What does *gay* mean in present-day English?

Words change their meanings over time, and sometimes the changes happen so quickly that we can spot them in action. You could investigate ongoing semantic change in the English language by looking at the changing meanings of just one word, for example the adjective *gay*.

According to the online British and World English Oxford Dictionaries, *gay* now has four different meanings:

is this a gay picture?

- (1) 'light-hearted and carefree'
- (2) 'brightly coloured, showy'
- (3) 'homosexual, especially a man'
- (4) 'foolish, stupid or unimpressive'

The earliest meaning is number (1), which dates from about 1310. Dictionaries usually give number (4) as the most recent meaning, attested in Britain in 2002 (though earlier in the USA).

Justyna Robinson's research*, though, found that *gay* has a fifth, even more recent meaning, used mainly by teenage boys: (5) 'not very masculine' (for example, if you are a man, carrying an umbrella or eating a lot of salad can be 'gay').

is this a gay thing to do?

These semantic changes seem to have happened during the last 60 years or so, which means that older people probably use *gay* differently to younger people.

How to investigate? You could **test a hypothesis** such as: only older people will use *gay* with the first and second meanings, and only younger people will use *gay* with the fourth and fifth, most recent, meanings.

Or you could simply **explore a research question**, such as: what are people's attitudes towards the different meanings of *gay*? You could compare the views of older and younger people, or you could just focus on people of your own age.

Whichever type of language investigation you decide to do, your **AIM** will be to investigate semantic change in the word *gay*.

How to investigate the hypothesis

You can find out how older people and younger people use the word by asking them what they would describe as *gay*. Then follow up by asking them why.

EXAMPLE: Here are the answers given by a young boy in Justyna Robinson's study. They show that one of the ways he uses *gay* is with meaning 4:

Researcher: *who or what is gay, in your opinion?*
Participant: *my school*
Researcher: *why is your school gay?*
Participant: *because it's boring*

Once you've noted down your participants' answers, ask them to tell you something else or someone else that is gay. Justyna Robinson asked the same person this question 3 times. In this way you should elicit all the meanings that are the most central for the person. Some people may always give the same meaning, while for others there may be 2 or even 3 different meanings.

Try to ask at least 3 people aged over 60 and 3 people who are teenagers (or younger). If you can ask another 3 people aged between 18 and 60, that would be even better. Be sure to write down all the replies. The more people you can ask, the surer you can be about your findings.

How to analyse your data

Here are some things to look for:

1. Does any one meaning crop up more than any others?

TIP: Robinson found that *gay* meant 'male homosexual' for people of all ages but that the other meanings people gave were different,

depending on their age. This suggests that in present-day English 'male homosexual' is the central meaning of *gay*.

2. Do older people give one meaning more often than younger people do? What about younger people? Do they give one meaning more often than older people? Your hypothesis predicts that older people will give meanings (1) and (2) while younger people will give meaning (4) and perhaps (5).

3. What kinds of things do people describe as 'gay', in the different senses of the word? Again, the hypothesis predicts that older and younger people will describe different things as 'gay'.

TIP: Robinson found that young people used *gay* in the sense of 'boring' to describe school, lessons, writing, reading, friends and their dad! They used gay in the sense of 'not interesting' or 'weird' to describe various politicians, and one boy described his sister as gay, meaning 'annoying'. Some, mainly teenage boys, used the phrase *stop being gay*, meaning 'stop being annoying'.

Another way to investigate the hypothesis

You could show people 4 pictures to illustrate things or people that could be 'gay' in each of its different meanings. For example, you could show them the picture at the top of the first page (which illustrates something bright and colourful) and ask them 'could you describe this as gay?' Then show them pictures illlustrating something carefree, a male homosexual, and perhaps (for meaning 4) a school or a lesson at school. You could add the picture of a man eating salad to see if they use *gay* with the 5th, most recent, meaning. Then analyse your findings to see which picture elicits the most 'yes' answers, and whether older and younger people say 'yes' to the same pictures, and how often.

TIP : You could organise your findings in a Table, like this:

	Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3	Picture 4	Picture 5
Person 1	X	X	X		
Person 2			X	X	

In this example, Person 1 said they would only describe pictures 1 and 2 as 'gay'. Person 2 said that only pictures 3 and 4 could be described as 'gay'.

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How to explore a research question

You could explore what people think about the meanings of *gay* by asking them how many different meanings they know and whether they would use *gay* these ways themselves. You could also ask them what kind of person they think might use *gay* with the different meanings. Then you can find out their attitudes to the changing meanings by asking what they think about them.

> EXAMPLE: a 79 year old woman in Robinson's study said
> "I mean, this is a new word to me in the other sense of being gay. We always said 'They look nice and gay', clothes; and people who are happy. That is what I think of this gay. I think they spoiled the word. Wrong choice of a word, but I am a bit old fashioned. Homosexuals used to be called queers, pansies.

As the replies will be open-ended you will probably need to record the conversations you have with people. Again, try to record at least 2 older people and 2 people who are teenagers or younger.

Analyse this data by looking for any common themes in the answers that people give. For example, people often dislike new uses of a word and think that the word has become spoiled, like the woman in the example above. Younger people may not even know the older meanings of *gay*.

In conclusion Does your investigation show that older people use *gay* in different ways to younger people? Or that younger people don't know the older uses, and older people don't know the most recent uses? If so, this would confirm that *gay* has changed its meaning over the last 60 years or so.

Suggested reading

Robinson, J. (2012). *A gay paper: why should sociolinguists bother with semantics? English Today* 28: 38-54. You can read a summary of this paper here.

You could also look at Milligan, K. (ed.) 2002. 'New uses of "gay".' LINGUIST List 13, 23 February, 2002.