALE	as	'woman' is to 'girl'
boy:	+ HUMAN, – ADULT, + MALE	as	'horse' is to 'foal'
girl:	+ HUMAN, – ADULT, – MALE	as	'cat' is to 'kitten'.
			[(adult y)][(young) y].

All linguists using these examples, however, notice the fuzziness of the category boundaries employed (Lyons 1977: 334; Leech 1981: 120f.). Apart from the obvious caveat that it is hard to determine at what exact age or stage adulthood begins, *boy* and *girl* are even "more damaging" to componential analysis (Leech 1981: 120) because of the instability of the feature [ADULT] and the resulting asymmetry of the word pair. Lyons points out that

> ... if we analyse the three words *boy*, *girl*, and *child* in terms of a common feature [-ADULT], this feature will require different interpretations in the three cases. ... and the distinction between *boy* and *man* is drawn rather differently from that between *girl* and *woman*; ..., the age-range for calling someone a *girl* overlaps considerably with that for calling someone a *woman* (1977: 334).

The contrast [± ADULT] can thus only be applied to the basic meanings 'female/male child' and 'daughter/son'.[23] For *girl*, the value of the feature [±ADULT] is not convincing at all, since *girl* can be used in reference to adult women who have passed the stage of childhood and adolescence. Leech (in 1981!) attempts to explain this asymmetry[24] by stating that

---

[22]   In the eighteenth and more particularly the nineteenth century, *girl* (like *wench* earlier) became pejorative and was used euphemistically for a prostitute (*OED* s.v. *girl*, 2d; short for *girl about* or *of the town*).

[23]   For an empirical study on the subject, see p. 15f. below. Interesting exceptions are forms of address or jocular usage such as *a night out with the girls/boys* (at a pub or bar), which are commonly used by members of the same sex. For *boys*, we find a similar tendency to express group-reference or belonging such as *He plays football with the boys on Saturday afternoons* or *He likes to feel that he is one of the boys*.

[24]   When the whole range of meanings is considered, *girl* is apparently much more similar to *lad* than to *boy*. *Lad* can denote a 'boy', but also 'a man of spirit and vigour' (*OED* s.v. *lad*, 2a). Connotations found in phrases such as *He's a bit of a lad* or *He's quite a lad*, are now also found in the coinage *New Lad*, the male reaction to too much *Girl power*:

more abstract criteria may be involved, in particular social factors such as being eco-nomically independent of one's parents, taking adult responsibilities etc. These criteria apply differently to the two sexes: boys seem to reach 'manhood' earlier than girls reach 'womanhood' not for biological reasons (which would argue in the opposite direction), but for social reasons [...] traditionally, a girl has been regarded as dependent on her parents until married (Leech 1981: 121).

5.   *Girl* and *boy* in the twentieth century: the feminist approach

This asymmetry of designations and the fallacious explanations given for this disparity were, and still are, principal issues of feminist linguistics. According to this approach, such linguistic asymmetries are to be avoided as they not only reflect social and political inequality, but also induce and enforce these inequalities of opportunities and power. Hence the use of *girl* in reference to adult women is considered severely offensive.[25] In her early study *Language and woman's place*, Robin Lakoff (1975) indicates the "pitfalls" of such a use of *girl*:

> One seldom hears a man past the age of adolescence referred to as a boy, save in expres-sions like 'going out with the boys,' which are meant to suggest an air of adolescent fri-volity or irresponsibility. But women of all ages are 'girls' [...] *girl* is flattering to women because of its stress on youth. But here again are the pitfalls: in recalling youth, frivolity, and immaturity, *girl* brings to mind irresponsibility [...] a woman is a person who is both too immature and too far away from real life to be entrusted with responsi-bilities and with decisions of any serious nature (Lakoff 1975: 25f.).

Almost twenty years later – twenty years of Women's Liberation and feminist linguis-tics – Jane Mills in her dictionary *Womanwords* is even more explicit when she states with regard to the connotations of *girl*:

> For implicit in the word *girl* are the notions of childishness, dependency, conformity, non-aggression, obedience and non-competitiveness (Mills, ed. 1991: 103).

6.   The impact of women's liberation, feminist linguistics and political correct-ness

In the final part of this paper I would like to show that cultural and political trends such as Women's Liberation, feminist linguistics and Political Correctness seem to have in-

---

"A (young) man who embraces sexist attitudes and the traditional male role as a reaction against the perceived effeminacy or Political Correctness of the New Man" (Knowles & Elliott 1997, s.v. *New Lad*).

[25] See, for example, the warning in the PC-conscious *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*: "a word meaning a woman, which is sometimes considered offensive by women" (s.v. *girl*); see also Lawson (1983), Bebout (1984), Messner et al. (1993) and Mills, ed. (1991).

fluenced the present-day meaning of *girl*. These phenomena have had an impact on its denotative and connotative meanings, an impact which resulted in two different, even opposing tendencies, both of which bring about a considerable change in the concept of *girl* at the end of the twentieth century.

6.1   Semantic restriction of *girl*

In one of the few empirical studies on the subject conducted in 1979 and 1980, the asymmetry of the designations for male and female persons was examined by Linda Bebout. With regard to *girl*, two hypotheses were supported by the data:

> *Girl* implies a lack of maturity (and sometimes a corresponding lack of sexuality) when used in reference to an adult.
> The terms *lady*, *woman* and *girl* are not used in reference to the same age ranges as the corresponding male terms – especially *girl*, which can refer to a much older person than *boy* (Bebout 1984: 14).[26]

About a decade later, the study was replicated in order to test whether there had been any significant language change in this period of ten years (Bebout 1995). In both stud-ies, the test-group consisted of educated speakers of the Canadian middle-class, i.e. language-conscious people most likely to be influenced by issues of feminism, feminist linguistics and ideas of Political Correctness. The most striking result of the compara-tive study was that the asymmetries were neutralised because of a widening of the cate-gory boundaries for *woman* and a limitation of the category boundaries for *girl*. While the age ranges for *girl* and *boy* were about ten to even twenty years apart in the 1980s, they proved to be almost identical in the 1990s:[27]

> During the decade of the two studies, English has changed from a language where, for example, adult females were habitually referred to ... as *girls* ... to one where 15 and 16 year olds are called *women* (Bebout 1995: 163).

---

[26] The text of the relevant item is as follows: "A close friend visiting you answers the door and comes back to say to you: "There is a boy [man, gentleman; woman, lady] at the door who wants to talk to you." Describe the picture that might form in your mind about the kind of person who is at the door. Give also approximate upper and lower age limits" (Bebout 1984: 20).

[27] While the minimum age for *woman* was 20-34 in the 1980s, a quarter of the respondents in the 1990s indicated that a reported *woman* at the door could be as young as 16-18 years. Similar to *woman*, a new category had to be added in the case of *boy/girl*: while no respondents in the earlier study indicated that they would expect the girl at the door to be no older than 8-12 years, that was the largest response category in the later study (Bebout 1995: 171-4). The proportions of responses in the age categories for *boy* and *man* were not significantly different in the two studies.

Though this empirical study tested only the language behaviour of a small group, it certainly reflects a change in usage by language-conscious users.[28] This change in response to the issues of Women's Liberation and feminist linguistics is triggered by conscious avoidance of non-prestige forms. *Girl* in this context has undergone a restriction of meaning and therefore a change in its denotation. Since fewer language users are likely to envision *girl* as including adults, *girl* and *boy* are employed symmetrically for 'male/female child (young) adolescent' or 'son/daughter'.

6.2   *Girl power* and the connotations of *girl*

The second, contrasting, tendency has its roots in popular culture. Popular culture here refers primarily to the most successful all-female pop group ever, the *Spice Girls*,[29] and their appropriation of the language of empowerment in their ideology of "I can do it" and "Go for it". The *Spice Girls* are feared for their non-conformist and aggressive behaviour in public, where they definitely do not personify the conventional girl-values of 'non-aggressiveness' and 'dependency'. Their motto and brand, by contrast, is "Girl Power".[30] From the very beginning, their image was firmly linked with this appeal to "Girl Power", which stands for traditional feminist postures, such as sisterhood, sisterly solidarity and self-sufficiency, expressed by "Ginger Spice" Geri somewhat differently as "[...] standing strong together, we identify with each other [...] it is essentially about friendship [...] You don't have to be perfect and you don't have to be depending [sic] on a man [...]" (Interview with Oprah Winfrey in May 1998). The inner sleeve of their second album *Spiceworld* is full of glib slogans such as "I'm a girl, I can do it". This *Girl power* manifesto also comes in the form of most of their lyrics, which are co-written by the *Spice Girls*: an air of confidence, aggression and power in *Do It* ("I will not be told / Keep your mouth shut, keep your legs shut / Get back in your place, Huh / Blameless, shameless damsel in disgrace. / Who cares what they say / because rules are for breakin'") or *Denying* ("You think you're quick/ But I'd like to see you keep up with me") and, as the most articulate expression of *Girl power*, in *The Lady is a Vamp*:

---

[28]   An examination of about 400 instances of *girl* as used in the *Guardian* of September 1998 confirms these findings. Apart from a few instances of phrases such as *girls' night out*, a few instances of quoted *my girl* for a girl-friend and one instance of *girl secretary*, *girl* only refers to female children or (young) teenage girls. The examples in this part of the paper are mainly taken from the CD-ROM edition of the *The Guardian* for 1996, 1997 and 1998 (January-September).

[29]   In July 1996, their first single with the telling lyrics "I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want" entered the British and American Charts and immediately became top in both. Since then, the *Spice Girls* have been one of the best-selling pop groups and have managed to surpass the *Beatles* by being top in three successive Christmas charts (1996, 1997, 1998).

[30]   See for a similar act of appropriation the (model?) coinage 'black power'.

But she's got something new
She's a power girl in a 90's world
She knows just what to do ...

The huge, if possibly fleeting, impact the *Spice Girls* have made on teenage girls is, for instance, apparent in an article in *16*, a magazine for sixteen-year-olds, which gives as a piece of advice for life "Celebrate 'Girl Power' every day – by being strong, confident, and most of all, yourself!" (*16*, "The Spice Girls Times", 16 March 1998). The *Spice Girls* have also extended their cultural impact outside music and youth culture by ascribing a pioneering role in promoting "Girl Power" to Margaret Thatcher, who is recurrently praised as the "first true Spice Girl" (*The Spectator*, 12 December 1996).[31]

Linguistically, the appropriation of the term *girl* by the *Spice Girls*, who are commonly referred to as "the Girls", and their language of empowerment have lead to a change in the connotations of *girl*: associative meanings such as 'immaturity, conformity, non-aggression, obedience and non-competitiveness' are replaced by the opposites 'independence, strength, assertiveness, aggressiveness, power, self-sufficiency' and also 'frivolity',[32] especially when *girl* is employed in reference to adolescent girls or young women, most often peers. In this use and thus more generally in the register of pop culture, *girl* is short for *power girl*. There are indications that the "Girl Power ideology" has had some impact on the life of young girls and their attitudes, albeit in rather negative ways, as documented by a significant increase of juvenile crimes committed by young females:

> The violent side of girl power. [...] Girl power has mutated into a vicious ideology of beatings by female adolescents determined to claim traditionally masculine traits, according to a report published yesterday (Rory Carroll, "Gangs put boot into old ideas of femininity", *The Guardian*, 22 July 1998, p. 5).

While there is no way to predict whether there will be a real empowerment of young females and a constant change of attitude and while it is far too early to test this hypothesis of changing connotations of *girl* in a wider range of styles and registers, it is already possible to show the impact of the catch-phrase *girl power*. An investigation of the CD-ROM edition of *The Guardian* of 1996, 1997, and 1998 (to September) shows

---

[31]   In John Hind's "Cyberpet. Teletubby. Spice. Spin. Di. [...] The Blairites also defeated that lot in 1997", an article on the "Word 1997", the choice of "Blairite" is criticised: "Girl power" and "Spice" are thought to encapsulate the *Zeitgeist* of 1997 much better (along with *Teletubby, Di, People's Princess, euro-sceptic*) (*The Observer*, 9 November 1997, p. 1).

[32]   Thus "Girlpower" reflects what Natasha Walter describes as the "new feminism": "[...] However young women dress, however they make love, however they flirt, they can be feminists. They do not want to learn a set of personal attitudes before being admitted into the club". Walter also regards Margaret Thatcher as the "great unsung heroine of British feminism", who "normalised success" and "made power socially acceptable for feminists" (1999: 172-4, at 174).

that it has become a media buzzword whose use is no longer confined to articles on the *Spice Girls*, or pop culture in a wider sense:

	Absolute Numbers	*Spice Girls*	Music	General
1996 [whole year]	11	9	1	1
1997 [whole year]	129	44	18	67
1998 [Jan-Sept]	111	24	23	64

This table primarily shows that the catch-phrase *girl power* has indeed caught on since July 1996 when the *Spice Girls* first appeared on the scene. Apart from the manifest increase in absolute numbers, the institutionalization (cf. Lipka 1992: 45f.)[33] of *girl power* is apparent in its extension to a more general meaning. While in 1996 *girl power* is virtually confined to articles on the *Spice Girls*, the instances of 1997 and 1998 show a move to much more general contexts. Although in some of the articles the link to popular culture (sports, fashion, advertising) is still strong, we find a number of cases where *girl power* is used outside the sphere of popular culture. A few examples of this use may suffice here:

> When it comes to sex, independence and assertiveness are the current media buzzwords. Learn to love yourself, take control, get what you want in bed, fulfil your wildest fantasies. A new religion is sweeping the shelves of newsagents across the country and monopolising daytime TV. It's called girl power (Jennifer Morris, "On Campus: Some like it spicy", *The Guardian*, 3 June 1997, p. 24).

Girl Power is also used in reference to women well into or past their adolescent years. In a TV review, Adam Sweeting comments:

> In a[n] [...] exhibition of Girl Power, the massed Luciano widows, led first by quavering matriarch Graziella (Vanessa Redgrave), then by beautiful but cold-eyed Sophia (Nastassja Kinski), vow to wreak a terrible vengeance on the Carollos, who massacred their menfolk (Adam Sweeting, *The Guardian*, 25 June 1998, p. 27).

A commentary on the announcement of the Office for National Statistics that women outnumber men in the workplace for the first time in more than 50 years is entitled "Girl power: all work and no say" (*The Guardian*, 3 January 1998, p. 5). In a more encouraging article, *girl power* (orthographically adapted) is used by Katherine Viner:

> [...] shows women on newspapers under the age of 35 earn an average annual salary of £ 32,000, compared with £ 25,000 for men. Call it girl power, call it feminisation, young women are performing better in journalism than ever before (*The Guardian*, 6 July 1998, p. 6).

Even victims of *girl power* are to be found:

---

[33] While *girl power* is put in inverted commas or capitalised in its earliest uses, it is now re-currently written *Girl power* or *girl power* (cf. the examples).

> A clerk who was ordered to mop the floor by the country's youngest woman bank manager was yesterday awarded almost £ 5,000 in compensation by an industrial tribunal which ruled that he had been the victim of sex discrimination. [...] "I was definitely a victim of girl power," he said. (David Ward, "Clerk ordered to mop floor awarded £ 5,000", *The Guardian*, 2 September 1998, p. 4).

The lexicalization of *girl power*[34] becomes most obvious in cases in which *girl power* is generalised to such an extent that it becomes synonymous with *feminism*. Thus Fay Weldon phrases her belief that feminism has gone too far as

> Girl power triumphs, certainly in the metropolitan areas ("Women: Pity poor men", *The Guardian*, 9 December 1997, p. 4)

Thus it comes as no surprise that the lexicalization of *girl power* is already established. In the 1998 edition of *Roget's Thesaurus*, *girl power* is listed as one of the synonyms of *feminism*.

6.3 *Grrrl*

This re-definition of *girl* as seen in "power girl" and *girl power* is not an isolated case. In fringe popular culture, we find an even more obvious example of the cultural impact of feminism on present-day English in *grrl* or *grrrl*, a sound-symbolic variation of *girl* which imitates the "growl of a tiger" (Algeo & Algeo 1997). *Grrrl,* which was coined to denote 'female hard rock musicians' and 'computer nerds', is now also applied in reference to 'young females' in a more general way. The word has already been listed in the section "Among the New Words" in *American Speech* (1997), and is also found in a number of derivations and compounds, such as *cybergrrrl* and *grrrlculture*. For British English, the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* (Knowles & Elliott 1997) gives 'young militant feminist' for the related *riot grrl* and cites similar neologisms:

> most recently the terms Ladette and New Ladette have been coined for the New Lad's female equivalent, representing the militant feminism also typified by a Riot Grrl (s.v. *New Lad*).[35]

While *ladette* is coined by utilising a word denoting males, *grrl* and *riot grrl* are linguistically more similar to *girl power* and *(power) girl*: the term *girl* is appropriated in a language of empowerment.

---

[34] *Girl power* has become so firmly established that a number of nonce-formations have been coined according to the pattern, both in appreciation and refutation: "tabloid power" (3 June), "pound power" (3 November), "people power" (19 November), "man power" (13 November; note the difference to *manpower*), "Granny Power" (19 December) etc. (all from *The Guardian* 1997).

[35] For the *New Lad*, see fn. 24 on p. 13 above.

7.   Conclusions

We have seen that cultural phenomena can trigger considerable semantic changes of an everyday word such as the Modern English word *girl*. This is primarily due to the fact that childhood and adolescence are not, as one might think from the present perspective, natural states in the development of humans, but social conventions. The gradual emergence of childhood and adolescence as a specific period of human life thus may have played an important part in the radical restructuring of the semantic field for 'young human persons' in the late Middle and, in particular, the Early Modern English period. *Girl*, a lexeme originally denoting 'young person of either sex' and hence found in the periphery of the semantic field, became the central item of the field and, in Standard English at least, is employed for the new concept of a 'female child central to the nuclear family, young adolescent' in all registers and styles. Yet, *girl* has never been fully symmetrical to its supposed counterpart *boy*, since it could also be employed in reference to adult women. Due to the impact of feminism and Political Correctness we now, at the end of the twentieth century, find that the meaning of *girl* is not fixed. On the one hand, there are tendencies to narrow the category boundaries for *girl*, so that its meaning is restricted to 'young female child, young adolescent'. While *girl* is still employed in reference to adult women in the opposing development, its connotations in this use have changed significantly. In a language of empowerment, the term *girl* has been appropriated by young and adult females in coinages such as *(power) girl*, *girl power* and *grrrl* and given the new connotations 'power', 'assertiveness', 'self-sufficiency' etc. In many respects, today's *power girls* are thus remarkably similar to the *roaring girl* Moll Cutpurse. In highly PC-conscious circles the development of girl even seems to have come full circle: The novelist Bernhard Cornwell reports that his American editor replaced all the instances of *girl* in his book by *woman* or *lady* and suggested that he should use "pre-woman" in reference to a nine-year old girl (*Die Welt*, 8/9 May).

References

Algeo, John & A. Algeo (1997), "Among the new words. *s.v.* grrl, grrrl, grrrrl", *American Speech* 72, 89-90.

Ariès, Philippe (1973), *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, 2nd. ed. (1st ed. 1960), Paris: Éditions du Seuil. [First edition: Paris: Plon].

Bäck, Hilding (1934), *The synonyms for "child", "boy", "girl" in Old English. An etymological-semasiological investigation*, Lund: C. W. K. Gleerups.

Bebout, Linda (1984), "Asymmetries in male-female word pairs", *American Speech* 59, 13-30.

-   (1995), "Asymmetries in male-female word pairs: a decade of change", *American Speech* 70.2, 163-85.

Diensberg, Bernhard (1981), "The etymology of Modern English *BOY*: a new hypothesis", *Medium Aevum* 51, 79-87.

-   (1984), "The etymology of Modern English *GIRL*", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 85, 473-5.

-   (1985), "The lexical fields *boy/girl – servant – child* in Middle English", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 86, 328-36.

Fehrenbach, Robert J., Lee Ann Boone & Maria A. Di Cesare, eds. (1982), *A concordance to the plays, poems, and translations of Christopher Marlowe*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[The] Guardian and the Observer on CD-ROM. 1996, 1997, January - September 1998, Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey.

Glauser, Beat (1985), "Boys and girls, sons and daughters: the evidence of the Survey of English Dialects (SED)", *English World-Wide* 6, 37-57.

[The] Helsinki Corpus of English Texts, Helsinki: Department of English, Univ. of Helsinki.

Kelly, Fergus (1997), *All things spice. The complete, unofficial story of the Spice Girls*, Harmondsworth: Puffin.

Knowles, Elizabeth & Julia Elliott (1997), *The Oxford dictionary of new words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kurath, Hans et al., eds. (1952-), *Middle English Dictionary*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. [= *MED*].

Lakoff, Robin (1975), *Language and woman's place*, New York: Harper.

Lawson, Sarah (1983), "*Girl* in British newspapers", *American Speech* 58, 84-5.

Leech, Geoffrey (1981), *Semantics. The study of meaning*, 2nd ed. (1st ed. 1974), Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Lenker, Ursula (forthc.), "*Country wenches – chaste maids – roaring girls*: a study in the English terms for 'young females' from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century".

Lipka, Leonhard (1992), *An outline of English lexicology*, 2nd ed. (1st ed. 1990), Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Luick, Karl (1898), "Die Herkunft des ne. *girl*", *Anglia Beiblatt* 8, 235-6.

Lyons, John (1977), *Semantics*, 2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mills, Jane, ed. (1991), *Womanwords*, London: Virago.

Moerdijk, Alfons (1994), "(Mis)use of semantic parallelism: Robinson's etymology of English *girl*", *NOWELE* 24, 49-65.

Pauli, Ivan (1919), *"Enfant", "garçon", "fille" dans les langues Romanes*, Lund: C. W. K. Gleerups.

Pollock, Linda A. (1983), *Forgotten children: parent-child relations from 1500 to 1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, Jane & Christian Kay, eds. (1995), *A thesaurus of Old English in two volumes*, London: King's College.

Robinson, Fred (1967), "European clothing names and the etymology of *Girl*". In: W. W. Arndt et al., eds. (1967), *Studies in historical linguistics in honor of George Sherman Lane*, Chapel Hill, 223-40 (with an "Afterword 1992" reprinted in: Fred C. Robinson, ed. (1993), *The tomb of Beowulf and other essays on Old English*, Oxford, 175-81.)

Simpson, J. A. & E. S. C. Weiner, eds. (1989), *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press [= *OED*].

Smith, Jeremy (1996), *An historical study of English. Function, form and change*, London: Routledge.

Spevack, Martin, ed. (1973), *The Harvard concordance to Shakespeare*, Hildesheim: Olms.

Terasawa, Yoshio (1993), "Some etymological and semasiological notes on girl". In: Klaus R. Grinda & Claus-Dieter Wetzel, eds. (1993), *Anglo-Saxonica. Beiträge zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte der englischen Sprache und zur altenglischen Literatur. Festschrift für Hans Schabram zum 65. Geburtstag*, München: Fink, 335-45.

Walter, Natasha (1999), *The new feminism*, London: Virago.